# Inviting Grief into Games: The Game Design Process as Personal Dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how designers might initiate a dialogue with underrepresented groups, infusing design with individuals' personal stories and imaginations. It does so alongside the example of Jocoi, a game aiming at mediating the experience of loss and grief over a dead baby. Apart from being a taboo subject in general, there is no explanation for the absence of this fairly common experience in games. Drawing on the emotional worlds and tastes of individuals identifying as bereft parents, Jocoi involved a collaboration with an Austrian self-help group for affected parents. The stories of four informants then served as an initial orientation point marking out the direction of our ensuing game design process. Working out central themes, needs and concerns conveyed by the group, the aim was to address some of their emotional challenges appropriately through a game. The paper first presents a rationale for the chosen method of collaboration. Most importantly, we embrace a paradigmatic shift from game design as the production of meaning and emotion towards game design as facilitation or mediation. The second section will zoom in to the concrete tools and stages we used in our our facilitation process with Jocoi. It will trace key moments in moving from kick-off workshop to the final game. Finally, the ensuing discussion will highlight learnings for a broader understanding of introducing diversity into games. The question of appropriateness seems to be of particular importance for game designers. It is a matter of maintaining a balance between active listening and autonomous creative practice. The project is part of an ongoing PhD project on loss and grief in games.

## Keywords

game design, emotion, grief, metaphor

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity in play and games raises the question how the makers of games can listen to previously marginalised voices beyond established audiences. Arguably, a proper invitation exceeds the broadening of the "gamer" label and its respective market, and demands a collective awareness that games can and should address the diverse needs and realities of everyone beyond a gaming mainstream (Shaw 2013). Drawing on and

learning from personal stories is particularly necessary when it comes to identities partially or entirely missing from games. In the case of experiences revolving around motherhood, loss, and the grief over a dead child, we are almost completely left in the dark with examples. Games have a tradition of ignoring the experience of being a mother[1] not to speak of more granulated conflicts arising with the particular situation of losing a child. The detrimental effects of this symbolic annihilation are obvious; for mourning mothers it signals that their identities are not welcome in wider culture, for participants of game culture - developers and players alike - it diminishes potentials for empathy. At the end of the day, designers may deem it safer to dodge the topic all along, repeating the circle of marginalisation.

In our work on Jocoi, we attempted to narrow the gap between the world of lived grief and video games by inviting in "subject matter experts" (Rusch/Rana 2014: 4) to help our design team create a game about loss and mourning. These experts have been recruited through an Austrian self-help group for bereft parents, and identified as mourning mothers interested in the de-stigmatisation of their experience. Their input helped formulate a design vision and served as an anchoring point during development. Collaboration was based on the paradigm of emotion as interaction, allowing us to adopt a designer roles as dialogue partner. This paper will first explain the implications of this paradigm, followed by an account of the collaboration and design process. Since informant work and development were carried out in two separate steps in different regions it makes sense to present them in chronological order. The epilogue summarises player reactions and future perspectives of Jocoi.

## EMOTION IN GAMES: TWO PARADIGMS

The ambition to invite loss and grief into games comes with the question of how games handle emotion. Traditionally, game designers have approached this question with an interest in how games might produce and convey a certain emotion. They have even considered themselves as "emotioneers" (Freeman 2004), infusing technology with the magical power to trigger emotional responses in players. Within this stimulus response paradigm, games are imagined as conveyer belts transporting packages of emotional information units from A to B. A game designer's task is to apply tools to fix the emotion unit well enough so it can have the correct effect on the other side. At the end of the day, he has to ensure the effective production and smooth transportation of "emotion units" required to trigger intended effects. Success and failure are measured according to how well the intended emotion aligns with the felt emotion of the player.

