2.3 Conjugal Love: Losing the Spouse in *Passage*

> He saw death standing beside him and
> knew that he was about to die.
> *Philippe Ariès/The Hour of Our Death*

PROLOGUE

Passage is a short, minimalist 2D game by American indie game developer Jason Rohrer and was published in 2007 for PC, Mac, and Linux. In it, a pixelated representation of the game designer Jason Rohrer traverses the eponymous passage on a 2D plane, and there is the option to meet his wife and continue the journey as a couple.

Over a playing time of five minutes, the couple is subtly pushed towards the right side of the screen until the spouse reaches the right edge, transforming into a gravestone. The player has to decide how to spend the player character's remaining lifetime as an aged, significantly slowed-down widower. For fans, much of the attraction of *Passage* is due to the simplicity through which this story is told (i.e. Fagone 2008).

The game does not feature any sophisticated bonding rituals or fleshed out character representations. Rather, its minimalism provides an interesting case for how emotionally engaging representations of attachment, loss, and grief can be conveyed through a simple ergodic spectrum.

When opening the game, one cannot fail to notice *Passage*'s unusual proportions. The game takes place inside a 100x16 pixel corridor with large chunks of the screen above and below it blackened out (fig. 10). In conventional platform game manner, the player character starts on the left side of the passage. This initially suggests that the direction to go is eastward. To move the character, the four arrow keys are used, taking real-time control over a stylised representation of Jason Rohrer. The camera follows the character movements, scrolling the aisle-shaped window as he moves.

Traversing the passage, the character explores more of the initially blurred environments in front of him. Objects materialise as obstacles, decorative items, or treasure chests, some of which contain rewards. Such rewards translate into a number of points added to the score displayed in the upper right corner of the screen. An additional point is rewarded for each step taken to the right. Apart from indicating progress, the score does not hold any significance for gameplay.

The dimensions of right and left, as we shall find out, are packed with symbolic meaning. Encoding left as past and right as future, they draw on what visual semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen call 'Given' and 'New'. In their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Desig*n (2006), they write that "[f]or something to be Given means that it is presented as something the viewer already knows, as a familiar and agreed-upon point of departure for the message" (Kress/van Leeuwen 2006: 181).

Comparing visual texts across genres, they observe that the Given of a message is usually located on the left. *Passage* is no exception. Starting on the very left of the screen, the player character is Given, both as controllable player unit and as discernible human character. The rest of the environment is blurred, indicating that the New is still out of reach.

For something to be New means that it is presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps, not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention. Broadly speaking, the meaning of New is therefore "problematic",

"contestable", "the information 'at issue'", while the Given is presented as "common sensical, self-evident" (Kress/Leeuwen 2006: 181).

Little is known or agreed-upon about the blurry, garbled heap of pixels in front of the character. He faces an uncertain situation that might be 'problematic' but also hope-inspiring. The objects in the distance are New enough that they haven't taken shape yet. This can be changed by approaching them. Since the field of vision moves with the character, approached objects turn from blurry to concrete, from New to Given.

Apart from the character's movement in space, he is also moved by space. Starting out on the left, his position is constantly advancing towards the right. This suggests that the progression from left to right also stands for ageing, for being in time. By doing this, *Passage* draws on another visual convention, namely representing time through space (Boroditsky 2000, Lakoff/Johnson 1980).

Expanding on Lakoff and Johnson, psychologist Lera Bodoritsky (2000) has suggested that thinking about time in terms of space is just as useful as using temporal information (Boroditsky 2000: 1). Among the spatial relations conventionally used to talk about time are front/back, as in someone being ahead of her time, and the notion of moving through time, or time moving us.

In *Passage*, these metaphorical conventions are translated into propositions of the game space. First, the character exerts agency by 'going forward', by 'moving ahead'. Secondly, due to the shape of the passage, which is wider than it is high, the most straight-forward way to go is literally forward. Since the game's tunnel vision conceals regions above and below the character, walking up or down is comparatively risky. It would mean to move towards the (visually) unknown. Thirdly, the score only increases when we move from left to right, indicating that going forward is objectively more rewarding than going up, down or left.

