

# Unraveling Grief: Design Space Analysis of Death-themed Games

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## ABSTRACT

Death-themed games address permanent death as experienced in real life, connecting players through digital grief stories and inspiring reflections on death. In this study, we examine eight selected death-themed games and deconstruct them into four sets of design questions using the Design Space Analysis method. These questions, along with their associated design options and criteria, offer a breakdown of how different types of digital grief experiences can be shaped through game design. We conduct the analysis from the perspective of a death-themed game designer and researcher, offering insights into the design rationale behind these games. Our findings are summarized in a Design Space Map, which provides guidance for analyzing existing death-themed games and designing new ones. For example, a designer might choose a different level of intimacy in the portrayed grief relationship to elicit a player experience focused on either empathy or reflection.

## Keywords

Death, Game Design, Death-themed Games, Design Space Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Death in the context of games is far from the experience of permanent loss in real life (Joelsson and Reunanen 2019; Keogh 2013). It is more commonly used as a restart mechanic to measure failure and facilitate learning for players (Van den Hoogen et al. 2012). However, over the past decade, an increasing number of games have begun to explore death in its real-life context, expressing grief or reflecting on death-related topics (Laiti and Virtanen 2024; Rautalahti and Salo 2024). These games are often referred to as death-themed games (Eum et al. 2021) or death-positive games (Good Death, n.d.; Nicolucci 2019), with perhaps the most well-known examples being *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020), *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales 2008), and *A Mortician's Tale* (Laundry Bear Games 2017).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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Existing literature has mainly focused on in-depth analyses or close reading of individual death-themed games, exploring how they create emotional impact on players and their potential to help players cope with grief in real life (Schott 2017; Nicolucci 2019; Eum et al. 2021). However, there is little research analyzing these games from a designer's perspective or on a larger scale to identify the similarities and differences shared by multiple death-themed games. In this work, we examine a selection of eight death-themed games, focusing on the following questions:

- 1) What types of death themes do the games address?
- 2) How are these themes expressed through various game design options?

We adopt the Design Space Analysis method (MacLean et al. 1991), also known as the Questions, Options, and Criteria (QOCs) framework, deconstructing the games into four sets of design questions with corresponding design options and criteria. For instance, how is the expression of different death topics affected by varying levels of intimacy in characters' relationships? Some games emphasize grief by portraying the detailed loss of close relationships, fostering emotional resonance and empathy in players. Others present players with multiple, less intimate deaths, reducing the grief associated with individual loss and encouraging a more objective, reflective perspective on death. Together, these questions, options, and criteria illustrate how various death themes are expressed and shaped through different aspects of game design.

We conduct our analysis from the perspective of a death-themed game designer and researcher, providing insights into the design rationale behind these games. Our findings are summarized in a Design Space Map, which offers guidance for future analyses of death-themed games and the design of new prototypes.

## **BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK**

### **Games with Unique Death Designs**

Have you ever felt the grief of losing a virtual character you loved? To begin, let us first discuss how games can approach death beyond a restart mechanic, instead incorporating it in a impactful or unique manner.

#### *Switching controls after death*

Some games incorporate the death of a character by switching player controls. In *Danganronpa V3* (Spike Chunsoft 2017) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018), both games begin by allowing players to control a character designed to die at a certain point in the narrative. When that moment arrives, players are forced to switch the first-person control to another character (the real or the second protagonist), directly experiencing the shock of the initial character's death. Through the different feelings in controls and sometimes the grief expressed by the second controlled character toward the first one, players are constantly reminded of the loss (Vandenplas 2022).

#### *Creating fictional worlds of death*

Some games utilize death themes to craft intriguing fictional worlds of the living and the dead, such as *Limbo* (Playdead 2010), *Gris* (Nomada Studio 2018), *Guacamelee!* (DrinkBox Studios 2013), and *Flipping Death* (Zoink Games 2018). *Limbo* creates a bleak, lingering world at the edge of death, where a boy searches for his sister (Recher 2015). *Gris* visualizes the five stages of grief through its world design (Sandra and Mutiaz 2021). *Guacamelee!* and *Flipping Death* employ a world-switching mechanic, allowing players to interact with characters in both the realms of the living and the dead to uncover new paths or narrative threads (Kuhar' 2018).

### *Depicting life with death at the end*

Games like *Long Journey of Life* (Li Yang 2017) and *Passage* (Jason Rohrer 2007) present a condensed representation of a complete life journey, with death as a reflective end. When playing these games, players often connect with their real-life experiences, making personal choices at important junctions. For instance, in *Passage*, after the death of the wife character, some players refuse to move forward from her gravestone, so that when their own time comes, the two gravestones will be formed next to each other (Harrer 2018).

### **Death-themed Games**

The games discussed above feature impactful death-related design elements; however, death is not the central theme of their design goals. In this research, we focus on games in which death serves as the central theme or overarching design principle, in order to better uncover the shared patterns and structural elements of death-themed game design.

The selected death-themed games emphasize permanent death as experienced in real life. Through narratives of loss or grief, or by creating death-impending situations, these games encourage players to reflect on death or its acceptance. The search and selection process is detailed in the Method section. Below, we list the games with brief descriptions in alphabetical order, followed by a summary of relevant research.

#### *Selected games*

*A Mortician's Tale* (Laundry Bear Games 2017): Inspired by the death positive organization The Order of the Good Death and its founder Caitlin Doughty's experiences (Good Death, n.d.), the game portrays the daily work of a mortician. By being exposed to death regularly, players are encouraged to adopt a more open perspective on death (Nicolucci 2019).

*Before Your Eyes* (GoodbyeWorld Games 2021): The initials spell "BYE". Utilizing a unique blinking mechanic to switch narrative scenes, players blink through the memories of a young deceased boy. Since blinking is inevitable, this mechanic effectively conveys the theme that, no matter how much one wishes to stay in a past memory, one can't, and life just fades.

