1.2   Understanding Bereavement

This chapter provides the conceptual and historical context in which I explore bereavement as subject in games and game design. A dominant view on grief is that it is a universal process, a kind of 'work' which can be performed in more or less successful ways to arrive at the goal of overcoming.

As opposed to this view, the constructionist grief approach I prefer to work with looks at the language of grievers as the source of understanding grief experience situationally. This pushes the authority of knowledge from scholar to experience expert. What is important is the grievers' imagination and the narratives and meanings it elicits. I argue that this can be a rich resource for game design and analysis.

ORIGINS: ON MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

It is difficult to find an academic text on the subject of loss and grief that does not contain a reference to Sigmund Freud's essay "On Mourning and Melancholia" from 1917. This essay is acclaimed as the beginning of medical grief studies (at least to Western minds), holding the status as the first attempt to systematise and bring to public attention grief as a core experience in human life.

The goal of Freud's essay is an ambitious one, to capture the emotional mechanics of loss and grief. What happens to the psyche when

a person goes through an irreversible separation from a loved object, whether a person, thing, or abstraction? Freud seeks to explain possible outcomes of this separation through a universalist model. The two titular terms – mourning and melancholia – stand for a desirable and a less desirable outcome of grief work.

In mourning, which Freud considers the 'normal' outcome, grief work is used constructively to 'work through' the loss and distance oneself from the lost object. Freud describes the mechanics of this process as follows:

"Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, a great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged." (Freud 1917 in Strachey 1961: 234)

The economics of "normal grief" that Freud describes here come with a set of assumptions. First, the notion of "reality-testing" treats emotional attachment as a fact whose presence or absence in the life of the mourner can be determined ("tested") with certainty. On the one hand, this acknowledges that the deep connection someone might have to the deceased may feel as grave as a "fact".

Secondly, the absence of this object of love naturally issues a request. That request is to withdraw emotional energy from the love connection in order to overcome it. The assumption is that loss comes with a particular order, a demand that shapes the requirements for normal grief by pushing the griever towards letting go. This push is met by "natural" resistance and protest in the mourner, since "people never

willingly abandon a libidinal position". In conclusion, there is a particular set of emotional turmoil, a particular kind of "painful unpleasure [that] is taken as a matter of course by us. The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Strachey 1961: 245). In other words, there is a point of overcoming, a win state, which distinguishes successful from unsuccessful grief work. This moment of completion equals emotional freedom.

Mourning, if done right, is an act of liberation from a cathectic involvement that, through loss, has turned unfeasible. The mourner can turn themselves into a 'winner' by cutting bonds with what is inevitably lost. In Freud's words, mourning "impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live" (257). The libido to the object is disparaged, denigrated, "kill[ed]" (ibid).

This imperative of separation presents the grief situation as a zero-sum game: The mourner can choose between survival of the lost object or survival of the self. Attachment is something that has sutured the self into a certain libidinal place, a place that can only support and benefit the ego if the loved object is alive. Upon the loved one's death, the self has an unpopular choice: It either stays in place and 'rots' with the lost object, or it painfully cuts itself out of the attachment and finds a more appropriate position for new attachment. Only by 'undoing' previous bonds can the mourner's position be re-crafted, re-invented, re-immersed in new attachments. There is a particular procedure that is supposed at the core of any process of overcoming: There is the ego, the lost object, and a separation that is first met with difficulty but eventually carried out.

What, then, if a bereaved individual felt no sense of protest or resistance against the demand of separation – what if, instead, such a demand was denied, and with it the 'success' of overcoming? There is the possibility to fail the process of overcoming, in which case Freud speaks of melancholia. In melancholia the mourner does not give up on the lost object, but instead turns against themselves in reproach and

accusation, what Freud calls a "disturbance of self-regard" (Strachey 1961: 244).