This model has been problematised for various reasons. Most crucially it equates emotion with information, assuming that emotion can be crafted or "engineered" on one side and received on the other. By implication, emotion possesses an essential, quantifiable core that may be compared between the producer and consumer. For critics of this approach this view is considered as dangerous reductionism that leads to the selective privileging and silencing of emotional realities according to the producer's perceptive horizon. More likely, emotion is culturally grounded and produced through interaction and acknowledgement (Boehner et al 2005, 2007). The shift towards an interaction paradigm has two important consequences. First, it exposes the idea of emotioneering as a top-down design practice ignoring the part of the interaction that happens on the player side. What it fosters, after all, is a focus on the purportedly solid contents, not the dynamics of emotion. Secondly, emotion as interaction calls for a shift of attention away from helping technology handle emotions towards helping individuals tackle their own emotions with technology (Boehner et al 2005: 59). Rather than being an engineer of meaning, game designers should reconsider their role as facilitators, making a creative contribution to an ongoing dialogue.

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The conceptual move of game design as production towards game design as facilitation crucially corresponds with a move from knowing to listening. A central goal is the acknowledgement of stories, situations, and conditions that may be addressed through a game design lens. In order to come up with an appropriate response to those stories, a designer must be able to learn first, and then engage her design tools in a dialogue with what is going on.

## INVITING INFORMANTS IN

Acknowledging the informants as experience experts was first and foremost to make them equal collaboration partners. On the one hand, this required making their input count from the very start of the project (Lange-Nielsen 2012, Sotamaa et al 2005). Rather than starting the project with a clear-cut game idea in mind, we put priority on learning about their stories, interests and tastes before we settled on a design vision. On the other hand, collaborative tasks and settings should be fun and meaningful to the informants. Not only are aesthetically pleasant experiences more likely to encourage an intimate communicative space, but they also result in more useful contributions (Andersen 2003).

### Potential dangers

However, there were two dangers potentially compromising a smooth collaboration. First, upon initial contact with the group we could sense an equal amount of enthusiasm for sharing personal stories, and confusion about the idea of making a "game". For some, this label was thoroughly alienating and overwhelming, others were more open and curious towards appropriating it. This is why we avoided referring to the informants as full-fledged game designers, and used the term participants, informants or "muses" (Khaled 2012) instead. The idea of a muse-artist relationship was especially appealing to us, since it comes with positive connotations like inspiration and creation without constraints. This reflected our intention best.

The second concern was slightly more profound, as it regarded the unclear emotional state of the informants. Up to the first encounter, it was still uncertain how they would respond to a set of activities that demanded them to tread on potentially painful territory. Even if they had volunteered to share their stories, there was still some risk of retraumatization. How could the experience of losing an unborn baby be ascertained without pulling the plug on a potentially pleasant workshop session? A preliminary response was focusing on the mother-child relationship rather than the traumatic event of separation itself. As it turned out, this was a sound choice, since all of the informants embraced the option to create their personal "utopia" of the mother-child relationship.

### Personal experience and metaphorical design

Keeping these concerns in mind, what method would be most appropriate to encourage the free flow of personal stories? Arguably, making sense of one's intricate experience relies on our capacity to draw metaphorical connections (Lakoff/Johnson 1980). Metaphors help us to make complex human experiences tangible by understanding them in terms of something else. This enables us to identify salient aspects of an experience, making it accessible to us in the first place. Practices of symbolisation and imagination have therefore been central to different therapeutic schools (Kirmayer 1996, Garland 1998, Lawley/Thompkins 2000), and have recently made their way into game design (Rusch 2009, Rusch/Rana 2014). Metaphorical game design utilises our ability to translate an abstract feeling into a concrete metaphorical shape and interrogate this shape in terms of its mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics, goal conditions etc. The goal of fleshing out behaviours and potential relationships of metaphors, or "experiential gestalts", is to arrive at a game system that resonates with the experience of other players (Rusch/Rana 2014). The process starts from a personally felt phenomenon and moves towards a

specific form. This procedure was adopted as the central workshop method for various reasons. First, the model prioritises what feels true to an individual in a particular moment in time, avoiding attention to formal expectations and definitions. Feeling and individual imagination come first. They are valid tools for knowledge construction, underscoring the role of informants as experience experts. Secondly, the metaphorical design process allowed us to set tasks with a flexible end. Whether the informants would arrive at a game prototype, mockup, or any other type of representation was up to them, alleviating the pressure of "being a designer". By means of participation they were already creating valuable input that the design team could draw from later on.

