

2.5 “Let’s All Be Good Mothers OK”: Losing the Badger Cubs in *Shelter*

In my first playthrough I lost Wendy to the river. My heart hit my throat when it made the cry as the wave swept over us all...

Psymon/Shelter Steam Forum

PROLOGUE

Shelter (2013) is a 3D adventure game by the Swedish independent game developers Might and Delight, currently available as downloadable title for Windows and Mac OS. It uses a third person perspective to tell the story of a badger mother¹ protecting five young cubs while journeying from burrow to burrow. While traversing a serene, yet danger-ridden landscape, she must look after the wellbeing of her offspring, hunt and gather food, navigate wildfires and waterfalls, and escape predators. The danger of these situations is underscored by the use of a permadeath mechanic, which renders the death of a cub or

1 The player character’s gender is left ambiguous, but there is a consensus among game designers that she is a mother. Furthermore, the developers mention “all mothers” in the thank you note at the end of the game credits.

the mother irreversible, in the latter case leading to an early end of the game.

Besides its sequel, *Shelter 2*, *Shelter* is one of the few commercial video games casting a mother as the protagonist, and to touch on the experience of maternal loss. Games discussed in previously chapters have featured mothers too, alas in passive or antagonistic roles (from the ‘ghosted’ mother in *Brothers*, to the dark Queen in *Ico*), while the attachment and grief experience is mediated through a male character. In *Shelter*, however, we negotiate the game world, and feelings of attachment and potential loss, through an implicitly maternal body. This makes *Shelter* an interesting example to learn from for my case study on pregnancy loss as a game design context.

Drawing on my first playthrough, I will discuss the case of maternal bereavement, and the consequences of losing all badger cubs during a play session. In this case, the establishment of care and protection as the sole purpose of the mother badger backfires and translates into a ‘depression narrative’, where the landscape has lost its nourishing function. I argue that this reproduces the myth of maternal loss as pathologised² “worst loss” (Rosof 2014[1994]). Minor adjustments could have led to a more empowering notion of post-loss survivorship.

When opening the game, we see the start menu embedded in an idyllic pastel backdrop of the autumn forest. The waterfall completes this first harmonious look at nature. We hear the meditative purling of the water and a frog’s soft rhythmic croaking, while *Shelter*’s slow theme music sets in; a contemplative ballad in minor key, performed on acoustic guitar. As we press ‘start’, the waterfall becomes louder. We have entered the comfortable burrow behind it and are immediately put into the role of the badger mother. The first thing we hear is the whining sound of the small badgers demanding the mother’s attention. They are

2 Child loss and parental bereavement is frequently related to “maladjustment” to loss, and diagnoses such as Complicated Grief Disorder and post-loss morbidity (Shear/Shair 2005).

miniature version of mother badger, but they each come with slightly different fur patterns.

Figure 15: Visual prompt explaining how to pick apples in Shelter



Source: Might and Delight (2013)

Upon pressing the WASD keys, the mother can be navigated through the 3D landscape, mouse movement adjusting the camera position, and the left mouse button interacting with the environment. When pressed with no game object around, the mother opens her mouth and growls at her young. The young respond in a high-pitched yelp. Wherever the mother navigates, her four badgers will try to follow and remain in her personal space. The fifth cub is greyed out and lies motionless on the floor. Is it dead?

A green leafy object can be pulled from the ground. It is a root, which the mother can carry in her mouth and feed to whoever needs it most. When fed to the perishing cub, a banjo jingle is played, indicating success. The badger cub's fur turns brown, like their siblings', and the

reunion of the family is complete. It is time to leave the burrow and learn about hunting and gathering activities in the open field. Like in *Brothers*, instructive prompts are used to illustrate these core mechanics. In fig. 15 the player is shown how to shake fruit off a tree by sprinting towards it and ramming the stem. Doing so is impactful and rewarding. When a tree is rammed, the screen shakes, and we hear the dull plummeting sound of the fruit hitting the ground. This is an example of what Steve Swink calls “polish” in his book on *Game Feel* (2009), an aesthetic factor that contributes to a gratifying gameplay experience.

