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Playing Through Life, Death, and Grief in Fortnite and Elden Ring

Jasper Lynn
jlynn1@skidmore.edu

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Jasper Lynn

Playing Through Life, Death, and Grief in *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*

Skidmore College

SDM Department: Media Studies

Advisors: Prof. Benzon, Prof. Lindner

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Introduction: Video Games in the United States and Japan

One of the most ubiquitous and controversial features of video games is death and dying. From military landscape settings to the replica of military operations as play and narrative structure, the instruments, settings, and experience of death are everpresent. Evidence of the almost total isomorphism of video games as a medium with activities and imagery around death is the fact that even games that do not explicitly represent death but use the game apparatus to establish point of view are called “first person shooter” games. At the same time, however, video games are often considered to be the medium that most successfully creates various forms of simulated liveness. Video games are often characterized and differentiated from other mediums by virtue of their interactivity and by the way in which their construction of immediate action and motion in digital worlds provides players with the experience of presentness. The seductive power of this virtual life force has been linked to an increase in fantasies of violence among players and even to the crossing of the boundary between imaginative forms of action and actual violent behavior. In other words, an important paradox lies at the heart of video games that suggests that the medium is what Peter Galison, in the context of the history of science and technology, called a trading zone, a space in which contradictory ideas about life and death in the contemporary techno-social world are exchanged, explored, and perhaps denied (Galison 1997).

This thesis seeks to contribute to the growing literatures on video games that focus on the interconnections among liveness, death culture and technological change, by exploring this paradox. To do so, I have selected two contemporary video games, *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*, that each explore the themes and conditions outlined above in different ways. *Fortnite* is a third-person shooter, battle-royale game with a colorful visual aesthetic that is designed and produced by Epic Games—a major video game publisher based in North Carolina. On a technical level, *Fortnite* is known for its integration of a building system that allows players to protect

themselves and traverse the geology of the battle-royale map. The game's structure invites players to parachute down onto the map of the game, scavenge building materials, gather weapons and consumable items, and equip themselves to battle against the other players in the game. In total, 100 players are present in a single match of *Fortnite*. Under these conditions in-game, each player aims to be the last player alive and thereby win the game. This ludic formula proved successful early after *Fortnite's* launch, but the game only reached a pop-cultural zenith with the development of in-game cosmetics. Epic Games offers *Fortnite* for free and derives most of its revenue from in-game skins and other items purchased to be used with no advantage in-game. This ludic system, rooted in competitive death and dying and visually centered on an economy of constant updating of appearance, creates what I will define as a form of perpetual liveness rooted in a US military world view. *Fortnite* builds ludic and visual systems allowing players to simulate a heroic and forever victorious position in the Gameworld, which I argue, truly catalyzed *Fortnite's* global success.

Elden Ring is a third-person, action-adventure, role-playing-game set in a medieval, gothic world; it was designed under director Hidetaka Miyazaki within his studio From Software and produced by Bandai Namco, two video game corporations working from Japan. In contrast to *Fortnite's* cheerful demeanor and childlike appeal, *Elden Ring* is a dark sci-fi fantasy epic, set in a misty, fog-drenched world that challenges players to fight their way to obtain power over it without a clearly defined narrative and ludic structure to get there. Before producing *Elden Ring*, From Software had developed a series of third-person role-playing games that were well-known for their unusually high degree of difficulty and celebrated for the way in which they yield many hours of gameplay and intense satisfaction for players driven to overcome the bosses of the game. Unlike most single-player video games, *Elden Ring* players have no option to increase or decrease game difficulty to better calibrate it to their skills in-game: the only way to progress is

to master the skills needed to beat the notoriously difficult bosses of the game. Moreover, From Software RPG games are also notorious for their lack of defined narrative details, forcing players to become digital archaeologists and discover the wider plot structure as they progress through the games. *Elden Ring* continued this successful formula but is the first From Software game that utilizes an open-world format, a fully rendered actionable space that can be fully explored at any order within its limits; this change that broadened the scope of past From Software games was highly acclaimed, selling 20 million copies of the game as of February 2023 and winning Game of the Year at *The Game Awards 2022* (Amoroso, 2022). While *Fortnite* presents a decidedly optimistic and American view war as a matter of child's play, *Elden Ring's* lugubrious gameworld and high degree of difficulty engages players with a dreadful, mournful, and as I will argue, specifically Japanese experience, even if they win the narrative war against the game.

The thesis will begin with a literature review establishing the relevant vocabulary and approaches to video-game analysis with a particular emphasis on the literatures that explore issues of liveness, haunting, and video game technology's relation to the military. Following that framing, literatures in media studies as well as art historical analyses that deal with questions of aesthetics will be explored. Finally, the paper will turn to a close reading of each game, including attention to game play structure, issues of visual representation and player experience. Particular attention will be paid to how these elements suggest ideas about warfare in the post-industrial world as well as to differences in the legacies of WWII in Japan and the US. The goal of the thesis is to contribute to game studies by understanding how these games in particular operate to reflect the complex technologies, national and corporate interests that support their development as well as to mediate the cultures of death and the valuation of life during the contemporary moment.

Part I: Theoretical Framing

A: Media /Game Studies Review

Just as video games are a relatively recent addition to a long history of technical media, game studies is a relatively new area within the general field of media studies. Despite a short history, compared to film theory for example, there is now a robust set of literatures on video game studies built on two different frameworks for understanding the specificity of games within the broader landscape of visual and technical media. One of these foundational notions of game studies derives from Johan Huizinga's 1938 book *Homo Ludens* that established play as an essential component of society and the analysis of play as an essential component of cultural analysis and critique. Huizinga proposed the existence of what he called "the magic circle," a space of play in which a distinct and specific set of rules develop for gameplay that contrast with the rules governing the operations of everyday reality. Many game scholars depend on Huizinga's text to explore the gameplay structure of videogames as well as the simulated world spaces they create. Thus, Ludology is described as an approach to game studies that emphasizes the formal systems underlying games, such as rules, mechanics, and gameplay, rather than the cultural or narrative aspects of video games (Juul, 2002). The second fundamental framework shaping game studies argues that video games should not be analyzed as games but rather as forms of stories to be read and consumed by players. Scholars such as Janet H. Murray who adopt this point of view are known as narratologists, and rather than deploy game theory, they work instead through modes of analysis derived more from literary theory and criticism (Murray 2006). I rely on both strategies because ludology's emphasis on codes of gameplay, rules, and gameworlds, and narratology's emphasis on mythological storytelling, are both necessary for a close reading of *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*.

In many regards, *Fortnite* is a classically ludological game. *Fortnite's* world is experienced through independent short rounds of battle royale; despite moments of emotional

intensity during these battles, all remnants of players' actions are removed at the end of the game. Game studies scholars have asserted that this lack of persistence common in shooting games, makes the games more like chess-boards, used by players to hone their skills competitively and play casually, than worlds to inhabit (Carter and Mavoa 2021, 2845). The fundamentally ludological nature of *Fortnite* can be demonstrated not only through its gameplay structure but also in the progression and updates of the game's design. Because of their attachment to consistent game rules, ludological games are challenged by the need to renew interest and popularity in a form that can quickly become stagnant. To address this issue, Epic Games pioneered the seasonal battle pass system, whereby often themed seasons introduce new weapons, items, skins, and most importantly, changes to the battle royale map. The result is a complex and shifting spatio-temporality; time is altered because a player's familiarity and knowledge of one season's map never lasts long and obtaining skillful dominion over *Fortnite's* in-game world, the goal of such competitive shooter games, is theoretically impossible. This changes the player-game dynamic because *Fortnite's* shifting digital space operates more as a medium for intermittent checking in and engaging with the current state of the game, its players, and the genre of battle royale games, than as a space to master (Carter and Mavoa 2021, 2847). Although certain features of the game's geography remain the same amongst seasonal map changes, the player is presented with new visuals that make the space appear to be both continuous but ever evolving. Simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, the fundamentally ludological structure of *Fortnite* lends what I will describe below as an uncanny aura to the game.

