

2 Late Capitalism: Caring for Corpses in *Return of the Obra Dinn*

In Lucas Pope's *Return of the Obra Dinn*, the player searches for human remains on an ill-fated ghost ship, using a skull-decorated pocket watch to return to each corpse's moment of death. This pocket watch, the major mechanic of the game, is called the "Memento Mortem," a literal and iconographic encouragement to remember death. We really don't need the reminder—death is everywhere. With the help of the Memento Mortem, we find ourselves tripping over dead bodies, each more gruesome than the last. We pore repeatedly over the few grainy clues we're given, wondering what catastrophes could have caused these deaths and cringing at the fate of the doomed sailors. But diegetically, our sympathy and curiosity are incidental to the game's driving purpose. The PC is an insurance adjuster for the East India Company, brought aboard only to do a job: to determine and officially record the name and fate of every individual on the sixty-person manifest. Each person aboard who lived and died during the fateful voyage of the *Obra Dinn* will be reduced by the game's conclusion to a monetary value, owed either by or to the insurance company. The game's power hinges on the fact that the player, rather than the PC, is drawn into the complex web of relationships, rationales, and motivations that could help to explain who these people were and how they might have behaved in the moments before their deaths. *Who were they? How did they die?* We want to know, and so does the insurance adjuster, but our reasons for caring are fundamentally different the adjuster's.

This chapter considers the haunted nature of wandering games, and the reasons that death in Walking Simulators feels simultaneously so present and so absent. Walking Sims tend to engage in a mode of play that Marie-Laure Ryan would call "internal-exploratory interactivity" and Henry

Jenkins would call “embedded spatial storytelling.”¹ They offer the player an environment empty of people but filled with objects that speak to the characters and events that used to exist here. These “archival adventures” present ludic repositories of archival material, carefully arranged, that the player transforms into a coherent narrative by the way they navigate the given environment.² Archival adventures are haunted spaces, trapped liminally between life and death, with the player’s actions bringing a dead and empty world back to life.

Obra Dinn serves as the case study for this chapter because it’s explicit about its obsession with mortality. In most archival adventures, the player sifts through texts and personal effects—books, sketches, a favorite piece of furniture or item of clothing—to attempt to situate those objects within the context of a broader story. In *Obra Dinn*, the archival objects are themselves corpses—rotting remains that fantastically transport the player, via the ever-present Memento Mortem, to the precise moment when living people become archival and archivable objects. Margaret Schwartz argues that beginning one’s analysis “from the starting point of the corpse” invites a materialist reading of dead bodies, “inquir[ing] precisely into the relationship between the material and the textual.”³ Drawing from Schwartz and from Amanda Phillips’s writing on the intersections between necropolitics and game mechanics, I consider how the corpses in *Obra Dinn* serve not only as a liminal link between life and death but as a heuristic for understanding the conventions surrounding death and capitalism in wandering games.⁴

I begin with the corpse as an archival object in the context of the game. Next, I take a step back and consider how death suffuses *Walking Simulators* in general. Despite their (somewhat complicated) reputation as peaceful ludic environments, these games fully participate in the morbid enthusiasm for death and violence that so characterizes the history of video games. But players in these games explore the aftermath of death rather than causing it directly, shifting the temporal orientation. Accordingly, I then consider that question of temporality more closely, showing how *Obra Dinn* sates the player’s desire to grasp the moment of death. The archival poetics of the game hinge precisely on the mythical existence of that impossible moment when the living person transforms into archival object. I conclude by discussing what that process of objectification means in the harshly capitalistic world of *Obra Dinn*—a world in which every death, no

matter how fantastic, must eventually be reduced to a number in a ledger and nothing more.

An Archive of Corpses

To begin where *Obra Dinn* begins, consider the corpse. Schwartz poses a “theory of the corpse as a communicative object.”⁵ If humans are forces of subjectivity, self-expression, and individuality, corpses present the opposite challenge: they are silenced, material objects, important because they represent what used to be a subject. As Schwartz notes, we encounter a present absence with a corpse; indeed, “a materialist media theory of the corpse gives a space to the body as the *site of difference* between the deceased and her legacy.”⁶ In this difference, Schwartz finds the corpse to be a “literal figure for mediation, an object in transition between one kind of being and another.”⁷

