From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure

By Sabine Harrer

Abstract

In games, loss is as ubiquitous as it is trivial. One reason for this has been found in the established convention of on-screen character death as a signifier for failure (Klastrup 2006; Grant 2011; Johnson 2011). If that's all that games have to offer in terms of addressing an existential trope of human experience, the worried protectionist concludes, shouldn't we dismiss this intrinsically flat medium as inferior to more established media forms such as film or literature? (Ebert 2010). Contrary to this view, this paper discusses gameplay examples that shed light on how this medium might leverage its expressive resources to arrive at rich representations of loss.

First, the notion of loss implied in Sigmund Freud's work "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) will be discussed in relation to losing in games. Looking at procedurality, fictional alignment and experiential metaphor as three expressive gameplay devices identified by Doris Rusch (2009) will help explain the expressive shortcoming of losing and lay out what is at stake with profound gameplay expression. Moreover, it will serve as the keywords structuring the following analysis of three videogames, Final Fantasy VII (1997), Ico (2001) and Passage (2007), and their design decisions fostering deep representations of loss. Keeping the Freudian notion of loss in mind, we can trace its repercussions on the three expressive dimensions respectively. Following a separate analysis of each gameplay example, the last section will discuss some commonalities and differences and arrive at the identification of desired object, permanent disruption and linearity as design aspects modeling loss in more compelling ways than losing.

Keywords: Loss, human experience, game design, procedural expression, fiction, metaphor, cultural studies.

Introduction

> If games are playgrounds for thought, they may be the perfect venue for testing our reactions to this unknowable thing. And because we use games to process experiences in a safe space, we can use them to confront in play what we never want to have to confront in reality. We can rehearse what we'll do when death leaves us lost. Because it will. (Grant 2011)

Contrary to being dismissed as trivial tools of temporary distraction (Ebert 2010), digital games are now increasingly explored in their capacity to engage players in profound ways. Efforts "to make the medium deeply important to people" (Blow 2010), have spurred design approaches to "critical play" (Flanagan 2009), non-profit initiatives like "games4change"[1] and research on "the human condition in videogames" (Rusch 2009), investing in the development and investigation of a rich, sophisticated game culture. They mirror a concern for games as significant cultural artifacts, seeking to question and expand the notion of games constantly. This brings about the need to understand the representational affordances of the medium, calling for the critical exploration of game design conventions and ways to use them for rich forms of expression.

Discussing loss and mourning as a trope in videogames, this essay responds to this need by drawing together psychoanalysis, design theory and cultural analysis to understand the expressive mechanisms of games in relation to emotional states. First, I will introduce the Freudian concept of loss, arguing that games have been blamed for its trivialization due to their central losing component. The distinction between loss and losing is a helpful starting point to the question how we arrive at profound and compelling representations of loss, and to counter the limitation of games' emotional bandwidth. This question will be pursued by adopting a game design lens based on Doris Rusch's (2009) identification of three expressive devices in games; procedurality, fictional alignment and experiential metaphor. These key concepts, which according to Rusch foster a purposeful design of human experience in videogames, will be used to structure the following analysis of three gameplay moments from Final Fantasy VII (1997), Ico (2001), and Passage (2007). In spite of the different cultural, economic and artistic contexts these games work in, they arguably offer some strong structural commonalities in how they deal with loss beyond losing. The core interest of this analysis is to systematically trace these common features and explore the way they resonate with a Freudian concept of loss.

