

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-

---

2021

## Representation of Death in Independent Videogames: Providing a Space for Meaningful Death Reflection

Alexander Boyd  
*University of Central Florida*

 Part of the [Game Design Commons](#), and the [Interactive Arts Commons](#)  
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020>  
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020- by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Boyd, Alexander, "Representation of Death in Independent Videogames: Providing a Space for Meaningful Death Reflection" (2021). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 476.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/476>

REPRESENTATION OF DEATH IN INDEPENDENT VIDEOGAMES:  
PROVIDING A SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL DEATH REFLECTION

by

ALEX BOYD  
B.A. COLLEGE OF SCIENCES, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science  
in the Nicholson School of Communications & Media  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2021

Major Professor: Anastasia Salter

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the unique representation of death in independent videogames. Specifically, in three titles: *That Dragon, Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale*. These three games break traditional norms of death in video games and how death is presented in other more traditional mediums. These unique perspectives are more concerned with the personal and societal side of death, the reflection, and confrontation of our mortality.

Each game is a stand-out example of a growing trend in independent titles coined as "death positive" games. These types of games are made with the intent to approach death differently, potentially providing comfort to those struggling with death fear and anxiety.

Through a close play of each game, analyzing their developer's design intentions and how they were received by audiences, I am to illustrate how independent games have become an ideal space to confront and manage death fear and anxiety. This is achieved through their unique ability to occupy a moment in ludic space and time, where a player can rest, reflect, and give up – an experience I call meaningful death reflection.

This thesis offers a meaningful look at a potentially growing trend in various forms of media to present the topic of death in new contexts, distancing itself from traditional presentations in mainstream Western media. This trend would appear to be filling an audience's desire to engage with content that allows them the opportunity to think about their mortality in new ways.

This thesis is dedicated to Josh Weatherly whose input and wisdom I missed dearly.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first want to thank Dr. Anastasia Salter, whose expertise and patience helped keep my research and methodology on track as my writing and scope would frequently veer off course! Your guidance as both an advisor and professor has opened many doors to a better understanding of games studies and academia as a whole. I look forward to applying what I have learned from you towards all my future academic pursuits.

Thank you, Dr. Natalie Underberg-Goode. You have been an incredible mentor during my time here in the Digital Media MA program. Thank you for the various opportunities you have given me to make the most out of my time in this program. Working with you has been an incredible experience and your feedback has been invaluable not only in this thesis, but in all of my academic work.

Thank you, Dr. Edwin Lohmeyer. Your insights regarding our societal relationship with death through media were eye opening and led me to many valuable sources I otherwise would not have encountered. Your invaluable feedback has shown me multiple areas of this subject I would like to continue researching.

I also want to thank my parents for their continuous support of my academic pursuits! Thanks for having my back. Finally, I especially want to thank my partner, Paola Gervasi. Your support and motivation helped more than you know. Thanks for always participating in my crazy ramblings about videogames!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Why Death in Videogames .....	5
What is Being Examined .....	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
Media’s Representation of Death and Death-Denying Culture .....	11
Arguments Toward a Non Death-Denying Culture .....	13
How We Engage with Death.....	16
Non-serious Death in Videogames .....	17
Genres, Narrative, and Emotional Resonance.....	21
Serious Games/Critical Play/ Persuasive games .....	24
Serious Games .....	24
Persuasive Games .....	26
Critical Play .....	28
CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDIES.....	31
That Dragon Cancer .....	34
Numinous Game’s Intention .....	38
Reception .....	44
Spiritfarer .....	48
Thunder Lotus Games Intention .....	54
Reception .....	56
A Mortician’s Tale.....	58
Laundry Bear Games Intention.....	63
Reception .....	67
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION.....	71
Further research .....	75
REFERENCES .....	77

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Death has been a persistent mechanic of videogames for as long as the medium has been around. Some of the earliest commercially available games utilized death and life counters to denote a player's failure, facilitating player improvement. As videogames evolved, the use of death as a mechanic persisted, becoming an integral part of gameplay. Platformers, first-person shooters, action-adventure games, and simulation games all utilize death as the metric that determines a player's success or failure in progressing the game. The heavy reliance on this utilization of death as a mechanic has made players so accustomed to their avatars dying over and over again; any consequence of player death has all but lost any meaning in regard to grief, loss, or taking death seriously. Narratively, however, there are exceptions to this trend, as some games try to get players to take death more seriously. By killing off certain characters or tasking the player with preventing the death of a character, developers can evoke a more emotional representation of death, raising the stakes for the player. Early examples include *King's Quest IV* and *Planetfall*; both games attempt to meaningfully engage with the subject of death narratively by allowing players to fail in their quest, resulting in the death of in game characters or the protagonist. These types of games are not in the majority, as Gabby DaRienzo points out during her Game Developers Conference (GDC) talk about *A Mortician's Tale*, "Lots of games feature death but very few ask players to actually deal with it" (DaRienzo). Audiences have become comfortable with systematic death in videogames, but indie developers are finding that videogames are an engaging medium for exploring representations of death and mortality.

Independent developers (developers who do not have the financial support of large publishers) have been a consistently refreshing presence in game industries, and game studies scholars have written much about their impact on the videogame industry; “independent games are continually presented as the authentic alternative to mainstream games” (Juul). Their desire to move away from the various aspects of mainstream development has facilitated an innovative environment where game mechanics are expanded beyond the surface level of just player interaction and toward directly communicating the game's core message. These kinds of independent games have garnered attention from academics for their ability to handle a wide range of serious subject matter ranging from societal and political issues to personal mental health. The unique affordances of the videogame medium make this possible. Stand out examples include the use of agency, complacency, and empathy (Isbister, Juul, Sabine) to create meaningful experiences. In the context of an interactable medium, these subjects take on a new form—the player’s actions determine the outcome of what is taking place on screen, and they have to be prepared for the consequences of those actions. A great example of this can be found in the condensed game loop of *Papers, Please*.

In *Papers, Please* developed by Lucas Pope, players encounter each of these elements during their playthrough. In the game, you work as a border immigration officer in a fictional country trying to make enough money to take care of your family. The player’s job is to make sure individuals are entering the country legally and the parameters that determine that legality are changing each day. The player has the *agency* to determine who gets into the country or who doesn’t, meaning the player has the “ability to make choices that mean something to him or her” (Flanagan 7). They can *empathize* with the individuals in extenuating circumstances, potentially

allowing them to enter the country illegally. They are also *complacent* as there are many decisions made that result in the harming of other characters.

Independent videogames have offered audiences unique perspectives on various subject matter, both personal and societal, leading to some extremely popular releases. This has not been lost on larger publishing companies and console manufacturers, as independent games have become a large source of revenue. “Indie gaming’s success and popularity have created the fertile grounds for co-optation from mainstream publishers” (Lipkin 14). For example, Microsoft has sought out many independent developers to feature their games on their Game Pass service, a subscription that provides users with a changing library of games that they can download from. Similarly, Nintendo made it a point for their latest console (Nintendo Switch) to be as accessible as possible to independent developers. Making the Switch easier to develop for, meant Nintendo’s console quickly became a fan favorite for independent games. A large portion of independent games, however, are not published on major platforms; many are self-published through personal sites or sites like itch.io—a dedicated platform for independent developers to share and sell their games.

As independent games have become more profitable for larger publishers, many of the qualities that comprise indie games have come into question. Is it still an indie game when a large publisher provides all the funding a team needs to make the game? This is a large and ongoing debate, but it is important to note that how “independent” some titles are has come into question. Additionally, it is important to remember independent games come from a wide range of different backgrounds: from development teams that receive funding, solo developers with no funding, academics, etc. “‘Indie’ as a moniker subsequently loses its clarity, leaving developers

and fans alike unable to easily distinguish indie games in their original ideological, as opposed to stylistic, sense from those that are not” (Lipkin 14). With such a wide range of definitions for what an independent game can be, specific genres have been established by educators, developers, and creators that are more concerned with the societal and personal impact that games can have. These genres are: art games, games for change, and societal impact games.

These types of games are considered to be more “serious”, made with the sole intent to get players to think differently about particular societal subjects and hopefully bring about some kind of change. Many commercial independent games fall under these categories based on the designers' intention and player response, but more often than not market success is their primary goal. These types of independent games' main focus and purpose is to facilitate change through their craft and they have proven on multiple occasions that they can offer meaningful insights and answers to the complex questions of the human condition.

In recent years, as independent developers continue to explore and experiment with the possibilities of videogames, there has been a rise in independent games that seeks to break away from the traditional use of death as a mechanic, offering insight into how we think about death and our own mortality on a societal and personal level. These games acknowledge and embrace the very natural fears we have about death and dying and hope to offer a space of refuge where players can confront these thoughts, sit with them, and hopefully walk away with a healthier understanding of death. These games have been labeled as “death positive”, meaning they are upfront with realistic depictions of death in the hope to move away from the taboo nature of the subject.

In this thesis, I intend to enter this discussion regarding independent video games' capabilities to communicate serious subject matter by critically examining their use of death and mortality. The death I am concerned with is not how it is traditionally represented in games: “the hindrance of progression” (Keogh), “a temporal glitch in the system’s efficiency brought around by the player’s incompetence” (Becker, Ernest), “an inevitable and intermittent interruption to the player’s experimentation” (Atkins), or “a pedagogical tool used by the videogame to teach the player how they should be playing” (Sudnow). Instead, I am examining the personal and societal side of death, the reflection, and confrontation of our mortality that causes fear and anxiety. Through closely examining the subject of death in three titles (*Mortician’s Tale*, *That Dragon Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*), I aim to illustrate how independent games have become an ideal space to confront and manage death fear and anxiety. This is achieved through their unique ability to occupy a moment in ludic space and time, where a player can rest, reflect, and give up: an experience I call meaningful death reflection.

### Why Death in Videogames

The modern perspective of death in Western society as taboo has been argued extensively by philosophy and sociology academics. Early modern literature suggests that the topic of death is entirely and holistically taboo for the modern individual. More recently, however, it is argued that death is no longer taboo: “there is now a vast body of literature on death which has been developing over the past decade... this cannot indicate a reluctance to talk about death” (Mellor). However, it is still widely accepted that death remains a forbidden topic in the public space. “So masterfully do we hide death, you would almost believe we are the first generation of

immortals” (Doughty ix). Through close playthroughs of the games being examined and the responses of players and critiques, we can see that the perception of death as a taboo subject still rings true for Western audiences.

The concept of death today is a touchy subject. We like to keep it at arm’s length as much as possible. Even now, as I write this amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the realities of death are still kept at a distance for a large portion of the general population. Ernest Becker tells us this is because the thought of our own death is a fundamental human fear: “This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die” (Becker). It is the avoidance of this terror that makes death an inherently tricky subject, both publicly and personally.

As contemporary Western society becomes increasingly secular, the comforts of believing in a religious afterlife are no longer there to quell the anxiety of our mortality—“the only way to get beyond the natural contradictions of existence is in the time-worn religious way: to project one’s problems onto a god figure, to be healed by an all embracing and all justifying beyond” (Becker). The comfort is gone, but the human desire to believe in a life after death continues. The sociologist Raymond Lee wrote about this phenomenon, which he terms “re-enchantment”. He argues that through the course of modernity, as religion takes less precedence in the lives of individuals, we are actively searching for comfort regarding our mortality through this re-enchantment. Media has become a suitable outlet to explore the possibilities of new ways to interpret the afterlife, a way to “re-enchant” ourselves, and I seek to prove that independent videogames have provided unique experiences that are worth examining.

There has been extensive research in game studies about the qualities of empathy, embodiment, failure, and complacency found in video games, highlighting the medium's ability to make the interactor an active participant of what is happening on the screen, and evoking a meaningful response. Katherine Isbister is a strong advocate for the power of video games and remarks about the power of media and games in *How Games Move Us*: “games are held as an innovative and powerful medium for doing what all media do—helping us understand ourselves and explore what it means to be human” (Isbister 18). This power that games have, allows them to offer new experiences that can be applied to many facets of life.

Building off the research of others, I want to explore the connection that considers directly, the impact of turning away from the traditional use of death in videogames and instead toward meaningful death: to the condition of death, death anxiety, or the re-enchantment of the afterlife. The merger of this topic with the medium of video games, I believe, offers a strong argument as to why people are interested in interacting with this subject matter. The affordances of videogames offer a strong similarity to real world experience that can foster impactful moments for players. These moments are an example of people developing and using games to look for comfort and answer questions surrounding the uniquely human fear of death.

### What is Being Examined

To defend my claims, I have chosen three independent video games that embody what I call “meaningful death reflection”: *That Dragon Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale*. Each of these games directly challenges the player to reflect not only on death but on their own passing and the passing of those close to them. I believe games like these are paving the way for

more critical reflection on this subject as each title offers a different perspective on death and personal mortality. These perspectives range from grieving the death of a loved one, processing our own mortality, to dealing with death as an everyday reality that we routinely keep ourselves distant from.

As discussed in my methodology, all games are examined for their impact based on their story, mechanics, reviews, articles, and personal stories from individuals impacted by their experience with the game. The main criteria that I will be using to determine the titles' effectiveness are: 1) the critical reception of the game and 2) the meaningful impact it left on players.

Chapter Two offers a review of the literature surrounding both the modern conception of death, and its use in videogames. I go over what has brought us to our modern perception of death, the changing thought around it as a taboo subject, its various forms of representation in media, and critique of theories surrounding re-enchantment. The review of game studies details the traditional use of death in games and the facets of game design and gameplay that allow for more meaningful experiences. What follows is a look into the ways games that break traditional genre norms can be used for “artistic, political, and social critique or intervention” (Flanagan). Here I argue for the medium’s ability to be an ideal space for presenting difficult subject matter. By examining the topics of serious games, critical play, and persuasive games, I lay the foundation for how each game being examined offers a meaningful critique on perceptions of death and mortality and how audiences are eager to engage in content that is designed to consider death differently.

