

From loss and grief to game design working with the experience of bereaved mothers

Sabine Harrer

Austrian Academy of Sciences
University of Vienna, Austria
sabine.harrer@univie.ac.at

INTRODUCTION

How can the experience of loss and mourning be communicated through digital game design? How can the voices of grieving people be made tangible through game mechanics, rules, and game fiction? These are some questions I am currently exploring in my ongoing PhD project, which aims at contributing to our analytical and hands-on understanding of experiential game design.

Methodologically, the project consists of two parts, an analysis part in which I'm distinguishing the experience of "loss" from the more structural "losing" that is so ubiquitous in games. Some previous work on this chapter has been published in Harrer [2013]. The goal of this textual analysis drawing on a couple of available games which arguably feature "loss", is to structurally assist the second part of the thesis, a hands-on game design part. This design part uses a creative partnership with an Austrian self help group catering to the needs of mourning parents to further contextualise "loss" as a specific type of lived experience. Four women identifying with the theme of early child death agreed to participate in the design work by modelling metaphors of their experience. These, together with conclusions from the analysis chapter, will serve as the anchor for upcoming game design and implementation work to be carried out this fall semester.

For CHIPlay's participatory design workshop it might be most interesting to zoom in more into the work that has been carried out with the four informants, and discuss its place and function in the overall design process. Image, video and audio footage is available.

something about ourselves, and how can we tap that potential? The following investigations are exploratory rather than exhaustive, drawing on observations from existing games, relevant scholarly discourse as well as my own design work, and intend

to take a first stab at the problem instead of aiming at a final solution.

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANT WORKSHOP

Initially, the participants expressed an interest to involve in the project, while all of them were equally confused by the idea of "creating a game". This suggested their roles as "muses" rather than co-designers [Khaled 2012]. Nevertheless, I decided to work with materials and activities that were likely to result in procedural models of their emotional landscapes. For this, I drew heavily on the work of Lakoff and Johnson [1980], Lawley and Tompkins [2000] and Rusch [2009] to come up with the following storytelling method:

After a brief welcome round assisted by random objects on a blanket, I invited the participants to go on the following journey:

"You are taking the objects with you on an expedition. You are going far far away until you reach a planet. You know this planet well, but there are many things to explore.

On this planet there are:

you, a child that you mourn(ed) about, and everything else that is also there"

I chose this initial metaphor of the planet to give them a starting point for symbolic modelling, while staying open to their imagination (there is no limit to what can live on their "planet").

To mark their "arrival" on their planet symbolically, I asked them to pick one of the key cards scattered on the ground. Each card had been designed and cut out individually and contained a different term referring to a formal game element ("goal", "time", "gestalt", "space", "change", "transform", "negotiate", "progress", etc.). I left it up to them whether or not to be inspired by this extra term on their exploration.



After picking the keys they were asked to model their planets, using the materials available. They were guided through this task in 3 steps, stretching out over the remaining 3,5 hours:

- 1) Coming up with symbols: what is there on the planet? what form/shape do these objects take? what do you see, hear, perceive otherwise?
- 2) Thinking about the rules: Are there any laws? What happens if you break the laws? What is there to do on the planet? What can't be done?
- 3) Discussion: 30 min per model to engage in a Q/A about the specifics of the planet. Participants were asked to check out the planet and make comments and observations. They were a really talkative, engaged bunch so everyone asked a lot of questions, sometimes challenging, mostly appreciating each others' planets.

The workshop ended with an invitation for the participants to take pictures of their planets or take them home, and to keep me updated on any "developments on their planets". I further announced to stay in touch about any design work and invited them to stay available for playtesting twice throughout the implementation process. However, since the prospective game will be targeted towards the near and dear of people who have lost a child it might require a different group of testers. This is to be decided and might also be an interesting point for discussion.

UPCOMING WORK AND OPEN QUESTIONS

A selection of workshop materials, particularly the final models together with the analysis chapter Harrer [2013] will be the starting and orientation points of our design efforts throughout the next four months. A student team from the Medialogy section of Copenhagen's AAU will be in charge of the tech and implementation part, while my role is to facilitate the mediation between informants' and designers' voices throughout this process.

There are some challenging questions ahead regarding the way we are inviting lived experience into the design. First, and rather conceptually, is the construction of visual materials, audio files and photographs enough to call the project a "co-design" or "participatory design" project? Secondly, we are working with different areas of expertise and control over creative expression: while participants are being treated as experts of their own worlds and narratives, these experiences are still being translated into the realm of game design and tinkered with. What does it take to maintain a fair balance between participants' voices and the creative autonomy of designers? How have others handled the blurry notion of "participation" and what techniques have they used to take the contributions of informants to full fruition? In other words, what options are there to engage external voices beyond "face value", beyond a place where they might undermine the creative autonomy of game designers?

These are some of the issues which the project struggles with at its current stage, and which I would be happy to put up for discussion at the CHIPlay participatory game design forum.

REFERENCES

1. Harrer, S [2013] From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames beyond Death as Failure", *Culture Unbound* 5(35),online <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v5/a35/>.
2. Khaled, R. [2012] Muse-Based Game Design. DIS Into the Wild.
3. Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. [1980] *Metaphors We Live By*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. Lawley, J. und Tompkins, P. [2000] *Metaphors in Mind. Transformation through Symbolic Modelling*. The Developing Company Press.
5. Rusch, D. [2009] *Mechanisms of the Soul: Tackling the Human Condition in Videogames, Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, Digra digital library. online: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.01371.pdf>.