The mother can leave the fruit on the ground, in which case the fastest cub will pick it up. Otherwise, she can interact with the fruit to pick it up and have the group of badgers collect around her, yelping with anticipation. The mother can then move closer to a cub of her choice and feed it the fruit. Moments later, players encounter the first rodent, fox, and frog, accompanied by similar instructive prompts. Hunting is done by the same principle of sprinting combined with a well-timed attack using the mouse button.

While we are informed about the possibilities of hunting and gathering, the consequences of failing to feed a cub are only learned through eventual experience. As foreshadowed in the cave, cubs can die, but before they do, they will slow down and experience problems following their mother. This has consequences for the upcoming challenge; the crossing of a field which is dominated by birds of prey. Running from cover to cover as a group is only possible if all cubs are strong enough to catch up in time.

These first moments in *Shelter* characterise mothering both as a vulnerable and a powerful task. This is indicated by the opposites of a meditative, low contrast environment and the choice of 3D controls which are traditionally used in fast-paced first-person shooters like *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996). Having entered the game via a pastel-coloured, contemplative opening screen, and the family scene in the burrow, associations to violent actions seem out of place, but in fact they hint at the reality of permadeath threatening the parenting project.

The mother is the heroine in charge of survival; not just of herself, but of the whole group. This power is first indicated by the resuscitation of the greyed-out badger in the corner of the first burrow. At the same time, the threat of death is directly related to the mothering performance: Timing jumps against the tree, finding roots, and making informed choices about which cub to feed next are required, or the badgers will turn grey and starve. Mothering is not restricted to tasks like hunting and gathering, but the mother's every move is characterised as precarious. As the leader, she can walk her offspring into danger and they will follow blindly.

ATTACHMENT

In this section I will unpack *Shelter*'s principle of mothering and maternal bonding along four game design devices. First, the game uses dependency rules that program the mother in terms of two tasks, protecting and nurturing. This allows the game to construct a dichotomy of giving/receiving between mother and children.

Secondly, on the spatial level, the invisible bond device represents infant bonding as a natural, instinctual thing. The NPCs' pathfinding activities mimic a need for closeness with the mother.

Furthermore, the contrast between who takes and who receives care is emphasised on the visual aspects of the character design, in which markers of age are used to indicate responsibility or vulnerability.

Finally, the game presents an interesting case of auditory synaesthesia, in which sound is used to emulate the badgers' collective sense of danger and satisfaction.

Dependency: Protecting and Providing

Feminist thinker and motherhood theorist Nancy Chodorow (1978) has pointed out that rather than an innate instinct or identity, motherhood is best thought of as a task. The task of mothering in *Shelter* is expressed as two acts of giving: The act of giving protection, and the act of giving

care. First, on the basic level, *Shelter*'s mothering comprises (spatial) planning, well-timed navigation, and observation, both of the children and of the environment.

The imperative of survival in a potentially dangerous open field, and the condition of potential predator attacks and starvation, focuses the player's attention to the well-being of the cubs: Is it safe for them to follow where we go; can they follow in time? Is the distance between two patches of protective grass short enough to pass?

The flexible camera movement allows regular nervous looks over one's shoulder if one suspects a cub to be lost. Such anxious questions and manoeuvres are reminiscent of the paranoid bonding rituals in *Ico*, yet with the justified fear of permanent separation. Two situations in which this fear of separation is particularly invoked are the bird-infested meadow, and the creek crossing.

In the first scene, the shadow of a bird must be constantly observed while the family runs from one patch of grass to the next. The player has to keep a focus on the goal of the journey while also ensuring that all badgers reach a protective patch of grass before the bird can dash down and snatch them. Difficulties can arise if the player feeds a cub on the way, triggering an eating animation which stops the cub in the open field. It is possible to distract the bird, but if struck, the mother will suffer an agonising death herself, and the game will end prematurely.

The creek crossing scene requires a monitoring of the rhythmically recurring waves, and the identification of protective areas sheltering the cubs from harm. Like on the bird meadow, this scenario requires well-timed decisions, as well as an understanding of the cubs' ability to follow their mother.