Chapter Three presents three case studies of the games just mentioned. In each case study, using the methodology of close playing to understand the “intersection of form, function, meaning, and action” (Edmund Chang) of each game, I examine each title’s representation of death, the designer’s framing of the subject, their discourse surrounding their design choices, and their intention of making the game. What then follows is the reception of each title: how critics reviewed them and their impacts on individuals. This close play analysis presents how each title is an effective form of meaningful death reflection, offering a unique perspective on death and mortality for players. These perspectives include reflection on one’s own personal mortality, the loss of a loved one, and our societal relationship with death.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many angles one can examine death within the videoludic medium; since the first games, there has existed a fail state—a way to lose. In videogames, there are various fail states, and a predominant method for communicating this is the death of the player avatar. This digital death has been the primary method for players to experience failure in videogames and, as a result, has created a new context for death that strips it of any weight or consequence. In the environment of specific videogame genres, the player is a harbinger of death, destroying and killing everything in sight, being killed multiple times in the process. This rinse and repeat cycle of death, although certainly entertaining, does not illustrate the capabilities of videogames to examine death from unique and meaningful perspectives. Recently, there has been a growing appreciation for videogames that examine and utilize death outside of the traditional videoludic norms, not only from a consumer perspective, but also academic. The rising interest in the death positivity movement has seeped into a surge of death positive gaming. “This growing cultural appreciation of the phenomenon of death has not left the world of the videoludic behind. We are in the midst of something of a mortuary gaming boom” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE*). The successes of death positive gaming have revealed the interest audiences have towards videogames that approach death differently. In this literature review, I aim to highlight the traditional use of death in videogames, our relationship to death as a Western audience, and how death positivity in gaming is changing the way we think about death, helping individuals cope with natural fears and anxieties towards death.

### Media's Representation of Death and Death-Denying Culture

Academics have described Western society as a death-denying culture. Discussions surrounding death and mortality are seen as taboo and very much avoided since entering modernity; “in an age of increasing secularization where God is seen to have departed or be dead” (Lee), there is little room to explore death. However, at the same time, there is an obsession with death and dying in the media. Keith Durkin documents this phenomenon in his paper *Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture*: “Although the United States is a death-denying society, Americans may be said to have an obsessive fascination with death and death-related phenomena” (Durkin 43). Contemporary Western society’s strange obsession with death in media has been a point of criticism by academics. The glorification, fetishization, and obsession with death and violence are ever-present, contributing to an incredibly skewed vision of death's realities. There is no modern medium that is not guilty of contributing to this obsession; movies, television, and videogames have all perpetuated this altered version of reality.

Pop culture is filled with examples of glorified, fetishized, and unrealistic examples of death. “Rather than being unspoken and unseen, violence in American life ha(s) become both visible in its pervasiveness and normalized as a central feature of dominant popular culture... Symptomatically, there is the mindless glorification and aestheticization of brutal violence in the most celebrated Hollywood films” (Giroux 60). Examples of this can be found in the film *Pulp Fiction*, *The Walking Dead* television series, and the *Doom* videogame series. Although these images of violence are not directly responsible for our skewed relationship with death, it is a symptom of and contributes to our death-denying culture's ideologies, fueling our separation

from realistic death. Because we are so separate from realistic depictions of death, one might argue that this contributes to our socioeconomic behaviors that seek to fly in the face of death.

Scholars have theorized as to the possible reasoning behind this strange relationship with death. One theory by Ernest Becker posits that our daily activities are motivated by an ever-present fear of death. In some way, we attempt to cheat death to establish some kind of permanent aspect of ourselves that stays around after we have passed on. He states, “The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count” (Becker). Many manifestations of this theory present themselves in the work individuals dedicate their lives to; “In Western societies, in particular, individuals tend to be preoccupied on notions of ‘production’ and ‘success’ which are measured through various metrics, such as promotions at work or the amount of economic capital an individual has at their disposal” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 16). This obsession with “success” has seeped into the very nature of our society over time and has promoted narcissistic qualities in individuals that make it difficult for them to see things through a more empathetic lens. “As all vestiges of the social compact, social responsibility, and modes of solidarity give way to a form of Social Darwinism with its emphasis on ruthlessness, cruelty, war, violence, hyper modes of masculinity, and a disdain for those considered weak, dependent, alien, or economically unproductive” (Giroux 13). Suppose the words of Becker and Giroux are accurate; in that case, these capitalist preoccupations are a common way in which individuals will not only try to keep a piece of themselves ever-present after death but continue to perpetuate their unhealthy relationship with it. If continued, we will

hang onto self-centered ideologies that will prevent us from nurturing healthy relationships with our own mortality.

Some theories are rooted in the modern individual's lack of experience with death, compared to that of their ancestors. Today, many people do not have an experience with death until their adult years, and even then, the handling of death is left to professionals. “Over the last fifty years in western Europe and America most adults between the ages of eighteen and forty have never stood at a deathbed, never observed the moment of death” (Tercier 221). What results is a society that is extremely curious about aspects of death and dying, and this fascination extends to the media consumed. “Our insulation from death causes us to crave some degree of information and insight concerning death, and we feed that craving through popular-culture depictions of death and dying” (Durkin 47). This “insulation” from death has created a void that entertainment has filled—“Institutionally repressed, death has been removed from the main arenas of life, only to be replaced by death as an entertainment form” (Schott 2). There is no shortage of ways modern audiences are exposed to subjects of death in the media they consume, however, many of these representations are through a glorified lens that indulges the fantasies of a dramatic or heroic death: one that results in saving the lives of others, or is a catalyst to a major investigation. The deaths portrayed in pop culture are rarely concerned with the average or mundane reality of death.

### Arguments Toward a Non Death-Denying Culture

Even though the argument of Western culture being primarily death-denying is the most dominant stance on the topic, some scholars argue the opposite; they argue that death in the

modern era has never been more prevalent and present in our media. Ernest Becker, the author of *Denial of Death*, is a central figure on the subject of death as a societal taboo. However, Bethan Michael-Fox highlights elements of Becker's argument that could be perceived as contradictory. "Becker's influential text, has explicitly stated that 'in philosophical and literary terms there has never been a denial of death'... In the twenty-first century death and the dead appear to have become so commonplace that they 'are ever-present and far from being denied, repressed or a societal taboo'" (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 167). The perpetual presence of death in art and media even today is undoubtedly a strong argument towards death not being a societal taboo. However, there are three elements that I believe to be contradictory to this argument. The first being the representation of death in modern media that is usually far and away from a realistic illustration. Just because death is ever-present in our media, it does not mean we fully understand it or are comfortable with it. The second is the way we culturally interact and talk about the subject of death. It is common practice to use various metaphors and platitudes when discussing those who have died; phrases such as "they have passed on" or "they went to be with our Lord" are indicative of the disconnect between how we portray death in media versus our discussion of real-world death. By actively repressing healthy discussion of death in media, it becomes increasingly possible for that repression to manifest itself in damaging ways, as seen in the ways mainstream media hide healthy grieving processes. The third being the shift towards more realistic death and a heavier focus on realistic death in recent films, television, and videogames. Examples include *The Good Place*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *American Horror Story*, and the latest Disney Pixar movie, *Soul*. There has been a noticeable rise in media interested in approaching death from more realistic, creative, and thoughtful perspectives. The rise of this type

of content is evident that not only is this something not explored extensively in previous media, but something audiences are interested in and engaging with in a meaningful way.

In the wake of academic writings and cultural acceptance of the death-denying stance of our culture and the prevalence of ‘unrealistic death’ portrayed in multiple mediums, there has been a shift in visual media (film, television, and videogames) that suggests death is becoming more of a topic that individuals are seeking and excited to think and talk about. This phenomenon can be found in what Bethan Michael-Fox terms the “Articulate Undead”. Recently, multiple television shows found on cable and streaming platforms have featured characters or groups of characters that are specifically identified as being dead. These forms of media handle death in ways unseen in the past and point towards an audience that is slowly growing more comfortable with the subject and exploring its various nuances such as: “what is our purpose in life”, “what happens after I die”, “how will I be remembered”. Each of these forms of media points towards the same direction. Just as there is a “mortuary gaming boom”, there is a similar rise in television and film.

The increase in media content that deals specifically with death and interacting with the dead indicates that we have begun to identify our problematic relationship with it. H.A. Giroux states, “death, fear, and insecurity have come to take precedence over crucial questions about what it means to apprehend the conditions to live a good life in common with others” (Giroux 102). Through watching and interacting with realistic and thoughtful representations of death whether it be film, television, or videogames, we can begin to construct a healthier relationship with it and improve our quality of life. Evidence of this occurring can be found in the various articles written about this kind of media content explicitly highlighting the messages of these

stories. For example, Alex Mell-Taylor's article *The Good Place Joyfully Embraces Death* and Phil Hoad's article *Why is Pixar so Brilliant at Death*. When media takes a unique stance on the topics of death, it is noticed. When done well, it does appear to leave a lasting impact on those who engaged with it.

### How We Engage with Death

The typical representations of death and dying we engage with through our media are indeed entertaining. However, they can damage our understanding of mortality and potentially further fears and anxieties towards death. "This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die" (Becker 87). Our creative capabilities in modern entertainment can afford us new ways to engage and interact with topics of death in ways not done before. Videogames can create engaging environments where player agency and interactivity can communicate meaningful representations of death to the player that actively help people sort through complicated feelings about death and their mortality. "It is worth exploring these games as they provide alternative modes of thinking about the meaning of being human, and offer insights on how to live better in the time we have left" (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 29). As we continue to exist in a culture that shields us from the realities of death, there will be an increasing desire to engage or interact with the subject as means of coping with mortality and pull back the curtain on what is hidden. To get a better understanding of how videogames can facilitate this type of engagement, I will first break down traditional depictions of death in videogames as it has been the dominant way game players have been exposed and

accustomed to interactive on-screen death. This type of death could be referred to as Non-serious death.

### Non-serious Death in Videogames

Death in videogames historically serves solely as a mechanic. It is failure communicated to the player by hindering their progress or forcing them to re-do a portion or all of the game. Systems are designed to help players keep track of how close they are to death; health containers/bars, lives, and rechargeable shields are implemented to let the player know how close they are to reaching a fail state of the game and subsequently being punished. This punishment towards the players is designed to help them learn and overcome the obstacle to continue the game. Perfect examples of this can be found in classic games such as *Galaga*, *Pac Man*, and *Super Mario Bros*. Death is such a common occurrence in video games; a player is rarely if ever, asked to meditate over their on-screen demise outside the context of how they can avoid repeating the mistake that put them there in the first place. The fleeting nature of death in games naturally makes it easy to overlook the aspects in which it can be used outside the perspective of a mechanic. In this section, I will continue to describe how death is traditionally utilized in videogames (through a Western lens), examples of influential games that break this mold, and the rise of the development of death positive games.

The consequences of death are something that game designers have extensively explored. It has been used to generate more revenue in arcades, give players a certain amount of tries before having to restart the game, or even glorifying fantasies of violence. Rarely (except for a few outliers) has a game utilized death outside the context of a punishment to condition the

player towards mastering the game. This persistent mechanical approach towards death has elicited attention from academics: “Until now, video games have tended to employ death as a mechanic (e.g., for a penalty, challenge or learning purposes) or as a narrative element in the story” (Nicolucci 193). “The argument is, in summation, video games don’t take death seriously. It is not death as a human experience, but death as merely so many quarters” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 51). Surely this is no surprise. Anyone who has played videogames past or present can relate to the passivity with which these games regard death and dying. However, this perspective of the trivial nature of death in games is largely through a Western perspective, focused on the “telos and a linear temporality. In a culture where death is a grim finality and where resurrection is only possible by the divine” (Mukherjee 1). It is worth noting that the traditional utilization of death and respawning can be examined from a much different perspective when viewed through the lens of eastern ideologies and religions, where “reincarnation is the norm rather than the exception” (Mukherjee 1).

Regardless of the cultural lens being used to examine the traditional use of death in games, a handful of historic and influential games take a different approach that makes the player “take death seriously” (GDC) through narrative. Some examples of these games include *Mass Effect*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Shadow of the Colossus*. These games combine elements of death as narrative and as a mechanic. In *Mass Effect* and *Final Fantasy VII*, character death influences both narrative and gameplay as the death of certain characters removed them from your team. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the player is led to reflect on whether or not they are performing heroic actions by killing the various colossi, eventually learning that they were murdering innocent

creatures. These games that encourage players to take death seriously led to highly impactful games that shaped genres and innovated narrative-driven games.

Although there are many games that take death seriously as mentioned above, it is not in the majority of how death is presented in games. The persistent use of “traditional” death in videogames has made it all but meaningless, arguably contributing to the recent boom of death positive games. In the wake of repetitious digital killing, small independent games started to pop up such as *A Mortician’s Tale* to serve as a breath of fresh air and a new perspective of what games can offer those interested in more “morbid” subject matter.

The successes of death positive games such as *A Mortician’s Tale*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, etc., shows how interested audiences are in approaching and talking about the subject in new and different ways. Games have a unique opportunity to delve into the discourse of death to large audiences in ways no other medium can. “Ultimately, I think the power of a game lies in its ability to bring us close to the subject. There is no other medium that has that power” (Brophy-Warren ). Here, the transformative potential of games shines through in dealing with the all too human fear of death or any anxieties surrounding mortality. “Players can become highly engaged, even transformed, when they inhabit avatars... Game designers are, in effect, molding our social milieu and the way we build ties with one another, as well as shaping how we see ourselves” (Isbister 87). Such an influential power can undoubtedly be utilized towards reshaping how we engage with death through media towards a healthier discourse on the subject.

