

Grief in Mobile Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how grief is represented in mobile games. Through close readings of five mobile games, I argue that just as poetic language disrupts everyday language by drawing attention to the surface and texture of words, so too can poetic game elements disrupt the standard grammar of their platforms, thereby reawakening players to the layered meanings of ludic rhythms, forms, and materials. I suggest that some mobile games deliberately subvert the norms of their platforms and genres in order to create interpretive gaps. The discrepancy between players' expectations of mobile games and the modes of engagement that these games make possible produces irresolvable contradictions that we might think of as ludic *aporia*. I conclude that these points of friction and uncertainty are key to expressing experiences that are as fraught, as dissonant, and as bittersweet as grief.

Keywords

Grief, mobile games, friction, serious games, ludonarrative dissonance, poetry

INTRODUCTION

"I have been trying to tell you the secret of infinite lives", writes the poet Stephen Sexton in an elegy to his dead mother (Sexton, 2019, 19). His poetry collection exploring cancer, bereavement, mourning, and memorialization is structured around the 16-bit Super Nintendo System classic, *Super Mario World* (1990). Each poem is named after a different level of within the pixelated gameworld. The oceans of lava in the poem 'Iggy's Castle' situate a description of his wakeful mother "whose toes / whose hands whose fingers whose ankles whose head she says are on fire" (2019, 11), while 'Donut Ghost House' sparks thoughts of living worlds peering into dead worlds. Sexton expresses a desire to build his mother a monument out of cathode rays. This monument, he writes, will be "composed of light as you might say / so you can see it friend not the things themselves but the seeing of them" (2019, 95), suggesting that the light-emitting pixels of the videogame world are not just sights to be perceived, but are sites of perception. Sexton does not want to create a memorial object that represents his mother, but one that preserves his mother's perceptual experience. In this paper, I follow Sexton's lead, using the paradoxes that arise from the alignment of grief and play to position mobile games as sites of perception – as artefacts of light that illuminate one of the darkest human experiences. Building on the pathbreaking work of Sabine Harrer (2013; Harrer & Schoenau-Fog 2015; Harrer 2018), I use a close reading approach to investigate the capacity of mobile games to represent feelings of attachment, loss, and longing.

I take as my starting point the qualities shared by mobile games and poems. They are compact, portable, and - potentially - profound. They are often subject to tight formal parameters, but can do a lot with a little. As a stanza floats in the white space of a page, a phone's small screen is a floating focal point framed by the material world beyond.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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Poetic language defamiliarises everyday language by drawing attention to the visual surface and aural texture of words, as well as to the webbing between words. Likewise, poetic game elements can disrupt the standard grammar of their platform, thereby reawakening players to the multisensory meanings of ludic rhythms, forms, and materials. In the games analyzed in this paper, the subversion of the ‘norms’ of mobile gaming shapes interpretive gaps that invite creative, subjective responses. That is to say, the discrepancies between players’ medium-specific expectations and the modes of engagement that these games make possible produces irresolvable contradictions that we might think of as ludic *aporia*. These points of friction and ambiguity are key to expressing an experience as bittersweet, as dissonant, and as fraught as grief. As a counterpoint to the gamification of serious topics – where gamification is defined as the addition of game-like elements to non-game contexts (Deterding 2020) – I posit that the subversion, limitation, or removal of conventional game elements can elicit both deep attention and critical distance from players. I offer a typology of friction that can be used as a shared shorthand to notice and name the poetic affordances of videogames. I conclude by suggesting that rather than aspiring towards ‘fun’ and ‘flow’, designers of serious games about difficult, distressing ordeals should instead value friction as a rhetorical device that honors complex facets of human experience.

CORPUS

I selected five mobile games for close reading. I sought out critically-acclaimed games published within the last five years that were launched on a smartphone platform. These games each had an average runtime of between one and five hours, was accessible on an iPhone 7 (iOS 15), and – most importantly – they each engaged meaningfully with a form of grief. *Old Man’s Journey* (Broken Rules 2017) explores the protagonist’s feelings of guilt and regret as he travels to the deathbed of his ex-wife. *If Found...* (Dreamfeel 2020) and *The Stillness of the Wind* (Lambic 2019) centre on the grief elicited by community abandonment, neglect, and decay. *Florence* (Mountains 2018) grieves the end of the protagonist’s romantic relationship. Finally, *Far From Noise* (George Batchelor 2017) positions the protagonist in a liminal state between life and death, allowing her to mourn and release her former self.

