

3.1 Grief-Based Game Design: A Case Study on Pregnancy Loss

INTRODUCTION

In the last five chapters, I have discussed design devices which are helpful to construct notions of attachment, loss, and grief. What I have shown across the five videogames is that the medium has a wide palette of opportunities to model human experiences through nuanced ergodic and non-ergodic means. They can characterise why we care, for instance by putting players into an inequitable distribution of power in which they engage in paranoid bonding rituals (*Shelter*, *Ico*), or by creating eye-level relationships between characters, which invite players to care about a character as an equal partner (*FFVII*, *Brothers*). While demonstrating rich methods of making nuances of inter-character relationships tangible, the five games have also indicated a tendency to prioritise male experience and silence other possible vantage points for grief-based game design.

Videogames' hidden preference for male experience spaces is a part of a wider problem in videogame culture (Alexander 2016, Code 2016). In 2016, videogame writer Leigh Alexander observed that "the industry model whereby wealthy white men peddle power fantasies that throttle everyone else's needs out of consideration remains alive and well" (Alexander 2016). According to her, not only are interests of "wealthy white men" overly catered to by the game industry, but this has effects

on those whose needs are systematically ignored by. In a similar vein, game developer Brie Code (2016) has argued that the gun-toting, rapid-fire-action aesthetics of arcade-style game culture do little to include a growing number of game audiences who would prefer games fostering care and empathy over fast-paced entertainment.

This case study joins this recent ‘pro-care’ videogame discourse by addressing the woman-focused experience context of pregnancy loss through game design. Given that for millions of women, grieving over the loss of a fetus or an infant is an ordinary experience¹, it is notably absent from videogames. By way of challenging this symbolic silencing, this case study looks at possibilities of grief-based game design, involving four bereaved mothers who were guiding the ideation process.

The participants constructed inspirational materials reflecting on their ongoing bonds with their fetuses. These materials were used to inspire the development of the digital game *Jocoi*. The women were contacted via the Austrian self-help group bereavement group ‘Regenbogen’, and game development was carried out with a student team at Aalborg University Copenhagen over the course of three months.

The aim of the study – designing a video game by addressing lived experiences of griever – can be understood as a reflective design process (Löwgren 1995, Sengers et al. 2004).

Sengers et al. (2004) describe reflective design as follows: “Some of our products are things to use; some are things to think with. The latter might have little practical use but can encourage reflection on

1 According to information by the World Health Organisation, “In 2009 there were 2.6 million stillbirths globally with more than 8200 deaths a day. At least half of all stillbirths occurred in the intrapartum period. Among the 133 million babies born alive each year, 2.8 million die in the first week of life.” This suggests that losing a foetus or child is a common experience for many women world-wide. Source: http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/maternal/maternal_perinatal/en/, last accessed 23/3 2017.

technology, its situated meanings in people's lives, and our own role as researchers and designers" (2004: 15).

This case study uses game design as process to 'think with' in regard to three specific questions. First, how can the narratives and ideas of griever be considered early on during ideation, not merely as part of playtesting? Secondly, how could inspirational material about lived grief experience be appropriately translated into gameplay? And eventually, how can the impact and purpose of a 'grief game' be assessed? Even though the case study is process- rather than product-oriented, the evaluation of responses to the final prototype of *Jocoi* inform perspectives on the use and value of grief-based game design.

MUSE-BASED GAME DESIGN: A METHODOLOGY

Concerning the question how to include the women's experience and backgrounds into game design, I found Rilla Khaled's (2012) muse-based design approach useful. Muse-based design is "an experimental empathic design approach foregrounding a dialogic artist-muse relationship between a game designer and player" (Khaled 2012: 721).

Khaled observes that while it is common practice for game designers to test their products on players late in the design phase, it is less common to include players' views at a point where they can impact the core design concept. This leads to missed opportunities regarding the innovation of design, causing game designers to gravitate towards a repetition of well-established creative formulae.

As opposed to this, muse-based design turns the focus to the tastes of (potential) players, and how they may challenge "existing assumptions surrounding the nature of game design" by means of fostering "designerly self-awareness" (Khaled 2012: 721-722). Instead of a conventional development cycle in which the player is involved only as playtester of a finished product, muse-based design invests in learning about the player early on and formulates appropriate design constraints in response to player inspiration. This creates a dialogic situation in which the player becomes the 'muse' inspiring ideation, and

the designer acts as ‘artist’ creating under idiosyncratic design constraints.

First, the image of the muse-artist relationship is not free from problematic associations, especially when we look at visual art history. The muse has dominantly been depicted as a young seductive woman offering her scantily clad body to the male artist’s gaze, or ‘inspiring’ him through a kiss. Famous examples are Paul Cezanne’s *Kiss of the Muse* (c. 1860) and Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). In these paintings, rather than a dialogue partner, the muse is the sexualised object on display. Her contribution to the art-making process is systematically silenced.