Loss Versus Losing

In his study on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) Sigmund Freud explores loss as a universal emotional state in human life. Analyzing "profound mourning, as the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved" (1917: 244) he talks about the culturally contingent reaction to a universal human experience. Describing how his patients experience loss as a state in which the world "has become poor and empty" (246) he proposes a therapeutic paradigm that contrasts mourning as a fruitful reaction against melancholia as a pathological reaction to loss. While deeply rooted in his practice of individual therapeutic treatment, Freud himself and interpreters of his work alike regarded his findings as metaphorical extensions of a larger cultural condition, and as help to the meaningful interpretation thereof.[2] Following Freud, each kind of cultural production can be read as a sublimating act compensating for the ubiquity of loss experienced by a "shared" psychic condition (Freud 1929/1961). While videogames in general can be seen in that light, this essay is more specifically interested in the way videogames can resonate with Freud's own interest by modeling what "the real loss of a loved object" (Freud 1917: 250) feels like. From a game design stance interested in the meaning potential of games, this question needs to be tackled in awareness of its contingency on the player. We thus have to ask, how do certain gameplay characteristics afford loss? This question implies a different view than a determinist stance claiming a cause-effect relation between form (i.e. gameplay) and meaning (i.e. loss). To a certain extent, affordances guide and structure the production of meaning (Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010). Losing can be seen as one such an affordance that according to authors like Johnson (2011) and Grant (2011) cannot per se tie in with a wider experience of human emotion. Johnson writes,

> Winning and losing are only defined in their relation to us. Their meaning does not come from an abstract ideal that is buried in the rules of the game, but from our experiences in life, such as witnessing a war... or having once won the emotionally fractured heart of the blonde from class, only to have it crumble in my hands. (Johnson 2011)

This quote raises the main problem at stake: while games offer new modalities to represent human experiences and desires, designers have yet to explore the ways games' structural affordances can be meaningfully exploited to come up with representations beyond a mechanistic paradigm. Trying to model loss through losing is to fall into this mechanistic trap, because losing is not a structural affordance of loss; it is an affordance of game progression. At their core videogames are procedural representations which means that they draw their expressive potential from rules of computational execution (Bogost 2007: 5, Rusch 2009). Such rules determine the possibilities and constraints of player interaction with a system, including conditions of winning and losing. Procedurality uses losing as a central

tool of signification as it makes certain possibilities tangible to players. This does not mean that losing is necessarily suited to signify loss. Quite contrary, as the death of the main character in most platformer games since Super Mario Bros. in 1985 suggests, losing has mostly been used to represent temporary failure on the way to eventual mastery –potentially hindering but never entirely threatening the player. Game over is yet another moment in an infinite circuit of trial and error, subverting the meaning of death as end of life by using it as a sanctioning mechanism for ill-performed player interaction. As a corollary, watching their digital superhero fall into bottomless pitches, die from enemy grenades, or be devoured by zombies under the condition of such a "quantum immortality" (Grant 2011) is hardly suited to affect players emotionally. As Grant concludes, "games have trained us to view death as a triviality" (Grant 2011).

This look at platformer games demonstrates that procedurality affords meaning making through the question how does it work? rather than what is displayed?. So is what we see, when we see our game characters die, completely irrelevant to the meaning of the game?

Hardly. From a cultural studies perspective, the meaning of gameplay performance is necessarily caught up in cultural reference, which means that throughout a play experience players establish meaningful links between the medium, their cultural memory, and the real world.[3] This requires us to look at procedurality in relation to fictional alignment and experiential metaphor, which according to Doris Rusch are the core ingredients of gameplay expression. In her essay Mechanisms of the Soul: Tackling the Human Condition in Videogames (2009) she explicitly introduces these three concepts as devices for the purposeful design of human emotional states and complex experiential processes in games.

While procedurality is the language by which gameplay becomes structured, fictional alignment refers to its meaningful contextualization in a fictional setting (Rusch & König 2007; Rusch 2009). According to the author, "the game-part brings in the affective strength of the real-world activity and the fiction contextualizes those game emotions and enables players to attribute them to the events in the gameworld" (Rusch 2009:3). Fictional alignment, then, is where the link to our cultural memory is established. What conventions have we, as players, come to internalize by our cultural contexts? Based on this question, we can find out what fictional alignment resonates with the procedural meaning of loss as the permanent separation from a loved object. While fictional alignment draws a connection between a game and players' shared set of fictional conventions, the term experiential metaphor introduces personal experience as an important factor to activate such conventions. Experiential metaphor is premised on an understanding of gameplay "as a physical visualisation of abstract ideas such as emotional processes or mental states. What the game feels like can provide an additional interpretative cue that helps game comprehension along" (Rusch 2009: 5). Experiential metaphor shifts the focus from the technical to the emotional dimension of mean-