These games differ significantly in tone, form, and genre. *Old Man’s Journey* is a 2D puzzle game. It has thematic connections to Alfred Tennyson’s *Ulysses* and is structurally aligned with Joseph Campbell’s model of The Hero’s Journey, but its closest textual kin are traditional sea shanties: it is both sincere and sentimental, cliched and authentic, folksy and lyrical. Visually, it is reminiscent of a stack of vintage seaside postcards. *If Found...* is a visual novel in which the player’s role is to carefully and thoroughly erase the contents of a journal that relays the protagonist’s story. It is akin to a piece of performance art, with a strong sense of place and voice. It is raw, intimate, earnest, and sometimes uncomfortable – in a word, provoking. The heart of this game could survive being remediated as a performer silently ripping out and burning pages of a densely written and intricately illustrated portfolio, witnessed by a concerned by impotent crowd. *The Stillness of the Wind* is a casual farming game. It is in conversation with Romantic poetry, specifically with the work of Keats and Coleridge that explore the collision between the pastoral and the fantastical, and with Shelley’s *Ozymandias*. In fact, the game environment is a multimodal, interactive manifestation of the sonnet’s concluding lines: “boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away” (Shelley 1811 / 1977). *Florence* is a Young Adult romance novella that belongs alongside the popular crossover media of John Green and Jenny Han. It is a wordless interactive graphic novel that follows the titular protagonist on a journey from loneliness to love and back. *Far From Noise* is a narrative game that takes place on the edge of cliff. A young girl’s car has veered off the road and now balances precariously above a steep drop down to the ocean. Over the course of a single night, the girl converses with a mysterious white stag about the relationship between life and death.

The game feels like a one-act play, with a single, static set and a small cast. It is a snappy and self-conscious, dialogue-driven, philosophical exploration of transcendence expressed from the perspective of a metamodern millennial teenager. Although my analysis plays particular attention to the thematic and formal points of overlap between these games, I feel it is important to emphasize their heterogeneity too.

DISCUSSION

My playthroughs affirmed the conclusions drawn by Kat Schrier and Matthew Farber in their case studies of autobiographical games representing difficult experiences (2021). All of the mobile games in my corpus 1) restricted and undermined player agency, 2) lacked win and fail conditions or forced failure upon the player, 3) provided opportunities for players to set the pace of play, and encouraged reflective, self-directed moments of slowness, and 4) ameliorated bleakness with messages of conditional hope. I noticed that each of these four elements relies on interpretive gaps and ludic *aporia*, arising from intermodal friction and the subversion of medium-specific or genre-specific expectations. The limitation of player agency and the removal of win or fail states undermines player expectations of mobile games as a medium, while the ‘vertical’ spaces in these games encourage players to linger. The bittersweet tension between pessimism and conditional optimism stems from the complex and sometimes contradictory interplay between semiotic planes.

Mobile games are multimodal ecosystems of meaning. They communicate across visual, verbal, auditory, haptic, and ludic, and performative planes. While these planes can support and reinforce each other, they can also complicate, subvert, ironize, or compete with each other. Here, I offer a ‘Typology of Friction’ (Fig. 1) that can be used to describe the synergistic interplay between planes. The same terminology can also be used to describe the degree to which a text complies with or subverts the ‘standard grammar’ of mobile games.