Obra Dinn offers the player a chance to explore this notion quite literally, as each corpse aboard the ship presents itself as a material object that opens a portal to a previously living subject. The player begins by encountering a corpse, often by following the buzzing flies to a pile of rotting remains. The corpse’s materiality, in other words, is made explicit by the semirealistic rot taking place all over the ship. When the player is close enough to touch the corpse, the Memento Mortem pocket watch appears. The player clicks once, and the watch spins backward, blacking out the screen entirely. Staring at that empty screen, the player can only listen to the characters’ voices as they speak the final words this doomed individual heard or said while the text of those lines of dialogue appears in white. If the words are spoken in a language other than English, a translation appears as well. Suddenly the blank screen fills with a three-dimensional still diorama, rendered in a grainy, dithered one-bit black-and-white visual style that looks a little like a woodcut rendering. The player is free to walk around within the scene, closely examining characters, objects, and any details that might help to establish identities and motives. Suddenly the scene disappears again, and a book opens to the page on which the player now must record the answer to two crucial questions: *Who was this? How did they die?*

In answering these questions, the player engages with another idea from the scholarship on mediated corpses—the centrality of inscribing, recording, and archiving. “Technologies of inscription and archive are central to

the modern encounter with the dead," writes Schwartz.⁸ The archive itself has long been theorized as a site of dead materials brought metaphorically back to life by a scholar who uncovers a hidden story in between desiccated papers. Players take on the role of intrepid scholar scouring a dark library for forgotten secrets.⁹ Traditionally that archive is composed of written, textual materials, a meaning shared as well by library science and popular use of the term.¹⁰ However, an alternative understanding of the archive as an assemblage of embodied, affective orientations and gestures has subsequently grown out of performance and queer studies.¹¹ When we consider the archive as embodied practice, enacted again and again, passed from body to body, video games become fundamentally archival—not in the sense that they record some pivotal piece of written information but in the sense that they script a certain bodily performance (for both human and avatar). Rebecca Schneider writes about embodied memory serving an archival function—an archive of flesh—such that “remains do not have to be isolated to the document. . . . [The body] becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory.”¹²

The idea of a flesh archive takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to *Obra Dinn*: an archival adventure with a complex relationship between fleshy remains and written text. The corpses serve as fleshy remains that, before our eyes, have rotted mostly into bone. To remember them, we return to the logbook and its two questions: *Who is this? How did they die?* The player can either guess that character's name and cause of death, which is then scribbled into the book in handwriting, or they can further explore the 3D scene and consider it (and other scenes) as long as they'd like. But the instant the player has correctly guessed the full information on three pages, the game interrupts itself with a satisfying musical beat: “Well done. You've guessed three more fates correctly.” The book flips to each correct page and shows the player's guesses as they transform from handwriting into printed type. It's a performance of ultimate epistemic certainty: the archival messiness of the handwriting, with its play between uncertainty and certainty, guess and corroboration, is neatly subsumed into clear, printed text.

This is the opposite of the way flesh and text usually work in games. The objects one finds, the objects with narrative meaning imbued in them, tend to be textual. For example, in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you touch a text to activate a body. The player wanders around an archive of textual materials (such as books, letters, and poems) and revivifies a playable memory by

touching a textual object. In *Obra Dinn*, it's the reverse: you touch a body to activate a text—the script of the scene—followed by a dioramic still image, after which you write down the knowledge you've gleaned by examining bodies. It's an inversion: rather than an archive of textual objects that turn into bodies, *Obra Dinn* offers a flesh archive of dead bodies that must be converted into text.

The next section broadens slightly to examine the centrality not just of corpses but of death in general in Walking Simulators, a genre supposedly uninterested in violence. Teasing apart death from violence, I argue that Walking Simulators may be less violent than other genres, but they still revolve around death; they're just more interested in what happens after.

