Pustay, Steven. "The Digital Path to Death." *The Digital Logic of Death: Confronting Mortality in Contemporary Media*. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 53–88. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501364051.ch-2>>.

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The Digital Path to Death

I've been dying for many years. Sometimes death is a clear penalty for my carelessness, my inattention to detail, or my inability to properly plan for the challenges ahead. Other times, it seems to be inevitable — no matter how hard I struggle, it's only a matter of time before death catches up with me. There are times when I scarcely fear death, and even taunt its grasp for my own amusement; there are times when the possibility of death is so horrifying that I hardly want to move. There are times when death finds me unexpectedly, times when I can easily see its approach in the distance, and times when I willingly submit myself, hoping that some knowledge will be gained that can prevent a needless death in the future. There are times when pleasure masks the possibility of death, allowing me to momentarily forget its power. Yet in time, pain and frustration set in, foregrounding the very fact of death and surrounding me with its presence. As a gamer, I've been dying for many years.

Death in Digital Games

In the early 1990s, a panic engulfed the medium of digital games in both the popular press and the social sciences, one centered upon their increasingly violent content — such as the famous “finishing moves” of *Mortal Kombat* or the infamous Sega CD release of *Night Trap* — and the impact such violence was thought to have on the real-world actions of gamers. Of course, as we saw in our last chapter, this was also the very moment when moving images began to adopt a more visceral approach to depicting death as a result of the increasing influence of digital logic, so perhaps the excitement and turmoil regarding representations of violence should not be particularly surprising. Yet while politicians, pundits, and scholars have remained focused on the ramifications of *violence* in games ever since, more important questions surrounding the image of *death* in games have gone largely unasked. For example, why does this new medium represent death as such a trivial and inconsequential event? Perhaps more astutely,

is the representation of death in games trivial, or can we perhaps glimpse within games a relationship to death that had been absent or denied in prior representations? To put this another way, do games deny death, as did so many moving images throughout the last century, or could there perhaps be another drive or desire at play?

Death has always been a fundamental component of digital games, from the exploding ships of *Spacewar!* in 1962 to the imploding yellow body of *Pac-Man* in 1980, from the first person rampages of *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992 to the third person decapitations of *Resident Evil 4* in 2005. Indeed, death has long served as both a narrative component of gameplay which gives weight to the inputs of the player and a mechanical component which defines the consequences of their actions. Yet as the first medium in which spectator input is essential to the creation of narrative, digital games render death in ways we've never before seen, challenging the conventional representations found in moving images throughout the last century while also imbued with meanings that recall and repeat the very instincts which have allowed us to face death — and, at times, deny the power of death — for hundreds, if not thousands of years.¹ At their simplest, digital games seem to continue that project of denial, making death no more than a roadblock that must be endured (or ignored) in order to accomplish specific goals. At its most complex, this new medium entirely restructures the relationship between death and temporality in moving images, bringing the unalterable past into direct conversation with the possibilistic future.

Despite the relatively brief history of the medium, death has by no means remained constant in digital games, instead shifting and changing in conjunction with broader cultural transformations in our understanding of temporality, identity, and mortality. As such, the role of death in games has changed dramatically since the days of coin-op arcades, when games were designed as a “pay-for-play” system that encouraged short play sessions geared around the achievement of high scores rather than the completion of a specific narrative. Games like *Space Invaders*, *Frogger*, and *Centipede* were never meant to be beaten, instead simply increasing in difficulty with each passing level and thus ensuring that “death” was the inevitable conclusion of every play session.² In the late 1980s, the rise of computer games and home consoles brought with it a shift away from high scores and toward the introduction of increasingly complex narratives — narratives that had strict completion criteria that often involved “extra lives,” “continues,” and “game overs.” Within the last decade, however, those same types of games have almost entirely done away with the idea of game-ending failure as a play mechanic, instead offering players an unlimited amount of re-tries and do-overs which not only push the goal of gameplay away from the mechanical perfection of specific skills and toward narrative resolution and closure, but also dramatically change both the function and perception of death within the boundaries of digital logic.³

Given that the image of death is so abundant in digital games while the event itself is so inconsequential, it would seem obvious that this new conception of mortality is simply another form of denial. Yet if we take a closer look, we'll find that games provide a new way of approaching and negotiating our own impermanence, that the digital, in both games and elsewhere, has altogether reconfigured our understanding of Being in relation to time. To unpack this reconfiguration, this chapter examines the new impression of death found in narratively driven games since the digital turn (as well as other moving images that have been influenced by the logic of gameplay) based on five observations.⁴ First, that death is rarely permanent in digital games, acting instead only as a mechanical indication of incorrect gameplay as well as a narrative rewinding. Second, that successful gameplay often requires the player to simultaneously recall mechanical outcomes that occurred within both the past and future of the narrative diegesis. Third, that gameplay often centers around repetition, not only of specific mechanical actions but also a constant and continual restructuring of the narrative. Fourth, that contemporary games often place as much importance on the creation of virtual subjectivity within the narrative as they do on the development of skill within play mechanics. And lastly, that the goal of most games is not to avoid death altogether (if at all), but rather to avoid "incorrect" or narratively unsatisfying deaths. As these observations demonstrate, I intend to examine how death is conceived along two different axes of gameplay, one that focuses on the representation of death within the fiction of digital games, while the other demonstrates the function of death within the structure and rules of gamespace. In game studies, this is known as the divide between narratology and ludology — the study of narrative in gameplay and the study of the mechanics of gameplay — but rather than focus on one or the other, this study attempts to bridge the gap. Death, in both form and function, is evenly spread between these axes.

To draw out the interrelated strands of death in digital games, I'll turn to two well-known theories of death and its relation to human consciousness and identity: Nietzsche's formulation (and Deleuze's subsequent re-reading) of eternal recurrence, and Freud's development of the death drive. While these two theories may seem, at first glance, to be incompatible, both employ the notion of *repetition* — a return to a previous state of being — as way to understand our fascination with and terror of death. By examining digital gameplay through the concepts of eternal recurrence and the death drive, I argue that repetition, in the form of digital *re-animation*, acts as a mechanical substitute for our survival instincts, allowing players to construct virtual subjectivities within narratives where natural death (i.e., the narratively "correct" death) can only be understood — and, in fact, only exist — in relation to a multitude of other *compossible* deaths.

It may seem obvious to say it, but perhaps no other narrative medium embodies the digital more than the digital game. While films, television,

books, and photographs have all been directly altered, to some degree or another, by the technologies of the late twentieth century, the digital game was born from it. In games, the attitudes and desires that constitute our digital logic are not simply expressed but rather *enforced* — they become the very rules and laws that govern gameplay. As such, games provide an exceptional avenue for exploring our new attitudes toward death, along with our desire to control the limitations of our own bodies, to stretch and reconfigure the boundaries of time, and to define not only our own relationship with mortality but also our own path to death.

Re-animation

When Brøderbund Software released Jordan Mechner's *Prince of Persia* for the Apple II in 1989, popular culture rarely presented temporality as anything other than a fixed and stable construct, flowing swift and sure in one direction.⁵ A runaway hit that would later be ported to a wide variety of platforms, Mechner's game is often cited first for the unprecedented fluidity contained within its rotoscoped animation system — which rendered the title character as a fully realized, believably *alive* surrogate for the player — and second for the uncompromising nature of its gameplay and punishing time-limit.⁶ In the opening cutscene, an Arabian princess is captured by the evil Vizier Jaffar while her father, the Sultan, is away fighting a holy war. The Vizier desires the throne, and gives the princess a deathly ultimatum: "Marry Jaffar ... or die within the hour." The princess's only hope resides in the player, assuming the role of "a brave youth she loves ... already a prisoner in Jaffar's dungeon" some thirteen floors below her in the deep recesses of the castle. The hour given to the princess is not an exaggeration — the player is given exactly sixty minutes to progress through the game's thirteen levels, escaping the dungeon and fighting their way toward a deadly showdown with the Vizier himself. Death in *Prince of Persia* can be brutal, resetting the player back to the start of a level even if they are seconds from its completion. However, the game's clock is even less forgiving, continuing to count down toward the princess's final moments regardless of the player's gameplay prowess.

Fourteen years later, Mechner and a considerably larger team of programmers at Ubisoft relaunched the *Prince of Persia* franchise with *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. In addition to the game's shift into the third dimension, the defining feature of this new series was the player's relationship to time itself.⁷ "Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction," the prince announces as the game begins, "but I have seen the face of time, and I can tell you ... they are wrong." The key gameplay mechanic of this new iteration involves the "Dagger of Time,"

FIGURE 2.1 *Death is brutal in the original Prince of Persia.*

a weapon wielded by the prince that gives him (and thus the player) the power to reverse the flow of time. In dangerous or even fatal situations, with the simple press of a button the gameplay is literally rewound using a visual effect not at all unlike a VCR rewinding, allowing the player to choose a more suitable spot to replay or, more accurately, re-animate the prince's story. The narrative further serves this re-animating mechanic: presented as a tale being recounted by the prince, even death is easily explained away with a simple "wait, that isn't how it happened." Furthermore, the nonlinear composition of the Prince's story stretches and reshapes the boundaries of time; not only does *The Sands of Time* begin with images from its own final level, but at the conclusion of 2005's *The Two Thrones*, the final game of this new *Prince* trilogy, we find the prince beginning to tell a familiar story: "Most people think time is like a river ..."

