

## I've Been Killed so Many Times and Learned Absolutely Nothing



Well, time to start this shit over again.

I'm always one for a good challenge, and I'm not usually one to back down on them. The challenge of taking hard classes in high school. The challenge of trying not to laugh every time you hear the number "69". The challenge of trying to sleep when there are people having discussions about politics at 2 A.M. right outside your room.

But most importantly, the challenge of trying to date someone who won't dump you within six months.

Though completing challenging video games are also somewhere in my top five.

Now, many people would argue with me that challenging video games are a waste of time. They would say that I should be trying to advance myself in other ways, such as reading *1984*, watching *Amadeus*, or cleaning my room. First off, nobody actually says that to me because everyone assumes I already do those things. Secondly, it's fun, so shut up and go watch football or something. If all else fails, I can just bullshit an argument about how playing the games builds character and willpower to move forward in life despite constant failures until this "sensible" person goes away.

But to be honest, that last point does hold some weight: there's this strange allure to finally conquering these feats. A lot of them are really famous games and are rather fair, so it's your fault if you suck at them, and the world will know it. There's like this voice in the back of your head taunting you "Oh come on you can't even beat *Super Mario Bros?*" Like, holy shit man, these Hammer Bros. are like the border patrol to my level progression, cut me some slack.

And then, after dying countless times to instant-kill spikes, doing all those bosses where you have to dodge things going really fast, and finishing the final boss with a stylish spin move, it feels amazing when it's 11:30 PM, your mom is calling you from the basement to go to bed, and you can message your friend Noah "HEY I FINALLY BEAT *MEGA MAN 3*" while he pretends to care for a few minutes. You feel like, for once in your life, you've achieved something. And whenever someone thinks you suck at games, you can immediately invalidate their argument by pointing to this milestone.

But then there's this:



Woah that's me playing

This is *Ikaruga*, a space-shooter game (think Space Invaders but less boring) with black bullets and white bullets. And lots of each.

Also, I don't mean to spoil the game, but I have the slightest feeling that if you were to play this game, you'll die a lot. Like, this game may sound a tad easy seeing as you can absorb bullets or whatever, but in practice, human reactions can only be perfect for so long.

To me, *Ikaruga* is this crazy spiritual experience where you question what life choices you've made to reach this point in life where you're proud to have even *survived* Level 1. I've heard that there are people out there who can finish this game in about twenty minutes, and I've invested like ten hours or so and I can't even pass Level 2. But okay, I'll just practice more and then one day I'll...

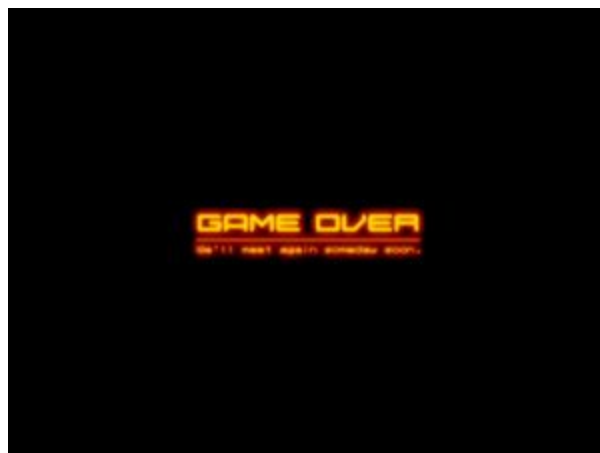


...Not this shit again.

So okay, scratch that. Maybe practicing isn't the answer here. I've tried so many times and I only get about a few inches farther after twenty attempts to get back to the place where I died. So maybe, much like all those physics problems I used to practice for my AP exams that I got wrong, the answer isn't to practice at all, but rather to give up and look at the solution so I can figure out what to do next time.

All I need to do is discover the secret that these legendary deities use to beat the game. So I've decided to do one thing that's encouraged in life but not in elementary school, copy off whatever strategies the masters do. I look up gameplay footage on Youtube, watch people get millions of points on the hardest difficulty on just the first level, cry a little inside after realizing their superiority, and then get back to playing this game.