Since its release in 2017, *Fortnite's* chess-board has been elaborated, but both the rules and the rulebound nature of the game have remained the same and no definitive narrative structure has been added. This is in stark contrast with the narratological structure both of *Elden*

Ring itself and of the series of games of which *Elden Ring* is the latest installation. From Software games are typically understood to be driven by narrative structures simultaneously hidden in-game and celebrated out of it, as communities of what Kevin D. Ball and fans have called “lore hunters,” corroborate and discuss narrative details found within the games (Ball 2017). The way in which individual players and communities piece together the narratives underlying the equally celebrated combat systems of gameplay demonstrates the degree to which the narratological structure of *Elden Ring* is one of its key attractions to players. Andreas Theodoru analyzes this attraction by describing the narrative structure of the *Dark Souls* games that precede *Elden Ring* as forms of spatial storytelling through which players actively seek out hidden details of the story through in-game items and dialogue rather than witnessing dramatic action in the form of cinematic cut scenes (Theodoru 2020). This active engagement of players in the making of interactive fiction extends even to the conclusion of the game’s narrative, where players are given options of multiple narrative endings.

Despite this element of control, however, Theodoru proposes that none of the options offer catharsis for players (Theodoru 2020, 92). Instead, and in stark contrast to how *Fortnite* updates its appearance to continually engage players, Theodoru argues that From Software uses what he calls a “Gothic ludo-narrative” to propel players towards deeper engagement (Theodoru 2020, 84). By subverting the Hero’s Journey structure and the traditional happy-endings of Western mythologies and fairy tales, *Dark Souls* creates sensations of dread and tensions that players seek to resolve through play. In the design of *Elden Ring*, From Software intensified this structure by expanding what had been 2 possible endings to 6, many of which are not properly speaking endings but rather reconfigurations of the oppressive ruling regime that brought ruin to “The Lands Between”--the gameworld--in the first place. The repetitive return to ruination embedded in the fractured and dreadful narrative of *Elden Ring* demonstrate the importance of

understanding the broad strokes of ludological theory when analyzing the game, but also point to particularly ways in which *Elden Ring* “challenge(s) the hegemony” of Western mythology and narratives in ways that will be discussed further below (Theodoru 2020, 84).

B: Liveness

While the ludological/narratological debate is specific to game studies and is essential to understanding elemental features of both *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*, game scholars also engage concepts that are important to the larger framework of media studies, of which liveness is the most pertinent to my study. As telecommunications and broadcasting technologies developed over time and across industries like radio, television, and music, the cultural sense of what it means to have attended or seen something “live” changed. Media theorists since at least W. Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) have explored how recording, replication, instantaneousness, and other conditions of technological reproduction altered traditional definitions of time and space and established liveness as a contingent cultural problematic rather than as a naturally defined and authentic dimension of human experience. Phil Auslander, for example, has argued that “Liveness, then, is not an empirical or even an ontological category. Rather, it is a discursive effect, a quality that is produced in the encounter between a particular viewer and a particular media event” (Auslander 1999, 3). In other words, the liveness of media is not primarily predicated on phenomenological proximity to media events or on whether a particular recording is of a live event, but is produced in relation to the language viewers use to understand their experience of them. As a result, liveness has lost its traditional associations with physical proximity, live performance, and spatial immediacy, and in the 21st century, is more distinctly defined by technologies that mediate and mediatize digital sensations of liveness. As evidence for his assertion, Auslander uses the fact that the concept of liveness developed after the advent of media that could record and replicate past events and was

retroactively applied to all ephemeral media that came before these technologies as being considered “live” (Auslander 1999, 5). He further argues that prevailing notions of liveness shifted in reaction to the development of different types of recorded media. As a result, Auslander argues that instead of liveness being determined by the technologies, viewers dictate the way liveness is understood. In other words, rather than a typical example of technological determinism, liveness must be recentered around the idea of “spectator determinism” (Auslander 1999, 9-10) and video games understood to put forth a “binding claim” on players in ways that are specific to the medium.

For some scholars, video games do not merely engage and deploy specific liveness conditions but in fact depend on it. According to Chris Hanson, for example, video games “necessitate a sense of liveness not shared by other media. Games *require* constant input from the player to sustain a continuous feedback loop between the player’s interaction and the game’s mechanics.” (Hanson 2018, 12). In fact, he asserts that agreeing to provide the input that maintains liveness of games is part of the binding contract to which players commit when they choose to play one game or another (Hanson 2018, 10). Key to Hanson’s argument is that various and sometimes conflicting temporalities are fundamental to the medium specificity of video games. He points to potential disjunctions between in-game time and how time actually flows because of the capacity of players to preserve, pause, slow and rewind time. In some games, this discontinuity between real time and game-time is amplified by temporal discontinuities within a particular game’s structure: narrative games, like *Elden Ring*, have complex diageitic temporalities while ludological games like *Fortnite* permit repetitions and returns not possible either in the real world or in other games. As I will argue below, and while they do so in different ways, both games complicate the form of liveness that Hanson argues undergird video games as a medium by adding death, mourning and perpetual resurrection into

their preceding temporalities and raise questions about how these disjunctions shape player experience.

MMOs--massively multiplayer online game--are useful for understanding the kind of contract about liveness that video games ask players to accept. MMOs are characterized by large numbers of people playing video games simultaneously in real time from different places. Frequently, these events can accommodate more people than can be housed in even the largest IRL venues, an impressive scale that is unique to the affordances of MMO's, a scale that produces unique liveness effects. More important than their empirical size to the specific kinds of liveness they generate, however, is their hybrid character. MMOs are simultaneously live events, human people in one space acting and experiencing in tandem, and also digital events, simulated performances that unfold in the temporal and spatial abstraction of pixels that turn on and off. Following Auslander, I argue that by coordinating real and simulated events that enfold player impact into the spatio-temporality of the game, MMOs exemplify important dimensions of the liveness contract imposed by video games as a medium. MMOs issue contracts to players that requires them to interpret and accept a combination of real and simulated events as "live." In addition to hybridizing ideas of liveness and simulation, MMO's also include the impact of player decisions and actions on gameplay into their binding claims: the medium is interactive, and both engender forms of identification between players and in-game characters as well as permit some degree of control over those characters and the world they inhabit. In fact, players typically structure apparently individualized narrative paths through game stories. giving them forms of agency that are unique to the medium.

Elden Ring and *Fortnite*, popular enough to be considered MMOs, connecting millions of international players within persistent, shared, digital spaces, mediate players' experience of liveness in ways that reflect this broad contract. Epic Games for example, capitalized on this

simultaneous gameplay performed ‘live’ by a self-assembled community of digital *Fortnite* players by crafting events that occurred on all consoles logged into the game in real time. The first, “Blast Off,” flew a rocket launched by the mysterious Visitor across every map and sky of *Fortnite* player loaded into a game at the time (Figure 1). This relatively simple form of liveness comprised of a single simulated image appearing in different places at the same time, has since evolved to include new forms that emphasize the medium’s intrinsic trans-medial character: digital concerts of popular musicians like Travis Scott, showings of filmic media like *Dragon Ball Super*, and other events occurring in real time and space but only digitally attended by video game players (Figure 2). In this way, *Fortnite*’s live events add a distinct form of temporality to the in-game world that persists in time whether a player is digitally present or not. *Fortnite* has developed additional features that mobilize this hybrid form of liveness: with the persistence of the seasonal map changes, *Fortnite*’s Battle Royale Island presents itself as a live place that exists independent of the player and changes as it matures. This counteracts video games’ usual reliance on player presence to animate player-characters who are motionless husks once the player puts the controller down. Similar tactics of mediated and hybridized liveness are present in *Elden Ring* in the Bloodstain. When players die in *Elden Ring*, their deaths are recorded as Bloodstains that can be viewed and interacted with by other live players as red apparitions (Figure 3). Bloodstains simultaneously provide valuable strategic information for surviving the gameworld as it unfolds in game-time, and also record an event that happened at a specific time and place and that was triggered not from within the game but by a players’ action performed on it. In these ways, *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*’s gameworlds are persistent digital places brimming with live presence that both reflect and have shifted the evolving and contingent genealogy of mediated liveness. Through their hybridization of player experience shaped by the mechanics and representation of player-characters, the identification between player and avatar, and player

agency in storytelling, *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* demonstrate how liveness is a seminal feature and central condition of video game experience and hence a central object of game analysis.



