

global network player authority PowDiePie guild god Let's Play angel Undead wt dungeon
game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon face body fight PVP contest
religion Gamer representation healing to relo-scape SOUL diablo class tradition experience in-game Skul
simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral virtual identity buff priest rebirth genesis clan
narrative immersion community symbols salvation Twitch gamer digital discussion wedding
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To Live or Die in Los Santos: Death and Post Mortality Aspects in *Grand Theft Auto V*

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Abstract

Review of the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* concerning death and post mortality aspects.

Keywords: review, death, post mortality, *Grand Theft Auto V*

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Grand Theft Auto V was one of the most anticipated video games in the last few years. It is the seventh installment in the main *Grand Theft Auto* series and the fifteenth overall. The first game of the series was released in 1997 for PC and PlayStation and two years later for Nintendo's Game Boy Color. The responsible developer was Rockstar North alongside Tarantula Studios, the former is even today accountable for the progress of the series. Today's Publisher is Rockstar Games, an affiliated company of Take-Two Interactive. The *Grand Theft Auto* games – or in short just the *GTA* games – are one of the bestselling video games worldwide. For instance according to Take-Two Interactive's report of its fiscal third quarter 2016, *GTA V* has been sold in over 60 million units across all platforms (Take-Two Interactive 2016). The whole series has been sold over 220 million times (Take-Two Interactive 2015) and is placed on rank five in the list of the bestselling video game franchises ever. The fans of the *GTA* series waited eagerly five years since the predecessor *GTA IV* was published. Concerning to it's great financial success and not least because of the throughout positive valuations the game achieved by many game magazines it's not surprising that the game has an immense impact of the Gaming YouTube channels

when it has came out 2013 on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.¹ Many YouTubers had or have a Let's Play or Walkthrough on their channels within which they showed their audience the game's story or other interesting features like the multiplayer mode *GTA Online*. But no matter what they have chosen both the normal story and the multiplayer mode show some interesting religious motives regarding death and post mortality.

Death and Post Mortality Aspects

Like in many other video games the event of Game Over is a consequence of losing all your character's health. The concept of a health bar showing the player's physical condition is an established idea especially in role play games. Health limits in such cases the damage you are able to bear before you die. The protagonist can restore health in *GTA V* and *GTA Online* by eating or drinking so life is therefore constituted as a linear scale influenceable through mundane activities. Even the depiction of the oncoming death is devious. When you get shot the blood and the bullet holes are visible on your body so you are relentlessly confronted with the deadly consequences of your actions. In the moment of death the Game Over screen presenting the word "wasted" shows up and the game slows down the scenery turning the screen in black and white. Even if your life gets "wasted" when your health decreases to zero you will get a chance to continue your game because of concept of multi mortality and multi vitality. Gregor Ahn (2011: 127) emphasizes that the principles of reanimating defeated avatars has led to a widely changed handling of dead and post mortality in the conception of games compared to what we are used to in "real-life". It is common for modern video games to provide unlimited lives for the player in order to beat the game without too much frustration. The question now is whether the players know what the constantly revival of their avatar means in religious terms.



Through the avatar the player is in the position to dismiss the inevitable death over and over again. This ability beyond nature is presenting more with a religious background in *Grand Theft Auto Online*. The GTA franchise features a plenty activities you can do with one of the three main characters: If you feel like having a new car then go as Franklin Clinton to the vehicle of your choice and take it or if you always wanted to rule your own company smuggling arms and drugs Trevor Philips is the man of your choice. But if you always thought the world is only 157 years old and trees are able to talk you should take the chance to become am member of the Epsilonism with Michael de Santa. The Epsilon Program is a religious cult which appears in almost every game of the series. They share many similarities to L. Ron Hubbards Scientology church. For example their logo resembles strongly the one of Scientology using the same design only forming the typical octagonal cross to an "E" (for the Greek letter Epsilon). For promotion aspects the Epsilonism has an own real websiteⁱⁱ as well as an official Twitter accountⁱⁱⁱ. As addressed earlier the player has the choice to become part of the Epsilon Program. When he decides to do so he has to fulfill some missions for Cris Formage. He is the founder and leader of the Epsilon Program and he appears in both *GTA V* and *GTA Online*. His role in the multiplayer mode is a bit larger concerning to death and post mortality aspects. When the player's character dies for the first time the Game Over Screen presenting the word "wasted" shows up like in the main game. After this a short cut scene with Cris Formage starts. The whole scenery appears like a near death experience since the *GTA Online* Protagonist enters a transcended place comparable with the typical description of heaven. Furthermore he seems to hover and you can hear maritime sounds. Before he is able to do something, Formage flies smoothly in the player's direction. As well as in his occurrence and his speech regarding to the player constitutes him as a god-like person. He refers himself as miracle to the protagonist and speaks of enormous power he uses to watch people. He also invites the player in

watching whenever he likes. The function of this little scene is the introducing of the Passive Mode to the game. When the player enters this mode he cannot be harmed by other players anymore. Vice versa he is also unable to do harm to others. Thus he takes also the role as a god or at least as an *ubermensch*.