This, Freud speculates, may be the result of identification with the lost object: The mourner might have had a 'strong fixation' on the loved object that induced them to incorporate it. What happens is that the object falls on the ego "like a shadow" (ibid: 249). Instead of giving up the lost object, the mourner incorporates loss and thereby gives up themselves. Yet why should a mourner do this? Freud suspects that the reason is a complex, ambivalent relationship to the loved person:

"In melancholia, accordingly, countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault [...]. In mourning, too, the efforts to detach the libido are made in this same system; but in it nothing hinders these processes from proceeding along the normal path[...]." (ibid: 256-257)

Ambiguity means that either the cause or the quality of the loss may be hidden from the mourner; "hate and love contend with each other". The "object has not perhaps actually died but has been lost as an object of love" (ibid: 245), such as in a loved person who has become unavailable as a friend or lover.

By conserving the lost object, the mourner can continue to make sense of this ambiguity. This sense-making, as Freud observes, largely consists of self-reproach and "heightened self-criticism" (247). This is what compels Freud to think of melancholia as a pathological state. Self-reproach "behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies [...] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished." (ibid: 253). This metaphor of the wound is most effective at medicalising grief as a potential disease with grave consequences.

Overall, Freud presents with "On Mourning and Melancholia" an economic zero-sum model of grief, whose two trajectories – 'good' grief and 'bad' grief, simply put – seem to summarise the challenge of letting

go[1]. This has inspired a tradition of grief psychology, whose goal it has been to further categorise the 'symptoms' of grief. Through different comprehensive models, 'grief work' has been split into tasks, and stages, steps and tracks which still resonate in popular ideas of grief today.

MODELS TO GRIEVE BY

Most models of grief today build on Freud's 'grief work' narrative but present it through a psychologised potpourri of stages, phases, and tasks. Their main paradox is that each model claims completeness, while providing an almost arbitrary number of stages.

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1   Some critics have put into perspective that this economic view is at odds with what we know about Freud's personal approach to becoming a bereaved father and grandfather (Silverman/Klass 1996: 6, Clewell 2004, Mallon 2007). It is documented that the loss of his daughter and grandson shook him profoundly (Silverman/Klass 1996: 6), and when his friend Ludwig Biswang lost his son, Freud wrote: "Although we know after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And, actually this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish." (Freud 1961: 239, as quoted in Silverman/Klass 1996: 6). Grief scholars Silverman and Klass have argued that the dissonance between Freud's medical view and his own life is typical for a modernist reductionist discourse of emotion. Freud's economic view on 'good grief' and 'bad grief' is part of a 20th century zeitgeist of understanding human experience through rationalisation. According to sociologist Zygmund Bauman, one of modernity's core features is the conviction that order and knowledge can be achieved "through the ultimate taming of the inherently chaotic natural forces and by systematic, and ruthless if need be, execution of a scientifically conceived, rational plan" (Bauman 1991: 29).

The lowest number of stages has been proposed by Rubin's (1999) so-called Two-Track Model of grief, which frames grief as wedged between individual needs (Track I) and relationship to the deceased (Track II). The model stresses grief as ambivalent activity; one can be anxious on a track I level, while simultaneously holding positive affect vis-a-vis the deceased on track II. Another bifocal model of grief is Stroebe's and Schut's Dual-Process Model (1999). Reiterating much of Rubin's cross-disciplinary concern, grieving activities can be "loss-oriented" and "restoration-oriented".

The number three plays a role especially in early 20th century models, including war traumatologist Erich Lindemann's (1944) three-stage idea of cutting bonds, adjusting to the new situation, and forming new relationships[2] (1944: 190). Two decades later, attachment scholar and neurobiologist[3] John Bowlby (1981[1969]) builds on Lindemann's

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2 In his influential essay *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief* (1944) he observes that "the duration of grief reaction seems to depend upon the success with which a person does the grief work, namely, emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships" (ibid: 190). This passage highlights two aspects of medicalisation which continue to matter in clinical discourse. First, efficiency is expressed through time and the "duration of grief". Lindemann assumes that the faster grief can be concluded, the more successful the griever. Lindemann is explicit in pointing to the therapists' role in expediting grief. At a different point, he even provides an estimation of the therapy sessions required to take a normal griever from loss event to overcoming; "eight to ten interviews" (ibid: 199)

3 John Bowlby's opus magnum *Attachment and Loss* (1981[1969]) popularised the notion of grief work widely (Parkes 2010). underscores the importance of childhood bonds when it comes to loss in adult life. However, he updates the psychoanalytic approach to attachment, adding a neurobiological angle. During childhood attachment, Bowlby argues, a person develops "working models representing principal features of the world about him and of himself as an agent in it. Such working models

three-phase principle. The first phase is characterised by yearning and searching for the deceased, followed by a time of disorganisation and despair, which is believed to be eventually replaced by some degree of reorganisation (cf. Davis 2004: 508, Field 2005).

