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28 June 2012

The Legacy of the Slayer:

How *Buffy* Lives on in *Chaos Bleeds*

When Sunnydale collapsed in upon itself in the 2003 series finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it would only make sense that Buffy's story was over and the curtain finally closed. However, that has hardly been the case, as evidenced by the numerous novelizations, comic books, action figures, and video games that have carried on *Buffy*'s legacy since the show ended. As *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon says:

Buffy was designed to be an icon. She was designed to be a hero that lived outside of her television show that entered people's subconscious lives and their video games and their comic books and books and anything we could think of... I wanted to create something that was bigger than one hour a week. (*Chaos Bleeds* Unlockable Interview)

Therefore, evaluating Buffy's portrayal in other forms of media is vital to understanding the series, its impact, and Whedon's vision. This is especially recognizable in the video game *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds*. The game's nostalgic appeal, fidelity to the source material, and interactive extension of the series and its characters serve to strengthen the franchise's connection with its audience. This connection keeps the show's themes—such as duty, heroism, and morality—relevant by allowing new and old audiences to emulate or subvert them in gameplay. Through this form of transmedia storytelling, the show's legacy continues to live on.

Chaos Bleeds is the fourth video game based on the *Buffy* franchise and the first one released across multiple gaming platforms. The game serves as a spiritual successor to the 2002 Xbox exclusive *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* developed by The Collective. *Chaos Bleeds* was instead developed by Eurocom simultaneously for Xbox, PS2, and Gamecube, yet maintains many of the elements from the first game. Both games utilize a third-person perspective as the

player guides a character through levels of combat, puzzle-solving, and light platforming. Both also serve as lost episodes of the show, with the Xbox exclusive game taking place during the third season and *Chaos Bleeds* during the fifth. *Chaos Bleeds* differentiates itself from its predecessor and other previous video game incarnations of the show by allowing the player to assume the roles of characters other than the titular heroine, specifically Xander, Willow, Spike, Faith, and even Sid the Dummy (Gamespot).

The most obvious appeal of a video game adaptation is the ability for fans to experience the source material in a new and interactive way. Rather than merely watching the story unfold on screen, players partake in the action. The plot only progresses at the rate that the player can, or chooses to, complete certain tasks. *Chaos Bleeds* allows *Buffy* fans to assume the roles of the main characters and guide them through a narrative arc. Amber Benson, who plays Tara, summarizes the game's main attraction in an unlockable interview featurette, saying, "They've made the game just like an episode of the show. The quirky dialogue, the interesting relationships, the funny scenarios, the tongue in cheek, self-referential humor; it's all there. So when you play the game, you feel like *you* are a part of Sunnydale" (*Chaos Bleeds*). Fans gain a fuller immersion in the world of the show through acting within it than the more passive emotional projections achieved through watching the episodes.

Another major appeal to the game is the sense of nostalgia it draws upon. Most movie and television tie-in video games tend to market themselves as promotional material for their source. Games based on movies are usually released prior to the film, as a means of advertising and building excitement for the theatrical release. Notably, this is not the case with *Chaos Bleeds*, as the game was released in August 2003, three months after the series finale aired. The game could be viewed as promotional material for the show's DVD sales, as the back of the

manual advertises the fourth season DVD box set. Yet, the plentiful references to past episodes, the painstaking attention given to accurately recreating the characters and sets, and the fact that the game takes place during the fifth season rather than the end of the seventh indicate a purposeful emphasis on the show's history.

Xander perfectly articulates the role of nostalgia in-game during a level set in Sunnydale High School when he says, "Key to the library cage. Makes me all nostalgic for Oz." Roaming the still-intact halls of an alternate dimension's Sunnydale High lends itself to the player's own feelings of nostalgia and longing for the (fictional) past, before the beloved characters had grown up and the show had ended. Other references to past episodes—like the inclusion of Sid the Dummy, a one-shot character from the first season—both rewards active viewers of the series and expands upon relatively minute details from the show. Anna Reading and Colin Harvey comment on the power and appeal of nostalgia in video games based on historical events. They write:

[A]pproaching games in terms of nostalgic-play also highlights more broadly how memory is increasingly central to understanding the manifold ways in which games are produced, marketed, and above all, played. The yearning to revisit or experience some element within a past time and place through play is key to understanding the human psyche in a postmodern culture in which new technologies are central to time compression and distancing" (177).

