Love is a Struggle

A Game on Domestic Abuse

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Abstract

The goal of this project is to create a portrayal of domestic abuse that leads to greater cognitive understanding and emotional investment in the user through the game medium. Games have become a popular and widespread media form, and part of this project’s goal is to realize on a larger scale some of the potential ways games can communicate more sophisticated and emotional experiences. This project is an attempt to explore how a topic such as domestic abuse can be presented in a sophisticated way through the form of the game medium that provides the user with a deeper understanding and a newfound emotional investment in the topic.
Introduction

*Love is a Struggle* is a game designed to address how games explore emotional, aesthetic, and social values using properties specific to the game medium. The problem this project seeks to address is twofold: the way mainstream games rely on other media form conventions to creating meanings and narratives, and the casual attitude towards violence and male-centric narratives that permeate traditional game narratives today. Within gaming academia and independent game communities designers and academics are exploring how a game’s mechanics, rather than the visual, textual, or audio elements, carry the weight of portraying social, aesthetic, political, and emotional messages to the player. In exploring themes such as companionship, meditation, addiction, politics, and relationships game experimenters have been moving away from the popular yet unsuccessful strategies of cut-scenes to finding powerful experiences games have to offer players through the game’s interactivity itself. My project is built on the work of designs and writings with the stated goal of using properties unique in digital games to examine and express an aesthetic, emotional, and informative message about domestic abuse and the circumstances surrounding its victims. By focusing on this topic, I can explore how games communicate emotional, aesthetic, or social messages to players, which may or may not necessarily be traditionally narrative, and inverse the common position of the (assumed) male powerful player figure into a victimized and powerless one.
**The Problem**

Computer, video, and other interactive digital games are becoming as prevalent as television and film as a global communications medium, yet in comparison to other popular media, games are still regarded as a “low culture” media form. Game artists, experimenters, academics, and vagabonds have produced some stunning emotional and aesthetic experiences that could rightly be called games, ranging from Ice Pick Lodge’s *The Void* to Jason Rohrer’s *Passage*. Yet by and large these cases exist on the fringe of gaming culture and industry, and overall most mainstream games lack a level of literacy in portraying messages and aesthetics that go beyond mere entertainment. This problem can be attributed to several causes, but most commonly traditional games are limited by their focus on portraying power fantasies, their reliance on filmic conventions, and using the affordances of the game medium itself as a meaning making tool.

One of my main concerns is how the largest companies in the gaming industry focus their core resources and AAA-Titles primarily towards games of violence, male fantasy, and action-movie style conflict. Partially due to the relative youth of the media, and partially due to the conflict-oriented nature of digital games, violence has often been approached in a relatively casual and immature manner. The Academic Collective Ludica explain how the “core market is often referred to as ‘hardcore gamers,’” an identity that “has become ‘ground zero’ from the perspective of game design and marketing, and is taken by industry as the ‘de facto’ target demographic for its goods. It is characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male
fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination” (Fullteron et al).

Although there are major successes, such as EA’s *The Sims* series and Chris Sawyer’s *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, that become major industry sellers they are looked upon as the exception to the norm, which consists of games that revolve around navigating, shooting, killing, and/or conquering obstacles.

Major game titles have also relied heavily on filmic and conventions from other media to tell their stories. Due to the rapid advancement of CG and the focus on graphical advancement in computers, games have relied on cut-scenes and non-interactive visual & audio “interludes” from gameplay to serve as the main way to advance narrative and messaging in games. However, as Doris Rusch and Matthew Weise explain, “The cut-scenes may claim that a game is really about a deep and complicated relationship between the heroine and her significant other while the actual game-play is all about running, hiding, ducking, aiming, pulling the trigger and reloading; the cut-scenes might be about unconditional love but the player does not get to experience this concept through the game-play” (Rusch & Weise). This observation reveals how a game’s mechanics, in fact the very aspect of the media which defines it as game, can be completely incidental to the meaning making that is intended with the narratives from cut-scenes.

**Design Document**

In this document I will first begin by outlining the previous work of other academics, artists, and independent developers who have addressed similar goals in exploring the potential for games to be expressive and aesthetic experiences. I explore both
writing and application of their work, along with examples of works that also seek to discuss abuse specifically in games. I then provide an overview of the game interactions, a discussion of how the game is designed around the cycle of abuse, and an overview of the level design impetus. I conclude with further discussion on future work that could be done with this project, and a series of conclusions in relation to the outlined goals.
Theory and Background

Among game academics and independent developers there have already been a substantial number of discussions and experiments on how games can be used to express political, social, emotional, or aesthetic meanings. There have also been, to a lesser extent, some experiments and efforts to at least reference or center games around sexual, relationship, or other forms of abuse. I am going to highlight and summarize some of the main discussions surrounding how play and games can be used as expressive tools, and then relate them to my particular problem space of creating a game that addresses IPV and domestic abuse issues.

Procedural Rhetoric

Procedural Rhetoric is an idea that serves as the basis for Ian Bogost’s book *Persuasive Games*, one that explains how games can be used to argue or portray a particular viewpoint or argument. The basis of Procedural Rhetoric lies not in a game’s representational elements, but in the mechanics and processes that underlie and govern the game. He explains that “processes that might appear unexpressive, devoid of symbol manipulation, may actually found expression of a higher order” (Bogost 5). Processes, combined with devices of representation and rhetoric, create a “procedural rhetoric” that “is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models” (Bogost 29). The strategy of persuasive games, and of Bogost’s examples of effective procedural rhetoric, is to set up a simulated model where the experience of interacting with
that model serves to persuade the player of a point; the message of the game is
driven by the simulation of a situation that is usually literally depicted.