Therese Rando (1984) suggests that the stages decathexis, development of a new relationship with the deceased, and formation of a new identity can be divided by two, turning the three stages into six 'R-processes' of mourning: recognising the loss, reacting to the separation, recollecting, relinquishing attachments, readjusting, and reinvesting in life. When it comes to numbers, Rando thus presents the most elaborate grieving system. As clinical psychologists Bonanno and Kaltman (2001) point out, however, the more elaborate the system, the more likely it is to be "rife with assumptions about what grieving should be, or how bereaved individuals should feel, and how long they should feel it" (2001: np).

Four has been the titular number in William Worden's tasks of mourning (1982). This model is inspired by Worden's observations from clinical practice, and it suggests (1) acceptance of the reality of the loss (2) working through the pain of grief (3) adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing and lastly (4) withdrawing emotional energy and reinvesting in another relationship as activities which must be mastered in consecutive order by any mourner. While these tasks might be relevant to specific situations, like conjugal bereavement, their appropriateness has been challenged for other contexts, such as parental grief (Rando 1986, Davies 2004).

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determine his expectations and forecast and provide him with tools for constructing plans of action" (Bowlby 1981[1969]: 140). During later life, these models mediate instances of love and loss, imposing an unconscious ruleset which Bowlby believes determines how we connect to others and cope with loss. From his Darwinist-biologist perspective, loss events always threaten established working models, and the individual's psychosocial survival. Healthy grief work, then, constitutes the successful "unlearning" of the attachment to the deceased (Davies 2004: 509).

Finally, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (2011[1970]) five stages of grief is the most popular bereavement model in our Western collective memory (Wambach 1985). The famous stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually acceptance, are widely applied in terms of a 'complete' picture of successful grief work, both by mourners and care takers (Wambach 1985, Silver/Wortman 1980, Izod/Dovalis 2014).

However, Kübler-Ross's ambition with *On Death and Dying* has been more global. As a part of the hospice movement in the 1970s, her interest was in demedicalising death by speaking to the 'lay' mourner. Kübler-Ross draws from a range of clinical examples while breaking with convoluted medical language. Her work features expansive interviews with the dying. However, by mapping those voices to the five-stage model, she again reduces people's rich narratives to a formula. Precisely the claim that the model is people-centred has given rise to abuse, such as in a case where nurses expected their patients to die in the "correct order" (Silver/Wortman 1980: 332).

To be fair, there is evidence that grief models can serve as tool for comfort and validation in some cases (Wambach 1985, Bradbury 1999). This is even possible if grief models are appropriated and diverted from their clinical sources[4]. Individuals who do not match the mode, however, are often left with feelings of inadequacy also known as the disenfranchisement of grief (Doka 2002, Attig 2004).
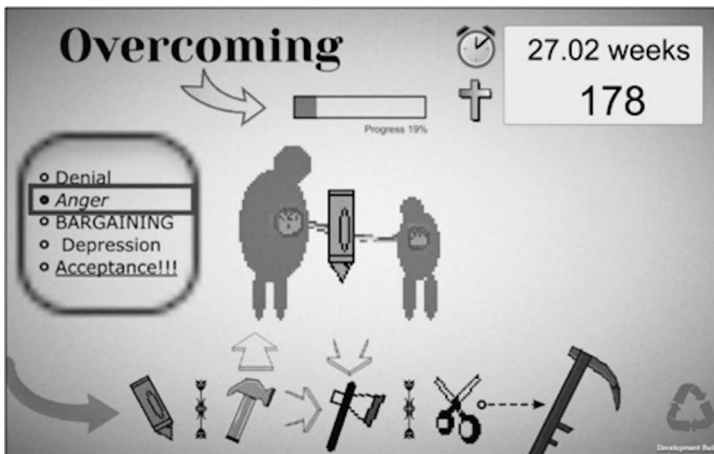
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4 As a widow in Mary Bradbury's (1999) ethnographic study Representations of Death reports: "I mean, a friend of mine told me there are three stages you go through when you lose someone. First of all you can't believe it, then you go through a stage of anger and then in the end you accept it. But, I certainly haven't got to anger yet (Christine)." (Bradbury 1999: 172). Christine's sentiment indicates that 'grieving by the model' means making sense of one's own experience through an external filter.