In addition to player-controlled movement, there is also the passive being-pushed forward as the game progresses. This reduces the distance between Given and New: The character is pushed towards a point where

he has 'seen it all', nothing about life is New, a moment which elegantly coincides with the time of death.

The movement towards the right creates an anticipation of death. Game journalist Anthony Burch (2007) recounts that it took him

"almost half the game to notice I was aging. By the time I realized what was going on, I suddenly became much more frantic; I no longer had the ability to see what was coming, and I took on a much more panicked pace as I tried to quickly progress through the landscape..." (Burch 2007: np).

At the point of noticing the passing of time, noticing that the character is being pushed forward, Burch is confronted with the question of mortality, and how much time there is left until the rest of his life becomes Given.

While the unusual format of the passage pushes our attention to the left/right axis, it is also possible to move up and down. The division into upper and lower parts of the landscape is once again metaphorically charged. The 'surface' level is easy to traverse because it is free from obstacles, but it is also free from interesting elements which can only be discovered by going deep. In contrast to this, the low regions feature an intricate maze, sprinkled with treasure chests and visually stimulating decorations. The choice is between living a simple, conformist life which is boring, or a full life which is hard to navigate.

To go deep is to walk off a path which – through the score count – one is objectively told to pursue. Instead of doing the 'right' thing, one commits to experimentation, and thereby dismantles the myth that life is flat, one-dimensional, and must be traversed in linear ways.
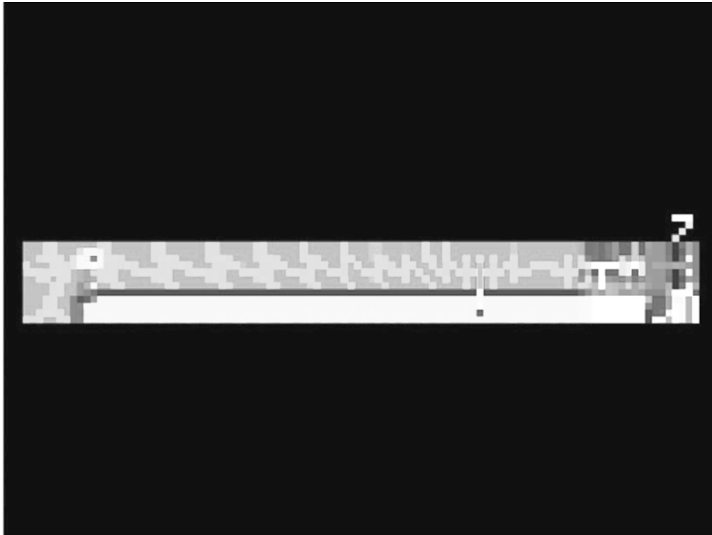
ATTACHMENT

If one follows *Passage*'s visual pointers and walks the character straight to the right, it takes some seconds to run into the arms of the spouse, whose presence in the world has lingered there from the beginning as

blurry silhouette (see centre of fig. 10). The moment of walking into her space has consequences for the rest of the game. Henceforth the player navigates as a couple, classified as heterosexual by conventional gender markers.

In what follows, I will discuss three moments in the construction and maintenance of this union: The way we fall in love, the way we go through life together, and what this suggests about imagined gender roles and the notion of romantic love.

Figure 10: Screenshot of Passage: *The starting position of the main character (left), future spouse in the distance*
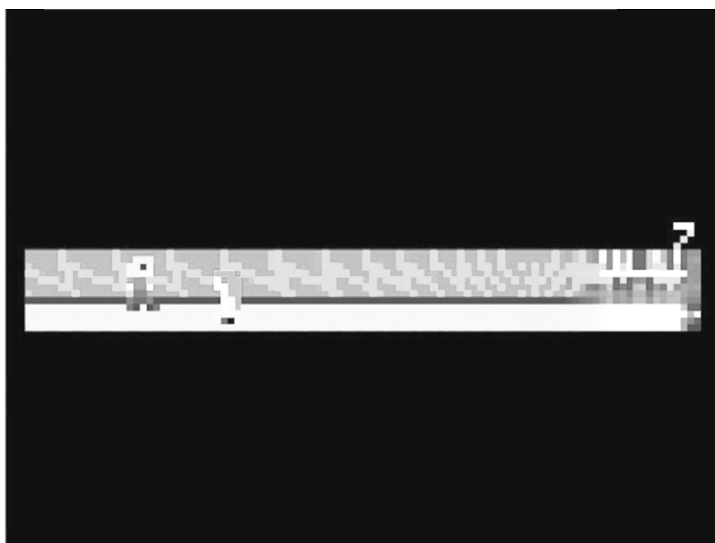