Figure 1- Player/avatars watching *Fortnite*'s first live event.

"Best Fortnite Live Events Over the Years." Essentially Sports, September 14, 2021.

<https://www.essentiallysports.com/best-fortnite-live-events-over-the-years-esports-news/>



Figure 2- Screenshot of the Travis Scott live event, complete with specially designed backgrounds, as seen by 1 of the 12million live viewers.

Hernandez, Patricia. "Fortnite's Travis Scott concert was surreal and spectacular." *The Verge*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/23/21233637/travis-scott-fortnite-concert-astronomical-live-report>



Figure 3- Aftereffects of in-game death visible in both the bloodstain and the blood-colored ghostly avatar.

Anderson, Miranda. "Elden Ring and Bloodstained Reveal Ridiculous Way a Player Died." *Game Rant*, September 25, 2021. <https://gamerant.com/elden-ring-bloodstain-reveals-ridiculous-way-player-died/>

C: Media Archaeology and Media History

Understanding the technological underpinnings of games within larger media histories is important to this study because of the way in which video games afford players specific types of engagement with liveness that differ from other media. This does not entail a simple progression from cinema to TV however. Rather, it entails attention to what Parikka calls media archaeology, “a critical practice that challenges dominant narratives of media history and provides a counterpoint to the notion of media as a smooth and seamless progression towards the present” (Parikka 2011, 2). Already in the 1960s, theorists like Marshall McLuhan outlined how new media recycle old media, adapting old forms to new conditions in ways that are transformative rather than linear. Thus, the way in which video games’ offer players a sense of immediate action and agency in digital worlds relies on but also fundamentally alters the forms identification, perspective, and gaze developed in its immediate precedents in film and television. With regard

to audience conditions, for example, video games replace the passive viewer who is fixed in place gazing at a screen, with an active viewer who is potentially mobile and connected to the screen via a controller. Moreover, while cinema viewers are seated in spaces along with other viewers, the condition of the gaze is such that it is exclusively focused on the screen and not on other viewers. While television's domestic situation interrupted this mono-directional flow by making engagement with other members of household possible while watching, video games engender hybrid forms of engagement that are both collective and isolated.

A media archaeological approach to the relationship between television and video games also reveals a gendering of game play that is relevant to *Elden Ring* and *Fortnite* that demonstrates what Parikka has called "the ways in which past media practices and technologies continue to influence and shape our present and future" (Parikka 2011, 2). According to Michael Newman's book *Atari Age*, when video games first entered the physical space of the house, they were connected to TV consoles which were associated with femininity because of their apparently passive mode of consumption and because the domestic sphere was largely understood to be the space of women (Newman 2017). Over time, however, the rise of male dominated sports broadcasting on TV along with the more active forms of engagement with TV made possible by the game console, shifted both the gendering of certain domestic spaces and the devices within them towards masculinity. This male coding was both reflected in and reinforced by the preponderance of war games in the early history of video games. When war movies are folded into this excavation of first-person shooter games, we understand two things that are important to my reading of *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*. First, games are gendered in a way that creates overlap between the primarily male population of the military and of gamers. Second, video games interrupt not only the passive witnessing of death that characterizes film death, but also change the spatial relation between death and the player. In a film context, death

takes place in a contained and distant space on the other side of the screen while for gamers often playing at home, death threatens to leak into the everyday spaces of life experience. This media archaeological lens thus supports Galloway's broad assertion that "The first-person shooter is a genre that ... raises important questions about the role of games in shaping our perceptions of war, conflict, and security" (Galloway 2006, 109).

In addition to their layering of other media technological systems, video games also adopt, alter, and update visual and aesthetic systems developed within the history of art. The grotesque, for example, is an art historical concept used to describe ancient works in which the experience of both pleasure and horror converged. I suggest the long history of the grotesque is pertinent to the importance of the gothic, ghost story quality of games like *Elden Ring*. According to Astrid Ensslin, gothic video games challenge players to confront their fears and anxieties, creating "a sense of unease and tension that drives gameplay and narrative" (Ensslin 2012, 5). This sensation manifests itself most pronouncedly in *Elden Ring*, where the sheer number of creatures and enemies waiting to attack the player around every corner grants a liveness to every area and action taken by the player--a liveness characterized by looming deadness. Thus, combining media archaeological analysis with an art historical perspective reveals how the technical apparatus and affordances of video games both absorb and alter previous conditions of media technologies in ways that increase the importance of liveness to the understanding of video games and to video game studies.

D: Haunting and the Military-Entertainment Complex

To most fully understand how *Elden Ring* and *Fortnite* do this "shaping of our present and future," it is necessary to build on this broad understanding of media studies and examine two lines of thought in more detail. The first is most fully developed by Jeffery Sconce in his book *Haunted Media*, in which he provides a series of "haunted" readings of various electronic

media artifacts and practices, highlighting the ways in which they “engage our deepest fears, desires, and cultural fantasies” (Sconce 2000, 5). His primary purpose is to demonstrate how the affordances intrinsic to specific media technologies inform the stories that are told through them and shape the thematic content that typically clusters around them. While the structure of Sconce’s argument, which interlinks form and content, could and has been used to analyze a great range of media history, his specific interest focuses on how the underlying technologies of mediums like radio and television create sensations of electronic presence that are often ghostly and haunted in nature. To make this argument, Sconce develops a genealogy of haunted pieces of media that starts with the invention of the telegram. Relying on the input of binary morse code from human operators within a growing network of telecommunication, the telegram connected modern individuals immaterially, collapsing traditional forms of spatial, temporal, and ontological distance. As a result, Sconce proposes that “the telegram was haunted by its own impermanence, as messages passed through a medium that was neither fully mechanical nor fully human, but rather a cyborg blend of both” (Sconce 2000, 22). This uncanny form of telepresence, according to Sconce, was seized upon by the Spiritualist movement, motivating Spiritualist users at the time to explore “the affordances of the telegraph as a medium for communicating with the dead” (Sconce 2000, 20). Spiritualists went so far as to conceive of spirit batteries, spiritual telegraphs, and eventually developed the belief that they could access ghostly presences within and through the telegraph itself (Sconce 2000, 29-32). Although what might be called Techno-Spiritualism was generally composed of a small group of people operating at the end of the last century, Sconce nevertheless asserts it had a large historical impact by initiating what would become a long history of hauntings in electronic media.

Although Sconce begins his account of techno-medial haunting with the telegram, he also argues that the form of haunting that began with telegrams was carried into and then changed by

other forms of early telecommunications. In other words, his argument entails not only a theory of haunted media as such but also proposes a model of media history as well. Thus, Sconce proposes that the haunted uses of the telegram shaped the reception of the radio as a medium that erased geographical distance and conjured voices from seemingly nowhere. Radio, however, unlike Spiritualism, had a mass audience. As a result, radio radically expanded the associations being made between new telecommunication technologies across society. The new affordances of increasingly ubiquitous and omni-present wireless communication connected many more disparate listeners and inspired “stories of paranormal radio as the ‘voice from the void’” (Sconce 2000, 64). Just as importantly, radio listeners engaged in these mystic technologies from the comfort of their homes, which not only domesticated technological ghosting but, in some ways, normalized the paranormal. Sconce’s discussion of radio thus reveals not only the persistence of issues of haunting across various wireless telecommunications, as sending telegrams to the dead became ghostly narratives traveling on radio waves, but also describes how changes within underlying media technologies changed the specific forms of haunting triggered by the development of new media apparatuses.