Comparing these two *Princes*, we find that where once death was defined through a temporality both rigid and absolute, little more than a decade later that basic assumption had been radically overturned: time was at the mercy of the gameplayer, and death was no longer an ending or even a setback, but rather simply a resetting of the scene. Both princes were subjected to the same brutal and horrific moments of violence — their bodies cut in half by swinging blades or pierced by spikes that would shoot up from the floor — but the consequences of their deaths could not be more different; one subject not to the violence of booby traps or armed guards so much as subject to time's inevitable pursuit, while the other a master of time for whom death was merely an inconvenience to be internalized and then overwritten. As the

Prince of Persia series demonstrates, an analysis of death in contemporary digital games must begin not with its visual representations of dying, but rather with both the medium's ability to create a tangible sensation of *life* (a feat it accomplishes through animation and interactivity) and the unique sense of temporality (built around *compossibility* rather than linearity) that has become a cornerstone of digital games and, in many ways, digital logic itself.

In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey provides a useful model for understanding the relationship between animation, temporality, and death in moving images, as well how the digital has begun to restructure that relationship. Although animation first appeared across a variety of mechanical entertainments during the nineteenth century, it only truly took root in popular culture with the advent of the motion picture, which, Mulvey contends, "combines ... two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate."⁸ These two fascinations are concretely connected to one another through their relationship to time, and Mulvey astutely attributes the power of animation to our (unconscious) recognition of temporality inherent in its antipodes: movement and stillness. Movement, she argues, implies duration, the continual extension of time that we associate with the forward progress of living. Stillness, on the other hand, creates a recognition of the past, of that which was but no longer is.⁹ This is the frozen photographic subject that Barthes referred to in *Camera Lucida* as "that-had-been" or, more precisely, "what is dead, what is going to die," and which Bazin hinted at when he referred to the ontology of the photographic image as equal to the process of mummification — "a defense against the passage of time [that] satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time."¹⁰ Though we often refer to the cinema's power to create life, Mulvey correctly points out that the cinema is actually mired in death — its very foundation is but a false imitation crafted from images of a stilled past, a process that Barthes sees as "a terrible return of the dead."¹¹ The cinema, Maria Walsh follows, is thus "haunted by a death ... akin to the living death in Freud's conception of the uncanny."¹²

Prior to the digital turn, the cinema rendered these frozen moments of death invisible to the average spectator through an illusion of movement which implied life even where life had been taken away. With the widespread adoption of digital technologies, however, the individual's relationship to (and control over) the temporal continuity of the cinematic apparatus changed drastically. Mulvey argues, for example, that the presentation of films on DVD, Blu-Ray, and streaming video has created a "cinema of delay" in which the viewer can freeze the image and insert stillness into sequences that were intended to be viewed in continuous motion.¹³ This "transfer of cinematic works to digital media," Steven Shaviro explains, "allows for a renewed contemplation of them precisely because our ability to freeze the frame at

any moment makes the cinematic dialectic between stillness and motion more accessible to us.”¹⁴ Death was in many ways always already situated within the very framework of the cinema as a *photographic technology*, but where once this image of death was hidden, the digital has given us access, precisely because death is always already situated within the framework of the digital as a *rendering technology*, such that viewing the world through a digital lens reveals only a series of rigid, binary dichotomies: ones and zeros, on and off, movement and stillness, possibility and impossibility, being and nonbeing, life and death. While the “digital disruption of linearity ... frees the viewer from the dictates of narrative continuity and cinema time,” as Walsh puts it, the digital has, more importantly, destabilized the cinema by granting the spectator the power to give and take life as they see fit, a power once reserved for (and recognized by) filmmakers alone.¹⁵

Yet while DVDs, Blu-rays, DVRs, streaming videos, and other similar digital technologies grant us jurisdiction over the temporality of moving images, the individual photographs themselves (and thus the very structure of cinematic life) fail to change. Instead, they simply repeat in the same combinations again and again and again.¹⁶ Mulvey’s cinema of delay may therefore encourage a more “pensive” spectator — a term that she borrows from Raymond Bellour’s reading of stillness in the cinema of Max Ophüls — but not a more active one, given that they have little affect over the outcome of events unfolding on the screen.¹⁷ The same cannot be said for digital games, where the player’s direct control over the actions and movement onscreen inserts *their* life into the game, and when that movement is disrupted (those moments when the player has failed to meet the requirements of the mechanics of gameplay) the freezing and slowing down of time becomes *their* death — a death that marks a transition through which content is not only stilled but also often rewind. What defines death in digital games, at least since the digital turn, is not simply the close relationship between the animated avatar, the active spectator, and moment of inanimation, but more importantly the introduction of *re-animation*, a process through which gameplayers attempt to change the outcome of both the narrative and mechanical content by recalling their previous mistakes and overwriting them with new actions. This is why Alexander Galloway refers to digital games as an action-based medium “whose foundation is not in looking or reading but instead in the instigation of material change through action” — change which in most cases begins with a traumatic, narratively unsatisfying death, and then through action uses the knowledge gained from that failure to push toward a more satisfying conclusion.¹⁸ The process of re-animation is therefore not an erasure so much as an overwriting akin to the process of painting on a used canvas, where the original image is not gone but rather continues to exist both behind and underneath, not so much as a contradiction of the new image but rather as a base that holds it up.

Compossibility

I'll return to the process and purpose of re-animation in greater detail shortly (as well as its impact on the digital logic of death) but it's first vital to note that re-animation would not be possible without the unique temporality found in digital games, one in which the player continually constructs the present not only as a response to the past, but also with concrete knowledge of the future — an organization which is in direct opposition to the traditional notions of time found in moving images prior to the digital turn. To unpack the difference between these two modes of temporality, let's turn briefly to Max Scheler, whose notion that every person has an intuitive, *a priori* knowledge of her/his own death was entirely reliant on a temporality that is at once fixed, constant, and limited — a theory that would also (albeit for different reasons) greatly influence Heidegger's later formulation of the *Dasein* as Being-towards-death. For Scheler, our knowledge of death is based not on the observation of the deaths of others but rather on a recognition of the totality of the present instant, which Bernard N. Schumacher sums up as follows:

The structure of the vital process at the individual instant T (the total content of a moment) can be discerned in three qualitatively distinct dimensions that are correlative to that instant: the immediate present (pr) + the immediate past (p) + the immediate future (f) of something. Three extensions (of the vital process) can be assigned to these dimensions: perception (which relates to the present), memory (which relates to the past), and expectation (which relates to the future). ... Scheler maintains that although the past increases, the two other dimensions (the present and the future) necessarily decrease, given that the totality (T) is constant.¹⁹

Utilizing a model of time that is finite and omnidirectional, Scheler argued that death is made visible not by the observation of specific events but rather through the general “inductive experience of the changing content of every real life process.”²⁰ In other words, because life is bound up in continual movement and constant change yet also *limited in possibility*, then stillness, stasis, and death must be inevitable, however far in the future. Following this logic, the thinking subject must assume that the past and future necessarily contradict one another, and as the “scope of the content” of the past begins to grow (i.e., as they grow older and experience/remember more) so too must the scope of the content of the future condense and diminish, eventually leading to nothingness and death.²¹

Despite the well-tread notion that the capacity for nonlinear narratives somehow divorces film and television from the temporal constraints of the real world, a Scheler-esque model of temporality was still predominant in

pre-digital moving images, where even if the story were told in a nonlinear fashion the diegetic time nonetheless marched steadily and consistently forward — each second equaling one less moment to affect the outcome of the narrative, each action of the protagonist essentially one less move that can be made.²² Contemporary digital games present us with an alternative to this fixed temporality — rather than a linear progression in which the future is merely an extension and erasure of the past, time in games doubles back upon itself, and through this repetition the player knows exactly what their future will be because they have already experienced it, *because they have already died*. In the digital temporality of gamespace, the individual instant is no longer composed of three qualitatively distinct dimensions {T = pr + p + f} but rather one *compossible present* which is constructed of multiple cominglings of the past and future {T = pr (p + f)}.

For example, whenever a player leaps over lava pits in *Super Mario 64*, uses a cardboard box to sneak past armed guards in *Metal Gear Solid*, summons hoards of ant lions to attack Combine soldiers in *Half-Life 2*, or hunts down a mythological beast in *The Witcher 3*, they are armed not only with a perception of the mechanical obstacles of the gamespace or the outcome of their own controlling inputs. Instead, they also often possess a memory of having faced these very obstacles mere moments before — sometimes multiple times in various combinations and with various results — *in a future that is now made past*. Nearly every moment of gameplay is informed by multiple dimensions of time brought together, a present whole which both is structured atop and can exist only in relation to many *compossible* variations of both the past and future.