*Far from Noise* (George Batchelor 2017): Hanging on the edge of a cliff and trapped in a car, the player character is forced to confront her impending death. After a reflective journey and reaching a state of calm and acceptance, the character makes one final attempt to escape the cliff. The game leaves players with an open ending, uncertain whether the car falls or manages to get away.

*Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020): In a spiritual world, players take on the role of a spiritfarer—collecting spirits with remaining wishes, getting to know them, and helping settle their souls before guiding them to the afterlife. A hug is shared at the end of each life, and the game portrays a warm and beautiful journey of bidding farewell.

*That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016): As an autobiographical game, it chronicles the final years of the designer's young deceased child. Immersed in the family's grief and memories, players take on the role of observing, accompanying, and interacting with the child in the past.

*The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales 2008): It is a short, experiential game with only one character and a single path toward the end. Players control an elderly woman as she walks to a bench in the graveyard. Sitting on the bench, she may die at any moment—or not. Death occurs purely by chance, and she might walk away like any other day, unaware that death has just passed by.

*The Stillness of the Wind* (Lambic Studios 2019): Featuring a golden field and a relaxed atmosphere, the game seems to be a casual farm management game until the end, when

players realize that death is inevitable. No matter how well players manage the farm, they are left with no choice but to watch the controlled character gradually perish and cease responding.

*What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017): As the last remaining member of the Finch family, the player character sets off to visit the old family house, exploring the rooms once inhabited by each deceased member. Though the narrative of each death is limited, the members' personalities are revealed through personal items and traces of their past lives left behind in the rooms.

### ***Relevant research***

Existing research often provides in-depth analyses of one or a few death-themed games, focusing on their interpretations of grief and how they may influence players in real life (Harrer 2018; Rautalahti and Salo 2024). For instance, *A Mortician's Tale* has been examined as a tool for aiding death education among adolescents, as it provides players with the experience of approaching death from a mortician's professional perspective (Nicolucci 2019). *Spiritfarer* presents grief stories of various distinct characters, allowing players to connect the experience to their own real-life encounters. As a result, the game has been explored for its potential to help players cope with loss in real life (Eum et al. 2021). Similarly, *That Dragon, Cancer*, as an autobiographical game narrating the designers' loss, resonated with many who shared similar grief experiences and has been proposed as a digital memorial for the deceased (Green 2016; Schott 2017).

Some studies have analyzed death-themed games and applied their findings to inform the design of new prototypes. In her work *Games and Bereavement*, Sabine Harrer examined five games addressing different types of relationship loss and organized a workshop to explore how bereavement can be represented from the griever's perspective (Harrer 2018). These analyses informed the design of *Jocoi* (Sabine Harrer 2016), a game focused on self-care in the context of pregnancy loss. Similarly, a study on existential games compared six titles to examine their varied approaches to death-related themes (Chittaro and Sioni 2018). This research led to the development of *Existence* (Luca Chittaro, Riccardo Sioni 2018), a game that encourages players to reflect on their own mortality.

While existing research primarily focuses on in-depth analyses of individual death-themed games, our study takes a designer's perspective and adopts a broader view by analyzing eight selected titles to identify shared characteristics and design patterns. By summarizing our findings in a Design Space Map for death-themed games, we aim to provide a more comprehensive and structured framework to support the future analysis and design of these games.

## **METHODS**

### **Design Space Analysis**

The Design Space Analysis method, also known as the Questions, Options, and Criteria (QOC) framework, proposed by MacLean et al. (MacLean et al. 1991), can be used to reason about design choices based on existing artifacts. It involves formulating questions about different aspects of the artifact, identifying possible options for each question, and articulating criteria for evaluating and selecting among the options. In our research, the artifacts are eight death-themed games. Field notes were gathered through extensive play sessions, and the first author developed four sets of design questions from the written observations. These questions deconstruct death-themed game design into four major aspects: death design, fictional design, visuals, and mechanics. Each aspect is further broken down into various design options based on the examined games. We define the intended death theme or death expression as the overarching criterion guiding choices among the options, with more specific criteria describing the effects or experiences achieved through individual options. We use QOC notation to visually represent the analysis in graphical form alongside the discussion (e.g., see Figure 1).

## Research Perspective

The first author has a background in game design and game design research. In this paper, we refer to her as the designer-researcher, abbreviated as DR. Prior to this study, DR designed and produced a death-themed game titled *Between* (CRSTNxiao 2025) (a solo production from April 2022 to August 2024), which positioned and motivated her to explore and analyze similar games from a designer's perspective. While *Between* will not be analyzed in detail in this paper—as our focus is on already published games with established audiences—its development provides intimate, first-hand insights into the process of creating a death-themed game. This experience enabled DR to approach the Design Space Analysis from a designer's point of view and served as a gateway to understanding and reasoning about the design choices in the selected death-themed games.

Given the emotional impact of these games, the selected titles were initially experienced through non-commentary walkthroughs on YouTube. This allowed the DR to be emotionally prepared and adopt a more objective designer's perspective during the play sessions. It also enabled the DR to form an initial overview and outline a preliminary structure for the Design Space Map. Following this, the DR played and completed each game in a continuous single session, except for *Spiritfarer*, which, after 20.5 hours of combined playtime across several sessions, ceased to provide new insights for the map. During the extensive play sessions, the DR collected self-observational and self-reflective data in the form of written field notes, supported by in-game screenshots (Chang 2016; Kärnä et al. 2024). In total, data collection accounted for 33.75 hours of gameplay, resulting in 4,128 words of written notes and 28 screenshots.

## Selection of Games

The selection includes a variety of games addressing death-related topics, ranging from popular and highly praised titles to lesser-known ones. All games were initially gathered through Google searches using the keywords: death games, grief games, mourning games, death-themed games, and death-positive games. Three major lists were referenced from the websites Bereev (Izumi 2021), Talk Death (TalkDeath 2020), and The Order of the Good Death (Good Death, n.d.). The list was further refined by reviewing game feedback on Steam, game trailers on YouTube, and relevant research literature. This process ultimately narrowed the selection to eight games deemed the most inspiring and representative from the DR's perspective.