Death and Its Aftermath

The relationship between video game and real-world violence is fraught, and it remains one of the most well-trodden research areas in game studies. But undeniably, video games as an art form are obsessed with death and violence. Since Steve Russell's *Spacewar!*, the mechanic of “shoot” has been arguably more fundamental than even “move” or “jump” in game design. Violence also predominates as a theme, especially after *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D* kickstarted the FPS, a genre predicated on killing hordes of enemies as quickly as possible. Other video game genres—strategy, sports simulators, adventure, roguelikes, RPGs—might portray violence as more strategic, cartoonish, abstract, or athletic, but the violence remains central. And importantly, as Carly Kocurek notes, the cultural conversation and handwringing focused on violent video games serve to center that violence even more explicitly: “Violent games become the most popular in part because they draw the most attention, which further normalizes them . . . this discussion [of violence], in reaching people who would not necessarily be playing games, renders this violence an integral part of video games as a medium.”¹³

This focus is no accident. Julian Stallabrass points out that video games' focus on war and their status as “capitalist and deeply conservative forms of [mass] culture” emerges from their reification and idealization of the American military-industrial complex.¹⁴ As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue in their now-classic *Games of Empire*, video games are “a paradigmatic media of Empire—[of] planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—and

of some of the forces presently challenging it. . . . Born out of the same military research matrix that generated the personal computer and the internet, virtual games continue to be a testing ground for some of the most futuristic experiments in digital technology."¹⁵ Most games are (and always have been) what they call "Militainment."

But as Kocurek notes, all violence in video games is not created equal. The problem is not violence as such but rather who gets to cause it. She explains that *Death Race* "triggered outrage not only because it was violent, but because it depicted violence which questioned the state's monopoly on legitimized violence and did not follow culturally accepted narratives of violence, such as military or police violence, or the western."¹⁶ The seeming obviousness of video game violence is not, then, a random historical quirk, something that just whimsically happens to be a part of the art form, but a carefully constructed phenomenon existing within certain acceptable limits, the boundaries of which are delineated by the games that try to go beyond them. The relationship between violence and video games is a feature, not a bug. And far from an upside-down, carnivalesque power fantasy, video games were born and remain a medium that inscribes and reinscribes only the socially acceptable types of violence of the twenty-first-century imperium.

The intersection between video games and death (instead of the violence which causes it) has drawn less attention, but multiple scholars have done crucial work on the topic: Amanda Phillips, Megan Adams, and Bonnie Ruberg, among others.¹⁷ Gabby DaRienzo hosted an exceptional podcast from 2016 to 2018, *Play Dead*, in which she interviewed game developers (including Lucas Pope) on how they think about death in their games.¹⁸ In the introduction to his special issue on video gaming and death, John W. Borchert writes of "games as spaces where death is contested, an object of play, and subject to playfulness."¹⁹ When death becomes such a playful and played-upon limit, then *permadeath* takes on that charged finality that regular old death used to have, as Chang, Constantino, and Soderman point out.²⁰ Whether the player is constantly dying or successfully managing to evade it, the player's relationship to their character's death within a ludic system serves as the core of most digital games, grounding the experience of play, the stakes of loss, and the flow of the narrative.

With this in mind, we can better understand the foundational tension caused by *Walking Simulators*: exploratory, nonviolent games without

points, goals, or tasks in which the undying PC wanders around a narratively rich space. Despite the ludic safety of the Walking Sim—your avatar usually cannot die, nothing will suddenly attack you and you will not be expected to attack anything else—the environments of these games are still suffused with violence and death, even as they are dismissed as not violent enough by those who see that quality as an insult. *Gone Home's* narrative tension arises precisely from the player's anxiety that everyone in their family is, if not dead, then unpleasantly missing from a creepy, unknown house. *Dear Esther* features the story of a suicidal man whose wife was killed by a drunk driver. In *Firewatch*, the protagonist, Henry, constructs wild conspiracy theories to explain what is eventually revealed to be a child's tragic death in a rock-climbing accident. In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you explore the boarded-up ancestral home of the cursed Finch family, all of whose members are now dead (as the PC soon will be). In *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, all the humans have disappeared in a mysterious contagion, leaving behind only a bucolic landscape and audio clues as to their fates. In *The Path*, six avatars of Little Red Riding Hood travel through a forest to meet their abstract demise at the fangs of six different wolves.

It therefore seems a misrepresentation to claim Walking Simulators as somehow removed from death or violence. Rather, it makes more sense to recognize them as games about the aftermath of death. In most games, you, the player, are the bringer of death. You enter a peaceful scene and kill everything in it. In a Walking Simulator, it's the reverse: you enter a place in which death has occurred or might have occurred, and you try to make sense of it. Your work is that of shrouding and mourning rather than killing. You're participating in the ancient, seemingly universal practice of "caring for the dead body in some fashion."²¹ But Walking Simulators are not nonviolent at all; they are about what happens in the aftermath of violence.