This ability is diminished in case the mother has neglected her second task; providing food. As demonstrated in the beginning moments of *Shelter*, the game makes a binary distinction between active hunter/gatherer and passive eaters. It is established that the cubs must eat but that they are also incapable of procuring their own food. This is underscored by their anticipatory bouncing in front of a desired root or

fruit tree, while they patiently wait for their mother to prepare the item for them.

While nourishment is an important concern for the young, the game portrays the badger mother as beyond material needs. In fact, she does not have any prescribed needs at all, apart from the urgency of survival which coincides with the player's objective to complete the game. The two mothering tasks of protecting and providing work within the binary of giving and taking, make the mother's sole purpose to become the dependable provider. Like Ico, she needs to be needed.

Intuition: The Invisible Bond

There is an 'intuitive' connection between mother and children, expressed through an invisible bond between them. Wherever the mother goes, the offspring will follow, or at least try to do so. This constructs the space between bodies in terms of an instinctual connection. The badger cubs are programmed to literally follow their mother's path and stay connected on a physical level. This is similar to the unity device in *Passage*: In both cases, the connection and the imperative to bond physically is imposed by design.

However, even though the children follow blindly, there is still space between their bodies. As a result, we can distinguish between the body standing for responsibility, and the bodies standing for vulnerability. This is the case because the mother badger can navigate and go wherever we like, while the cubs are delivered to our navigation. Infant-mother bonding is evoked as something that is naturally given and that is, like the marriage in *Passage*, non-negotiable.

This constellation hails at the player to become the dependable caretaker: There is someone who will trust them with their life; will the player live up to it? The mission is to keep the family close. This is not always easy, particularly at night, when the badger's field of vision is dramatically reduced, and an approaching wolf pack can cause the badger cubs to disperse in panic. The only way to prevent the loss of a young one is to run after them and find them within seconds.

Another challenging situation is the crossing of a wild river, which needs to be timed so that even the slowest badger can follow in time. In other words, *Shelter* is much about looking out for others and adapting one's speed and strategies to those who are more vulnerable than the player character. Over time, the badger cubs gain in size and speed, until they are almost equal to those of their mother. This is a way in which the game subtly rewards the badger mother's efforts, which smoothly translate into players' accomplishments.

Age Markers

Age is expressed through the cubs' bodies, which start out as miniature versions of their mother, clumsily waddling by her side, and grow as the game progresses. Due to the size difference to their mother, the badger cubs are immediately recognisable as fragile, helpless others, worthy of adult, nurturing attention. This effect is described in Elisabeth Isbister's (2006) character design manual, in which she points to the babyface bias in social psychology. According to this model, childlike features are more likely to evoke assumptions of dependence, reduced responsibility, submission and manipulability in the player (Isbister 2006: 10).

In *Shelter*, this effect is used to encourage the player to take over a caretaker role as a responsible badger, and to emotionally invest in the young. As I will discuss later, the appearance of the 'babyface' badgers has motivated some players to give them names, indicating a kind of attachment comparable to pet ownership.

The impression of an age difference is not limited to the visual level, but addressed through sound as well, as described in the idle call-response ritual. Here, the low-pitched brawl of the mother represents adulthood, while the badger cubs' 'cute' response reinforces their waddling, helpless appearance as legitimate receivers of care.

Auditory Synaesthesia

Shelter's delicate graphics palette and the diffuse nature of the lighting push attention to other levels of perception. The auditory synaesthesia

device produces the coupling of sensations (Pichlmair/Kayali 2007), i.e. through the mimicking of the badgers' sense of smell through audio cues.

Predators and environmental dangers, like the wildfire, have their characteristic sounds, and they are audible before they are visible. Becoming attuned to one's auditory surroundings, then, can be a matter of life and death. If the distressing, dissonant signal of the bird of prey appears, for instance, we are well advised to seek refuge in the tall grass even before we see the bird's shadow on the ground. This kind of auditory player guidance simulates the badgers' instincts and sensual experience. The audio interface operates like a sense of smell, which informs the animals about possibilities and dangers.