Sconce’s genealogy of haunted affordances of the telegram and radio extends to visual media like cinema and television. Television, for example, according to Sconce, recalls the structure of radio because it connected viewers and presences located in the separate and distanced confines of individual private homes. But, according to Sconce, television did more than conjure ghostly voices as did radio; the early television set, itself a technological apparatus housed within a piece of domestic furniture, seemed to concoct entire worlds and embodied characters that continued and extended beyond the borders of the screen. The television, in other words, seemed to bring distant and unknown characters and spaces to the space of the home and at the same time conjured a separate world located in some entirely other place. As a result of

this doubling, Sconce proposes that the “television transforms the home into a haunted space, a space inhabited by absent and spectral others, a space marked by the uncanny sense of presence and absence that has become the hallmark of electronic media” (Sconce 2000, 94)

Although Sconce develops a compelling history of sensations of ghostly presence and uncanny space associated with electronic media, the genealogy he constructs of electronic telecommunication dating back to its inception and continuing to the present fails to give adequate attention to video games. Video games, however, continue the engagement with electronic presence and death described by Sconce in ways that reinforce his argument that “electronic media’s fascination with death, the afterlife, and the uncanny is not a new phenomenon, but rather a perpetually renewed engagement with technology’s own ‘ghostly’ origins.” (Sconce 2000, 5). To give just one brief example, video games directly expand the ways in which television connected disparate players and presences from within the confines of home and other private spaces. Because Sconce’s argument is based both on a theory of persistence within a techno-medial genealogy as well as on a history of specific affordances generated by particular mediums and technology, video games cannot be merely added to this genealogy. Instead, their medium specificity must be engaged to explore how they enter the chain of media hauntings but also eventually produce new forms of live, electronic presence in their own ghostly origins and stories.

Media theorist Patrick Crogan offers important insights on how to adapt Sconce’s theoretical framework to the conditions of video games. For Crogan, the war and combat popularized in video games derive from the fact that the technologies undergirding video games all derive from industrial development in the military, which I argue is the techno-cultural origin point of the of spectral haunting of the medium itself. Specifically, he claims that “‘Spacewar!’ was the first computer game that was both playable and entertaining” and that it became

“emblematic of a form of game development that took place within the academic and military research communities in the 1960s and 1970s” (Crogan 2005, 16). According to Crogan, this simple computer game was conceived by MIT military researchers hacking military simulation software intended for actual battle in which living “players” die, and converted it into a dramatic simulation of both life and death. This relationship to the military, Crogan asserts, continues “to play a significant role in the genre’s evolution and its role in wider culture” (Crogan 2005, 1). He argues that this connection occurs not only within video games, which as a genre is dominated by an overwhelming production of military warfare games most often depicting the American military as its protagonists, but also in the way video games are produced and played. For Crogan, the “sharing of technologies and expertise in simulation, and in the overlapping domains of military training and entertainment media” permeates the techno-social milieu of video games (Crogan 2011, 42). In fact, according to Crogan, the interconnection with the military is the single most dominant influence in the origins and current production of video games. With Crogan and Sconce’s theories in mind, regardless of their explicit content, I argue that the military haunts all video games: it is the ghost in their machines.

To fully understand *Elden Ring* and *Fortnite*, it is important to connect the theoretical frameworks of Sconce and Crogan. On the one hand, like the media described by Sconce, video games are conduits of uncanny worlds, electronic presence, mediated absence, and ghostly desires. They modify time and space, establish connections between human and nonhuman operators, and cross boundaries between private places and shared experiences. Each of these attributes, activated in different ways by different games, collectively engage the long history of mediatic haunting. On the other hand, video games’ technological origins in the military infuse video games not only with military technology but also with military interests and points of view. In other words, building on Crogan’s analysis, it is not just that the military metaphorically

haunts the design of popular games, but that in some games actual military soldiers, technologies, and ideologies are represented as ghostly presences. In other words, the way in which video games produce presence and ghostly liveness is paradoxically and problematically built on the technologies and bodies of death. To introduce video games into Sconce's genealogy, therefore, requires, first, an explicit analysis of the interweaving of the modern history of electronic media and military technology. Second, it requires close attention to how individual games reflect the military points of view of the countries they are produced in, as well as differences between various national experiences of war. Third, once understood as a medium that actively shapes the understanding of technological incursions into war in ways that vary much more than early radio and television broadcasts produced in America, video games can also be understood as sites of grief and dread in response to national military history. Sconce helps us understand that electronic media reflect deep-rooted "cultural desires," and Crogan's alignment between video games and the military illuminates the cultural and ghostly presence of war and military death; thus, I argue video games become consequential spaces to understand deep-rooted desires to ignore, manage, and atone for militarized death and killing, and the ways in which it undergirds early 21st century life.

Part II: Game Analysis

A: Elden Ring

While video games certainly belong to a generalized military-industrial and military-entertainment complex, the global forces undergirding that condition are also mediated by the historically contingent cultural practices of specific locales. As a result, any understanding of liveness and deadness in *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* must consider their different origins in the United States and Japan respectively. Crogan's analysis of the relationship of video games to the military-entertainment complex, for example, is limited to the American military and to

American games. Japan, however, has an entirely different set of historical relations to its own military organization and technology compared to America's. While from the American perspective Japan was an aggressor, the horrifying, militarized death of hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens at the hands of American atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 undoubtedly created a national sense of death, grief, and mourning wholly unique to the modern world that Reiko Tanimura describes "were expressed in various ways in postwar Japan, from the creation of memorials and the practice of ancestor worship, to the development of new forms of artistic expression that grappled with the trauma of war" (Tanimura 2021, 5). As a result of this contradictory history, until very recently Japan was both a largely unarmed, demilitarized nation, but also a nation intensely focused on technological and media industries as its economic engine within "a period of rapid economic growth and modernization, driven by a combination of government intervention, investment in new industries, and technological innovation" (Aoki 2001, 92). Thus, the innovations of tele-communications and media in Japan developed independent of the interests and control of military ambitions. In other words, Japanese video games are connected to the machinery of death in ways that differ significantly from the U.S.

According to Paolo Xavier Machado Mendez, this postwar period of Japan witnessed the development of forms of culturally postmodern media characterized by the fracturing of "Japan's grand narratives" (Mendez 2017, 3) During this period, younger generations turned away from "political and communal activity and towards excessive consumerism and a kind of media-worship" (Mendez 2017, 3). Mendez argues this fracturing of societal cohesion created contemporary social anxiety that is known as otaku culture in Japan. For Mendez, the disrupted, socially fragmented, and technological mediation of otaku must be recognized as the socio-historical context of *Elden Ring's* preceding games, the Dark Souls series. Mendez traces the exchanges between the demise of certain traditionally Japanese cultural practices and the rise of

international forces triggered by WWII. He argues that the postwar period amplified the belief that Japan had entered what Buddhism calls *mappō*, the third age of Buddha's law characterized by the degeneration and unraveling of the true essence, the *dharma*, of the Buddha's teachings (Mendez 2017, 90). Mendez proposes, in other words, that this Buddhist belief in a mystically apocalyptic period in which the societal narratives and culture built up over centuries unravel and dissipate took on historical urgency and reality because of the impact of British and German economic and political policies adopted in the Meiji period, and because of the constitutional reform enforced by General MacArthur in the wake of Japan's defeat in World War II (Mendez 2017, 91). The result of this exchange between Buddhist theosophy and Western military culture was a techno-social set of conditions unique to post-war Japan that are indelibly imprinted on the games produced by From Software, even on the level of small details. For example, Mendez notes that the *Dark Souls* games only employ English voice actors, forcing Japanese players to use subtitles to understand games made in Japan.