Digital on-screen deaths can potentially hold the weight and significance of real-world death, as S. Lyons writes in *Imagining a Robot Death*. Lyon references famous science fiction

films such as *Blade Runner* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* that present death through the perspective of artificial intelligence. Here, questions such as “what does it mean to be alive?” and “what does it mean to die?” can be examined in new ways. Through these perspectives, we can infer that the unknown is what drives our fear of death. Schott succinctly describes it as follows, “a fear of death is not merely aroused through the potential for pain that is associated with the process of dying. Death, quite simply, is that which deprives us of life, and by that understanding we perceive death as a negative phenomenon” (Lyons). For many individuals who struggle with anxieties about death, the idea of what happens after we die is a horrifying thought to process. “Looking mortality straight in the eye is no easy feat. To avoid the exercise, we choose to stay blindfolded, in the dark as to the realities of death and dying” (Doughty ix). We go to great lengths to protect ourselves from the looming dark thoughts that may cross our minds day-to-day. Avoiding these thoughts will not cure our fears, “But ignorance is not bliss, only a deeper kind of terror” (Doughty ix). There is much we can learn by interacting and exposing ourselves to authentic representations and discussions of death.

Our entertainment can serve as an essential role in this, especially in Western cultures where we are perpetually shielded from the dead. Entertainment that bridges the gap between death and life after death can help us to make better sense of our mortality. Some examples in more traditional mediums include *2001 A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *The Good Place*. Outside of the traditional mediums, videogames are a natural medium for individuals to explore “life after death”, where agency, environment, and narrative meet to create a personal and impactful experience.

As mentioned earlier, these experiences are not found in all games. In the following section, I will analyze where these kinds of games can be found based on genre, narrative, emotional resonance, and what Mary Flanagan has famously identified as “Critical Play”. These topics illustrate how videogames are the ideal medium for dealing with death and mortality. Not only does engaging with death in games expose us to what our society shields from us, but it also helps individuals alleviate symptoms of death fear and anxiety.

### Genres, Narrative, and Emotional Resonance

Indeed, this new wave of death positivity in gaming is not videogames first foray in dealing with death in a more realistic or severe tone. There have been many games released over the past decades that have thoughtfully engaged with death not only narratively but mechanically as well. Some additional examples include *Planetfall*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *Jotun*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, and *Death and Taxes*. Each of these games has incorporated death outside of what is typical for a videogame. They have incorporated death into the narrative itself, which influenced and changed how the game is played. These games are not considered death focused or death positive games by any means, but they illustrate how meaningful utilization of death can capture audiences emotionally and empathetically. In this section, I will be presenting the ludo-narrative and mechanical qualities that makeup games that ask the player to “take death seriously”. Through utilizing Mary Flanagan’s definitions of “critical play” and a brief overview of the “narrative vs. ludology” (Clearwater 29) genre debate of game studies; one can identify the numerous qualities that constitute a “serious game”, that is, “a digital game used for purposes other than entertainment” (Susi et al. 1). These qualities are shared in each game being examined

in the following sections as they intend to positively affect how the player views death and their own mortality.

In her definition of critical play, Mary Flanagan compares game designers to other artists of different mediums; stating that the medium provides designers with various possibilities, limitations, and conventions. Critical play is a premise that allows for interpretation of games outside of the context of solely being forms of entertainment. In order for game developers to communicate their own expressions, depictions, or answers to the more serious topics of our lives that we are inevitably exposed to, it is essential that we as players are able to identify games that seek to do more than just entertain, where we “create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about the aspects of human life” (Flanagan 6). I believe this need for Flanagan’s definition of critical play is rooted in the fact that videogames are still a relatively young medium seen as a “diversionary activity”, where many generalizations and assumptions are made about what games can or cannot be. In the same vein, when dealing with the emergence of a new type of game, we must also establish genre as these games break the mold of the typical ludo-centric categorization of videogames.

To better understand these kinds of “death positive” games, or more broadly defined as “games that take death seriously”, we must be able to identify their shared qualities appropriately. In the field of game studies, there has been much debate regarding game genre, “Ludologists have argued that gameplay is paramount. The role of the player and his or her decisions and actions distinguish videogames from any other medium. Consequently, the medium is seen as being defined primarily through the concept of interactivity and simulation rather than interpretation and representation and such elements as rules, goals, and outcomes are

held to be more important or more central than story, character, theme or meaning” (Clearwater 29). Although the interactivity of the player is an apparent distinguishing factor of videogames as a medium, to maintain that definition of game genre would be a disservice to the games being examined here. It would not accurately describe what these games are and what they are communicating to the player. *That Dragon, Cancer* is not just an adventure game, and *Spiritfarer* and *A Mortician’s Tale* are not just management sims.

Further establishing what these games are by appropriately categorizing them based on their subject matter gives a much better representation of what these games stand for. “To consider these thematic differences as 'uninteresting ornament' might mean we would miss important details about the design and production of these games and how they are valued by their audiences” (Clearwater 33). Defining these games based merely on their gameplay mechanics does not provide audiences with enough information about what the game can offer them. Geof King and Tanya Krzywinska offer their own insight into a more successful system of defining videogame genre: “platform, genre, mode, and milieu” (King & Krzywinska). Through this method, games can be better defined by the experiences they provide players; not only does this help better define the wide range of subject matter videogames can encompass, but it also allows players to more accurately set their expectations for the game. “The strength of King and Krzywinska's system is that it takes into account very different aspects of a videogame that might be potentially useful for analysis and genre study” (Clearwater 36). Discussing games outside of entertainment and into the realm of games that seek to change the way we think or approach aspects of ourselves or society as a whole naturally leads to Persuasive Games as defined by Ian Bogost and Critical Play as defined by Mary Flanagan.

### Serious Games/Critical Play/ Persuasive games

In the following section, I will highlight Mary Flanagan and Ian Bogost's groundbreaking research to support my arguments for *That Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* posited in this thesis. Their definitions of “Critical Play” and “Persuasive Games” offer strong evidence toward the medium of videogames as a space where social, political, cultural, and personal themes can be uniquely considered and challenged by both designer and player. First, I will also distance my arguments from the study of “serious games” as that research is more closely tied with utilizing games for education based on “existing social and cultural positions” (Bogost). After broadly framing my perspective on what videogames are capable of through “critical play” and “persuasive games”, I will then provide detailed examples based on my multiple playthrough and analysis of the games listed above.

### Serious Games

When discussing videogames that intend to break away from the repetitive industry of AAA games and large-scale development and take on a more “serious” subject matter, multiple terms come up: serious games, art games, games for change, and social impact games. Each of these categories of games wants the audience to treat its subject matter with an additional level of seriousness that would traditionally not be expected in mainstream titles. However, there is an important distinction to make between these categories that is worth clarifying before proceeding. In this section, I will clarify the difference between these categories and establish which ones to keep in mind through each case study.

Scholarly research surrounding the topic of serious games may at first glance seem to be concerned with any game that may treat its subject matter as “serious”; however, its criterion is far more specific. The research of serious games has been mostly geared towards education and military simulation (Flanagan). In practice, this does not seek out to rethink or reshape perceptions or ideas of a given subject matter instead; it is focused on “create(ing) videogames to support existing social and cultural positions” (Bogost). Certainly, the subject matter these games and simulations are concerned with are serious. However, it is the possibility of fostering change that I am more concerned with.

That is where the other categories come in (art games, games for change, social impact games). These are the types of games that are primarily concerned with examining established societal standards or concerns, “to address real-world issues or to raise awareness and foster critical thinking” (Flanagan 224). These types of games have been very predominant in academic environments, only occasionally making their way to mainstream audiences. However, these games' influence has undoubtedly helped push forward the narrative that videogames can be utilized for far more than what is traditionally presented in the mainstream industry.

Although identified as independent games, *That Dragon, Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* have each taken a page from these types of games that seek to facilitate societal change and could certainly be defined as games for change or societal impact games. Each game is an example of how game studios and designers outside of the mainstream expand the possibility of games to invite players to critically examine how we view death.

In the following sections, I use the research of Ian Bogost and Mary Flanagan to frame the capabilities of videogames further and give context to how each examined game make their arguments.

### Persuasive Games

Ian Bogost seeks to define how videogames are persuasive through “procedural rhetoric”, breaking through the typical perceptions of videogames. He argues that their ability to persuade through “rule-based” representations uniquely places them in a category of rhetoric that cannot be achieved in other mediums. He presents his arguments on the power of persuasive games in three categories: politics, advertising, and educational learning. However, Bogost’s definition of persuasive games can be applied to any game that seeks to change its player’s perspective on a particular subject. “In addition to becoming instrumental tools for institutional goals, videogames can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change” (Bogost). In this section, I will apply Ian Bogost’s definition of persuasive games to each title being examined to illustrate the developer’s persuasive stance against societal attitudes towards death.

Bogost breaks down the definition of “procedural rhetoric” by first defining procedurality: “Procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes”, then defining procedural rhetoric as the “practice of using processes persuasively” (Bogost). In framing his argument for the power of procedural rhetoric, Bogost references Charles Hill’s essay *The Psychology of Rhetorical Images*, where he provides a chart of media that is ranked as “most vivid information” to “least vivid information” (Hill). In this chart, Hill

ranks “moving images with sound” just under the most vivid of information, which is “actual experience”. Through procedural rhetoric, videogames can create persuasive experiences that are more closely tied to experiences we have in the real world. Here Bogost argues that “these capacities would suggest that procedurality is more vivid than moving images with sound, and thus earns the second spot on the continuum, directly under actual experience” (Bogost). Because of this close relation to “actual experience”, the argument can be made that designers hoping to create a persuasive message about death can rely on the videogame medium to effectively engage the user and communicate their message.

The interactive nature and affordances of videogames are the catalyst that allows for these “vivid” experiences that can be so closely related to real-world experiences. “Interactivity guarantees neither meaningful expression nor meaningful persuasion, but it sets the stage for both (Bogost). *That Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer, and A Mortician’s Tale* each mount their own unique arguments towards our personal perspectives on our death and the death of loved ones. Through their established system of rules afforded to the player, each game successfully utilizes procedural rhetoric. *That Dragon, Cancer* uses tried and true mechanics such as collision detection, navigation, and user intervention to create a bond between the Green family and the player as they grow closer through Joel’s battle with cancer, creating an experience where players can question mortality. *Spiritfarer* uses management sim mechanics such as resource management, gathering, and crafting to foster deep relationships between the player and the various characters that board their ship; therefore, allowing players to ponder not only the impact those around them have but the impact they have on those they love. *A Mortician’s Tale* uses user input and basic puzzle solving to place the player in the shoes of a mortician who faces the

aftermath of death in various daily contexts; thus, leading to players questioning how the funerals of their loved ones will be handled and their own.

Through the lens of Ian Bogost's work, it is clear that videogames have the potential to offer incredibly persuasive experiences that are more closely tied to real-world experiences than other mediums. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is not necessarily achieved through a one-to-one representation of the real world; "Meaning in videogames is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world" (Bogost). *That Dragon, Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* each form their narrative around the specific relationship we have with death and construct an abstract world that supports that narrative. Just by looking at screenshots from each game, one can see that graphical realism is not their goal. Nevertheless, each title creates realistic representations of loss, the passing of loved ones, and death anxiety. These are powerful artistic experiences that encourage players to look at things differently, whether it be their place in the world or how loved ones have impacted their lives.

### Critical Play

In her book *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan defines how games can be utilized for "artistic, political, and social critique or intervention" (Flanagan). By covering a wide range of types of play from "playing house" to "critical computer games", Flanagan shows how playing games can extend far beyond the confines of entertainment and into "creative expression". In this section, I will be utilizing Mary Flanagan's definition and examples of critical play to illustrate how *That*

*Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer, and A Mortician's Tale* are strong examples of her definition and seek to change societal perceptions on death and mortality.

Flanagan establishes “artists’ games” as an alternative to the trends and forms of traditional mainstream games and a prime example of critical play in practice. There are many subjects large game studios do not even consider in their games for fear of how general audiences will receive them. Many studios have received negative reviews for their games due to their “play it safe” nature of their design. For example, the 2018 Ubisoft game *Far Cry 5* was reviewed harshly for its lack of social commentary on America’s obsession with religion and firearms, a core subject of the game. “It’s a timely story that could at least try to address the polarized nature of current American politics, or talk about the issues inherent in a country that seems to worship firearms. But I never saw anything that hinted at how these cultists were radicalized” (*Far Cry 5 Review - Polygon*). An artist game is a space where a designer freely shares their message, designing their games specifically to critique some aspect of society or the human experience, with the goal of encouraging players to look at a particular subject differently. *That Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer, and A Mortician's Tale*, being independent games, share some of the freedoms affiliated with artist games described by Flanagan. Each title has its unique message built directly into the very mechanics used by players to complete the game.

Expanding on her ideas of critical play, Mary Flanagan creates a variation of the traditional iterative design process called “the critical play method”, which “provides an effective model for designers and artists to use to engage in, and encourage, critical play in both game making and game playing” (Flanagan). By imbuing the iterative design process with the

explicit goal of critical play, developers can break free from traditional design practices creating gameplay that combines mechanics and message.

*That Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer, and A Mortician's Tale* are strong examples of how critical play, when utilized in the independent games industry, can meaningfully influence players, specifically on death as a mechanic and societal views on the subject. Critical play shows us what games can be as cultural artifacts that can vividly illustrate a particular subject and its place in a group of peoples or a society as a whole. According to Mary Flanagan, “the desired results are new games that innovate due to their critical approach, games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play” (Flanagan 261). As I will show in the following case studies, each game encourages critical thought during and after play.

## CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDIES

The games that I have selected for close examination are *That Dragon, Cancer* by Numinous Games (2016), *Spiritfarer* (2020) by Thunder Lotus Games, and *A Mortician's Tale* by Laundry Bear Games (2017). These titles represent what I think are highly effective and impactful representations of game designers moving away from the traditional use of death in games. Additionally, they utilize aspects of critical play and procedural rhetoric to create artistic and authentic death representation that offers players the opportunity for meaningful death reflection. These game's success is also an indication that audiences are interested in experiencing games that deal with such subject matter.