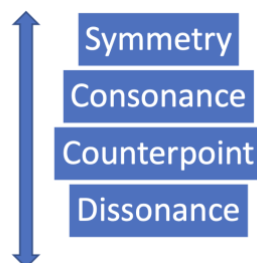


Figure 1 Typology of friction

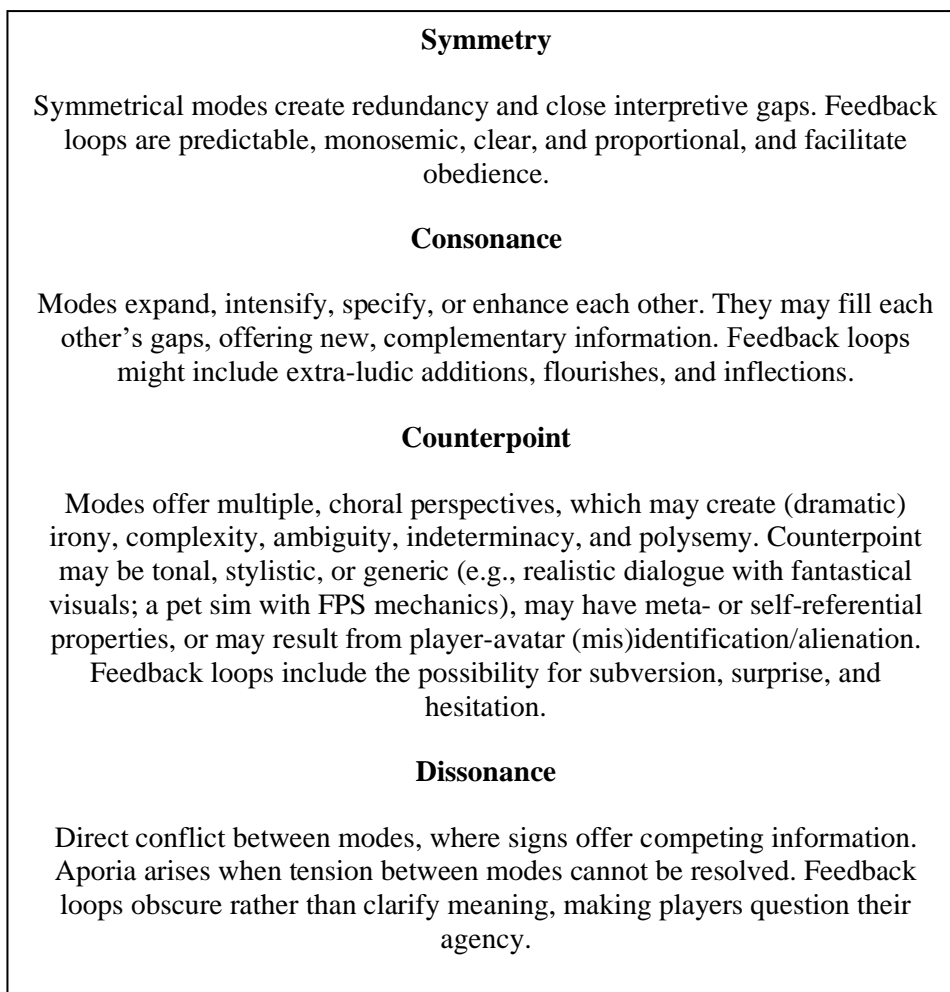


Figure 2 Expanded definitions of types of friction

Madison Schmalzer's (2020) exploration of intentional 'jank' – which she defines as “a player's perception that a videogame does not behave in the ways that it should” – provides a useful parallel. Jank refers specifically to a perceived mismatch between player input and machine output, rather than to the tension that may emerge between, say, audio and rules, or haptics and visuals, and so on. Furthermore, while friction between semiotic planes can be defamiliarizing, it doesn't have to be jarring, alienating, absurd, confronting, confusing, or wry – which are often the rhetorical moods associated with jank and with glitch aesthetics more broadly. In fact, as I'll demonstrate in the following close readings, intermodal friction can feel faithful, earnest, sensitive, resonant, sincere, and true.

As I note in the expanded definitions of my typology (Fig. 2), intentional friction can generate interpretive gaps, which, in turn, can invite subjective, creative responses. I find it is helpful to think of interpretive gaps created through the subversion of medium and genre expectations as existing on a macro level, while interpretive gaps created through the friction between semiotic planes as existing on a micro level. The titles of *The Stillness of the Wind, If Found...*, and *Far From Noise* all express a sense of absence, loss, or retreat – a clue, perhaps, that each game will renege on its medium- and genre-specific contracts with the player. *The Stillness of the Wind*, for example, evokes the farming simulator genre. However, while the trajectory of most farming simulators leads to expansion, increased efficiency and productivity, and a

diversification of potential interactions, *The Stillness of the Wind* cherishes stasis. The slow, repetitive monotony of directing an elderly avatar around an arid patch of land is a bulwark against entropy, but ultimately the game shrinks towards decline and erasure. The eventual, inevitable deaths of the chickens, goats, crops, and wild desert creatures are softened by the guilt-laden knowledge that soon the aged farmer will die too. There is some relief latent in the fact that the interactive elements will not outlast the player's intervention: the game promises an end to agency and therefore an end to player responsibility. While many games are designed to entice players to continue engaging through the flattering idea that the gameworld is dependent on them, *The Stillness of the Wind* insists on the futility of intervention. Instead, it shapes an uneasy playing experience that suggests if play can drudgery, then death can be release. In refusing to measure the player's progress or attainment, the game shifts the medium-specific question 'how do I win?' towards the more philosophical question of 'how can I find intrinsic value in these interactions?', or even 'how should I spend my time?'

The Stillness of the Wind resists expectations players may have of mobile games specifically. As Jesper Juul notes, there is an expectation that "the sun always shines in casual games" (2009:31), but *The Stillness of the Wind* does not shy away from negative affect. It is by turns bleak and boring and draining. The game is tragic without being epic, and this is emphasized in the juxtaposition of the cyclic regularity of farm labor and the dramatic news from the wider world communicated via lyrical letters from the protagonist's family. Beyond the edge of the screen, empires rise and fall, moons are colonized, political scandals erupt, indulgent festivals overrun the streets, and the Rapture begins. The fantastical, futuristic, heroic escapades common to many videogames are side-lined and shrugged off in *The Stillness of the Wind*. Life on the farm seems to happen outside of time, and action seems to happen elsewhere. Cocooned or marooned, the player is confined to a charming but chilling tiny world on a small screen. An ocean of sand and a set of headphones insulate them from stimulation and volatility (Fig. 3).



Figure 3 Screen capture of the avatar traversing the desert surround the farm in 'The Stillness of the Wind'

Far From Noise also rejects both genre-specific and medium-specific expectation by severely limiting player agency. As a narrative-driven game, the main interaction in *Far From Noise* is dialogue choice, but – unlike many games with branching narratives – *Far From Noise* does not have multiple endings. More strikingly, it restricts players to a single viewpoint, holding them at a distance from the characters (Fig. 4). Despite never finding out what the protagonist looks like, the spatial distance between the player and the protagonist does not translate as a straightforward disentanglement of perspectives. As the Philosopher-Stag says to the protagonist, "You have simply been gifted an anchored perspective", drawing attention the fact that both the protagonist and the player are trapped in one spot, sharing feelings of impotence and impatience. The protagonist becomes a 'gap' but not a cipher – she has her own story to tell with

plot points that the player cannot change. The player can, however, impact the framing of these events, choosing how the protagonist responds to and integrates them. In subverting the techniques usually used to encourage player-avatar identification, *Far From Noise* directs the player's attention towards the value of detachment. That is to say, the game models and encourages one of the core principles of mindfulness in the face of adversity; distance from the thoughts and emotions that arise moment-to-moment. The limitations of simulating intimacy in games are foregrounded in order to allow the player to consciously step into the role of 'the observer'. In this way, players are invited to face and master their own desire for control, aroused by the expectations attached to interactive, ludic media.