## THE "TRAUERSPIEL" WORKSHOP

The initial informant workshop took place in the self-help group's community centre in Vienna, and was called "TrauerSpiel", signalling an invitation to playfully explore experiences of grief. In our account to the informants we also disclosed a brief description of purpose and method of the workshop. Hence, the informants knew upon arrival that they would engage in imagination-based crafting activities inspiring a game. It was easy to contain further information, since this was all the information we had ourselves.

The set of tasks revolved around discovering, describing and modelling the relationship to their babies metaphorically. This process was built up step by step and was embedded in a core metaphor serving as a shared point of reference. This metaphor, "a planet on which your dead baby lives", aimed at inviting a description of the mother-child relationship beyond common expectations. Planets have a specific territory, atmosphere, population, fauna, etc. and there are no limits as to what rules might regulate a planet. It accounts for the possibility of alien life and gives rise to an abundance of inexplicable benevolent and malicious phenomena. For these reasons it seemed to be an appropriately open context to fuel an emotional exploration.
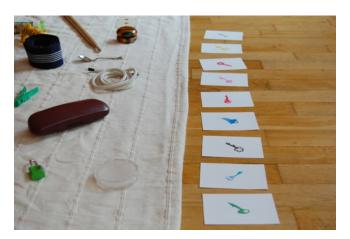


**Figure 1:** Key cards to be picked up by the informants to initiate the symbolic modelling exercise

In order to immerse them in the task and mark the threshold from literal to metaphorical engagement, the informants chose a "keycard" from a set of cards arranged on the floor. Each card was designed individually to emphasise the uniqueness of the planet they were about to visit. Each card contained a different structurising game design term ("goal", "time", "gestalt", "space", "change", "transform", "negotiate", "progress", etc.), which could be used as an additional focus during the upcoming crafting phase.

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## The crafting phase
For the next stage, a table bulging with art materials was unveiled, as the informants were asked to craft a physical representation of their planets. Initially, emphasis was put on the imagination of a basic structure. To do this, informants were instructed to draw on their sensory perception: What did they hear, see, feel, and what was it like? The goal of this phase was to come up with a central "emotional ontology" of their planets. As the models started to gain a more distinct shape, the attention moved towards more detailed questions about the planets' attributes, rules and behaviours. Were there laws? What if these were infringed? What was there to do on the planet? Additionally, and rather as an aside, where would they locate grief and mourning?

## The admiration phase
The second part of the workshop was dedicated to identifying the individual traits of each planet and negotiate their meaning. After a short break, the participants entered the workshop room again, this time they were asked to take some time to study ("admire") the works of their fellow informants. They were instructed to notice particularly interesting features about each model, and voice them in during the ensuing discussion round. Addressing each planet model individually, the observers were asked to make their remarks first, followed by a response of the planet owner. Separating speaking time for observers and creators turned out to be a discussion booster. For the observers, the planet models were like intricate puzzles to be solved, stimulating a variety of questions and remarks. For for the creators, seeing others engage in their own work encouraged them to dwell on explanations and background stories.

This exercise served to carve out and compare unique characteristics of each planet, focusing on the differences. First of all, models varied according to how recently the loss had happened in the mothers' life. In the case of the most recent loss, for instance, the planet's imagery revolved around themes of seeking safety and an untroubled reunion with the dead child. More remote experiences allowed for visions of internal conflicts, and scenarios of letting go. As expected, the extent to which these visions moved towards a playable form was another source of variation. As a rule, the planets were imagined and described as momentary snapshots of the mothers' condition, but they all possessed an underlying system of rules that could be interrogated during the admiration phase.