Like the DVDs, the game immortalizes the story, plot, and characters, allowing them to be read and re-read, and ensuring they never truly die. Hidden secrets and unlockable bonuses within the game challenge players to revisit levels in order to complete the game in its fullest sense and relive the story over and over again.

Chaos Bleeds further appeals to fans of the show by promising a new story set in the Buffyverse, drawing on their desire for Buffy's story to continue while simultaneously adding to the Buffyverse lore. The game's plot functions as a missing episode from the fifth season of the

series, planting itself within the framework of the canon somewhere between episodes “Forever” and “Intervention” (Gamespot). When thought-to-be-dead vampire Kakistos appears in Sunnydale, Buffy and the Gang learn that alternate dimensions are beginning to bleed together. In order to stop it, they must travel to a dimension created by The First Evil, a mystical being that first appeared in the third season of the series and eventually became the chief antagonist of its final season. The game manual proclaims, “Buffy helped Angel overcome [The First’s] influence and thwarted its plans. The First has not forgotten...” Since the game takes place two seasons before The First becomes a serious threat on the show, it builds upon the existing relationship between Buffy and The First by adding new layers to their history as enemies. Furthermore, Ethan Rayne becomes involved with The First’s plans due to a discovery about his ancestral heritage, tying together two seemingly unrelated characters from the show and indicating that even if fans have seen every episode, there is still narrative to explore and things to learn about the characters.

Tie-in products for the game include a comic book by Dark Horse Comics and a novelization by James A. Moore. Both products further draw attention to other *Buffy* merchandise that builds upon the franchise’s lore. In fact, the comic book serves as one of the unlockable bonuses within the game, offering fans who might not usually read comics the opportunity to do so without additional cost. According to Martin Picard, video games based on television shows play upon “consumers’ desire for franchises they liked; once the consumption of a franchise begins, one wants logically and emotionally to obtain other products in the franchise, to obtain a complete vision of the whole, both materially and narratively” (*The Video Game Explosion* 298-9). In other words, hardcore fans of the series will want to buy this game, both to complete their *Buffy* collection and because it expands upon the narrative of the show. By

releasing the game after the finale, the developers remind fans that *Buffy* is not over. There are still novels, comic books, action figures, and games to buy, and more importantly, there is still story left to tell.

Undoubtedly, there is a financial incentive to this type of merchandising, capitalizing on an established fanbase. However, there is more at play here than corporate exploitation of fan desire. There are parallels between the Buffyverse and the transmedia storytelling techniques Henry Jenkins outlines in the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* universe. With *The Matrix*, the core narrative was not limited solely to the three films, but instead spread across the movies, games, comics, animated shorts, and other media forms. To get the full story of *The Matrix*, audiences had to do more than just watch the films; they had to actively engage in all the various media forms. As Henry Jenkins puts it, "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (114). While not quite as complex or co-dependent on other media as *The Matrix*, the Buffyverse certainly follows a similar model, especially when you take into account Whedon's vision for *Buffy* to be something bigger than a television series. *Buffy* is not a self-contained entity, but rather the sum of many works across several different media: the *Angel* spin-off series, the Whedon-helmed comic books, the novels, and the video games. If fans want to know what happens to Angel after he leaves Sunnydale in Season Three, they need to watch *Angel*. If they want to know what happens after the final episode, they need to read the *Season Eight* comic book series. And if they want to explore Buffy's world for themselves, they need to play the video games.

The game developers, obviously recognizing the draw of the Buffyverse, go to great lengths to ensure the authenticity of the game through its marketing, imagery, and sound design.

The back cover of the game promotes an “Authentic *Buffy* universe with involvement from creator Joss Whedon and writers Christopher Golden and Tom Sniegowski.” This promotional material indicates that fidelity to the source material is extremely important to the developers’ understanding of their potential customers. Golden and Sniegowski work within the Buffyverse, both having written spinoff novelizations and comic books. While they are not writers for the actual series, their understanding and appreciation of the world and their ability to capture the characters’ individual voices, as well as the fact they are established writers, adds some credibility to the game. Though advertised as having “involvement,” it is questionable how centrally Joss Whedon is involved. He serves as neither executive producer nor writer for the game and appears solely as an unlockable character and in bonus interview videos. Nonetheless, the developers attempt to boost their credibility by linking the game to the show’s creator. Furthermore, the inclusion of the interview videos with the cast and creator of the show sends the message that this game is not just a marketing tool, but includes active involvement and interest from those working inside the Buffyverse, and is therefore a work worthy of the fans’ time.