The methodology of my case studies rely on the act of close playing, which is playing a game to understand it's "intersection of form, function, meaning, and action" (Edmund Chang). More specifically how does each game make use of its elements of critical play and procedural rhetoric to mount their claims about death both personally and societally. To effectively "close play" each title, they were completed multiple times. The first playthroughs were to experience the games as naturally as possible, playing the games either at the pace designed by the developer or by what felt emotionally applicable in certain situations. This helped to avoid in-depth analysis that may hinder the intended experience of the designers. After allowing for time to process each game narratively and as an experience, I played them again, this time focusing on the methodologies of close playing:

careful and critical attention to how the game is played (or not played), to what kind of game it is, to what the game looks like or sounds like, to what the game world is like, to what choices are offered (or not offered) to the player, to what the goals of the game are,

to how the game interacts with and addresses the player, to how the game fits into the real world. (Edmond Chang)

After playing each game enough to feel confident that I had taken note and understood what I believed to be their core messages regarding death and mortality, I researched the developer's design intentions, their narrative goals, and player's response to the game. Time was spent reading scholarly journals, blog posts and transcribing many video interviews with the studio developers on their design intentions; these ranged from elements based on personal experience to experiences shared by the development team. I then moved on to the audience's reception of each game. This included reviewing game ratings, blog posts, user reviews, and feedback from communities that had experiences and/or were familiar with the subject matter being portrayed.

As stated in my introduction, each of the titles being examined are not concerned with the typical depictions of death in videogames; games where they “concern themselves with only part of the conceptualization of death. “Shooters, dungeon crawlers, fighting games... The play here is largely focused on giving death to others and not the experience of death” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 49). Each of these titles focuses on the experiences of death, the experience of others dying, and the consideration of what happens after death. Game scholars have noted a growth in games that consider death outside the realm of a mechanic, a trend of “death positive gaming” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 50). This trend is rooted in the death positive movement popularized by Caitlin Doughty, a movement dedicated to “de-stigmatizing the discussion of death and pushing against the death denial culture present in western society” (Zibaite). A wonderful result of the death positivity movement and concurrently the trend of

death positive games is the extended invitation for people to explore another possibility of interpreting death, an interpretation that can reduce fear or anxiety towards the subject.

The games examined here extend an invitation to the player to exist in a ludic space where personal thoughts on death are nurtured and encouraged. Should the player accept the invitation, multiple opportunities for meaningful death reflection present themselves, opportunities for the player to consider death and mortality differently. “It is worth exploring these games as they provide alternative modes of thinking about the meaning of being human, and offer insights on how to live better in the time we have left” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 28). Paolo Ruffino refers to a quality of life associated with environmentalism and the Anthropocene, but I believe the sentiment still applies to the personal reflection of our human mortality and how that reflection leads to a better-lived life. These positive reflections can reveal new appreciations towards life, or alleviate fears towards our personal mortality.

In each of these titles, I will be deconstructing their representation of death and highlighting the points of invitation, where the player can exist in these digital ludic spaces and reflect on what is being presented to them on screen. Each game will be analyzed in its own section based on my methodology listed above. The game will be analyzed based on my playthroughs, then by the developers' intentions, followed by the reception of audiences and communities affiliated with the subject matter of the game. The context in which death is portrayed in these games ranges from personal loss, metaphorical journeys, and the handling of the dead.

None of these games or future games regarding death should be expected to alleviate all notions of death fear or anxiety; however, each of them offers opportunities for death positivity

that can be a welcoming space to reflect and contemplate those fears. It is this consideration that I believe to be truly valuable to the betterment of individual life. Based on our societal norms of how death is discussed, treated, and hidden away from us, these games allow us space for critical thought on death rarely seen in the real world.

### That Dragon Cancer

*That Dragon Cancer* was developed by Numinous Games and released in 2016. The game is an interactive memorial to the developer's (Ryan Green) young son, who passed away from cancer at the age of five. The player joins the Green family through their experiences raising a son with cancer, a truly personal and intimate space for a player to enter. Each chapter of the game illustrates a standout moment for the Green's during Joel's treatment; everything from calm moments of play with Joel, inconsolable frustration, hopeful optimism rooted in faith, to the transition to palliative care. "This game stands in complete contrast to the function of death in games... The subject matter of the game is thus, on the one hand, unremarkable as the nature of the death is all too common and routine, but made remarkable on the other hand, by the manner in which the player is invited into the family experience and the intimacy it permits" (Schott 2). This intimate experience is a memorial to Joel where one can rest, reflect on death, and those who have battled cancer.

*That Dragon Cancer* is very upfront about the kind of game it is and what is waiting for the player at the end. The first scene opens on an aerial view of a pond, it is a sunny day, and green grass surrounds the body of water. The camera pans closer to reveal Joel feeding a duck. The camera shifts perspective again until it is clear that the player is controlling the duck. Sitting

on a bench behind Joel is his father; an audio recording is playing of the Green family's voices as they help Joel feed the wading ducks. The family is all there, Joel's mother and father as well as his brothers. This is an immediate indication to the player that they are entering into a very personal space, and by playing this game, they are here to be a part of this personal journey.

As the player moves from scene to scene, they are introduced to more of Joel's favorite activities and words, such as swinging on a swing set and saying "more". However, in each scene, ominous spiked orbs are ever-present, representing Joel's Cancer and his looming fate. A perpetual memento-mori reminding the player of Joel's diagnosis that he must carry with him and what you will be sharing in throughout the game.

During their Kickstarter campaign, Numinous Games allowed contributors to share the stories of those they have lost to cancer and memorialize them in the game. Much of those shared stories are gathered and presented in scene six, "Waking Up". Here cards populate the hospital counters and are hung on a string from one end of the room to the other. Each card can be opened by the player where they can read a message from a contributor paying tribute to those battling or who have battled cancer. The hospital walls are lined with paintings and pictures from contributors, some even including the footprints of the children they have lost to cancer. It is here that although the game is primarily a memorial to Joel, it is also a memorial to all those who have battled cancer. "Ultimately this is an expression, not just of Joel and not just a memorial of Joel, but to everybody who has had to endure this kind of loss" (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). By allowing others to contribute their own stories surrounding cancer *That Dragon, Cancer* becomes a collaborative experience built on shared grief.

At frequent intervals of the approximately two-hour playthrough, the player is assigned multiple perspectives to embody. The player is flung into the shoes of the people in Joel's life. Scene seven: *I'm Sorry Guys, It's Not Good* opens with the player waiting with the Green family in a doctor's office playing a See 'n Say with Joel while his parents sit anxiously on the next couch over. After a few rounds on the See 'n Say, the doctor and palliative care nurse enters to inform the Green family that Joel's condition is terminal.

At that moment, there is "a whole new vocabulary" (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). As the player moves to each perspective, multiple conversations and internal dialogue occur. The doctor estimating how much time Joel may have left, a hospital administrator explaining how good they are at end-of-life care, and Ryan and Amy's inner dialogue trying to process this new information. As the player moves from one character to the next, the room is quickly being flooded with water. Submerging everyone in the room, except for Joel, who boards a rowboat and floats above the all too heavy water; he is not privy to what is happening. At this point, if the player was clinging on to any chance of being able to change Joel's prognosis, it is made clear that won't be an option. The room continues to flood as the camera changes to a third-person perspective of Joel captaining the rowboat allowing the player to control him rowing around the room. The adults in the room are giants from Joel's perspective, clearly emphasizing the lack of control he has over anything happening. As the water continues to rise to consume the adults, it is shown that they too have no control. Trying to fight Joel's cancer would be to fight the ocean, an impossible task.

The player can delay the flooding of the room by using the See 'n Speak to rewind time and revisit the adults' perspectives in the room. By doing this, they can take the time they may

need to process the calamitous conversation. The weight of this scene is palpable as the player now knows there won't be much time left with Joel; each moment is fleeting.

This scene is a pivotal moment that comes late in the two-hour story; its placement an apt metaphor for the time that the player may have taken for granted with Joel. A player may be left wondering what moments have already passed where they could have taken another few moments to appreciate their time with Joel. Did they spend enough time with him in the park? Or in scene three, where you sit with Joel on your chest while he receives intravenous medication? They are certainly not to take any future moments for granted, as each is a space for meaningful reflection and a chance to get to know Joel a little better.

In those moments of quiet solitude with Joel is where Numinous Games shows the unique ability of videogames to invite the player to exist in a moment suspended in space in time. A moment where you are simultaneously idle but still actively engaging in thought and action, whether it be thinking about mortality while clicking on Joel to rock him back and forth or periodically clicking to stay present in a moment. There is no better example of this than in *That Dragon Cancer's final scene*, "Picnic at the edge of the world".

Scene fourteen titled: Picnic at the edge of the world, opens on a rowboat; Joel is at the helm looking forward towards an island. The water is calm, and there is a bird aboard with him controlled by the player. After listening to a loving and difficult letter read aloud from Ryan to Amy about Joel's passing, the rowboat arrives at a beautiful small green island. After the boat pulls up to shore, the camera changes to a character controlled first-person perspective, and Joel is nowhere to be seen. It could be argued that there is a perspective change here, it is very possible that the player is now controlling Joel's father or mother who was riding in the boat

with Joel. As the player moves through the island, they eventually arrive at a clearing where Joel can be found sitting down on a picnic blanket surrounded by giant pancakes and a dog. For the first time, Joel speaks coherently. He was never able to speak well, as the cancer caused various developmental issues. Joel says he is glad you are here and asks you if you want any pancakes as you move to sit with him. He then introduces you to his dog “Manju” (according to Ryan Green, Joel loved dogs). A bubble wand appears on the screen, clicking blows bubbles all around Joel, much to his delight. After a few moments of no interaction, the camera begins to pan away. At the same moment, an icon appears in the center of the screen, informing the player that they can still interact; they can go back and continue to sit with Joel. This was the moment that changed everything. That pulling in and out, that one click that gives you more time to spend with Joel, to say your goodbyes and blow a few more bubbles; that’s all the agency the player needs to stay suspended at that moment, to think and to reflect at their pace to be able to leave when they are ready. There is no other medium that can offer that moment. It is in those invitations to stay where a videogame can facilitate change. *That Dragon, Cancer* is a space where a person can journey and interact with a family through immeasurable pain and come out on the other side, having gained new insight on loss and death.

### Numinous Game’s Intention

When Numinous Games started production on *That Dragon, Cancer* amid Joel’s battle with cancer, the Greens didn’t know exactly what kind of story they would be making. However, their message was initially rooted in optimism, “when we started developing the videogame, we had seen a lot of these moments where it felt like God was answering our prayers. Where Joel

was responding in miraculous ways, and we thought as we started creating this videogame that we were going to be sharing with the world a testimony of a miraculous healing and this was our way of sharing that story” (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). As Joel’s diagnosis changed, so did *That Dragon, Cancer*; through the highs and crippling lows, the Greens created and shared a story subverting player expectation and provided a memorialized space where developer and player can converse through multiple perspectives about faith, love, and loss. In this space, players share in the love of a family and are invited to reflect on death, their possible fears about it, and maybe overcoming some of those fears.

Initially intended to be an installation art piece, the idea for the game came to Ryan after a particularly difficult time of trying to soothe Joel’s pain and discomfort. No matter what Ryan tried, nothing seemed to work; “There is a process you develop as a parent to keep your child from crying, and that night I couldn’t calm Joel... It made me think, ‘This is like a game where the mechanics are subverted and don’t work’” (Tanz). With this subversion of expectation in mind, Ryan Green began working with fellow developer Josh Larson on his family’s experiences caring for Joel. Ryan describes the game as a “point and click adventure... an expression of our family’s journey in the midst of that battle” (*That Dragon, Cancer - 2014 Interview with Developer Ryan Green*).

Small victories were a big part of the Green’s experience caring for Joel, and Numinous games wanted to communicate those small victories to the player. Throughout Joel’s treatment, the Greens had an immense amount of hope about the process. Every small achievement Joel made brought about a new level of appreciation about how precious life truly is; “I think what we found is that those years when Joel was sick were not as nearly as sad and desperate or scary

as we expected them to be. There was a lot of hope and a lot of joy, and you start to get a picture of the preciousness of life we simply didn't have before that. Everything Joel did was amazing to us because it wasn't a guarantee that he would do it. Any little words he said were amazing to us even though he never had more than a few words” (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). By including Joel’s small victories, the game begins to take on the form of a memorial to his life. *That Dragon, Cancer* is not just about Joel's battle with cancer; it is about Joel; his interests, favorite things, favorite words, love of dogs, etc. Memorialization in a game environment is where interactors can meet, interact, and form a bond with the memorialized. The Green’s wanted to invite players to fall in love with Joel. This memorial of Joel offers not only an incredible story about a family and their child but essential experiences about grief and mourning.

#### “If Every Hour Wounds, Let Us Sit A Minute” - Memorializing Everyone's Battle

In *That Dragon, Cancer*, there are multiple moments where the player is invited to rest in a space and, at times, required to rest in order to progress the game. Numinous Game’s use of this unique affordance to videogames allows for powerful moments of reflection and serves as a metaphor for the importance of acceptance and “moving on”. *That Dragon, Cancer* “is not a game that can be won, only experienced” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 253), and these moments serve the game well in properly memorializing those who have battled cancer and giving players time and space to think about death.