Auditory synaesthesia is also used to characterise what kinds of dangers and predators the badgers currently face. The bird theme is a hectic and energetic rhythm sequence accompanied by wind noises, mimicking a predator which will swing down speedily and snatch a child. The nocturnal wolf theme is smoother and slower, invoking the stealthy nature of a wolf pack lurking in the shadows. Yet the device is also used to characterise positive experiences, such as acts of feeding, in which we always hear the reassuring banjo jingle. When we reach a safe area, the badgers' sense of safety is expressed through an uplifting guitar arpeggio or a variation of the theme music.

THE WORST LOSS: BEING A BEREAVED BADGER MOM

While the premise of the game is to keep as many cubs alive until the end of the game, the permadeath mechanic allows moments of loss to happen at various points in the game. These moments of loss are varied, ranging from the attack by a bird of prey to the slow starvation of a young. Sometimes, the cause of death is indicated on the diegetic level, as in the high-pitched screech of a cub being stolen by wolves at night. Sometimes, the cause of death is extra-diegetic, such as in a technical

error, like a glitch, or a pathfinding mistake that has a badger prematurely leave their cover on a hawk-infested meadow. In such cases, the only indication is a missing badger graphic.

Irrespective of the cause of death, it is introduced matter-of-factly, refraining from dramatic commentary, synaesthetic response or change of environment. This is unlike *Ico*, where we have seen the emotional-landscape-device at work, or *Brothers* where death is framed as tragedy through carefully composed grieving rituals. In *Shelter*, life continues for the bereaved, and the lack of mechanical, auditory, or visual closure invites feelings of guilt and a sense of having failed as a caretaker. In what follows, I will discuss this construction of the bereaved mother as ultimately failed identity, based on my first playthrough of *Shelter*.

Maternal Bereavement as Ultimate Failure

When I first entered the game, I was overwhelmed with the camera controls, and missed the tutorial lesson that feeding the cubs was mandatory for their survival. This is why after some time one of my cubs went grey and was left behind, motionless. This taught me to forage for roots, rodents, and frogs with some degree of desperation, as seeing another cub perish like this seemed unbearable. Each fruit shaken from a tree, each root pulled from the ground, picked up by mouth and fed to the cubs renewed my spirits. The soothing banjo jingle accompanying each feeding action affirmed that an act of caring had taken place.

Only minutes later, during the night, the next incident happened. While the cubs scattered around in fear of predators, my attempts to search for them by running in arbitrary directions proved futile. One nauseating screech later, the group had gathered, but one young was missing. This moment has been characterised by journalist Cara Ellison (2013) as a feeling of “huge loss, somehow, at the fact that a little badger graphic has disappeared”. By the point I realised that I had miscalculated the distance from one shore to the next, I had given up on seeing my three remaining cubs alive. And indeed, I left the creek alone, as a fully bereaved badger.

Feeling a deep sense of purposelessness, I also noticed that the bereaved badger parent was still able to use the environment, hunting and gathering as before. Perhaps she could at least engage in some self-care activities, now that she was on her own and unconstrained by the demands of her offspring. When I hopefully pushed her against a tree and picked up an apple, she picked it up with its mouth, as usual. Yet, instead of doing the obvious and eating it herself, the apple remained in her mouth. It was as if she wanted to offer it to her dead offspring.

I walked my badger in a random direction and pressed the mouse button again. The apple dropped to the ground, uneaten. For the lack of other options, I picked it up again and carried it through the forest, until I found a rodent, which I hunted and started carrying around instead of the apple. I used the badger to randomly pull out roots, shake apples off trees, and hunt animals down, hoping that she would finally understand that it was okay for her to eat, too. In the end, I was surrounded by a pile of edible items which had lost their function. To me, this indicated that my badger had given up on life itself. Clearly, the absence of her young had made her dysfunctional. It had never been as clear as now that the landscape around her, and all the objects in it, were designed for the benefit of my badger's children. They were never intended to nurture her. Now that her children were gone, so was the point of any of her action. The forest had become a place of cynical abundance, in which her vital life-saving skills had been reformulated to become destructive. As the piles of dead rodents and useless apples around her demonstrated: My badger had become a useless plunderer; a failure at life.