ing making. To describe what a game feels like is to establish a link between a subjective experience and the community of values in which we have learned to talk about this experience. Experiential metaphor helps us distinguish between physical visualizations of emotional states, creating a contingent knowledge of loss. The Freudian notion of loss, for instance, is not metaphorically captured by a repetitive fall in a bottomless abyss that can eventually be overcome. We would rather have to look for representations that make the inevitable and permanent nature of losing something loved tangible. It calls on games to refrain from the dying convention and introduces the need to look for the procedural, fictional and metaphorical equivalents of real life experience.

While Rusch has implied the three devices for practical game design work, they are equally well suited as analytical tools to trace expressive features of loss in videogames. This particularly applies to approaches interested in the question how games afford meaningful links to human experience. In combination, the three key concepts offer a compelling game-specific angle reminiscent of Kress's (2010) social semiotic approach. According to the latter, mode (procedurality), discourse (fictional alignment) and genre (experiential metaphor) count as the three semiotic resources creating the affordances of a text. What we find in the concept of procedurality is the capacity of games to make use of time and space. While this urges the analysis to zoom in on the smallest composites of gameplay structure, it arguably misses out on accounting for the cultural dimension, the meaning of gameplay experiences (Sicart 2011). In combination with fictional alignment and experiential metaphor, however, it works to explain the means of meaning making afforded by the discursive and generic aspects of the games. As a corollary, this framework is suited to explore the structural potentials and constraints of design choices, i.e. the way a game makes use of space and time to create affordances of meaning for the player. It is not to determine the way players actually identify with the result, but to gain a critical understanding of the design choices regarding the way they imply loss as an experiential option. The framework will carry the analysis of three games that propose representations resonating with a Freudian concept of loss in different ways.

Final Fantasy VII

Final Fantasy VII is the most dated as well as the most complex and long-winding game in discussion. Published by Japanese Square in the 1990s for the PlayStation worldwide, it features a well-known death scene that has held many players in shock and is cherished as a sad and unforgettable moment in game history.[4]

Procedurality

As a typical role-playing adventure, FFVII's mechanics range from exploring the planet, fighting enemies, leveling up playable characters and solving riddles around the intricate political and personal stories carrying gameplay. Apart from Cloud Strife, the main character we control throughout the game, we meet characters that join our party and thereby become partly playable characters. Each of them brings a characteristic ability or skill that is revealed particularly during battle. Aeris, a team member introduced in the first hours of gameplay, brings inherent healing powers that make the consumption of healing potions during battle redundant. During the hours after Aeris has joined the team, the players get a fair amount of time to internalize what Aeris stands for procedurally. Repeating the pattern of a free healing option during battle, the players are likely to identify Aeris's essential function for the team. She is fundamentally integrated in gameplay by contributing a unique skill that cannot be restored after her sudden and unexpected death. The moment of Aeris being killed by Cloud's alter ego Sephiroth is introduced by a cinematic cut scene and immediately followed by an interactive emotionally charged dialogue in which Cloud's shock is externalized, offering the player room for identification. The previous establishment of Aeris as a playable character is one of the reasons why losing her is a memorable experience for the player. On the gameplay level, her permanent absence is manifested in the need to look for alternatives to her healing skills. Procedurally speaking, losing Aeris is tantamount to losing a comforting gameplay pattern. In FVII, death appears in two different gameplay versions. We can see how death as a fail state, creating tension during fights, has a clearly different function than permanent death, which always becomes tangible through the disruption of previously established gameplay patterns.

