2.6 Designing for Loss and Grief: A Summary

By looking at what video games have already done to model these subjects on an ergodic spectrum, the previous chapters have identified some devices and the way they make space for player projections. The intention was both to contribute to the growing body of game analyses which address video games as cultural text (i.e. Smethurst 2015), and to provide a pragmatic starting point for grief-based game design. Apart from making strategies available for my own design-based case study (to be discussed in the next part of this book), the hope is that other game designers will find the suggestions in this chapter useful for their own practice.

As should be clear by now, the choice of game design devices influences how games divide social power among characters, who the player is encouraged to side with, and through whose perspective and body a grief narrative is told. I have observed that rules and mechanics regulate the gameplay bonding rituals and so construct reasons to care for an other. By defining what we can and cannot do, game systems do not only constrain possibilities, but incidentally construe motivations for attachments. These motivations cannot be divorced from the players' social background, and existing cultural notions of dependency, friendship and responsibility.

While rules provide the set-up for social roles, it is also important how performing these roles *feels*. This is where controls come in, and

their ability to haptically involve the player through interreactive[1] options. Through control devices, we can model characters' presence and absence. Control schemes regulate who acts, and whether agency is distributed equally or unequally among characters. A character whose presence is tightly integrated in the controls will be physically missed when removed from the game.

In *video*games, the way we experience the other as present or absent is often a matter of what we see on screen. Different bodily constellations in virtual space invite players to interpret what is going on between characters. Are attachments secure or precarious? Are they being taken for granted by the characters, or do they need to be fought for?

Character design, the way bodies look like when they meet in space, is necessarily related. Size differences, as well as the use of identity markers characterise bodies in a way that can proliferate (or challenge) stereotypes. There is a point in treating markers such as gender and age as game design device: They make tangible part of the attachment and loss quality on a social level (i.e. they make *Passage*'s attachment tangible as spousal, and *Shelter*'s relationships as parental commitment).

Finally, auditory representation can illustrate individual character traits in less explicit, more subtle ways. They can be used to anchor characters in their worlds, adding a sense of legitimacy to their presence in the game's/the player's world.

Rather than as separate units producing particular effects in isolation, design devices only make sense in the context of a larger (non)-ergodic spectrum. For the purpose of understanding the choices game designers have when constructing notions of attachment, loss, and grief, however, I will first address them individually. The chapter closes with an overview of how they have been used in context.

1 For a discussion of this term and why I use it as an alternative to the concept of interaction, see chapter 1.1 of this book.

WORKING WITH RULES AND MECHANICS

I have observed three ways in which the bond to another character, be it an NPC (*Ico*) or a second player character (*Brothers*), is communicated through rules and mechanics. To distinguish different constellations, I have named these incorporation, dependency, and synergy rules, respectively. Incorporation rules impose a bond and thus characterise it as fact beyond the player's control. Dependency rules motivate caring through a power divide between the characters, and synergy rules foster attachment through an eye-level relationship. Irrespective of the differences between these connections, the sense of collectivity can be amplified by the use of an adversary threatening the inter-character bond.

Incorporation rules merge two separate characters into one controllable unit. This strategy is used in *Passage*, where the player character starts out as single person, and through the fateful entering of the NPC's space ends up blending with her. We are not told about this rule until the game puts it into effect. This surprise fusion makes three claims about the attachment (or more precisely, heteronormative romantic love). First, "falling in love" is presented as event beyond one's control; something overwhelming both the character and the player by being a fact of nature.

Secondly, relationships are *made* but not chosen. After the 'love' event, the characters stay attached without raising the need for consent or negotiation. Staying together is a natural consequence of falling in love. Thirdly, the two character models touch on a physical level, proliferating a conservative world view of "two becoming one" as soon as they engage in physical contact.

This last point is particularly problematic when considering that incorporation is achieved by an 'incorporator' who is incidentally male, and done to a passive 'incorporated' who is incidentally female. This enforces a possession narrative, inducing some players to talk about the spouse as an object to be "taken" as a wife. Since the wife is passive, being 'taken' is an act which she cannot question or protest.