OVERCOMING: THE GAME

The propositions and limitations of the grief work hypothesis should now be clear in theory, but how do they feel in practice?

With the design of *Overcoming*[5], I intend to demonstrate two things. First, translating aspects of the grief work hypothesis into gameplay, it demonstrates what it feels like to perform a universal task of grief work in the most effective way, measured on a normal/pathological binary. In theoretical writing, the experiential quality of relinquishing bonds with the deceased can be concealed by the use of technical terms like decathexis, liberation, or emancipation.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Overcoming*, a literary review game about the 'grief work' hypothesis*

Source: author

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5   A prototype of Overcoming is available for MacOS on: https://enibolas. itch.io/overcoming.

In a game system, the requirement of relinquishing the bond, and 'killing' the libido can be expressed through a stressful task.

Secondly, by translating the mourning/melancholia binary into a win/lose system, *Overcoming* demonstrates how well the grief work hypothesis and its assumptions suits itself for game design. To game designers this may suggest that grief itself can be accurately expressed through a simple win/lose economy. To show the problems with this idea, *Overcoming* emphasises the generic, arbitrary nature of grief work as stressful task which follows an extrinsically imposed sequence.

Overcoming translates three features of grief work into gameplay; the idea that there is a universal task which is carried out to relinquish bonds with a deceased, secondly that normal grief work happens inside of a time window which can be quantified, and thirdly, that the success of a grief process is evaluated from the outside, by the grief scholar or therapist.

In the centre of the screen, we see two characters connected by a bond. This is the bond between griever and deceased which must be relinquished as the main objective of the game. Below the characters, we find an array of tools which can be selected and repeatedly clicked on the bond to sever it. As a generic mechanic, clicking refers to the 'universal' nature of grief work; slightly boring, while still requiring some effort. Clicks must be fast in order to be effective, and the mechanic stays the same across all 'grief stages'.

The list on the left indicates which stage the griever is currently at and determines which tool must be used to 'grieve correctly'. Through trial and error, the player must learn how tools and stages correspond. The graphics are supposed to be informative and confusing at once. They represent the inconsistency through which grief models communicate their universality claims.

The progress bar indicates how far the griever is along in the process of overcoming. An empty progress bar indicates the beginning of grief work, while a full bar indicates the moment the game is won. A full progress bar epitomises progress in our current 'digital age' and is therefore a suited as a signifier for the grief models' progress rhetoric.

A progress bar pushes attention to the goal of completion, and in *Overcoming*, it claims that emotional labour can be quantified.

There are two other items which refer directly to *Overcoming*'s quantification of grief; the timer and the score count on the right side of the screen. The moment the game starts represents the moment of loss. This triggers a stopwatch, counting up the weeks from loss to overcoming (or failure). The time limit used to indicate failure is inspired by treatment plans to what grief psychology calls 'complicated grief disorder' (Shear/Shair 2005).

While the timer counts up consistently, the scoring criteria are less transparent. The score count is based on a secret algorithm providing secret quantified information which cannot be deciphered by the griever-player. The number stands for the implied knowledge of grief psychology evaluating the 'success' of grief work. All the player can hope for is to make a difference through repetitive clicking and taking pride in their arbitrary score.

There is a second ending that is reached when the player does not do the grief work successfully and fails to fill the progress bar in time. Instead of filling up, the progress bar stays empty while a dark shadow of depression envelops the characters, 'emptying' and 'consuming' the ego until it finally disappears.

My review of psychopathological grief literature and the mechanics of *Overcoming* point to a central flaw of the grief work hypothesis. All authors imply attachment as an important prerequisite of grief, but the abstract nature of the model keeps them from explaining what this attachment means in the lives of grievers. In *Overcoming*, the bond between deceased and bereaved is the central element on screen, and the object players must engage with to win the game. And yet the player is never told why they should care about the bond in the first place. The grief work hypothesis uses a level of abstraction which removes it from the reasons for attachment.