The question of timing rather than the existence of violence, then, becomes pivotal in our developing theory of wandering games. In *Obra Dinn*, as in many other Walking Simulators, the linear time line is annihilated: you begin in the final chapter, with the final four deaths, and move roughly backward as you travel down into the lower decks. It is impossible to win without replaying certain memories. On first viewing them, you don't have any idea what you're looking at, and only on the second or sixteenth viewing, after exploring many other death scenes, do you know

enough to gauge why a certain detail might matter. Pope arranges the narrative in this way because it's more interesting—once you've seen a character's death, you are much more attuned to their mundane actions in earlier scenes—and for more practical, material reasons: a corpse is required before it's possible to access a memory through touching that corpse. Therefore, the corpse must exist first in the ludic time line. The player moves backward in time, leaping from one corpse to another, starting at the end of the story after the ramifications of violence have played themselves out, working backward toward the source.

The *Obra Dinn* suffered more fatalities than most other voyages. All sixty crew members succumbed to some combination of murderous crew members, violent storms, contagious fevers, and, of course, the gargantuan and truly terrifying sea monsters summoned by several poisonous shells. The dropdown menu of possible deaths each character may have suffered speaks to the game's exuberant goriness. You spend your time puzzling thoughtfully over whether that character has just been spiked or fully decapitated, squinting at the low-resolution image of a pierced neck to determine if the head has been fully separated from the body. This gory reverence for murder relates to Phillips's idea that games make gruesome death into fun. They describe "how the simulation of death as both technological feat and gamic goal produces a playground of mortality in which new orientations towards death and dying might be invented, rehearsed, and even normalized."²² The twitchy, technical expertise required for successfully shooting someone in the head, they write, turns the act of shooting into a ludic goal and divorces it from the ramifications of actual death. The famous term *necropolitics* comes from the eponymous essay by Achille Mbembe, who reads "politics as the work of death" and sees sovereignty "expressed predominantly as the right to kill."²³ Combining Mbembe's necropolitics with video game "mechanics," Phillips coins the term *mechropolitics*: the politics of dying in video games. "Mechropolitics," they write, "makes death fun, not merely as a visual spectacle but as a co-operative activity performed with a machine and encouraged by the mechanics of game and system design. These systemic relationships, in turn, influence how we think and behave within real world deaths."²⁴

Obra Dinn shares its complex mechropolitics with most other Walking Simulators. On one hand, the player cannot die throughout the game. Not only is there no permadeath; there's not even a possibility of death for the

PC. On the other hand, (as in *Edith Finch*) you play the death scene or near-death scene of every crew member. The player brings each character briefly back to life, only to kill them again in the playthrough of their death scene. By touching each corpse, you enliven the archive.

In this sense, the bodies aboard the *Obra Dinn* share something with John Sanders's conceptualization of haunted cartridges—those evocative material objects that “help to elucidate unsettling ambiguities between data and spirit, save files and human identity. . . . The information-carrying cartridge is revealed to mirror the body/soul duality so familiar to humanity, housing data which may be possessed, altered, and corrupted by entities unknown.”²⁵ When writing on haunted cartridge narratives, Sanders points out how the glitchiness of a game cartridge makes explicit the Freudian uncanniness of all video games: looping repetitions, doppelgängers, liminality, a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the return of the repressed, and so on. These, he says, are the sort of uncanny experience that video games have made comfortable for us, but “the familiarity gamers have with these uncanny operations conceal the inherent strangeness. . . . all that it takes to unmask video games as the uncanny media they are is to expose these operations, even for a moment.”²⁶

The remains aboard the *Obra Dinn* function in a similar way. We are used to encountering corpses in video games—indeed, we are used to creating the corpses in video games—but the pocket watch makes us trip over them, literally and metaphorically. These are not clean gamic bodies that will dissolve when we've dealt them the fatal blow. They are grotesque, depicted in morbid decomposition, alerting the player to their location with the presence of swarming flies. And you cannot search each body and loot it of useful objects; you can only “loot” it of the moment that person died. The next section considers how such a moment gets constructed.