Nevertheless, *Passage* demonstrates that incorporation can be useful to convey a notion of commitment over a short playing time and through simple means. Rather than investing in long-term bonding rituals, imposing a rule which suddenly merges two characters demands adjustment from the player, and changes the character's place in the world. Another pragmatic advantage is that incorporation can be simply reversed to introduce separation: While the condition for incorporation in *Passage* is touching the spouse, the condition for separation is that the spouse touches the right side of the screen. In other words, a spatial rule is used to both establish and undo attachment.

I suggest that the incorporation device can be used to evoke narratives beyond the misogynistic version of spousal attachment proposed in *Passage*. A simple gender swap would be the most obvious possibility to avoid the hegemonic cliché of male agency and female passivity. Another option would be to modify the separation condition to allow for breakups, perhaps by the introduction of landmarks, treasure chests, or new characters which may motivate separation.

Rather than imposing attachment, dependency rules structure gameplay around the need to help a more vulnerable character and motivate attachment through the feeling of responsibility. *Shelter*'s win condition is to survive in the wild, but its rules and mechanics focus heavily on keeping the cubs' wellbeing in mind while traveling from burrow to burrow. This is reflected in the mother badger's ability to forage for food, which the badger cubs must eat in order to survive. At the same time, the cubs are defined as vulnerable and trusting, following their mother even when she walks off into the habitats of predators, and starving when she fails to feed them. This dynamic is constructed through a permadeath rule: Once attacked or perished, the cubs disappear forever; there is no quick save option to bring them back. This frames death as the *player's* failure to provide rather than presenting it as part of an inevitable narrative moment. Each death comes with the question, *Could I have done something different to prevent this loss?* Due to interreactivity, the answer is always yes, encouraging emotions of guilt.

Although matching the theme of survival in *Shelter*, permadeath is not required to construct dependency. *Ico* uses the device to produce elaborate rituals around helping a less capable other. Examples are Yorda's jump into Ico's arms, the fights against shadow creatures, and the escape towards the next idol gate. These rituals instil a sense of responsibility which can turn into gameplay deprivation when the dependent other is gone. In both *Shelter* and *Ico*, the loss of the other is the loss of the ability to help. With Yorda gone, there is no one to fight for, and no one to escape with, while the loss of a badger cub, as we have seen, evokes guilt over being a bad parent.

Game designers using dependency to motivate attachment should not forget that this device is based on an inequitable distribution of power between two characters. If players emotionally invest in dependency they do so because they feel responsible for a weaker, less dependable, or completely helpless other. This can be appropriate in some cases, as in the portrayal of an infant-adult relationship (*Shelter*). In the case of *Ico*, however, the power divide coincides with a gender divide, characterising agency as an incidentally male quality, while Yorda's physical inferiority is *also* coded as feminine trait.

Another consideration is that escort missions, which both *Shelter* and *Ico* are examples of, are often blamed for characterising the helpless other 'artificially stupid'. This means that while characters are programmed to be vulnerable, this does not reflect in their behaviour, such as when they run into a line of fire or confidently attack clearly overpowered enemies. *Shelter* and *Ico* circumvent this problem by disallowing the NPCs to autonomously interact with enemies. The downside of this strategy is that they have no autonomy and are therefore inferior by proxy.

A third attachment device is synergy, which is when two characters' roles and abilities are defined as complementary and equally strong. The motivation for attachment is not the need to assist a helpless other, but conversely, to respect a similarly strong partner through fun collaboration. Synergies can be prescribed by or subtly emerge from the game rules. *Brothers* is an example of prescriptive synergies, since the

only way to progress is to use the complementary abilities of Big Brother and Little Brother. The brothers collaborate on eye-level, and all elements in the game world are custom-tailored to accommodate teamwork. The rules of interaction are simple: Each brother owns a button that triggers a contextual action depending on the game object in front of them. This way, the game conditions players to interpret some tasks as 'Big Brother tasks' and others as 'Little Brother tasks', dividing responsibilities equally.

While in *Brothers* synergy is authored and pre-defined, *FFVII* uses synergy more subtly, through character stats and battle dynamics. Instead of forcing the players to recognise Cloud's and Aeris's chemistry, the game balances their character profiles in ways which encourage Aeris's inclusion in battle party. Cloud is optimised as a physically strong character who is good on the offensive. Not only does he acquire fighting skills faster than others, but his limit breaks feature mostly aggressive strikes.