Fictional Alignment

On the fictional level, Aeris's stylization as an allegory for virtue renders the message of her futile and unfair death evermore urgent. The alignment of fiction and gameplay characterizes her as a strong and unconditionally caring figure devoting her powers to healing and reconciliation. Her musical theme, a contemplative triad, is played whenever another branch of her intricate story is in the focus of attention. Preceding her membership in the party she is introduced as a flower vendor in the slums of the industrial city Midgar and from then on constantly surrounded by symbols of spirituality and peace, growing flowers in a church or praying in an ancient temple prior to her death. As discussed above, her caring shamanic characteristics are integrated within gameplay to suggest her importance to the party. Moreover, the emergence of a shy love interest between Aeris and the main character Cloud offers some room to her identification as a loved object. The way ambitions and motivations of neither Cloud nor Aeris are fully revealed di-

rects some player curiosity towards whether they might be a happy couple in the future. Taken together, these fictional aspects render Aeris's death by Cloud's antagonist even more dramatic. Neither the gameplay nor the fictional level have prepared players for this radical turn of events. While it lasts, we once more listen to the now well-established piano triad which, according to Schreier, is "the real reason Aeris's death made you cry" (Schreier 2012). Cloud's response to Aeris's death further reifies its inevitable and most of all irreversible nature. "This can't be real", he says, holding Aeris in his arms. "Aeris will no longer talk, no longer laugh, cry... or get angry. What about us? What are WE supposed to do?"[5] We, the players of FFVII, then have 60 gameplay hours left to look for answers to this question. Since Aeris's ideas how to save the planet have remained undisclosed until her sudden death, we are kept in the dark about another possible turn of events that resurrects Aeris. This, however, is not going to happen. Aeris's greyed-out portrait on the team member list gives a subtle hint that her absence from gameplay is permanent.

Experiential Metaphor

The profound quality of Aeris's loss is made physically tangible by making her abilities and character irreplaceable on various, quite literal, levels. First, we have seen her skill's contribution for gameplay and the way her integration as a team member has created a pattern that players could rely on for various hours. On the experiential level, this represents Aeris as a great help out of our current difficulties. Furthermore, she is constructed as a romantic love interest of Cloud Strife, whose complex array of fears, wishes, and desires suits itself as a metaphor for players' own psyche. For players who identify with Cloud Strife, the questions and concerns he raises in the light of Aeris's death address themselves in a way that can be deeply engaging. Countless fan sites engage in mourning work by retelling the love story of Aeris and Cloud[6] or opening the floor to personal confessions: "When [Aeris] died", writes Aprillis on a virtual fan community board "I... stopped playing FFVII for a week because I was so upset. So I'm glad that a lot of people felt the same way about her death as I did."[7]

Ico

Like Final Fantasy VII, Ico is a Japanese production, launched first by Team Ico for the PlayStation 2. Other than the fictionally dense and quite literal representation of loss discussed in the previous section, we now deal with a more cryptical, nonetheless compelling take on loss, this time taking center stage as a subject we explore throughout the whole game.

Procedurality

Ico is a third person 3D action-adventure game whose core mechanics consist of navigating Ico through a mysterious castle that he seeks to escape with Yorda while fighting the black shadows continuously threatening Yorda's life. Throughout the first five or so hours of the game players learn to internalize a basic pattern that establishes Yorda as an object of our concern. In case Yorda is abducted by the shadows and successfully pulled into one of their black holes, the game sanctions the player's failure by freezing the screen into a game over scenario, leaving the player to start again from the last save point. This renders Yorda deeply important on the level of procedurality, since killing all the black shadows threatening her is a condition of game progression. The player can reduce the frequency of shadows by reducing the space between Ico and Yorda. This can be controlled by the R1 button, which makes Ico call out for Yorda or hold her hand while walking. Introducing intricate climbing and puzzle passages, the gameplay sometimes affords their separation, adding a time challenge to the puzzle. One can never know when and where the next group of shadows spawns to attack a now completely exposed Yorda. Apart from Yorda's dependence on player choice, her status as an object of importance for gameplay is constructed by her magic ability to open spellbound doors, which she will often do by default whenever close to one. Halfway through the game, Ico's tragical loss happens when Yorda is inevitably captured by a mother-like shadow abducting her child on the way to freedom. Like in FFVII, this event is introduced by a cut scene that this time, however, ends up in an altered procedural environment: now bereft of Yorda's presence, the R1 and the fight button have become obsolete, reducing Ico's possible agency spectrum to walking, jumping and climbing.