Source: Jason Rohrer (2007)

Falling in Love as Incorporation

Upon moving closer, we turn the spouse character from a blurry, latent New into a recognisable Given; a red-headed woman in a bright green

dress. What distinguishes her from the player character is her static posture. Is she human after all? Curiosity may lead us to move closer.

Figure 11: Screenshot of Passag*e, meeting the spouse*

Source: Jason Rohrer (2007)

Figure 11 shows the situation right before entering the spouse's personal space. Once we do, a bright red heart envelops the couple. This moment in which "there is love" (Oliu 2014) is also the moment in which the hidden incorporation rule is triggered. This means that the woman is 'turned on' into an animated wife-being, turning around to face the same direction as her husband and starting to walk in sync with him. There is no space between the characters, so the player suddenly needs to navigate a conjoined couple, dealing with the resulting alteration of game space.

Incorporation imposes a sudden turn of events, which takes first-time players by surprise and constructs a certain notion of romantic love which is worthwhile disentangling in game design terms. First, touch is

not only defined as an expression of 'falling in love'. It also function as the cause of a permanent shift in status from single to couple. Once incorporated, the presence of the spouse is no longer up for debate. Love is circumstantial rather than a matter of choice. This is quite different from the attachment quality in *FFVII* and *Ico*, where players are interreactively involved in forging a bond.

In *Passage*, the player has to come to terms with love as it strikes, love as something overwhelming to be adjusted to. This is problematic considering how the relationship is established. While 'falling in love' comes unexpected, advancing the spouse is still an act committed by the male character, while the woman waits to be 'taken' as a wife.

Man Acts, Woman Appears

Like in the games previously discussed, *Passage* uses gender to say something about the attachment quality, the motives of bonding, and the characters' identities. Due to the game's minimalism, this happens through simple binaries. First, conventional markers like the long dress and the long hair are used to distinguish female from male character. But these markers correspond with a gameplay dichotomy of passive versus active. It is worthwhile looking at how this construction happens from the beginning.

When they enter the game the player character's gender is ambiguous. They are only defined through what they can do; traverse the passage. When we meet the spouse, the visual markers introduce a gendered difference, and therefore encourage a heteronormative reading of the situation: The player character turns from genderless to male. However, since the player character and his behaviour are Given, it is the woman who appears as other. This is in line with what cultural critics Laura Mulvey (1999) and John Berger (2008[1972]) describe as mechanics of the male gaze. In her influential essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Mulvey observes the conventional staging of women as image, as a thing to be looked at, while men are the bearer of the look. Berger, similarly, writes that "men act and women appear. Men look at

women. [...] The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (Berger 1972: 42).

The spouse is a 'sight' in the most classical sense. Before we 'activate' her she behaves like other landmarks in the player character's environment, "like a lamp-post", as a player observes[1]. A visual detail shown in fig. 2.8 is that before attachment, the woman, though positioned on the same plane, is slightly beneath us. In the second 'love' envelops the characters, she is lifted and clicked into place side-by-side with the male character.

The portrayal of romantic love in *Passage* proliferates a traditional gender pattern we know from Grimm's fairy tales and 1960s and 70s Disney princesses (Stover 2013).

In her essay Damsels and Heroines, Cassandra Stover discusses Snow White and Cinderella (both in Grimm/Grimm 1812) as prototypes of women "wishing for the one she loves to find her" (Stover 2013: 4). According to Stover, Disney has moved on towards a post-feminist rhetoric of the strong female character fighting for autonomy. *Passage*, in contrast, presents waiting for love as the only objective of the spouse. This is illustrated by the case in which she is not picked up. In this case, she will indefinitely wait in her corner in the North-East, her gaze turned towards the past, from where she suspects her lover. Since the woman is reliably passive, the player can explore the passage until they get old, deciding last-minute whether to spend their last days in company. In case players cannot find her, they can conveniently track her down using Rohrer's coordinates[2].

