

WHO WEEPS FOR THESE MARIOS?
AN ANALYSIS OF DEATH IN *HOMESTUCK*

A THESIS

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Abstract

This paper examines a modern webcomic *Homestuck* (written and drawn by Andrew Hussie) through multiple frameworks: briefly comparing the fictional characters to real people in terms of psychology, then comparing how *Homestuck* uses the concept of death to other works of literature as well as modern video games (as *Homestuck* uses video game logic for a great deal of its narrative, since the story takes place within a video game). Using these examinations, this paper will point out and establish how other writers can follow *Homestuck*'s example when it comes to using the concept of death as a literary device within their own works. The end goal of this paper is to have an in-depth analysis of a webcomic as there are very little to none within the academic sphere as of the writing of this thesis. Using the method of having many few small papers within a larger paper is to both mimic *Homestuck*'s structure of having many narratives within one overarching narrative and to help ground the argument within research outside of typical literary research.

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Method

To start in the least pretentious way I can think of, my first step in researching and writing this paper was that I had to find a question to answer. As a Creative Writing Major, this was not simple. However, as I was researching for a project in my Graphic Novel course, I came across an article about the webcomic that's inspired me to get to the point I am at today. The article was written back in 2015, when the hype and awe around the spin-off videogame "Hiveswap" was still fresh thanks to the mystique of the 2.4 million dollar Kickstarter success. I wasn't particularly interested by all the hype around the game, however there was one question of the interview that caught my attention: "Why do you [Andrew Hussie, author of *Homestuck*] kill off all your characters?" It's an interesting question to say the least: the running joke was that *Homestuck* has been killing its characters off in a way that's more brutal and grotesque than even *Game of Thrones* dreams of reaching. Hussie's answer was unsurprisingly long-winded, but what caught my attention was the following explanation:

HS is supposedly a story that is also a game. In games, the characters die all the time. How many times did you let Mario fall in the pit before he saved the princess? Who weeps for these Marios. In games your characters die, but you keep trying and trying and rebooting and resetting until finally they make it. When you play a game this process is all very impersonal. Once you finally win, when all is said and done those deaths didn't "count", only the linear path of the final victorious version of the character is considered "real". Mario never actually died, did he? Except the omniscient player knows better. *HS* seems to combine all the meaningless deaths of a trial-and-error game journey with the way death is treated dramatically in other media, where unlike our oblivious Mario, the characters are aware and afraid of the many deaths they must experience before finally winning the game.¹

¹ "Dagobot. "The Wizeguy: 'Homestuck' inspired 'Hiveswap' Interview." Big Shiny Robot, 26 May 2016, 12:09 PM, www.bigshinyrobot.com/58844/wizeguy-homestuck-inspired-hiveswap-interview/."

That answer gave me my question. My question became “How does the webcomic *Homestuck*, by Andrew Hussie, handle the narrative concept of death? How is it different from traditional portrayals in literature? How can writers learn from Hussie's example?” I researched the various underbellies of each question, going into psychology surrounding death in real life, the storytelling techniques surrounding death normally when used as a construct in literature, and how is death applied as a mechanic in video games. Then I read and annotated *Homestuck* itself, finding every instance of death or reference thereof. At which point, I lost all of my research due to technical issues. I spent two months regaining all of my research before losing it again due to the same technical issues. I finished the research and then took a break. This paper contains the conclusions I came to over the multiple times of reading and re-reading *Homestuck*.

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, *Homestuck* is a digital comic (aka a webcomic) that was created, written, drawn, and (mostly) animated by Andrew Hussie. It draws upon several different media types to tell its story of children finding a video game (mainly called Sburb) that ends the world as they know it and their process to create a new world. There are many protagonists of this story as the cast is incredibly large, but for the purposes of this paper the comic's protagonists are the four initial human children: John Egbert, Rose Lalonde, Dave Strider, and Jade Harley. They travel through many realities, some older and some newer, in order to create a world worth fighting for as they go back to fight a mostly unfathomable enemy in Lord English, Lord of Time itself.