Although Mendez focuses on *Dark Souls*, his analytic framework can be productively applied to *Elden Ring*: in fact, I argue that the later game brought even more complexity to the dynamic exchanges between Japanese otaku culture and western game culture rather than resolved it. The most prominent in-game evidence of the impact of this intensification of what Mendez calls the "patchwork" of Western influences within Japanese games, is in the way in which *Elden Ring*'s gameworld depends on a diffuse amalgamation of historical styles combining a generalized depiction of Western medieval traditions and an implicitly Buddhist philosophical sense of foreboding catastrophe (Mendez 2017, 97). For example, medieval, gothic structures like the Academy of Raya Lucaria defy physics and resist the quantifiable scale of human perception (Figure 4). Reinforcing the medievalizing supernaturalism of the setting, the gameworld is also inhabited by monstrous characters like the Marionette Soldiers and the Raya

Lucaria Sorcerers (Figure 5). The grotesque visual elements routinely deployed by From Software create Lovecraftian worlds that seem to derive from the subconscious recesses of Western historical memory but arrive into the world filtered and distorted by Japanese memories of WWII--an actual rather than mythical encounter with an catastrophic event. The apocalyptic state that conflates actuality with mythology in “The Lands Between” is most pronounced in the Mountaintop of the Giants, a snowy area devoid of life where gothic buildings and structures are decaying and broken, and giants, some slain and others lumbering near death, slump through fields along the mountaintops (Figure 6). This Gameworld, filled with forests of decaying bodies, establishes for the player a golden age stretching back into a vaguely historical period that both anticipates and preserves trauma that existed long before the player ever picked up the controller.



Figure 4- Atmospheric effects compound the sense of uncanny scalelessness of the medievalizing castle. IamWatchingAoT. Reddit, June 1, 2021, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Eldenring/comments/ucsszl/the first time i saw the academy of royal lucaria/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Eldenring/comments/ucsszl/the_first_time_i_saw_the_academy_of_royal_lucaria/)



Figure 5- This vaguely anthropomorphic figure, whose body seems to be mostly evaporated, adds to the sense of apocalypse.

"Marionette Soldier." Elden Ring Wiki, Fextralife,
<https://eldenring.wiki.fextralife.com/Marionette+Soldier>



Figure 6- The carcasses of slain giants have been taken over by strange life forms.

Japan_plastic_addict. Reddit, June 5, 2021.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Eldenring/comments/u8ph2l/the_fire_giants_were_impaled_by_stakes_of_living/

The visual patchwork of *Elden Ring*'s gameworld is not merely a matter of visual style however, but is also a result of specific aspects of how the game was produced. When developing *Elden Ring*, From Software sought out George R.R. Martin, writer and creator of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a novel that became the basis of one of the most widely consumed epic fantasy dramas, *Game of Thrones*. Rooted in the depiction of medieval battles, dragon slaying and historical science fiction, Martin's literature motivated From Software to ask him to mythologize "what happened 5000 years before the current game" (The Late Show with Steven Colbert 2022, 7:10). Although heralded as describing a morally complex historical reality, *Game of Thrones* also offers a narrative about characters who move toward a future they imagine in idealized terms. Seen through Mendez's framework, the result of this collaboration was that Hidetaka Miyazaki and FromSoftware both embedded Martin's mythologizing narrative about a Western golden age within *Elden Ring*, but inflected it with the fracturing effects of Japanese mappō and otaku post-war conditions. By intersecting a world shaped by a Buddhist belief in the inevitability of cataclysm with Martin's historical science fiction narrative about the persistence of possibility, *Elden Ring* generates both a "Buddhist post-apocalyptic aesthetic" that uncannily doubles and distorts Western story-telling techniques.

Reading *Elden Ring* and other games by From Software in relation to the context of post-modern Japan underscores the importance and historical specificity of figures of death, grief, and dread that are repeatedly depicted. Many scholars, including Mendez, describe *Elden Ring* and its precedents as gothic and sublime, terms that evoke both a dark and morbid historical period as well as an aesthetic condition that emphasizes the sensation of being overwhelmed and at risk (Figure 7). The atmosphere of *Elden Ring*'s gameworld is macabre, ghostly, uncanny, and fundamentally tragic--a beautifully sad place deeply haunted by its past. While this language helps capture the tone of the game, the vocabulary ultimately derives from a Western artistic

tradition and thus potentially misses the deeper implication of the theoretical frameworks provided by Crogan and Mendez. While the historical context alluded to in the game is of a mythical long-ago moment in the dark ages of Europe, the historical context of the production of “The Lands Between” is modern Japan; a country ravaged by a war fought with weapons with otherworldly power, a war that filled new media across the globe with images of disappearing people and ghostly entities. Postmodern Japan, in other words, reflects postwar Japan, where a patchwork of US and Japanese military actions created a true apocalypse and left the work of perpetual mourning in its wake.



Figure 7- The large size and repetition of gothic elements of this castle evoke the sublime. Hollister, Sean. "Elden Ring PS5 review: a FromSoftware masterpiece." *The Loadout*, February 24, 2022. <https://www.theloadout.com/elden-ring/review-ps5>

I argue that *Elden Ring* mobilizes the paradoxical capacity of video games to bring liveness to death in order to enable players to participate in a national experience of death and to engage with cultural practices of death and grief specific to Japan. The integration of players into the process of questioning life, death, and grief starts in *Elden Ring's* opening cutscene and in the first minutes of gameplay after creating one's player-character. *Elden Ring* opens sonically with sounds of a blacksmith striking hot metal with a hammer, whose glowing light illuminates the

construction of the *Elden Ring* (Figure 8). As the narrator outlines a vague history of the Shattering and the current state of “The Lands Between,” images of the battles, demigods, and Tarnished who sent this medieval land into chaos visualize his words. He lays out trails of a narrative to soon be discovered and announces to the player, “The fallen leaves tell a story. The great Elden Ring was shattered. In our home, across the fog, the Lands Between...A war from which no lord arose. A war leading to abandonment by the Greater Will. Arise now, ye Tarnished!...The call of long-lost grace speaks to us all... Cross the fog, to The Lands Between...And become the Elden Lord!” (Miyazaki, 2022). This religious language of grace and resurrection is a ‘patchwork’ reflection of both Western and Japanese myths that use physical crossings of rivers to suggest the passage to death. In Greek mythology, the afterlife was accessed by crossing the River Styx while in a Japanese-Buddhist context, there was the Sanzu-no-Kawa (三途の川), or the River of Three Crossings. Players must enter the watery fog and traverse this existential waterway and therefore experience the rest of the game as an afterlife. The players’ entry ticket into “The Lands Between” is death itself.



Figure 8- A rare cutscene, where players cannot control the action, emphasizes the importance of the creation of the Elden Ring to the game’s narrative structure. The special nature of the image is reinforced by intense atmospheric effects.

Thibson34. Reddit, March 1, 2022.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Eldenring/comments/t4ds1p/every_image_from_elden_rings_opening_cinematic_4k/

If the game begins with a ritualized introduction to death and dying, the introductory gameplay also foreshadows the way in which “The Lands Between” operates as a space that engages not only the momentary event of death but the ongoing process of grieving in the post-modern world. Upon the conclusion of the introductory cutscene and just after players have created their characters, the avatars are initially pictured motionless, limp, and dead. Soon, however, the player-characters are enlivened by the cascading spark of the Elden Ring and become controllable for gamers. Upon awakening, players’ only possible next action is to continue along an unnamed path that eventually takes them face-to-face with the Grafted Scion, and combat ensues. At this early juncture in the game, almost all players lack the skills and weapons needed to defeat this enemy. In other words, while most preliminary tutorials are designed to provide players with the skills they need to progress in the game, *Elden Ring’s* tutorial section accustoms players to dying, to repeated death, and to gameplay that comes to life only through death.

Even if highly-skilled players defeat this enemy, they frustratingly realize the only way to progress to “The Lands Between” is to jump off the bounds of the combat platform and die by falling. It is only at this point, when the player has died in-game and “crossed the fog,” that gameplay actually begins; after being awoken by the maiden Melina and horse Torrent, the player’s cinematic introduction to the game ends, entry into “The Lands Between” becomes accessible and the nearly uninterrupted stream of gameplay to *Elden Ring’s* possible narrative endings starts. This ludic introduction to the narrative world of *Elden Ring* immediately primes players to grieve their player-characters and frames the remaining game experience as an afterlife in a state between life and death (Figure 9). Just as the post-war Japanese Buddhist

world was shaped by the ghostly presence of the war dead and of the constant threat of cataclysmic devastation, *Elden Ring* uses the complex affordances of the video game medium to prepare players to accept a gameworld haunted by continual grief.



