Death and remembrance in *Final Fantasy Type-0*

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The Final Fantasy video game series is famous for its over-the-top cataclysmic-world-end stories and absurd hairstyles. The latest entry in the series is *Final Fantasy Type-0*, released in March 2015 for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One consoles. (The original game, however, dates from October 2011, released only in Japan for the PlayStation Portable.) This game brought some nice changes (gameplay-wise) for the franchise, but this is not my interest here. What is unique about this game (besides its nonsensical story and awful dialogues) is how one particular facet of its fictional world works, namely the memories of the deceased.

Allow me to explain. The world of *Final Fantasy Type-0*, called Orience, is comprised of four nations. Each of these nations has a Crystal (the capital "C" indicates it is a huge and sentient mineral) that grants them unique powers. However, with great power comes great… costs; and the price to pay is a certain degree of memory loss. The Crystals make the common people of Orience forget those who have died. (Also, I should remark that treating the memories of the dead in a bizarre way is not a first for the series; see Box 1 for a quick overview of the topic in *Final Fantasy X*). This means that once a person – let's call him Bob – dies, nobody will remember anything about him. Even Bob's relatives, friends or whatever, immediately forget everything they knew about him: his name, his appearance, his stories, his deeds, his achievements etc. The only way to "remember" Bob is to read something that was written about him. One of the game's characters synthetize the idea nicely:

> "*If people's actions fade away from our memories with time, then all we can do to prevent them from slipping away is to keep written records. But if the Crystal erases all our memories of the dead, what good is a list of someone's achievements when we can't remember who they were?*"
> —Ace, one of the main characters of *Final Fantasy Type-0*.

Of course that, not knowing any better, the people of Orience thinks this is normal. They believe this is the way in which the Crystals encourage people to carry on with their lives after a loved one passes away, instead of being held back in mourning for them. This reasoning is presented repeatedly in the game by the characters, mainly in response to Rem, a girl

who thinks it is rather sad to forget all about your loved ones.

The Vermillion Bird Crystal in *Final Fantasy Type-0*. (Screenshot from the game.)

However, this "memory mechanics" is, of course, custom-made for the game, which revolves around young people throwing away their lives in a senseless world war. Therefore, it is simply an excuse to explain why all the soldiers, free from the fear of death and loss, are so eager to vainly sacrifice themselves. Fear of death is, after all, intimately linked with the instinct of self-preservation, as argued by Zilboorg (1943). However, that does not work as neatly for everyone in Orience, as the following quote implies:

"*I'm not going to let myself die, even if it means I have to take someone else's life instead. I… don't want to be forgotten.*"
—Dominion Legionary, a NPC (non-player character) from *Final Fantasy Type-0*.

In any case, this kind of forgetfulness poses a serious problem to how Orience's advanced civilization actually came to be. It would be very complicate to keep accumulating knowledge and technological advances if the folk would keep forgetting the inventions and ideas of dead

people. This is especially true for the stages of civilization predating the invention of writing systems.

Anyway, instead of pinpointing the failings of a video game's narrative and its lack of logic or cohesion, let us simply accept it and move forward to focus on a different aspect of death and memory. I want to talk a little more about the importance that the (memory of the) dead had in the history of religious belief in our species.

DEAD ANCESTORS

Whenever humans started thinking about causal relations (either true or imagined ones), superstitious behavior accompanied them (this is also observed in other animals; see Box 2). Consequently, the seeds of religion started to form. At first, the nomad human tribes would try to deal with basic stuff through ritualized superstition (much like the pigeons from Box 2), like, for instance, ask for a good hunt or good weather, propitiate a spirit to stop a storm etc. Soon they added spirits and ancestor worshiping to their beliefs – and death (and the memory of the departed) played a major role in this. (It is way beyond the scope of this article to explain how religion emerged and took root; for that, please refer to the amazing books of Daniel Dennett [2006] and Nicholas Wade [2009] – the discussion below is largely based on their research).

Since we are not in Orience, after someone passes away we still remember him/her. As Dennett says: "A considerable portion of the pain and confusion we suffer when confronting a death is caused by the frequent, even obsessive, reminders that our (…) habits throw

up at us like annoying pop-up ads but much, much worse." He goes on to say that we "can't just *delete the file* from our memory banks" (his italics), which is precisely what the Crystals do to the people of Orience. Dennett continues stating that actually "we wouldn't want to be able to do so"; which is the same thing that Rem tells everyone in the game.