Throughout the comic, there is a lot of character death. Dave Strider, with his ability to travel through time with his position as a Knight of Time, dies countless times. Arguably, he is the prime example of this paper will call the Mario Principle (referring back to Hussie's statement about Mario and his multiple deaths in the Dagobot interview). It is impossible to count how many times any given Time player (a character who is given an X of Time title: Dave, Aradia, Caliborn, and Damara) died throughout Homestuck: Dave and Aradia had tendencies to use alternate timeline versions of themselves as sacrificed chess pieces. Disregarding this, this paper has to focus on how many times the main timeline (or, to borrow *Homestuck's* vernacular, the alpha timeline) variant of characters die in this comic as they are the versions that truly matter by the webcomic's own logic. Like the Mario that finally gets to the end of the game, saves the princess and defeats Bowser, the alpha timeline variants of the cast are the winners of Sburb.

However, unlike Mario, these characters are not blissfully unaware of the deaths that happened along the way of winning the game. Dave may be the most aware of it by virtue of how his powers work, but all four of the webcomic's protagonists have had to die at least once to win the game. The question is is how does this affect them, when the characters themselves go to such great lengths to emphasize that they are not simply characters with character arcs, but people with their own emotions?

Real Death Psychology

How do people in real life form their opinion on the subject of death? According to Kaustenbaum, people in real life do not have individual opinions on death, but rather they hold opinions that are held by groups. Specifically, he said:

“Our personal perspectives [on death] have been influenced by childhood experiences. Did the grown-ups take our concerns seriously, or did they try to evade and distract us when death was in the air? Did adult behavior teach us that dying people remain in the bosom of the family, or is that so horrible and mysterious that we should not even speak of them? Few of us know just how much and just in what ways we are influenced by images and feelings we acquired in childhood. Occasionally we may have a memory flash in which we suddenly grasp the connection between our present day attitudes and events that occurred in childhood, and as interpreted by a child's mind. At other times we may experience a surge of panic, revulsion, or anger whose links with early exposures to dying and death are not immediately apparent to us.”²

Ultimately, the environments around people form their idea of death. For example, my older brother and I have entirely different views on the subject of death. With his autism, my parents have never truly explained it to him beyond “this person is gone now”. I got a similar explanation, however where he didn’t ask more questions and investigate on his own, I did. I can remember clearly when I first understood the concept of death. I was in fourth grade, pacing on my house’s front porch, and questioning why dragons didn’t exist. In hindsight, I latched onto that question as my elementary school dissertation, my “eternal” quest for truth, as a way to ignore the fact that my great-grandmother was dying. Because that is what I perceived my parents to be doing: busying themselves with things that they liked while going on as if everything was normal.

With the characters in *Homestuck*, that concept applies entirely. Let’s examine the four protagonists through that concept for a moment. With John, he reacted in a subdued manner to every

² Kastenbaum, R. (2000)

death he personally witnessed. Using this concept, the reader can make a reasonable assumption that this is how John observed his father's grieving process for his grandmother over the years. With Jade, Jade reacted to the deaths she saw with great ceremony and emotional responses. With how her grandfather stuffed himself as well as an alternate version of Jade and left both of those taxidermied corpses in the tower with her, the reader can connect these two with each other. With Dave, death was either an annoyance (the crow) or a stoic, manly act that had to be done (his brother's sacrifice). He reacted with little emotion, hiding behind facades of irony, humor, and stoicism because that's what his older brother taught him. For Rose, death is something that is yet another passive aggressive maneuver. She learned this from her own perceptions of her mother, thinking that her mother held a funeral for her cat as a passive aggressive jab at Rose rather than a way to respect her daughter's feelings. When Rose got over that understanding with her mother's death, deaths became something to avenge, which is an idea that the reader can safely assume Rose got from her literature tastes and the Horrorterrors' influence on her. With each of the four, their reactions to death are all from their environments, be that their family or the media they consumed. The protagonists' desensitization of death only got exaggerated as the Alternian trolls made their presence within their game session, which requires a slight detour to explain how Alternian culture and its views on death affect the characters and the plot of *Homestuck*.