Aeris, conversely, develops mage skills swifter than any of the remaining characters, and performs otherwise expensive restorative moves for free. Over the course of many battles, players are allowed to explore these synergies and may come to the conclusion that Cloud and Aeris are a good match. Like in a mutually beneficial long-term relationship, or a friendship, synergies are nuanced and may create attachments which – as I have shown in my discussion of fan hacks– are difficult to let go.

When it comes to loss, the way we have invested in synergy dynamics matters. If synergy has been imposed, as in *Brothers*, separation is a matter of scripted events as well. Contrasting *FFVII*, where attachment is a player's personal choice, *Brothers* talks about rather than elicits emotion in players. If synergetic attachment has been a personal choice by the player, like in *FFVII*, players can feel shocked by the separation, feeling a "secondary loss" (Stroebe/Schut 1999) of their strategy setup, and develop fan practices of "continuing bonds" (Silverman/Klass 1996) with the lost character.

Including an adversary is part of the conventional videogame formula, in which an enemy or evil force exerts aggression against a game hero and needs to be overcome to win the game. But an adversary can also serve to foster belonging between characters. In all games I have discussed, a friendly other is made important by making them the target of some antagonistic force, whether evil or a force of nature. Yorda is attacked by shadow creatures which only Ico can get under control, Big Brother and Little Brother bond over the fear of the evil Spider Lady, and *FFVII*'s battles against fantasy monsters make up the better part of time spent with Aeris. The badger cubs are in a constant threat of being killed by predators, flames or high water, and the progression of time in *Passage* conjures up the question of how long the couple will stay together.

In any of these cases, danger to the team unit serves two functions. First, it strengthens collective identity by drawing a line between 'us' and 'them'. This line emerges from who the rules define as victim (us) and as perpetrator (them), constructing a sense of belonging. Secondly, danger foreshadows an inevitable or possible separation. The shadow creatures in *Ico* do not take Yorda away from Ico, but they point to Ico's paranoid fear of loss in an uncertain future. Indeed, the shadow-fighting rituals foreshadow this loss. In a permadeath scenario like *Shelter*, the adversary does not foreshadow but produces loss immediately. One wrong step and one badger graphic is missing (Ellison 2013). While the devices described above characterise specific attachment qualities, the adversary device can be used to amplify a sense of in-group belonging.

WORKING WITH CONTROL SCHEMES

As input devices, controllers make what is happening between characters physically tangible. Control schemes communicate who is imbued with agency and create a sense of presence. Game designers can use control schemes to model feelings of presence and absence through interreactive strategies, designing haptic rituals to realise a connection. I have observed two ways in which games have done this compellingly,

through devices I call the tandem controls, and the call-response controls. The former constructs presence by mapping two characters on the controls simultaneously; the latter models yearning for a desired character, focusing attention on the desiring character.

Brothers demonstrates that instead of channeling all action through the perspective of a single character, video games can use the device of tandem controls to divide gameplay rituals among several characters. In the game, the controller serves as a haptic proxy of the sibling constellation we see on screen: We see Little Brother on the right side of the screen and press the right action button on the controller; the left side is reserved for Big Brother.

Over time, our hands are conditioned to feel the brothers in terms of 'their' space on the controller. The real-time sharing of space among characters is different from role-playing settings like in *FFVII*, where several characters take turns. Tandem controls express a notion of equality by making several characters 'own' space simultaneously. This avoids creating the feeling of a hierarchy or a 'pecking order' between characters.

Through repetition, *Brothers's* controls normalise the equal presence of the brothers. This feeling is then exploited in Big Brother's death to create a powerful sense of bereavement. Even as Big Brother is visually absent, his action button remains in the hand of the player. Big Brother is present as an "inner representation" (Klass 1993) in Little Brother's world, from where his actions become tangible memories with an impact on the game world.

This demonstrates the potential of tandem controls as design tool for narratives of commemoration and remembrance. Once the presence of a character has been established on the haptic level, designers can combine visual absence and haptic presence to suggest that a character continues to matter after their death.

While the tandem scheme maps the actions of several characters at once, the call/response device focuses on a single character's yearning for another. *Ico* only addresses the main character's wish to be with

Yorda, which can be expressed by pressing the shoulder button on the controller.