I would argue, however, that Khaled’s proposition of muse-based game design is a way of reclaiming the voice of the muse by bringing them back into dialogue. The artist-muse relationship is a pragmatic category whose function is to involve dialogue partners in design who are intimidated by the idea of making a game. Khaled argues that while designers often believe they can empower participants by putting them in charge of design tasks, this can backfire in situations where participants do not want to be ‘empowered’. As she discusses elsewhere (Khaled/Vasalou 2014), the question of empowerment needs to be resolved contextually.

The role division proposed by the muse-based game design approach regulates design contributions in terms of clear responsibilities. “The role of the muse is to inspire, and the role of the designer is to respond through attempts to create interesting experiences that relate to and appeal to the muse. The designer’s objective is to amuse the muse” (Khaled 2012: 724).

Finally, as an experimental design method, muse-based design stays open to the idiosyncratic needs of the participants rather than defining a procedure. In fact, part of the dialogue is to design a method which responds to wishes and fears the muses might have and provide a design context in which they feel safe and comfortable sharing their experiences.

PARTICIPANT SETTING

The muse-based design approach was set up to accommodate the given participant context in important ways. First, the reason the women joined the project was to make space for their children and share their stories freely irrespective of societal taboos. They expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of contributing to the destigmatisation of grief experience in public discourse, and about doing so using creative methods.

The denomination of ‘child’, preferred over ‘fetus’, and the consistent use of their children’s names suggested that they cultivated “continuing bonds” (Silverman/Klass 1996), and that they stayed in touch with the deceased through “inner representations” (Klass 1993). Like in Klass’ study, the women experienced the cultivation of their children’s inner representations as a fulfilling aspect in their everyday post-bereavement lives. The desire to communicate about their children was not diminished by the time that had passed between the loss event and participation, which ranged from 13 months and 10 years. The muse-based design approach suggested that the women’s rich narratives could be tapped for ideation, provided that this happened in an empowering setting.

Secondly, the women expressed some skepticism towards videogames because they had not previously identified them as meaningful expressive media. Much in line with Alexander’s (2016) and Code’s (2016) critique, the women asserted that videogames were not ‘for them’ and were understandably reluctant to embrace their roles as ‘game designers’. Addressing them as ‘muses’ was helpful here because it reframed their contribution in terms of subject matter expertise. This assured their value to the project and lessened the burden of ‘making a game’. In other words, the muse-artist division clarified expectations and areas of responsibility. Creating clear boundaries around the task to inspire without thinking too much about game design helped divert attention from videogames as objects of distrust and put focus on their experiences instead.

Hence, the muse-based design roles allowed putting the women's voices first and game development second, preliminary ignoring dominant ideas about videogames and dedicating ideation to what the women had to say. This implicitly turned the discourse from alienation into innovation: If the women were alienated by 'old' notions of video games, making a game based on their ideas would certainly inspire new ones. Alienation, if used right, could turn into a design resource.

THE TRAUERSPIEL WORKSHOP

The ideation workshop was carried out under the name Trauerspiel in the summer of 2014. Over the course of four hours, the women worked out personal symbolic expressions of their mother-child bonds, based on the principles of "dual communication" (Potash/Ho 2014) and "metaphorical modelling" (Rusch 2017).

As discussed in an earlier chapter, Potash and Ho (2014) have addressed two important moments during grief-related artistic expression; the moment of intra-personal communication or creation, also referred to as "poiesis" (Levine 2014), and the moment of inter-personal communication, or reception by a listener who cares (Thompson 2003). These moments were also important during the muse-based ideation workshop, as a process that first invited the participants to create, and later to observe and reflect.

During the initial Trauerspiel workshop in Vienna, metaphorical design exercises (Rusch 2017) were used to learn about the women's experiences. Rather than 'making a game', the goal was similar to group work in expressive arts therapy in that it involved person-centred "meaning making" (Thompson 2003).

Usually, metaphorical game design starts with a person's unorganised feelings, associations and expressions towards a phenomenon and, step by step, moves towards a formalised game system (Rusch 2017). However, since this method is individual-centred, a modification was used to create common ground for the group: The women were instructed to model their relationships with their dead

children through the image of a ‘planet’: They were asked to imagine themselves as explorers visiting the planet where their child lived, and to describe in as much detail as possible what they found there.

The shared metaphor of the planet was supposed to pave the way for observing similarities and differences across the representations in the sense of inter-personal communication (Potash/Ho 2014). First, crafting the planets required attention to ‘what was there’ in terms of the women’s inner representations of the mother-child bond. After this phase of introspection and expression, the planets could be admired side by side as part of a larger shared ‘galaxy’, suggesting commonalities and making differences more transparent.

Another intention with the planet metaphor was the creation of a context for game design, since its confinement in time and space shares elements which can be directly mapped to a game. Planets have a surface (level design), an atmosphere (visuals, sound), inhabitants (characters), and natural laws (rules). In other words, they can be explored in terms of aesthetics, mechanics, and dynamics (Hunicke et al. 2004).