In Alternian culture, death was the ultimate game over. Those who die were the ultimate chumps, whose legacies would be absorbed into the possession of whoever killed them. A common joke within the *Homestuck* community was to joke about how nothing in Alternian culture was *not* made of dead babies. Alternian trolls would be born into a battle royale scenario, with each of these babies (grubs) would be chosen by (what is *essentially*) a wild animal to be their parental figure.

These teams would fight and kill their way through to be able to live. Once they earned the right through infanticide and homicide both, they would be given land to build their home on by the Alternian royalty. In all honesty, Alternian culture would need its own thesis paper to be dissected into its full meaning and symbolism, but for the purposes of this paper the Alternian culture is *Homestuck*'s exhibit A for a highly violent environment that churns out highly desensitized and emotionally stunted children. This culture has a ripple effect onto the main protagonists, with the Alternian trolls guiding, influencing, and befriending them.

In real life, death is something humanity cannot escape however much we try. It is a constant part of our lives, whether we like it or not. With the amount of death in our lives, it is entirely likely to become desensitized to it.

Our world is full of dangerous places that children grow up in, as is the case with the characters of *Homestuck*. While the real world does not have the exact same dangers with evil Betty Crocker, secret alien conspiracies, and a video game that is fated to end the world and recreate it over and over again, the real world has its own dangers that can kill people just as easily. Within a study about treating children exposed to violent communities and environments, a common reaction from adults when dealing with such children is noted to be a “why bother” attitude:

“This is in effect a “why bother?” attitude and/or a belief that other concerns are of more importance. It may also be assumed that children become inured to the disturbing effects of violence after repeated exposure. Our findings would suggest the opposite. The effects of each episode can be additive and seriously deplete the child’s inner resources.”³

³ Pynoos, R. S. and Nader, K. (1988), page 471

This is a point to consider because of how easy it can be to dismiss violence, both in real life and in fiction. By the end of *Homestuck*, the reader can become desensitized to every form of violence imaginable: decapitation, bisection, stabbing, being shot with an automatic rifle more times than one can count, being hung from a noose, etc. If you can name it, a character has died that way within *Homestuck*. It becomes very easy to ask, as a reader, “Why should I care if this character dies?” In Act 6, *Homestuck*’s narrative argues that the reader has to care if these characters die, because the characters themselves (specifically Rose and Dave) identify themselves as real as any person you, the reader, can encounter on the street.

However while Rose and Dave made this argument, the only character to truly symbolize it in a manner that is believable would be John Egbert. He was the first character the reader becomes. John was the first character to get the “You are” introduction panel. And John was the last character the reader truly interacts with within the comics (the Snapchat epilogue/credits sequence is told entirely through his Snapchat account). He was the character that embodies the effects of the violence in the comics better than anyone else. While the other characters in the end recover and heal, working hard to make Earth C a better place, John is the embodiment of a real child who has gone through a very violent environment. In the previously mentioned study, there is this passage:

“After extreme life threat, children have described specific complaints that reflect a constricted affect, estrangement, or reduced interests. They have complained of one or more of the following: (1) a lessened interest in play or other usually enjoyable activities; (2) feeling more distant from their parents or friends and/or more alone with their feelings; and (3) not wishing to be aware of these feelings.”⁴

⁴ Pynoos, R. S. and Nader, K. (1988), page 449

It is arguable that all characters show examples of this throughout the comic, with the two main Strider brothers (Dave and Dirk) being the epitome of this as time goes by in the webcomic.

However, for the Striders, these behaviors are more a defense mechanism around the pressure they feel and are behaviors that they learn to grow out of with help from their friends and significant others. John, meanwhile, falls *into* these behaviors at the very end of the comic.

