

Title	<Theoretical Article>Death Rules: A Survey and Analysis of PC Death in Tabletop Role-Playing Games
Author(s)	St. Jacques, Nicholas; Tobin, Samuel
Citation	RPG学研究 (2020), 1: 20-27
Issue Date	2020-09-21
URL	https://doi.org/10.14989/jarps_1_20
Right	This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.; この作品はクリエイティブ・コモンズ表示4.0国際ライセンスの下に提供されています.
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
Textversion	publisher

Death Rules

A Survey and Analysis of PC Death in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Nicholas St.Jacques | ニコラス セイン.ジャック

Samuel Tobin | サムエル トビン

Independent Scholar | 独立研究者
nstjacques15bf@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0002-3963-9990

Fitchburg State University | フィチュバーク州立大学
stobin2@fitchburgstate.edu | ORCID: 0000-0002-7170-7607

Abstract

In this paper, we define and explore player character (PC) death in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) through a survey of how PC death is addressed in a range of TRPG rulebooks. We connect PC death to player agency and in doing so connect death to downtime and other play modes in which players have less or no control of their PCs. We discuss how PC death affects gameplay by breaking up time, by ending or starting a period of play, or by reinforcing or severing player and PC connections. The objective of this analysis is to improve our understanding of PC death, as well as PC life and the control, agency and play associated with it.

Keywords: Death, mechanics, TRPGs

要約

本稿では、テーブル・トーク・ロールプレイング・ゲーム (TRPG) におけるプレイヤーキャラクター (PC) の死を定義し、様々な TRPG ルールブックで PC の死がどのように扱われているかを調査することを考察する。また、PC の死をプレイヤーの行動力と結びつけ、ダウンタイムや、自分の PC のコントロールが少ない、あるいは PC をコントロールできない他のプレイモードと結びつけている。PC の死が時間の中断、プレイの終了や開始、プレイヤーと PC のつながりの強化や切断によってゲームプレイにどのような影響を与えるかについても考察する。PC の死だけでなく、PC の人生とそれに関連するコントロール、エージェンシー (行為主体性)、プレイについての理解を深めることが本稿の分析の目的である。

キーワード: キーワード: 死, ゲームメカニック, TRPG

1. Introduction

Across all types and genres of games, death comes in many shapes and forms (Ndalianis 2012; de Wildt et al. 2019): it punctuates and paces video games; in wargames it removes troops from the tabletop; and it fills discard-graveyards in collectible card games. In this paper, we deal with the forms and meanings of death through the lens of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Call of Cthulhu*, and discuss how death in these games impacts gameplay at the mechanical, narrative, and social dimensions of gameplay. This analysis not only helps us understand PC death, but also PC life, control, agency, and play and to think critically about how different modes and conceptions of play function in TRPGs. We focus on TRPGs, as opposed to other forms of games, as TRPGs feature a compelling combination of kinds of rules and practices which work together to produce experiences, such as the death of a PC, that are unique and as yet under-studied.

In this paper we challenge common assumptions about TRPGs. This includes the assumption of a one-to-one relationship between player and PC, an idea found in many TRPGs and

highlighted in Jose Zagal and Sebastian Deterding's "Definitions of 'Role Playing Games'" (2018). It also includes the assumptions that players necessarily care about their PC's well-being, and play to avoid their deaths or are emotionally impacted when they do die (Fine 1983). Our analysis and participant observation suggest that in some cases PC death is welcomed by the player or required by the game system.

In his paper on bodies and time in TRPGs, Evan Torner calls for more studies of TRPG texts: "Researchers can now look at tabletop and other RPG subsystems – particularly the text introducing these subsystems – to determine the types of play they generally reinforce, and thereby the philosophical, ethical, and logical bases on which the system itself rests" (Torner 2015, 120). This paper is our attempt to answer this call by analyzing the systems which produce PC death and exploring the implications of said systems. We are also inspired by Ken McAllister and Judd Ruggill's meditation on "thanatoludism" and the relation between death and play in computer games (2018). While we are interested in player-centric approaches to games and game studies, the focus of this paper is



primarily on rules and game text. This approach owes much to Aaron Trammell's historically oriented practices in his work on *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014). We used participant observation through playing different TRPGs as a secondary viewpoint. We are basing our discussions of player death on TRPG books supplemented by our own play experiences.