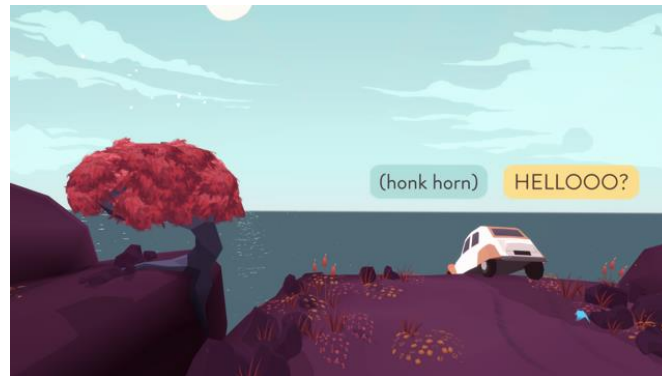


Figure 4 Screen capture from 'Far From Noise' showing the player's fixed viewpoint

Player-avatar identification is often positioned as a holy grail to attain in game design, but in deliberately offering more distant subject positions, my primary texts encourage oscillation between emotional investment and critical engagement. For example, several chapters in *Florence* end with the protagonist looking out of a square window, her gaze never meeting the player's, making the player feel like they are peering into Florence's life through a scrying mirror. The concentric rectangles of the smartphone's screen and the edge of the diegetic window frame hold the player at arm's length. At other points in the game, however, the smartphone screen becomes a metaleptic visualization of Florence's own phone screen (Fig. 5), creating a mimetic, embodied consonance between the player and the protagonist through their aligned gazes and gestures. Here, players are invited to role-play as Florence, mimicking her body movements. In this way, the materiality of the mobile phone is used to highlight the universality of Florence's experiences of love and loss, as well as to honor the individuality of the protagonist as a shy, Asian-Australian young woman on a journey to self-actualization (Sundaram & Gottlieb 2022).



Figure 5 Screen capture of 'Florence' showing the metaleptic effect of interacting with a phone-within-a-phone

Grief is an emotional, physical, and social reaction to loss. Sabine Harrer's close analysis of console games led her to conclude that the expression of grief in games is contingent on coupling loss with attachment and care, rather than with mastery and skill. This hypothesis held true for the mobile games in my corpus. The games I analyzed used levels of difficulty to express the ease or effort associated with an action, but they did not connect loss to failure. In fact, with the exception of *Old Man's Journey* – which blocks progress until players have solved gentle environmental puzzles – the games did not measure players' skill at all. Instead, loss was presented as a measure of attachment. *Florence*, for example, connects loss with care by creating mechanical symmetry – or, to push the poetry connection, a mechanical rhyme – between attachment and grief. Players are invited to participate in the formation of the romantic relationship between the protagonist, Florence, and her first love, a cellist called Krish. The interactions that introduce and establish Krish's presence in Florence's life are mirrored in the motions necessary to erase him when their relationship breaks down. When Krish first moves into Florence's apartment, the player is required to unpack his possessions. The player can choose to create space for both Krish and Florence's possessions to coexist by reorganizing the shelves and relegating some of each character's items to storage. Although it does not impact the direction of the plot, choosing which items to keep and which to store gives players a sense of agency – or rather, a sense of responsibility. As Jon Stone notes, “responsibility does not mean the same thing as ‘agency’; it implicates the player, rather than empowering them” (2021:n.p.). The feeling of accountability arising from the medium's interactivity motivates players to perform the task well, even as the game devolves an additional level of responsibility to players to determine whether their own decisions are right or wrong. That is to say, players are ultimately accountable to themselves: the game functions as a mirror that reflects back to them their own feelings about romantic connections and compromises.

The choices offered to players in these vignette function as metaphors for what we gain and lose when we enter into monogamous, romantic relationships. Replace Florence's bicycle pump with Krish's skateboard? Swap Florence's childhood teddy for Krish's wrestling figurine? The symbolic objects in this sequence suggest that the enrichment of Florence's life through the addition of new hobbies and interests comes at the cost of her own old comforts and habits. Players can choose to be fair and reasonable, aiming for a sense of equality between the pair, or they can choose to sacrifice the symbols of

Florence's single life to fully embrace Krish's presence. Equally, they can refuse to relegate Florence's possessions to storage, and thereby express a sense of caution about the disruptive potential of Krish's presence. Lastly, they can, of course, choose to reject the game's injunction to take the decision-making process seriously and decide, for example, to have two toasters in the kitchen. One particularly poignant decision in this sequence is whether to replace the photograph of Florence and her mother (with whom she has a strained relationship) with a photograph taken when Florence visited Krish's big, friendly family. Again, there is no correct answer, but the gesture nonetheless feels weighty. It creates an interpretive gap that invites players to decide if Florence's relationship with Krish will make things more strained or less strained with her mother. This interpretive gap can only exist because *Florence* subtracts certain game elements. It doesn't need to measure and quantify the player's input, nor does it need a binary set of win and fail states. By virtue of being an interactive experience mediated via smartphone, traces of conventional ludic systems (such as inventory management, set collection, and territory control) have a palimpsestuous presence in this sequence. However, rather than feeling 'literal', these ludic echoes feel metaphorical – even poetic. They subtly suggest that relationships are about gains and losses, and they can exist on a shifting spectrum of competitive to cooperative.