After Joel’s passing, and development transitions to a memorialization of his life, Numinous Games began a Kickstarter campaign to continue development. Included in the

campaign is the opportunity for backers to share their own stories and stories of loved ones and their battles with cancer. These stories were added into the game in two scenes, “Waking Up” and “Drowning”. In these scenes, players can spend a considerable amount of time reading through the notes and stories from other families. In “Waking Up”, hundreds of cards are scattered through the hospital rooms and hallways, each containing a sentence or two from someone with a unique experience with cancer. The cards contained love notes to those who have passed to words of encouragement for those battling cancer. In “Drowning”, messages are scattered across the sea in bottles. These bottles contain more detailed stories from families and their experiences with cancer. By including these messages, Numinous Games uses *That Dragon, Cancer* to create a memorial that extends further than just Joel's life but everyone who has battled cancer. These are significant moments of reflection; there is no urge to progress to the next stage of the game or any suggestion that the player could not or should not read each of the cards or bottled messages. In a sense, these scenes communicate an aspect of death we are very easily separated from in modern society. These scenes are a reminder that death is ever-present, and even though we might not see it is all around us. These moments are similar to those found in *A Mortician's Tale* and *Spiritfarer*; when commenting on subjects relating to death and mortality, it would appear that developers have adopted this affordance of rest as a necessity for players to process the weight of the subject.

There is a second implementation of “rest” in *That Dragon, Cancer* not shared in the other games being examined that relies on deliberate inaction to progress the game. It is this mechanic's implementation that brings weight and emphasizes the unique interactions that can occur in a videogame, especially ones handling the difficult subject of death. In the scenes “On

Hospital Time” and “Picnic at The Edge of The World”, the player must intentionally cease interacting in order for the game to progress. Ryan Green described this as a form of “giving up” in order to move forward. “Throughout the videogame, there is a mechanic that repeats where you have to give in to rest to move on, there is this impulse to make the right choice or fix it or do better or continue or fight but before you can move on you just kind of have to rest, and you have to kind of give up in order to move forward. The game ends that way too. If you wanted to blow bubbles for Joel, you could blow bubbles for Joel forever. But eventually, you have to stop because in life you have to stop” (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). This provides players with a level of agency accessible to videogames; the player controls the pacing. They can inhabit and interact with a space for as long as they please, and they are able to move on when they are ready. We often do not have this luxury in the real world. Celebrations, tragedies, and events all happen whether we are ready for them or not; inside a videogame is different though, we do have control. Games like *That Dragon, Cancer* can prepare us for inevitable events we might not be prepared for because we were able to take the time to experience them at our own pace.

Even with this level of agency over the game's pace, the player still has limitations over the outcome of the game. No matter what the player does (besides staying in one place indefinitely), Joel will pass away by the game's end. There is no action or alternate path a player can take to change the outcome of the story, and the tone of the game communicates the inevitable very clearly to the player. Of course, being a memorial to their child, Ryan and Amy wouldn't want to create a fictional narrative surrounding their child's battle with cancer. However, this limited level of agency is very intentional in communicating the experiences

surrounding cancer. “That's what fighting cancer is like... no agency, no control” (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*).

*That Dragon, Cancer* is an intimate exploration of a family's experience that they invite players in to be a part of. The Green family wanted to actively encourage players to engage in a dialogue with them and a dialogue with death. This dialogue was an essential part of the development process for Ryan Green, who advocates a videogame's ability to create conversations between developer and player. “Videogames are a conversation between the designer and the player, where the designer is trying to tell the player something. And they do that by giving them little bits of information at a time that builds on each other. So once you establish that vocabulary, that language, between designer and the player, there is this invitation to play, to challenge, to learning, and to mastering. At every step of that way, there is an opportunity for the designer to tell the player something and the player to tell the designer something.” (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*). In an interview about the game, Josh Larson, a developer of Numinous Games and close friend of the Greens, stated, “Part of our goal with TDC is to draw players in through this immersive experience and have them confront their own fear of death and try to overcome it” (*That Dragon Cancer Interview - How the Passing of Joel Green Affected the Game*). This dialogue with players is an honest one about death and tragedy; it is in stark contrast to the usual ways death is presented in the media. *That Dragon, Cancer* helps push forward and sheds light on the desire we have to engage with honest and realistic representations of death.

The work of Linser et al. on “the Magic Circle” (Linser and Ree-Lindstad) points to what makes *That Dragon, Cancer* an accessible experience for all instead of those who have had

experiences with cancer. The “porous” nature of game environments is what allows *That Dragon, Cancer* to be so effective. “The use of that single word allows entry to a space of play that is not separate from the activity at hand, meaning that a player is able to both feed into and take from gaming environments automatically and willingly” (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 259). Numinous games developed *That Dragon, Cancer* specifically with its social context in mind, and included them in the game as seen in the scenes “On Hospital Time” and “Drowning”, as well as including the photographs of Joel and the Green family in the credits of the game. In order for *That Dragon, Cancer* to be as effective as possible, it needed to include these elements outside of the game world, elements from reality, that keep the player ever-present to the realities of the Green’s experience and the experiences of families all over the world.

### Reception

*That Dragon, Cancer* was received with critical acclaim, winning the “Games for Impact Award” at the 2016 Game Awards and the “Award for Innovation” at BAFTA 2017. Audiences have praised Ryan and the Green family for the immense amount of bravery it took to create such a personal space and then invite others to be a part of it. PAX co-organizer Mike Krahulik wrote, “(he) has encoded the experience, his actual experience, of being a father to a son doctors tell you will not and cannot live. It is an act of incredible bravery to collect it at this level of emotional ‘resolution,’ and we talked for as long as I could possibly spare about what it is to be a believer in God in the world we have been given” (Tanz). Many players have walked away with similar sentiments, the overall reaction being that they are glad they played the game and

experienced what it had to offer. Numinous Games have impacted many through *That Dragon, Cancer*, and succeeded in their goal to get people thinking about life and death differently.

The audience of *That Dragon, Cancer* praises the game for its ability to bring the player close to the Green's emotional, familial experience, one player stating that "Every moment of this game it feels like it was made with love and passion" (Steam user). This emotional journey affected many players who left reviews sharing their own personal experiences with cancer and how much *That Dragon, Cancer* meant to them. Players also shared how the game moved them to tears multiple times as they grew close to Joel throughout the game and experiencing what he went through was difficult.

Not only did *That Dragon, Cancer* affect people emotionally, but it also served as a reminder that games can go further than the non-stop action and photorealistic graphics we see in multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns for triple-A titles. Games as a medium are capable of delving into metaphysics; "Amidst all the plasma guns and power-ups, it can be easy to overlook the fact that videogames are inherently metaphysical exercises" (Tanz). This is not new information, but it can be easy to forget in the current industry. It is the small independent games that remind us just how effective games can be. Ryan Green was well aware of this potential videogames have and leveraged that to tell his family's story, "I see videogames in a very spiritual and metaphysical way because I feel like as videogame designers we get to create worlds and invite people into it. One of the things I like to say is that we got to create a world and I got to place my son in it, and I asked you to love him and let that love change you" (*Interview With Ryan & Amy Green*).

Although the game was mostly met with positivity, support, and praise from fans and others who have experienced cancer in some capacity, the Green family was still met with criticisms about their decision to make a game about Joel. Critics accused the Green family of trying to make a profit off the death of their child. Some have perceived the game to be insensitive to Joel's death and even accused them of being self-pitying in search of attention. These are all absurd claims of course, but these responses are rooted in the complicated relationship with death we have created in contemporary culture. It can be difficult for people to engage with a true portrayal of death that is deeply personal as it gets to a very core fear about being human, acknowledging our mortality and the uncertainty of what happens after we die. Our modern relationship with death can misconstrue its honest representations, shielding ourselves from important metaphysical exercises. Jenn Frank remarks poignantly on TDC and how the subject of the game is by nature difficult, but optimistic as well, "We will all meet this thing, or have already met it," she wrote. "Maybe that should be scary, but *That Dragon, Cancer* is about sustaining the hope and joy of life for just as long as we can." (Tanz).

*That Dragon, Cancer* is a reprieve from the usual depictions of death not only in videogames but mainstream media as a whole. It touches on fundamental human questions regarding death and the afterlife. The popularity and reception of titles like *That Dragon, Cancer* shows that audiences are interested in interacting with titles that examine death and allow them to get close with it as a subject. Death has been a difficult topic for the modern individual, but now as we are shielded from the realities of death, we need games like *That Dragon, Cancer* to share in experiences that can help us cope when we experience the inevitable. "The questions *That Dragon, Cancer* is asking... are the kind of spiritual and existential quandaries that have

haunted humanity since Job: Why are we here? Can we influence our fate? What kind of God would allow such suffering? How do we endure the knowledge that we, along with everyone we have ever met and loved, will die?" (Tanz). This is a game of overwhelming personal loss, by allowing players into such a sensitive space. Numinous games is providing a unique opportunity for the player to participate in the shared grief of the Green family. The act of sharing in this grief is a form of meaningful death reflection that allows an individual to get closer to the subject we are consistently concealed from.

### Spiritfarer

Spiritfarer, designed by Thunder Lotus Games and released in August of 2020, is described by the dev team as a “cozy management game about dying” (NYMG). Taking place in the underworld of Greek Myth, the player controls Stella, a young girl who is taking over Charon’s job as “spiritfarer”. Accompanied by her cat Daffodil, Stella adventures through the river of Styx, picking up various spirits aboard her ship and helps them prepare to move on into their final resting place in the spirit world. “Your goal... is to convince them (the spirits) that it is okay to go. That their life on this earth is over” (*Spiritfarer* | *Interview w/Jo-Annie Gauthier* | *PAX East 2020*). Through labor, compassion, and closure, *Spiritfarer* becomes an environment where players can wrestle with their own questions about death and the impact we leave on each other’s lives.

In modern Western society, it has become commonplace for someone to have their first experience with death until they are a teenager, and in some instances, not even until adulthood. This can make it difficult for individuals to process the death of those they know, from close family members to a friend they wished to have grown closer to. *Spiritfarer* condenses elements of those experiences into small personal relationships with fictional NPC characters. Katherine Isbister argues for the emotional potential of players engaging with NPCs, “Avatars and NPCs allow players to identify and engage in new ways, awakening different kinds of emotions that designers use not just for entertainment, but also for encouraging the deep awareness that travels alongside agency—a feeling of responsibility and of the complexity of relating to other beings” (Isbister 56). The player is informed from the beginning of the game that these relationships with the spirits are only temporary, that they will move on when they are ready. Through these short

and personal relationships, Thunder Lotus Games has created a grieving simulator where the player can experience (to some extent) loss and be exposed to the process of grieving.

Each spirit encountered is a colorful and animated portrayal of a wide range of personality types. Just like people in the real world, these spirits have their own personal struggles, hopes, and fears that they must sort through before passing on into the afterlife. Every action you take as Stella is a labor of love to those on your vessel. Each meal you prepare and each item you craft to make the spirit's stay on your boat more comfortable is significant, it brings you closer and strengthens your relationship with each character. That closeness allows them to open up to you about their lives; that is until they let you know they are ready to move on and leave through the "Everdoor". The Everdoor is a portal found under a bridge in the River Styx. The bridge is designed to resemble the Rakotzbrücke Azalea in Rhododendron Park Kromlau in Gablenz, Germany. The reflection of the bridge in the red water forms a full circle, creating a doorway for the spirits to pass through. As the player prepares to board the rowboat that takes the spirit to the door, the other spirits of the ship gather to bid farewell to their fellow passenger. As the player approaches the Everdoor, there is a moment where everything stops; it is not until the player moves Stella forward to give the spirit one last hug that they watch them pass away into the afterlife. It is here where players can find a unique cadence playing *Spiritfarer* where grieving but accepting the loss of those aboard your ship is essential to the progress of the game.

The other games being examined are largely focused on death from an outside perspective; death taking place in the real world and the effect it has on those still alive. Death in *Spiritfarer*, however, is from a more hypothetical or metaphysical stance of what is waiting on

the other side of death. This change in perspective shapes how labor, suspension, and interactive compassion takes form for the player.

Thunder Lotus uses laborious game mechanics to create meaningful connections between player and character. Through ritualistic interactions based on a character's preferences, a comradery is forged. These player-character relationships continue to blossom the more "labor" they complete for the spirit. Even the various upgrades the player makes to Stella's ship is for the sole purpose of being able to better provide for those on board. Expansions to the ship's size allow the player to invite more spirits on to the ship as well as construct more facilities for crafting and resource gathering. Improvements to the boat's speed allow the player to complete requests made by the spirits and gather resources even faster. Hull upgrades allow the player to travel to various locales in the underworld that allow them to reach even more spirits to help.

Preparation is a major theme throughout the game. From cooking, crafting, building, gathering, etc., each action is to benefit one of the spirits on your ship, contributing to the preparation of their journey into the afterlife. Multiple perceptions of death present themselves through the characters and their struggle with coming to terms with their fate. Some spirits are scared, and others approach their passing with poise and confidence. It is through your active labor alone that these characters are able to leave; however, it is not required for the game to continue. Without user action, the day and night cycles of the game proceed, certain NPCs continue to change their location, and the spirits reside comfortably in your ship. There is no loss state in the game.

From a mechanics perspective, there is no way to "lose" in *Spiritfarer*. At no point in the game will a player ever encounter a game over screen. However, a player can "feel" that they are

failing by not satisfying the needs of the spirits. This “feeling” of failure is something quite unique to games, “the fundamental difference between tragedy in games and stories is that in stories we never feel responsible for failure and suffering; in games, we do” (Juul 112). It is this responsibility that drives the player forward, the desire to help the spirits, to form bonds with them, and do what is necessary to help them prepare for their final journey into the afterlife. This in-game act can be directly translated into the process of saying goodbye to a loved one before they pass.

*Spiritfarer* is through and through a game of labor and compassion; it is the intentional element of this labor that allows the player to forge meaningful relationships with the spirits and cope with the loss of loved ones. Repeatedly experiencing the departure of characters that you grow close with exposes players to healthy processes of grieving.

As in the other games being examined, *Spiritfarer* offers players moments of rest and reflection, where they can be suspended in a moment in time until their input continues the game. There are two recurring scenes in which the player can take advantage of this: the passage to the everdoor and the makeshift memorials that the spirit’s rooms become after they leave.