Rendering the “Moment”

Dying rarely occurs in a single moment. As Jennifer Malkowski writes in *Dying in Full Detail*, the so-called moment of death is “especially resistant to mediated visibility . . . a supposed point of transition from living being to corpse that has fixated image-makers and audiences, and that obscures the more frightening reality that dying is a durational process—a long one, for most Americans.”²⁷ Because of the way that dying works, she notes, it

used to be nearly impossible to record a single moment when living human became corpse. The process of dying simply takes too long to be captured by the impatient camera, at least until the advent of video. Malkowski argues that Americans' conception of death (and their certainty that it arrives in a visible "moment") is fully mediated through "fiction film and television . . . because individuals' access to unmediated dying declined so dramatically in the twentieth century."²⁸ But the romantic notion of a single moment of death continues to hold sway. We've seen that moment so often in media that it really feels like it should exist.

Obra Dinn fully revels in (and contributes to) this mediatized understanding of death as a singular moment: the moment when *something* exits a body, leaving behind a fleshy, inert shell. For most of the sixty humans aboard the *Obra Dinn*, the Memento Mortem returns the player to the scene several seconds before the death itself. In some scenes, the character has already received the death blow—for instance, the young midshipman who crawls back to his cabin to die after he's knifed for overhearing a mutineer's plot. In others, the death scene comes as a surprise for the doomed character, and the dialogue before their death offers a slice-of-life snapshot of courtesies and everyday actions. In some rare cases, the "death scene" is not a death scene at all, but rather the moment when the character escaped from the *Obra Dinn* on a lifeboat. From this, we can note that the watch returns us to a moment of leaving—a soul leaving a body or a survivor escaping a disaster. In either case, it is a *moment* that is crystallized, held suspended for the viewer's curiosity and detection. Malkowski writes that "studying the corpse to retrieve a sense of the last moments of life" used to be a common war correspondents' practice, and the player of *Obra Dinn* accepts this notion fully.²⁹

For documentarians, creating a legible moment of death on film became, in the early days of film, not only a technological and creative challenge but an ethical quandary. How could a photographer justify the hours-long, vulture-like vigil they needed to practice in order to document something that would visually read as a precise moment of death? To answer that question, Vivian Sobchack outlines a typology of gazes for the documentarian recording a death: the accidental gaze, the helpless gaze, the endangered gaze, the interventional gaze, the humane stare. These, she writes, can each be considered ethical, but "there is a sixth visual form which is ethically ambiguous and suspect . . . this form, unsure of its ethical grounding and

allegiance, can be called the ‘professional gaze’.³⁰ The professional gaze, she writes,

is marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and machine-like competence in the face of an event which seems to call for further and human response. . . . The concern for getting a clear and unobstructed image, and the belief that it is possible to strip that image, that representation, of human bias and perspective and ethicality so that it is “objective,” indelibly marks the inscriptions of the professional gaze with their own problematic ethical perspective in the face of both human mortality and visual taboo.³¹

Obra Dinn, though fictional, presents itself as if it were documentary—precise, calculating, and supremely interested in facticity. Like Pope’s previous work, *Papers, Please* (2013), the meat of the game occurs in the completion of paperwork. The PC of *Obra Dinn* is at work. His gaze at these bodies is professional, and Sobchack’s description of that gaze fits him perfectly. He silently observes each scene, then records information as though it were objective—as though it were possible to “strip that image . . . of human bias and perspective and ethicality so that it is ‘objective.’”³² The logbook then confirms or denies the facts he’s written, offering a perfect epistemic clarity in tidy pockets of nine facts at a time, transforming his handwritten scribbles into typed text. Objectivity, confirmed.

The professional gaze is not, however, the way the player observes the bodies they encounter, which creates an interesting tension between the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the observer. The PC is a professional at work, but the player is at leisure. The player might conceivably be considering these corpses with a sort of professional contemplation (if, for example, they were writing a book chapter about them), but they are much more likely to be viewing them with something akin to Sobchack’s humane stare, which “inscrib[es] the intimacy and respect and sympathy it feels with those who die in its vision” or “may fix itself as shock and disbelief, its gaze ‘hypnotized’ by the horror it observes.”³³ The camera’s view might be professional, but the player is more often watching in horror, flinching but unable to look away.