In the TRPGs we look at here, and in most TRPGs, groups of players gather together to role-play individual characters who undertake a series of meaningful interactions and conflicts within a world largely enacted by a gamester, a player-officiant who generally controls non-player characters (NPCs). For simplicity, we will use the term game master (GM) to describe this role. We refer to other participants who control only their PCs simply as players.

For the most part, players create their PCs. They typically do this by following the character creation process of the TRPG they will be playing. No matter how a player chooses to create and play their character, the player has an instrumental connection to the character. This is true even if the player does not make the character personally through one of the character creation systems provided with most TRPGs. We argue that characters' lives begin not at creation, but when a player starts playing them. Before that point, they are a concept.¹ As PCs are played in a campaign or a session, they obtain a unique personality and style inseparable from the player's interpretation and investment.

The investment of time, energy and affect into a PC and through that PC into a TRPG suggests that the death of a PC carries an emotional weight. This can be described in terms of a connection to the PC that goes beyond the instrumental into identification. Gary Allen Fine's *Shared Fantasy*, the first major study on TRPGs, recounts an informant speaking about player identification with their PC: "If you played enough in *Dungeons & Dragons*, you do identify enough with your character, you don't want him killed out of hand...you don't sit there and just sit back, 'So what, he's just a fake character.' You're in for the game" (Fine 1983, 219). Here we see identification as a product of time and investment resulting in a feeling of loss. We argue that these kinds of feelings stem from a loss of investment of time and energy and from a loss of possibility for continued play.

PC death is a threat not just to a player's feelings, but also to the safety of the PC, as the game-object through which players experience the

game. They invest time along with cognitive and emotional energy into the PC, but beyond this loss of investment, the possibility of a player's PC dying is high stakes as it places play in peril. The death of a PC may mark a temporary end of play or a permanent one. Or it may, in some TRPG systems, mark a beginning. In either case it is a moment when the status of play is literally in question.

2. The Mechanics of Death

In this section we show how PCs die in most TRPGs. For the most part this amounts to the destruction of the PC's body through conflict, often combat (Torner 2015). As with so much in most TRPGs we start with the roll of a die. In TRPGs, dice rolling is typically used to decide the outcomes of conflicts. Death is most often, but not always, decided by dice rolls. Dice rolls determine if a PC is injured and if so, how badly. Character death is most often determined by their remaining hit points (HP). For example, as explained in *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*: "[w]hen damage reduces you to 0 hit points and there is damage remaining, you die if the remaining damage equals or exceeds your hit point maximum" (Crawford et al. 2014, 197). If a character drops to 0 HP, and does not meet the conditions for instant death, they begin to roll a twenty-sided die in order to make so-called death saving throws. The player must roll a ten or above three times to come back to consciousness, and if they fail, they die. *Pathfinder* (2009) follows similar rules as it is based on earlier versions of *Dungeons and Dragons* (mostly 3.5). *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons* also are both fantasy TRPGS.

In *Pathfinder*, if a character's remaining damage after hitting 0 HP equals or exceeds the character's constitution statistic, the character dies. In both *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*, characters begin at level one and over time increase in level and powers. A character's constitution statistic at level one is a number scaled from eight to sixteen and HP generally ranges from six to fifteen. At the start of a level one campaign, it is easier to die in *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*, where the instant death condition is decided on half of the player's health, while in *Pathfinder* it is decided by a number value that starts at eight, and is either left at eight or adjusted to a value between eight and sixteen or so. As players level up in *Pathfinder*, HP rises from six to ten per level while the constitution statistic cannot be raised until certain levels are hit, and even then, it can only be raised by one or two points.