Leibniz first conceived of compossibility as a way of understanding why the world exists as it does, rather than as one of any number of other possibilities, based on the absence of inconsistency and logical contradiction. Responding to Spinoza's contention that everything that can exist does exist (and no more than what does exist could exist), Leibniz conceived of a world — *the world* — as a “complete individual concept” made up of numerous individual substances (compossibilities) whose relational properties do not oppose one another and thus are not contradictory.²³ Deleuze took this a step further in *Cinema 2*, where he declared that Leibniz's formulation of the compossible can only lead to — or as Deleuze puts it, Leibniz “is thus obliged to forge” — the notion of the *impossible*, of divergent worlds where “the past may be true without necessarily being true.”²⁴ Rather than focusing on the compossible substances that exist simultaneously within *our* world, Deleuze instead questions whether every action *may* happen somewhere, in a world that is impossible with our own yet still existent. A model for understanding the temporal structure of certain forms of cinematic expression in the postwar period, Deleuze's impossibilities and divergent worlds may seem, at first, to also directly mirror the deviating paths taken by gamers through the process of re-animation (where

each death transports the player to another impossible plane). Even his example of such impossibilities, borrowed from Jorge Luis Borges, sounds eerily like the structure of a contemporary digital game:

For nothing prevents us from affirming that impossibles belong to the same world, that impossible worlds belong to the same universe: “Fang, for example, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door ... Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both escape, they can both die, and so forth ... you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend ... ” This is Borges reply to Leibniz: the straight line as force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line that forks and keeps on forking, passing through *impossible presents*, returning to *not-necessarily true pasts*.²⁵

Yet what separates Deleuze’s impossible worlds from the re-animated actions of a gameplayer is that, in Deleuze’s scenario, each fork in time, each impossibility, contradicts itself and therefore is unknown to those affected — in other words, Fang cannot know that he was killed by the intruder *somewhere else*, and thus cannot use that knowledge to shape his present.²⁶ In digital games, the opposite is true: every action is a response to an absolutely known past/future, and thus games are constructed not around “impossible presents” and “not-necessarily true pasts” but rather “compossible presents” and “necessarily proven futures.” In a game, the events described by Borges *can* exist alongside one another in a single, coherent, and compossible whole — rather than contradicting one another, they inform one another and allow one another to take on specific meanings. Fang can be killed by the intruder and then use that knowledge to kill the intruder, and in doing so (by allowing the player to progress only after some specific criteria are satisfied) the game molds the player’s understanding of *both* actions, of *both* life and death (or even “life and life” or “death and death”) as relational compossibilities.

In the temporality of pre-digital moving images, the past and future of any individual instant were, by definition, contradictory — so much so that as one increases, the other must decrease. In the digital time of games, this sense of contradiction is gone, allowing the past and future to exist together as compossible components of the totality of a moment, whereby both life and death, movement and stillness may exist side by side. Thus we find that while movement and stillness in games may initially point to the finiteness of the flesh in the same manner as the cinema (as forward progress of living and as stillness of death), the digital medium’s new conception of a compossible temporality, alongside the interactivity that places the gameplayer into the game, ultimately presents us with a radically new recognition of mortality which points not to the death of others but rather to *the death of the self*. As such, we are once again left to question whether the re-animation of digital

games denies death or instead shifts our relationship to death in some other way; to ask whether the goal of digital games is to insert life into the inanimate or to ensure, through a repetition of events, that the animate can become inanimate (that life can die) only in a manner that feels natural. I'll return to this question of the drive to ensure a natural (i.e., narratively satisfying) death shortly, but first let's examine the consequences of digital repetition and the possibility for change brought about by the process of re-animation.

Recurrence, Subjectivity, Contemplation

Re-animation and compossibility have been central to the image of death in digital games for decades, but they are not the only aspects of modern game design that define how we approach the issue of mortality in digital spaces. Since the late 2000s, a new mechanic — in fact a new principle of game design — has become prevalent across a variety of game genres, one that furthers the immersive possibilities of the medium. The mechanic: an ethical choice (or choices) given to the player that influences both the resolution of the narrative and the player's digital subjectivity. These “moral choice engines,” according to Marcus Schulzke, enhance the cultural value of games through the production of “compelling simulations that force players to test their own values [while furnishing] sanctions in the game to respond to the player's choice.”²⁷ Yet while many critics and scholars read this mechanic as little more than the proliferation of virtual morality plays — “a training ground in which players can practice thinking about morality,” as Schulzke reads them — its true function is far more complex, marking a shift in game design philosophy in which *the formation of a virtual subjectivity* has become a focal point of a wide variety of narratively driven games in various genres and styles.²⁸ The ethical dilemmas presented in games like the *Mass Effect*, *Infamous*, and *Fallout* series — do you shoot the criminal or talk him down? do you feed the weak or take the food for yourself? do you kill the tyrant to free his people or take his throne? — are not simply toys through which we adopt various moral viewpoints, nor simply spaces in which we affirm our own sense-of-self through ethical action, but rather mechanical devices through which we influence the development of a separate *virtual subjectivity* with its own relationship to death, one that helps to shape our understanding of our actual mortality. At the forefront of this new subjectivity-defining mechanic was Irrational Games' *Bioshock* — an RPG-lite first person shooter released in 2007 and designed by Ken Levine — whose narrative hinged on an ethical choice that gave even the most jaded gamers pause.

Bioshock tells the story of the dystopic underwater city of Rapture, constructed in the mid-twentieth century by business tycoon Andrew Ryan

and conceived as the ideal manifestation of the laissez-faire principles of Objectivism, the philosophy espoused in the literature of Ayn Rand. Rapture's purpose was to create a society free of the ethical constraints of government, religion, and bureaucracy, which Ryan explains in the game's opening sequence:

Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? "No!" says the man in Washington, "It belongs to the poor." "No!" says the man in the Vatican, "It belongs to God." "No!" says the man in Moscow, "It belongs to everyone." I rejected those answers; instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose ... Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small!

In the absence of ethical oversight, the scientists of Rapture discovered a plasmid known as ADAM, which utilized stem cells to enable superhuman powers like telekinesis and mind-control ("evolution in a bottle" as an in-game advertisement claims). Unfortunately, ADAM could only be cultivated within the organs of adolescent girls, test subjects whose minds were warped by the process and who subsequently became known throughout Rapture as the ghoulish "little sisters." The player — assuming the role of "Jack," a man whose identity at the start of the narrative is little more than a tabula rasa, suffering from amnesia after his plane crashed into the sea directly above Rapture — is inserted into this story just after class warfare has broken out in response to the limited quantities of ADAM. As they fight their way through the city using their own modified weapons and genetic powers, players battle against numerous citizens who have been genetically mutated by ADAM into sometimes deformed but always dangerous and deadly opponents. Each encounter brings with it the possibility of death, yet each death is little more than an inconvenience thanks to another Rapture technology known as the "Vita-Chamber," which has the power to "restore" and thus re-animate players after death (*Bioshock*, it turns out, is one of only a handful of games that attempt to narratively explain the process of re-animation).²⁹

Along their path, players also run across a number of little sisters, who wander the corridors of Rapture in search of dead bodies — "angels" as they call them — from which they collect the genetic material that they must rather morbidly consume to create more ADAM. Each encounter with a little sister presents the player with a grisly choice: either rescue the young girl from the debilitating effects of this process by destroying the ADAM within her body, or harvest the ADAM, increasing the player's abilities at the cost of the little sister's life (an act that mercifully happens offscreen). Not simply another intuitive action in response to a threat or challenge, this choice is given significant weight within the narrative, which, depending

on the ratio of girls freed versus harvested, presents the player with one of two endings *and thus defines them* in one of two ways: a “good” ending for those who sacrificed power in order to rescue the young girls, and a “bad” ending for those who were concerned more with the accumulation of power than for the lives of the innocent. Yet the narrative conclusions that result from this choice are not simply a way to declare the player as either hero or villain, but rather a way to define their very relationship (or more accurately their “path”) to death itself. For example, the “bad” ending sees the player go insane with power (a result of the large quantities of ADAM they have consumed), which leads them to steal nuclear weapons which they will presumably use to destroy the world and themselves in the process. The “good” ending, on the other hand, ends quite literally years later at the player’s deathbed, where the rescued and now-grown sisters hold an old man’s hand as he slips away into death.³⁰ In *Bioshock*, death was never meant to be avoided but was instead the very goal of the narrative itself — to permit the player to die in a manner that seems “natural” given the context of the player’s in-game subjectivity.

As *Bioshock* implicitly demonstrates, re-animation is merely the *how* of the image of death in digital games, but not necessarily the *why*. In other words, our examination of death in games thus far has revealed that the digital allows for a compossible present in which players can overwrite previous deaths through the rewinding process of re-animation, but now we'll move forward to examine why games have adopted this re-animating process, as well as how re-animation reconfigures the player's relationship to death, their own in particular. To do so, let's turn to two well-known (and widely

FIGURE 2.2 *Players face a difficult choice as they encounter their first “little sister.”*

misunderstood) philosophical theories which situate man's relationship to death, Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return and Freud's development of the death drive. Both take as their starting point *repetition* — the very process which drives re-animation — yet arrive at very different conclusions about the function of death: one which reveals the vital roles that *identity* and *difference* play in the recognition, assessment, and contemplation of death, while the other a critique of the *instincts* and the drive to create "*one's own path to death*."