Unlike *Brothers*, in which each character owns a button, and therefore agency, the call/response scheme characterises Ico as an agent uttering a request, and Yorda as the addressee following suit. This amplifies the asymmetrical power distribution, since the game never explains Yorda's motivation to follow Ico. Her actions always happen in response to an external demand, so we are left in the dark about her true ambitions and intentions, including whether the desire for intimacy is mutual. It is not her choice to hold hands, it is Ico's anxious demand.

This means that by putting a single character's emotional requests in the spotlight, *Ico*'s call/response controls characterise one character as hungry for attention, while the feelings of the desired characters are unknown. Nevertheless, by rendering Yorda's responses reliable, making her consistently jump across the abyss into his arms, or holds his hand, the player comes to expect that the call is always followed by a response.

When Yorda disappears, players can still press the 'desire' button, but Ico's voice goes into the void. His unrequited shout feels like a desperate attempt to stay connected to a lost other, which is a more uncertain post-loss scenario than the tandem control's certainty of *being* connected beyond death. Due to this uncertainty, the call/response scheme characterises attachment as precarious and fragile, characterising love and loss as an ambivalent experience which can never be fully understood.

WORKING WITH SPACE AND ENVIRONMENT

If videogames represent characters on screen, both the distance between them and their movements can express different attachment qualities. How and to whom is space granted or denied? I have observed different spatial strategies games use to answer this question, which I have called *the union*, *the invisible bond,* and *the elastic bond*. In the union, there is

no space between characters; the invisible bond makes an NPC automatically follow the protagonist in an effort to keep close; and the elastic bond has the player negotiate the distance between characters through gameplay decisions. These three constellations make two claims about relationships. First, they decide to what degree intimacy can be taken for granted, depending on whether the space between characters is safe or contested. Secondly, they determine the quality of loss when the other is removed from the constellation.

The union appears in *Passage*, where the player navigates a double character unit through space, adjusting to an altered size imposed by incorporation. In the maze environment of *Passage*, a double body unit tells a story of compromise: The player can no longer reach the treasure chests they used to reach, and this is a direct result of connecting with the wife. The couple is not only controlled by the player, it is also controlled by space. Tapping into the convention of left as past and right as future (Kress/van Leeuwen 2006), the union is pushed towards an uncertain future at the end of the right screen.

This has two bonding effects: First, since the couple is pushed towards the right edge together, the question of what awaits them affects both of them. Will things stay as they are? Or will they be separated soon? Secondly, since the spouse is heading the party, we can expect her to reach the right side of the screen first. Some players may anticipate her loss and thus hold on to her while the bond lasts. Since the rule of death –hitting the right edge of the screen – has not been established yet, players have no way of telling whether things will improve, worsen, or end. The only thing to do is to spend one's remaining time as a couple to the best of one's abilities.

An invisible bond is established when the distance between characters is automatically regulated by the game. We have seen this strategy in *Shelter* and *Brothers*, where it is used to express the 'natural' belonging of a family bond: In *Shelter*, the badger cubs follow their mother wherever she goes, since proximity is synonymous with better chances of survival. If malnourished, the cubs may slow down, and make the crossing of a creek, or the traversal of hawk-ridden landscapes more

risky. Maintaining a good relationship is thus a matter of lubricating the invisible bond by feeding the cubs regularly.

Shelter also demonstrates how, for extra effect, the family bond may be temporally broken, as in the nocturnal 'panic' mode when the cubs, scared by the presence of predators, disperse in different directions. In panic mode it is again the mother who is fully responsible for getting her young back and re-establish the safety of the family unit.

In *Brothers*, the invisible bond is introduced in the form of a maximum distance between the characters. While solving puzzles, the brothers must not leave a given area, reinforcing a sense of collective sibling identity, albeit without the power hierarchy the 'follower' dynamic creates in *Shelter*. Within their identity space, the brothers can roam around freely, and interact with the environmental.

In both games, there is an invisible, hard-coded attachment space. It indicates that relationships are given rather than player-made. This strategy allows game designers to prescribe a sense of belonging. The relationship is something natural, something taken for granted by the characters, as is often the case in real-world family scenarios. Neither in *Shelter* nor in *Brothers* do the players have to construct togetherness and intimacy from scratch through hard work. It is there by default.