Once the player completes enough of a particular spirit's requests, they will inform Stella that they are ready to go through the everdoor. Once the ship arrives outside the everdoor, the other spirits gather around the rowboat that Stella and the departing spirit must board to get to the actual door. This is a nice touch by Thunder Lotus Games to have the rest of those aboard the ship say goodbye to the departing spirit, akin to family and other loved ones gathered around the bed of someone who is soon to pass. As you leave with the departing spirit on the rowboat towards the Everdoor, the spirit shares with you their appreciation for your help and their

thoughts on their journey. Once you arrive, there is a suspended moment in time, where nothing happens until the player moves Stella toward the spirit. Here in this moment, the player is invited to reflect, to take the time they may need before proceeding. Similar to *That Dragon, Cancer* and *A Mortician's Tale*, the player is allowed to rest in ludic space. They are encouraged to take in the moment, accept it, and take action to move on, as we all must do at some point.

Thunder Lotus Games is emulating personal experiences and guiding players through the grieving process. These moments from games like *Spiritfarer* are proving just how far a game can go to provide emotionally enlightening scenarios. "Game designers can viscerally explore cultural issues... or help players deeply experience an emotional and social scenario that intrigues them... game designers are really only beginning to explore how to use these capacities to create rich emotional experiences" (Isbister 56). The more developers like Thunder Lotus Games create experiences such as these, the further videogames can develop in creating unique and rich emotional experiences that are less often encountered in the real world.

The grieving process in *Spiritfarer* does not end there. The second recurring scene can be found after returning to Stella's ship. Players can find the departed spirit's room filled with flowers, becoming a makeshift memorial. Each spirit's room is adorned with decorations that are unique to their own personal interests. Here the player can return as often as they may choose to pay their respects. Additionally, resource collection events are triggered by passing through certain areas of the underworld. These events are introduced and taught to the player by one of the various spirits. After those spirits have passed and one of the collection events can be triggered, the player must go to the house of the spirit to begin the event. Again, Thunder Lotus

Games is emulating an aspect of grief, visiting the gravesite of someone who has passed away as well as recalling the departed when participating in activities that remind you of them.

The underworld in *Spiritfarer* is a beautiful and idyllic locale, where everyone has the opportunity to take the time they need in order to properly prepare themselves for the journey beyond. That, however, would not be a realistic portrayal of loss in the real world. An unfortunate part of reality is not getting the opportunity to say goodbye to those who mean the most to you before they pass away. Thunder Lotus incorporates this into the character story of Atul, Stella's paternal uncle. Atul hides some personal familial baggage from Stella that he is not able to overcome in order to make the journey to the ever door. Since Atul is unable to cope, he decides to leave the ship without saying goodbye and is never seen again. This served two purposes, the first explaining some of Stella's back story, and the second emulating the departure of someone before you are able to say goodbye. Each spirit that boards your ship in *Spiritfarer* represents a unique relationship that players can potentially relate to.

As mentioned before, modern society has crafted a strange relationship with death where we are immersed in it through media yet distanced from it in reality. *Spiritfarer* utilizes a traditionally laid back and relaxing genre of videogame (management sim) to communicate serious themes of death. This juxtaposition resonates with the work of Matt Coward-Gibbs, who put together the *Death and Culture Network* Annual Symposium specifically focused on "the realms of the once-removed from death" (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 18). In this work, activities of leisure can be utilized to work through the topics surrounding death. *Spiritfarer*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* are all part of a wave of death-positive games that encourage players to think about death and dying.

## Thunder Lotus Games Intention

Each title developed by Thunder Lotus Games has been concerned with taking an atypical look towards death in the videogame medium. Their titles before *Spiritfarer* (*Jotun* and *Sundered*) made interesting approaches to death as a mechanic, however in *Spiritfarer*, they wanted to try something new. “We are a very weirdly death focused studio... I think we tried to depart from death as a mechanic and as a violent thing and move more into acceptance of death and how it can be a positive thing” (*Spiritfarer* | *Interview w/Jo-Annie Gauthier* | *PAX East 2020*). This focus on positivity reaches into each level of the game's development.

Although dealing with heavy subject matter, positivity shines through *Spiritfarer* not only through the interactions with the characters but aesthetically as well. The underworld, as portrayed by *Spiritfarer*, is a near idyllic environment with bright and beautiful colors, each location more visually striking than the last. The characters are hand-drawn and animated, each displaying their own unique behaviors. One would be hard-pressed to determine the somber nature of the game just by looking at it. The artistic team pulled much inspiration from Yoshida Hiroshi, a renowned wood-block artist, “He did a lot of amazing scenery paintings. What he did was go to every place he wanted to visit and paint... it was a huge gift in how to capture the beauty of nature in a more simplistic way than a photo would” (*Spiritfarer* | *Interview w/Jo-Annie Gauthier* | *PAX East 2020*). The art not only counter-balances the heavy subjects of death but helps to frame death in an entirely new light. This directly facilitates the death positive nature of *Spiritfarer*. They are communicating through the art that death does not have to solely be associated with sadness, fear, or anxiety. Death can be celebrated and seen as a positive experience alongside those emotions. “Having *Spiritfarer* be bright and bubbly gives back that

hope to me. My goal was to feel at ease to make the player feel that death is not the end of the world. Yes, it is sad, it's okay to mourn, but the people who have passed have had an impact on you and the impact that should be positive" (*PAX West 2019 Interviews*).

As a player, sadness is mixed with peace, knowing that the characters you are spending so much time with are happy to be moving on to their final journey in the afterlife. Since death is perpetually on the mind while playing, Nicholas Guerin, the creative director behind *Spiritfarer*, wanted to make sure that players didn't walk away with a negative experience or outlook towards death, saying he wanted the game to be a "positive take on saying goodbye to people" (*Spiritfarer Developer Interview at E3 2019*). Guerin wanted to focus specifically on the impact left on us by those who have passed on and think about the impact we will have on those we have to eventually leave behind.

This emphasis creates a bond with the spirits that are reminiscent of familial relationships. With the characters being so uniquely different from one another, a player may easily relate these in-game relationships to their out of game relationships. Sailing the underworld with a handful of spirits is very conducive to living with a family. The reason being that many of the characters are, in fact, based on members of the dev team's relatives who had passed away. "Many of the characters are inspired by relatives of team members... there is tons of personal investment into the game" (*Spiritfarer Developer Interview at E3 2019 3*). Creating a strong bond with the NPCs of *Spiritfarer* is essential to the desired experience of them departing through the spirit door. If the characters the player travels with are not engaging or reflect some aspect of the player's reality, they would not be able to elicit the desired emotional response.

## Reception

Being the most recently released game in this list, *Spiritfarer* does not have the volume of sources documenting the reception of the game that the other titles do. However, *Spiritfarer* has already garnered much attention for its perspectives on death and has been reviewed favorably across the board by users and online publications. The positive reception and response in the current market shows that audiences are interested in games that are centered around reflecting on death and dying.

Many online publications, such as Polygon, have spent large portions of their review considering the importance and impact of the subject that *Spiritfarer* is dealing with. Nicole Carpenter remarks on the weight of dealing with realistic death in a videogame, “Death is natural. It’s inevitable and unavoidable. It’s also crushing, scary, and complex. I can understand why most video game developers would choose not to address these realities: a first-person shooter would be an entirely different game if the bodies didn’t simply disappear into the ether as more and more pile up” (*Spiritfarer Review: A Game about What’s after Death - Polygon*). In an environment where the majority of titles involve constant violence and killing of any kind, any game that enters the scene with a different approach to death will cause for pause. Published reviews like the above illustrate the interest audiences have for games like these.

It is worth acknowledging that a potential reason for *Spiritfarer*’s extensively positive reception is due to the timeframe in which it was released. During the month of its release in August 2020, the world was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic where people were staying indoors social distancing, unable to spend time with their loved ones. Sadly, this also meant an increase in the passing of friends and relatives. During this time of separation and loss, many

found comfort in the mechanics of *Spiritfarer*. Players were able to hug characters and be present with them when they moved on, serving as a useful method to cope with such difficult times. Published reviews also emphasized the game's timely release: “The craving for physical affection is poignant, after many of us have gone months without being able to hold our loved ones” (Clark). “I played *Spiritfarer* at a time when I could not ignore death; in the middle of a pandemic that has killed (and continues to kill) numbers of people I can hardly comprehend” (*Spiritfarer Review: A Game about What’s after Death - Polygon*). Although *Spiritfarer* would have still reviewed well outside of such a context, it is certainly worth keeping that in mind when reflecting on the nature of the game.

### A Mortician's Tale

*A Mortician's Tale* made by Laundry Bear Games is a short one-hour game about working at a funeral home heavily inspired by the book *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* by Caitlin Doughty. The player controls Charlie, the new funeral director for Rose and Daughter's funeral home, a small family-owned business struggling to stay open. Focusing specifically on the death industry of Western society, *A Mortician's Tale* challenges players to participate in the practices of Western funeral homes and directly questions the industrial nature of the practice. It is praised as the "definitive death positive game" (*DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE* 231) for its close ties to the death positivity movement, established by Caitlin Doughty in 2011. *A Mortician's Tale* critically examines the death industry and death as a human experience in the ludic space; not only giving players a look into the business of funeral homes but actively encouraging players to question these practices and consider how they want their own death to be handled. Again, just as in the other games being examined, *A Mortician's Tale* allows players to rest and reflect, serving as another ideal example of subverting death mechanics. Instead of the player doling out death or repeatedly dying, they are tasked with caring for the dead and those they have left behind.

*A Mortician's Tale* is a game of little choice; in fact, the player is never allowed to make decisions on how Charlie does her job except for some scenarios where they are allowed to opt out of handling a body due to extenuating factors. Emails are your primary method of communication with the owner Amy Rose, colleagues, and friends. Each day begins by checking Charlie's emails, getting caught up on newsletters from "Funerals Monthly" and receiving your tasks for the day. The bodies must be prepared in various ways for their funerals, whether it be

preservation using formaldehyde or cremation. Each day comes with its new business developments and bodies.

The art direction of the game shies away from realism to be more approachable by using a cartoon art style for the environments and characters. Although cartoon looking, the player utilizes the real tools and methods used by morticians during gameplay. During each of the body preparations, the camera changes to a top-down perspective with the individual laid out in the center surrounded by the tools and chemicals necessary for proper preservation. When preparing a cremation, the body is placed in a box and the player must remove jewelry or pacemakers from them before pressing the button that rolls them into the furnace. After, the player places the bones into the cremulator to then be transferred to an urn. Each body is prepared following the wishes of the deceased or their relatives. Even with the cartoon art style, there is a heaviness felt when handling the deceased. The emails from their relatives invokes compassion, the game asks the player to look past the body in front of them and see the person they were. Some familial relationships are bit more complicated; mirroring the real world, there are many ethical dilemmas when the wishes of the deceased's relatives contradict those of the deceased. This sets up the player to scrutinize these moments and wrestle with their limited agency over these circumstances, acknowledging the ethical questions raised.

One scenario in particular involves the son of a family who has committed suicide. In his letter he specifically states that he wants to be cremated. However, he never took the necessary legal action for that to happen and his family held full control over how his body is handled. Unfortunately, the family does not follow his wishes stating, "he wasn't in the right mind" and decide on a standard burial. Amy Rose asks Charlie if she is comfortable handling this body and

the player can either accept the task or reject it. This is a crucial statement from the designers about what *A Mortician's Tale* is supposed to be. The important part is not primarily that the player handles every single body, it is that they analyze and reflect on the scenarios being presented before them. What are the ethical dilemmas that frequently occur in the death industry, and what are we doing to truly honor the wishes of the deceased?

Laundry Bear Games takes this a step further by presenting even more scenarios to the player through the in-game newsletter titled "Funerals Monthly". One particular email discusses the unethical treatment and misgendering of trans people after they have passed, and how the forms and procedures that are put in place do not appropriately accommodate them. It makes clear many factors the general public most likely are not privy to about body processing. The game explains, "there have been notable situations where trans women have had their wishes overruled by their families, and have had their hair cut, are buried under the wrong names, and subjected to the wrong pronouns in their obituary announcements" (Laundry Bear Games). The newsletter continues by including the requirements listed by the CDC's handbook on Death Registration, "enter male or female based on observation. Do not abbreviate or use other symbols. If sex cannot be determined after verification with medical records, inspection of the body, or other sources enter "unknown"" (Laundry Bear Games). Through these presentations of scenarios and ethical dilemmas, Laundry Bear Games communicates its core message and sheds some light on how much of the death industry is shielded from the general public. Most notably, the game itself is an explanation of why the death industry escapes so much reform and accountability for their actions. Many people will never have to encounter these scenarios until

they themselves have to handle the funeral arrangements of a loved one, and even then much of the process is never explicitly explained to them.

As the player progresses through the game, more emails from the owner of the funeral home arrive. She informs Charlie that she is concerned about her ability to keep the business running and may have to sell. Eventually, the owner is forced to sell her funeral home to a large corporation. In the eyes of this new corporate entity, the dead are correlated with profit margins, a means to an end. Charlie continues her work for the new owner and soon begins to question the ethical practices of this corporation. In the final scene of the game, after continued ethically questionable decisions, corporate greed, and the departure of co-workers, Charlie decides to open her own funeral home that offers environmentally friendly solutions for burials such as natural burials and tree pod burials. Charlie's business is shown in an open area behind the building where people are burying their loved ones themselves into the ground. Their graves are lined with stones and small saplings are used as headstones. Charlie's journey through these jobs leading to the opening of her own business showcases the various tenets of the death positivity movement. From a narrative perspective, the game hopes to get people interested in the death positivity movement, however from a mechanical point of view, *A Mortician's Tale* shares similar elements with the other examined games.