### *The bliss planet*
The bliss planet, for instance, features the implicit rule that life on the planet has to be idyllic at all times, and potential danger is under control. As indicated above, this planet caters to the wish for an intact unimpeded mother-child relationship. The abundance of high grass "to hide in" and the constant presence of children's laughter promises security, even if the planet reveals a number of gaping craters represented by big black buttons literally fixed on the planet with safety pins. These craters are somewhat disarmed in the mother's imagination. Says she, "First I was a little bit alarmed and thought maybe my children could fall down the crater. But then I noticed the craters were harmless". Furthermore, the weather is changing constantly, but this does not seem to affect the planet's inhabitants in any negative ways When another informant noticed that the planet's two-fold material structure (paper and felt) reminded her of "a world in a world" the bliss designer agreed that this means she crafted "part ideal, part reality". From her position on the planet she does not notice reality, though, neither does she want to. The planet functions as a retreat from this ghastly view. If the sky and the landscape work as desired, the planet is fully sheltered from the possibility of grief. As a result, a hidden win state of the "bliss" planet is to maintain the planet's immaculate condition, keeping nature intact as a protective instance.

**Figure 2:** The bliss planet (paper/felt, threads, buttons, safety pins, rubber animals)



**Figure 3:** The fireside planet (textiles, buttons, wool, pillows, Lego bricks, post-its).

## *The fireside planet*

The next planet models the first moments after a still birth using the core metaphor of a campfire. The informant, who attended the scene as a midwife, imagines the bereft parent couple to be quietly seated next at the fireside, holding their new born child as they contemplate their ambivalent surroundings. Two central qualities of the fire are fleshed out to give significance to the scene. First, it sheds light on the objects scattered on the ground. Some of them, as the designer notes, represent moments of hopelessness and despair (materialized through the Lego bricks referred to as "Bruchstücke"). Others are moments of unexpected bliss, or "treasure". Through the flames' dynamic quality different shards and treasures are concealed and revealed at different times. The mother's position is described as particularly directed towards such flashes of treasure, whereas the father's gaze lingers on the overwhelming shards of despair. The second quality associated with the fire is its nourishing warmth that sustains the family through their struggle for clarity. This struggle is indicated by the fingerless clock, a lack of temporality that is, however, needed for exploring the scattered pieces on the ground. A central theme of this world is the restoration of order and time, albeit not before ambiguity has been faced and explored in detail.

**Figure 4:** The sheep planet (Duplo animals, textiles, Lego house, buttons, post-its)

## *The sheep planet*

The scenery of the sheep planet was created eight months after a child loss during late pregnancy. On a green, abundant meadow stands a sheep facing a river. The sheep represents the mother, her gaze carefully directed to the other side of the river. There are two cheerful tigers on the other side of the dead, her lost son and her great-grand mother. The sheep is characterised as complacent with her observer role. The quiet river separating sheep from tigers does not disturb it. It used to be composed entirely of tears, but this has changed. However, it invites the question what would happen if the sheep crossed it? Would it turn into a tiger herself? (probably) Would the tigers still be there when it got there? (unknown). The sheep is asking these questions, but it is not yet interested to make a move. Behind the scenes waits the herd that she belongs to. Not only would they be frightened by her new tiger gestalt; the mother sheep also wants to stay with them more than it needs to visit the other side of the river. For now, observing it is pleasing enough.



**Figure 5:** The cave planet (paper, fur, felt, feathers, rubber objects)

*The cave planet*
This model is a response to the most remote traumatic experience, a loss during late pregnancy ten years ago. The cave planet's designer was the most drawn towards making a game, which is why the planet features a set of rules, a temporal structure and a goal condition. Most basically, it deploys the core metaphor of a cave, which is composed of an inner and outer shell. Confined in the inner shell is the son, craving food and warmth. Collectively, the family has to tend after the baby, feeding and holding him so he will grow. To find food, they have to take turns in mastering tasks, assisting each other. Their shape-shifting abilities (likened to the "Barbapapas") come in handy here. Once the baby has reached a certain size, the family is allowed to leave him behind in his inner cave and take off in a spaceship. The designer points out that the cave itself represents grief. It has become the baby's home. It needs to be visited and attended to by the entire family to accept this fact and eventually leave it behind.