Whereas his friends make new homes and new lives in this world they have made, John returns back to the home where he started this all. Throughout the comic, John was the leader because he never gave up. That was what set him above his three friends: they all can outfight him, but no one can help their friends like John Egbert can. John held himself together through witnessing numerous deaths and did not cry a single time: not at Jade's dead dream-self body in Act 4, not at his father's dead body in Act 4, and not at Rose's dead body in Act 6. John is one of the only two people in the webcomic that even remembers the Game-Over timeline where everyone died and he got to witness a good portion of that. He worked tirelessly to make sure that never happened, all while keeping up his determination that everything is going to be okay. However, during the credits, the reader got to see how that all added up to the point where John had to disconnect from his friends. He celebrated his 18th birthday with them, then he stopped. That qualified him under the first behavior given in study: he has a lessened interest in enjoyable behavior. What little the reader sees of him during this credit sequence was him checking in on his friends, making sure everything was going okay for everyone, with the occasional hangout with his friends, but primarily it was all work related. The sections that highlighted John's interactions with Caliborn especially emphasized that behavior. The distance between John and his friends is staggering when one realizes that he was one of the only people to remember a

timeline (the Game-Over timeline) where everything went wrong. The only other person who remembered was Roxy Lalonde, but she was so focused on forgetting everything that went wrong and connecting with those that she did not get to in that original timeline that John could not lean on her to connect and grieve these experiences. Combine that with Vriska's disappearance, it becomes very clear that John was alone in his grief. For his father, for the Game-Over timeline variants of his friends, for everyone. His friends all got their loved ones back, but John was still missing his father at the end of the credits. Jane's father, while the same man biologically, is not the man who raised John and had the same close relationship with John as John's father did. And John, despite doing *everything* he could to win, will never have that again. John has the power to change that, with his ability to change the story, but it would be at the cost of his friends' happiness.

That nobility, John's ability to say no to the temptation of changing everything just so he could get his father back? Would be something Vriska would disapprove of. This paper cannot talk about John without talking about his troll mentor, his foil, Vriska Serket. Where John never gave up, yet showed the self-restraint necessary to keep the alpha timeline intact, Vriska showed the same determined nature, yet lacked the self-restraint. When she died permanently and went to the dream-bubbles (an afterlife created by the Horrorterrors so those that were permanently dead from all timelines could still offer advice to those who were still alive and playing in Sburb), Vriska went through a process of self-discovery. At the end of that process, she became the embodiment of the following quote: "Knowing that it is our fate to die—and, what is worse, that it is our fate to know that we will die—makes us furious at nature."⁵ Whereas the other

⁵ Eisenberg, Evan.

characters of the webcomic wished to escape their position within a story, wanting to be real people without the pressure of narrative arcs, Vriska Serket *embraced* her role in a narrative. Where John's losses became additive and ate up his emotional resources to be able to live and function as a person, Vriska's losses became fuel in the fire for her many, many irons (her plans) in the fire. Her mother's death, the loss of her relationships with her friends (due to her own actions towards them), her own death: all of them became fuel for her determination to become a hero the only way she knows how: by being herself. Where John suppressed his emotional response to all of his loss to help his friends, Vriska disregarded grief entirely and went straight into what many psychologists and readers would dub an unhealthy spite-filled revenge plot. And in the end, she ultimately succeeded! She became the ultimate heroine of the comic, the only one to even put a remote pause on Lord English's crusade by trapping him within the relic. But where John got time to recuperate and begin the process of healing via withdrawing himself from everyone, Vriska doesn't survive the end of the comic. In the credits epilogue, Vriska was missing with Terezi looking for her. By giving into the universe's logic, by embracing her role as a character in a story, Vriska technically killed herself: a story is something that repeats. Vriska could never grow because she let herself become a character in the story where the other characters move to become *people*.

Homestuck uses real world psychology in order to connect with the reader, both consciously and unconsciously. By using what we take for granted as well as what isn't commonly known, *Homestuck* benefits from psychology in that psychology gives *Homestuck* its foundation for what the reader should expect from its characters and how they react to death.