The time and thought players put into combining Florence and Krish's belongings is proportional to the effort it takes to extricate and disentangle their lives when Krish eventually moves out. Players may have forgotten whose possessions are whose, reflecting how deeply enmeshed the pair have become. The game does not give the player the option to retrieve Florence's items that they previously put in storage, which means that the shelves are left with gaps that symbolize feelings of emptiness associated with loss. Grief, here, is not only a reaction to the irretrievable loss of the loved one, but to the irretrievable loss of the person you were before your entanglement with the loved one. Once again, players take responsibility for deciding whether to keep a few of Krish's things as mementos or to be meticulously systematic about handing back every item associated with him. The sequence ends with the player swiping to close a cardboard moving box, a gesture that 'rhymes' with the opening of the unpacking vignette.



Figure 6 Screenshot from 'Florence' showing a progress bar filling up as the player uses a mimetic swiping gesture to brush her teeth.

Florence also uses mechanical 'rhymes' or symmetry to contrast the moment Florence meets Krish with the moment she lets him go. Up until her first encounter with Krish, Florence's life is presented as mundane and monotonous. The color scheme is limited to cold blues and flat greys – except for the brightly colored social media images that Florence and the player enviously flick through on the commute to work (Fig. 5). The

gestural controls in these early sequences are mimetic (e.g., swiping a finger vigorously left and right to brush Florence's teeth, tapping the alarm clock once to make it snooze, choosing between 'liking' and 'sharing' an image on social media) and parody elements of gamification (e.g., progress bars that fill up as players obediently perform these boring chores as in Fig. 6). The mechanics, here, are an interactive approximation of the verbal metaphor 'going through the motions'. Challenge, variety, and surprise are deliberately minimized, which means that players are invited to share in Florence's boredom first-hand. It also means that when players and Florence first hear Krish playing the cello, it is love at first sound. The introduction of a new musical instrument to the soundscape is accompanied by the introduction of a new color to the visual plane: vibrant yellow. Yellow musical notes drift through the street, while a smooth, strong cello melody replaces the tinny percussion of the music that had been playing through Florence's and the player's headphones. The 'motions' available suddenly shift towards the metaphoric end of the spectrum, abandoning the literal, mimetic gestures of the 'gamified' opening. Players are required to move Florence towards the source of the intoxicating music by tapping the yellow musical notes, which pop like bubbles. Magical realism is invoked to visually represent the euphoric sensation of 'walking on air' by having Florence slowly float upwards in response to the player's tapping. At first her feet are just a few inches above the ground, but before long she is swimming horizontally across the screen, her expression blissful and serene. Eventually, the screen is so full of musical notes that it is impossible to tap them all, suggesting that Florence is overwhelmed by the experience. She rounds the corner to discover Krish busking. The game sets no time limit for how long Florence and the player linger to listen to his beautiful music: their enrapturement is shared just as their boredom was.

In contrast, the sequence entitled 'Let Go' – which is both a ludic instruction and an emotional imperative – requires the player to resist touching the screen at all. Florence is depicted walking beside Krish, whose outline is slightly fainter than hers. A slow, mournful cello plays in a minor key, answered by stuttering piano notes that represent Florence's inner monologue. Florence walks marginally quicker than Krish and so, if the player does nothing, she pulls ahead of him, and he fades away completely. However, if the player taps the screen even once, Florence stops walking until Krish catches up with her and the words 'Let Go' appear again – a firm but gentle reminder of what she must do. The player can repeat this cycle indefinitely – they can linger in this scene just as they lingered to hear Krish busk. The fact that players expect to be able to interact with a game means that this sequence can prompt confusion and frustration: the game insists that letting of a loved one requires stoic patience – a form of will power expressed only through inaction. This sequence is an inversion of the vignette at the end of the autobiographical PC game *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), which represents the grief of losing a child to illness. This game concludes with a 'Picnic at the End of the World': a joyful, digital heaven that allows the player to blow bubbles with the deceased child and listen to him giggle. After a while, the camera begins to track away from the scene towards the horizon, but it only takes one click of the mouse to return to the child's side and spend more time together. In both games, a tension emerges between the mechanical plane and the audiovisual plane. In *Florence*, the animations are a visualization of the metaphor of 'moving on' – Florence is positioned such that as she moves away from Krish, leaving him behind in her past and establishing emotional distance between them. The mechanics, however, close this distance and suggest that any type of engagement will inevitably bring Krish into the present again.