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Figure 1: Chris Formage as he appears as a god-like person.^{iv}

Besides the meaning of death of the own avatar and the role of Epsilonism in *GTA V* related to death and post mortality facets there are a few more minor encounter with the afterlife during the playtime. One of them is part of the narration if the player decided to do so. During the optional missions "Something Sensible" or "The Time's come" at the end of *GTA V* he has the opportunity to kill off Trevor Philips or Michael de Santa. But these missions can be replaced by "The Third Alternative" in which all three protagonists survive. Herein the player is again in a god-like position deciding who is allowed to live on and who is not. Of course the player can dispatch NPCs during the whole game if he feels so. But killing off the own avatar is far more

significant since he is the player's embodiment in the game. Apart from all the circumstances a character can die of respectively is able to continue his existence the game includes hidden specifics that cause the player to get in touch with the afterlife. For instance, *GTA V* deals also with the paranormal. When the player goes between 23 p.m. and 00:00 a.m. (the game has true in-game time) to Mount Gordo he can watch the ghost of Jolene Cranley-Evans. In front of her is the name "Jock" written in blood, a hint that her murderer was her own husband Jock Cranley, a NPC in the game. However ghosts are not the only proof of the fluidity of life and death in *GTA V*. In Vinewood, a borough of Los Santos, it is possible to find a zombie who tells you his life story. These examples points that Rockstar operates with two of the oldest archetypal manifestations of horror and impending apocalypse to create a world where the undead becomes experientable.

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Figure 2: Ghosts are not the only undead creatures in *GTA V*.



Figure 3: Talking to zombies seems quite normal in *GTA V*.

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Though, death in *GTA V* is not always connected to supernatural entities. Owed to the criminal milieu in which the main story takes place, the player can find a few spots where mafia punishments happened. Behind the Vinewood cinema you can find a short message on the wall saying: "Ain't no mystery. They drowned her because of what she knew!". During the side mission "Murder Mystery" Michael de Santa has to solve the murder of a man named Isaac. His investigations lead him to the sunken corpse of the women mentioned in the message. A bag is put over her head and her feed are cemented. It's probably that she knew who murdered Isaac which is why she had to die. Other examples that show the human's ruthlessness in dealing with other people's lives appear as some Easter eggs referring to real and fictional homicides. One of them is the murder on the Manson Family in 1969. In Vinewood Hills the player can find the number 1807 above an arrow on a brick wall pointing to one of the houses. This arrow leads the protagonist to a house which looks very similar to the one Charles Manson lived together with 18 women. The digits 0 and 7 stand for the seven people which were killed by order of Charles

Manson. The other one is about the fictional Infinity murder. His true name is Merle Abrahams and his actions reach back to the happenings of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, released in 2004. Here Rockstar created a typical case of a serial murderer. The killings occurred in Los Santos years before the story of *GTA V* takes place, but it's only possible to understand and solve the mystery of the Infinity murder when both games are played. Although these details are terrifying, they equip the game with a realistic disposition.

Conclusion

It may seem paradox but *GTA V* and its multiplayer mode have available a vivid otherworldliness. On the one hand *GTA V* mirrors many aspects of a criminal's deadly style of life for which reason the player is forced to expose with frequently violent and torturing scenes as well as with the opportunity to dispatch a NPC or a teammate. This free choice causes the player to reflect his own opinion on human life because he is constrained to consider if the life of this NPC or his teammate is worth to spare or not. On the other hand it is not unusual to hunt and find ghosts or watch zombies in public. Admittedly the occurrence of supernatural beings provides more for the amusement of the players than being a serious part of the narrative. However they expand the game world by an otherworldly sphere. Through this combination of self-reflecting moments and meetings with creatures of the afterlife *GTA V* plays with death and post mortality in order to exhibit a porous border between life and death. For further studies in researching death and post mortality issues or religious aspects in general *Grand Theft Auto V* respectively almost the whole *GTA* franchise can serve as a productive example. They can for instance specify the role of the Epsilonism for the authenticity of the game world as well as for the player's game experience or they could put the game in a larger context and try to portray the development of

the concept of religion in the history of video games.

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- ⁱ In 2014 *GTA V* was also released for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. The PC version came out in 2015.
- ⁱⁱ Available at <http://www.epsilonprogram.com/kifflom.htm>, accessed 15 May 2016.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Available at <https://twitter.com/EpsilonismToday>, accessed 12 May 2016.
- ^{iv} All screenshots from the gameplay were taken by the author.