Throughout his work, Nietzsche developed a philosophical approach to death that would begin, in *The Gay Science*, as conscious affirmation of one's path through life, become a challenge to the elite to accept one's mortality in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and finally morph into a pseudo-scientific explanation for the infinite nature of the universe in his late writing, such as *Ecce Homo*. The philosophy itself, referred to as both eternal recurrence and the doctrine of eternal return of the same, begins with a simple thought experiment: what if, Nietzsche asks, you were told that you will live the same life again and again throughout time, without change, so that "every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh" were repeated for eternity — would you rejoice your good fortune or would you recoil in horror?³¹ Nietzsche suspected the latter, referring to the doctrine of eternal return as "the heaviest burden" which is relayed not by an angel but rather a demon: "would you not throw yourself down," he asks, "and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke?"³² The very thought of eternal recurrence is, according to Nietzsche, enough to break the will of anyone less than the *Übermensch*, the overman or superior-being that Zarathustra, Nietzsche's philosophical surrogate, saw as the ultimate aspiration of human consciousness. So powerful is the thought alone that it appears, on the one hand, as a dangerous weapon that Nietzsche and Zarathustra were reluctant to unleash upon an unprepared or unwilling public — "if this thought gained power over you it would, as you are now, transform and perhaps crush you" — while on the other hand a force strong enough to propel humanity toward greatness — "how well disposed towards yourself and towards your life would you have to become to have no greater desire than for this ultimate eternal sanction and seal?"³³ Yet rather than prodding us to examine the value or purpose of our life (a common misreading), eternal recurrence is instead a call to recognize and embrace — or at the very least, cease to be terrified of — our own death, for it is not simply an ethical appeal nor a religious doctrine but rather a complex understanding of Being, time, and the limitations of personal subjectivity and self-identity.

According to Nietzsche, Being implies a constant present — it is itself not a process but rather the end state of the process of Becoming — and because time is always passing, we are never Being anything but rather are always Becoming something else. As such, all of the physical world, all beings and thus all Being, "is" or can only "be" *pure Becoming*.³⁴ How

does the recognition of Being as pure Becoming lead us to the doctrine of eternal return? Alexander Cooke provides a useful summary of Nietzsche's philosophical move:

If there is neither start nor end to Becoming, how does one experience the very passing of the Moment that justifies the fact of Being as Becoming? The present or Moment, such that it can be experienced as passing, must be both past and yet-to-come. For Time to incorporate the Moment in two states (past and yet-to-come), at some point, the same passage of Time must recur or return. Insofar as there is no end point to becoming, it must recur eternally.³⁵

At this point, we find clear echoes between the notion of eternal recurrence and the process of re-animation: both presuppose that Being and temporality are not limited but rather subject to continual repetition, both view life as constant Becoming or movement and death not as final but rather as a moment of resetting or recurrence, and both establish a clear relationship between the past and future. At the same time there are divergences, first (and most obviously) the fact that re-animation is always an opportunity for change while eternal recurrence is always a repetition of the same, and second a fundamental difference in the metaphysical arrangement of the Moment.

We'll return to first divergence again shortly, but for now let's follow second: rather than the compossible present of the digital $\{T = pr(p + f)\}$, or even Scheler's three dimensions of the totality of the Moment $\{T = pr + p + f\}$, the doctrine of eternal return suggests that *there is no present* but rather only a past that is forever Becoming the future $\{T = p \rightarrow f\}$. This notion has significant ramifications for the individual and their relationship to death, both within the actual and the virtual, because the absence of a present effectively denies the possibility of personal identity or self-constructed subjectivity — the very same sense of subjectivity that helps games like *Bioshock* differentiate between a satisfying death (i.e., the "correct" or "natural" death, narratively speaking) and the numerous traumatic and unsatisfying deaths that litter the compossible time of gamespace. "From the point of view of subjectivity," Cooke explains, "one can point toward the self-affirmation of one's own being in enunciating 'I am.' Such a statement, according to its 'common' understanding, presupposes that the 'am' is a quality of Being, *not* Becoming."³⁶ In a Moment that can only be experienced as a passing, one cannot state *who they "are"* (how can one "be" if one is always "becoming"?) but rather only state *what they have done or hope to do*, their personal choices and actions — choices made in the past; choices that are yet-to-be-made. In the absence of a present, subjectivity is defined by choice, and identity is thus not a thought but rather an act, it is not thought but rather enacted.

Here we find an avenue back to the digital, as action and choice have become the defining elements of modern games — action as choice — as well as the elements within games that *define us*. Every Moment in a game requires action in response to a mechanical challenge, and every action is a choice, one in which the player decides on the appropriate input based on a multitude of factors (not the least of which is their recollection of the compossible past/future).

But are these basic inputs — jump here, avoid this, kill that — enough to allow a player to define their own virtual subjectivity?³⁷ A useful intervention here comes from Heidegger, who, in his readings of Nietzsche and elsewhere, positioned subjectivity not as the result of self-affirming thought (thinking and Being are the same, for Heidegger, only insofar as they *belong* to one another) but rather as a side effect of both the “will to power” — which he describes as Nietzsche’s “single name for the basic character of beings and for the essence of power” — and the fact of eternal return of the same.³⁸ Every being is “will to power” for they constantly seek or, more appropriately, create power, “the uppermost value” that has no need to supplant other values because “power and *only power* posits value, validates them, and makes decisions about the possible justifications of a valuation.”³⁹ As such, the individual being cannot self-affirm or self-identify because it is always already defined through its basic, eternal character as “will to power,” and thus every attempt at what Heidegger calls “incessant self-overempowering” — *any choice or action beyond self-preservation* — is nothing more than a “power-conforming becoming [that] must itself always recur again and bring back the same.”⁴⁰ Following Heidegger’s logic, the typical inputs required in digital games are not enough to allow a player to define their own virtual subjectivity because these actions are only concerned with self-preservation and the avoidance of death, thereby failing to define the individual in relation to their being as “will to power.” Yet as we see in the case of *Bioshock*, modern game design frequently presents players with moral and ethical dilemmas through which the player can influence the development of their digital subjectivity by means of the accumulation or sacrifice of some form of power, dilemmas which, more often than not, relay those subjective choices directly through death (whether the player’s own or that of another).

In fact, let’s briefly turn back to *Bioshock*, which presents a commentary on the very nature of subjective choice in gameplay through a significant twist in its narrative, in which the player discovers late in the game that nearly all of their actions have been the direct result of a mind-control experiment whereby the protagonist is supposedly conditioned to obey any command given to them following the phrase “would you kindly.” A flashback reminds them that at every turn in the story, an ally named “Atlas” (actually Andrew Ryan’s main competitor, Frank Fontaine, in disguise, his alias a not-so-subtle nod to Ayn Rand) had used the phrase “would you kindly” when

“asking” them to proceed in a certain ways, requests that would then appear in written on-screen prompts as “objectives” to be completed. “The game has manipulated us through its use of environmental nudges, game-world obstacles, and objectives we have been kindly asked to achieve,” Grant Tavinor explains, “so that for the most part, we have ‘sleepwalked’ through the game, unaware of the artifice, an actor in someone else’s artwork.”⁴¹ This revelation is shocking on two levels. First, on the narrative level it reveals that the player is not simply the survivor of a plane crash but rather a sleeper agent conditioned to assassinate Ryan. More interestingly, however, it makes visible an underlying mechanical principle of digital games, in which a player will generally perform any task so long as the game fails to give them any other option — so long as it fails to give them *choice*. Why do we run from one end of a level to the other? Because the game tells us to. Why do we pick up this object instead of that one? Because the game tells us to. Why do we shoot these men rather than join their cause? *Because the game tells us to*. This is not to say that games which fail to offer choice cannot produce in-game subjectivities, but rather that, as *Bioshock* argues, without choice games define players rather than allowing players to define themselves. This revelation also leads to one of *Bioshock*’s most shocking sequences, where the player’s control over the action is literally taken away (such that none of the normal controlling inputs function correctly) and they become helpless to stop themselves from gruesomely beating Ryan to death with a golf club. Regardless of how the player has defined their own virtual subjectivity, in this moment their lack of choice defines them. Ryan’s last words in response: “A man chooses, a slave obeys.”

FIGURE 2.3 *The player discovers their lack of free will in Bioshock.*

There is, however, one exception to Fontaine's mind-control in *Bioshock*: the little sisters. Fontaine never directly intervened in the decision process which ultimately defines the player as good or bad, saint or sinner, and as such *Bioshock* aims to show us how gamers *can* define their own virtual subjectivity rather than having their subjectivity defined by the game; not by allowing the player to self-preserve (i.e., avoid death) in whatever manner they choose, but rather by letting them create their own "will to power" through ethical choices — choices that, as we will see shortly, also define what is and is not a natural, satisfying resolution (i.e., death) for the player. This mechanic is even joined by other approaches to contemporary game design, such as open-world "sandbox" games like the *GTA* and *Fallout* series, which give players specific tasks but a multitude of options or ethical avenues through which to accomplish those tasks. In turn, players are offered various rewards that change their abilities and shift their "power" — another opportunity through which they can influence their digital subjectivity.

Despite its current prominence within the mechanics of gameplay, however, choice alone cannot wholly define identity in games for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, not every game utilizes choice in order to allow the player to influence their virtual subjectivity, and second because many of the choices presented in modern games can be overwritten by a more powerful force: re-animation. *Choice* is therefore only one half of the creation of identity and the definition of "natural" death in digital games, an equation that is completed by *chance*, the potential for difference. By chance, I refer not to a quality of randomness in games, but rather to the opportunity they provide to change outcomes after they have already occurred.⁴² Gameplay presents choice, but re-animation is the act that enables chance, for it allows the player to create different outcomes based on various compossibilities. Chance also brings us back to the most obvious divergence between re-animation and eternal recurrence — if re-animation is always an opportunity for change and difference, and if eternal recurrence is always a repetition of the same, then how can re-animation be read as a digital manifestation of eternal recurrence? Or, to view this question from another perspective, is there any room for chance or difference in Nietzsche's doctrine?