Therefore, with each advancing level, *Pathfinder* transitions from being harder to die in to being easier to die in, while *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition* does the opposite. In this way, *Pathfinder*'s rules for death support an easier entry

¹ See Evan Torner's discussion of the "pause-play" effect in TRPG community theory (Torner 2016).

point for new players playing at level one, which gradually rises in difficulty as they play. In contrast, *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition's* rules on death make the game a bit harder at the start, but much easier to avoid dying as the game goes on, making it less likely for developed characters that survived the early levels to die an untimely death. This perspective of course assumes that avoiding death is the point of play in these games, but as we will see, this is not always the case.

Other systems have similar rules in place concerning HP. *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (Raggi 2009) uses HP in a standard fashion but adds situations where drops in ability scores can kill a PC. In other games, HP are not tracked, and the fate of PCs is tied to reductions in their ability scores. The *Burningwheel* (2002) derived games *Mouseguard* (2009) and *Torchbearer* (Olavsrud and Crane 2013) both eschew HP in favor of states or consequences a PC will be tagged with if they fail in a conflict. That said, while some games do not use HP, most do.

Vampire: The Masquerade (Rein-Hagen 1991) has similar death rules to the systems discussed above, however, the directions indicate that “true death”² should be arrived at in a spirit of player and GM collaboration. This flexibility means that both player and GM are empowered by the system to choose to have a PC die for narrative purposes, regardless of HP. In games like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, true death is reached through negotiation between player and storyteller, and can even be planned by the player.

That players may choose for their PCs to die, and not just by playing in a risky manner, suggests that PC death can offer something of value not (usually) to the PC, but to the player. The distinction between the needs and desires of the player and the PC respectively is a feature of TRPGs that PC death helps to put into relief. Peter Christiansen positions this kind of willing PC death in digital games as “thanatogaming” a form of Foucauldian resistance to biopower or societal control of life and lives (2014).

An extreme example of the value of PC death expressed through the macabre is a game that does not include a hit point system. However, this does not mean it is safe for PCs. Far from it. While the previously mentioned systems are designed for long, campaign-style play, with the players meeting up week after week to continue a long-running story, the system *Ten Candles* (2015) is a system designed

for one-shots, a single session of gameplay. The genre of the system is “tragic horror”, and as such, while characters may die sooner due to player intervention, the rules and mechanics mandate that all player characters must die by the end of the game. We focus on *Ten Candles* here as it is a particularly clear-cut example of a game that makes a feature of PC death.

A game like *Ten Candles*, where the players are doomed to lose, and the characters are doomed to die, allows the player to experiment with playing different kinds of characters. This can mean different sorts of classes, types, races, or builds depending on the TRPG, but also different ways of behaving and interacting with NPCs and other players. Playing a game in which a PC will die can also mean playing the most exciting part of a PC's life. The ability to explore how one faces death within the safety of a fictional role-playing game may be interesting to some players, and perhaps even cathartic to others.

Ten Candles is not the only game in which a player may actively welcome their character's death. In any other game, the player, their character, or both may have accomplished what they set out to achieve and reached a satisfying endpoint. Alternatively, the player may have grown tired of their character and opt to play a new one. A range of out-of-game reasons may also force a player to stop playing and seek a quick exit from the game.

Most TRPG rulebooks have messages about how the players should treat the rules. And most of these statements can be summed up as: use, bend, and ignore these rules as you wish. For example, in *Pathfinder*: “The rules in this book are here to help you breathe life into your characters and the world they explore [...] Remember that these rules are yours. You can change them to fit your needs” (Bulmahn 2009, 9). These needs may entail that a PC survives what mechanically ought to be a fatal roll, or conversely, that a PC dies despite favorable odds. In such cases, PC death is determined not only by dice rolls and predefined rules but socially, in collaboration and discussion between players and GM about how and when rules and results will be implemented.