## THE DESIGN SPACE ANALYSIS OF DEATH-THEMED GAMES

### Death Design

#### *The player's relationship with death*

To conduct the design space analysis of death-themed games, we begin with a simple question: Who died? (see Figure 1). This question highlights the relationship between the player character and the deceased character in the game (Papale 2014; Wenz 2019). The options are categorized as follows: (a) the death of the player character, (b) the death of a loved one to the player character, and (c) the death of a less-related character (i.e., the deceased character does not share a close relationship with the player character). These varying levels of intimacy in relationships influence the types of grief players may experience (Lankoski 2011; Robson and Walter 2013).

For option a, the loss of relationship is between the players and the player characters, as seen in *The Graveyard* and *The Stillness of the Wind*, where players experience the death of the controlled characters, directly feeling the loss of connection and the inevitability of death (Frome 2016). For option b, the grief stems from the loss of a close relationship.

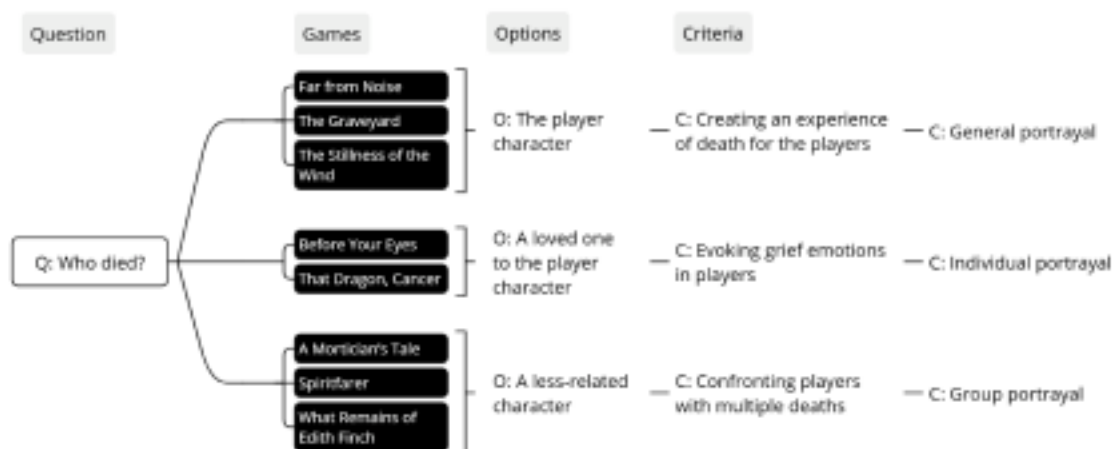


Figure 1: Question, Options and Criteria (QOCs) of death design in death-themed games

In both *Before Your Eyes* and *That Dragon, Cancer*, this involves the death of a young child. Through the eyes of the deceased child or the bereaved parents, players are immersed in a detailed story of loss, resonating with the families' grief (Cuerdo et al. 2024).

Option c consists of the loss of less intimate relationships, resulting in grief that is less intense and depicted in less detail (Jakoby 2012). However, players are usually confronted with multiple deaths, as seen in *A Mortician's Tale*, *Spiritfarer*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Though *What Remains of Edith Finch* also involves family loss, the relationships are more distant due to generational gaps. In these games, the player characters narrate the death stories in a more neutral tone, rather than experiencing the deep grief of a single, detailed loss as seen in option b. In both *A Mortician's Tale* and *Spiritfarer*, the player characters take on roles of a mortician or ferryman, preparing or accompanying the multiple deceased toward the end.

### The perspectives to approach death

We can now observe the different perspectives from which these games approach death themes (Jakoby 2012; Thabet 2015). In option a, players find themselves at one end of a relationship loss, experiencing death as themselves by witnessing the death of the controlled characters. In the DR's gameplay report, *The Stillness of the Wind* elicited a greater emotional impact than *The Graveyard*, due to its longer playtime and greater interactivity. Through the daily tasks of controlling the character to farm, cook, eat, and read family letters, the DR developed a deeper connection with the player character—especially when she would emit a greeting sound each time the DR clicked on her. Consequently, the shock of death struck more heavily as the character gradually slowed and eventually ceased responding (Lankoski 2011). We summarize this under criteria a: these games approach death by creating an experience in which players are directly confronted with death or loss as themselves. In both *The Stillness of the Wind* and *The Graveyard*, the theme centers on the randomness and inevitability of death.

Also catering to criteria a is the game *Far From Noise*, where players are faced with the impending death of themselves. While the game also involves the loss of a player character, players are not positioned at the relational end of the character, but rather placed in the character's situation as themselves. As a third-person narrative game, the player character is not visually presented, and very little background information is provided. This vague outline of the character allows players to project themselves into the situation (Gaver et al. 2003). Rather than witnessing the loss of a controlled character, players find themselves in a car hanging off a cliff, contemplating their own impending death (Farrow and Iacovides 2014). With an open ending, the game centers on the theme that it is the time spent reflecting about life and death that matters.

Criteria b refers to games that approach death by evoking grief in players, corresponding to option b. With detailed background information and complete narratives, players are not positioned as themselves, but rather step into the shoes of specific characters (Cuerdo et al. 2024). Players are guided to resonate with and feel the deep grief of characters who have lost their loved ones. According to the DR's gameplay report, these games offer the deepest grief and most emotionally intense experiences. As these stories unfold in great detail—especially after witnessing the growth of a young child up until their death—it becomes natural to be fully immersed in the characters' relationships (Bopp et al. 2019). In the end, the experience feels so painful that, even though the DR does not have a child, she relates deeply to the parents' loss.