It is likely that the experience described above is a result of lacking rather than conscious game design decisions. However, *not* choosing for the badger mother to have needs – as well as abilities to address those needs – makes up part of the game's ideology. It includes the statement that 'if you are a mother, the death of your children will make you dysfunctional beyond recovery'. This statement is made simply by failing to change the mother badger's rituals along with her identity status: Losing her cubs requires a new focus on the self and survival.

In the current game, the mother is incapable of shifting the focus back to herself, leaving untouched the food she is so willing to procure for others. Associations to eating disorders are obvious. If the bereaved mother's rituals do not change, this communicates that she is 'stuck' in the past. Part of what makes her appear as destructive is that she is literally programmed to cater to children who are no longer there. She will continue to work for these ghosts without accepting any rewards. She will continue to repeat this delusional mode of existence until she accepts that her purpose has ended, or until she is captured by a bird of prey; which is how my depressing gameplay session ended.

There exist historical templates for the kind of bereaved motherhood incidentally created by *Shelter*. In her book *Motherhood and Representation* (2013[1992]), E. Ann Kaplan describes the myth of the self-sacrificing mother. According to this myth, motherhood is tightly linked to an imperative of self-neglect for the 'better' of the offspring. It is clear that, under these conditions, child loss translates into the "worst loss" (Rosof 2014[1994]). A bereaved mother does not only lose her children. She loses her identity, and is, therefore suspected of never adjusting to the loss. This myth also circulates in clinical psychology discourse, where a causal link is made between the loss of children and the risk of 'morbid post-loss behaviour' (Shear and Shair 2005). *Shelter* reproduces this dominant 'maladjustment' narrative of maternal grief by characterising the badger's post-loss life in terms of depression beyond repair.

From the beginning of the game, the mother's tasks have been reduced to caring for the children. This is also reflected in a game environment whose delicacies have been designed to be consumed by the cubs. The mother's body, apart from being a vessel of care, is absent as subject for care or concern. Like it, the mother's needs are absent from the game. This game design decision backfires in the situation of full bereavement, where the body of the mother – and her lack of self-concern – becomes visible. It becomes transparent that the badger-as-mother was never designed to have needs, and therefore cannot start to learn to have needs after surviving her maternal role.

As an agent without needs, the bereaved mother can choose between two unattractive options. She can either refrain from engagement with the world; stopping to hunt and gather, two activities which signify care. The other option would be to live on in dissociation; denying the fact that loss has happened. Since a third option of self-care has not been programmed into her system, she cannot acquire self-care skills. Self-care does not exist on the performative spectrum of a self-sacrificing mother.

There is another interesting aspect of *Shelter*'s bereavement ideology which demonstrates how gameplay can repurpose discourses on bonding and grief. *Shelter*'s motherhood is combined with a nature discourse, which according to *Killscreen* journalist Filipe Salgado sparks associations to the nature-programme broadcasting voices of David Attenborough and Werner Herzog (Salgado 2013). *Shelter*'s anthropocentric ideal of the self-sacrificing mother and the maladjusted, bereaved mother are embedded in a 'cycle of life' narrative, which presents this kind of motherhood as natural. This naturalisation discourse silences the mother's feelings and needs, including only those parts of 'wildlife' which sustain the romantic motherhood-as-sacrifice myth.

Sacrifice after bereavement is clearly in contradiction with the need to survive and procreate in 'nature'. A badger in the wild would start feeding herself in order to start mating again. While there is no doubt that new-born badger cubs are helpless and dependent, there is no immediate reason why parental commitment would continue after death, and why, as a part of this commitment, the mother would neglect herself.

What is powerful about this discursive construction of "natural maternal sacrifice" is that it cements the myth through simple economics of gameplay. During the first minutes of the game, we learn that the mother's physical needs are absent. Instead, we get to see her body as a vehicle to provide for others. Meanwhile, we are confronted with "the cruel unblinking stare of nature" (Walker 2013), but never at the cost of sacrificial motherhood.

One possible player response to this is the experience of shame and guilt over bereavement, often reported in *Shelter*'s online forums.

