Introduction

> Life does not have a reset button.
> *Jane/Grand Theft Auto III*

Videogames are the medium of loss and death. Videogame characters frequently fall from cliffs (Super Mario Bros.), get shot (Space Invaders), and go bankrupt (Theme Hospital). Sometimes they die in swimming pools (The Sims), are butchered by rotating blades (Super Meat Boy), impaled (Tomb Raider), or flattened by rolling boulders (Crash Bandicoot). As the opposite of winning and mastery, loss and death seem to be built into the structure of videogames, and therefore make up much of their entertainment quality.

At the same time, the mechanics of loss and death in many videogames seem to have little in common with the emotionally complex experience of going through loss in real life. Game death is presented as a preliminary state, a short moment of frustration in an infinite loop of trial and error. This is epitomised by the game over screen, which often appears after a character's death, and typically includes the option to continue. Rather than finality, this marks death as an opportunity to retry. Note how this differs from life, where the death of a loved one

is inevitably permanent. As the fictional radio guest Jane in GTA III's Chatterbox puts it: "Life does not have a reset button"[1].

In games where loss and death are used as incentives to play on, the focus is on optimising player performance rather than on the deep portrayal of a game character's emotionality. Rather, emotion is co-opted to serve a narrative of success and mastery. Hardly a legitimate experience in and of itself, death is presented as a power tool for player improvement. The point is not to reflect on the transitory nature of existence. The point is to work on one's jumping technique, so one can avoid the fall into the bottomless pit next time.

Apart from being performance-oriented, the kind of 'death work' found in many games is framed as a solitary rather than a social activity. This is a third contradiction to death in life. Loss necessarily raises the question of social connectivity, not least because the loved one was part of a social fabric before they died. So, while dealing with a loss may include self-management and introspection, it also affects social constellations and requires the bereaved to reframe their place in society.

Finally, when we consider the narrative of the game over screen, its premise of immortality harks back to a limiting Western tradition of repressing death (Gorer 1960). Instead of being allowed to occur as part of ordinary life, loss is relegated to the side, becoming somewhat unspeakable. Game over frames death as an antagonist who can be successfully battled and overcome.

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1   The action-adventure videogame series Grand Theft Auto has a history of including ironic critical remarks about toxic videogame culture, which contrast its own blatant use of sexist and racist stereotypes. In GTA III's fictional radio show Chatterbox, caller Jane complains to host Lazlo about the negative influence of videogames on her son. "My son's dog Hugo got hit by a truck, and he says, "Mommy, mommy, where's the reset button?" Kids these days, they think life is a game. Well, it's not a game, Lazlo. It is very, very serious". Jane's last sentence before she is cut off is "Lazlo, life does not have a reset button".

In other words, if loss is a structural affordance of games in that it is the logical opposite of winning, this version of loss does little to acknowledge the reality of lived grief as it occurs in human life. The kind of short-lived, performance-driven, and solipsistic death-moments common in many videogames ignore the social aspects of care and bereavement by default.

Game over may just not be games' most adequate mechanic to tackle loss. A paradigm shift of videogame death is required. The goal of this book is to contribute to this paradigm shift.

AIM AND SCOPE

While the death-as-failure paradigm dominates games, some designers have suggested alternatives which use games' expressive repertoire more fully. The first part of this book will be dedicated to learning from these suggestions. I argue that they enrich our understanding of tools which game developers have at their disposal to represent attachment, loss, and grief in interesting ways.

Rather than focusing only on a theory of grief design tools, my aim with this is book is to develop an applied understanding of game representation. The book investigates design tools in their pragmatic context of use. This is done to answer three questions: How does game representation work? How can we understand grief as lived experience? And what can we do as game designers to integrate both?

I argue that in order to become more about grief and less about self-improvement, loss in games needs to be coupled with attachment and care, not mastery and success.

My aim with this study is to mobilise game design as an expressive modality for lived grief experience. This is a multidisciplinary challenge, requiring a back-and-forth between theory and game design practice. The theory part, which follows hereafter, serves to investigate and critique what digital games have done in the past to tackle attachment, loss, and grief between game characters. The practical part applies the-

se findings in a concrete design setting where I collaborate with grievers. The goal of this methodology is to both contribute to the literature on videogames as cultural artefacts, and the growing field of participatory game design.