Box 1. The dead in *Final Fantasy X*

Final Fantasy X was released in 2001 for the PlayStation 2 console, getting remakes in 2013/2014 for the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Vita and in 2015 for the PlayStation 4. The game is set in a world named Spira and has the most different and best delineated setting in the series.

There is no mystery about what happens after you die in *Final Fantasy X* – I mean, besides the "Game Over" screen. The dead (or, more precisely put, their spirits) go to a place called the Farplane (although the Al Bhed people have a different theory). The good and the bad, all end up there. The curious thing is that the Farplane is not a sort of heaven, hell or Hades – it is an actual place in the city of Guadosalam that people can physically visit (and no doubt a major tourist attraction!). The living go there to talk to their deceased loved ones. As such, there is no uncertainty about the afterlife and thus little need for an actual fear-based religion revolving around eternal punishment (such as in our real-world monotheisms). The fear in Spira is much more straightforward – it involves a giant Leviathan-like monster (called Sin) that swims around destroying towns and punishing people for the sins of their ancestors from a thousand years ago (much like the god of our monotheisms' stories).

The Farplane, in *Final Fantasy X*. (Concept art of the game.)

The deceased play an important role in people's lives, even long after their deaths. We preserve reminders of the dead, relics, stories, images. With time, their unseen presence in our lives goes beyond the simple "Oh, I wonder if he/she would like this" to a more complex

"virtual presence", namely a spirit. That is part of how ancestor worshipping came to be, where they were honored or propitiated with prayers, offerings and sacrifices. But I am getting ahead of myself here, so let us get back to track.

Perhaps the most pungent reminders of the dead are our dreams. A dream is thus a "place" where we can actually "see" the deceased (like the Farplane, from Box 1). As Wade (2009) puts it, this is perhaps how the idea of an afterlife and a "spirit world" first appeared. Since people would keep "meeting" their deceased relatives and acquaintances in dreams, then perhaps they were not truly dead, just "somewhere" else. This led the ancient humans to the conclusion that the spirit world could be visited in dreams – or also in trances, which was achieved at first during ritual dances and later during induced trances by shamans (with the use of natural-occurring psychotropic substances).

With the establishment of both an afterlife and a spirit world, the ancient tribal religions could transform into a more organized and specialized set of beliefs, led by an also specialized class of priests. This accompanied the transition from a nomad existence to a settled one. Still, the ancestors retained an important part in this context and were thus still remembered and worshiped. Well, why would anyone want to meet an ancestor in dreams/trances in the first place? To access their knowledge, of course. The elder were always (and rightly so) regarded as wise and people asked their counsels in solving difficult matters. The ancestors, of course, also filled that role. Finally, as the state religions were solidified, meeting the ancestors in dreams or trances slowly gave way to more controlled

forms of divination (conducted by the priest class), involving birds, bones, shells etc. The psychologist Steven Pinker (1997) even makes the stinging commentary about how these ancestor cults took hold and endured: "Ancestor worship must be an appealing idea to those who are about to become ancestors." Perhaps the powerful presence of an important ancestor, like a leader or hero, transformed from a simple spirit to a full-fledged god.

THE WORM AT THE CORE

The "ancestors in dreams" idea explained above is not the only explanation for the appearance of the belief in an afterlife. Another idea, likely complimentary to it, revolves around the fear of death. It is called "Terror Management Theory" (henceforth, TMT) and was developed by Greenberg et al. (1986), being derived from the Pulitzer-winning book *The Denial of Death*, by Ernest Becker (1973).

Becker argues that a major part of what humans do is related to ignoring/avoiding the inevitability of death. Knowing that we, like all living creatures, will eventually die is a very unwelcome realization. Moreover, knowing that death may come at any moment for reasons we cannot predict or control just makes it worse. Thus, the terror of total annihilation haunts people, creating a strong subconscious anxiety; as a result, people spend their lives attempting to avoid this feeling. William James (1902) called death the "worm at the core" of human existence and endeavors and Zilboorg (1943) linked it to the instinct of self-preservation, arguing that an organism would not function if this fear were constantly present on the top of one's mind. Becker's book is then a nice

argument on how civilization and culture are, in part, ultimately an unconscious intricate defense mechanism against the anxiety caused by the knowledge of our mortality.