Touchscreen affordances mean that the player's hands continually obtrude between them and the gameworld. Hands are symbols for points of interpersonal connection, and so the prohibition of haptic interactions in this sequence urges players not to 'reach out' – in essence, to stop 'feeling', in the dual sense of the word – whilst simultaneously

acknowledging the huge temptation to do so. The unnatural and counterintuitive experience of remaining passive while engaging with an interactive medium reflects the unnatural and counterintuitive feeling of letting a loved one go. That is to say, the counter directional draws of audiovisuals, haptics, and mechanics express a central paradox of the grieving process: the game suggest that in order to move on, you must give up. Loss is connected to yearning for attachment, and progress is tied to the pain of detaching oneself. To put it another way, if joy is for growth and pain is for pruning then it is not a coincidence that these experiences are proportional to one another. This seemingly oxymoronic balance is communicated through the dissonance between the audiovisuals and the mechanics, as well as through the undermining of the player's expectations of an interactive text.

This kind of intermodal friction in games can be used to create ludic *aporia* – an irresolvable conflict between competing meanings. A straightforward example of intermodal friction occurs in *Old Man's Journey* during a sequence in which the protagonist scales a mountain to climb aboard a hot air balloon that will transport him to his next milestone. The visuals are beautiful – a warm wash of colors contrasts to the previous scene's menacing storm clouds, and the snow-capped mountain pass looks idyllic. The music, however, is pensive – even somber. This intermodal incongruence creates an interpretive gap that invites players to reconcile competing strands of information. The game's wordlessness exacerbates this gap because the lack of verbal text devolves responsibility to the player to narrate the game's events. The game's preceding 'postcard from the past' – a still image depicting a moment from the protagonist's life that punctuates the end of each level – showed the eponymous Old Man on one of his nautical adventures in his later years. Unlike other snapshots in which the Old Man was transfixed by his spectacular surroundings, this postcard shows the Old Man turning away from the beautiful backdrop of *aurora borealis* reflected in mirror-bright glacier water. He is hunched over a photograph of the wife he abandoned in favor of a life of adventuring. This narrative beat provides the player with a way to interpret the intermodal dissonance in the subsequent scene: the mismatch of audio and visuals might express the loneliness of wanderlust, or the fading allure of novelty, or the high price of freedom. The game expresses the oxymoron 'bittersweet' by ascribing bitterness to one semiotic plane and sweetness to another.

In *Old Man's Journey* there is a correlation between the complexity of the experience being described and the prominence of intermodal friction. The nadir of the protagonist's journey occurs when he slips down a waterfall and plunges to the bottom of a lake. The Old Man continues his journey underwater, but his appearance becomes slightly translucent and spectral, introducing the possibility that he has drowned and is now traversing limbo. The mechanics of dragging hillsides up and down to create viable pathways for the protagonist remain the same, but now the Old Man is moving along the Z-axis. He advances towards the player rather than following the left-to-right trajectory the player has come to expect from this game, and from puzzle-platform games in general. What is more, the Old Man's route is blocked by dozens of shipwrecks, but unlike previous obstacles – such as the flocks of sheep that require the player's strategic manipulation of the countryside to bypass them – the player can simply flick the wrecks out of his path as if they were weightless. When the Old Man is at his most vulnerable, the mechanics make the player feel powerful. Eventually, moving the dune of the lakebed reveal a hidden chamber, its door barred and bolted. The player taps to release the giant padlock and doing so uncovers the Old Man's most painful memory. This postcard from the past shows the sight that awaited the Old Man back on land when he decided to give up his life at sea and return to his family: a derelict house, long empty and in ruins. Ambiguity is created in this sequence through tension between the visual plane and the mechanical plane. The visuals suggest the man has drowned, but the mechanics require the player to continue solving puzzles as if the

man were carrying on with his journey. On a narrative level, the Old Man is at his lowest – spatially, he is at the bottom of a lake, and emotionally, his loneliness is now life-threatening. However, on a mechanical level, the player is given the Poseidon-like power of launching shipwrecks in any direction they choose. Is this new power the result of having nothing left to lose? Must the Old Man reach ‘rock bottom’ – literally and metaphorically – before he has the strength to face his repressed memories? Again, the spaces left for player-led narration created by the game’s wordlessness are vital for inviting subjective, polysemic responses. Furthermore, if we think of prosaic language as being characterized by a close connection between signifier and signified and poetic language as being characterized by a deliberate complication of the connection between signifier and signified, one could argue that the effect of intermodal tension is akin to the effect of literary language. That is to say, the friction arising from the multimodal nature of the remediation of dead metaphors such as ‘rock bottom’ reawakens players to the nuances of experience that underlie a clichéd phrase.