Through these messages, we see a counter to the conflict and dice-based system through which PC death is produced. (Dormans 2006). For a variety of reasons, players and GMs might decide to bend the rules.³ The possible death of a PC (or a party of PCs) is exactly the kind of event which prompts the sort of rule-bending we see encouraged

² It is worth noting that a PC in *Vampire* is of course not alive but rather undead, hence the designation, “true death.” A state of magical coma called torpor is a status in *Vampire* that places a character in a state where they may as well be dead. Golconda, a state in which a vampire overcomes the need for blood (“vitae”), also typically results in a PC exiting the game as a player-controlled character.

³ In the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* rulebook (p. 314) we are admonished that “The Judge is always right. Let the rules bend to you not the other way around.”

across TRPG rule books. This suggests a tension: if PC death is too important to leave up to the roll of a die, then why do these same games have mechanics and rules for PC death at all? This is an issue of control, not of GMs over the game, but of all of the participants, players and GM alike, working to exert control over core issues of gameplay, such as duration, pace, logic, a sense of what should happen in this gaming universe and player satisfaction. Controlling how and when PC death occurs to at least some degree is perhaps one of the most important ways playgroups can control the contours of the game experience. It is unsurprising that death, which can mark the end of play, would be something critical for TRPG playgroups to control.

3. When Death is Not the End

In some cases PC death marks the start of play. In *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (DCC, 2017), player death is a key part of character creation.⁴ DCC draws out the character creation phase across a first adventure. PCs are rolled up in much the same manner they have been since the beginning of *D&D*, but in DCC's case a player rolls up many PCs. These PCs, or really *potential* PCs, are weaker than most new PCs – they are zero-level as opposed to 1st, and they are created (mostly) to die. DCC relies on a “character funnel” or more accurately, a sieve. The character who survives the first adventure becomes *the* PC. The player, ideally, is invested in this new 1st level PC in a way they might not have been if they had developed the PC in a more typical fashion. Harrowing or grimly comic gameplay experience here replaces pre-written and imagined backstory.⁵

PC death might also precede PC creation even earlier than the funnel of DCC, as the lively undead of *Vampire* (1991), *Monsterhearts* (2012), *Night's Black Agents* (2012), and other vampyric TRPGs show us. Death is also not the only end for PCs in TRPGs. The long-running *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) by Chaosium contains profuse PC death, but it also features a system based on decreasing points by which PCs, due to exposure to mind-shattering realities of the universe, lose said minds and so players lose control of their characters. This is not death, but it is often treated as one by players, as the player no longer controls the character who, in the adventures to come, will be under the control of the GM. Thus, we see that PC death, at least as we are defining it for the purposes of this paper, is not

simply a state of a PC not being alive, but the end of player control over their PC. This definition allows us to include important and closely related states such as the insanity function in *Call of Cthulhu*, “true death” in *Vampire*, and related states, such as possible apotheosis to godhood or enlightenment in a host of TRPGs. However, in expanding PC death to include these related cases there are repercussions that we will return to shortly.

4. Death and Downtime

While the actual death of the PC amounts to a permanent loss of player agency, there are situations where a player is not in control of a PC. No matter the time-scales of TRPG play, from the micro-moments of combat to the slower pace of long-distance travel, players cannot control their character at every moment. In order to keep the pacing of the story, there are moments when a large quantity of time, between sessions or scenes, is condensed into a quick summary of what happened to PCs while they were not under the direct control of the players.

For example, if a group of PCs needs to wait for an in-game event to happen, the GM might ask what the players want to have their PCs do during the interval. This interval between periods of active role-play can cover any length of time that the players and GM feel is not worth role-playing. These breaks and shifts in play style are often referred to as downtime.⁶ PCs often practice some skill, see to some sort of economic or social responsibility or rest and heal. These same sorts of activities might be role-played as well, but often they are consigned to these downtime intervals. These activities amount for little time at the table for players, but potentially lots of time in the lives of the PCs. This results in large quantities of time where the PCs are active in the adventure, but not under the full control of the player.