The TMT builds on Becker's research. This theory states that cultures are symbolic systems whose purpose is to give meaning and value to life. And by giving life meaning, cultural values manage the terror of death (see also Solomon et al., 1991; 2015). Of course, the most obvious example of a cultural value that "grants" immortality is the idea of an afterlife, alongside its accompanying religion (which would dictate who is worthy of receiving immortality in the thereafter). The invention of a soul that endures after death in the spirit world was thus achieved by all human cultures.

Box 2. Superstitious pigeons

Skinner (1948) conducted a fantastic experiment with pigeons in his lab. He starved some pigeons a little to make them really crave food. A mechanism in their cages would feed them a couple of times per day. Of course, as classical experiments (and experience with domestic animals) had shown before, animals learn quickly how to get food after doing some chore, like raising their paws or pressing a button. However, Skinner decided to feed his pigeons at random, independently of any behavior the animals were displaying.

He saw that the behavior of the pigeons did not remained random though. In fact, after being fed randomly a couple of times, the animals started to show consistent behavior, each doing some odd thing of its own, like keep circling clockwise for instance. They were simply repeating the behavior they thought had made the food appear. This is superstition.

As Skinner himself puts it: "The bird behaves as if there were a causal relation between its behavior and the presentation of food, although such a relation is lacking. There are many analogies in human behavior. Rituals for changing one's luck at cards are good examples. A few accidental connections between a ritual and favorable consequences suffice to set up and maintain the behavior in spite of many unreinforced instances. The bowler who has released a ball down the alley but continues to behave as if he were controlling it by twisting and turning his arm and shoulder is another case in point. These behaviors have, of course, no real effect upon one's luck or upon a ball half way down an alley, just as in the present case the food would appear as often if the pigeon did nothing – or, more strictly speaking, did something else."

There are some later research confirming Skinner's finding (for instance, Timberlake & Lucas, 1985) while a few others seem to partially contradict it (Staddon & Simmelhag, 1971). It is strange that such an interesting topic has barely been studied to this day. Perhaps this is just to avoid hurting the sensibilities of our religious species, since many still believe the myth of humans-as-masters-of-Creation.

In addition, further research in TMT uncovered other cultural values that also manage the fear of death, such as posterity, patriotism, humanity's purported superiority over other animals (Becker had already pointed out how humans dislike the fact that they are animals), beliefs regarding sex etc. Some of these values at first glance do not seem to be related to death at all, but they in fact offer some kind of symbolic immortality.

But not everything is so bleak, as Sam Keen says in his foreword to *The Denial of Death*, "the bitter medicine that he [Becker] prescribes – contemplation of the horror of our inevitable death – is, paradoxically, the tincture that adds sweetness to mortality."

NEVER FORGET

Returning to *Final Fantasy Type-0*, the "idea" of the Crystals seems to resonate with the TMT.

By erasing the memories of the dead from people's minds, the Crystals also relieve people from this pressing fear of the inevitability of death. As I said above, people in Orience seem more prone to throw their lives ways at war (although more often than not religion does the same thing in our world).

Could then the people in Orience, unbound by this fear of death, have built their civilization? Moreover, would it be anything like ours (as the game clearly is) or would it be something completely alien to us? Maybe the latter; although it should be pointed out that Becker clearly states that our species still largely lives in tribal ways and easily sheds blood to purchase our token of immortality. But once again I was sidetracked – lacking the fear of death is a just secondary symptom in Orience, the cause of which is the erasure of the memories of the dead.

Ending scene of *Final Fantasy Type-0*, with nearly all the main characters dead after their final sacrifice in the war. After this, their "mother" (Arecia, a god-like creature) finally capitulates: "The world will change to one where death cannot be forgotten. So please, I ask that you remember my children." (Screenshot taken from the game.)

I know that in the beginning of this article I asked you to ignore the fact that Orience could not have become what it is if its people kept forgetting the dead and their stories. Well, now I want you to think about it again. The deceased obviously continue to play a big role in our lives long after they die – and they have done so in the whole story of our species. Would it be actually possible to live and thrive without their memory? Of course not! Our species can only

thrive on accumulated knowledge and each generation adds to what was achieved by the preceding one. As many historians and scientists have said before, the past is the key to the future.

> *"Everyone has lost something precious. Everyone here has lost homes, dreams, and friends. Now, Sin is finally dead. Now, Spira is ours again. Working together, now we can make new homes for ourselves, and new dreams. (…) Just, one more thing… the people and the friends that we have lost, or the dreams that have faded… Never forget them."*
> — Yuna, ending speech of *Final Fantasy* X.

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