Fictional Alignment

What is suggested on the gameplay level as a symbiotic relationship between Ico and Yorda comes to be fictionally aligned to the classical hero/damsel in distress dichotomy. Yorda's tall, fragile, elf-like and unarmed body is starkly contrasted against the solid appearance of Ico. His mission as a boy in charge of Yorda's well-being not only reverberates on the level of his looks but the narrative situation the couple finds itself in. Yorda first appears when Ico releases her from a cage, establishing her helplessness from the beginning of the game onwards. The castle's somewhat friendly solitude created by austere decoration, bright sunlight and a murmuring wind noise creates a context of intimacy. In contrast to Aeris, who needs a dramatic personality to stand out against other characters in the game, Yorda is Ico's only possible love object within the deserted, somewhat temple-like building. Ico's fundamental loss is, again, inflicted by a malign instance, rendering his attempts to lead Yorda over the bridge to freedom fruitless. Debilitated by an unknown power, Yorda collapses while the bridge disintegrates,

causing Ico to fall. When Ico wakes up alone after this dramatic cut scene, we notice the altered conditions that reflect Ico's deterioration. The weather has turned wild, raining down on Ico as the player has to find a new reason to go on playing the game. Up to this moment, all gameplay decisions have revolved around the questions how to defend Yorda most effectively in order to save her. Due to its prominent role within gameplay culture, this damsel in distress scheme takes little time to be naturalized by the player. It is all the more shattering to have it taken away all of a sudden. What appears to be the single unimportant button of R1 on the procedural level has a highly tangible function on the level of fiction: it represents Ico's ability to make a difference in Yorda's life. Halfway through playing time this ability is taken away from him for the rest of the game.

Experiential Metaphor

Ico deploys a number of metaphorical devices that make the experiential quality of loss feasible to players. On both procedural and fictional level Yorda's status as Ico's object of love is reminiscent of a parent-child relationship. Like a parent cheering up a child afraid of ghosts at night, Ico engages in the killing of black shadows. Through experiential metaphor this gameplay strategy can be accessed as an imperative to protect and care for Yorda. Her fragility manifesting in her every move frames this as a heroic duty. This "attachment mechanic" is established long enough to naturalize it as the gameplay's central goal (which other than in FFVII is never literally addressed). When Yorda is lost, we might feel like a bereft parent discovering that our ability to care is no longer needed. This establishes a smooth resonation with the challenge of mourning to withdraw one's libido from a lost object of love (Freud 1917: 244). Ico's level design fully matches this conflict by deploying orientational metaphors aligned to Ico's emotional state: While the castle is situated on top of an erect rock, Ico's fall from the bridge is followed by a sequence on the bottom of it. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 14) Ico's fall and his struggle back up evokes a metaphorical link deeply engrained in our cultural vocabulary: "being subject to control or force is down" while "having control or force is up" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 15). Ico's loss of agency represented by the obsolete R1 function is in perfect alignment with the changed weather conditions that make inner sadness in the light of a lost "care function" tangible. The game thus models a symbolic landscape representing the emotional inner life of the main character. This is a strategy we find again in Passage as well.