"I'm a terrible mother": Maternal Guilt Online

Shelter's focus on care as a priority of badger behaviour comes with two characteristics. First, the uniqueness of a loss situation due to permadeath, and secondly the lack of 'handholding' concerning explanations of the loss. There is no post-loss ritual, no funeral scene that makes sense of a badger's demise. The player is left alone with their interpretation of the traumatic event and must make sense of it without guidance.

For some players it has therefore been important to share their badger loss stories with fellow players online. I argue that this is not unlike what constructionist grief therapy calls "meaning reconstruction" (Neimeyer 2000). According to Neimeyer, the need for meaning reconstruction after loss arises from the loss of identity and self-concept after bereavement (2000: 552). He argues that rather than in isolation, attempts to find new meanings are always situated within the discourses, rituals, and cultural traditions of the grievers. (ibid.) Online forums and journalistic writing can be seen as such a discursive space for players trying to make sense of their traumatic gameplay experiences.

After playing *Shelter*, journalist Cara Ellison confesses that "I cry out at my monitor, and a feeling of intense sadness falls around me as only four cubs run up to my side. I feel numb as I carry on, and I wonder if I will get over it." (2013: n.p), and her colleague John Walker (2013) reports to have felt "shame" over losing a cub. Guilt and shame are also recurring themes in *Shelter*'s Steam forum. User Psymon writes:

"In my first playthrough I lost Wendy to the river. My heart hit my throat when it made the cry as the wave swept over us all... Ian was taken by the bird in the

last area. I could tell it was going to happen, and immediatly [sic!] regretted my bad timing. I'm a terrible mother :C³

Three things stand out in this small dramatic testimony: The use of the pronoun 'I', which suggests identification (Burn/Schott 2004), the tone of self-accusation, and the naming of the cubs. These dimensions are related. By choosing the pronoun 'I' rather than 'her', 'it', or 'them', Psymon conflates the positions of the player and the badger mother. The account switches between description of gameplay ("my bad timing"), and description of the narrative ("I lost Wendy to the river"), with emotional phrases ("My heart hit my throat") to serve as lubricant between player and protagonist.

This frames the badger identity as a double responsibility of the player-mother. In the self-accusative "I'm a terrible mother", Psymon accepts liability on both levels. This requires that Psymon has internalised the motherhood premise of the game. They take for granted that the cubs are unable to sustain themselves, and that dependable action (good timing) is required from them.

Guiding 'Wendy' safely across the river, and 'Ian' across the hawk area are not merely acts of gameplay; they reflect something about the player's ability to be an empathetic care taker. This can be inferred from Psymon's "regrets" about bad timing as well as the user's choice to give the cubs names. *Shelter* is used as a platform to negotiate loss-related fears, such as causing the death of a more vulnerable other through neglect or dangerous behaviour. Speaking 'through the badger' is used as an update of allegorical fable telling. Like in a fable, the badger's properties serve to explore questions of ethical and moral conduct without addressing them directly. As obvious from the report, the questions revolve around the ethics of being a good mother, and the conditions of failure. Yet unlike written fables, *Shelter*'s gameplay puts

3 Online source: <https://steamcommunity.com/app/244710/discussions/0/666826250814499557/>.

the players inside the moral system, where the myth of the sacrificial mother and its consequences are experienced first-hand.

The choice to identify with the badger mother, like the choice to name one's children, is a player-driven activity, nowhere suggested by design. Nevertheless, some players take naming for granted as common practice, as in the Steam forum thread “What did you name your children, and which ones didn't make it?”.

Since naming conventionally takes place at the start of a life, it is expected to take place at the start of a *Shelter* play session as well, indicating the intention to bond. Players are creative in coming up with naming techniques, drawing on the cubs' coat patterns, or naming them after characters from blockbuster TV-series *Game of Thrones* (2011-), which is famous for the merciless execution of key characters.