The game also attempts to appeal to fans by faithfully recreating elements of the show visually and sonically, and by building upon the narrative in new and interesting ways. According to Tanya Krzywinska, “The pleasure of playing games is in part dependent on the player experiencing a sense of integration into a game and its world. Our being-in-the-game-world may be troubled if the representational qualities of the character we play at being are experienced as somehow problematic” (Demon Girl). That is to say, the player must believe to an extent that the world of the game is the world of the show because noticeable differences between the two may ruin that sense of immersion. Jenkins observes that the world must be instantly recognizable and consistent in order to work despite the medium shift:

The Wachowski brothers built a playground where other artists could experiment and fans could explore. For this to work, the brothers had to envision the world of *The Matrix* with sufficient consistency that each installment is recognizably part of the whole and with enough flexibility that it can be rendered in all of these different styles of representation” (113).

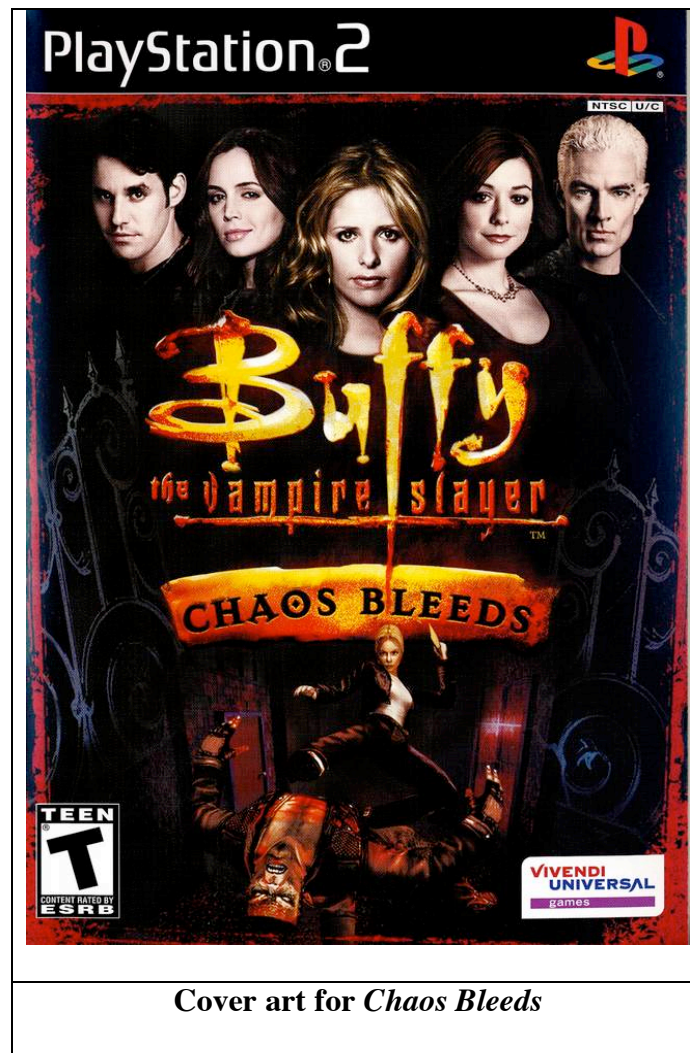
Just as the Wachowskis utilized other talent to build upon the world they designed within other media, so too does *Chaos Bleeds* utilize video game developers and writers to expand upon the Buffyverse. Yet, because the world is recognizable as the same one from the TV series, it still resonates with fans.

Recreating elements from the show comes, first and foremost, through the in-game character design. The game characters resemble their real world counterparts in painstaking detail, from their models to their dialogue to their speech patterns. Visually, the models are heavily influenced by the actors on *Buffy*, as their faces, expressions, and even clothing style (such as Spike’s signature leather jacket) are lifted right from the show.



Comparison of Spike's in-game model to James Marsters as Spike

Furthermore, the cover art paints the illusion that the player is controlling the “real” characters by using headshots of the actors and not, with the exception of Buffy, the 3D models used in the actual game. Although the game cannot perfectly replicate real people, the game characters are instantly recognizable and visually linked to the show.