In the first part of this book, I expound the idea that videogames are cultural texts which construct a part of social reality through representation. This part is dedicated to close readings of five recent single-player games, which, I argue, present interesting alternatives to the loss-as-failure paradigm. Each chapter is dedicated to one of five games, and the creative strategies they put to use to model attachment and loss dynamics between two or more game characters.

While the literary method of close reading has been traditionally dismissed within formalist game studies (Keogh 2014), its interdisciplinary nature comes with notable advantages for the purpose of this study. First, it allows me to go in-depth with the structural elements of a videogame. Close readings provide an analysis in context. This means that no one part of a videogame can be assumed to be more or less important for the gameplay experience prior to analysis. Gameplay, visuals, sounds, and controls work together to produce a ludic quality. It is the composite nature of this quality which makes a game function or signify.

Secondly, close readings do not only require me to look at the game proper, but also at what surrounds it. Videogames have a cross-referential function in that they repurpose visual and auditory elements. They mediate history, art, and politics. Close readings need to consider this intertextual function of videogames.

Thirdly, close readings investigate the way cultural texts relate to social power. One commonality of all cultural representation, including videogames, is that they make ideologically charged statements. This happens, whether consciously or not, through the limited nature of a media item. A story is told from the perspective of character A rather than character B, introducing a preference of who is heard and who listens. Characters are often gendered and racialized, crafting a link to real life politics. Unpacking such dynamics through a close reading lens

is to acknowledge videogames as an artistic medium capable of making comments about the world. If videogames are cultural artefacts, they need to stand up to cultural analysis. How do they portray grief as gendered and racialized experiences? What kind of control is given over attachment and loss dynamics, and how is power distributed among different characters?

Overall, I perform this close reading with two goals in mind. The first one is to identify game design devices which construct compelling attachment, loss, and grief experiences. The second one is to identify the limitations of these design tools.

In order to enable cross-comparison, I use game examples with a similar build-up. First, all games are single-player games of progression (Juul 2005). This means they unfold their action along a narrative arc, lineally. Furthermore, all games feature a tragic inter-character relationship which is modelled through gameplay. These structural commonalities allow me to study differences and similarities in how the five games construct relationships, and how loss and grief are conveyed across different playing times, through different aesthetics, using different soft- and hardware.

Apart from understanding how devices function on a pragmatic level, I am interested in the way the games weave players into "inhabitable ideologies" (Anthropy 2012). As cultural texts, videogames present limited versions of social reality, make conscious or unconscious assumptions about love and loss, and make space for some experiences while silencing others.

The five games are diverse in their genres, scopes, and aesthetics, but they all make concrete suggestions about what loss and grief feel like. They draw on specific ideas about i.e. maternal love, conjugal relationships, and romance, and thus hail at players with particular interpretations of lived experience.

Learning from these past games, the second part of this book uses game design as an empathetic tool to work with grievers. I will discuss my development of the participatory grief design method Trauerspiel, and the game Jocoi, a videogame developed with four grieving mothers

and a student group from Aalborg University's Medialogy department in Copenhagen, Denmark. The grievers worked as partners inspiring the game concept and giving feedback at various stages during development.

The process was driven by three questions. First, how can game designers include grievers and their lived experiences early on in the development process? Secondly, how can personal narratives be properly translated into game design devices? And thirdly, how can we assess the impact of participatory game design addressing real-world grief?

These three questions coincided with different stages in the design process. An approach to the inclusion of grievers had to be developed early on, and it needed to address the idiosyncratic needs of the participant group. What mode of participation would make them feel comfortable and empowered enough to share their grief stories in a way that would also inspire game design? This can be related to a current question in the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI): How to involve players in the design process early on in order to craft a relatable, emotionally meaningful game? (Lange-Nielsen et al. 2012).

The question of appropriate representation emerged at the point at which design moved from inspiration to conceptualisation of Jocoi. My ambition was to translate the grievers' narratives and images into a game system which would resonate with the participants. However, deciding on an 'accurate' gameplay representation, paradoxically, required making a decision on behalf of the participants. This was a balancing act between listening to the participants and owning design authority (Khaled/Vasalou 2014). Overall, taking charge of this process felt like mediating an emotional dialogue between the development team and the participants (Sengers et al. 2004, Boehner et al. 2007).

Although the case study was process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented (Löwgren 1995), the design process ended with a concrete prototype which was played and assessed with the participants. How did the game, and the process of inspiring it, matter to the participants? Did they identify with it? What could their perspective on their invol-

vement tell me about the potential therapeutic uses of grief-based game design?

WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS

One of my intentions with this book is to make a contribution to the academic field of videogame studies, and media studies more generally. The study adds to the research on videogame representation, in that it provides a new perspective on games as cultural artefacts forming and informing our views on grief. By unpacking myths around game expression and proposing a descriptive, non-essentialist perspective on game expression, the study highlights opportunities to think grief and game expression together. On a methodological level, it demonstrates the benefits of close reading for game analysis, especially the need for a critical discussion of game devices in their capacity to make statements about love and loss.

My second ambition is to add to the field of game design and HCI research by developing a framework for grief-based design. Related to this is the wish to make difficult human experiences more speakable in interactive media. While the Trauerspiel design method has been created with grievers in mind, it can be applied to any participatory game design setting, especially those involving groups with sceptical or antagonistic views on videogames. I have observed that designing with people who reject 'games' comes with a potential for innovation, since their dismissal of what has been done before is an implicit call for change. Grief-based game design in particular challenges ideas of what play may mean and is therefore a fertile ground to explore new game experiences and audiences. My hope is that the Trauerspiel method can help other game developers embrace collaborations with people unlike themselves, people who challenge the usefulness of games, and people who deal with trauma.

This goes hand in hand with the third ambition of this study, which is to contribute to the field of expressive art therapy. While the

therapeutic function of design dialogue is not explicitly addressed in this study, the results speak a clear language. Game design is a language which can be harnessed for introspection, and a systematic exploration of inner themes. In the case of Trauerspiel and Jocoi, the game design process has been deeply validating for both designers and participants, suggesting it as a feasible addition to the expressive art therapy toolset.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book is divided into three parts. Part one introduces the theoretical and conceptual background of the study and reviews previous work in the fields of game studies and grief scholarship. Part two contains analyses of five games, Final Fantasy VII (1997), Ico (2001), Passage (2007), Shelter (2013), and Brothers (2013). In part three, I discuss the case study, introducing my methodology, the participatory design workshop Trauerspiel, the design of the game Jocoi resulting from the workshop, as well as its assessment.

Part One: Theory

Chapter 1.1 is concerned with the question of game-specific representation and how we can understand the expressive properties of videogames. The chapter will first review two pervasive myths within games and design studies which have promoted a limited essentialist treatment of videogames as ergodic (Aarseth 1997) or interactive (Bogost 2007) structures. Both terms refer to the circumstance that videogames, unlike other media, require a player to participate in the action. However, they assume this 'gameness' to have a particular effect on the audience, either overriding meaning (ergodicity myth) or reforming meaning (interactivity myth). Alternatively to this view, I suggest treating videogames as multimodal texts (i.e. music being no less important

than rules or mechanics), while also accounting for games' unique participatory aspects.

In chapter 1.2, I discuss the conceptual and historical background of my approach to grief. This approach is situated in a constructionist understanding of sense-making as bereavement work (Neimeyer 2009, Rosenblatt/Bowman 2013). Constructionism puts the focus on the personal language of grievers as a resource to approach loss experiences. I connect this understanding of grief to game design, framing gameplay as a modality of 'grief talk'. I borrow from previous studies on expressive art in grief counselling (i.e. Neimeyer/Thompson 2014) which have addressed artistic techniques as a way to validate grievers. Art-making is conceived in terms of a dual communication of creation and reception (Potash/Ho 2014), two moments which, I argue, are also at work when we make and design games with each other.

Historically speaking, constructionism has been developed as an alternative to the dominant grief work hypothesis (Bradbury 1999) coined by Sigmund Freud in 1917 (Strachey 1961). Starting with Freud's seminal text "On Mourning and Melancholia", chapter 1.2 first reviews the mechanics of grief work and its central binary of 'good grief' and 'bad grief', reflecting on what has made this hypothesis so attractive to 20th century psychology. I do so through a combination of literature review and reflective game design, using my prototype of Overcoming, a game mimicking the medical grief rhetoric of cutting bonds (Lindemann 1944, Bowlby/Parkes 1970).

Part Two: Analysis

Chapter 2.1 addresses ally loss in Final Fantasy VII, discussing the design devices of symbiosis, gendering, and musical theming in the construction of an eye-level attachment between protagonist Cloud and party member Aeris. I argue that these devices suture Aeris firmly into the game world and inflict a secondary loss (Stroebe/Schut 1999) when Aeris is removed from the game. This is discussed along two fan prac-

tices; the Aeris ghost glitch, and resurrection hacking, in which players seek ways to keep Aeris in the game after her loss.