In other words, through creative acts of naming, players forge attachments with the traits of ‘their children’. The extra effort of naming expresses an intention of attachment, and the willingness to invest stronger emotions in the loss experience. This is tangible in Psymon's account, but user Hyde uses a similarly affective tone: “I remember the piercing cry as Splotch was taken, then desperately searching for my little badger, only to realize what had happened. And then when the water washed over Jeremy..... I was just traumatized.”⁴

It would be wrong to say that witness reports like the ones above can only be understood in terms of identification. In fact, dramatic wallowing in traumatic witnessing may also be used for comic relief and emotional distancing. The Steam forum thread “GOD WHY?”⁵, for instance, is initiated by an author venting their shock over their cub's loss: “o god... o my god! the... the bad bird ate my baby!!!!” The thread subsequently turns into a mixture of other trauma reports and self-help jargon (“we're here for you”). User Scary Jesus points to the “need to

4 Online source: <https://steamcommunity.com/app/244710/discussions/0/666826250814499557/>.

5 Online source: <https://steamcommunity.com/app/244710/discussions/0/864977479829251642/>.

start a support group for this game”, concluding: “Guys lets all just be good mothers ok”. User Arpogest responds by bringing up the mother’s culpability as a predator herself: “How many foxes and little rodents did you kill through the game, how many families did your mother-badger ruin? :)”. This puts a new twist on the guilt question, having Cougarific conclude “o god!!! now we need a carnivore-guilt support group!!!”.

In contrast to this emotional mode of retelling, the second type of report constructs loss as a technical subject, frustrating to an emotionally distanced, mastery-focused gaming discourse. In this discourse, practices of naming are absent, and even explicitly opposed, as in User Deadpan Serious’ comment: “i’m so glad i never named them. i lost the first simply because the AI pathfinding must have got it stuck and when i counted only four cubs i went back but never found it.”

Seeking emotional distance through technical discourse, Deadpan Serious frames the refusal to invest emotionally in terms of a refusal to deal with inferior software. This expresses a different attitude of gaming as an escapist activity from real-life emotion. *Shelter* is primarily seen as an entertainment product which is supposed to ‘function’. As already mentioned, *Shelter*’s many glitches and pathfinding errors introduce sudden, unexplained deaths, which some users take as an opportunity for roleplay and others as a reason to complain. In the comment section of *Eurogamer*’s *Shelter* review⁶, user chop-chop complains that

“[m]y first cub died because of poor game design. In the 2nd level... while I’m grabbing some food, one of the cubs gets snatched without warning. No sound, nothing. Just the sound of the wolf enjoying his meal. Cool. My 2nd cub died because of a bug. He got stuck in an endless running animation in the middle of a river, where the 3 other cubs and myself walked just fine, and of course got killed by the incoming wave. What’s even worse than the death of this little cub, is that I think my interest for this game died with it...”

6 See online at: <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-09-11-shelterreview>.

In this report, badger death is framed in terms of technical error. Instead of blaming themselves and their failing mothering, the user blames “bad game design”, the lack of feedback, flawed animations, and glitches for the loss. In comparison with Psymon’s reconstruction of meaning, where the player “lost Wendy to the river”, chop-chop constructs emotional distance by focusing on the technical side of drowning, the “endless animation” beyond his control. Rather than a dramatic trauma report, affecting the player-badger emotionally, loss of control over a badger’s life is nothing to be playfully appropriated. On the contrary, the loss of control over life is the loss of interest in the game.

I would suggest that on a broader scale, these two types of meaning reconstruction say something about player-specific attitudes to representations of grief. Do players see their medium in terms of an invitation to live through someone’s life; experience someone’s perspective? The first kind of witness report answers this question positively.

The proposed guilt narrative of maternal grief is accepted as experience to empathise with through gameplay dynamics. The second kind of narrative shows, however, that some players prefer to reject the negotiation of real-life experiences through games. Games are expected as a medium to grant them control over life. If this control is taken away, gaming is experienced as ‘unfair’, as ‘badly designed’. From one perspective, it is ‘life’ or ‘nature’ that’s unfair, from the other perspective it is the game designer. Whether as dramatic confessions of parental guilt, or as rationalisation of technical errors, *Shelter* has encouraged players to engage in traumatic retellings, and to bond over ambiguous loss situations. This shows that players are active co-creators of the grief narrative.