The way gender markers are deployed do not get less problematic when considering the autobiographical dimension of the game.

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1   Retrieved from the Penny Arcade fan forum: http://forums.penny-arcade.com/ vanilla/discussion/48341.

2   Rohrer includes directions of the spouse in his creator's statement, which can be found online at: http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/statement.html.

According to Rohrer, the characters are representations of himself and his spouse. In the closing note of the creator's statement, he writes: "That's me and my spouse in there, distilled down to 8x8 pixels each.[3]" The claim of authenticity in such a statement has led to a collective journalistic blindness towards *Passage*'s misogynistic undertones.

Given the wide reception, any reaction to the problematic portrayal of the spouse is surprisingly absent (Burch 2007, Grossman 2007, Koster 2007, Meer 2007, Siegel 2007, Thompson 2008, Fagone 2008). The loud appraisal of *Passage*, as an "art game hit" (Koster 2007) and Rohrer as "programmer saving our 21st century souls" seems to look through and past the spouse's object status. Instead of seeing the passive woman for what she is – a fantasy woman produced by selective, male-focused design decisions – the 'autobiography' label seems to function as an excuse. In fact, Rohrer's one-sided portrayal of romantic love seems to be celebrated as artistic genuineness; as an 'authentic' expression of human existence. This is done despite the fact that the real-world spouse portrayed in the game is never invited to speak about her own experience. Reducing her to a collectible in the game does not make the game more 'authentic'. It only highlights that what's going on is a symbolic act of silencing. The suspiciously male-dominated, journalistic enthusiasm around *Passage* indicates that not only is this acceptable, it is not even noticed as problematic.

Marriage as Unification

Passage expresses marriage as the melting together of two bodies. Forming a union, causing "two to become one" is an old expression for romantic love, featured both in a Spice Girls' song (1996) and the *Old*

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3   Read Rohrer's creators statement here: http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/ passage/statement.html.

Testament[4]. In both popular texts 'becoming one' denotes sexual intercourse, while in *Passage* physical conjunction has more to do with giving up privilege in exchange for a life with someone else. Moving as a couple means that we can only move so far. Some of the deepest layers of the passage will have become impassable, and one may be confined to the 'ordinary' surface level of a 'simple life'. However, if one manages to find a treasure chest, rewards will be doubled, as indicated in the score.

For some players, moving as a double character, however, has been a cause for frustration. As user Scosglen sarcastically asks in the Penny Arcade forum: "Is the hidden lesson that marriage will hold back your treasure-getting opportunities?[5]" For the user, the change from being single to being married equals a loss of opportunities, evoking a sense of compromise. Since the possibility space has been diminished, sharing space with the wife signifies a lack of freedom. The increasing score count provides only a meta-commentary on the relationship. Like an advertisement in a lifestyle magazine, it attempts to sell heteronormative commitment as a project worthwhile pursuing (Ingraham 2005).

What makes the union device work as a design element fostering attachment instead of mere frustration is the space-is-time rule. The push forward in time now applies to both characters. Since the spouse walks ahead, the anticipation of an end – and the worry to lose her – can be projected onto her. What if she reaches the end of the passage? Will she die? Will both characters die? Being pushed towards an uncertain end creates suspense. Time is a threat unifying the couple not only spatially but emotionally. They are in this together.

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4   In the "Genesis" verse 24:2 of the *Old Testament*, God commands: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (New King James Version 1982).

5   Online source: http://forums.penny-arcade.com/vanilla/discussion/48341.

Ageing Together

The collective push towards the right is related to the fourth device, ageing. Not only is the environment transforming in front of our eyes, but so are the characters' bodies as they get older. The first soft hint at this temporal progression is the constant change of the characters' pixelated fashion. Over time, the suggestion is, interests and tastes change. Simultaneously, hair colour changes as well; a particularly strong hint at deterioration being the moment Rohrer loses his hair.