According to Deleuze, the answer is obviously yes: "Every time we understand the eternal return as the return of a particular arrangement of things after all the other arrangements have been realized, every time we interpret the eternal return as the return of the identical or the same, we replace Nietzsche's thought with childish hypothesis."⁴³ How does Deleuze arrive at this conclusion if Nietzsche's entire premise is centered around a return "of the same"? To begin, Deleuze reads the eternal return not simply as the repetition of Time but rather as the purest *form of Time*, a model of temporality that is very much akin to the compossible time of digital games. Rather than a past that bypasses the present in the process of Becoming the future $\{T = p \rightarrow f\}$, Deleuze posits the Moment as a "living

present” which exists as a contraction of “successive independent instants,” of which the past and future are not independent dimensions but rather only “dimensions of the present itself.” For Deleuze, “the present alone exists” — the present is itself *a constant repetition* that exists *in the absence of both the past and future* $\{T = pr \neg (p + f)\}$.⁴⁴ Reading eternal return as a form of Time — as *the* form of Time — is significant not because it returns the present and thus once again accounts for identity and subjectivity (for Deleuze’s project, as we will see, upends the notion of identity found in Nietzsche and elsewhere), but rather because it creates a present that constantly and continually encourages contemplation. How so?

Deleuze posits that identity — metaphysical essence — is formed not from Sameness (the notion of the identical, of shared qualities) but rather through difference, which he considers to be a first-order principle of all Being. Difference in this sense is found not in the comparison of one substance to another but rather *within* each substance; a *difference-in-itself* that is revealed only through repetition, which produces a material change not in the substance that repeats but rather “in the mind which contemplates [the repetition]: a difference, something new *in* the mind.”⁴⁵ Here, we find that Deleuze has overturned the notion of identity found in Nietzsche by making it a secondary principle of difference (rather than the other way around), and that where Nietzsche saw identity as not thought but rather action, Deleuze sees identity as only thought — or, more accurately, only recognizable within the thought that contemplates eternal recurrence. While Zarathustra called this very thought “so much the hardest to bear that no prior, mediocre human being can think it,” Deleuze creates a sense of the return in which every Moment, every repetition of the present is an opportunity to recognize difference-in-itself, to recognize and construct identity through difference. “Thus,” Deleuze states, “the circle of eternal return, difference and repetition (*which undoes that of the identical and the contradictory*) is a torturous circle in which Sameness is said only of that which differs.”⁴⁶ As this fuller picture of the return demonstrates, not only does Deleuze find identity in that which differs (that which repeats) and thus sees the return as undoing the primacy of the identical, but he also reads the return as an *undoing of contradiction* — it creates a space in which differences-in-themselves are not contradictory but rather compossible.

Turning back to games, we find that re-animation is, in essence, this same process, it creates a compossible present in which the repetition of life and death is uniquely visible and thus the contemplation of such repetition is uniquely possible. Following this, the repetition of death in games does not make death invisible but rather *hyper-visible*, especially when repeated and inconsequential deaths come face to face with a permanent death within the narrative (a structure I’ll return to in a moment). Yet the compossibility inherent in the temporality of gamespace must constantly point to and create difference — it must constantly insert chance — in order to allow the player

to contemplate and identify death. As Daniel W. Conway shows us, a central act in Deleuze's reading of eternal recurrence is Zarathustra's dice throw (itself already a game), in which the throwing of the dice reveals chance while the dice's falling back to earth demonstrates necessity.⁴⁷ Being two separate events, necessity (in this case the repetition and recurrence inherent in Time) does not rule out or abolish the possibility of chance. The present may eternally recur, but each recurrence allows us to further contemplate, identify, and re-animate. As Deleuze puts it: "To think is to create: this is Nietzsche's greatest lesson. To think, to cast the dice ... this was already the sense of the eternal return."⁴⁸ In digital games those dice are always thrown again, the player is always given the chance to recognize, contemplate, and overwrite death.

Regardless of whether or not Nietzsche truly believed that life would eternally repeat in the same manner without change (still subject to great debate amongst many critics and scholars), the "thought" of eternal return — the *burden* of eternal return — is that a "return of the same" inherently implies a stasis (a failure to change), and if all existence is not Being but rather Becoming (a continual process of change), then stasis can be nothing more than non-existence and death. Eternal recurrence is not a promise that life will repeat itself again and again and again, but rather a signpost that points to death, a declaration that once you have died your own possibility for change is now eternally gone. This is the burden that digital games challenge, creating a space where we *can* change after death, where death itself is the impetus for change. Following this, Deleuze's re-reading is not a so much promise that life will repeat eternally in different forms, but rather an observation that every Moment is a repetition — a "torturous circle" — through which we can recognize and contemplate the true essence of Being: that all beings are subject to an eternal change that permits the "emergence of the new" just as assuredly as it inevitably leads to death. In games, we re-animate not to deny death but rather to contemplate it, to recognize its consequences, and *to make death more present*.

The Path to Death

As with Nietzsche before him, Freud's awareness of the importance of death in human consciousness was born out of a recognition of repetition, but rather than a contemplation of eternal forces, Freud's repetition was seen in the neurotic replaying of traumatic events: in the soldier's flashbacks of a harrowing battle, in the dreams of an abuse victim which recall painful details from their childhood, or even in the compulsive nature of the child's "fort-da" game.⁴⁹ Such repetition, Freud argued, "disregards the pleasure principle in every way" by acting not as a cathexis or discharge

of excitations (for all mental processes are, according to Freud, little more the accumulation and release of the tensions between forces), but rather as manifestations of an extraneous force which “exhibit, to a high degree, an instinctual character.”⁵⁰ Considering that Freud defines the instincts as “a compulsion inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things ... a kind of organic elasticity,” and considering that the previous state of life or being is always inanimate non-life or nonbeing, we must then be compelled, as Freud puts it, to contend that all instincts lead to the return or recurrence of the inanimate state — that all instincts lead to death. “This view of instincts strikes us as strange,” Freud admits, “because we have become used to seeing, in them, a factor impelling toward change and development, whereas we are now asked to recognize, in them, the precise contrary — an expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance.”⁵¹ Rather than Nietzsche’s notion that life always returns *as* the same, in Freud we find the instinct for life to always return *to* the same (such that Sameness is a *state* of the past and not the past itself). All of life is thus a return, a return to a previous form of Being that is enabled only through death.

The push for the animate to return to the inanimate — what Freud referred to as the death drive, and which has also become known as Thanatos, the death instinct — was first elaborated in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920, which has simultaneously become one of the most important, divisive, and misunderstood texts in Freud’s body of work. As W. Craig Tomlinson explains, “Many of the schisms in international psychoanalysis — between ego psychologists and Kleinians, between fundamentalists and reformers, between Europe and the Americas — have important roots in this text.”⁵² Yet at the same time the tensions that have arisen from the essay (and thus from the very notion of the death drive itself) have proved fruitful in many ways, as Tomlinson points out when he continues to assert that “much of the richness and diversity of psychoanalysis can be traced to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.”⁵³ While it certainly has its defenders, Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan in particular, few have truly grasped the importance of the death drive. This is partially Freud’s own fault, for he himself cautioned that the death drive “is the development of an extreme line of thought” which he seemed comfortable with only when situated in opposition to Eros, the sexual instincts, so much so that he admits that he would “feel relieved if the whole structure [of the death drive] turned out to be mistaken ... and [thus] the compulsion to repeat would no longer possess the importance we have ascribed to it.”⁵⁴ Many readings of the death drive follow suit by positioning the drive not as a return to the inanimate but rather as the object-cause of aggression or self-destruction — a fascinating argument in its own right that Freud nonetheless developed later, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, almost as a way to conceptualize the drive without reference to the troubling and disconcerting aspects of the body’s own desire to return to a previous state. As such, the drive itself has often come to stand for aggression and violence

rather than the true consequences and ramifications of the push toward the inanimate: that “the goal of all life is death” and thus “everything living dies for internal reasons.”⁵⁵

This line of thinking leads us to an intriguing dilemma: If “the goal of all life is death,” why do we work so hard to deny it and struggle so hard to avoid it? This question is just as applicable in contemporary digital games, if not more so given the often inconsequential nature of death as a game mechanic: if the goal of games is *not* to avoid death, as I have previously suggested, then why do we fight so hard to do just that? To respond, we must return to the instincts. “Seen in this light,” Freud realizes, “the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion, and of mastery greatly diminishes.”⁵⁶ Self-preservation, self-assertion, and mastery; all three of which have also drastically diminished in importance within contemporary game design, and two of which we’ve already touched upon at some length. Let’s begin with mastery, as it was the primary goal of digital games at their very inception — the achievement of high scores and better performances — a goal that has been repeatedly overturned in contemporary games. In a not-so-veiled critique of Nietzsche, Freud argued that the instinct toward mastery at work in human beings, “which may be expected to watch over their development into supermen,” is no more than “an untiring impulsion towards further perfection [which] can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression” — the repression of the basic drive toward death.⁵⁷ Likewise, the aim to master or perfect gameplay was itself little more than a forced or required repression of death, for the entire goal of such perfection was to avoid dying for as long as possible — a virtual repression of a virtual death that would, as with actual death, always find the player in the end.