Criteria c is that the games approach death by confronting players with multiple and more distant deaths. In *Spiritfarer*, the DR reports that the first two departures are quite hurtful, as she constantly revisits the empty rooms and develops the habit of feeding characters their favorite food before saying goodbye. However, as these are not losses of close family members, and each loss story is narrated with similar weight, the DR reports a milder grief experience. As more passengers depart, the DR becomes more accustomed to the losses. The departing passengers constantly comfort the player character (as well as the DR), saying that one should not be sad that they are gone, as their journey has ended and it is time for new encounters. Similar words are expressed in the ending of *What Remains of Edith Finch*: "I don't want you to be sad that I'm gone. I want you to be amazed that any of us ever had a chance to be here at all" (Giant Sparrow 2017). These games emphasize appreciating life and encounters as they are, rather than focusing on the inevitable end.

As multiple deaths occur, the DR reports becoming less aware of individual losses and more guided to reflect on death and separation as a whole. *A Mortician's Tale* portrays the most distant relationships among the selected games. In the role of a mortician, players are not acquainted with any of the deceased characters. Rather than evoking grief, the experience inspires a more objective, holistic view of death (Good Death, n.d.).

## Death portrayals

After understanding how these games approach death themes, we summarize them into three portrayals in death-themed game design: general, individual, and group portrayals.

General portrayal typically features a single death story, with descriptions focusing on the situations rather than the characters. With little background narrative, the vague outline of the player characters allows players to project themselves into the situations (Gaver et al. 2003; Farrow and Iacovides 2014). Instead of resonating with the grief of others, players are confronted with loss and death as themselves and reflect on death from their own perspective. Games in this category include *The Graveyard*, *The Stillness of the Wind*, and *Far From Noise*.

Individual portrayal also focuses on depicting a single death story, but with concrete details in characters and background settings. With a comprehensive narrative of the loss of a close relationship, players are guided to resonate deeply with the characters' grief (Cuerdo et al. 2024; Bopp et al. 2019). These games often elicit the strongest emotional impact. Examples include *Before Your Eyes* and *That Dragon, Cancer*.

Group portrayal features multiple but more distant losses, as seen in *A Mortician's Tale*, *Spiritfarer*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. In these games, players are not experiencing the direct loss of a close relationship, and the multiple death stories are usually narrated with similar weight. Confronted with such grief stories, players are encouraged not to invest heavily in individual loss but to reflect on death from a more objective perspective (Eum et al. 2021; Nicolucci 2019).

## Fictional Design and Endings

We continue by asking the second question: When did the death happen in the game's timeline? (see Figure 2) This leads to different options regarding fictional design in these games. Regardless of whether the death occurs before or after the gameplay begins, players always experience the moment of death—either by reliving it through memories or by witnessing it for the first time.



Figure 2: QOCs of fictional design and endings in death-themed games

### Fictional worlds and "ferryman of the Styx"

If death happens before the game begins, the game needs a way to reveal the past stories of the deceased. This can be achieved through memories, either from bereaved relatives, as seen in *A Mortician's Tale* and *That Dragon, Cancer*, or from the deceased themselves. In the latter case, non-fictional settings often use notes and diaries left behind, as in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. In fictional settings, it becomes possible to communicate directly with the deceased, as in *Before Your Eyes* and *Spiritfarer*, where the spirits narrate their own pasts.

In games that incorporate death as a unique design element, creating fictional worlds of the dead and the living is a commonly used technique (Thon 2009; Thabet 2015). However, since death-themed games often draw on grief rooted in real-life experiences, fictional settings are not frequently used. Among the studied games, only two feature fictional settings—*Before Your Eyes* and *Spiritfarer*. Both games introduce similar fictional elements: worlds for deceased spirits, gates to the afterlife, and spiritual animal forms (Recher 2015). Within these settings, the stories of the deceased characters unfold through direct conversations with their spirits. After resolving their unsettled thoughts or wishes, the spirits are ready to let go and move on to the afterlife. However, death remains unalterable even in these fictional settings (Keogh 2013). Nothing can be changed. Resolving the spirits' unsettled wishes is, in fact, a process of mentally preparing both the spirits and the bereaved players (Wong and Tomer 2011). Following the spiritual journey, both the players and characters come to accept the unresolved parts of their past lives and are ready to let go and move on.

Another pattern observed in these games is the presence of characters similar to the *ferryman of the Styx* in Greek mythology. These characters serve a functional role that extends even beyond fictional settings (Jørgensen 2010). In *Before Your Eyes* and *Spiritfarer*, the ferryman characters help the deceased remember, reflect on, and accept their past lives, mentally preparing and guiding them to the afterlife. In non-fictional settings, although a spiritual ferryman does not exist, there are characters who perform a similar role by guiding and unfolding past narratives. In *A Mortician's Tale* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the mortician and the remaining Finch family member connect and open up the narratives of many deceased, settling their final arrangements.



### Fixed or open endings

For games where death happens after the game begins, players experience the moment of death for the first time alongside the characters. This leads to options regarding endings—specifically, whether death is a fixed or randomized event. The different possibilities of death then serve various criteria for thematic expression.

In *The Stillness of the Wind*, death occurs as a fixed ending: no matter how well players manage the farm, the character dies for alternative reasons. The game creates a sense of helplessness and conveys the inevitability of death. *The Graveyard* features an open ending in which death is a randomized event. If it happens, players are confronted with the same sense of helplessness as in *The Stillness of the Wind*, witnessing the controlled character perish on screen. However, this randomness introduces an interesting dynamic, as players are unaware of when—or even if—death will occur. One Steam comment notes that the character was still alive as the game neared its end. Just as the player thought death would not happen this time, the character dies in the last moments of the possible time frame. This resembles our perception of death in real life: we are unaware of when, where, or if it will happen, so it always comes as a shock and leaves a lasting emotional impact (Seale and Van der Geest 2004). *Far From Noise* also features an open ending. As the character makes a final attempt to leave the cliff, the game scene closes, leaving players unsure whether the car falls or manages to escape. This open ending invites player interpretation and further emphasizes the game's theme that it is not the answer that matters, but the time spent hanging on the edge and reflecting on death (Herte 2020).