Attachment is most generally referred to as cathexis, a universal energy currency that must be a converted from the purpose of fostering attachment to fostering overcoming. In *Overcoming*, clicking on the

bond is a dull experience because it is dissociated from the person we are connected to. This suggests that in order to understand grief as lived experience, we need to understand the embodied features of attachment. Why do the bereaved care, and how? To find out, constructionist grief theory has proposed to look at grievers' language, and the way they make sense of their feelings.

CONSTRUCTIONIST GRIEF THEORY

Constructionism argues that loss is an undoing of previously stable assumptions about the self and others; it challenges salient "narratives of self" upon which the individual used to rely (see also Thompson 2003). If loss challenges the cohesion of self-narration, grief narratives are a way of exploring new meanings. Rather than serving narrative templates from the outside, like the modernist grief work model would suggest, constructionism locates the source for cohesion in the griever's own imagination.

Social scientist and grief scholar Paul Rosenblatt observes that from a cognitive linguistic perspective, the grief work hypothesis also already proposes a particular imagination of grief (Rosenblatt/Bowman 2013). It constructs it in terms of an "ontological metaphor" (i.e. Lakoff/Johnson 1980), a discrete thing. He elaborates: "We talk about all sorts of nonconcrete things, as grief, as though they were concrete, discrete, and bounded like solid things are, like a piano or a cup, but grief is not a discrete object. It is a sociolinguistic construction" (Rosenblatt/Bowman 2013: 83).

While the ontological metaphor of grief has fed into the normal/pathological binary demanded by modernity and medicalisation, Rosenblatt argues that it has done little to "understand and help" the bereaved. This is because it silences what he calls the "hyphenated feeling/thought" of the bereaved, the felt constellation of a specific grief situation (2013: 83). He proposes that grief scholars start paying attention to this constellation by looking at the metaphors the grievers

design themselves to make sense of their experience. The kind of images, symbols, verbs used to describe a loss or grief situation indicate both priorities in the grievers' lives, and appropriate ways of addressing it as bystanders, therapists, and scholars.

Discussing the symbol of the hole, which he identifies as recurring element in griever's loss narratives, Rosenblatt demonstrates how metaphors can be critically engaged by therapists and scholars:

"Is a hole bond? That seems paradoxical, but maybe missing someone is always a connection to that person. Is a hole something to fill in? The message I hear with the hole metaphor is often, "This will always be with me, and it should be". But then the hole metaphor may seem to imply something that needs repair or filling in or a loss of self that needs to be repaired." (Rosenblatt/Bowman 2013: 84)

This passage illustrates how the engagement with the self-chosen language of the bereaved pushes attention to the griever's personal needs. Their feelings become a legitimate starting point for making sense of the grief experience. Rather than analysing how the griever's experience would fit inside an externally created template, experience is taken seriously as expert source from which appropriate self-narratives emerge. Secondly, this means that rather than moving away from the griever and their lived concerns in order to arrive at a solid true meaning of grief, meaning is assumed to be located in the griever's capacity to formulate appropriate metaphors. Thirdly, this enables understandings of grief in the plural, acknowledging the complex nature of emotion as a multimodal and multidimensional process floating between different thoughts and feelings.

Constructionism re-envisions the role of therapists and scholars from grief experts to empathetic listeners. This is discussed by clinical psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer in his essay *Failure of Imagination* (2007). Kirmayer asks what happens when the self-narratives of clients clash with the expectations of the therapist. "If the story is incoherent, implausible or unordered to us, what will we do?" (Kirmayer 2007: 363).

The modernist view of grief work would reduce incoherence to a sign of defectiveness and "slot various experiences into categories as symptoms", practicing a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Kirmayer 2007: 377). Kirmayer contends that this rarely happens consciously but is the work of prolific media stereotypes of 'good' overcoming to which neither grievers nor clinical staff are entirely immune (2007: 378). The task of a clinician, however, would be to battle engrained assumptions and imagine grief along with the visions of their client. This requires the professional to expand the "vision of the possible", listen to client's "stories and their potential truths" and thereby give authority, depth and texture to such an account (ibid: 369). In other words, one of the core competences of grief therapists and scholars is the ability to listen and give space to the expressions that be.