Literary Death

An incredibly obvious statement is that there is a *lot* of death in literature. Examining the entirety of death in English-written literature, even narrowing it down to British literature from certain time periods, would need its own paper to entirely wrap around the concept to the point that it deserves.

For the purpose of this paper, however, Shakespeare will be the main example of traditional literature as a point of comparison against *Homestuck* due to Shakespeare's works and *Homestuck* having similar humor styles for their respective time periods and having similar structure in their dialogue-heavy formats. Much of modern literature was founded in Shakespeare and many, many people have discussed Shakespeare's usage of death within his works.

There is a quote from one study⁶ that is necessary when comparing examining Shakespeare's usage of death in his works: "Of course, death was connected to something bad, especially when the person committed a bad deed. For those who lived virtuous lives death meant only a natural end of something." This was, in context, a response to another scholar's examination of death in and outside of the time of Shakespeare and was a specific statement about how death was viewed within the time period of Shakespeare himself. Where this quote becomes relevant for *Homestuck* is when one examines the mechanics of Sburd, specifically that of Godtiers. When a player reaches Godtier, they become immortal on incredibly conditional terms: there are only two ways for them to die. The first is when they are killed in a manner that

⁶ Bhatt, Parvaiz Ahmad, and Dilruba Rasool.

is considered “just”, which is usually interpreted to mean that they used their Godtier powers and life to terrorize others and to be a villain. The second way for a Godtier player to die is in a “heroic” way. The only way to truly stay immortal with a Godtier status is to stay morally neutral or to simply not be a paragon of either end of the morality spectrum. One can argue that this makes *Homestuck* both distinct from its literary predecessor in Shakespeare, where Shakespeare uses death as both punishment and reward depending on a person’s morality in their actions and *Homestuck* uses death as simply a punishment for being too far into any one extreme morality alignment. Shakespeare punished his villains with painful death and framed his heroes with honorable death, but for *Homestuck* death just makes a person irrelevant to the ongoing adventure and story. The only way to stay alive in *Homestuck* is to avoid violence (which is impossible given the violent nature of the story and its villain) or to be a well-rounded individual without a strong leaning towards heroism or villainy: to aim for the Asphodel Meadows rather than Tartarus or Elysium. One could argue that this is because of different societal ideas of life and death between other eras and our postmodern era.

In more medieval times, for example, the method of denying death’s existence was entirely different from how such a thing is done today. My older brother with autism still does not fully understand the concept of death, despite having been to several funerals and having people missing from his life because people have died. Death was simply not directly talked about to my brother or myself and has never been explained in any manner at all: no euphemism, no scientific conversation, no religious experience. While my experience would not be not universal for how others learn about death, such an approach would not be remotely possible in,

say, medieval times. Humanity denying death's existence is a common thread that connects us with our ancestors, but as Calderwood noted in his book *Shakespeare & the Denial of Death*,

“On the whole the Middle Ages was not such a time, or if it was, the denial was accomplished so gracefully as to render death somewhat transparent. Transparent but by no means invisible. Death is too culturally useful to be allowed to become, as if it ever really could be, invisible. Socially and theologically death is valuable for its reformative virtue.”⁷

Death was very much a part of the world when a lot of classical pieces of literature were written, shadowing a lot of the lives of the people reading and writing the pieces. This quote relates back to Shakespeare as it is the cultural set up for a lot of his work, specifically how death is used within them in a way that mimicked life at the time: art mimics life. However, since Shakespeare influenced much of Western literature, this view of death as a tool in literature would have a long-reaching cultural effect. The application of death as a visceral punishment is an easy tool to use in literature for it to be common, with how in both literature and in media to this day death is employed as a valuable tool to scare people into feeling one way or another. With that context in mind, one could argue that *Homestuck* uses death traditionally: death is the punishment for being too extreme with your morality as well as being a punishment for being irrelevant to the story. There is a large theme with that latter sentiment in *Homestuck*, with characters in their afterlife either happy to be irrelevant to the plot and thus can take the time to reflect and learn without pressure hanging over them or extremely upset with their irrelevant status and looking to claw back to relevancy and life.