And wouldn't you know it,



Things haven't really panned out well.

But that can't be right, I'm trying to incorporate as many strategies as I can on those first couple levels. I've been getting a few hundred thousand more points, but as awesome as it is to have a high score, I'd like to actually finish this game too. In the many games I've played over my life, be it *Mega*

*Man, Pokemon, or Blue's Treasure Hunt*, my initial goal has never been to collect a certain item or to get so many points. That comes after the goal of just trying to find victory at all.

I mean, it's obviously possible complete this game, I've seen it with my own eyes, but there's some secret I'm overlooking. And I need to find the answers to this little conundrum, even though I have no idea where to begin. After all, I have no clue how I'm supposed to get to those elusive caves where I'm guessing *Ikaruga* mystics reside, such as "The Arcades in Akihabara" and "Some Basement in the House of Middle-Class Adults." So Wikipedia it is.

As I scroll through the generally useless information Wikipedia provides me, something I do every day, mind you, I find out that *Ikaruga* has a lot Buddhist themes. What themes exactly, and where, I have no idea, but if my senior year English class has taught me anything, it's that you can bullshit a deep interpretation for any form of media, so I'll buy it.

Too lazy to read through the hundreds and hundreds of articles Wikipedia had on Buddhism, I decide to take a journey for self-fulfillment. I reach into the depths of me, and pulled out whatever vague concepts on Buddhism I had left over from AP World History, be it pacifism, avoiding materialism, traveling the world, find your inner peace, going bald, or buying massive amounts of opium.

Actually, I think that last one was from 19<sup>th</sup> century China, but close enough.

But slowly, I start to understand what must be done. Yes, as great it is to do so much with the game, perhaps that's not what's needed right now. What I need now is to focus my efforts on the basics before the complexities. Perhaps the basic goal of finishing the game will be enough to appease me. After all, do I really *need* a high score above 20 million points?

But this strange side of me, this sense of honor that I've had in everything, reawakens. It's not just the fact that I need to achieve something, it's about how I achieve it. Like, fuck man, I didn't like getting a C on my Differential Equations mid-term, regardless of the fact that I could easily pass the class. And yeah I could've just gone back to Calculus II for the easy GPA boost, but I'm not about that life. Sure, I could take my time and patiently move towards victory, but the world doesn't work like that, you can't wait until you're 60 before finally graduating high school with 120 AP credits under your belt. I mean, I honestly have no clue if honor is in the Buddhist mythos or not, but materialism is and I'm guessing that craving high numbers of something is technically materialism. So maybe points are meaningless after all. Or maybe I just need to challenge myself in something other than points.

And then it dawns on me. The enlightenment from the heavens. The answer I've been looking for. The path to completing this game while still feeling a sense of achievement.

I can beat *Ikaruga* at its own game by being as mystical as hell. I realize that this game can be beaten without firing a single shot. I don't need to hit bosses at all because they retreat eventually, knowing that I'm no threat to them.

Also I totally didn't see this idea while browsing Wikipedia nope never.

So now here I am again, back at the start. Armed with knowledge and ready. I can be one this game. The game charges at me with the same force I've seen before. I can't stop the enemy with my own

might, the turmoil just comes to me as I accept it. But, after firing, they pass on, knowing that I only wish to be at peace.

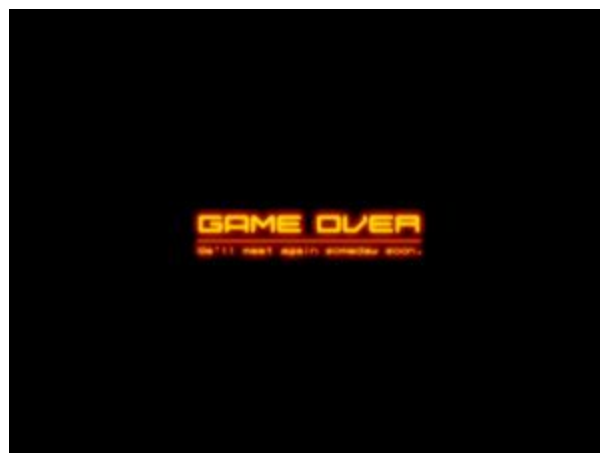
I get through Level 1 without much issue. I take a deep breath. Level 2 is even more merciless than the last. Before I know it, enemies are encircling my ship, trying to get me to crack. But I don't give in. It takes some patience but I eventually manage to avoid dying. And so I press forward to the main stage.