This is different in the elastic bond, where intimacy is something desirable but also something contested. In *Ico*, the two protagonists struggle through an adverse environment, where staying together grants benefits but is not always possible. Distance is defined as dangerous: The farther the characters are apart, the more exposed the NPCs are to aggressors. However, Yorda does not 'instinctively' seek Ico's space, like the cubs in *Shelter* do. She needs to be explicitly called over, and sometimes left alone when the game disallows her from accessing key areas. This forces the player to take the risk of temporary spatial separation, followed by a pleasant reunion. The elastic back and forth frames intimacy as a precious resource that must be earned rather than expected.

Overall, the elastic bond is a device which can be used to characterise relationships as problematic, tense, or tragic. It

communicates that the presence of the other can never be fully owned, even if this is a collective wish.

WORKING WITH CHARACTER DESIGN

Visual design, the way characters and their environments look, can do much to portray experiences of bonding, loss, and grief. They add a socio-cultural dimension to the loss experience, using identity markers such as age, gender, and kinship. Throughout my analyses I have focused mainly on these three identity markers and how they have invited players to care. Furthermore, I have observed how visual design can be used on a metaphorical level to express character emotions via emotional landscapes.

Gendering, or the characterisation of protagonists along a female/male binary, has been used to foster bonding in two ways: bonding over gender difference, and bonding over similarity. Bonding over gender difference is used by games which imply bonding as heteronormative longing for the opposite gender (*FFVII, Ico, Passage*). Part of the motivation to bond is a romantic interest.

In *FFVII*, gender difference structures who acts and who is looked at (and by proxy who desires and who is desired), which is similar to *Passage*, where incorporation is marked by a gender divide. Long hair and skirt are conventional markers of femininity on the spouse; these markers happen to correspond with a role of the passive object waiting to be incorporated by a male protagonist. Visual gender markers, then, define whose experience we side with. In *Ico*'s dependency constellation, gender serves a similar purpose of declaring different abilities male or female. Through gender, the game designers portray Yorda's inability to swim, climb, fight, and run as feminine traits.

The second function of gender is same-gender bonding; loyalty over the fact that one shares gender aspects with someone else. This is done in *Brothers*, where gender markers regulate the boundary between friend and foe. The two prominent female characters personify existential

threats. The ghost mother, whose appearance is confined to Little Brother's hallucinatory episodes, explains Little Brothers' post-traumatic fear of water. The other woman – an evil, seductive spider witch – is responsible for Big Brother's death and is thereby cast as a convenient hate object facilitating male bonding. Women are not othered to be desired, they are othered to provide a context for a male-centred grief narrative.

It is possible that *Brothers*' misogyny is a side effect of repurposing mythological archetypes rather than a matter of conscious game design intent. However, design ignorance does not excuse toxicity. The Spider Lady boss battle mechanic, in which Big Brother pulls out legs from the spider's body to disarm the woman's seductive charms is an obvious rehash of the *vagina dentata* myth and its century-long tradition of vilifying female sexuality (Raitt 1980).

Visualising age can flesh out the reasons for responsibility and care, like in *Shelter*, where the size difference between the badgers points to an adult-child relationship. The size difference makes immediately clear who cares and who is cared for, and achieves a cuteness effect: Through the relative smaller body size of the badger cubs, who clumsily waddle along with their mother, we understand that these cubs are worthy of our protection.

In *Brothers*, age markers are used to justify the distribution of skills among the brothers. From the beginning, it is intuitive to assume that Big Brother will pull the heavy levers and push Little Brother over the high latch. As *Ico* demonstrates, though, body size is not always used to mark age or competence. Yorda is much taller than Ico, but her size does not translate into skills or responsibility. If anything, it emphasises Yorda's unavailability, and invites readings of Ico's yearnings in terms of an infantile desire for the mother's attention (McDonald 2012).

Another use of age markers is shown in *Passage*, where character sprites change over time as to display varying fashion choices and physical conditions. This expresses the collective experience of ageing together as the couple is pushed forward in time. Here, age markers

represent a process and stress the character's collective experience of growing old, rather than marking different social roles.