Cover art for *Chaos Bleeds*

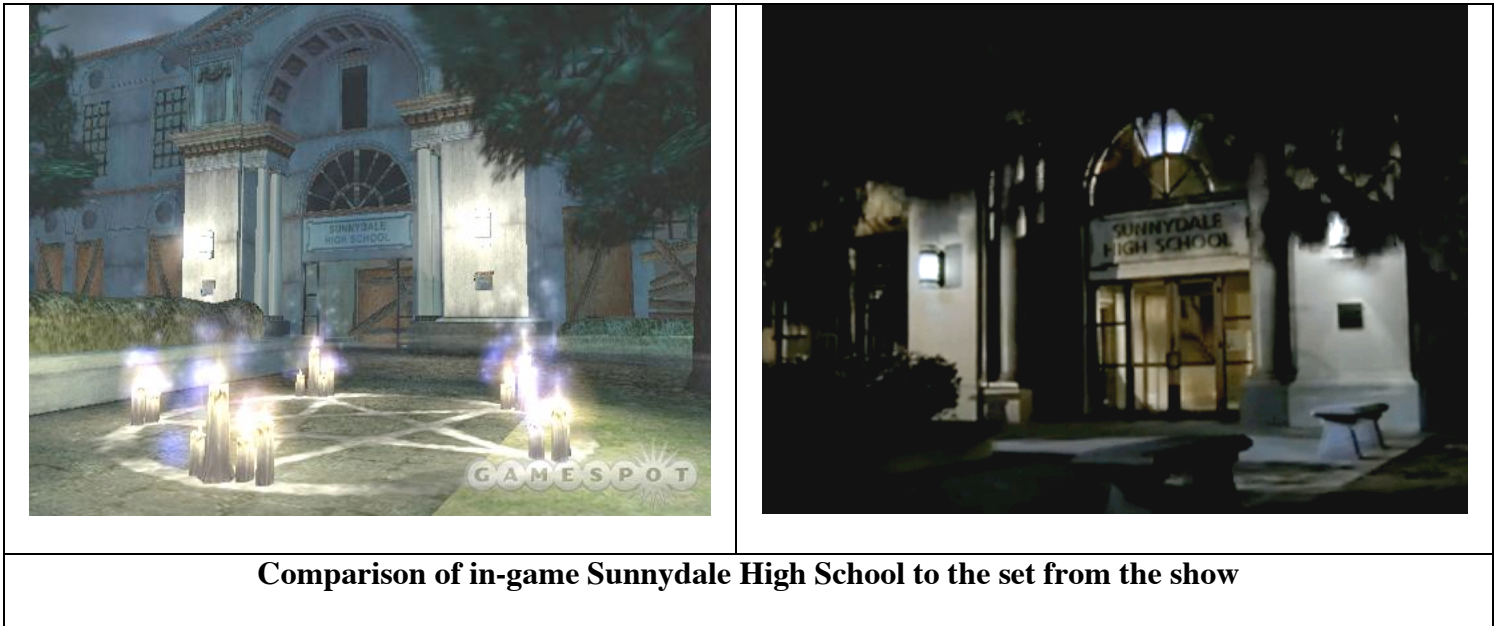
Each character also moves and plays noticeably different from one another. For instance, Buffy's hand-to-hand combat is quick and strong, involving a varied array of kicks and punches

reminiscent of her fighting style on the show, while Willow utilizes an arsenal of spells to take out foes. Xander, who possesses no superhuman strength or magic, moves sluggishly and is harder to use than Buffy in combat scenarios. This clunkiness could normally be deemed a design deficiency on part of the game developer, but instead it embodies his character and indicates the developers' insistence on keeping the game congruent with the show's mythology. While a super-strong Xander who hacks easily through his enemies might prove entertaining to play as, it would break the sacred element of authenticity and, thereby, the player's immersion.