Grief and the Expressive Arts

This new focus on the imaginations of grievers, and the ethics of professional listening has been related to the process of art making. Expressive art counsellor Barbara Thompson suggests that loss puts the bereaved in a "state of liminality" (Thompson 2003: np), the undoing of certainty and stability, which can serve as inspirational context for art making. She argues that imagination, the crafting of symbols, allows lived experience to become real. As demonstrated in their anthology Grief and the Expressive Arts (2014) Neimeyer and Thompson, this can happen through diverse artistic modalities; dance, singing, poetry, painting, drawing.

In her approach to music therapy, Joy Berger stresses music as a catalyst for memories, which can be constructively tapped during grief to "call forth deeply personal, relevant emotions, stories, and meanings connected with one's loss" (Berger 2014: 38). Inviting grievers to recall their relationships with the deceased by listening to a music piece, the idea is to "hear and resonate with the person's current mourning, here" and to "create a new musical memory that can be revisited in this person's future ahead" (ibid). Berger points to the importance of

practicing shared music listening with an affirmative, open and empathetic attitude. This creates "a safe conduit for the person's vulnerable emotions and rich life stories to emerge" (ibid).

Shanee Stepakoff's (2014) "graphopoetic process" is a technique which uses poetry to reflect on the experiences of the bereaved. First, a poem is selected by the facilitator in response to the client's or group's themes. After letting the poem sink in, the group share their responses, engaging aspects of the poem in respect to their own experience, and emerging feelings. Secondly, the group are invited to write in silence, which, according to Stepakoff is a powerful way to reveal things which would not be expressed through speaking. This writing exercise can take a structured form. The author points out that poetic structure can give useful constraints to help participants contain feelings that would otherwise be difficult to process (2014: 68). The graphopoetic process concludes with the opportunity to read one's poems out loud and receive respectful attention by facilitator and group members.

Finally, an example for visual arts techniques is given in Leigh Davies' article "Drawing on Metaphor" (2014). Davies argues that "metaphorical imagery allows holding on and letting go, grieving and creating, to occur simultaneously" (2014: 146). She argues that possibilities for meaning creation do not only exist in the content of visual images, but in their artistic elements, materials, lines, colours, and textures. This means that the grievers' treatment of art materials can be an important resource for communication: "If, for example, a client talks about the colours of the materials available, repeatedly reorganises them and repackages them but doesn't use them, the therapist might become fascinated with the colours" (2014: 146). This underscores the importance of the facilitator's attitude, and the willingness to invite with curiosity what is there. A visual image may first not be ready to be addressed consciously, "yet it exists and can be dealt with if and when the time is right" (ibid). When this is the case the metaphorical image can be explored "to see what it can do" (147). By doing this, Davies argues, the facilitator allows the griever to treat reflections in their own terms; "to take what is timely and helpful and to leave the rest" (ibid).

While inviting meaning making through different registers, these techniques have one thing in common. They provide what Jordan Potash and Rainbow T. H. Ho (2014) call a "dual communication", on the intrapersonal (within the griever) and the interpersonal level (2014: 29). First, intrapersonal validation emerges from the process of making, and the conscious focus on lived experience through what Stephen Levine calls poiesis. Poiesis is "the basic activity of shaping in response to what is given" (2014: 14). By immersing participants in verbal and non-verbal expressions, the techniques above demonstrate that poiesis can be initiated in different ways. In the centre of poiesis is a search for appropriate language through introspection. The outcome of this introspective process is engaged carefully and respectfully.

Secondly, rather than a work requiring critique, the art object is an opportunity to observe and resonate with the griever's feelings. This moment of interpersonal validation by viewers who care, has been consistently emphasised in constructionist literature (Thompson 2003, Potash/Ho 2014, McGuiness 2014, Berger 2014, Stepakoff 2014). These can be therapists, family, group members or a general public (Potash and Ho 2014: 28). There are two features in particular, which predestine art objects as mediators for interpersonal validation.