## The discussion phase
After the specific properties and dynamics of each planet had been inspected, the informants were instructed to draw similarities between the planets. This last workshop phase was intended to round off the experience by arriving at shared themes in the lives of the informants. How did common planet features look like, and what shared conflicts and desires did they represent? Informants' responses are summarised below along the axes of space and time, as well as activity on the planets.

*Space*
Perhaps the strongest similarity among all planet models is its imagination as a utopian, paradisiac realm, which is ready to give shelter to a symbolic reunion of mother and deceased baby. In the discussion, an informant noticed the idyllic landscape and the absence of dangers. "Everyone felt good". This indicates a shared wish to live and celebrate the mother-child relationship, rather than focusing on the loss moment. The lush meadows, comfortable cave, friendly wildlife and nurturing treasures conjure up worlds full of resources underscoring the loving connection between the mother and the lost baby. The spaces' beauty appears almost surreal. And as we have seen, it always comes with a particular constraint: On the bliss planet, balance needs to be maintained, the craters must not be threatening. The cave system might be cosy and full of visitors sometimes, but the baby is forced to stay confined in the inner cave. The sheep might enjoy the view on the other side of the river, but she would take an enormous risk walking through it. At last, the fireside is atmospheric and inviting, but its flames sometimes illuminate the insurmountable shards putting the visitor in front of existential questions.

*Time*
There is an insistence on non-temporality in all of the planets, a meditative atmosphere ruling the planets, signifying the wish to spend more time with the loved one on their planets. The midwife-informant describes the atmosphere after the still birth as a "kind of timelessness. In this phase there is also something like unintentionality. And that doesn't mean that in this time nothing happens." Her image of the clock missing its indicators characterises this feeling that temporality is not important during the immediate aftermath of loss. What is needed is the idea of a connection to the dead child unthreatened by temporal order. This need is also expressed in the bliss model, which insists on having neither goal nor development. Other, less recent loss experiences allow for the slow rediscovery of temporal order. The sheep planet gives the option to find back to normal life (regaining temporal order) or walking through the river (uncertain afterlife). The cave planet sets leaving the planet and its non-temporality as an explicit goal condition. What

the planets share, though, is the absence of time pressure while nourishing the mother-child relationship.

## *Activity*

As an informant remarked during the wrap-up discussion, the feeling of timelessness and unintentionality ruling all planets also comes with a "clarity of perception". She roots this observation in the number of wiggly eyes other informants pasted on their planet creatures and inhabitants: "But the eyes... there is a sharpened perception, not because something must be done, but because the situation allows or invokes it… Just putting being in the centre". Being, in all planets, implies being there for someone. To some extent, all planets feature the need to care and nourish, either through attention (sheep planet, bliss planet) or through nutrients supplied by the planet (cave planet, fireside planet). As an informant observes, "I just thought that - in regard to everyone - you give the child what you couldn't give it in reality. That's in every game. Caring and feeding and observing over a long time; a time that one would have needed to, one would need [to spend with the baby]."

## MAKING JOCOI

The materials constructed throughout the TrauerSpiel workshop were sorted, translated and transcribed to be used for the ensuing game design phase. The development team, five Medialogy education students at Aalborg University's campus in Copenhagen were presented with the materials as well as with the task to continue the design dialogue. More concretely, the aim was to create a game based on the aesthetics and themes of the planet models with special attention to the grief theme. The central question, how to communicate loss through a game, asked for both muse-based design awareness (Khaled 2012) and a structural understanding of a "loss gestalt" (Harrer 2013). While muse-based design required a careful balance between creative autonomy and adaptation to the tastes of the informants, the "loss gestalt" had not been explicitly addressed by the informants. It was this part of the design that called for a strong design autonomy, while other choices could be immediately inferred from the planet models.