Furthermore, the characters sound and act like they would on TV, both through scripted dialogue and their actual voices. The game is surprisingly dialogue-heavy, and each character speaks like one would expect having watched the show. In fact, many of the show's actors—including Nicholas Brendon, Anthony Stewart Head, James Marsters, and Eliza Dushku—lend their voices to the game, ensuring that even the acting style is consistent with the characters. Although Sarah Michelle Gellar and Alyson Hannigan's voices are noticeably missing, the replacement voice actresses for both try to replicate their tone and phrasing as much as possible. Giselle Loren's voicing of Buffy is a dead ringer for Sarah Michelle Gellar; she was later cast as the voice of Buffy in Joss Whedon's pitch for an animated *Buffy* series. By trying to capture the likeness of the actors, the game developers attempt to bridge the gap between the medium shift while paying tribute to the actors' contributions to the characters.

Likewise, the ability to explore familiar locales from the show—such as The Magic Box, Sunnydale High School, and Buffy's usual late night hangout, the Cemetery—help recreate the world of the show in a digital environment. By fully developing the environments and letting the player explore them, it also strengthens the illusion of the show's sets as actual locations. Sunnydale High School, for example, exists on the show as two real world locations: the exterior

is a real high school in Torrance, California, while the interior is comprised of sets built on a soundstage. In *Chaos Bleeds*, however, players enter the school through the digital exterior and find themselves seamlessly within the interior, blurring the line between the two real-world sets and giving the Buffyverse a sense of unity.



The development of credibility, believability, and authenticity to the game allows players to more easily immerse themselves in the world of both *Buffy* and *Chaos Bleeds*. There are, however, plenty of differences between the show and the game due to the medium shift. Obviously, the fact that the core characters can die if the player is not careful, resulting in a game over, breaks the element of immersion. The characters also tend to talk to themselves, or rather the player, quite often. Their limited supply of quips (“Mom always said my natural charisma would open doors... just not this one”) quickly become repetitive, reminding the player that they are pre-scripted and recorded. Furthermore, active gameplay is broken up with cut scenes, reverting the player to a passive viewer for a brief time.

Notably, Xander, who represents the typical video game demographic, is the most “meta” of the characters, drawing attention to the game-like conventions. During the high school level, for instance, he proclaims, “Amazing the stuff you find lying around here. It’s like a freakin’ video game.” Drawing attention to its gaming conventions is not, according to Robert Alan Brookey, a fault but rather a necessity for the adaptation video game. He argues, “For the cross-promotional and synergistic practices of a franchise to work, the consumer (and player) must be reminded that there are other products to be consumed” (*Hollywood Gamers* 47). Although immersion is necessary for a player to enjoy a video game, awareness of the game reminds players that there is a source text, the show, to watch. Players who have never watched the original series are constantly reminded of its existence, while fans of the show are reminded to go back and re-watch it.

The role of immersion in relation to player agency is a tricky subject when it comes to video games, especially goal-oriented ones like *Chaos Bleeds*. A major draw to the game is the idea of becoming the show’s heroes. The back cover proclaims, “Buffy and friends must unite with an unlikely ally to slay vampires, zombies, and other bloodthirsty hellions. Destroy the dark side, before Sunnydale is forever condemned to permanent darkness.” The perspective shift from the third-person (“Buffy and friends”) to the second-person (*you* must “Destroy the dark side”) voices the apparent duality to the game. On one hand, the game tells a story to the player about the characters joining forces to stop the spread of evil. On the other hand, it is about the player’s experience and his or her assumption of the characters’ roles. Krzywinska comments:

But once you get stuck into game-play, however, the image of the in-game body becomes far less important than doing things with that body in the world. It is more a tool or technology for action than a representation. This complicates the sense that player-characters are simply representational objects designed for the gaze. Instead, what we have here is a complex operation between narrative, representation and active participation. (Demon Girl)

That is to say, once a player is immersed in the game, the digital avatar becomes less a character and more of a physical extension of the player, such as the way a mouse cursor functions, for instance.

At first, it appears the player has full freedom; they choose which direction to walk, what weapons to fight with, and at what speed they wish to complete missions. However, the player is not granted complete free will, as there are limitations to each of these things. For one, the game design utilizes clearly defined game levels. Many doors are locked or barricaded, and the spaces the player is allowed to roam are limited. In the Downtown Sunnydale level, for instance, the player can walk the streets and rescue Spike, Faith, Willow, and Xander in any order they please. This indicates a sense of agency as to the order of events, yet the locations of these characters and the paths to reach them are predetermined by the game developers. The player also cannot choose to leave Sunnydale, confined to the level design, at least not without quitting the level. Likewise, weapon choice is limited by the variety and placement of weapons within the level. In other words, there are rules to the game, which allow the player some freedom but can ultimately never be totally broken.