Contemporary games, on the other hand, are concerned less with the perfection of skill than with the development and resolution of narrative, a fact clearly seen in the near ubiquitous “difficulty levels” of contemporary games which ensure that, with a large enough time commitment, even the most novice player can find closure. As we have also seen, contemporary games often introduce choice to allow the player to define their own *virtual subjectivity* — a digital declaration of “I am” that is only feasible in the compossible time of gamespace — yet this process is not self-assertion but in fact quite the opposite. Digital games require the gamer to abandon their own sense of self or self-concept (to use a Freudian term) in favor of a virtual self, a split subjectivity that has, as we will see in Chapter 3, a separate relationship to death yet always responds or points to our actual understanding of death’s inevitability. As such, self-assertion of the player’s *actual subjectivity* is explicitly repressed in contemporary games.

Finally, then, we have self-preservation, the instinct to fight against harm and death. In games, as we have repeatedly seen, re-animation diminishes the need to fight against death, for death is no longer final but instead a

learning process through which we can overwrite the mistakes of the past. So we must ask again: Why do we fight against meaningless death in games? The answer concerns all three of the “diminished” instincts: in order to reach a satisfying resolution in digital game narratives (at the expense of the diminishment of mastery), we craft a virtual subjectivity that suppresses our actual subjectivity (at the expense of the diminishment of self-assertion), which allows us to recognize and thus push toward a “natural,” satisfying death (at the expense of the diminishment of self-preservation). As Freud makes explicit, “We have no longer to reckon with the organism’s puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.”⁵⁸ In life, we struggle because to struggle is an instinct, one “whose function,” Freud further explains, “is to assure that the organism *shall follow its own path to death*.”⁵⁹ In games, we struggle not to avoid death itself, but rather to avoid the “wrong” death, a death that fails to satisfy the demands of both the narrative and our virtual subjectivity. In games, we struggle so that we can die in our own fashion, we struggle because within the virtual (unlike the actual) *we can assure our own path to death*.

Death is not failure in contemporary games because the very goal of games *is* death, not only to recognize death but also to create one’s own path to a narratively satisfying, “natural” death. Let’s take a moment to parse out the concept of a “natural death,” for it’s a term that Freud uses repeatedly throughout *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Colloquially, natural death might refer to senescent death, the eventual failure of life-sustaining processes due to the aging of the body, but digital avatars fail to experience senescence and as such this type of death is mostly unavailable in gamespace. For Freud, however, natural death is not about senescence but rather the body’s own release or excitation of the tensions between life and non-life, between the animate and the inanimate. A traumatic death may also release such tensions, but for Freud it does so “by a kind of short-circuit” which helps the organism “attain its life’s goal rapidly” — *too* rapidly, before the organism is ready.⁶⁰ In games, where death is no more than a temporal rewinding, this rapid push toward death serves the opposite function, for it accrues tensions rather than releases them. For example, a traumatic death at the hands of a nameless mythological monster in *God of War III* is not the “right” death for Kratos because such a death does not release tensions but rather builds them, and likewise it would feel unnatural for Commander Shepard to be killed by a random Geth in *Mass Effect 3* for this would only add to our excitements. To achieve a cathexis, to release these tensions, Kratos can only die when his vengeance against the Gods is complete and Shepard can only die as a sacrifice to save the galaxy from destruction — only these deaths are “natural,” for only these deaths release tensions by satisfying the demands of the protagonist’s (and thus the player’s) virtual subjectivity.

Even open-world games find ways to ensure a natural death for the protagonist, despite the genre's propensity for allowing players to continue to explore and interact with the gameworld after the main narrative is complete. For example, in a shocking moment toward the end of Rockstar North's *Red Dead Redemption* — a revisionist open-world western set not in the mid-nineteenth century but rather in 1911, just as the “wild” west was being co-opted by civilization, government, and the free market — the player-controlled protagonist, John Marston, is unavoidably killed within the narrative while defending his family from corrupt government agents. Unlike when he was gunned down by a random bandit in a long-abandoned ghost town, or attacked by a bear in a snowy forest, or shot down in a duel in a Mexican border town, this death — dying to save the family that defines his identity as a man of peace rather than violence — is a death that satisfies the criteria of both Marston's self-identity and the player's virtual subjectivity. Instead of re-animating Marston, the permanence of this shocking event within the narrative is reinforced moments later, when the game cuts forward in time several years to find the player unexpectedly given control over Marston's adult son. This dramatic switch away from the avatar that the player has controlled for upwards of twenty-to-forty hours confirms that this death was indeed a satisfying and “natural” death for Marston, while also mechanically allowing the player to continue to interact with the world through Marston's son.⁶¹

“But let us pause for a moment and reflect,” Freud pleads, for “it cannot be so.” It cannot be so, can it? That death is the ultimate and even desired

FIGURE 2.4 *John Marston is fatally gunned down yet his death is still narratively “natural.”*

resolution of life? And what of games — what is the relationship between death and resolution in games? To find out, let's momentarily return to the cinema, where Peter Brooks and Laura Mulvey, among others, have argued that the death drive functions in film narratives to push toward *closure*. In *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks borrows from Tzvetan Todorov's model of narrative transformation, "whereby plot — *sjuzet, récrit* — is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance," a "same-but-different" that functions in a similar manner as does Deleuze's difference-in-itself. In other words, plotting — which allows the narrative to push from beginnings to endings, from birth to death — is a continual recognition and contemplation of a change that "puts time into motion" while also creating tensions within the viewer.⁶² Reading this process through Freud, Brooks argues that such change is driven by repetition, for "narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition ... a *sjuzet* repeating a *fabula*." As with all Being's drive toward death, this repetition is a push toward (or return to) a previous state of stillness or stasis that marks the end of change and the release of tensions, so that "the desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end ... of *fabula* become *sjuzet*."⁶³ This end — this *closure* — is not simply a model of death (even when it calls upon or utilizes the very image of death, as is so often the case) but rather death itself, which Brooks makes explicit when he argues that "death provides the very 'authority' of the [narrative], since as readers we seek in narrative fictions the knowledge of death which in our own lives is denied to us."⁶⁴ Mulvey builds on this by noting that films typically begin with intense action and movement which serves to "jump start" the narrative, whereas the goal of the film's ending is to allow stillness to return — usually through the narrative devices of death or marriage (what Brooks playfully refers to as "erotic stasis"). Death in the cinema has, for Mulvey, a "double tautological appeal, a doubling of the structure and content" — the *fabula* finds closure through life attaining its goal while the *sjuzet* provides closure in the stillness of the image.⁶⁵

In digital games, on the other hand, traumatic or "incorrect" deaths cannot serve as closure because they shatter the content from its structure, they act not as a moment of finality but rather as the beginning of the process of re-animation and the establishment of the player's own path to death. But what of the "natural" death, the narratively satisfying death — surely such a death must function as closure? Not so, for in games we find that even a death that *resolves* the narrative fails to *close* that narrative, for games (unlike the cinema) are not meant to be completed but rather repeated, played again so that new choices and new actions can define and create new experiences, an extension of the very logic of re-animation that exists at the heart of digital games. This is why choice and chance — action and re-animation — are so central to gameplay, because choice shapes our experience while chance allows us to overwrite not just moments of traumatic death but also

the entire experience, to create compossible experiences that allow us to recognize and contemplate the complete consequences of our choices and their impact on each unique path to death.

For example, building on the trend toward the development of in-game subjectivities, we find that contemporary games frequently allow for multiple resolutions or endings — anywhere from two variations (as with *Bioshock* or *Infamous*) to hundreds of combinations (as we see in *Fallout: New Vegas* or the “extended ending” of *Mass Effect 3*) — each of which allows the protagonist to die only in the fashion that feels most natural while also encouraging players to repeatedly form *new* virtual subjectivities by restarting and re-animating the narrative. Added to this, the contemporary landscape of gaming is dominated by online multiplayer and game-expanding downloadable content (“DLC”), which allows gamers to continue playing long after the narrative has come to an end, and which often require that the narrative is not closed but rather left open. As such, natural death in games provides not closure but rather a desire to re-roll the dice, to create a new subjectivity which can define a new path to death.⁶⁶

Reading death in games through the death drive, we finally begin to resolve a question that is crucial for understanding the conception of death in this new digital landscape: Do digital games deny death? The answer, at first glance, seems obvious: games rob death of consequence and finality, making death no more than a momentary punishment for incorrect play and thus no more important than a slap on the wrist. But when we dig deeper into the processes of re-animation, the recognition of death through the compossible time of gamespace, and the establishment of virtual subjectivities through recurrence and chance, we find that games are not a denial but rather a new avenue in our exploration of death, through which we can experience death yet also live to contemplate it, and through which we can imagine, create, and follow our own digital path to death.

After the Game is Before the Game

To get a clearer picture of the digital path to death, and to further examine how re-animation, compossibility, recurrence, and virtual subjectivity all play out in games, let’s turn to a reading of the image of death in two contemporary “game” texts — the first being one of the most successful “indie” titles of the last console generation, while the second not a game but rather a film that has taken up the very logic of gameplay in order to explore the path to death.