There are game systems that feature specific mechanics for downtime, invoking it as part of the gameplay. For example, *Burning Wheel* has a downtime system in which the players work to increase their statistics during breaks. This involves a lot of studying, testing, and time spent in activities that are not directly covered through roleplay. A less mechanically heavy example is *Blades in the Dark* (2017), a game that allows players to build up the world around them and see the consequences of their actions take shape, while also exploring their characters in between jobs (adventures). During downtime in this system, players split the spoils from their previous mission, and then perform actions to handle in-character stress. Players also

⁴ Indeed, a key part of the game. “Let the characters die if the dice so dictate it” (p. 314).

⁵ *Paranoia* (1984) also makes use of a multiple PC to each player approach but in that case, it is sequential, with a new PC coming into play as the prior die (usually spectacularly). This approach is not part of PC creation but rather of play. Each PC was a clone so in many ways this style is more like the classic video game concept of multiple (often three) lives.

⁶ For an overview of types of downtimes in TRPGs see Oren Ashkenazi’s “Five TRPG Systems With Downtime Mechanics” (2019).

have time to run their character's gang and build themselves up.

Such downtimes function mechanically like a form of momentary character death. Play for that player moves from controlling or acting as and through their PC, to setting up possibilities of play for another time. In the case of a dead PC, this might be creating a new PC, exploring options for some sort of resurrection, or even taking (literal) stock of their PC's life, accomplishments and possessions. In the case of the PC in downtime, the player is also not in direct control of the PC. Akin to a wind-up toy, the player sets their character in a direction and lets them proceed on their own. This differs from most PC deaths in that it is not as fully a loss of agency, but more of a switch from direct to indirect control of a character. In both cases, play moves from one mode to another, but the factor that separates permanent PC death from downtime is the amount of agency the latter still retains.

One of the most common instances of a player not having control over a PC are moments when the player is prompted to roll the dice. In the brief moment between picking up the dice and seeing the result, the character is not controlled by the player, or even the gamemaster, but is instead in the hands of chance. Note the hush, however brief, as we wait for the die to settle. These fleeting moments when the player is not in control have similarities in concept, execution and game-play with character death. In conjunction with PC death, these moments of downtime and pre-play character creation can help us think critically about player control and agency.⁷

When we equate TRPG play with a player's active control of a PC, and call this "actual play,"⁸ we valorize a specific type of player-character relation and thereby narrow understanding of what it means to play. When we limit the definition of gameplay to directing characters' movements, giving them voice, and controlling their decisions, we elide other gaming activities and pleasures and fall into a ludic essentialism (Tobin 2015), which flattens game-related objects and texts. PC death is the death of player agency, loss of control, and the end of the "player's pleasure of influence" (Aarseth 1997). However, it is not the end of the player's engagement or pleasure. Death and other instances of downtime in a TRPG are different sorts of

experiences compared to, for example, a player controlling a PC moving through a dungeon, finding treasures, and encountering foes. This second type of gaming engagement is what we typically define as "playing" a TRPG. Compared to these activities, the literal death of a PC is an experience that is rarer, and that has importance beyond other game events. Literal PC death grounds and orients the player to the PC in singular ways and punctuates playing time, bringing the flow of play to a temporary or, sometimes, final halt.

5. Total Party Kills and the Deaths of Multiple PCs

A total party kill (TPK) is a form of mass PC death that can be found in most tabletop role-playing games and often results in the end of a campaign. When every PC in the party dies, especially in a longer running campaign, it can be an opportunity to start over, either by building off of the existing world and possibly incorporating the late PCs fates as background or by switching play to a new setting or game. More common than total party kills are scenarios, where one or two PCs perish in an encounter. If even just one PC survives, that character may be able to recruit new adventurers (the co-players' new characters) to form a party and convince them to take up the former group's cause. However, in the event of a total party kill, lacking a PC to provide continuity with the previous play, a group of players and a GM might take this moment to consider the abandonment of an entire setting, system, or cast of characters, or indeed decide to not continue at all.