Krzywinska argues that the gaming limitations are thematically consistent with the show itself. She states:

The operation of the game's programmed infrastructure invokes an experience of being subject to a pre-determined, extrinsic, and thereby, Othered force (in the full Lacanian sense), provided by the tacit alliance between The Powers That Be and the game designers. This works in productive tension with the promise of player autonomy offered by the game's interactive dimension. It also reflects Buffy's own ambivalent and tense relationship with the authors (The Powers That Be) of her Slayer destiny, an aspect that derives from the world of Greek myth where heroes often struggle against the fates and the meddlings of gods. ("Playing Buffy")

In other words, the boundaries of the game design reinforce Buffy's sense of duty and inescapable destiny. As in the first season's "Prophecy Girl," where Buffy realizes her death at the hands of the Master has been foreseen and is therefore unavoidable, the important plot and objectives of the game are predetermined. Buffy may try to break as many rules as she can, but even she can't escape her duty to fight evil. By controlling Buffy, the player must also take on her role as the slayer. Though the player may want to shop around Downtown Sunnydale or read through the books in The Magic Box, he or she must instead fight the forces of darkness.

The limitations placed on players function as more than a (somewhat convenient) thematic link to the source material. More relevantly, these limitations serve to restrict the player's moral decisions so that they fall in line with the core values of the show. Brooke states:

Given that the reward for completing a level is a cut scene with a predetermined message, the interactive aspects of many video games do not empower players to resist the messages that are woven into a game's structure. More to the point, those elements of a game that can convey ideological messages are also the elements in which the player enjoys the least agency. (35)

While it is true that many of the cut scenes praise the characters, and thereby the player, for completing their tasks, this argument fails to take into account moral decisions within the gameplay. For instance, in the Blood Factory level, the player, as Xander, must free enslaved hostages. The hostages may be freed in relatively any order, but the task must be completed to proceed. The player is given the ability to attack the hostages, depleting their life bar with each hit and invoking an angry response from them. Xander can torture the hostages by repeatedly attacking them, for the player's amusement or to act out frustration, for example. Should a hostage be killed by an enemy or the player, the game immediately ends as a failed mission and the player must restart from the previous checkpoint. Thus, the player is given the freedom to experiment within the moral structure of the game, but ultimately punished for killing the

innocents by having to restart the level. If the player attempts to leave without saving the hostages, Xander proclaims, “I can’t leave the prisoners—I have to rescue them,” and the player is prevented from exiting. Therefore, ideological messages exist within both the cut scenes and the gameplay limitations bestowed upon the player.

These limitations on player agency serve to foster understanding of the world and characters. Video games are often evaluated in terms of the negative influence their violent or degrading images promote. However, as with *Chaos Bleeds*, positive moral messages can also be imbedded within gameplay. Xander is noble and well intended; he would not leave people in danger if he could save them. While the player may kick and punch at walls, run around in circles, and enact plenty of other odd behavioral traits that are out of character for Xander or the others, the important moral decisions remain tied to character importance. Therefore, it is not the player’s moral agency on display, but rather Xander’s. The game rewards players for acting the way the characters would by progressing the story, and punishes them for acting out of line by forcing them to start over. Thus, the player has the choice to assimilate to these moral values and continue playing, reject them completely and quit, or find some sort of balance between them.

Players may understand that, though they might like to kill the innocents, Xander would not, and therefore they must resist that urge and instead act like him to progress. They may begrudgingly accept the rules of his world and follow them or agree that it is the morally correct course of action. In this way, the game characters are not blank canvases shaped by the player’s decisions. On the contrary, their convictions are forced upon the player, willingly or not. Buffy must save her friends because she loves them and feels it is the right thing to do. Whether or not the player feels the same is inconsequential. The player can choose not to save Buffy’s friends and not complete the objectives, but the story will not move forward and they will be stuck in a

static environment until finally agreeing to do so. If they care about the story or finishing the game, they must assume Buffy's mentality as their own, or at least begrudgingly accept it as the only path through the narrative. In doing so, the player comes to understand the moral stance of the characters and the show.