Developed by the appropriately named Danish studio Playdead and designed by Arnt Jensen, *LIMBO* was first released in 2010 as a downloadable title on the Xbox Live Arcade, though its critical and

commercial success paved the way for later versions to appear on a number of other platforms. The bulk of the game's loosely strung, two-to-three hour narrative is relayed through its intense black and white aesthetic, complete with shadowy figures who float through parallaxing, shallow-focused landscapes that stutter and fade as if being projected from an old, scratchy 16mm print. Using the mechanics of a side-scrolling platformer — think of *LIMBO* as Mario's beautiful but menacing nightmare — players inhabit the body of a small boy who struggles to survive in a terrifying environment of deadly creatures, traps, and other lost children, his frequent encounters with trauma and death only occasionally offset by glimpses of a young girl in the distance. Any sense that this girl might be the key to understanding the nightmare which has befallen the protagonist is entirely intuitive, as *LIMBO* utilizes none of the traditional narrative techniques found in the majority of contemporary games. There's no dialog, no cut-scenes, no opening titles, no explicit explanation of how the boy arrived in this world, nor are there even hints regarding his emotional response to his circumstance (beyond, as we'll see, the player's own actions as they guide him on his journey). Yet the narrative is hauntingly engaging, it doesn't force a story upon the player but rather allows them the space to contemplate subtle themes about trauma, decay, and the recognition of the inevitability of death.

Key to the affective nature of *LIMBO*'s narrative is the deep connection that the game renders between the avatar of young boy and the player's subjective experience of the gameworld, a connection crafted through subtle mechanical touches. For example, the game begins with a dimly lit forest landscape fading into view, the soft light barely enough to accentuate the outlines of massive trees in the distance or the sharp tufts of grass and jagged branches which litter the dark contours of the forest floor. The position of this moment at the start of the narrative, the emptiness of the scene, and the absence of an apparent avatar all suggest (at least to the seasoned gameplayer) that a pre-scripted cut scene is about to play out, and thus many players wait for several moments before wondering if something is wrong and choosing to input a command by tapping a button. No matter which button was pressed, two tiny, glowing white eyes immediately open and blink as a small body rises from the ground, miniscule against the immense trees that frame the image, the silhouette of his face little more than a blank canvas that nevertheless seems to react to the strangeness of the gameworld with the same confusion as the player. This tiny moment of immersion, this sudden connection between the impulse of the player and the awakening consciousness of the boy, immediately links our thoughts to his thoughts as much as it does his life to our life.

Similarly, as the player begins to proceed forward, they notice that the pace and speed of the boy's movement is entirely variable, such that the player can slowly and cautiously inch forward or run full speed toward the next deadly challenge — a significant departure from the typical on/off,

FIGURE 2.5 *Death surrounds the player in LIMBO.*

standing or running nature of more traditional side-scrolling platformers. This is particularly interesting because *LIMBO* is relatively light on action and very rarely requires precision when it comes to the movements of the player. Instead, the game grants such precise control not to aid in physical challenges but rather to allow players to approach the world only in the fashion that they see fit, to position the boy as either meek and timid or bold and daring.⁶⁷ While this may not be an ethical choice that directly defines the player's virtual subjectivity, it nonetheless sutures their anxiety into the boy's journey, passing through a world that is permeated with death.

Indeed, despite the best efforts of the player, they will likely bear witness as the boy is forced to repeat hundreds of gruesomely depicted deaths, some simply rendering his body limp and inanimate, others forcefully tearing his body into pieces. For many players, their first death comes fairly early in game, either sliding down a steep hill into a pit of jagged spikes or failing to jump across a cleverly hidden bear trap, whose sharp teeth almost perfectly mimic the surrounding blades of grass. Each death is rendered through a fluid and dynamic animation system which makes the trauma that befalls his body all the more shocking, disturbing, and memorable; whether it's the limp swing of his hands after his body is pierced by the spikes or the way that tiny spurts of black blood shimmer across the dim light when his head is severed from his body. Yet these deaths are not the end of the boy's journey, and instead each summons a temporal rewinding so that the player can overwrite such trauma through the process of re-animation. In fact, like many games the occurrence and repetition of death in *LIMBO* is not

simply a sign of inadequate play but rather built into the very structure of the game's mechanics.

To demonstrate this, let's consider a puzzle that appears about thirty minutes into the game, where the player approaches two round, floor-mounted switches, each too wide to jump over and each with their outer-section lowered and their inner-section raised. In order to progress, the player must randomly choose which section they think will be safe to stand upon. Upon choosing the center section of the first switch and finding it safe, the player will most likely repeat this action on the next switch, only to be crushed to death by a large stomping mechanism. Only through death, and thus only through the recurrence made available by *LIMBO*'s compossible temporality, can the player learn that the switches are activated in the opposite manner from one another, an important distinction considering that, after re-animating this sequence of events, they will soon be chased back across the switches by a group of enemies who will themselves be crushed by the trap. Within the puzzle, we see the game design equivalent of Zarathustra's dice throw: death acts as the necessary falling back to earth, while the resetting and re-animating insert the chance to correctly navigate the traps.

Death is a necessary event in *LIMBO*, and in fact it seems to influence the environment and form the very support that the world itself is built upon. Throughout their journey, for example, the player and the boy encounter many other forms of life — from a giant spider and a tiny dog-like creature to a group of other lost boys who have presumably set many of these traps, aiming to protect themselves in a world that seems designed to kill them — and although the player never directly engages these beings in combat, they will occasionally encounter their lifeless bodies which can then be used as tools to help pass deadly obstacles. For example, the protagonist is unable to swim, but at one point he must use the bodies of several dead boys as floating platforms so that he can cross a body of water, even dragging one into the water to begin the journey across. At the same time, the very world around him echoes the decay of the living, beginning in a massive, lush forest, moving its way through an equally enormous cityscape which mixes elements of the natural with the unnatural and the living with the dead, and finally ending in an industrial wasteland full of immense but lifeless machines, cogs, and gears. The closer the boy gets to discovering the truth of his circumstance, the further he gets from the living and the closer his proximity to death.

Despite the necessity of death within its gameplay, however, *LIMBO* also relies upon the player's self-preservation instinct to push them toward a "natural" death. One particularly striking example of this occurs as the player walks into the web of a gigantic spider, the game representing the stickiness of the web by slowing the player's movement until they become absolutely still. The spider approaches, pulls the boy up into its web, and

FIGURE 2.6 *Caught in the spider's web.*

wraps him in a cocoon of silk before leaving. Rather than fading to black before resetting the scene, however, the game once again waits patiently for the player to input a command, as any movement of the controller's analog stick suddenly causes the boy to wriggle violently in the direction of input, struggling to tear himself free of the web. A visceral representation of our survival instinct, this struggle matches Mulvey's "double tautological appeal" by echoing both within the visual narrative (the trembling body) and the mechanics (the motion of the player's input). Yet what's truly intriguing is the fact that the player has already died again and again by this point in the narrative, at times even submitting to death simply to learn the rules of a particular puzzle, so their struggle is in no way representative of a desire to avoid death altogether. Instead, this struggle represents the player's understanding that a traumatic death in the spider's web is not a natural death for the young boy, it cannot satisfy the tensions that drive both the narrative and the player's virtual subjectivity.

In fact, the boy's correct death — his "natural" death — is the ultimate end goal of *LIMBO*. The game's final moment appears suddenly in the midst of a challenging physics puzzle, which requires the boy to gain enough momentum to rapidly bypass a large spinning blade. As the boy flies past, the game suddenly shifts into extreme slow motion as his body smashes through a hidden pane of glass, tumbles through the air, and crumples lifelessly onto the ground. The moment is shocking for the player, though the image onscreen — a traumatic death where the boy is thrown violently to the ground — is not at all unlike the many images of death that have

come before. Instead, the slowing down of time (and the subsequent refusal of the game to rewind that time) emphasizes that this death is special, that somehow this death has meaning. A moment of stillness passes in which the body lies prone on the ground in the very same position as we first found him, and in an environment that also matches that initial image. Suddenly, two tiny, glowing white eyes open and blink as the boy rises from the ground, a striking moment of recurrence which echoes the instance of immersion that brought both the boy and the player into this world. But something is different, *something has changed*. The player pushes the boy forward, but instead of encountering spikes and blades they find the young girl, sitting alone at the top of a small hill, a large tree behind her with a rope ladder attached to a thick branch. Once again the player's movement is mechanically stilled and the boy comes to a stop at the edge of the hill, where another moment passes before the girl suddenly turns around. Before we can witness their reaction to one another, or even gain any explicit understanding of the significance of the events that led to this moment, the game ends, cutting to black and revealing the credit sequence. So what happened? Why did the game slow down the image of the boy falling? Why did it place such an emphasis on this particular death?

Considering the game's title — alongside other aesthetic clues such as the uncanny size differences between the boy and the world around him, the blank faces of the children that stalk and attack the player, and the very process of decay that seems to be guiding the structure of world itself — it's safe to assume that the protagonist is, in fact, already dead and experiencing a denial that has trapped him in a state of limbo, seeking out his still-living companion but unable to ever truly connect with her. A telling moment in this regard occurs at the conclusion of the credits, when the game shifts back to its main interface menu. Here, the background has changed from when the player first turned on the game, now reflecting a decayed version of the final scene on the hill — the rope ladder frayed, the branch cracked, the grass overgrown, flies buzzing in circles above the ground. The player experiences the image not at face value, but rather in relation to the many compossibilities that have come before, allowing them to recognize that this last death — the boy's body tumbling to the ground — was in fact a recurrence of the boy's *actual* death, which, as evidenced by the slow decay of time, preceded the start of the narrative long ago when the boy fatally fell from the tree. What seemed to be another throw of the dice was in fact the very goal of the game, to reach and recognize the boy's "natural" death, one that serves as a cathexis through which we can contemplate the fragility of the flesh and recognize the relationship between finiteness of being and steady decay of time. As we look back upon its narrative and mechanical design, we find that *LIMBO* calls upon the well-tread mechanics of re-animation not to deny death (as its protagonist was initially wont to do), but rather to create a space in which both the boy and, more importantly,

the player can come to contemplate and accept the inevitability of death through an experience in which a natural death is only made recognizable by the memory of both past and future compossible deaths.