The death of a single, or a few individual party members rarely ends the campaign outright, but nevertheless results in the loss of personal character plotlines, and produces challenges both for players and the GM. When an entire party is killed, if all the players continue playing, then everyone must create a new character. When everyone builds a new character, players may want to try out a different character type, which often leads to a period of time passed in collective discussion related to character backstory, intrigue, and emotion, as well as tactical unit building. When one or more PCs die, the surviving PCs will have to deal emotionally, socially, logistically with the death of their party member, and with the recruitment of a replacement. Depending on the dead PC's relationship with the rest of the party, and a player's feelings towards a dead PC, surviving PCs and their players, the group may be impacted to different degrees by another PC's death. Therefore, even a solitary PC death can be a kind of death for a party and a shared event.

In our experience as players and observers we have found that TPKs act much like the death of a single PC mechanically, in that hit points are

⁷ For a materialist take on a closely related subject see Jason Morningstar's "Visual Design as Metaphor: The Evolution of a Character Sheet" (2014).

⁸ That "actual play" podcasts and videos themselves represent a mode of TRPGing in which the consumer does not themselves actually play points to the need to think more expansively about what TRPGs are and what "doing" TRPGs is and might be, as watching other people play becomes more and more important economically, aesthetically, politically and in terms of raw numbers (see Taylor 2012; Taylor 2018; N. T. Taylor 2016; N. Taylor 2016; Kerttula 2019).

depleted, and dice rolls go badly. TPKs also can provoke similar feelings ranging from loss to relief. TPKs differ from solitary PC death in the intensity with which they force the issue of continuity of play for a playgroup. The death of the party need not be the end of the playgroup, but it does force a discussion of what and how to play next in ways that a single PC death or two cannot.

6. Time to Die

Not all PC deaths occur in long-term play or campaigns. Many modes of TRPG play are short affairs of a few hours. “One-shots” and play in settings such as game conventions, where players use pre-rolled or pre-generated characters, generally carry lower stakes for players. If and when PCs die in these settings, we can imagine that their player’s relationship to the event is different from that of the death of a PC, who survived many sessions or campaigns. In these cases, PC death might mark the end of play for that game and that player, which may be appropriate. This does not mean that the deaths of PCs played for a short while are meaningless, but rather that they work at different time-scales and affective registers.

Similarly, feelings about a PC’s death may be less intense in a session of a TRPG such as *Ten Candles* in which players know that their PC’s will die by the end. We can contrast lives and deaths in these one-shots with games that offer a player multiple PC lives over their scope. *Pendragon* (1985) is noteworthy in this regard as it focuses on not a one-player to one-PC relation, but rather on one player to a lineage. In this game, PC’s deaths are part of a longer conception of character life. Less romantic but related are games that allow for players controlling multiple PCs, perhaps one acting as the main character while others are secondary characters, such as assistants, lackeys, retainers, or even pets. This is most often the case in games that feature power and hierarchy as themes or concepts (as is the case with ghouls in *Vampire*).

If a PC “died” by losing sanity or humanity, as in *Call of Cthulhu* or *Vampire: The Masquerade*, their character may linger as a threat or issue to the rest of the players. Released from the player’s control, the GM may make use of the uncontrollable former PC as an NPC, perhaps in the role of a recurring villain or other threat. This sort of reversal can be a powerful moment of play and group storytelling. Players confronting a former PC, now returned under GM control, are playing with and against the history of their PC and their play before their character’s demise. As a player encounters an ex-PC through their new PC, they are implicitly if not explicitly forced to question assumptions of player control and affective investment in their characters and the game.