Passage

Passage is a five-minute-long PC game released by independent game designer Jason Rohrer in 2007, and has found wide acclaim for its minimal gameplay mechanics representing a complex philosophy of life.[8]

Procedurality

In Passage, players control a character on a 100x16 pixel field from a bird's-eye perspective, navigating him through mazes and walking over treasure chests by pressing the arrow keys. The long screen as well as the score that raises when we move Eastwards indicate that this is the way to go. Navigating up or down will allow players to choose a more maze-ridden or monotonous route that he can either walk on his own or together with a non-player character to be found at the beginning. Running into her triggers an animated heart that represents their falling in love. The player now controls a "twin" character taking double the space and effort to navigate. However, walking as a couple significantly raises the player's score indicated in the upper right corner. Since all of the remaining gameplay is about the couple's monotonous walk, supported by an equally monotonous looping 4bit soundtrack, the player is given enough time to internalize this stroll as the "way to go". The transformation of the spouse's body into an immovable gravestone and the slowed-down pace of the main character procedurally introduce the break with this pattern. The remaining seconds of gameplay can be spent by exploring more of the now austere environment accompanied by the same monotonous tune before the main character turns into a gravestone as well and the game ends.

Fictional Alignment

Since a creator's statement is available we know that Rohrer intended to make Passage about the meaning and transitoriness of life in general and his life in particular. The digital main character is identified as a representation of Rohrer himself and the pixelated girl picked up on the way is his spouse (Rohrer 2007). But even without knowing this autobiographical context we can immediately recognize the damsel in distress pattern at the core of Passage. In contrast to Yorda and Aeris, who make a difference to the procedural system by having their own skills contributing to player agency, the spouse is merely important on the spatial level. As a matter of fact, most of the time she is represented as an obstacle when we navigate through the mazes. This might be identified as a hindering factor establishing her as an object of love. However, by making the player used to their spatial proximity, the spouse literally becomes a part of the main character that is hard to lose in the end.

Experiential Metaphor

One would assume the simple gameplay mechanic of walking to have only little experiential range. However, the limitation on one action enables the game to establish expression via the metaphorical weight of game object relations. When we meet our spouse, we literally have to run into her in order to take her on a journey. Being together is rewarding (higher score), while we sometimes get stuck in a blind alley (the maze), forced to change our way. Sometimes, however, we are surprised by reaching an unexpected lottery win (a treasure chest hiding in the blurry pixels in front of us). Most literally, we go through all of these things while we see our characters' bodies age in a constantly transforming environment. There are allusions to changes in fashion, spaces of interest and physical states, establishing a time-lapsed biography whose end is clearly predictable. That way, Passage achieves a metaphor of transitoriness, reminding the players that the

character's inevitable death is in sight. As opposed to the sudden deaths of Aeris and Yorda, it does not come as a surprise in Passage but is softly introduced by the representation of age. The sudden transformation of the spouse into an immovable gravestone still comes at a shock. "Here one minute, gone the next, as they say", comments Rohrer (2007) on this moment. As one walks off, the feeling of being alone is conveyed on the spatial level; the character is literally half of what he used to be. Also, his pace is slower, reminding us of the emotional quality of mourning and grief. Do we want to continue, or would we rather do what a player suddenly decided as I watched him play Passage: Take the hands off the keyboard and make the husband await his own death next to the gravestone?

Discussion

There are some significant structural commonalities in how the examples discussed above afford loss that are worthwhile looking for at least two reasons. First, they give some practical guidance for game designers interested in tackling loss, and secondly they can help expand our theoretical understanding of gameplay as expressive artifacts beyond winning and losing.

First, the games share a compelling establishment of a desired object on all three dimensions of gameplay expression. On the level of procedurality, we find gameplay patterns that introduce a main hero in partial dependence on a non-player character who is usually introduced as a girl on the fictional level.[9] More specifically, the design choices to relate Aeris to healing power, Yorda to opening doors, and the spouse to a higher score count is to make them relevant for the player because their influence represents an integral part of the gameplay. When this part then breaks away the player necessarily has to look for alternatives or compensation, which in all three examples are less attractive than previous gameplay options.