These dynamics introduce a presentiment of death, of transitoriness. However, even in the light of physical markers of old age and the diminishing space between the couple and the right side of the passage, it is impossible to foresee what will happen. After all, through the past minutes, players have become used to the monotonous pace of their walk, accompanied by equally monotonous, repetitive chiptune music. Additionally, what may keep hopes for eternal life up are the very conventions of side-scrolling games, in which death is usually only a provisional state. As much as *Passage* gives us cues toward its built-in mortality rule, we would not be surprised if the game presented us with a *deus ex machina* mechanic ensuring replayability.

RULES OF DYING: MORS REPENTINA AND THE TAME DEATH

Soon enough, the game demonstrates what it means to arrive at the right side of the screen. The spouse performs the death rule, showing that the end of the passage is the end of a character's life. There is a specified spot, some pixels before the end of the screen, where the spouse avatar will instantaneously turn from person into gravestone. By putting her "ahead" of the player character, the game decides that the spouse dies first. Her transformation stays noticeably uncommented. The only change that occurs is that the player character is visibly bent over with grief, and from now on will move slower.

Passage's rule of dying is both shocking and instructive. It is shocking for its matter-of-factness: The game simply swaps the spouse's

sprite from human to gravestone. There is no additional effect like in the moment of falling in love, which is accompanied by a simple falling in love animation. Neither is there a blackout, nor any other kind of cesura indicating that something important has happened. Death is instantaneous and ordinary. On the other hand, this moment is informative because it demonstrates what will happen to the player character sooner or later.

Assuming that a similar transformation will occur to the husband as well, players can only guess how much time is left in the game. This gives the player some seconds for contemplation. They know, with some certainty, that their own death is imminent, so how are they going to spend their last moments?

I would argue that although the rules for both deaths are identical, they come with different ideologies, best demonstrated through two concepts by French death historian Philippe Ariès (1974). Ariès noticed that among some common attitudes towards death in Western history are the notions of the tame death, the idea that death makes itself known by those who die, and its opposite, sudden, traumatic death, a death that has been considered shameful and ignominious. He calls this second death the 'bad' death, using the Latin phrase *mors repentina*.

I would suggest that by means of its spatial set up, and the ageing device, *Passage* models temporality and evokes the anticipation of death. However, we do not know death until we see it in the sudden splitting away of the spouse. This makes the spousal loss a *mors repentina*; an unannounced, and, in Ariès terms, scandalous version of dying. The scandal lies in its sudden, traumatic nature, for which the player is unprepared. While they might suspect that death is possible, the game has not told them how. In Western death culture, particularly during medieval times, unexpected dying has been conceived as 'bad' death, contrasted by the controlled, certain, and announced 'good' death.

Passage gives us a chance to experience this good, tame death as well, and it incidentally does so by using the woman's 'bad' death as an example. Spousal death incidentally educates us about the rule of dying, and thus prepares us for what the player character is in all likeliness going to experience in a moment. In other words, the death of the spouse

tames her husband's death: It provides knowledge about when and where death will occur and gives the player a chance at planning the last moments of the main hero. The wife is not only used as object of love and projection for feelings of grief. She is also sacrificed to make the player character's death less shocking, providing a tame death experience for her husband.

What would happen if the roles were reversed? Only a slight modification – a swapping of character sprites when falling in love – would suffice to introduce a situation in which the spouse outlives her husband. In this case, the male character would carry the burden of performing a *mors repentina* with its shock effect. The narrative would change to focus on the widow. For the first time active while single, it would be an entirely new experience to make her search the landscape for a treasure chest of her own before she realises it is time to pass.

While swapping gender roles, this scenario would not break with Rohrer's intention of an autobiographical narrative. Since his wife was still alive when the game was released in 2007, *Passage*'s death rule is a construction of an imagined future to which there are alternatives. When deciding who dies and who survives, game designers consciously or unconsciously make use of available narrative templates. *Mors repentina* versus tame death are such templates, which *Passage* updates to the affordances of simple gameplay rules, presenting them as gendered events.