Much of our initial brainstorming activities was about logging the design team's first responses to the workshop materials and likening them to modes of gameplay. From the shared aesthetics and themes of the four planets, some design choices seemed obvious. The theme of timelessness, for instance, asked for a meditative pace, ruling out a wide range of time-based interactions by default. It was similarly clear that the act of caring and nourishment should be turned into a central mechanic.

What was less clear was how to understand and handle traces of loss and grief. As explained above, dwelling on these subjects was avoided in the informant workshop. Implications for design needed to be drawn from the subtleties and contradictions of the planets. Why, for instance, would the informants choose to consistently model a colourful, paradisiac realm around their dead baby? For some team members, this notion seemed simply inappropriate. To some extent, the mothers' imaginations clashed with dominant images of grief as a subject confined to "dark" themes. Yet the more the team got involved into studying the metaphors in detail, the more they started to embrace the intricate realities displayed by the planets. Wasn't grief a (futile) attempt to win back a warm and unproblematic environment? Wasn't a beautiful scenery inhabited by an unharmed baby what the mothers missed from their current lives?

As empathy for the complex meaning of the paradisiac visions grew, we started comparing them to the "loss gestalt" developed in Harrer 2013. This gestalt is based on observation of significant loss moments of non-player characters. It is comprised of a

three-step structure, starting with a bonding phase in which the NPC is established as part of the gameplay pattern. What follows is a non-playable sequence in which the NPC is taken away, followed by a part in which gameplay continues under less pleasant conditions. Interpreting the informant materials through the lens of this three-part loss gestalt helped to render the absent, more painful parts of the planets visible. What did the enjoyable moments on the planet have to say about disruption and suffering? If there was bonding and nourishment first, how could its sad implication, loss and depletion, be transported by our game?

## Settling for a core metaphor

Developing a final game concept meant settling for an appropriate core metaphor that would carry the central game logic. The rich symbolism presented by each planet did not make this an easy selection task. Initially, the cave metaphor resonated most strongly with the team, since it came with the proposition of a goal condition, some extent of spatial organisation, and the remark that the cave itself represented the grief experience. There is the central rule that the baby needs to stay in its inner core, while other players have to interact with the cave system, and the outside world to gather food. The goal to leave the planet in a spaceship calls for puzzle mechanics - maybe the spaceship has to be built in the first place? Since temporality is not an issue for either of the planets, the mechanics would likely be based on exploration.

Building a paper prototype helped us raise more detailed questions towards the salient aspects of the cave metaphor. Especially, what activities, inside or outside of the cave would contribute to the goal of building a spaceship? Were the parts buried? Could they be found by means of shining light on them? What about the baby; how should we enable the family to feed and hold it without taking it outside of the cave? What kind of nourishment should be involved? Should we maybe introduce bushes with hidden fruit that only become visible when someone is holding the baby? And what about all other elements from the three remaining models?



**Figure 6:** Early paper prototype of the cave scenario

As features among features were added to the initially coherent cave vision, it threatened to slowly disintegrate while robbing space off equally suited starting point. This was when we organised a "pitch workshop" in which each team member nominated a favourite symbol which to them represented the most salient aspect of the game experience we were after. During the pitch, the cave model was mentioned once. All remaining team members had rediscovered other interesting elements, such as the fire's

metaphorical potential for ambiguity, or the river's function as the boundary between life and death.

Finally we voted to continue working on the river metaphor. From the pragmatic point of view of practical constraints, a simple meadow scenario featuring a life/death river seemed more manageable than a multiplayer cave system. While being straightforward, the river metaphor had also been one of the most evocative images during the informant workshop. Particularly the question of whether or not the sheep should cross the river, and what would happen if it did so, had been a point of interest. As an informant concluded about the consequences of crossing the river: "You have to make up your mind before. Do I want it or not? I think this would be a good game. This goal and also this development. What do I need to go and what do I need to stay?"

Finally, the central conflict of the sheep observing the tigers on the other side and asking existential questions immediately invites the construction of a narrative: How did the sheep get to the river? If the sheep turned into a tiger upon crossing the water, isn't it likely that the tiger had been a lamb before? Maybe the mother sheep used to have a lamb before it sadly underwent a transformation?