## Visual Design

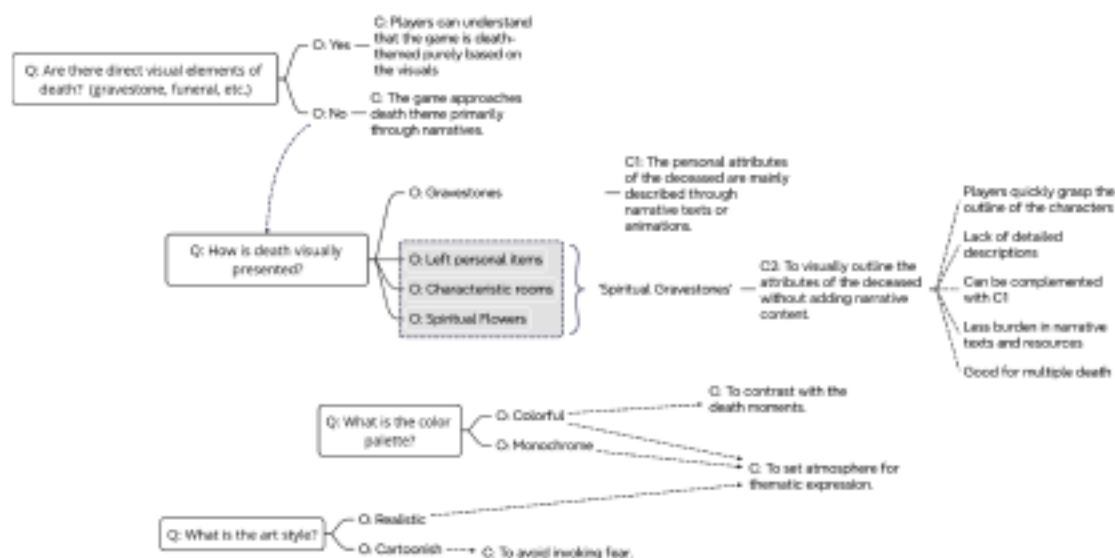


Figure 3: QOCs of visual representation of death in death-themed games

### Visual representation of death

We now address the question of whether there are direct visual elements of death in these games (see Figure 3). By direct visual elements of death, we refer to skeletons, gravestones, funerals, and other representations that explicitly depict death. These elements allow players to intuitively recognize the death theme based purely on the game's visuals (Correia et al. 2024). Surprisingly, most of the games do not feature such elements, as they primarily explore death through grief narratives or by creating death-impending situations for players. The only two games with prominent visual representations of death are *A Mortician's Tale* and *The Graveyard*, both of which are set in highly specific locations. *A Mortician's Tale*, set in a funeral home, frequently presents visuals such as caskets, urns of ashes, and other

funeral-related items. *The Graveyard*, as its name suggests, is set in a cemetery filled with gravestones. While gravestones also appear in the family cemetery in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, they play only a minor role in the game's overall visual experience.

Then how do the other games visually represent death? In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the deceased characters are depicted through their personalized rooms, left-behind items, and a spiritual shrine that represents their past lives (Gibson 2008; Galvan 2017). The spiritual shrine consists of distinctive personal items that best reflect the attributes of a past life, such as hobbies or valued belongings (see Figure 4, left). In *Spiritfarer*, the deceased characters appear as spiritual animals. After their second death—meaning when their spirits have left for the afterlife—their once-inhabited rooms are filled with unique spiritual flowers, serving as a similar representation to the “spiritual shrine” (see Figure 4, middle). Similarly, when designing *Between*, the DR created spiritual monuments for the deceased, composed of representative items and personal flowers to visually describe past lives (see Figure 4, right).

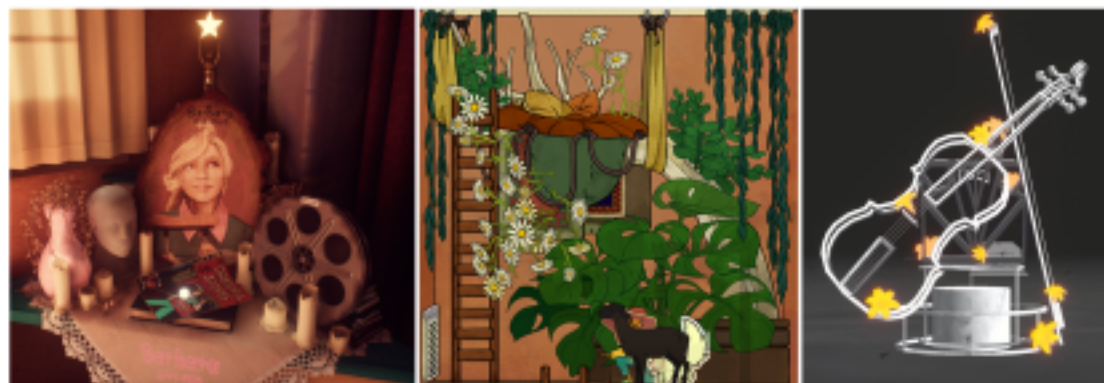


Figure 4: Similar structures of “spiritual gravestones” in three games (left: from *What Remains of Edith Finch*, middle: from *Spiritfarer*, right: from *Between*)

We refer to the similar structures observed in these games as “spiritual gravestones”, corresponding to ordinary gravestones that display names and years. The DR’s intention in designing the “spiritual gravestones” in *Between* was to visually memorialize the spiritual attributes of a past life—hobbies, qualities, and regrets. These structures effectively communicate the essence of a past life to players without heavy reading. We anticipate a similar rationale behind the design of these “spiritual gravestones”: they extend beyond the descriptive context of traditional gravestones with names and epitaphs, visually outlining a character’s past life without adding burden to narrative text (Fernández-Vara 2011). However, these “spiritual gravestones” are iconic expressions that lack detailed descriptions. They are effective in providing a first impression of the deceased, which can then be complemented by narratives to highlight main characters, as seen in *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Between*. Similarly, all three games are group portrayals depicting multiple deaths; therefore, this design is particularly useful for visually presenting various past lives.