In the cinema, compossibility and re-animation were rare (if not impossible) before the digital turn, but over the last fifteen years the logic of gameplay has begun to slowly infect the temporal structure of filmic narratives. More often than not, this occurs in narratives where the characters quite literally inhabit a digital world, such as *The Matrix* series or a film like *Source Code*, the latter a story about an Army soldier who finds himself in a virtual construction of a yet-to-occur train accident, repeatedly re-animating the event until he can discover its cause and prevent myriad needless deaths (along the way discovering that he was chosen for this experimental process because he is himself already dead). On the other hand we have characters who perceive the world as if it were a game, such as the New York City bike messenger of *Premium Rush*, who imagines multiple routes through each busy intersection — most of which result in a crash that will kill either him or an innocent bystander — until he can picture the perfect path that will allow him to squeeze through traffic seconds ahead of death.

Yet the best example of the logic of gameplay playing out in a cinematic narrative is without doubt the 1998 German film *Run Lola Run*, directed by Tom Tykwer, whose emphasis on re-animation is immediately evident in the two quotes which open the film. The first comes from T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding," where Elliot proclaims, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." The second, from German football manager Sepp Herberger: "After the game is before the game."

FIGURE 2.7 *Lola races to help Manni in Run Lola Run.*

Recurrence, the instinct to return to a previous state, and contemplation: all elements inherent to the image of death in digital games, all immediately present in *Run Lola Run*. Indeed, the world of *Run Lola Run* is defined by its compossible temporality, in which the events of both the past and future guide the characters as they create their own path to death.

After an energetic opening credit sequence which establishes the momentum that will carry us through the narrative, the film's title character is immediately placed into an almost impossible situation. When her moped is stolen, Lola finds herself unable to follow through on a promise to pick up her boyfriend Manni, a small-time crook who tried to make a name for himself by making a significantly large money collection. As a result, he subsequently loses the money while trying to evade the police, and when he calls Lola from a pay phone, he relays the situation with an increasing panic: he has twenty minutes to deliver the lost money to his boss or he will surely be killed. Lola begs him to flee, but instead he improvises a hurried plan to rob a local grocery, that is, unless Lola can somehow find one hundred thousand Deutsche Marks in under twenty minutes. As Lola hangs up the phone, a dramatic shift has already occurred within the very structure of the narrative. Though the viewer may be unaware, the film's temporality has suddenly taken up the compossible logic of gamespace, granting Lola the power of re-animation and allowing her to repeat the next twenty minutes three times, each new attempt an overwriting of a traumatic death that would otherwise fail to release the tensions that push the narrative forward.

The remainder of the film consists of three twenty-minute segments, each a compossible scenario in which Lola desperately attempts to find the money, and each featuring variations on several key events — an initial encounter with a bully and his dog, a fraught meeting with Lola's father, a frantic dash through the city in an attempt to reach Manni in time — as well as minor encounters with smaller side-characters which nonetheless help to shape the narrative as well as Lola's subjectivity and code of ethics. In the first segment, Lola fails to secure the money and is forced to rob the store with Manni, a robbery that ends in her accidental death at the hands of a nervous police officer. The second segment sees Lola rob her father's bank, which sets off a chain of events that leads to Manni being run over by an ambulance. In the third and final segment, Lola chooses to take a (slightly) more righteous path and legally bets a small sum of money in a nearby casino, which leads to her not only turning one hundred marks into one hundred thousand but also to Manni's recovery of his lost money as well. Though not a literal death, this "happily ever after" ending serves as a point of stasis — a stalling of the film's near-constant momentum — that acts in direct response to Lola's ethical choices: each robbery can only end in death, while the moral high ground (as it were) allows for what we can presume will be a more satisfying death for Lola many years later.

FIGURE 2.8 *Lola lies dying on the ground, a direct result of her moral choices.*

Central to the compossible temporality of *Run Lola Run* (though often tangential to its overall plot) are several moments of visual and narrative flourish where Lola alters or overwrites significant portions of the lives of several bystanders by simply encountering the person in different ways. For example, when Lola narrowly misses running into a woman with a stroller during the first segment, we see (through a series of rapidly cut polaroids that begin with the text “and then”) a future in which the woman loses her child due to neglect and subsequently steals another woman’s baby, whereas when Lola bumps into the woman in the second segment we see a future where she wins the lottery, and finally a third future where she takes up religion after Lola runs around her completely. Likewise, three encounters with a man on a stolen bike end up with the man either married to his sweetheart, a junkie in a public restroom, or the catalyst for reuniting Manni with his lost money, while three encounters with an ambulance result in it either narrowly avoiding an accident involving workers carrying a large pane of glass, quickly driving past the workers and subsequently running over Manni, or finally smashing through the glass after unknowingly carrying Lola swiftly toward her goal. Each of these encounters do not function independently from one another, but rather exist as compossibilities that inform and define each other, allowing the audience to contemplate the consequence of every action. This compossibility even manifests itself with individual sequences of the film, such as a moment when Lola stops in the street to catch her breath. In the background of a long shot, we see (slightly out of focus though clearly recognizable) a beautiful young woman who is approaching Lola, yet when we cut to a tighter shot of Lola viewed from

another angle, an old woman steps into the frame — Lola asks her for the time, but before she can answer Lola sets off running again. Here, the compossible temporality of the film overflows, allowing us to see both the woman's past and future mere seconds apart, a mixture that cannot be logically accounted for (at least without directly acknowledging the film's alternative temporality).

As previously mentioned, however, it would seem easy to misread these moments of compossibility as merely the altering of fate through random chance, what is often referred to as a “butterfly effect.” However, two important aspects of the film complicate this notion and point toward the film's adoption of the logic of gameplay. The first is the film's emphasis on the power of re-animation, seen most clearly in the initial compossible event that greatly informs how each of Lola's “play-throughs” will pan out. Immediately after leaving her apartment to set off on her desperate quest to find the money, Lola runs into a bully on her apartment stairs holding back a dangerous-looking dog with a spiked collar around its neck. In the first segment, the growling dog scares Lola and momentarily delays her journey. In the second, the bully trips Lola, injuring her leg and slowing her down as she takes off to meet Manni. Finally, in the third segment, Lola herself growls at the dog, leaping over the pair and gaining momentum as she hits the street. The most telling aspect of this encounter, however, is not the variations of its sequence of events, but rather the fact that it is literally animated — a cartoon Lola running down a wildly spinning staircase. This is not exactly shocking for the viewer, as *Run Lola Run* combines various cinematographic techniques, whether color or black and white, 35 mm, 16 mm, or digital video footage, still photographs, or animation. The film has an internal logic for each visual style, for example flashbacks are always black and white whereas any scene without Lola or Manni is shot on comparatively low-quality DV. Yet apart from the opening credits of the film — which itself establishes *Run Lola Run*'s compossible temporality — this encounter with the bully (the first of Lola's various and variable encounters) is the only animated sequence, visually emphasizing that Lola's action in each segment is not simply an intuitive choice but instead the beginning of the Lola's re-animation of past mistakes. But how can we be certain of this, how do we know that Lola is acting in response to previous-yet-future events?

The answer lies in Lola's strange reactions to repeated circumstances — reactions that are directly informed by the knowledge Lola gains through her separate-yet-compossible “play-throughs” of the film's events — the most striking example of which involves her unfamiliarity with guns. When she picks up a security guard's handgun during the first segment's robbery, the film establishes that Lola is unaware of the gun's safety lock, which causes her to inadvertently fire the weapon after being told to switch it off. In the second segment, when she's mocked by a guard for not even knowing how to use the weapon, the film cuts to a close-up as she switches off the safety

FIGURE 2.9 *A cartoon Lola re-animating her past and future.*

and confidently fires two warning shots. Just as with a gameplayer who uses the knowledge gained from an accidental death to overwrite the death itself, here we see that Lola has “learned” from a past that she could not have experienced outside of a compossible temporality. Likewise, Lola growls at the dog on the staircase because she “remembers” and responds to an encounter that she is actively re-animating — she is living in a compossible present informed by that which is both past and future.

Run Lola Run demonstrates, as well as any game could, that the compossible temporality of the digital enables us to imagine and craft our own path to death. Likewise, *LIMBO* reveals that the development of virtual subjectivity is not an attempt to control death, but rather a recognition that “the goal of all life is death.” As such, we find that digital games are not another form of denial but rather a new form of narrative through which we make death more present. The perpetual repetition of games allows us to apply our choices and chances to new understandings of the consequences of death, within both the actual and the virtual, in the process coming to acknowledge and contemplate death on its own terms. In our next chapter, we’ll continue to explore the impact of digital logic on our split subjectivity, coming to find that the digital path to death is but one relay through which we look past death’s possibility to reassert its potential.