

Death, Culture and Leisure

Playing Dead

Edited by

Matt Coward-Gibbs

EMERALD STUDIES IN DEATH AND CULTURE



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University of York, UK



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Contributor Biographies

Vivian Asimos graduated with her PhD from Durham University and an MSc from Edinburgh University in the Anthropology of Religion. Her research interests rest at the intersection of religion and popular culture, with a special focus on storytelling and mythology. She is the Co-editor of the *Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Myth* (2019) and is the founder of the *Religion and Popular Culture* Podcast.

Matt Coward-Gibbs is an Associate Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York and an occasional Lecturer in Religious Studies at York St John University. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and regularly teaches across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in sociology, criminology and religious studies.

Ashley Darrow received his Master's in Gothic Studies from National University in 2017. Since, he has helped organise conferences on the intersection of Gothic studies and gaming and has presented papers internationally. He is the founder and co-host of the *Horror Vanguard* podcast.

Chloé Germaine Buckley is a Senior Lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her publications include *Twenty-First Century Children's Gothic* (2017) and numerous chapters and articles on all aspects of the Gothic. She also researches with the Manchester Game Studies Network.

Maggie Jackson began her career in Educational Psychology where her interest in working with bereaved children led to the publication of *The Teacher's Handbook of Death* (2002) with Jim Colwell. Following her doctorate exploring death in children's literature, she has begun to focus on death in picture books for young children.

Ewan Kirkland teaches Screen Studies at the University of Brighton focussing primarily on horror video games. He has published numerous papers and chapters on *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil*, *Forbidden Siren* and *Haunting Ground* which have appeared in numerous journals including *Games & Culture*, *Convergence*, *Gothic Studies* and *Camera Obscura*.

Bethan Michael-Fox is a Doctoral student at the University of Winchester and an Associate Lecturer at The Open University. She has published on a range of topics that included representations of the undead in popular culture.

Christopher Partridge is Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University. He is the author of several books, including *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World* (2018), *Mortality and Music: Popular Music and the Awareness of Death* (2015), and *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (2013).

Benjamin Poore is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre at University of York. He has written widely on contemporary representations of the Victorians, literary adaptation and twentieth- and twenty-first-century playwriting. His books include *Heritage, Nostalgia and Modern British Theatre: Staging the Victorians* (2011) and *Theatre & Empire* (2016).

Paolo Ruffino is a Lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool. His research spans video game culture, gamification, the quantified self and independent game development. He is the author of *Future Gaming: Creative Interventions in Video Game Culture* (2018) and editor of *Rethinking Gamification* (2014) and *Independent Videogames: Cultures, Networks, Techniques and Politics* (2020).

Jonathan D. Stubbs is a PhD student at Nazarene Theological College, University of Manchester. He is combining his lifelong love of video games, years of academic study of theology and fascination with all things ‘apocalyptic’ by researching the apocalyptic imagery in video games, focussing on Bioware’s *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2012).

Andreas Theodorou is an independent scholar who began his studies on Nineteenth Century Gothic and the study of the mind, but later shifted focus to Gothic video games and the onus on interaction and immersion in contemporary narrative modes. He is the author and artist behind *Beyond the Darkness* (2018–2019), and a guest editor for the journal, *Alluvium*.

Solveiga Zibaite is a Social Anthropologist. Her PhD project, based out of the Centre for End of Life Studies at the University of Glasgow, is an ethnography of the Death Café movement in the United Kingdom. Her research interests include existential anthropology, online memorial cultures and sociological aesthetics.

Foreword

Since 2016, at the University of York, there has been a growing cluster of academics who are passionate, committed and focussed on matters of human mortality. Researching and talking about death, dying and the dead link us together and led to the formation of the Death & Culture Network (DaCNet), an interdisciplinary group of scholars and death industry professionals who wish to engage with death from a cultural perspective. As part of the DaCNet steering group, Matt Coward-Gibbs brings his wealth of experience to administrating the network ranging from his spates as an artistic director, youth theatre manager, research assistant and research centre manager. Add to this, Matt's teaching contribution at two universities and his stellar doctoral research, he is truly one of a kind and an emerging star into the research dominion of academia. Matt's vision and editorial work on this book only confirm this status and his value to the death studies community and beyond.

As part of DaCNet's various activities, its first annual symposium *Playing Dead* was held in May 2018. Memorably, the day had a bumpy start with technology problems leading to a last minute room change and a late start. Despite this inauspicious beginning and with participants being plied with coffee and biscuits, *Playing Dead* was a convivial event. Papers and discussion were insightful and thought provoking through an exploration of the intersections between death, culture and play. Play, in the context of this symposium, was used to broadly speak of leisure and recreational activities and, as such, not only encapsulated the playing of (non-)digital games, but also the consumption of cinema, literature and theatre. The symposium embraced the largely underappreciated phenomenon of play across disciplines by placing it within the context of death and culture.

This symposium was the catalyst for this book and draws together research passions that are united by play and focussed on death. As such it engages with the intricacies of playing digital games that inflict death in fantasy realms or are about memorialising and expressing grief. It examines scary folkloric-horror characters such as the Slender Man alongside death in the Pokémon universe. These death representations are held up in a complimentary, but contrasting, consideration of books that introduce children to death, the role of the dead and undead in television, the controversial relationship between music and suicide and even burial and exhumation in contemporary theatre. The significance of this work lies in the unity that Matt has managed to create through the interwoven thread of play – how we play, who we play and how we are playful in the context of death and the dead.

In this volume, Matt has succeeded in breaking new ground by drawing together interdisciplinary academics at different stages of their careers as well as integrating contributions from independent scholars. He has worked to encourage authors to convey their ideas across disciplines and to showcase their work and arguments to a high standard. The result is a collection of work that represents a range of voices that when brought together unite to provide a textured and vibrant contribution to death scholarship. Together these chapters bring strength and coherence to Matt's research interest and overarching research argument that play has intrinsic value in understanding the world around us in terms of community, labour, production and self-identity. Understanding and engaging with death through play is just one illustration of this and one that opens a wide realm to contemplate and investigate human mortality.

Ruth Penfold-Mounce,
University of York (UK)
@DeathandCulture
November 2019

Acknowledgments

They say it takes a village to raise a child; the same is true for an edited volume.

In the first instance, I would like to thank Ruth Penfold-Mounce for her ongoing support, encouragement, critical insights and unending thanatological enthusiasm. There are countless others who deserve recognition for their helpful advice and discussions along the way in the generation of this project. As such, I would also like to acknowledge David Beer, Rachael Burns, Alice Collett and Jack Denham as well as the wider publication team at Emerald for their care and assistance in the construction of this volume.

This volume would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the twelve individuals who contributed to this collection. They have my sincerest thanks not only for their contribution, but for trusting this rookie editor with their work.

Finally, I would like to thank Emma and Ruby: there is no one else I'd rather play this game of life with.