### *Art style and color palette*

Similar to the direct visual elements of death, not many of these games use a black-and-white color scheme, which aligns with our common perceptions of death aesthetics (Gan and Kok 2012). Instead, many of these games create colorful scenes to immerse players in a calm, peaceful, or even lively atmosphere, providing an emotional contrast when death occurs.

In *Before Your Eyes*, fully colored scenes and cartoonish graphics are used to depict the memories of a young boy. This design immerses players in a calm and peaceful daily atmosphere, until death appears as a glitched, unsettling graphic that gradually takes over the screen. *The Stillness of the Wind* employs a similar technique: most days feature a

golden-bright field as players manage a quiet farm, but the screen gradually turns bleaker and more blurred in a sandstorm. Eventually, everything settles into a fully white scene covered in snow, where the character gradually falls and stops responding (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Contrasting scenes in *The Stillness of the Wind* (left: the color palette in most scenes; right: the scene where the character perishes).

Besides creating contrast, the colorful and cartoonish art style also helps to ease the inherent heaviness of death-related topics (Wirman et al. 2024). In *Far From Noise*, the entire game consists of a single illustrative scene of nature—sky, trees, and birds. Even the car hanging on the edge of the cliff is just swinging gently in the breeze, with only a faint tire trail hinting that there was an accident. By establishing a tension-free atmosphere, the game encourages players to absorb the narrative and reflect on the theme of death with a calm and open mind.

The only two games with direct visual elements of death also employ different options in color palettes to fit their criteria. In *A Mortician's Tale*, the cartoonish art style combined with a purple monochrome scheme filters out the realistic colors of flesh and blood, making the embalming interactions more acceptable to players (Nicolucci 2019). *The Graveyard*, as a short experiential game of only five minutes, uses a black-and-white color scheme to effectively set the mood of death and grief (Müller et al. 2012). If the scene were colorful, players might not grasp the idea of a somber death journey and may instead be more tempted to explore the graveyard for encounters. Here, the bleak color scheme and the realistic art style of the graveyard are essential for helping players quickly align with the intended emotional tone and expectations of the game (Isbister 2016).

### *Death and horror*

In none of these games is death depicted as something terrifying. Most of them adopt a stylized game visual. While this may be partly due to the resource limitations of independent studios, we argue that another motivation is to avoid evoking fear in players (Soderman 2015). For instance, if the bodies in *A Mortician's Tale* were rendered realistically rather than in a cartoonish style, the resulting fear could overwhelm the intended emotions and drive players away from the theme. Even in *Far from Noise*, where the main visual is a car hanging on the edge of a cliff, a realistic style might provoke unintended stress and disrupt the calm, reflective atmosphere the game aims to create.

As death is a topic that can easily evoke horror with the aid of imagination, designing a death-themed game requires careful consideration of whether potential fear might overwhelm the game's intended expression and emotional tone (Thon 2019; Wong and Tomer 2011). For example, during the DR's gameplay session, her sensitivity to horror created difficulties when playing Barbara's story in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. She had to ask a friend to progress through that section before continuing on her own. This brief disruption introduced frustration and fear into the experience, making it less pleasant and reflective.



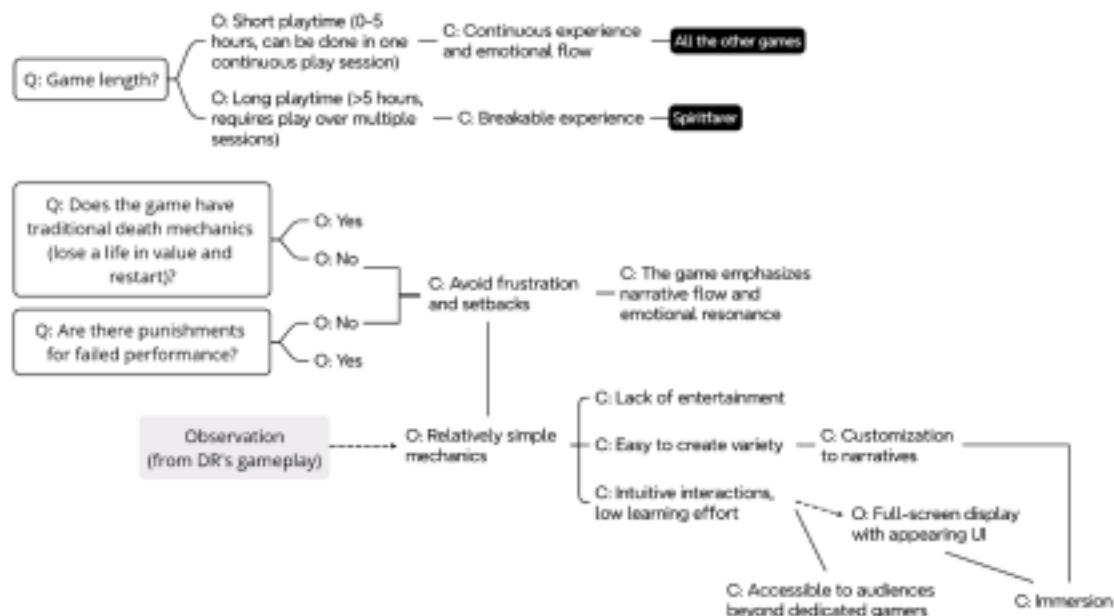


Figure 6: QOCs of mechanics in death-themed games

## Relatively Simple Mechanics

We then propose questions regarding the mechanic design in death-themed games (see Figure 6). Similar to fear, frustration is another emotion that requires careful consideration when designing these games (Nylund and Landfors 2015). While many games balance occasional frustration from challenging mechanics with the excitement of accomplishment, death-themed games follow a distinct emotional flow that centers on grief or reflection on death (Petrallito et al. 2017; Klasturp 2006). During the buildup of grief, strong emotions such as fear, frustration, or excitement can disrupt the sensitive and sentimental experience. As a result, the observed death-themed games commonly feature relatively simple mechanics, prioritizing gameplay fluency and immersion over complexity or playfulness (Leroy 2021; Calleja 2007). We reason out this option through three considerations: avoiding frustration in players, allowing customization of narratives, and appealing to audiences beyond hardcore gamers (Harrer 2018).