When we started with the first paper prototype of "Jocoi" (Romanian for "sheep game"), we were immediately pleased with its core structure: Building on the river conflict, Jocoi tells the story of "before" and "after" the emergence of the river while integrating the parents' three collective themes; timelessness, utopia and nourishment. After two iterations preceded by user feedback, we went for two major changes; an audio puzzle as the central game mechanic, and the change from keyboard-based controls towards more intuitive mouse-based controls.

## Jocoi

Jocoi starts with a our autonomous proposition that the mother sheep has, in fact, had a little lamb which she needs to take care of throughout the first phase of the game. After a tutorial in which the player gets introduced to the specific functions of left and right mouse buttons, the game begins in a utopian fashion. A beautiful sunny day on a meadow, the only thing we hear are forest sounds, bird singing and some soft wind in the distance. What we see is a meadow area inhabited by the player mother sheep, her little lamb and an idle flock. The play area is confined by a forest.

Interaction-wise, the two sides of the mouse represent different spheres of caring. The right mouse button, which is conventionally less likely to be used than the left one, is responsible for the mother sheep's needs. It can be pressed to walk slowly and feed on available flowers or patches of grass. This has, however, no tangible effect for the game yet. The left mouse button, on the other hand, is reserved to the mother's interactions with her lamb. The mother does not walk, she jumps around the meadow, always followed by her lamb. When the player clicks on flower, the sheep will not eat it herself but feed it to the lamb. This feeding action has a number of tangible consequences. First, it is connected to the soundscape. Every flower, depending on shape and colour, comes with a different musical element, which will be added as a layer of sound when fed to the lamb. Feeding the lamb is thus equivalent to building up an individual soundtrack, based on the shape and colour of each flower. This draws on the cave planet on which "one can select sounds, one can select lighting, it doesn't have to be day or night". The articulation of nourishing and musical impact is supposed to convey the importance of being there for the lamb. Selecting a flower that is "good enough" to be fed to the lamb is to make an impactful decision about the musical ambience. Secondly, on the visual level, feeding a flower will paint a colourful pattern on the fur of the lamb. By holding the left mouse

button on the lamb, this can be admired in detail. Thus, the combination of visible and audible impacts of feeding establishes the lamb as a thing to care for. Choosing one's flowers carefully affords a slow pace, responding to the wish for a meditative, timeless feel. Once a flower has been chosen and fed, it will fill up a symbol bar element on the top of the screen as well. Four sounds can be created like that at the same time, and they can be changed throughout the first part of the game.

Since it is possible to graze all available flowers on a meadow, new flowers can be spawned by lying down and cuddling with the flock. While the flock cuddles, the player can see four possible weather states pass by, an element that has been inspired by the bliss model in which seasons changed in a rather smooth, nonthreatening fashion. Each weather state offers a different variety of flowers, which will again feature different sounds and fur colours. The theme of the supportive family is reverberated in the flock, which enables the mother sheep to explore new grounds.



**Figure 7:** Final build of Jocoi, stage 1

On the other hand, the flock might also stand for the instance imposing a knowledge of "what is best". By enabling the player to see more flowers, the flock draws attention to the symbol bar and its purported function signalling a goal. An inner monologue may start in the player's mind: Is there a particular type of flower, or a colour, that I need to feed? What other tasks am I possibly missing out on?

While the player is engaged in this rather mundane feeding activity activities, admiring the seasonal change or trying to decode the function of the symbol bar, the world is suddenly shattered by an earthquake.

