Making Space for Grief: Conclusive Thoughts

In this study I have used a multidisciplinary lens to investigate the expressive possibilities of videogames when it comes to representing bereavement.

I first conducted five analyses of single-player games and their portrayals of attachment, loss, and grief in inter-character relationships. The analyses were conceptually rooted in the idea that games exist on an ergodic continuum (Newman 2002), involve players in interreactive ways (Smethurst 2015), and invite metaphorical projections (Rusch 2017). The goal was both to learn from the nuanced ways games have portrayed psychodynamics of bonding, separation, and grief in the past, and to critique limitations and problems with the chosen examples.

I then applied the learnings from the analysis to a participatory design study on pregnancy loss. Using muse-based design (Khaled 2012), this case study investigated how underrepresented grief narratives can be included into game design. Four Austrian bereaved mothers were invited to inspire the ideation of the game *Jocoi*. They participated in the metaphorical modelling workshop *Trauerspiel,* for which I adapted strategies from expressive art therapy (Potash/ Ho 2014, Levine 2014) and personal game design (Rusch 2017) to the needs of the participants.

Harking back to the question of how videogames can make space for bereavement, I will review my findings along three spaces of impact.

The first space, which I call *game space*, addresses opportunities for grief-related representation using game-specific means as suggested in this study.

Secondly, there is the *emotional space* of players who invest effort in making sense of games through emotional projection. This space can be consciously addressed when making games about attachment, loss, and grief.

Thirdly, the *design space* addresses game design as a way of opening spaces for collaboration, spaces in which designers and grievers can interact. One finding of this study is that interaction through game design not only can inspire game design ideation, but also offers a possibility for intimate conversations and mutual validation for grievers.

GAME SPACE

First, this study has contributed to a formal understanding of video games as expressive media, and the way the ergodic spectrum can be used to create emotionally charged game spaces. When it comes to formulating nuanced dynamics of attachment, loss, and grief, game designers can model game spaces to show players why they should care, and hence, what it is precisely they lose when a character is removed from a game. During analysis, I have identified attachment devices for five dimensions of game design; rules, controls, space between bodies, visual and auditory design.

I have suggested that on the level of rules, game design can encourage different motives for attachment, such as dependency and synergy. One example is *Shelter*'s construction of a dependent group of badger cubs counting on their mother's care. Losing a badger due to a mistake affects players differently than the loss of an eye-level character like Aeris. Her absence in *FFVII* comes with the loss of a strategic advantage. When designing *Jocoi*, we adapted the rule devices in response to the women's imaginations of the mother-child bond as something that can be fostered through feeding and caring. Unlike *Shelter*, where the young are in constant peril, the mothers imagined the

bond as something timeless, adding value to life. This is why *Jocoi* combines dependency and synergy aspects: The mother sheep needs to feed the lamb, but only in order to enrich her own world by adding colour and sound.

Attachment quality can also be sculpted through the design of space between bodies. While rules regulate which bonding rituals are possible, they come to life in inter-character space. *Ico*, for instance, uses an *elastic bond* between player character and NPC to communicate precarious intimacy. In *Shelter*, on the other hand, mother-child intimacy is presented as something intuitive by using an *invisible bond* which regulates that the cubs follow their mother. In the design of *Jocoi, Shelter*'s invisible bond was used, too, since the quality of a natural mother-child connection resonated with the mothers' ideas of staying connected with the deceased. Unlike the automatic spatial connection between mother and child, contact with the 'family collective' of the flock must be actively initiated by clicking on them. This emphasises the special intimacy of mother and child.

The design of control schemes can do much to anchor a character's presence or characterise their desire for another character. The *tandem controls* in *Brothers* create a safe space in which two characters cultivate a wholesome relationship. When one character is removed, the player has resources to draw on this relationship and commemorate it. A more precarious yearning for the other is constructed through *Ico*'s *call/response* device, which only focuses on one side of the relationship, the perspective of the yearner. In *Jocoi,* we adapt the scheme for the mouse-based *feed/be fed* controls. During the first part of the game, they condition the player to expect an endless care-giving loop. When the lamb is lost in the second part, the care button is lost as well, producing the gameplay deprivation effect learned from *Ico*.

I have discussed how games can use non-ergodic elements to characterise the social and emotional quality of a bond through visual and auditory cues. For instance, gender markers encourage readings of romantic relationships (*FFVII*, *Ico*, *Passage*), or facilitate same-gender bonding (*Brothers*). The way characters appear has consequences for

how players participate in the game and what narratives they will feel invited to project. In *Jocoi* we used age markers to refer to the mother-child bond, putting weight on the infantile cuteness of the lamb character. Furthermore, the simple art style reflects the women's colourful 'grief planets'. When it comes to the role of sound in *Jocoi*, we used listening as part of the player's intuitive caretaking activities. Listening to a flower's sound before it is fed signifies paying attention. In the first part, it stands for the careful selection of appropriate nourishment for the baby. After separation, it mediates recollection and the pondering of what remains after loss.