While the camera may not inscribe much intimacy, respect, or sympathy, those reactions are evoked in the player nonetheless by the voice-overs and the puzzle mechanic. *Obra Dinn* begins each encounter with a corpse-as-thing, but the puzzle mechanic nudges the player into an encounter with the corpse-as-formerly-alive. You can hear the voice of the person about to

die, whether they know they're doomed or not. The well-acted voice-over scenes (audible in the seconds before each dying body appears) rearrange the time line into snippets of linearity, as you first hear the living being and only afterward see their body in the thralls of death. The puzzle mechanic, then, pulls you into an intimacy with these people. You're drawn into a conversation with those who are about to die, trying to understand them. Did he mean what he said about the second mate, or was that quaver in his voice an indication of sarcasm? Was he trying to run away here, or was he running to help the friend he played cards with a few days ago? In building these fictive scenarios, in reliving death scenes again and again to search for clues, your compassion for the doomed characters increases.

In the final section, I examine the tension between the PC and the player, arguing that it exemplifies not only a Marxist alienation of workers from their labor but a late capitalist alienation of the player from their play.

Late Capitalism

"All digital games set up systems of value, exchange, accumulation and expenditure," Seth Giddings writes.³⁴ Drawing from Fiske and Watts, Giddings writes, "The player pays to 'work', feeding the slot with coins, thus alienated work is inverted."³⁵ Digital games in 1985, when Fiske and Watts were writing, seemed like a funhouse mirror of the assembly line, but in the realm of ostensible leisure. For Stallabrass, the economics internal to games "obsequiously reflect the operation of consumer capital for they are based on exchange, an incessant trading of money, munitions or energy, a shuttling back and forth of goods and blows."³⁶ As digital games grew increasingly complicated, Giddings notes, these internal economics no longer seemed as simple as one-to-one replication of capitalist norms, nor do they seem "subversive of capitalist work culture."³⁷

In this and similar scholarship, digital games have emerged as symbolic of a late capitalist ethos, a term that includes both an economic system and a cultural ideology. Late capitalism, an early twentieth-century concept with roots in German economic theory and Adorno and Marcuse's Frankfurt school of cultural criticism, emerged as a force in the English-speaking world with Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.³⁸ For Jameson, the term gestured toward the postmodern inability to form a frame of reference outside capitalism. There could

be no distance, no objective standpoint from which to judge or consider, only the sublimation of all culture, leisure, and entertainment into the inescapable universe of capitalist commodification. Since Jameson, and particularly since 2016, “late capitalism” has become “a catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class.”³⁹ While inequality isn’t new, twenty-first-century technology has highlighted it and enabled the proliferation of images of horrifying injustice. These injustices saturate public consciousness and bring with them a widespread critique of everyday life. As Mike Konczal notes succinctly in an article by Annie Lowrey, “austerity, runaway top incomes, globalization, populations permanently out of the job market, competition pushed further into our everyday lives. These aren’t new, but they have an extra cruelty that is boiling over everywhere.”⁴⁰ The term *late capitalism* indicts the whole structure on multiple levels: the economic system that creates billionaires with offshore tax havens, the uncompassionate societal shrug when that billionaire’s employees are not offered health care, and the saccharine narrative that goes viral online when the employee’s five-year-old raises \$1,000 for her daddy’s cancer treatment with her lemonade stand. It is in combination that these elements encompass late capitalism.

This combination (and the dose of “extra cruelty”) comes to the fore at the end of *Obra Dimn*, when the PC submits his account to his employers. The final judgments are not remarkably unjust overall. And these minor injustices, while surprising, do not explain the player’s discomfort at the conclusion of the game. Having spent a dozen hours analyzing the minutia of these grainy images, deducing every possible meaning of a hug or a raised hand, players find themselves startled by the starkness of each description. This final tally records what happened, but players recoil at the limited truth of each record. A few words on each person’s fate and actions does not seem like enough. The monetary value ascribed to each death seems entirely wrong. The very concept of accounting for these extraordinary, fantastical events with such cold calculation and limited notation seems bafflingly inaccurate—even though, technically, it’s not. The record offers no overall summary, warning, or conclusion. The player signs a certification that the statements are accurate, and the book is closed.

In some cases, the final judgments *do* seem unjust when placed into the context in which these events occurred. The East India Company (EIC)

assigns demerits to characters for “abandoning ship” when they drown during a kraken attack. When one sailor, doing his best to shoot a cannon at the gigantic kraken attacking the ship, gets crushed by the kraken after lighting the cannon’s fuse and then the resulting shot accidentally hits a superior officer, the insurance adjuster’s log will not accept the officer’s death as “shot with a cannon by the beast” or even “shot with a cannon.” Only after the player lists the laborer as the cause of death (a man who was, let’s recall, being crushed dead against the cannon by the kraken’s tentacles as his gun went off), will the book admit the death into its formal record. There are no accidents, only insurance claims. Context is important only insofar as it serves the vested interest of the insurance company.