Figure 9- Addressing the player directly, the game stresses the importance of individual death. Tucker, Jordan. "Elden Ring review: Dying on repeat in an open-world masterpiece." USA Today, February 23, 2022. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/reviewed/2022/02/23/elden-ring-review-dying-on-repeat-open-world-masterpiece/6906865001/>

Even as players progress through the game alive, their deaths are recorded as Bloodstains to be viewed by other players, always rendering players in this purgatorial state and creating a synonymous community of lonely, dead players (Ilger 2021); the difficulty of *Elden Ring*'s bosses are designed to be high and unyielding, carving away the player's incompetencies with each death to build their ludic skill up to the needed level. As a result, players are reliant on dying to learn their enemies' attack patterns, making them comfortable with, empowered by, and dependent on in-game death to supplant their in-game lives. Narratively, as Tarnished, player-characters are unable to truly die by virtue of in-game lore, which concretizes this familial proximity to death. In sum, *Elden Ring* continues the FromSoftware tradition of framing postwar ideology through the ludology and narrative of their games; considering the American military's

interconnectivity with contemporary video games and Mendez's post-modern reading of the FromSoftware games within Japan, *Elden Ring* acts as a locally cultural site of practicing death and grief.

B: Fortnite

Although Japan and the U.S. are now nominal allies, which helps explain the 'patchwork' of *Elden Ring*'s Eastern and Western influences, the history of the US military and the cultural practices and associations with death are quite distinct from those in Japan. While until recently Japan was committed to a policy of disarmament, the post-war history of the US is dominated by military driven research and development. So extensive is the influence of the military, so extreme is its spending, and so intrusive are its recruitment techniques that a military posture has become hegemonic throughout many dimensions of life in the US. With respect to game culture in particular, the pervasive mediation by and propaganda for the military within games and the gaming community has led scholars to define their imbrication as the military-entertainment complex (Michael C. Desch 2009). The U.S. military mediatizes its propaganda and recruitment by sponsoring the development of films, television, and video games with the goal of assuring a positive representation within popular media. According to Michael J. Shapiros, this "reflects the close relationship between the military, the entertainment industry, and the political and economic interests that drive U.S. foreign policy" (Shapiro 2009, Introduction). Moreover, the representations of the military generated by this complex typically rely on "citizen Joes" who are thrust into depths of warfare but heroically escape with their humanity intact--a strategy that seeks to normalize military service, in which "everyday activities, rather than exceptional or extraordinary events with real and lasting consequences" take place (Bender 2018, 20).

The way in which the military entertainment complex normalizes war also reflects important features of US military history and of the way in which media operates in different

ways within the military hierarchy. Since the end of the World War II, the U.S. military invested not only in mediatization but nearly non-stop armament development, eventually amassing the largest military arsenal. This continuous stream of military spending and development is embedded in a never-ending series of arms races that reflect and helped produce wars with Russia, Afghanistan, and Iraq that have been dubbed “forever-wars.” “Forever-wars” are characterized by ongoing military conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia and marked by a lack of clear goals, shifting strategies, and therefore “seemingly endless cycles of violence” (Bacevich 2013, 8). These lengthy military engagements have been mostly carried out by foot soldiers who, precisely because of the widely distributed propaganda media described above that represents military service as a normal activity like a job, see the military as a means of social mobility and economic security; in fact, according to a survey conducted by the Department of Defense in 2017, 51% of new active-duty recruits reported that they joined the military with educational, financial, and career-related incentives (Department of Defense, 2020). What is essential to note here, is that while low-level recruits consume mediatic advertisement, including video games, that encourages them to enlist while minimizing the understanding that their job is potentially to die, higher level prospective generals and admirals instead play video games developed by the military as part of their training in specialized military colleges (Turse 2017). Institutions like the Army War College train prospective generals and admirals in advanced tactical strategy by using video games, but these games simultaneously train them that lower-ranking American soldiers are disposable resources who die without consequence, because they are always immediately and easily replaced by another soldier. Video game characters, therefore, contribute to the culture of forever wars by suggesting to both low-level recruits and high-level decision makers that soldiers are avatars of everyday American citizens simply at work overseas,

not at risk of death but simply part of a never-ending stream of interchangeable and replenishable bodies.

The military-entertainment complex and the realities of American forever wars have shaped *Fortnite* in many important ways. Just as Americans “thank” members of the military for their service with taxes and economic subsidies, video games and in-game items often cost money; in America, people pay for services, whether the service is dying or living. *Fortnite* literally plays with this shopification through its deployment not of foot soldiers but of representational avatars. If a player in *Fortnite* is killed, they can merely change their skin to rinse off the stench of digital death and start a new game with a new life and they can repeat this cycle “forever.” As of 2023, players don’t even need to go back to the lobby to start a new game or change their cosmetic items, a recently added element of the game play that creates an even more continuous cycle between in-game life and death (Figure 10). For *Fortnite* players, this perpetual post-death life is further extended when they asynchronously attend live events while dead in-game (Pulis 2020). Thus, both in-game, where death is insignificant to the in-game goal of winning battle royale, and out-of-game, where live discussion unfolds through dead characters, the difference between death and life appears to be fundamentally inconsequential--merely shifts in uniform and recycled boots. Perhaps most importantly, in *Fortnite* and other battle-royale shooter games, the violence and death undergirding this forever cycle are cleverly concealed by colorful visual aesthetics (Figure 11). Thus, death seems avoidable, a fashion choice to be made, and going to war appears to be like going on a shopping trip. In an American context, therefore, perhaps the most normalizing aspect of how games like *Fortnite* shape and reflect death is the way in which they turn it into an economic transaction. Within advanced capitalism, Americans learn that death can be avoided if you can pay someone to play dead for you.



Figure 10- Although a player has just died, the menu options direct to ‘ready up’ and continue their experience, drawing attention away from any representation of mortality.

LunamWolf. Reddit, December 16, 2022.

https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteBR/comments/znh4sm/question_is_this_allowed_it_was_zero_build_solo/



Figure 11- Cheerful colors and vibrant landscapes distract players from any potential sense of anxiety or risk.

XboxViewTV. Youtube, October 9, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kefVshUPHn8>

In addition to the broad context of the formation of the military entertainment complex and the development of forever wars, many other specific extra-game conditions shape the ultimate character of *Fortnite* and hence are important to understanding the game’s particular engagement with modalities of liveness and ideologies of death. In 2011, Epic Games was

continuing to develop the Unreal Engine and seeking to capitalize on the momentum caused by the success of the third-person shooter *Gears of War* series from the late 2000s. The goal was to meld Epic Games' experience with third person shooters with construction-based games like Minecraft and the company organized an internal game-jam for this purpose. In this way, Epic Games mirrored the mash-up of games they intended to produce in the very means of its production and design. In this context of corporate-run, collective authorship, which is more like the military in its organization than the director dominated conditions that led to the creation of *Elden Ring*, the idea of developing a zombie survival setting arose (Saltalamacchia 2018). However, Epic Games wanted to release the game quickly and realized that amalgamating all these ideas into visually realistic graphics would be far too time and labor intensive. Instead, the game-jam team developed a graphic vocabulary that eliminated detail and other time-consuming visual refinements. In other words, the conditions of production that emphasized efficiency, speed, and teamwork, gave rise to the iconic cartoon style from which *Fortnite* is now inseparable.