⁷ Calderwood, James L. P. 9

But *how* do people deny that death is a factor of our lives? Calderwood has an answer for that as well,

“The most familiar form of death denial is simply life-involvement. We cannot dwell very deeply on our ultimate extinction while playing chess or break dancing. We may be, as Yeats said, fastened to a dying animal, but while the beast drags us toward the grave it also records each moment of the journey so vividly that we forget where we are headed. In the short run, at least, not even death can compete with such distractions as hay fever and electric guitars.”⁸

This is a quote that can apply to both life and art. With *Homestuck* in particular, the narrative never lets the reader fully absorb that death is a punishment. Sometimes the narrative distracts the reader from the negative consequences of death with literal electric guitars and the occasional illness (the Trickster episode in Act 6, specifically, comes to mind). Death happens often, always swiftly and viscerally. But it never has full consequences for a very long time. With the Dream Bubbles (an afterlife system set up by one of the Alternian trolls and the Lovecraftian horrorterrors), death never feels like it is *truly* the end for characters in *Homestuck*. Even before the Dream Bubbles are established, there is the kiss of life mechanic of Sburb. Death is never fully felt because of these mechanics in Sburb and the narrative: death never truly feels like the end and when it *is* the end, there is generally a large distraction.

And to distract from that idea, there is a closer example of Shakespeare’s usage of death as a narrative tool that can be examined. Mercutio from *Romeo & Juliet* is a good case study for this paper: his death changes the entire tone of the play. However, from a mechanical standpoint, “...Mercutio's death seemed simply the means by which Shakespeare managed to terminate the role and to dismiss a character no longer needed and for whom no more stage time could be

⁸ Calderwood, James L. P. 7

spared.”⁹ That is a lot of what is taught for how to use death as a writing tool: it is a way to eliminate characters who are taking up important space. While *Homestuck* does not change tones in exactly the same way that *Romeo & Juliet* does (with Mercutio’s death changing the tone of *Romeo & Juliet* from lighthearted and playful to having more tragic elements in it), the mechanical argument of that quote is one that resonates with a lot of the death in *Homestuck*. A possible parallel to Mercutio’s death is the death of Bro Strider (specifically Dave’s Bro, not Dirk’s Bro). If one were to look at Dave Strider’s arc as its own story, the parallel to Mercutio becomes more clear. Where Mercutio’s death marks a point of the tone becoming more serious, with the stakes being raised, Bro’s death serves a similar function for Dave’s arc. Arguably, Mercutio is killed for the simple mechanical function of there not being enough time in the play for him to have more lines. But he is also killed to affect the characters, Romeo specifically, to spur them into action and accelerate the plot. Bro’s death has a similar function, but rather than spurring Dave to embrace his role within the story and the game, Dave is put into a place of doubt. Where Romeo is more sure than ever that he must conquer all obstacles in his way to make Mercutio’s death worth it, Dave doubts the idea that the game puts forth that he is a hero. Bro’s death causes him to doubt the game’s mechanics and his way of life until Bro’s death, causing him to slow down and think about everything that has happened to him and his space within this world. Through this reaction to his brother’s death, Dave gets to have the adulthood and maturity that Romeo never got to experience thanks to Romeo’s rash nature. It calls back to the mechanics of how Godtiers work: by not being a paragon of the masculine hero that Dave’s Bro raised him to be, Dave gets to *live*.

⁹ Utterback, Raymond V.

Homestuck borrows from literature in how it uses death for a very simple mechanical function: to remove “unnecessary” characters and to attempt to evoke emotion from the audience.