While markers of gender and age are concrete ways to portray character traits, a more subtle visual strategy is to reflect a character's inner life in the game landscape. In *Ico*, bonding with Yorda takes place high up on the castle walls, which progressively crumbles throughout the game. While together with Yorda, the weather is sunny and clear; if outside, one can survey the surroundings, and the atmosphere is calm. The loss of Yorda coincides with Ico's fall from the bridge: The scenery changes from homely to rough. We are thrown into a dark cave framed by a thunderstorm. A loss of orientation accompanies the loss of bonding rituals. The environment is also used by *FFVII* and *Brothers* as additional indexical sign pointing to character traits. Aeris's birth house is located in the midst of the poor slum region in Midgar's Sector 5 but flowers bloom in her garden, indicating her resilience and innocence.

The journey through diverse landscapes and the use of day and night cycles, as well as different weather types, illustrate collective experience in *Brothers* and *Shelter*. Big Brother's death, as well as Ico's fall from the bridge, are accompanied by thunderstorms.

However well landscapes and weather can communicate characters' inner lives, *Brothers* is a good example for the overuse of this device. In the game, every landmark, tree, and animal in the landscape has an explicit meaning. Rather than making space for emotional projection, this puts the player into an emotional straitjacket, forcing them to follow the emotional message along or to be lost on the way.

WORKING WITH SOUND AND MUSIC

Sound can describe both the conditions under which attachment and separation is experienced and the personality of the character one relates to. If it is used synaesthetically, it characterises other sensations, such as smell or vision. Another possibility is musical theming, using a musical loop repeatedly to characterise a place, activity, or attachment figure.

Auditory synaesthesia, the coupling of sensations through music (Pichlmair/Kayali 2007) can simulate aspects of what it feels like to be in an attachment or suffer from separation. Used in game design, it can be used to simulate a sense of smell, like in *Shelter* where the badger mother's sense of danger is indicated through audible cues. Sound is used to heighten the sense of collective threat, but also to supply soothing feedback to a successful nurturing activity. This creates a panic/reward structure, which illustrates the emotional level of maternal caring produced by the gameplay ritual. Since rituals happen repetitively, the auditory structure provides a subtle expression guiding the players how they should feel.

Some games use musical themes, recurring melodies, which anchor a character in the game world. We have seen this at use in *FFVII*, where variations of the Aeris theme are played to mark geographical regions and events as 'Aeris-centric'.

The meditative tune both normalises and legitimates Aeris's presence in the game world and characterises her as calm and spiritual. This 'emotional payload' is evoked during her impalement, when the player is made to listen to the full version of Aeris's theme. Apart from hinting at the fact that we are about to lose an important character, hearing the tune continue during the post-impalement boss battle creates an effect of traumatic numbing. Aeris's friends cannot believe what just happened, can the player?

Another version of musical theming can be found in *Ico*, where Yorda's signal theme is casually played while the start screen is visible. A player will hear the beginning of the Yorda theme over and over again, depending on how often they open the game. Inside of the game, however, we do not hear this melody until the climactic end scene, when Yorda pushes Ico's boat out of the crumbling castle, remaining buried under it herself. Like in *FFVII*, the tune is familiar, so a nostalgia effect might kick in. We have heard this song before, but not until the end, and not in the context of separation. To very observant players it will occur that the lyrics of Yorda's song "You Were There" contain the phrase

Yorda whispered to Ico in the moment of his fall from the bridge. The song comments on the couple's being together and their separation.

WORKING WITH GRIEF CONTEXTS

As devices on an ergodic continuum, using interreactivity to different extents, the design strategies discussed here unfold their effects through interplay with other devices and in mutual exchange with the player over time. This interplay can be unpacked in terms of different loss gestalts, experience clusters which comprise dynamics of attachment, loss, and grief. By means of conclusion, I would like to review the different gameplay gestalts constructed by the five games, looking at the design devices in context.