Levine (2014) has pointed out that art objects differ from ordinary things around us in terms of their madeness, and their freedom from utility (Levine 2014: 15). According to Levine, "the work of art does not disappear in its utility; rather, it demands to be seen for its own sake. As a result, it can have a powerful effect on us, an effect that we call an aesthetic response, the experience of having our breath taken away and feeling moved or touched" (ibid). This in itself, he argues, can spark reflection about ways to live on after loss.

Secondly, Potash and Ho (2014) point to the memorialising function of art as objects with the ability to transcend time. The outcome of art making "reminds the viewer of the original event long after it has passed, allowing for continuity and immortality. This last point extends art from personally meaningful object to intergenerational symbol" (ibid: 29). They observe that especially in contexts of shared art making, group

members are eager to form connections reinforcing validation and mutual acknowledgement.

VIDEOGAME DESIGN AS EXPRESSIVE ART?

I would argue that the dual communication principle of the expressive arts can be applied to practices of game design and play. Making a videogame involves many of the expressive modalities discussed in Neimeyer and Thompson's *Expressive Art* volume; visual arts, music, writing, and spatial choreographies, for example. This creates opportunities for personal expression and intra-personal reflection.

I suggest that searching for a gameplay metaphor can be used to develop one's idiosyncratic grief language, just as can dance, poetry and story making. While game making includes different already explored expressive art techniques, it would also introduce the new feature of interreactivtiy, and the composite, dynamic nature of the ergodic continuum. Designing gameplay requires a focus on performance, possibilities, and atmospheres. This means that when grief is modelled through gameplay, the metaphors used become dynamic. To make them dynamic, the griever-designer would have to explore their image in-depth, "to see what it can do" (Davies 2014: 147).

Revisiting Rosenblatt and Bowman's (2013) metaphor of the hole in in the context of game design would allow us to explore the 'holeness' of grief in terms of dynamics, mechanics, and aesthetics: Depending on whether the hole is a bond or something to be filled, something to be repaired, etc. different experiential meanings emerge. Through play, the properties of these meanings can be explored in visceral ways, adding tangibility to words.

The benefits of both crafting and experiencing games which are based on grievers' metaphors can be seen in extension of the expressive art process unpacking what images "can do" to make us understand grief (Davies 2014). Unlike other artistic methods, however, game design engages metaphors through multiple modalities at once; rules, haptics,

graphics and sounds. While this adds complexity to the ways a metaphor can be engaged, it is possible to accommodate different priorities of grievers. For instance, if the hole metaphor evokes strong aural associations while the visual aspect is less pronounced, they might also choose an audio-based mechanic for their game. As composite texts with different levels of ergodicity, games can model different sensory aspects of what is currently most important for the griever. Even if the "rules" of grief are hidden for the griever, this hiddenness itself can become part of the game system, i.e. by designing a floating experience which allows players to soar through space like the griever does.

Like other art objects, the outcome of such a design process can invite validation through interpersonal communication; reception (Potash/Ho 2014, Levine 2014). In a videogame context, reception happens through play and therefore through an embodied participation in the interreactive scenarios (Smethurst 2015) representing the emotional landscapes of grievers. Compared to other modalities of reception, play invites the receiver to become part of a symbolic world, allowing an embodied connection to personal contents and themes. To acknowledge a griever's expressions by playing their game, one participates in their emotional landscapes and symbolically goes a piece of the way with them.

Expressive art literature reminds us of the non-judgmental attitude that would be required to "play with" the bereaved (i.e. Thompson 2003). If play is a receptive modality with the same advantages of empathetic listening and viewing, it means that gameplay is there to be experienced rather than critiqued or assessed. However, in analogy to compassionate listening (Berger 2014) and compassionate viewing (Davies 2014), compassionate play may also provide a starting point for respectful observations. Stepakoff (2014) points to the method of the respectful echo, the quiet repetition of a phrase or element that resonated for the listener. Similar to this, players may investigate a gameplay element that is particularly evocative for them: What does it mean, and what feelings does it evoke? To engage with these feelings may be a way

of honouring not only the feelings of the bereaved, but the effort done to give structure to their experience.