### Avoid frustration and setbacks

In the observed death-themed games, there are no conventional death mechanics where players lose a life as a numerical value and restart from failure. In fact, through the DR's gameplay, these games seem to avoid triggering any negative emotions unrelated to death (Bopp et al. 2016). For example, in *Spiritfarer*, if the player character accidentally falls off the ship during a voyage or within mini-game levels, there are no penalties or restarts. The ship simply stops and waits until the player returns, without even a UI indication for this subtle pause. Such design offers a comforting atmosphere for players—you are experiencing something heartbreaking, performance is not valued, and nothing is wrong. After the DR realized that even falling off during intense challenges has no consequences, the stress was released. The game encourages players to enjoy the minigames: you can score high, but there is no way down. Similarly, in *That Dragon, Cancer*, there is a karting mini-game that features no obstacles such as bombs or slippery hazards. All collectible objects merely give visual feedback and add to the score. By removing competition, this level encourages players to enjoy a carefree moment with the deceased child, emphasizing narrative and emotional resonance over performance or speed (Yeh et al. 2015). These mechanics provide players with moments of leisure within heavy narratives, without disrupting the grieving process (Isbister 2016).

However, death-themed games do not necessarily exclude 'fun' from their gaming experiences (Lazzaro 2009). As a significantly long game from the list, *Spiritfarer* requires mul-

multiple play sessions and introduces entertaining mechanics. The game integrates many minigames into the distinct missions of various passengers. Players engage in fulfilling wishes, exploration, and ship customization, which create an enjoyable and playful gaming experience. Through these tasks, players spend time with the passengers, get to know them, and thereby add to the grief of final separation. The game thus balances entertaining mechanics with emotional depth, making it both enjoyable and meaningful. *Spiritfarer* provides an example of how to incorporate gameplay fun into death-themed games, prolonging it into a breakable experience without detracting from the theme (Wang et al. 2009).

### *Customization to narratives*

For games that depict multiple death stories, the simple mechanics also allow customization for individual narratives (Carstensdottir et al. 2019). For example, *What Remains of Edith Finch* introduces unique mechanics to fit each character's story, such as swinging on a swing as a boy who dreams of flying, diving underwater as a baby in a bathtub, or transforming into monsters in a girl's nightmare. These interactions also switch control perspectives (first-person or third-person) to best support immersion. In addition to simple gameplay, this design also relies on intuitive inputs—such as moving, clicking the mouse, or pressing arrow keys—so there is little player learning required from story to story (Blackler et al. 2019). In this way, the game customizes diverse mechanics for each story, effectively immersing players into each character's narration. Even *Spiritfarer*, with its relatively complex gameplay, shares this attribute by incorporating a transformative tool that automatically changes into various items to meet each story's needs. By pressing the same button, the tool becomes a saw to cut trees, a kettle to water plants, or a hook to glide along ropes. These intuitive yet varied interactions are easy for players to learn and allow designers to tailor mechanics to each narrative, enhancing immersion in distinct death stories (Dubbelman 2016).

*Before Your Eyes* employs a unique mechanic in which players blink their eyes in the physical world to change scenes in the game and progress through the memories of a deceased boy (Gregersen and Grodal 2008; Dubbelman et al. 2013). The DR felt immediately immersed, as blinking is hard to resist, and she couldn't finish hearing a complete sentence in the first few scenes. After getting used to the mechanic, blinking still sometimes happened unconsciously, causing scenes to change and disrupting the narrative. This interactive experience aligns so well with the theme that, no matter how much one wishes to stay in past memories, one cannot, and life just fades (GoodbyeWorld Games 2021). This simple yet unique mechanic evoked a sense of forcelessness for the DR and resonates deeply with the deceased character's lingering wish.

### *Tailored for audience beyond hardcore gamers*

We anticipate that another reason behind the simple mechanics of death-themed games is their accessibility to audiences beyond hardcore gamers. These games are mainly designed to invoke reflections on death or express grief to connect individuals with similar experiences. By keeping mechanics and interactions straightforward, they accommodate those who are drawn to the topic but might be unfamiliar with gaming controls or kinetic challenges (Harrer 2018).

## **RESULT**

### **Design Space Map**

Up to now, we have analyzed the selected eight games by proposing Questions, Options, and Criteria (QOCs) regarding their game design (MacLean et al. 1991). Based on this analysis, we summarized the QOCs into a Design Space Map for death-themed games (see Figure 8). This map outlines the design space of death-themed games, listing options and

criteria for four design aspects: death design, fictional design, visuals, and mechanics. The map summarizes all observed similarities and characteristics of death-themed games, illustrating how they achieve distinct expressions of death themes through their game design elements (Hunicke et al. 2004).

In Figure 8, the left side displays the four design aspects with their corresponding questions, options, and criteria. On the right side are the eight studied games along with the DR's game, *Between*, with checked cells indicating the chosen options for each game. The questions and options were derived from observations made while playing these games and then summarized into the four design aspects. Referencing the DR's previous experience in designing a death-themed game, we proposed criteria to outline the potential effects or player experiences achieved through the chosen options. Together, our analysis identifies key features of death-themed games that may be considered when analyzing existing games or designing new ones: the level of intimacy in grief relationships, different death portrayals, fictional world design, random or fixed death, visual representation of death, evasion of fear and frustration, and straightforward mechanics. We then demonstrate two potential applications of this map.

### *To analyze existing games*

To analyze the design of an existing death-themed game using the Design Space Map, we begin by placing the game on the right side of the map and marking the options it occupies. These selected options then lead to the associated criteria on their right. Through this process, we break down the game experience into four design aspects, examining it piece by piece through each set of QOCs. As an example, we briefly analyze the first game on the list, *A Mortician's Tale*, using the Design Space Map (see Figure 8).