Video Game Death

One cannot discuss *Homestuck* without looking at video games. *Homestuck* and how its world works is greatly inspired by video games from all eras of video games. How do video games use death? In general, it is a mechanical structure for punishing players (for insufficient skill and/or for going into an area that the developers did not intend for the players to reach yet) as well as a setback mechanic. Sometimes a game will run by a checkpoint system, meaning that any death will send them back to the checkpoint with the loss of all progress that they had made. If one plays a game at a higher difficulty, usually the “Hard” or “Nightmare Mode” difficulty, death can mean complete erasure of progress: having to start from the very beginning of the game again. Sometimes, death will be inconsequential with the existence of extra lives and a “respawn timer” (a mechanic where one is taken out of the game for a specific period of time, at the end of which the player is brought back into the game).

However, from time to time, there will be video games that do something different with the concept and mechanic of death within their games. There are a lot of games who attempt to do so, but for this paper, the focus will be set upon three games: *Destiny 2*, *Super Mario 64*, and *Dark Souls*.

Within *Destiny 2*, the narrative of the game focuses on the now mortal nature of the game’s superhuman beings known as “The Guardians”. Through a loss of their god in a war, the

Guardians now are mortal: they have to be careful with their lives rather than sacrifice themselves at every opportunity with no consequences. Within the cutscenes, the game presses this tragedy into the face of the player and forces them to think about it via “NPC” (Non-Player Character) dialogue. The player character, however, manages to find a shard of their god and is, narratively, the only Guardian to retain their non-conditional immortality. This is similar to *Homestuck*’s Godtier role, however *Homestuck* maintains that mortality and death can affect anyone in the story. In *Destiny 2*, they sacrifice the potential of a unique experience with this now ex-immortal character in exchange to keep their old respawn mechanic from the first *Destiny*. Both pieces of media use death as a narrative tool, but to different extents: one can argue that *Homestuck* lacked any fear that *Destiny 2* contained for upsetting its audience with this tool.

Within *Super Mario 64*, death is used normally if one keeps to surface level analysis. Through stress testing and exploration, however, death in *Super Mario 64* takes an unintended (by the developers) turn. Dying in specific locations can cause the player character (Mario in this case) to teleport into new locations and help the player progress faster (this tactic is referred to as “death teleporting”). This practice is referenced in *Homestuck* via the Godtier Beds: in order to reach the Godtier status within Sburb, one has to die on a specific stone slab within the game. Doing so will unlock new abilities and give the person in question the previously mentioned conditional immortality. Death teleporting within *Super Mario 64* is done for reasons similar to the ones that the characters in *Homestuck* state for rising to Godtier: both make the game go by faster. This is similar to the “Zombie Mario” state within *Super Mario 64*, a glitch state where Mario has conditional immortality: he is immortal so long as he continues to fly after being shot

into the air with this immortality only being canceled if he touches a tree or a pole. The Zombie Mario glitch is done for similar reasons to death teleporting: you progress through the game faster. Where the Zombie Mario state is different from death teleporting is within its immortality, giving it a combat application similar to the Godtier status within *Homestuck*. With the Godtier death conditions being based in morals rather than physical constructs, it could be argued that the Godtier model is a form of this glitch turned into a narrative construct. This could be a slight stretch, given that it equates either a tree or a pole with a moral alignment, however the parallels are very difficult to ignore.

Finally, we come to *Dark Souls*. *Dark Souls* is marketed for its death mechanics and how death features within the game. Death, as a mechanic in *Dark Souls*, works very simply: it is a punishment and a setback. However, *Dark Souls* goes the extra mile with its usage of death with its usage of an incentive: when one dies in *Dark Souls*, the game is set with a simple message: “You can quit and never finish the game. Or you can get back up again and keep trying.” Dying becomes a slight to get revenge for, with emotional backing encouraging the player to get revenge on the enemy that killed them or to beat the puzzle that they had failed. The idea of dying, in *Dark Souls*, becomes a sort of inspiration point: the number of deaths becomes a point of pride, regardless of if that number is low or high. In one case, *Dark Souls* became a tool for helping with suicidal depression.¹⁰ The process of fighting through low periods and high ones through the game, through the obstacles and being rewarded with the vibrant and interesting world around players, is a process that can be seen within *Homestuck* as well as real life. *Dark Souls* is one answer to Andrew Hussie’s original question, with how the characters that live in