First, *FFVII* constructs an ally loss gestalt through a combination of the synergy device (abilities on par with the main hero), musical theming, legitimising Aeris in the game world, and gender difference, which marks her as a potential love interest. During the loss, which is both staged and introduces a boss battle reminding us of our 'secondary' gameplay loss, the nostalgic function of musical theming is used to construct traumatic numbing. After the loss, the game does nothing to acknowledge Aeris' absence, and allows players to search and yearn for her through fan practices. This radical removal also needs to be seen in the context of dozens of remaining gameplay hours, for which the synergy device has created a powerful premise: Aeris' limit breaks, and therefore her contribution to the collective, will be dearly missed during the rest of the game.

Passage portrays conjugal attachment and bereavement, using the incorporation device in a gendered form: The man initiates contact, the woman is incorporated, and together, they become an unbreakable union. This union, a non-negotiable connection between two characters in space is embedded in a temporal order expressed through the age device. Simultaneously, they are pushed to the the right. This combination of the union and age marker introduces the question of what will happen as the couple reaches the outer right frame. When the wife

is split from the unit through the separation rule, we remember just how much we have taken her presence for granted. Her absence conjures up the question what the player character, thrown back to a single-unit character, will do next. Will he stay with the little gravestone and refuse to move on, or will he go and explore more of the *Passag*e at the cost of leaving the gravestone out of sight? This is how *Passage* frames the male character's repertoire of possible grief responses, providing the options to move on, or to preserve bonds through the refusal to move.

Ico models the problematic loss of an ambivalent love object, perhaps the mother (McDonald 2012). The game first represents the Ico-Yorda connection as an unstable, constantly threatened bond, using the elastic bond device and a call/response control scheme, which frames the connection as inevitably precarious and enabled by Ico's repeated demands. The motive of helping Yorda as the more fragile, incompetent, and incidentally female character is established through a series of dependency rituals establishing a power divide. The staged loss of these rituals causes gameplay deprivation: Only half of the mechanics are left, and they need to be performed in a more depressing environment. Here, a symbolic landscape is used to communicate a melancholic clinging on to the lost (m)other.

Shelter's child loss gestalt first constructs the mother as self-sacrificing caretaker, using a set of dependency rules, and the invisible bond device to identify the offspring as intuitively trusting. The age device is used to reinforce vulnerability and cuteness on the visual level. The synaesthetic soundscape characterises collective alertness of potential dangers. Loss is modelled through the rule of permadeath, which constructs bereavement as maternal failure. Post-parental life is presented as dysfunctional and without purpose, since the game world caters exclusively to the project of nurturing. Since hunting and gathering become pointless with the loss of mothering duties, fruit, roots and rodents cannot be put to their assigned use. The game thus incidentally characterises bereaved motherhood's only choice as destructive pillaging.

Finally, *Brothers* constructs a fraternal loss gestalt, using a combination of synergy rules, the tandem control device, and a strategic dynamic of same-gender bonding. Attachment is characterised as safe and taken for granted. It is the player who has to grapple with a control system that – if used correctly – will adjust the brothers perfectly to their environments. The brothers share agency, with differences only introduced on the visual level of age markers, indicating contextual action (i.e. Big Brother being more likely to carry out actions requiring strength). The fraternal bond is defined as intuitive by means of making it both invisibly fenced-in (a maximum distance between them) and elastic (a back and forth between different spatial challenges). After loss, the tandem controls are used to great effect, working with a visually absent but haptically present Big Brother. By requiring player inputs that have previously mediated Big Brother's actions, the game models the brothers' continuing bonds and Little Brother's inner representation of Big Brother.

The possibilities and limitations demonstrated in these loss gestalts highlight strategies for grief-centred game design. I have argued that while providing compelling cases for game coherence, the discussed loss gestalts also illustrate current shortcomings in the representation of attachment, loss, and grief dynamics. One example has been the absence of female-centred grief experience. When it appears (*Shelter*), it comes with undertones of dysfunctionality, echoing the tendency of medical grief studies to pathologise female experience (Bradbury 1999).

Critical game design practice demands that we learn from previous failures, and challenge stereotypes which incidentally slip into game design if we fail to actively seek appropriate alternatives. Apart from subverting existing expressions, as I have suggested with the role reversal in *Passage*, one thing designers can do is address experiences which have not been tackled through game design before. This is what I have in mind with *Jocoi*, a game about pregnancy loss, which I designed as a case study on how game design can make real-world grief speakable. The tools I have identified in this chapter will be helpful to engage in a design dialogue with the bereaved.