Holy...

For once in my life, I feel like I'm actually good at this game. And it is rare in life that I feel as though I'm approaching magnificence

And then reality hits me; a wall I can't pass through without shooting. I still have some lives left, so I press onwards, only to find more walls, and my concentration breaking. I can't give up. Not here, not now, this is the way that-

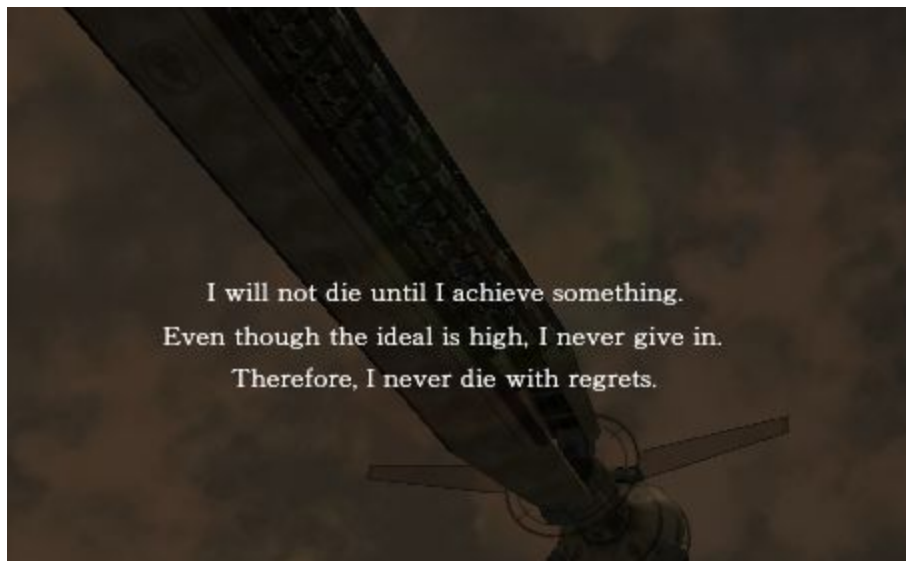


...Holy shit, you've gotta be fucking kidding me.

So as it turns out, playing passively isn't the answer either. At this point, all I can do is keep playing the game ad infinitum. I suppose I could try playing "almost passively," but that's like "running for almost 1 mile" or "almost talking to this cute girl" or "almost stopping your habit of masturbating." Yeah, I'll have tried come close to fulfillment, but I'll still have technically failed to reach the goal in the end.

But perhaps none of this was meant to be. Buddhism also talks about this idea called reincarnation. So the only solution I have now is to wait till I die and hopefully remember this game in my new incarnation. After all, as the game constantly reminds me, "We'll meet again someday soon.", but that someday soon may be relative to the existence of the universe and I'll just end up meeting it hundreds of years from now. Or it could be four minutes from now.

But will I have learned anything by then? Have I learned anything thus far? I mean, I know nothing about my past life, but maybe I lived the same way, as some socially-deprived nerd who decided it was a good idea to finish his work at 9 A.M. (\*wink\* \*wink\*). I certainly don't consider myself the greatest of people, so I probably haven't learned anything from my past life, though there's always the possibility I never had one. Or maybe I just forgot it all, but the game keeps engraving my skull with the message to "die upon achievement without regrets", so why should I die with the regret of forgetting whatever I've built up about myself?



I see this literally every single time I want to start a new game

But I guess today is not my day to be achieving such a grand desire. Although I could go for an achievement that is a bit more on the simple side. Reading *1984* would probably suit this.