Death of the Other, Passivity, and the Ethics of Mourning

Apart from the different versions of dying, I would like to look at the seconds of the game between conjugal bereavement and the player character's death. Arguably, this moment presents players with a moment of choice concerning the question of continuing bonds (Silverman/Klass 1996). How do they spend their last days in the light of a loss? The spouse was part of their life, part of their virtual body through which they explored the world. After the radical separation, the

only thing reminding them of this connection is the gravestone, now firmly planted in the ground.

On the other hand, after the separation the player character is free and unconstrained again. Free from the bond, he can go wherever he pleases. Surviving conjugal loss has weakened him, slowing down his pace remarkably, but apart from this he is still able to move.

Given that their clock is ticking, the player is put before a dilemma: Should they move on in the hopes of a last stimulating experience, perhaps a treasure chest, or an interesting landmark? This would mean, however, to lose sight of the gravestone, separating them forever from the wife's memory. Should they stay, and refuse to move on? In gameplay terms, this is a decision between acting and viewing, interreactivity and the refusal thereof.

For some players, maintaining visual contact with the gravestone has been an important symbolic act of attesting to spousal attachment; more important than their own ability to move on. I first observed this 'passive' player ethics when discussing the game in a class of fellow PhD students in Vienna. To introduce the premise of *Passage*, I asked a colleague to play the game in front of the class. When they reached the moment of spouse loss, they stopped. Then they let go of the controls and announced that playing on was futile and they would like to just wait for their own death.

Other players have reported similar experiences online. User LewieP writes in the Penny Arcade forum: "When my wife dies, I stop exploring, and stand by her grave so we can be together forever". When another user calls this response "disturbing", LewieP explains: "I knew I was going to die soon after her, and I wanted our graves to be side by side. If I had carried on exploring, our graves would have been no way near each other."[6] Like my fellow student, LewieP is willing to trade the player character's ability to move for a few last moments spent with their wife.

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6   Online source: http://forums.penny-arcade.com/vanilla/discussion/48341.

The wish to 'be near each other' induces the player to perform what I argue is a transgressive act against the game. By letting go of control the player disobeys the game's imperative to 'move on'. They are denying interreactivity, treating the game as a non-ergodic text, a spectacle. On the symbolic level, this transgression in terms of a play against play can be understood as a denial of normality, doing business as usual.

Stillness is a way of protesting the narrative of 'moving on', which is offered, but not enforced by the game rules. The player does not have to mod *Passage* but can simply choose to spend a contemplative moment in silence before the game ends. As LewieP puts it "what you can see on screen is what you can remember, had I let my wifes gravestone go off screen, that would represent forgetting about her".

Overall, the meaning of walking away as forgetting and staying as commitment to memory resonates with Freud's mourning/melancholia binary (Freud 1917, Strachey 1961) discussed in chapter 1.2 of this book. Freud associates "normal" mourning with the act of cutting bonds with the deceased, a radical closure through the efforts of grief work. In *Passage*, cutting bonds would occur in the moment when the spousal gravestone disappears off-screen behind the zealous griever. Squashed into the pixelated rest of past memories, the spouse becomes a trace, no longer occupying the bereaved. Letting the gravestone go off screen is a tangible image for this radical step of cutting bonds. Players' protest against this image can be understood along Silverman and. Klass's critique and the proposition of "continuing bonds" (Silverman/Klass 1996).

From the paradigm of the dominant model, standing still might not be "normal" – after all one does have the option to move on, to move away, to act. Moving one's hands away from the keyboard may first seem like a destructive act, since it challenges the status of the game as interreactive experience and breaks with the established flow of the game: If traversing the passage is life, standing still is death. The option to stand still, then, could be read as self-reproach. The player gives up

their right to move (live) in solidarity with someone else's loss of movement (life).

This means that standing still is an ethical act by which players claim agency. The decision to stand still against the interreactive 'dictate' of the game expresses players' emotional priorities. Since the game ends after five minutes, the player seizes control over the point of time at which the character no longer moves. They enact their last wish to be with their wife. Precisely by calling ergodicity, the rule of the game, into question, the player achieves a connection with the deceased.