Secondly, all three games feature a moment of permanent disruption that is introduced on all three levels of representation and followed by a slight change of gameplay patterns. Even if Ico and FFVII use cinematic cut scenes to make this moment tangible, Passage shows that this can also be achieved via a minimal effect like turning a previously moving spouse into a pixelated gravestone. Disruption introduces a turning point to gameplay: We no longer have access to Aeris's valuable healing powers, the R1 function of protecting Yorda and the spouse's presence. The moment of disruption is only experienced as such by virtue of happening late in the game, when the player has had enough time to learn and internalize the symbiotic love mechanics discussed above. By then, the function of Aeris, Yorda and spouse have come to be part of one's own world, as part of one's goals. Buying potions instead of having Aeris' healing powers available constantly reminds the player of her priceless contribution to the party. The broken R1 button, which in the prelapsarian scenario signified the imperative to protect Yorda, now stands for Ico's inability to reach her. Instead, he is expected to climb up ghastly contraptions in pouring rain, an equally dim scenario that Rohrer paints when he makes his alter ego walk away from his spouse's gravestone in an excruciatingly slow pace. Additionally, Passage and FFVII make use of spatial metaphors to make the absence of the character tangible: in Passage, it is the sudden disappearance of the spouse's body, disrupting the previously established feeling of the walking pair; in FFVII, it is Aeris's greyed-out portrait on the party member list that is no longer selectable.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the games share a strong sense of linearity which makes them what Juul (2005: 67) has generically defined as games of progression. Other than games of emergence like chess or Starcraft, whose procedural structures translate into a variety of equally feasible strategies, FFVII, Ico and Passage all establish a clear temporal order. There is a phase where gameplay patterns are established and internalized, a cut or animation scene which breaks up the pattern, and a phase where players have to learn the new pattern of a slightly more limited agency range.

The neat structural link between these phases and loss as a process seems too obvious, but as the different gameplay scenarios show, what happens within these phases needs to be crafted carefully. Is there enough time for the players to identify with the object of love? What procedural, fictional and metaphorical shape do I choose to represent this love? How much impact should a non-player character exert on the player's agency space? What game designers can take away from this discussion is the observation that no matter how harsh or shattering loss feels in real life, gameplay can only compellingly tackle it by maintaining an extent of player agency. All three examples establish a painful difference between gameplay patterns we come to like and gameplay patterns which point to what we liked and we no longer have. But most crucially, the latter can still be played. Playabil-

ity is thus a game's key affordance of profound loss: the pain is not that you lose, the pain is that you must continue.

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Notes

1 Find further information about this initiative on: http://www.gamesforchange.org

2 This is particularly the case in his late essay "Civilization and its Discontents" (1929) where Freud explores the psycho-social conflicts of the self in a greater context of culture.

3 Stuart Hall's model of two systems of representation, which explains meaning making processes as a connection between our mental conceptual maps, signs and the world (Hall 1997: 17) can be usefully applied here.

4 One among countless voices laying claim to this can be found in the archive of the "Play Station Universe" forum and belongs to SolidSnakeUS: "I would probably say that the saddest game moments I have ever seen is probably when Aeris died in Final Fantasy VII, that was extremely emotional for those who played and love the game and her as well. So sad." http://www.psu.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-11173.html.

5 Aeris's death scene accessible online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx3duFYCcho, quote at 03:49

6 The following FVII fan website commemorates the "soulmate" relationship of Cloud and Aeris by arranging select screenshots from the game into montages, thereby offering a solid interpretation of what the game only subtly affords: http://liz-jen.com/soulmates/cloud_aeris/pics1.html

7 Find the whole discussion on: http://s8.zetaboards.com/Cloud_x_Aeris/topic/8332103/1

8 Reviewers' comments ranges from "the greatest five-minute-long game ever made" (http://www.destructoid.com/-i-passage-i-the-greatest-five-minute-long-game-ever-made-58961.phtml) to "A game that made me almost cry" (http://playthisthing.com/passage)

9 There is too little space to accurately address the problematic intended male subject position (Yee 2008: 93) afforded by this design choice. This promises to be an interesting field of enquiry for future work.

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