Laundry Bear Games periodically gives players the opportunity to reflect on their time in the shoes of a mortician, personal mortality, and the death of those around you. Since the perspective of the game is directly through the eyes of a mortician, players come face to face with the jarring experience of how we handle our dead. When the bodies are brought to Charlie, the player is not required to rush through the process of preparing the body for the funeral and

burial. These scenes invite players to ask questions: How will I want my body prepared when I die? Will my family honor my wishes? What effect does this have on the environment?

Questions that may never even cross our minds until we see first-hand what happens after we die. The player can take their time through the process, maybe answering some of their questions and forming their own opinions of the process.

After each body is prepared for their funeral, the player moves to the viewing room where they attend the ceremonies and express condolences to the families and even pay respect to the deceased. The viewing room is a simple room adorned with simple decorations. Small potted plants are placed in the corners of the room, framed pictures are hung on the wall, refreshments for those grieving, places to sit, and a bible rests on a lectern in one of the corners. On the far side of the room is where the deceased's body or ashes are displayed. Inside this room, the player is allowed to stay for as long as they like, listen in on the conversations of friends and family and take everything in. Again, the environment itself evokes questions from the player; how many people will be at my funeral? How will my remains be presented? What will people talk about? The player can take the time to ponder on any questions that may come to mind as they are attending the funerals before leaving to start the next day and repeat the process again.

Each passing day is a look into a different preparation of a body and a different familial dynamic that may offer more considerations to be mindful of when thinking about our own death or the funeral of a loved one. As the days go on, the player becomes more familiar with the routine of preparing each body, which hopefully leads them to the realization of just how frequent death is and the various aspects of it we are shielded from on a daily basis. Out of the

games being examined, *A Mortician's Tale* is the most realistic in terms of the real-world implications of death. Death is an incredibly frequent occurrence, but each death has a story tied to it; the bodies that arrive daily at the morgue each had their own stories, experiences, and hopefully loved ones. This game offers the truly unique and sobering opportunity for players to look at their life from the perspective of where we will all end up one day, in a morgue, where a mortician will prepare our bodies and our loved ones will bury us and say their goodbyes. This is something we all must come to terms with, and *A Mortician's Tale* shows us that instead of running away from our inevitable death, if we accept it and clearly define how we want our body to be handled, we make the whole process not only easier for ourselves but easier for our loved ones as well.

#### Laundry Bear Games Intention

*A Mortician's Tale's* first iteration as a game existed as a prototype made in Pico-8 designed by Gabby DaRienzo (co-founder of Laundry Bear Games). Gabby was someone who struggled with severe death anxiety and was able to overcome it through playing videogames that did interesting things with death. After receiving funding, Gabby was able to put a team together and begin development on a larger scale version of the game designed in Unity. Laundry Bear Games wanted to make a game rooted in the death positivity movement that not only taught people about the Western funeral industry but confronting and hopefully overcoming death anxiety as well. "I was really into the idea of creating a videogame about the western death industry specifically where players could directly interact with those themes. And my goals were to encourage players to learn something about certain process behind cremation and burial but

also learn about the western death industry as a whole... one of our sub goals too, was that maybe we could encourage people who have death anxiety to maybe comfortably overcome it like I did with *Majora's Mask*" (GDC). Through combining elements of funeral industry realism, death positivity, comforting art design, and narrative *Laundry Bear Games* was able to create an interactive environment where players can get first-hand experience with the Western funeral industry while considering their own mortality.

Being rooted in the death positivity movement, *Laundry Bear Games* reached out to the founder of the movement and Mortician Caitlin Doughty to consult on the project. *A Mortician's Tales* wanted to get at the core of what brought about the death positivity movement in the first place by responding to Western cultures' unhealthy relationship with death. "In western culture America and Canada specifically, we are really bad about talking about death. We are bad about pretending it doesn't exist and dealing with it poorly when it does happen. The idea of death positivity is not to remove these feelings of grief or sadness... it's the idea that death and grief are sad; they are always going to be sad. If we are okay with confronting these things and lifting the veil on the death industry, we are better equipped to make decisions for ourselves and our loved ones when we die. I resonate with this idea a lot, especially as a person who overcame my own death anxiety through interacting with it directly, and this is what also inspired a mortician's tale" (GDC). By placing players in the workplace of a mortician, an environment completely foreign and shielded from outsiders, players are instantly engaged with an unfamiliar conversation about death, which is one of the essential steps to the death positivity movement. By engaging with conversations about death we would normally shy away from, the taboo of the

subject begins to deteriorate, and individuals can begin to have healthier conversations about death that benefit not only themselves but their loved ones as well.

For Laundry Bear making a narrative-driven game was crucial to the experience as they believed this directly correlated to how players perceive death when playing and as a motivating factor to playing the game. “Mortician’s Tale is a narrative game and is something that is really important to us and our team. And in my opinion it is the area of game design that players take death the most seriously” (GDC). Gabby DaRienzo cites multiple games as evidence for her theory, such as *Final Fantasy VII*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *Max Payne*, and *Mass Effect*. Each of these games incorporated death mechanically so that when a character dies, it changes the way the player has to play the game. *Final Fantasy* as an example, “The game is designed that Aerith is the dedicated healer... so when they kill her off... you have to rethink how you have been playing the game. It is a really good mechanical way to represent grief and something being taken away from you and how you can move forward without them” (GDC). These kinds of narrative elements were essential for Laundry Bear Games to create an experience that was the most engaging for players, especially in a game that can be completed in a short amount of time.

Another large pillar of development that dictated the message of the game was the balance between accuracy and comfort. Laundry Bear Games wanted to portray the work environment of a mortician accurately while still maintaining a level of comfort for general audiences. “In getting players to interact with these subject matters, it was important for us to be comfortable. In finding that balance of accuracy and comfort. We know this because the subject can be really uncomfortable for people, so finding that balance was very important to us, and one

of the ways we did that was the color palette” (GDC). Due to the limitations of the Pico-8 engine, a simple purple color palette was used that ended up being brought over for the full version of the game. The team thought that was the best way to mask some of the more gross or unpleasant elements of working as a mortician while still keeping the tasks and actions realistic. Accompanying the light color pallet was the decision to exaggerate character features such as larger heads and eyes to keep things from looking too realistic. Laundry Bear realized early on that there is a fine line between a game that will invite people in and a game that is uncomfortable to approach. In order to create a comfortable space for a dialogue about death, they had to be sure that they don’t repel anyone when death may already be a difficult subject to get into.

*A Mortician’s Tale* is a narrative game for the purpose of getting players to take the death presented in the game seriously. However, Laundry Bear Games deviates from what usually occurs in narrative videogame deaths. “In the game, you don't know any of the people you are taking care of... Pretty typically in games, when people die narratively it's always someone that you know that you're connected to. But in this game, we have asked players to take care of someone they don't know, or don't love” (GDC). This is an important departure as players are placed into the responsibilities of a mortician where they must be respectful to the deceased and their family, empathetically navigating different scenarios that are dealt with on a daily basis. Additionally, the player is able to potentially project their own experiences into these scenarios where the deceased can take on new meaning as they may reflect an individual in their life.

This theme of players projecting their experiences also applies to the character Charlie herself. Charlie is a silent protagonist; she never has any dialogue options for the player to

choose from as creating a fully fleshed-out character would be detrimental to Laundry Bear Game's intent. "The game has no dialogue options... We did this for a few reasons. One is because every single person deals with grief differently and death differently. It felt really weird for us to have a fully fleshed-out characters that the player has to take control of... The silent protag can act as a vessel for the player to insert themselves and their own feelings and experiences. It also places the importance on listening rather than talking... the goal is to listen to people" (GDC). By allowing players the space to project much of themselves and their experiences into the game, they are able to acknowledge death in new ways and perspectives at their own pace.

*A Mortician's Tale* is designed to accomplish two things in its short playthrough time, expose players to the Western funeral industry and get players to look inward and reflect on their thoughts surrounding not only the funeral industry but on their own mortality and death as a whole. Each element of the game is designed to accomplish this goal in a respectful way that is accessible and comfortable for people who might have a hard time discussing death or acknowledging their own death.

### Reception

Laundry Bear Games achieved their goal, as players responded very positively to the game and what it offered. *A Mortician's Tale* was met with critical acclaim by players and online publications, opening up a new discussion about death in games as well as bringing more attention to the interesting things independent game designers and studios have been doing with the way they present death in their games. As seen in the other games examined, the positive

reception of these games shows that people are interested in engaging with the subject of death in new ways, to think about it in ways that go against the Western norm.

*A Mortician's Tale* got the attention of various online publications that were fascinated with the new way this game was approaching death. Julie Muncy writes, “A Mortician's Tale slowly moves toward an embrace of the death positive movement, using its delicate balance of tragedy and mundanity to make death feel more familiar—more manageable, more real. A game can't ever answer all of our cultural fears about death, but Laundry Bear Games does what it can to start to open up this broad, unending cultural wound” (Muncy). Although the game is heavily rooted in the death positivity movement, at no point does it try and convince the player to be an advocate or force the player into thinking that it is “the” way to think about death. It simply presents these topics to the player to do with it what they will. I think that is what is so fascinating about this game; it is handling a subject that we as a society are so distant from that it just simply has to present it to the player to get them to think about it differently. A good example of this is in D.M. Moore's review of the game, “I haven't personally given much thought to the subject. And while *A Mortician's Tale* hasn't necessarily made me a convert to the movement, it has gotten me to think a lot more about the subject than I have in the past. Pretty impressive for a game that takes only about an hour to play” (Moore). The ability for such a short game to evoke such considerable thought about death speaks volumes of how separated we are from it in Western culture. As time goes on, I think we will see a growing desire to connect with content that deals with this subject.

For players who see the funeral business and are interested in exploring alternative options, the game does a great job of being the first step to more research and learning about the

death industry. The end of the game offers a great jumping-off point for players that want to look into things like natural burials, pod burials, and other small business or environmentally friendly options. One reviewer details all their online searches after playing the game, “So far, in the time since playing I have Googled: "pathology museum near me", "eye caps for embalming", "home burials", "massage for rigor mortis", "how deep do you have to bury a body?" and "can I bury a body myself?". All of those produced fascinating results.” (Warr).

Further proof of our desire for engaging discussions about death can be found in the response of *A Mortician's Tale's* audience. Gabby DaRienzo remarks on the response from fans, “We received a lot of messages, emails and DMs from people sharing personal stories of how the game resonated with them, how the game helped them grieve, how the game helped them make decisions regarding the processes after someone died, or how to support people who are grieving” (GDC). Such an incredible response is indicative of our what you could call “death illiteracy”. People need help navigating these difficult subjects, and if a game can provide such a service in a safe and respectable way, that is an incredible achievement. One fan writes in an article for *Rock Paper Shotgun* about how the game helped him through the death of his brother who died in a terrorist attack in Manchester. *A Mortician's Tale* helped him navigate the confusion and grief, “A death can be extraordinarily complex. Handling it isn't just about how, where and when a person died. There's more to it. The death includes the people that surround the person, the context, our thoughts and feelings and regrets and loose ends and a million other tendrils of sadness and stress and confusion... the game delicately and sensitively filled in so many of the blanks in something we all inevitably go through” (Hett). There are many examples of fans sharing just how much this game helped them through their difficult experiences with

death; whether it be coping with the loss of a loved one or overcoming their own death anxiety, games like *A Mortician's Tale* are helping us work towards a healthier relationship with death.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have argued how independent games have become an ideal space to confront and manage death fear and anxiety. This is achieved through their unique ability to occupy a moment in space and time, where a player can rest, reflect, and give up; an experience I defined as meaningful death reflection. I have examined closely our societal relationship with death, how violence and death are unrealistically portrayed in our media and the traditional utilization of death as a means to punish and hinder players' progress in videogames. I illustrated the recent rise of entertainment content that seeks to have a more thoughtful and/or realistic depiction of death as seen in the television show *The Good Place* or the Disney Pixar film *Soul*. More specifically, I examined the rise of videogames that dealt in this subject matter. The “mortuary gaming boom” that has resulted in a handful of games utilizing death outside the videogame norm. The rise in the creation of this kind of media offers the argument that audiences are interested in engaging with content that is intentionally designed to expose them to elements of mortality that they do not encounter on a day-to-day basis. Each title examined (*Mortician's Tale*, *That Dragon Cancer*, and *Spiritfarer*) offers their own unique contributions to approaching death from new perspectives.

*That Dragon, Cancer* showed how games can function as a form of interactive memorialization, where player agency is utilized to form a dialogue between them and the designer. John Green displayed how creating spaces where players can rest, reflect, and give up can offer powerful interactive experiences. As a player, having to consciously decide not to perform an action, to have to “give up” in order for the game to progress, changes fundamental ideas of how one “plays a game”. This is masterfully achieved in the most intimate scenes spent

with Joel. Beginning with simple moments of watching Joel interact with the world around him, eventually leading to the more difficult scenes of holding him while he receives his intravenous medication. Those moments with Joel culminate into one final sitting with him in the scene titled “Picnic at the edge of the world”, an incredible moment of celebration and grief that transcends the game itself. One cannot help but to feel the immense intimacy of this scene. The player is not only sitting with Joel as the individual that has gotten to know him over the past two hours, but they are also participating in a mother and father’s last moment with their son. The player can stay suspended in that moment for as long as they like, blowing bubbles for Joel as he feeds pancakes to his dog. Here, *That Dragon, Cancer*’s grandest moment of meaningful death reflection occurs through shared grief.

Numinous Games showed how the story of the Green’s tragic loss of their young son to cancer could be shared with others in a way that offers truly eye-opening perspectives on cancer, loss, and our own time left here on earth. As Schott so accurately stated, “This game stands in complete contrast to the function of death in games... The subject matter of the game is thus, on the one hand, unremarkable as the nature of the death is all too common and routine, but made remarkable on the other hand, by the manner in which the player is invited into the family experience and the intimacy it permits” (Schott). Although death may be routine from the outside looking in, *That Dragon, Cancer* shows that from the intimate perspective of those involved, it is anything but routine, which can be seen in the subsequent examined titles.