In stage two the meadow has changed. The lamb has gone, and the flowers collected on the symbol bar have receded. Instead, there is a river on the right side of the screen. At that point the player has internalised a routine of using the left mouse button. When she presses it in stage two, the lamb does not move, but screams instead. The player has to find out how to traverse the meadow without the lamb, "on her own" (using the right mouse button). When she finally finds out and interacts with the river, she gets into a first person perspective overviewing the sunset on the other side of the river. Around a fireside are two wild animals which the players will identify as wolves. One of them wears a fur jacket containing colours most likely familiar to the player. They are the colours on the lamb's fur moments before the earthquake had separated mother and lamb. Once the player decides to move out of the observer role, there are two possibilities. She can either move towards the other side of the river by keeping the left mouse button pressed on the little wolf. As long as she keeps pressing she will continue walking towards the other side of the river until her eyes close and the screen fades black.

Since we do not know what will happen in the case of crossing the river, the game does not end here. In order to do so, the mother sheep needs to leave the river view and return to the flock. She will notice how all the flowers are now covered in patches of grass and need to be rediscovered. This is a response to the quality of "hidden treasures" of the fireside planet. The player has to solve a puzzle in which she has to literally "recollect" the flowers that once composed the melody and the idiosyncratic fur of her lamb. This challenge structure refers to the cave model's idea of making the player solve a task before being able to leave the planet. When the last flower has been found the trees will give way to a new meadow which invites the flock to collectively "move on".

## EPILOGUE

The design and development of Jocoi involved a constant back and forth movement between the mothers' imaginations and the question how to find an adequate game expression for loss. During our semester-long work on the game, we ran a number of play-testing sessions to see how the abstract metaphorical proposition resonated with different audiences. The reaction from playtesters outside of the design team was mixed, and definitely shaped by the extent of their previous knowledge of the project. An important interest for the design team was whether the finished game was likely to inspire conversation about loss experiences in the players. This happened in some case, and was more intense when the context of our development efforts, a dialogue with the support group of bereft mothers , was previously known. This is only surprising if one considers emotion as information, expecting the emotional message of Jocoi to be "inside" of the game. Game design as a facilitation practice, on the other hand, is interested in the potential of Jocoi to engage players in a dialogue about their own emotional landscapes and to what extent these resonate with the symbolism of the game.

Apart from potential players of Jocoi, what did the informants think about our response to their planets? Did they enjoy playing the game, and overall, were they able to relate? To find out, we organised a final meeting, in which we briefly described the stages of design and development since the TrauerSpiel workshop. Then, we instructed the mothers to each play through the game and note their immediate response on a piece of paper. Simple impulse questions like "What now?" or "For whom?" served to structure their reactions. Overall, their responses were consistently positive. Apart from minor suggestions that would have improved their experience, the informants affirmed to identify with the events, the pace, and the structure of the game. The aesthetics were particularly applauded; they seemed to match the informants' taste, and the gameplay was reported to appropriately reflect their own emotional situation. An informant observed that the monotony of the first part was particularly important to establish the loss moment. After playing, two mothers simultaneously noted down the "impulse" to play again. Asked as to why they responded that they wanted to experience the blissful first part of the game again, enjoying some more time with their lamb.

Such unexpected results are part of the adventure of working with individuals outside established games contexts. Bereft motherhood is a vast landscape of emotions worthy of game makers' attention. Both because it expands their own vision of the manifold topics and conflicts of underrepresented groups, and because it unlocks the game medium for new audiences. In our case, drawing the mothers-informants during the early phase of the design process had a three-fold effect. First, it offered a convenient way for us to learn more about their relationships and attitudes towards games, motivating the use of design frameworks counterintuitive to ruling paradigms. Secondly, the creative collaboration functioned as social lubricant among the informants. The availability to share a space in which their expertise was welcome to flow freely created a sense of belonging and intimacy. Thirdly, it gave the design team time to accurately familiarise itself with the

themes and issues at stake. This process of growing empathetic connections to the planet models through design exercises eventually turned out a game whose aesthetics, dynamics and mechanics resonated with the informant group.

Not only did the mothers ask to show the game to their near and dear, they also requested to showcase it at a community event for mourning parents, and to have the TrauerSpiel workshop repeated there. To them, Jocoi is a suitable tool to foster dialogue about their loss. For us, it was an exercise in learning how to listen.

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