Cartoonish graphics are not merely *Fortnite's* visual style, but a determining factor of how players engage with *Fortnite's* gameworld. For example, building on McLuhan's theory of cool media, which engender viewer participation because of their low-definition, Scott McCloud, a comics writer, artist, and analyst, has argued that the incomplete, line-drawn characters of comics force viewers to fill in missing personal, visual details (McCloud 1994,30-36). As a result, comics readers experience what McCloud calls the 'iconic' quality of comic characters as memories, a condition that leads to more intense identification than with cinematic characters who are fundamentally inhabited by other people. I argue this process of identification through comic iconography is at work in *Fortnite's* graphics and the way it constructs liveness. The rushed cartoonish rendering style of the game renders avatars nearly as incompletely as line-

drawn comics, giving them instead a low-definition quality that invites strong player identification through the process of filling in details from personal memories (Figure 12). This process conceptually fleshes out the characters, merging the qualities of a graphic character with memories drawn from actual persons and embodied experience. *Fortnite* therefore does not merely adopt the strategy of using reduced visual languages to engage players from its media antecedent in comics, but intensifies it. Players do not merely fill in avatar details, they select, overlay, and switch out avatar skins in their entirety as a condition of gameplay. This system both satisfies the Epic Games business model, as players must acquire more skins the more they play, but also turns the gameworld into a space that invites players to actively transfer qualities of liveness and agency from their own lives into the gameworld and its characters.

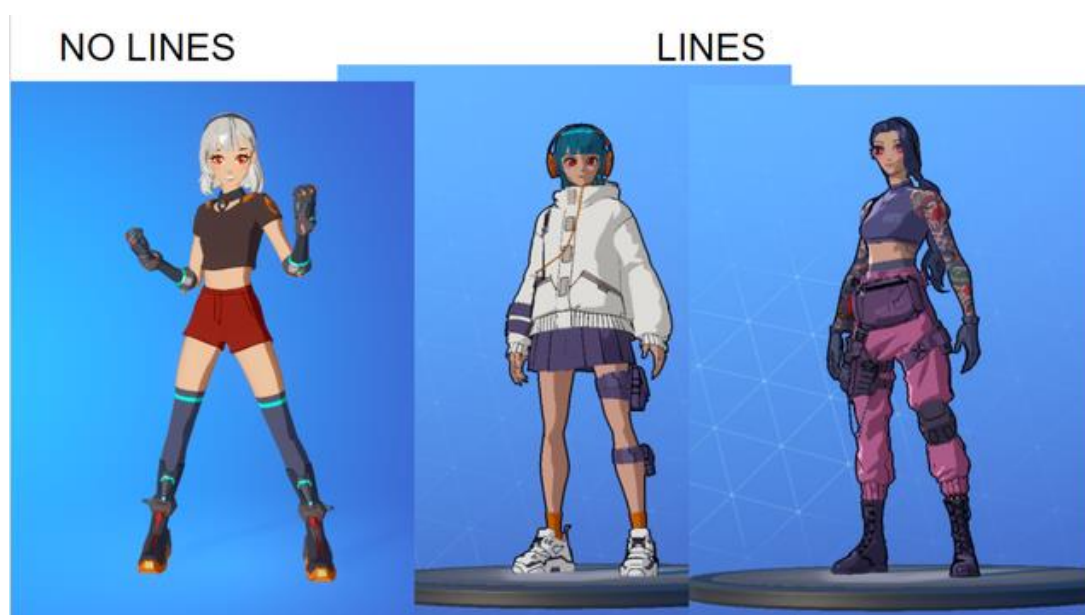


Figure 12- Skins drawn in highly schematic ways recall comics and are designed to invite players to fill in missing details.

mr-dover. Reddit, April 12, 2021.

https://www.reddit.com/r/FortNiteBR/comments/mplm2o/can_epic_games_please_make_an_edit_style_where/

While selecting and updating cartoonishly rendered avatars was essential to *Fortnite* gameplay from its release, starting with a limited-time game mode based on the recently released

Avengers: Infinity War in 2018, Epic Games began to collaborate with countless pop cultural figures and icons, from musicians, to anime characters, and classical film characters like Frankenstein's Monster, acquiring the rights to adapt their imagery for use as in-game skins (Figure 13). The use of specific characters familiar to players from outside of the game further intensified *Fortnite's* formulation of liveness and constitutes a strategy of appropriation and recirculation of images from mass media that invites a comparison with the tradition of pop art. While *Elden Ring's* engagement with the tradition of the grotesque appears to be intentional on Miyazaki and From Software's part, *Fortnite's* parallel with pop art most probably indicates the degree to which pop art has entered the background logic of popular image making rather than intention on the part of *Fortnite* designers. However, because pop artists used the appropriation and collage of mass media images to critique the ideology of shopification by exposing the commercialization of life and the deauthentication of liveness, any trace of this logic within *Fortnite* is useful for understanding if *Fortnite's* liveness does anything other than affirm dominant ideologies. While Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is used to explain the critical dimension of modern media by emphasizing how exposing the mechanics of image production snaps viewers out of the distraction generated by modern mass media culture and invites critical attention, neither Benjamin nor pop artists working in the 1950s and 1960s could have imagined that viewers could use that critical attention to enter and even alter the circuits through which the images circulate. Yet this is precisely what happens in *Fortnite*: players select skins from among countless pop cultural icons each with distinct representational identities and complex histories. By engaging players in a process whereby they actively reinforce a gameworld that offers them no stable identity, *Fortnite* might be said to educate players on how to navigate postmodern realities.



Figure 13- A small selection of the many skins based on well-known characters available in the *Fortnite* shop.

MMarvelousBoy. Reddit, June 10, 2021.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/FortNiteBR/comments/nwqwuy/fun fact theres more than 100 collab skins/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FortNiteBR/comments/nwqwuy/fun_fact_theres_more_than_100_collab_skins/)

In my view, this skin cycle which amplifies the game's cartoon aesthetic and ludological structure is the feature of *Fortnite* that is most indicative of the game's highly complex mobilization of liveness, and therefore of the game's ambiguous ethical stance regarding the U.S.' militarized understanding of death and dying. On the one hand, the skins reflect a deep commodification of life and the disposability of those who are paid to die, but not enough that they can buy their way into a new life. In its cartoonish, colorful world of iconic characters, *Fortnite* fashions a space akin to Sunday cartoons like Roadrunner, where players die but only to reappear seemingly without explanation. As players shift skins and reconstitute their visual experience, they sidestep death by merely stepping into a new appearance. Using this logic, according to which death is an outfit, *Fortnite* creates as much distance as possible between death and players, allowing them to simulate fantastical violence without getting close to death. While this cosmetic operation is self-evident, it also drives other financial and cultural logics more deeply embedded in the game. To increase the desire for skins, *Fortnite* introduced a paid

battle pass system that establishes a seasonal collection of items that a player earns through gameplay; completing challenges unlocks cosmetic items, and at the end of its seasonal duration, the battle pass is reset and offers new items, restarting the cycle (Figure 14). The challenges needed to unlock these items nearly always involve tasks, activities, and locations superfluous to actually winning a game of battle-royale, such as travelling to the farthest reaches of the map or finding an item or objective within a randomly determined location on the map. As a result, the battle pass system entangles players in a temporal loop that disrupts any linear flow of progression, delays winning, and instead incentivizes methods of playing in-game that yield purchases, motivating players to play the game simply to better consume monetized content and commodifying the very gameplay itself.

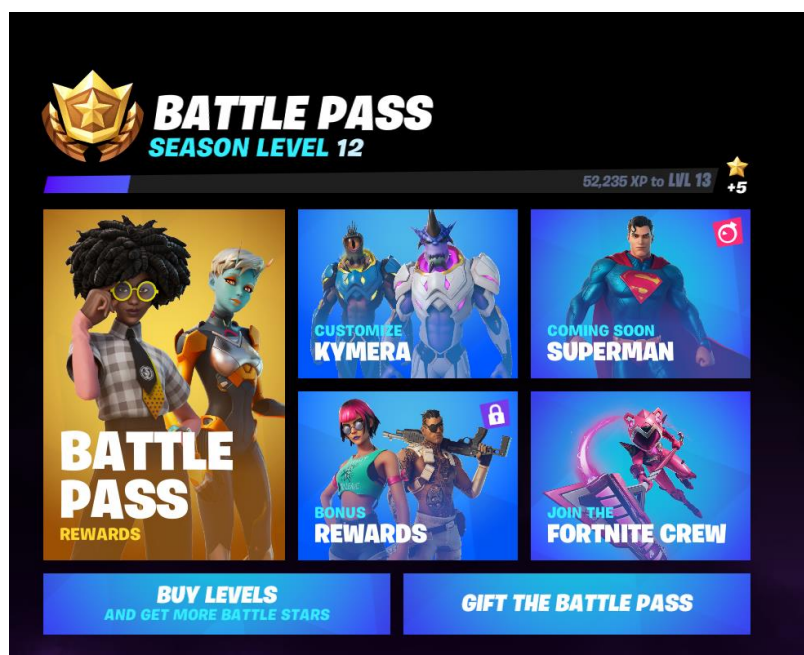


Figure 14- The battle pass offers players challenges and objectives that reinforce the complex relationship between economic exchange, cosmetic transformation and gameplay.