*A Mortician's Tale* confronts players with multiple deaths involving characters who do not share a close relationship (e.g., family or friends) with the player character. This design choice reduces the grief associated with individual loss. By presenting death as a recurring, routine event, the game encourages players to adopt the perspective of a mortician and consider the end of life as a natural and meaningful process. The game is then a group portrayal of death, emphasizing an objective, reflective view rather than invoking deep grief or emotional resonance. Although the game does not feature fictional settings, the player character takes on a functional role similar to the *ferryman of the Styx*, connecting and unraveling the narratives of multiple death stories. Set in a funeral home, the game presents direct visual elements of death, effectively drawing players into its thematic atmosphere. A monochrome color scheme is used to filter out the color of blood, and a cartoonish art style is used to help mitigate the fear associated with the embalming interaction. With its short playtime and straightforward mechanics, the game avoids potential frustration and sustains a grieving emotional flow and reflective gameplay experience.

### *To guide the design of new prototypes*

When using the map to guide the design of a new death-themed game, we approach it inversely—from criteria to options. First, we determine the specific death theme or expression we wish to convey through the game, establishing it as the overarching criterion. We then break this down into more detailed criteria, focusing on the particular effects or experiences we aim to evoke in players. These criteria inform the selection of options within each design aspect and shape the overall game design. Although *Between* (see Figure 7) was developed prior to this research, we use its creative process as an example to illustrate how the design space map can be applied to guide the development of a new prototype (see Figure 8).

*Between* was created with the aim of easing the fear of loss, conveying a neutral attitude toward death, and encouraging players to cherish the limited time in life. We set this as the overarching criterion to guide the design process. To promote a reflective rather than grief-driven experience, we adopted “group portrayal of death” as a more specific design



Figure 7: The DR's game *Between*, available on Steam:  
<https://store.steampowered.com/app/3422090/BETWEEN/>

criterion. This led to the choice of depicting multiple deaths involving characters who do not share a close relationship with the player character. We created many distinct gravestones for players to interact with and uncover the stories of the past. Naturally, the player character takes on a role similar to the *ferryman of the Styx*, connecting the various death narratives. The DR wished for past stories to be conveyed through direct conversations with the deceased, which informed the option of using fictional settings. We designed the worlds of the living, the between, and the dead, allowing players to switch between them to discover items left by the deceased and interact with their spirits. To create a soothing experience without heavy reading, we designed the structure of “spiritual gravestones”, composed of representative items and personalized flowers. This design offers players a visual impression of multiple past lives, which can then be complemented with narrative text to highlight the main characters.

As *Between* is a short experience, we designed the central scene of a graveyard (direct visual elements of death) in monochrome to effectively establish a solemn and reflective atmosphere. We applied a stylized art style and avoided depicting human figures to mitigate possible associations with horror (Carter and Allison 2017). The mechanics are relatively simple—typing the deceased’s names on a computer keyboard, with each letter emitting a piano note as the name flows into a melody. This interaction enhances the soothing atmosphere of the spiritual graveyard, filled with flower petals and melodies. The input resembles our daily use of computers, which also aligns with the DR’s vision of accommodating audiences beyond hardcore gamers. She wishes to reach audiences who share a fear of loss but may not be familiar with gaming controls or kinetic challenges (Harrer 2018).

## Limitations and Future Work

In this work, we analyzed eight selected death-themed games to provide insights into the design structures of such games. While we believe our research covers a significant portion of death-themed games, the perception of death themes can be subjective. There may be games that have had a significant impact on players’ reflections on death but were not included in our selection. The experience of death and grief can be deeply personal and meaningful to each individual. We are open to future work that could further expand the analysis of death-themed game design and potentially offer new insights or discoveries for our design space map.

Our analysis is conducted through the lens of a single designer-researcher (DR), drawing from her experience developing *Between*. While we believe this perspective offers a valuable and intimate understanding of death-themed game design, it inherently carries a degree of subjectivity. To provide readers with context regarding the DR’s background and perspective, we shared the design rationale behind *Between* and provided access to its playable prototype. We did not conduct interviews with the designers of the eight selected games and therefore do not claim to represent their actual design intentions. The analy-

sis and insights presented are solely based on the DR's personal experience in designing *Between* and extensively playing the selected games.

## CONCLUSION

In this research, we examined games that explore the theme of permanent death as experienced in real life. By confronting players with grief narratives or simulated death experiences, death-themed games often connect players with loss or inspire contemplation on death. While existing studies primarily focus on in-depth analyses of individual titles, our study adopts a broader perspective by analyzing eight representative death-themed games and identifying their design structures from a designer's point of view. The first author, as a designer-researcher in this field, draws on her prior experience developing a death-themed game to inform this analysis.

We analyzed the eight death-themed games using the Design Space Analysis method, also known as the Questions, Options, and Criteria (QOCs) framework. Through this approach, we deconstructed the games into four major design aspects, with each set of QOCs outlining how the games express death through specific game design elements. For example, adjusting the number of deceased characters or the level of intimacy in grief relationships can shape a gameplay experience that either evokes emotional resonance in players or encourages objective reflection. Since death-themed games often involve sensitive emotional experiences such as grief and empathy, their design requires careful consideration to avoid evoking player frustration or unintended associations with horror.

We summarized our analysis into a Design Space Map for death-themed games, providing a comprehensive and structured framework to analyze existing titles or guide the design of new prototypes. To analyze an existing game, it is placed on the right side of the map, with its occupied options marked. These marked options then lead to associated criteria, outlining the expected experience and the game's similarity to other death-themed games. Conversely, when designing a new prototype, the map can be approached in reverse: starting with the desired criteria for emotional flow or thematic expression, then identifying the corresponding options that best shape the experience. We hope this work inspires further exploration into this meaningful expression in games and lays the foundation for future analysis and development of death-themed games.



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