The way I connect metaphor and game design is inspired by Rusch's (2009, 2017) approach to experiential metaphor and emotional projection discussed in the preceding chapter. Far from being merely a tool for analysis, Rusch proposes experiential metaphor as a compelling tool to both interpret and create games in personal ways. While metaphorical interpretation unpacks gameplay in terms of its personal meaning for the player, this process is reversed in metaphorical game design. Rusch demonstrates this in games like *Akrasia* (2008), *Elude* (2010), and *Soteria* (2016), all of which address complex human experiences; addiction, depression, and anxiety.

However, there are ways in which an expressive art approach used in this thesis challenges Rusch's cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor. First, Rusch assumes that "[a]ll of our inner, emotional processes are abstract. We only have direct access to their symptoms – we can see someone go red in the face, frown, or smile – but what goes on inside remains hidden from direct observation" (Rusch 2017: 48). Emotion here is assumed to be a kind of information which resides in abstract properties 'hidden' inside the experiencer. This view coincides with the informational paradigm, which according to HCI researchers Kirsten Boehner and colleagues (2007) dominates affective computer discourse. They observe that "affect is often seen as another kind of information – discrete units or states internal to an individual that can be transmitted in a loss-free manner from people to computational systems and back" (2007: 59).

As opposed to this, they propose an "interactional view" on emotion as "culturally grounded, dynamically experienced, and to some degree constructed in action and interaction" (ibid). Applied to Rusch's example above, this would mean that going red in the face, frowning, or smiling are already parts of an emotional interaction, rather than mere symptoms of an emotion hidden inside. Furthermore, rather than neutral bystanders, we would look at the person's face from a culturally grounded stance of interaction, interpretation. Seen from this

perspective, emotional processes are concrete rather than abstract, since they emerge from a social space between people whose sense of touch, feel, sight etc. impacts the quality of emotion felt inside. This also means that emotional processes are ordinary in that they reside in the small acts of everyday life; for example the choice of a bereaved sibling to sleep in clothes of the bereaved (Foster 2011); Mrs. A's letter sorting activities after the death of her son[6] (Klein 1940).

I suggest that the interactional paradigm of emotion is not only suited to explore game design in the context of expressive art therapy, where the focus is on collective expression and communication (Levine 2014, Potash/Ho 2014). It also responds to Rusch's (2017) idea that lived experience can be made tangible through game design, while resolving a central paradox: Identifying structural aspects of experience and turning them into a formalised game system is a process of abstraction (Rusch 2017: 52). But if experiences are abstract to begin with, we would turn one abstract concept ('trust', 'grief') into another one (the game). At what point has the emotion been more than a concept, an idea? When has it touched people's lives?

An example for this paradox has been delivered earlier with *Overcoming*: This game translates a rational economic view on grief into the abstract mechanic of clicking and severing bonds. Rather than helping players to "become conscious of our experiences" (Rusch 2017: 47) the game ignores lived experience by abstracting it. I suggest that modelling experience through gameplay requires attention to its

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6   Mrs. A is the client of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1940/1994), who struggles with the sudden death of her six-year-old son. In her essay "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" Klein observes Mrs. A's elaborate rituals of rearranging furniture and sorting out letters of the deceased. Engaging with her lost son urges Mrs. A to perform specific everyday life activities confirming a connection with the deceased. In good Freudian fashion, Klein expects, however, that the 'excess' care Mrs. A. puts into the commemoration activities will stop once Mrs. A has completed her 'grief work' successfully and 'restored' her sense of self.

concrete 'livedness' and 'feltness'. What is it that makes up the messy, embodied sensation of dealing with a loss?

At first glance, this seems at odds with a tenet of game design – that game design needs precision, while experience is fuzzy. As Rusch writes:

"If you intend to make a game about something, it is not enough to have a fuzzy sense of what that something is. You cannot be vague when you are defining rules and behaviour. Rules are not like words that can tiptoe around an idea, hint at it, and make allusions. Rules lay down the law. They define how it is." (Rusch 2017: 48)

Game rules certainly "lay down the law", but from a constructionist standpoint, laws do not lay down meaning. The identical game rules mobilised in different player contexts can have vastly different consequences on the levels of engagement, perception and projection. And as I have previously argued, ergodic features do not make games more special than other media. Rules are like words in that they define possibilities for communication, which can be used in different ways to carry narratives of the bereaved.