Thunder Lotus’s *Spiritfarer* is a space where one can consider the impact others have on their lives and the impact they have on those around them. It was a stark reminder that those we love will not be around forever, and we should cherish the imprint they have left in our lives. It

shows how games can be relaxed and self-paced spaces where players can be exposed to loss and the grieving process. In a society where many people are unfamiliar with the various aspects of death and the processes that follow, *Spiritfarer* offers a valuable experience. Just like *That Dragon, Cancer Spiritfarer* offers the player space and time to inhabit moments for as long as they may need before moving on, proving to be an essential element for games dealing with death, grief, and loss. "Game designers can viscerally explore cultural issues... or help players deeply experience an emotional and social scenario that intrigues them... game designers are really only beginning to explore how to use these capacities to create rich emotional experiences" (Isbister). *Spiritfarer* is an essential step forward in how games can create emotionally rich experiences.

Sharing ideas from *That Dragon, Cancer, Spiritfarer* uses the videogame medium as a space for memorial. However, in *Spiritfarer*, it's the memorial of fictional characters. With each passenger's room on Stella's ship transforming into a space to grieve, players are engaging in the act of mourning in ludic space. This kind of meaningful death reflection invites the player to think inward towards the relationships in their life. What impact have they had on others and what impact has others left on them? Having a fictional space to "practice" these scenarios can be invaluable to those who struggle with death and their own mortality. This theme leads well into the last game examined as *A Mortician's Tale* deals heavily with the real world logistics of funerals and the death industry.

*A Mortician's Tale* by Laundry Bear Games is the definitive "death positive" game where players are taken on a realistic day in the life journey of a mortician performing the various tasks of the job. Here players are presented with the difficult to answer questions: how will the

funerals be handled for my relatives and loved ones? How do I want my funeral handled? How will people remember me? In the shoes of Charlie the mortician, you get to experience a wide range of what goes into the funeral business, from preparing the bodies for open-casket viewing, cremation, and attending the services. Just as in *That Dragon, Cancer* and *Spiritfarer*, the player is able to suspend themselves in a moment indefinitely until they are ready to move on and progress the game. The game never tries to force its message on to players, quite the opposite actually. Laundry Bear Games simply presents this new perspective on death to the player and invites them to critically engage and interact with it. “A Mortician's Tale slowly moves toward an embrace of the death positive movement, using its delicate balance of tragedy and mundanity to make death feel more familiar—more manageable, more real. A game can't ever answer all of our cultural fears about death, but Laundry Bear Games does what it can to start to open up this broad, unending cultural wound” (Muncy). *A Mortician's Tale* is a standout example of how critical play can be utilized in games to convey a serious message about a subject that can be difficult for many people to come to terms with.

By presenting the real-world logistics of Western funeral practices, *A Mortician's Tale* takes the grieving processes presented in *Spiritfarer* and places them in the context of the real world. Here, the volume and ever-present nature of death is brought to light, creating moments of meaningful death reflection. In these moments, players can approach the realities of the funeral industry to make more informed decisions about their funeral and open the doors to discussing the funeral plans of their loved ones.

*That Dragon Cancer*, *Spiritfarer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* each offer their own unique contributions to approaching death from new perspectives creatively. Each of their successes

illustrates the interest there is in having interactive encounters with this kind of subject matter. Not only have these games piqued the interest of an audience but actively allowed them to walk away with new ways to think about our mortality as well as what games can be. Each of these games brings to the table something different in the growing discussion of realistic death in the media we engage with. I believe these games and others like it have helped pave the way for other developers to look for innovative ways to branch out from the traditional implementations of death in games. Based on my review of current media (television, film, and videogames), it will be interesting to observe if there is a further increase in media that deals with death and mortality in more realistic or metaphorical means.

#### Further research

Independent games have been pushing creative boundaries for years, and it is inevitable that they will continue to do so. Close attention must be paid to independent studios, art games, games for change, and social impact games that are looking to expand the possibilities of player agency and what can be communicated through interactive experiences. I believe the “mortuary gaming boom” has hit a chord with a large enough audience to warrant other studios to expand on the works mentioned and analyzed here. It will be particularly interesting to see if larger studios, even triple-A studios, branch out into more experimental methods of incorporating death in their games and the impact that may have on the industry as a whole.

Videogames are an incredible medium to explore various aspects of the human condition. Through the ideologies surrounding games that can be considered “persuasive” or “for societal change”, there is far more that can be explored at the convergence of mechanics and

narrative. The games examined in this thesis have positively impacted the lives of those that have played them. As developers and technology continue to push the boundaries of what games can offer, we will continue to see severely impactful games that seek to better individuals and society as a whole. However, this is based on the market trends of the game industry and may not be the best metric for identifying an audience's interest in a potentially niche subject.

To further the research the effects of death-positive games, I believe conducting interviews with individuals who have been impacted by these types of games will offer significant information on the modern cultural aspects of death that contribute to the various forms of death anxiety. Additionally, getting feedback from individuals before playing the game for the first time and after they have completed it will be valuable in determining audiences' interest in these types of games.

## REFERENCES

- Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. Free Press, 1975.
- Bioware. *Mass Effect*. Bioware, 2007.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT Press, 2010.
- Brophy-Warren, Jamin. "The Board Game No One Wants to Play More Than Once." *Wall Street Journal*, 24 June 2009. [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2009/06/24/can-you-make-a-board-game-about-the-holocaust-meet-train/>.
- Chang, Edmond. *Gaming as Writing, Or, World of War/Word/Worldcraft* | Edmond Y. Chang. [http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/gaming\\_issue\\_2008/Chang\\_Gaming\\_as\\_writing/](http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/gaming_issue_2008/Chang_Gaming_as_writing/). Accessed 21 Mar. 2021.
- Chang, Edmund. *Close Playing, a Meditation on Teaching (with) Video Games – ED(MOND)CHANG(ED)AGOGY*. <http://www.edmondchang.com/2010/11/11/close-playing-a-meditation/>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2021.
- Clark, Nicole. "Spiritfarer," *A Game of Hugging and Letting Go, Is Perfect For Right Now*. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7wywg/spiritfarer-a-game-of-hugging-and-letting-go-is-perfect-for-right-now>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.
- Clearwater, David. "What Defines Video Game Genre? Thinking about Genre Study after the Great Divide." *Loading...*, vol. 5, no. 8, 8, May 2011. [journals.sfu.ca](http://journals.sfu.ca), <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/67>.
- DEATH, CULTURE & LEISURE: Playing Dead*. EMERALD Group PUBL, 2020.
- Docter, Pete. *Soul*. 2020.

- Doughty, Caitlin. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: & Other Lessons from the Crematory*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.
- Durkin, Keith F. "Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture." *Handbook of Death & Dying*, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2003, pp. 43–49. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.4135/9781412914291.n5.
- Far Cry 5 Review - Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/26/17164878/far-cry-5-review-ps4-pc-xbox-one>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021.
- Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play Radical Game Design*. MIT Press, 2009. *Open WorldCat*, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=291810>.
- GDC. *A Mortician's Tale: A Different View on How Games Treat Death*. 2018. *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEl0b\\_9BmE4&ab\\_channel=GDC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEl0b_9BmE4&ab_channel=GDC).
- Giant Sparrow. *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Giant Sparrow, 2017.
- Giroux, Henry A. *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. Peter Lang, 2011.
- Hett, Dan. "More Games Should Be Truly Honest about Death." *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, 28 Dec. 2018, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2018/12/28/more-games-should-be-truly-honest-about-death/>.
- Hill, Charles A. "The Psychology of Rhetorical Images." *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004, pp. 25–40.
- Interview With Ryan & Amy Green: Creators Of "That Dragon, Cancer."* *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPh095icQA0&t=204s>. Accessed 16 Oct. 2020.

- Isbister, Kathrine. *How Games Move Us Emotion by Design*. MIT Press, 2017,  
<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/how-games-move-us>.
- Juul, Jesper. *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*. MIT Press, 2019.
- Keogh, Brendan. “When Game over Means Game over: Using Permanent Death to Craft Living Stories in Minecraft.” *Proceedings of The 9th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment: Matters of Life and Death*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2013, pp. 1–6. *ACM Digital Library*, doi:10.1145/2513002.2513572.
- King, Geoff, editor. *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. Wallflower, 2002.
- Kubrick, Stanley. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. 1968.
- Laundry Bear Games. *A Mortician’s Tale*. Laundry Bear Games, 2017.
- Lee, Raymond L. M. “Modernity, Mortality and Re-Enchantment: The Death Taboo Revisited.” *Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 4, Aug. 2008, pp. 745–59. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/0038038508091626.
- Linser, Roni, and Nina Ree-Lindstad. *The Magic Circle - Game Design Principles and Online Role-Play Simulations*. 2008, p. 8.
- Lipkin, Nadav. “Examining Indie’s Independence: The Meaning of ‘Indie’ Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Cooptation.” *Loading...*, vol. 7, no. 11, 11, 2013. *journals.sfu.ca*, <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/122>.
- Lyons, Siobhan. *Death and the Machine: Intersections of Mortality and Robotics*. 1st ed. 2018, Springer Singapore : Imprint: Palgrave Pivot, 2018. *Library of Congress ISBN*, doi:10.1007/978-981-13-0335-7.

- Mellor, Philip A. "Death in High Modernity: The Contemporary Presence and Absence of Death." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 40, no. 1\_suppl, May 1992, pp. 11–30. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1992.tb03384.x.
- Miyamoto, Shigeru. *The Legend of Zelda Majora's Mask*. Nintendo, 2000.
- Moore, D. M. "This Video Game Will Make You Think Differently about Death." *The Verge*, 7 Jan. 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/7/16853780/morticians-tale-video-game-death-positive-movement-indie-short-play>.
- Mukherjee, Souvik. "*Remembering How You Died*": *Memory, Death and Temporality in Videogames*.
- Muncy, Julie. "'A Mortician's Tale' Might Be the First Game to Really Understand Death." *Wired*. [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com), <https://www.wired.com/story/morticians-tale-game-review/>. Accessed 16 Dec. 2020.
- Nicolucci, Viola. "A DEATH-POSITIVE VIDEO GAME FOR DEATH EDUCATION OF ADOLESCENTS." *Italian Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2, May 2019, pp. 186–97. [ijet.itd.cnr.it](http://ijet.itd.cnr.it), doi:10.17471/2499-4324/1071.
- Numinous Games. *That Dragon, Cancer*. Numinous Games, 2016.
- NYMG. *Episode 211: Spiritfarer: A Cozy Conversation About Dying with Jo Gautier (Thunder Lotus Games)* – NYMG. <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=18237>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2020.
- PAX West 2019 Interviews: Spiritfarer*. 2019. *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2ipOaW0BVg&ab\\_channel=SuperDeluxeGamesCast](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2ipOaW0BVg&ab_channel=SuperDeluxeGamesCast).
- Pope, Lucas. *Papers, Please*. 2013.

- Schott, Gareth. "That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating Life and Death in a Medium That Has Frequently Trivialized Both." 2017, p. 10.
- Schur, Michael. *The Good Place*. 2016.
- Scott, Ridley. *Bladerunner*. 1982.
- Spiritfarer* | Interview w/Jo-Annie Gauthier | PAX East 2020. 2019. YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeQk9iCampM&ab\\_channel=DuelScreens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeQk9iCampM&ab_channel=DuelScreens).
- Spiritfarer Developer Interview at E3 2019*. 2019. YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9g98r2Cbe0&ab\\_channel=gameslice](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9g98r2Cbe0&ab_channel=gameslice).
- Spiritfarer Review: A Game about What's after Death - Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/8/18/21373518/spiritfarer-review-release-date-switch-pc-ps4-xbox-one-thunder-lotus>. Accessed 5 Oct. 2020.
- Square Enix. *Final Fantasy VII*. Square Enix, 1997.
- Sudnow, David. *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Warner Books, 1983.
- Susi, Tarja, et al. *Serious Games : An Overview*. Institutionen för kommunikation och information, 2007. [www.diva-portal.org](http://www.diva-portal.org), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:his:diva-1279>.
- Tanz, Jason. "A Father, a Dying Son, and the Quest to Make the Most Profound Videogame Ever." *Wired*, Jan. 2016. [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com), <https://www.wired.com/2016/01/that-dragon-cancer/>.
- Tercier, John. "The Pornography of Death." *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*, edited by Hans Maes, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013, pp. 221–35. *Springer Link*, doi:10.1057/9781137367938\_12.

*That Dragon, Cancer - 2014 Interview with Developer Ryan Green.* 2014. *YouTube*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLLMuZZSS44&ab\\_channel=FamilyGamerTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLLMuZZSS44&ab_channel=FamilyGamerTV).

*That Dragon Cancer Interview - How the Passing of Joel Green Affected the Game.* 2014.  
*YouTube*,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGiJycMI5S8&ab\\_channel=ZoominGames](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGiJycMI5S8&ab_channel=ZoominGames).

Thunder Lotus Games. *Spiritfarer*. Thunder Lotus Games, 2020.

Warr, Philippa. "A Mortician's Tale Review." *PC Gamer*, 18 Oct. 2017,

<https://www.pcgamer.com/a-morticians-tale-review/>.

*What Are We Really Looking at?: The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play - Barry Atkins*,  
2006. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412006286687>. Accessed 8 Feb.  
2021.

Zibaite, Solveiga. "The Jovial Aesthetics of the Death-Positivity Movement: Notes on the  
Appeal of Playfulness in Activism." *Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead*, edited by  
Matt Coward-Gibbs, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020, pp. 157–72. *Emerald Insight*,  
doi:10.1108/978-1-83909-037-020201018.