Florence, too, is an almost wordless experience. In the place of dialogue or narration, the game uses music, color, and mechanics to tonally represent thoughts and communication, leaving the player to specify the contents of these exchanges and inner monologues. Conversations between Krish and Florence are represented as colored speech bubbles that the player must fill by assembling a set of jigsaw puzzle pieces. Florence’s initial shyness is expressed mechanically through jigsaws that have a comparatively high level of difficulty. Although there is no time limit, players may feel pressured to complete these jigsaws quickly to avoid an awkward silence on Florence’s first date. They may even experience the sweaty hands and elevated heart rate associated with first date nerves. As Florence and Krish spend more time together, the number of puzzle pieces in the speech bubbles decreases, making the jigsaws quicker to solve and conveying the new ease that Florence feels in Krish’s presence. Finally, the speech bubbles consist of just one jigsaw piece, implying that Florence’s contributions to the conversation are now effortless. Later in the game, when Florence and Krish begin to argue, this jigsaw mechanic returns but with sharp, red pieces, suggesting that the words exchanged by the couple are angry and painful – they breathe life into another dead verbal metaphor describing words as ‘pointed’ or ‘barbed’. This time, the bubbles do not disappear, but accumulate at the top of the screen, suggesting that the couple has said things that cannot be unsaid. Furthermore, the mechanic becomes competitive, with the player rushing to complete Florence’s jigsaw before Krish’s speech bubble appears in order to ‘win’ the argument and have the last word. The mechanical injunction to ‘win’ reminds the player that there can be no real winners in this conflict. As before, the puzzle eventually only has one piece, but now the implication of speaking without thinking are negative, signifying being careless rather than carefree. The layering of meanings is possible because of this mechanic’s capacious gaps.

To return to Sexton’s characterization of videogames, the speech bubbles in *Florence* are not sights to be perceived, but lights that illuminate the player’s own perceptual processes. In providing the player with only the subtext – or with only the phatic meanings of language – the game draws attention to the continual loops of deduction, inference, and encryption that we engage in when we converse. In other words, *Florence* captures the experience of conversing, rather than the contents of a conversation. As Sundaram and Gottlieb argue, completing *Florence* “means not just reaching the end of the narrative, but rather, making the game whole” (2022, p.92). The invitation for the player to make the game ‘whole’ is dependent on the game’s embrace of incompleteness. What is more, the interpretive gaps in *Florence* are carefully structured to create both intimacy and privacy. On the one hand, the speech bubbles are blank canvases that invite the player to project their own meaning onto them. On the other hand, the blankness of the speech bubbles screens certain details of the character’s

lives from the player. That is to say, the interpretive gaps engage the player as a collaborator, inviting them to insert themselves into the text or to use their own frameworks to resolve ambiguity. However, they can also be resistant to closure, insisting on the irreducibility of complex experiences. This is the case in *If Found...*, which relates a personal story of one young woman's experience of transphobia, rural poverty, and the disenfranchisement of youth, alongside the joy she finds in queer friendships, intergenerational solidarity, and Irish starscapes. The player does not get to experience the protagonist's inner landscape in its totality, but as an unstable palimpsest. In this way, interpretive gaps are not just entry points through which the player can gain access to the protagonist's world, which might invite the kind of 'identity tourism' that remarginalizes minority groups (Nakamura 2002; Pozo 2018; Ruberg & Scully-Blaker 2021). They can also be used to remind the player of the partiality and fragmentary nature of empathy, and that empathy is, in Hannah Nicklin's words, "an act of beautiful failure" (2022, p.75) that is always imperfect, approximate, and unfinished.

If Found... is a game that honors subtracting, expunging, exorcising, and letting go. The title anticipates both loss and return, with the ellipsis demarcating a hopeful emptiness. In fact, this tension between optimism and pessimism is representative of how *aporia* is deployed in this text. The player is positioned as the creator of gaps rather than the filler of gaps. The key verb assigned to the player is 'erase', as whatever the player touches dissolves beneath their fingers. When they swipe the pages of the protagonist's journal, the pencil text and freehand sketches are rubbed out, disobeying the repeated written pleas and orders to 'remember' events and characters. The only way for the player to progress through the narrative is to destroy its moment-to-moment unfolding. The subject position created through this interaction is that of the inexorable hand of time, continually turning the present into the past in order to reveal the future.

Scrubbing away the hand-written text, the rough character sketches, and animated landscapes feels like a destructive act. The scale of the fine, detailed drawings in comparison to the bluntness of a finger means that it is all too easy to erase part of the screen before the player has had a chance to look at it. This encourages the player to interact cautiously, making sifting through the journal's contents feel both fraught and sacred. The ephemerality of the journal suggests each inscription should be cherished. Thus players themselves are conflicted – they are forced to annihilate their own desire for access to the protagonist's life.

This mechanic, however, could also be understood as a creative, generative act motivated by future-oriented curiosity. As with the speech bubbles in *Florence*, it is the limited nature of this mechanic that creates a capaciousness that allows for multiple, evolving interpretations. Through repetition, the act of erasing gains a ritualistic feel. Specifically, it starts to feel like an act of mourning. Rather than attempting to keep the player engaged by ramping up the level of challenge in line with the logic of 'flow' or by introducing a variety of interactions, the game invites the player to repeatedly re-interpret the meaning of a single form of engagement – they do not 'move on', but rather they repeatedly re-signify events. This creates the opportunity for a profound, layered, reflective understanding of the game's narrative events and the player's role in unfolding them. Furthermore, as a metaphor for grief, it couples the finality of loss with the possibility for change.