One argument I made in this study is that game space can be used expressively to respond to situational affordances of lived grief experience. I have shown this in my adaptation of the design devices in response to the bereaved women's tastes. For future game design, this suggests that different, currently untapped grief experiences can be addressed as well, using a similar method.

A selection of five games is hardly sufficient to capture the expressive capacity of video games comprehensively. Rather than claiming that the design devices discussed in this thesis are all games can do to represent grief, they demonstrate the variety of strategies that have been used so far. However, this study was supposed to initiate rather than to end the quest for grief representation devices. One obvious place to continue text-based research would be in single-player games which feature more complex character constellations, or by focusing on the avatar-player relationship, as done by Smethurst (2015). Other interesting territories would be multi-player spaces and virtual worlds, both of which offer rich possibilities for negotiating death and bereavement to players (Gibbs et al. 2012).

EMOTIONAL SPACE

Game spaces cannot impose the meanings they construct, yet I have shown evidence that players use emotional projection to both bond with important characters and to find creative coping strategies when these

characters die. Examples are the *resurrection hack* and the *ghost glitch* in *FFVII,* as well as *Shelter* players' narratives of guilt and trauma shared online. These examples demonstrate the link between design devices and players' emotional realities while they participate in the interreactive circuit of play. By engaging in emotional projection they actively make sense of games in a way that matches their unique personal contexts.

The personal nature of emotional projection was demonstrated in the participants' responses to *Jocoi*. The women disagreed on the meaning of *Jocoi'*s symbolism, attributing different qualities to characters, events, and the overall play experience. Some read the baby wolf across the river as a predator; others saw it as a transformed lamb. However, there was an agreement that *Jocoi* represented their feelings appropriately, indicating that they identified with the game.

I have argued that this confirms the importance of ambiguity as design resource Gaver, et al. (2003). *Jocoi*'s ambiguous game space allowed the women to perform appropriate projections that resonated with their own context. The different readings of the lamb/wolf symbolism demonstrate that in order to be impactful and personally meaningful to players, gameplay narratives do not necessarily have to be explained. In fact, doing so would have undermined personal readings which, as designers, we could not predict when designing the game, even when including the women's hand-crafted models.

This suggests that emotional spaces are in flux rather than containing solid truths about grief-related feelings. While we used the women's symbolic expressions as a source for inspiration, the women themselves did not display any strong sense of attachment to their metaphors. These images, which had emerged as their most intimate representations of the mother-child bonds during the workshop had become distant memories by the end of the project. This indicates that the women had moved on from one emotional space to another throughout development. They remembered details but had forgotten about their authors. Rather than reliable and eternally true, these images were fleeting glimpses into their

worlds, which are worlds in constant change. As Claudia put it: "The river changed. Grief changes."

If grief changes not only inter- but intra-personally, design must make space for this flexibility, broadening rather than constraining interpretation. The challenge is that ambiguous design strategies make the designer more vulnerable, because they can no longer pretend to fix the final meaning of their game. The point is to open a game space in which grievers can experience their emotional projections, and this happens beyond the designer's control. Rather than a disadvantage, however, *Jocoi*'s reception suggests that ambiguity ended up strengthening respect for personal grief narratives. The women already knew how to feel about love and loss; we did not have to educate them through a game. Instead of telling them what to feel, ambiguous elements like the baby wolf made space for their situational projections.

DESIGN SPACE

The aim of the case study was to open an experimental space in which a dialogue between grievers and designers could be initiated. Including grievers into game design from an early stage (Khaled 2012) required providing a space which would take their needs and fears seriously. Dealing with the taboo experience of pregnancy loss, not only did the women come with the wish to make this experience more speakable; they also came with a deep alienation from video game culture. Creating clear roles through the muse-based design scheme (ibid.) helped frame their contribution as an inspirational input without the pressure to deliver a 'game'.

In hindsight, the women's participation as design partners and playtesters was equally important to the 'product' of the final game. Through their cultural probe (Gaver et al. 1999) sketchbooks, they reported that they experienced the workshop as a comforting space and considered the exercises appropriate to engage their stories. This suggests the relevance of game design as method for an art-therapy context. Designing a game can facilitate validation through introspective

crafting or poiesis (Levine 2014) and receiving attention by empathetic listeners (Thompson 2003).

The development team started in the role of such active listeners, engaging with the evocative planet models in an attempt to formulate a respectful response. This process came with two benefits for the design team. First, the recurrent wish for 'timelessness' and 'goallessness' challenged established ideas about video games and inspired unorthodox thinking.

Secondly, engaging with grievers' emotional landscapes meant to make a gift for someone whose tastes had previously been off the radar for videogame designers. This came with small surprises for the design team, such as the fact that the women enjoyed sharing stories about their children and imagined their grief worlds in colourful ways. The planet models are a far shot from the widespread idea that bereavement is the end of care.