7. Why Death Matters

PC death defines the player experience of the game, despite it being a rare or singular event. Compare the only semi-perilous *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*, with their magical PC resurrection option and generally more forgiving death conditions, to *Dungeon Crawl Classics* or *Paranoia*’s guaranteed high PC body counts, to *Ten Candles*’ requirement that all PCs must die by the end of the session. Differences in how PCs die, the relative likelihood of death, and what happens afterward (to the now-dead PC, party, their playgroup, and the game world) is one of the most important differentiating aspects of TRPGs.

PC death rules impact how players approach the game, as we observed while playing *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition* and *Ten Candles*. Players behaved differently in each game. In *Ten Candles*, players were much more likely to perform riskier moves, due to the interaction of two game features: they knew that their character would die at the end of the game and that their character could not die until they reached the end. The inevitability of the death of their PCs made it safe to take risks. In *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*, the same players were much more cautious about their moves, avoiding anything risky to avoid meeting an untimely demise. Even though these *D&D* characters were objectively and mechanically safer than their *Ten Candles* counterparts, they were played as if they were not. The mechanics and rules for PC death define the tone, mood, and style of a TRPG session as much or more than the setting or core conceit of the game. PC death colors PC life, and that life’s duration, rhythms, and punctuation. The ways players play is informed by their awareness of the possibility, probability, or inevitability of their PC’s death. The player’s awareness is affected by the game’s mechanics, systems, textual asides, and recommendations for managing and arriving at PC death.

Players need to feel safe knowing that the GM and the game system will handle PC death in intelligible and expected ways. PC death rules matter because they help create a safe environment for players, if not for PCs. PCs can die, but these deaths need to make sense, mechanically, narratively, and socially. In our comparison of *Ten Candles* and *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition*, we saw different play styles stemming from how each game handled PC death. What was consistent in both was that players played in the ways they did because they felt secure knowing that their play was safe, even when their PC was not.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, we analyzed how a wide range of TRPGs handle the death of PCs. We used participant-observation of TRPG play to understand how PC deaths work practically at the game table and what impacts death rules had on play styles and experiences. We found that PC death is variable across TRPGs. PC death can mark the end of a campaign, story, or adventure. PCs can die alone, or a whole group may perish more-or-less at once. We have shown that a PC's death is not always something to avoid, but in some circumstances, it is embraced. We found substantial overlap mechanically, but not thematically, between downtime and PC death. We connected PC death to conditions such as insanity in *Call of Cthulhu*, which also removes a PC from direct player-control. We argue that loss of control of a PC and the uncertainty that it generates is a particularly charged moment in TRPGs, one that is addressed differently from TRPG to TRPG. These mechanical and thematic differences in how PC death functions determine to a large extent the kind of experience players will have, the nature of the lives their PCs will lead, and what PC deaths will mean to their players.