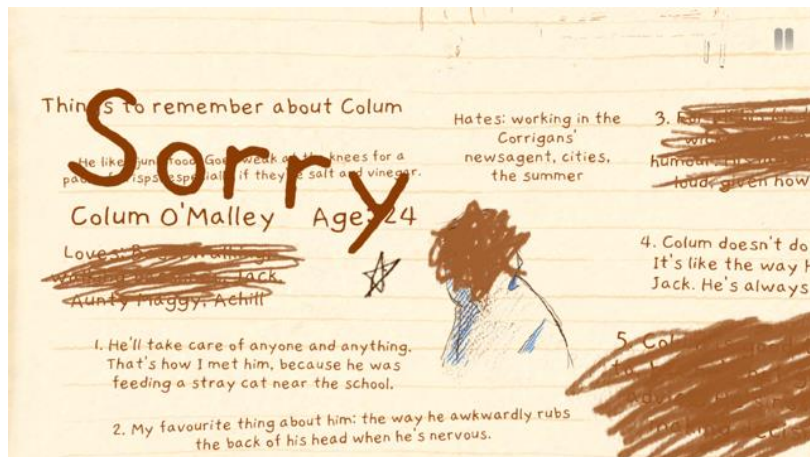


Figure 7 A redacted journal entry in 'If Found...'

The player's interactions are not the first attempt to redact the contents of the journal. Parts of it have already been furiously scribbled out, crossed through, or obscured by the word SORRY scrawled in weighty capital letters (Fig. 7). As the protagonist starts to experience compounded trauma, the self-censorship becomes visually more intense and emphatic. The resignification of redaction raises questions about the emotions that motivated this self-censorship in the first place, and the extent to which the player's dissolution of the contents of the journal differ from these previous attempts. In contrast to the previous censor's lines gouged into the pocked, textured paper, the player's vanishing touch feels light and immaterial. The emotion is closer to numbness or disassociation than it is to shame, regret, or anger. *Aporia*, again, emerges through a conflict between the player's expectations of the medium – it is a digital game, affording multiple replays – and the audiovisual plane's insistence on the finite nature of erasure. As a consequence, the player is made aware of their comparative spectrality – of their disembodiment. This complicates the player's relationship to the protagonist, Kasio. Perhaps Kasio is not the anchor point for identification – perhaps the player is more closely aligned with the impending black hole that threatens to engulf the gameworld. This, too, is an ambivalent subject position. As the game itself notes, “it has been hypothesized that black holes are the seeds of new universes”. As the narrative progresses, the player begins to understand that the protagonist is at risk of dying by community- and self-neglect. She is squatting in an abandoned, dilapidated house without heating or electricity in the middle of an Irish winter. Erasing the contents of Kasio's journal becomes synonymous with erasing her. The complexity of the player's relationship to the protagonist raises difficult questions about death by suicide (or by neglect), in that the player's sense of self is dispersed between Kasio and the social and environmental forces that precipitate her near death.

Conclusion

While some serious games researchers have argued that designers must “ensure positive experiences during playing” because “games should be engaging and enjoyable” (Caserman et al., 2020), I question whether flow states, entertainment, and empowering experiences of agency offer effective ways of exploring difficult topics. Caserman et al.'s ‘quality criteria’ are intended to be applicable to a range of serious games including exergames, where a focus on positive affect is perhaps appropriate. However, their recommendations that designers “ensure immersive experiences”, give players a “sense of control”, and use “attractive graphics” all reinforce the chocolate-coated-broccoli understanding of serious games. I feel that mobile games are well-suited to expressing complex experiences not because they soften discomfort, alleviate boredom, or smooth difficulty, but because they can elicit discomfort, boredom, and

difficulty through intermodal friction, as well as by subverting the standard grammar of gamification.

The concept of ludonarrative dissonance has been explored in games studies, but mostly as a design flaw to be rectified (Hocking 2007), as a prompt for game jams (Barbara, 2020) or as intentional ‘jank’ (Schmalzer 2020) that serves the purpose of defamiliarization and alienation. As an alternative to jank or ludonarrative dissonance, I have suggested conceptualizing intermodal friction as ludic *aporia*. I have demonstrated that intermodal friction creates interpretive gaps that either defer to the player to co-construct meaning, or that resist closure in order to insist on the ambiguity of what is being represented. Rather than uncritically aspiring towards the holy grails of ‘immersion’, ‘fun’, and ‘flow’, designers of serious games could consider how techniques that elicit friction might produce new multimodal languages to express complex facets of human experiences.

There will always be a place for therapeutic play that distracts, soothes, and dulls human distress. A conventional farming simulator or a romantic visual novel could provide invaluable solace to suffering players. However, it is also possible to find comfort and refuge in media that refuses to look away from grief. Auden’s *Stop All the Clocks* and Thomas’ *Do not go gentle into that good night* do not make me feel empowered or entertained. The reading experience is not ‘fun’: it is raw, and tender, and devastating, and acute. I want to advocate for mobile games that offer a similar intensity of experience – and, as my corpus shows, these games already exist. However, while player expectations of mobile games mostly still map onto the paradigm outlined by Caserman et al., my suggestion is that designers intentionally create interpretive gaps by subverting media-specific and genre-specific expectations, and by embracing friction between semiotic planes. It is those snags between semiotic strands – and not a perfect weft and warp – that capture the paradoxical entwining of love and grief, and play and death.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this research were funded by the MRC/AHRC/ESRC Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind program (Project name: ATTUNE – Understanding mechanism and mental health impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences to co-design preventative arts and digital interventions. Grant number: MR/W002183/1).

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