¹⁰ Writing on Games.

this world being fully aware of every time they die. Within the context of *Dark Souls*, the answer is that the only people to weep for these “Marios” are the player and a few close friends of the “Mario”. This can be argued as true in the context of *Homestuck* as well. With the lack of in-game personality for the player character of *Dark Souls*, it leaves a void for the player to fill themselves. Within *Dark Souls*, the player gets to experience every loss personally if they so choose to. While *Homestuck* has very clear characters with its “player characters” (aka the main characters), the webcomic has a very similar lack of distance between the “player” (the reader) and the characters due to how each character is introduced: the “You are X” introduction style that *Homestuck* has stylized as its own. Like *Dark Souls*’s approach to attempting to make the player feel each loss, *Homestuck* attempts to make each of the character’s losses and victories personal for the audience. While *Homestuck* distracts from the death state and *Dark Souls* doesn’t (as the death screen of *Dark Souls* can prove), both use death as a way to make the player and audience feel the loss of the characters.

Homestuck, overall, borrows mechanics for how death operates within its world and for what sort of narrative function death serves.

What Can a Writer Learn from *Homestuck*?

Quite frankly, there is a lot to learn from *Homestuck* outside of its obscure references and vocabulary. A writer can learn how to supplement their fantasy world via real world references (“Kick it, Barack”, as an example) and how to create strong characterization via mostly dialogue. However, the most to be learned from *Homestuck* is in *Homestuck*’s handling of death.

The way *Homestuck* incorporates video game death mechanics in its telling makes it stand out from traditional literature. Finding games with unique death mechanics and deep history may serve as a good jumping off point for any writer who wants to approach death differently in their works, especially when considering some of the options out there: the recent (as of the time of writing) *God of War* game comes to mind with its unique mechanic of only giving the player a single extra life in form of an item in the game that the player can purchase. With that and the fact that this item relies on the deuteragonist of the game that the game wants the player to bond with, the *God of War* approach could serve as an interesting way to change how death works within a potential narrative. Another potential option is *Undertale*, with how it differentiates how death functions between the player character and the NPC cast with the player character's death never being openly acknowledged by the narrative of the game and how every single NPC death is a heavy point of conflict within *Undertale*'s narrative. For those considering a science fiction genre, consider looking into *Doki Doki Literature Club* as an interesting approach of AI and AI death through its examination of the dating simulator genre.

Another lesson to be learned from how *Homestuck* handles death as a narrative tool is how *Homestuck* attempts to make each death personal for the audience via deep characterization and the use of a second person narrator. Each character of *Homestuck* is a player character by definition, yet they follow the more literary tradition of having their own personalities rather than the video game tradition of having little to no personality. And yet, through the use of the second person narrator, the reader is placed within the shoes of each character. Each time a player character in *Homestuck* dies, that player character is, by the rules of the narrator, you the reader. Each time Dave sacrifices a timeline copy of himself is technically a time that you sacrificed a

timeline copy of yourself while wearing Dave as a persona. Each time John makes a joke and gets a character to laugh, that is you making yourself laugh. On average, you die 2.975 times in a different body throughout *Homestuck*. By making the narration outside of the chat-logs put in the second person, Hussie attempts to draft you the reader into taking a personal stake into *Homestuck*'s characters and their lives throughout the narrative. And for a large part? He succeeds.

By being unorthodox, Hussie made *Homestuck* stand out. Its unorthodox nature is what made it stand out against so much other media. By having no boundaries, having anything and everything available to be brought into the story and working *with* the consequences of that rather than against it, Hussie made *Homestuck* a story for every person. Both of these things are essential qualities for a writer to have in their story in this age of media availability.

Most of all, *Homestuck* is a good lesson for a writer to learn how to let go.

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