The planets served as evocative objects during the semester-long development of *Jocoi*, carried out with a student team at Aalborg University Copenhagen. The women’s metaphorical landscapes presented a multi-layered canvas for empathetic game design: What desires, wishes, and fears were communicated through those models? How did they reflect grief? And what gameplay aesthetics, dynamics and mechanics did they represent? The students received photographs and transcriptions from the *Trauerspiel* workshop and were familiarised with preliminary observations about game-specific representations of loss and grief (Harrer 2013). These two resources were engaged with each other in terms of an ongoing dialogue: The women had started the design process; the goal was to complete it in a way that would resonate with their feelings.

DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Game development followed an iterative process (Fullerton 2008), during which different assessment methods were used to create functionality and user experience (UX) in line with the design goal.

The first iteration was addressed in terms of basic usability, the task efficiency (Bargas-Avila/Hornbæk 2011: 1), and functionality of the game. We wanted to know whether players could understand the controls and objectives of a game in a way that enabled them to play it without further instructions (Fullerton 2008: 279). The students were encouraged to use testing methods such as the think aloud protocol (Hoonhout 2008), interviewing and observation (Khaled 2012). These methods served to answer two central questions: How well was the game's functionality understood by players, and how well did it communicate the experience of loss?

The second iteration was tested in regard to UX, which meant it focused more on “dynamics of experience, and on modelling how interactive products, person characteristics, and context work together in shaping the experience of use” (Bargas-Avila/Hornbaek 2011: 1). In addition to student testers, the women were involved in assessment using cultural probes (Gaver et al. 1999). Cultural probes, as understood in this project, are activity packs with ephemeral value for the design process (Lange-Nielsen et al. 2012). This means that rather than an attempt at ‘objective’ data collection, probes are supposed to enrich the designer-participant relationship on a subjective level, provoking inspirational feedback (Gaver et al. 1999, Boehner et al. 2005, Boehner et al. 2007).

The cultural probe method was first used by experimental design researchers Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti (1999) in the *Presence Project*, who compared it to “astronomic or surgical probes”. They “left them behind when we had gone and waited for them to return fragmentary data over time.” With this poetic comparison, the authors illuminate the playful intentions with probe design. Subverting the meaning of ‘probes’ in a scientific context, they stress their explorative, ultimately uncertain quality. Neither scientists nor designers can predict what form

inspiration will take, but this is precisely the point of probe design to begin with. According to the authors,

“[cultural probes] address a common dilemma in developing projects for unfamiliar groups. Understanding the local cultures was necessary so that our designs wouldn’t seem irrelevant or arrogant, but we didn’t want the groups to constrain our designs unduly by focusing on needs or desires they already understood. We wanted to lead a discussion with the groups toward unexpected ideas, but we didn’t want to dominate it.” (Gaver et al. 1999)

This intention to simultaneously learn from unknown users but to do so in a non-dominating way explains the ambiguous nature of probe materials. According to Gaver et al, the design and presentation of the probe package is part of its functionality as an inspirational resource. The contents are not intended to narrow down respondents’ answers in particular ways. They are expected to elicit unexpected ideas.

During the last two decades, cultural probes have been used in a variety of design contexts, including work with families (Horst et al. 2004) and children (Wyeth/Diercke 2006). Boehner et al. (2007) deplore that this popularisation of the method has led to a standardisation of probe materials, defying the method’s original purpose of subverting rather than replacing existing methods of studying participant needs. Instead of aiming at eliminating subjectivity from the researcher-participant relationship, they seek to cultivate its personal nature through provocative, creative exercises. This means that the process of cultural probing cannot be formalised: The probe package follows contextual needs rather than standardised procedures or materials.

In my use of cultural probes, I wanted to acknowledge this intention. However, instead of designing the package as a welcome gift, as done in the *Presence Project* (Gaver et al. 1999), I constructed it as a farewell gift with a potentially inspirational use for the design team. I used the probes to get back to the women well into the design journey, as a way of thanking them for their participation.

Figure 16: The cultural probe package (left), the ‘You & Your Baby’ section in the feedback book (right)



Source: author

The package contained postcards addressed to the development team, an early prototype of the game, and a personalised scrapbook containing three sections; a feedback section on the workshop, questions about the current game prototype, and a section called “You & Your Baby” (“Dein Baby & Du”, fig. 16). This section invited the women’s personal story, an introduction of their child, and small associative exercises intended to acknowledge the importance of the child. The booklets were thus intended as ambiguous emotional objects lending themselves both to intimate storytelling and an opportunity to share thoughts about the project. When they were handed out mid-term, the women were instructed to return as many objects as possible and were given the option to receive the scrapbooks back after the project.

Finally, the end-term evaluation workshop was designed to assess the artefact’s role and relevance in the women’s lives. It involved group playtesting and a round of reflection provoked by five prompts (1. What remains? 2. Your impulse, 3. Why and for whom? 4. What does it

evoke? 5. What would you like to do now?). After writing down initial responses to these prompts, the women discussed possible trajectories and limitations for *Jocoi* and its audiences. In the following, this process will be documented alongside the ethical question of game design as a practice of representing others and their intimate experiences.