Krzywinska notes that the Xbox exclusive *Buffy* game relies on a Manichean model of morality, presenting Buffy as a clear avatar of good and the vampires as evil. In *Chaos Bleeds*, the lines between good and evil are noticeably more complicated and much closer to the way they are presented on the show. While in story mode, the player always controls a hero fighting against "evil." But since the playable heroes include morally ambiguous characters like Faith and Spike circa the fifth season, things are not as black and white. The multiplayer mode of *Chaos Bleeds* also offers the opportunity to play as the villains of the game (such as vampires, werewolves, and zombies), which allows the player to step outside of the typical heroic role and possibly identify, at least visually, with the monsters of the series, though this mode exists outside of the game's narrative. This allows the game to partially capture the undemonization of characters on the series, such as Spike and Anya, who slowly transcend their demonic heritage and find humanity.

Furthermore, evil alternate versions of friends and loved ones become enemies in The First's twisted alternate dimension. Xander fights the demon version of Anya, Anyanka; Willow fights against a vampire version of Tara; and Buffy fights against dark-magicks-using Giles, under the guise of Ripper. Despite this moral complication, the alternate versions of these characters are quickly deemed "evil" and the emotional resonance is somewhat downplayed. Xander, for instance, immediately tells Anyanka, "Don't think the fact that you're an evil alternate reality version of my girlfriend is gonna stop me from kicking your ass." (*Ed: Although*

Willow's response to Vampire Tara is considerably more distraught.) Each character is able to separate their real friends and lovers from the shadow versions of them. Compare this to “Doppelgandland” (B3016), where the Scoobies find themselves faced with a vampire version of Willow from another dimension. Despite knowing she is a soulless demon, both Buffy and Willow find they are unable to kill her. While the game obviously makes attempts to replicate the show's moral complexity, ultimately it reduces many of them down to “good guy” versus “bad guy,” falling back on gaming conventions such as “boss battles.” Though the game adheres to these conventions, it does work creatively within the expectations of an action-adventure game in order to touch upon many of the core values of the show.

Chaos Bleeds is particularly interesting in its portrayal of heroism. The design decision to include other members of the Scooby Gang indicates that Buffy is not the only hero on the show; ordinary Xander is a hero too. This expresses one of the thematic pillars of the show: the fact Buffy is granted superhuman strength does not make her a hero, but rather her moral sensibilities do. Because of Xander's desire to go good, he too is a hero whether or not he is a champion fighter. Krzywinska argues that in the Xbox exclusive game, because the Scoobies are not playable, the emphasis gets placed on the violent beat-em-up style of gameplay and not as much on the interpersonal elements of the show (“Playing Buffy”). In *Chaos Bleeds*, not only are the other characters playable, but several moments involve actively fighting alongside them. For instance, in the first Magic Box level, the player controls Buffy as the store is assaulted by vampires, while the game's AI controls Willow as she casts spells and launches her own attacks. Other times the player must protect another character, such as an injured Giles, portraying the importance of friendship and teamwork. Because each Scooby has their own strengths and sense of righteousness, they can all be heroes, just as the ordinary, everyday game player can be,

whether in taking on Buffy's duty within the game or out in the real world fighting for their beliefs. As *Buffy* is all about finding inner strength, learning how to use power, and standing up for what is right, *Chaos Bleeds* takes those messages and applies them very literally to the gamer.

Video games offer a valuable chance to build and preserve the legacy of a franchise. The art of a successful video game adaptation relies on duality, incorporating both nostalgia and something new, immersion and awareness of convention, and agency and limitation of the player. For the gamer to feel a connection to the source material, they must be immersed in the game world, yet aware of the game's reliance on another text in order to promote it. Likewise, the player must have the ability to make decisions within the world yet be restricted to moral decisions that reveal the nature of the characters and the show in order to understand and adopt them. In walking the fine line between these somewhat contrasting ideals, video games can build a stronger connection with a franchise's fan base, and thereby strengthen their investment in it. Notably, *Chaos Bleeds* is not the final *Buffy* game; since its release, a mobile phone game was developed in 2004 and a Nintendo DS game in 2009. The fact that six years after the show's end, video games and supplementary material continue to be produced further solidifies *Buffy* as lasting a part of our culture. As Buffy says, "The hardest thing in this world is to live in it," and so too must the franchise struggle to survive in an industry ruled by the latest fads and the newest trends. Having a strong fan base means that a show's legacy never truly dies even long after the final episode has aired.

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