References

- Aarseth, Espen J. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* [Cybertext]. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ashkenazi, Oren. 2019. Five RPG Systems With Downtime Mechanics. *Mythcreants*. <https://mythcreants.com/blog/five-rpg-systems-with-downtime-mechanics/> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Bulmahn, Jason. 2009. *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*. TRPG. Corebook. 1st Edition. Redmond: Paizo.
- Christiansen, Peter. 2014. Thanatogaming: Death, Videogames, and the Biopolitical State. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2014*. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/digra2014_submission_80.pdf (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Dormans, Joris. 2006. On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules. *Game Studies* 6 (1). <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kerttula, Tero. 2019. "What an Eccentric Performance": Storytelling in Online Let's Plays. *Games and Culture* 14 (3): 236–255. doi:10.1177/1555412016678724.
- McAllister, Ken S., and Judd Ethan Ruggill. 2018. Playing to Death. *American Journal of Play* 11 (1): 85–103.
- Morningstar, Jason. 2014. Visual Design as Metaphor: The Evolution of a Character Sheet. *Analog Game Studies*. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/visual-design-as-metaphor-the-evolution-of-a-character-sheet/> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Ndalianis, Angela. 2012. *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Petersen, Sandy, and Lynn Willis. 1981. *Call of Cthulhu*. TRPG. Corebook. 1st edition. Hayward: Chaosium.
- Taylor, Nicholas. 2016. Play to the camera: Video ethnography, spectatorship, and e-sports. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22 (2): 115–130. doi:10.1177/1354856515580282.
- Taylor, Nicholas Thiel. 2016. Now you're playing with audience power: the work of watching games. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33 (4): 293–307. doi:10.1080/15295036.2016.1215481.
- Taylor, T. L. 2012. *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 2018. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc77jqw.
- Tobin, Samuel. 2015. Cocktail Cabinets: A Critique of Digital and Ludic Essentialism. *Analog Game Studies*. January 1. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/01/cocktail-cabinets/> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Torner, Evan. 2015. Bodies and Time in Tabletop Role-Playing Game Combat Systems. In *Wyrd Con Companion 2015*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman, 160–176. Costa Mesa: Wyrd Con.
- . 2016. The Self-Reflexive Tabletop Role-Playing Game. *G|A|M|E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment* 1 (5). Ludica: 85–96. <https://www.gamejournal.it/?p=2913> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- Trammel, Aaron. 2014. Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons. *Analog Game Studies*. October 6. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/> (accessed 2020/8/21).
- de Wildt, Lars, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce, and Souvik Mukherjee. 2019. (Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar. *Games and Culture*. doi:10.1177/1555412019858890.
- Zagal, José Pablo, and Sebastian Deterding. 2018. Definitions of "Role-Playing Games". In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José Pablo Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 19–52. New York: Routledge.

Ludography

- Alder, Avery. 2012. *Monsterhearts: A Story Game About the Messy Lives of Teenage Monsters*. TRPG. Corebook. 1st edition. Nelson: Buried Without Ceremony.
- Costikyan, Greg, Dan Gelber, Eric Goldberg, Ken Rolston, and Paul Murphy. 1984. *Paranoia: The Roleplaying Game of a Darkly Humorous Future*. TRPG. Corebook. 1st Edition. New York: West End Games.
- Crane, Luke. 2002. *The Burning Wheel*. TRPG. Corebook. New York: Burning Wheel.
- . 2009. *Mouse Guard Roleplaying Game*. TRPG. Corebook. Los Angeles: Archaia Studios Press.
- Crawford, Jeremy, James Wyatt, Robert J. Schwalb, and Bruce R. Cordell. 2014. *Player's Handbook - Dungeons & Dragons*. TRPG. Corebook. 5th edition. Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC.
- Dewey, Stephen. 2015. *Ten Candles*. TRPG. Corebook. Warwick: Cavalry Games.
- Goodman, Joseph. 2017. *Dungeon Crawl Classics: Glory & Gold Won by Sorcery & Sword*. TRPG. Corebook. Santa Clara: Goodman Games.
- Harper, John. 2017. *Blades in the Dark*. TRPG. Corebook. Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions.
- Hite, Kenneth. 2012. *Night's Black Agents: A Vampire Spy Thriller Game*. TRPG. Corebook. London: Pelgrane Press.
- Olavsrud, Thor, and Luke Crane. 2013. *Torchbearer: A Roleplaying Game*. TRPG. Corebook. New York: Burning Wheel.
- Raggi, James. 2009. *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*. TRPG. Coreboo. Helsinki, Finland: LofP.
- Rein-Hagen, Mark. 1991. *Vampire: The Masquerade*. TRPG. Corebook. 1st Edition. Stone Mountain: White Wolf.
- Stafford, Greg. 1985. *Pendragon: Chivalric Roleplaying in Arthur's Britain*. TRPG. Corebook. Hayward: Chaosium.