Epic Games. 2023. <https://www.epicgames.com/help/en-US/fortnite-c5719335176219/battle-royale-c5719350646299/what-is-the-battle-pass-where-can-i-learn-more-a5720283337115>

The cyclic nature of the consumption pattern built into *Fortnite's* skin system has contributed to *Fortnite's* popularity among children--unusually for a battle-royale game, *Fortnite* has a T-for-teen rating and 26% of its players are aged 10-14--but also among adults who like to

“play war” (SuperData Research, 2019). Although this can be rudimentarily explained by *Fortnite*'s child-like visual forms, game theorists have posited that shooter games, played and experienced in independent, short rounds of combat within consistent spaces, operate less as narrative forms and more like sandboxes (Carter and Mavoa 2021, 2847). By combining the familiarity of the sandbox with the incentives of the cosmetic shopping system, *Fortnite* seems to have both deliberately targeted a youth market and also deliberately developed a youth culture around the game. On the one hand, this is one of the main reasons that *Fortnite* is central to discussions about what Roger Stahl calls the “ways in which war and violence are normalized in our culture” through war toys and action-figures. (Stahl 2009, 3). This normalization extends to the player culture that has developed around the game where in-game military cues like the G.I. Joes skin become out of game simulated military performances (Figure 15). For example, in the context of collaborative play, players typically say “flank,” “push up,” or “hold our position,” terms associated with military communication to coordinate in-game teammates and strategize combat.



Figure 15- While *Fortnite*'s GI Joe skin is based on a well known toy, first introduced in 1964, a new GI Joe toy was released based on the *Fortnite* skin, demonstrating the recursive nature of in-game and out-of-game realities.

The GI Joe Commando Snake Eyes Joins the Hunt." *Fortnite*, Epic Games, July 7, 2021.

<https://www.fortnite.com/news/the-gi-joe-commando-snake-eyes-joins-the-hunt>

On the other hand, this explicitly child-like domain of sandboxes, GI. Joe toys, and dress-up performances, all unfolding in a candy-colored world of cartoon images, creates a fountain of youth where players can act out a forever war in a state of perpetual youth. *Fortnite* gameplay repeatedly and ad infinitum takes players back to the beginning of the game and to the carefree life of a child who has yet to imagine their own death. Every feature of the game encourages players to enter into this cycle in which the threat of death is delayed, delegated and denied. The skin system makes all beings into disposable bodies and their cartoonish visuality invites players to identify with these avatars in especially powerful ways. The pop-art like collage and recycling of familiar images reinforces the instability of these characters, even as it further encourages players to invest in them psychologically. In ludological terms, the game's short bursts of game-time preclude the possibility that players understand the passage of time in-game. Every game is short, and therefore every game is always close to its beginning and far from an end. Players check in on the game rather than play to arrive at a definitive end: in fact, endings are always little more than opportunities to return to the beginning and to a new game.

On the one hand, these complex and contradictory temporalities situate the game within a perpetual present modeled on a fantasy of childhood time in which death and dying is safely hidden in an impossibly distant future. Players who choose *Fortnite* willingly enter a contract with the game in which they exchange money for eternal life and their mortal bodies for images that promise to exist in the eternal repetitions of the game's digital code. On the other hand, these same temporal disjunctions preclude any experience of natural time for players; instead time is constantly interrupted and broken into small bits and pieces. While the childlike fantasies of perpetual safety for those who can afford to pay for it certainly affirms the goals of the US military entertainment complex, the actual experience of gameplay is characterized by fractured time and by the effort to impose some degree of order and individual agency on the game world.

It is important to keep the fact that the most *Fortnite* players belong to the generations that could be called on, even against their will through the draft, to serve in the military. The game itself offers no critique of either this fact or of the looming presence of forever war culture in the United States; given the media history of the game, this should come as no surprise. Players, however, and regardless of the game producers intentions, use the game as a coping mechanism, to check in on the military entertainment complex and to assess the state of the always present threat that playing at war could become actual warfare. *Fortnite*, therefore, should be understood as a trading zone where explicitly American fantasies about exchanging history and death for a perpetual present of electronic flows come into contact with embodied players who must live with the constant threat of cataclysm. Media studies focus on contracts into which gamers willingly enter, but battle-royale players engage media to manage the haunting possibility that they will lose the capacity to choose to play or not.

Part III: Conclusion

To analyze two of the most globally popular contemporary games, this paper used a combination of game studies, liveness theory, media archaeology, and visual studies. This hybrid and transdisciplinary approach is necessary to understand these games in their full complexities. The frameworks of ludology and narratology called attention to medium-specific issues of game structure. Attention was paid to how video games engage liveness in their gameplay and a media archaeological approach revealed how the history of game technologies, particularly in relation to their origins in the military, shaped the contemporary reception of games and the organization of gameplay. Techniques of analysis derived from visual studies shed light on how the aesthetic character of each game reinforce important dimensions of the games' cultural impact. Finally, these close readings of *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* were contextualized within the specific national histories of post-war Japan and the United States, permitting a conclusion that uses the

affordances of video games typically used to emphasize issues of liveness and presence to instead explore cultural approaches to death and dying in the age of industrialized war.

Fortnite and *Elden Ring* each reflect profoundly different responses to the remaining effects of the same war. On the one hand, both are implicated in the consequences of the formation of the military-entertainment complex and in the cycles of late 20th century global economies. Both reinforce the seepage of military action into the everyday spaces of gameplay because each, in different ways, requires players to progress through the games via acts of violence and combat. Both encode local cultural practices into the games in terms through their distinct means of production and consumption. On the other hand, their gameplay and gameworlds are vastly different. *Fortnite* offers a sanitized, colorful representation of an uncanny, post-modern American military that engages in forever wars it never loses fought by soldiers who never die. *Elden Ring* offers instead a macabre, post-apocalyptic, amalgam of historical references in which death, dying, and loss are always present even after “beating the game.” *Fortnite* contains its players in a ludological cycle of perpetual play that locks them into a contract system in which they contribute time and money in exchange for perpetual victory and the uncanny quality of a life without end. *Elden Ring* weaves players into a gothic ludo-narrative that binds players to a story-telling modality in which the plot is never resolved but always leads to loss and mourning. Thus, *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* not only reflect the culturally specific conditions created by the historical facts of World War II, but these conditions are recirculated and resurrected by players outside of the game.

In different ways, *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* function as “trading zones,” creating spaces of negotiation between the incompatible conditions of life and death. *Elden Ring* introduces players to Japanese grief as it engages them in ongoing mourning after World War II through its macabre lore and unresolved narrative. *Fortnite* attracts players by offering a reassuring American fiction

that forever wars only expend disposable bodies, but players use the intermittent and unending game structure as a strategy for dealing with the loss of individual control that by necessity undergirds the military entertainment complex. The historical weight of *Elden Ring* is reinforced by its emphatically dark and filmic nature of its gameworld: director-driven, structured around dense and haunted atmospheres, and narratologically organized, *Elden Ring* reminds players of the mortalities of the material world. The futuristic lightness of *Fortnite* is engendered by a ludological cycle in which life and death, money, and skins are all interchangeable elements of a digital code in perpetual motion. Despite the profundity of these differences, both games are needed to fully understand how video games continue to be haunted by their military origins but are also means of coping with an increasingly complex world, almost beyond imagining.

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