In chapter 2.2, I observe how, as opposed to FFVII, Ico revolves around a vulnerable bond to the translucent androgynous Yorda, which constantly needs to be defended by the male protagonist. This attachment is constructed through spatial back and forth dynamics, the mapping of Yorda on the control scheme, and rules which define her as dependent. Ico's gameplay is dominated by the imperative to help Yorda, so her loss comes with a gameplay deprivation which is reinforced by the game's depressive symbolic landscape and a literal loss of control over the bond (McDonald 2012).

Chapter 2.3 investigates how the minimalist game Passage models a variant of conjugal attachment and bereavement which defines love as a process of physical incorporation: According to the hegemonic formula – "men look and women appear" (Berger 2008[1972]: 42) – the man initiates contact, the woman becomes part of the player character, and together they become an unbreakable union. This union is embedded in a metaphorical world where space equals time. Ageing is represented by the couple's transition from the left towards the right, foreshadowing the moment of death. I will analyse this moment using Philippe Ariès's (2013[1974]) concepts of mors repentina and the tame death, to show that the wife's death is staged as shocking spectacle which sets us up for the protagonist's death. Furthermore, I will discuss the refusal to play on as a possible player response to spouse loss.

In chapter 2.4, I discuss how Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons represents fraternal loss along a narrative of continuing bonds (Silverman/Klass 1996), using the devices of synergy between the brothers. Attachment is characterised as safe beyond death; this is established through a spatial bond that is both taken for granted and allows distance between the characters. After death, the simultaneous control of both brothers is used for the representation of continuing bonds. As the sole survivor, little brother is the only playable character we see on screen, but big brother's powers can sometimes be summoned by using his control buttons.

In Shelter's child loss gestalt, discussed in chapter 2.5, players also first play through dependency, and the imperative to keep the badger kids alive, engaging in practices of nurturing and protection. The game uses the devices of an invisible inter-character bond to model intimacy between mother and children, age markers to contrast cuteness versus adulthood, and synaesthesia to allude to danger. The staging of loss happens through permadeath (permanent death), a device which constructs bereavement in terms of maternal failure. I argue that both, notions of care and loss of purpose in Shelter reproduce the stereotype of the self-sacrificing mother (Kaplan 2013[1992]), dressed in a cycle of nature narrative.

Summing up, chapter 2.6 will conclude on the design devices and their possibilities and limitations for grief-based game design. Furthermore, some suggestions for critical modification are made.

Part Three: Design

Part three introduces the case study, discussing the methodology I developed to design with the bereaved (chapter 3.1), a report of the ideation workshop Trauerspiel carried out in the summer 2014 (chapter 3.2), the way grievers' inspirational material was used for the design of the game Jocoi (chapter 3.3), and the evaluation of the development process (chapter 3.4).

The initial chapter of this part focuses on the use of muse-based game design (Khaled 2012) to accommodate the grief narratives of the four study participants. I talk about the role of muse-based design as an experimental empathic design method cultivating a personal designer-player bond. Then I explain its advantages for a sensitive experience context like pregnancy loss.

The following chapter reports on the Trauerspiel ideation workshop, during which the participants created models of their mother-child relationships, using exercises informed by Rusch (2017) and expressive art therapy (Levine 2014, Potash/Ho 2014). The ideation exercises were designed both to empower the women to share their imagi-

nations freely with a group of peers who cared, and to inform game design constraints.

Chapter 3.3 discusses how the design team translated outcomes of the informant workshop into gameplay, providing an analysis of Jocoi. It looks at how the women's metaphorical landscapes served as an emotional canvas for the development team, and how design tools were used to match these landscapes.

Finally, chapter 3.4 brings up the question of impact along the three design iterations of Jocoi. Apart from reflecting on evaluation methods such as usability, user experience testing (Bargas-Avila/Hornbæk 2011) and cultural probes (Gaver et al. 1999), this chapter addresses the role of ambiguity in grief-based game design (Sengers/Gaver 2006).

Overall, the book moves from the broad analytical question of what videogames might be able to do to represent love and loss towards the specific design challenge of inviting these themes into the medium. The final chapter reflects on my findings.