The PC, of course, has not caused these deaths; they have simply been employed to record them. It’s a position of supreme omniscience and limited agency. But the mundanity, the lack of reaction from the insurance adjuster, is supremely late capitalist in its smug satisfaction with an inhumane and decontextualized system. The PC, at the conclusion of the game, sits calmly in their office, puts away the tabulation, and moves on smoothly to other tasks. All the player’s curiosities and frustrations seem not to touch the adjuster’s preternatural calm. What about all the sea monsters? The curse of the shells? Is this character not planning to distribute this crucial information to anyone else at the very least? The adjuster seems nearly psychopathic in their combination of zeal for the job and total disinterest in anything lying beyond the bounds of his remit. Once the final numbers are tallied, they seem perfectly satisfied to walk away.

This satisfaction on their part (and frustration on yours) highlights the way that gaming under late capitalism alienates the player from play, a step further than a Marxist read of the player-as-worker who is alienated from work. From a Marxist perspective, the insurance adjuster’s disinterest makes a certain, depressing sense: their job is done, and the object here was always to complete a job to an employer’s satisfaction. The character is at work, even if you are at play. Why should this official care personally about the fate of the laborers aboard the *Obra Dinn*? Perhaps they even do care, and we are not privy to their personal reaction. But when the PC reduces our beloved characters to a number in a ledger, it alienates us from the emotional connections we have been ludologically encouraged to build with the dead crew members.

“Within late capitalist leisure there is a clear moral preference for more productive, work-like play,” Giddings writes, and nowhere is this clearer than in Lucas Pope’s gamemaking.⁴¹ The critical bite that characterizes both *Obra Dinn* and *Papers, Please* stems from the conflation of work and play. *Obra Dinn*’s mechanics insert a Brechtian distance, reminding you that these characters are simultaneously people you care about *and* financial liabilities for an insurance company. But you, the player, have no financial interest in the fates of the crew—you are drawn into their story for the opposite reason than that of the character you’re playing. Engaging with the mundane context enables you to solve the bloody endings. Only by observing the ship’s surgeon tending a patient, or by seeing a topman in the rigging in an early scene, can you correctly figure out various fates and enter them into the book; it is only through noticing the characters’ attachments and desires—their humanity—that you are able to solve the mysteries of their deaths. As Rob Gallagher writes about another game in which one plays as an insurance adjuster: “*Tacoma* . . . is very much preoccupied with labor politics and the ethical quandaries posed by datafication. . . . These recordings allow us to determine what really happened, attesting to the humanity of Tacoma’s workers and the inhumanity of their employers.”⁴² In *Obra Dinn*, the Memento Mortem recordings perform a similar function—allowing us to determine what really happened—but only the final record submitted by the nameless insurance adjuster attests to the inhumanity of the employers. *Obra Dinn* pulls you into caring about these laborers as people and then reminds you, in the shallow final report, that their employer did not care about them at all, not in any way that mattered.

The player’s care, however, matters quite a lot. In her conclusion to *Dead Matter*, Schwartz writes about Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” the kind of poverty-stricken existence under which “life is reduced to survival and death constitutes only a release from toil.”⁴³ These lives, she writes, come into public consciousness only through their labor, and their deaths become visible only because the absence of that labor has made those bodies and lives noticeable. “Bare life treats the flesh as meat. We pay only as much as keeps the worker alive. When he dies, we complete the process of extirpation by moving on, filling the post, training the replacement. The slow stillness of grief has no place. One cannot lie down for six months and cry.”⁴⁴ In *Obra Dinn*, the PC’s employer treats these laborers as bare

lives—replaceable cogs in an industrial machine, unnoticed and unremarkable until the violence of their deaths (and the disappearance of sixty of them at once) attracts industrial attention. But you, the player, learn not to see them that way. You are the one who does the work of mourning them. You bear witness. You slow down and freeze time, and you stand still inside their last moments. You notice the particularity of this or that death, the personality of this or that life. The doomed souls aboard the *Obra Dinn* are not, by the end of the game, bare lives to you.

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