*September 12th*

*September 12th* is one example of a procedurally driven argumentative game, in
which the system of bombing civilians leads to the greater presence of terrorists. In
this case, there are specific representations (civilians, terrorists, bombs, buildings)
that are tied very closely to a game rules system that invites itself to scrutiny by the
player.

- The player is presented with a top-down view of a Middle-Eastern city, with
two kinds of people moving through them: civilians, dressed in blue clothes,
and terrorists, who are clad in black and carry guns.
• The player’s mouse is a targeting reticle. If s/he clicks, there is a short delay and then a missile fires to the location of the target and blows up any buildings or people caught in the blast area. Afterwards, there are several seconds before the next missile is ready. Because of the delay and blast area effect, it is almost impossible to avoid civilian casualties.

• If innocents are killed in buildings or blasts, civilians will mourn over their dead bodies then turn into terrorists.

• If the player takes no action for long enough, terrorists will slowly convert into civilians, and civilians will rebuild destroyed buildings.

• There will always be at least one terrorist in the city.

Instead of providing a linear narrative, or a text, September 12th is about producing two main forms of feedback with its model: showing higher terrorist activity after bombing, and showing lower terrorist activity when there is no bombing. Through these simple rules, the game’s main political message becomes clear: increased violent aggression against terrorism only encourages terrorist activity and membership.

*Disaffected!*  
*Disaffected!,* a persuasive game by Ian Bogost, systematizes the various failures of an company like FedEx Kinko’s and invites the player to take it apart and experience these failures through trying to accomplish goals and be efficient in the face of the overwhelming problems portrayed through the game’s mechanics.  
Bogost points out that “the operationalized version [*Disaffected!*] of the customer complaints produce actual frustration on the part of the player... the anti-advergame attempts to persuade the player that the corporation is inoperative and must not be
supported” (Bogost 228). In constructing a frustrating system that produces the experience of frustration, the designer communicates the message mechanically through the system he or she has built.

Metaphors in Game Design

The Gambit Game Lab at MIT has also explored the expressive power of games and mechanics, and two of its members, Doris Rusch and Matthew Weise, have both written and designed games that approached game design as a metaphorical process. Like procedural rhetoric, the theory behind using metaphor in game design is also driven by game mechanic working in tandem with representation to express an idea; in this case experiences such as addiction or depression. Approaching game design as a study in metaphor works, because metaphors “build the very foundation for the player’s interaction with the game-world and thus their function is not only to make the abstract intelligible, but to make the physical graspable, too” (Rusch and Weise). Ultimately, the interactions, visual, and audio inputs are all abstractions that map onto some relatable idea, whether it be physical space, an avatar’s health and well being, or a character being “alive” or “dead”; hence “digital representational games have a natural affinity to metaphors because they need to deal with mediacy and because the abstraction process necessary in game design is a precondition for metaphor creation” (Rusch and Weise). They explain how games can model a cognitive “gestalt”, and point out that “digital representational games mainly feature abstractions of gestalts whose dimensions can be directly delineated from experience,” that is, that games tend to abstract “gestalts” that capture a non-abstract activity or experience, such as waiting tables in Diner Dash or shooting aliens in Halo. However, they Rusch and Weise explain how “Complex
abstract concepts are multidimensional gestalts, too, only that their dimensions cannot be directly delineated from experience,” therefore requiring that “the abstract has to be made concrete... A metaphor must be found” (Rusch and Weise).

Hence, while modeling a gestalt of a literal event such as bombing a Middle Eastern City in September 12th requires a few abstractions, such as the player “being” a targeting reticle and so forth, to model an abstract concept like depression, the abstract concept must be translated into a relatable experience, then translated again into game abstractions.

**Elude**

*Elude* is a game released by MIT’s Gambit Game Lab that moves away from a literal experience and explores the abstract sensation of depression, and attempt to use game mechanics as metaphors for these “abstract gestalts”. Like procedural rhetoric and persuasive games, their model mostly relies on creating a system with certain mechanics having representations. But while procedural rhetoric works with
representing and systemizing a particular behavior to make a point (the Kinko’s employee picks up the order, gives it to the customer, but is hindered by an inefficient system), metaphorical mechanics raise the question of depicting a non-literal action and abstract gestalts (falling downwards into the earth in *Elude* is not literally falling into the earth, but a representation of the characters sinking mood).

Although the game uses familiar 2D platforming mechanics, those mechanics are used in an unfamiliar way to create a metaphorical representation of depression. Namely, instead of constructing a linear set of levels and a linear narrative to illustrate depression, instead it creates a system of procedures, or rather a system of metaphor which illustrates its point:

- Forest stage: the player can move left, right, jump upwards, and “resonate”. When the player resonates, nearby birds will color up then fly away. The more positive the color of the bird (green, yellow) the more the player’s jump ability will be increased. Sometimes the resonate ability fails and the bird will not resonate. When the player reaches the top of the forest, they enter the happiness stage. Sometimes the player is unable to travel upwards, the world will turn dark, and tendrils will pull players down to the depression stage.

- In the sky stage, the game becomes a jumping game where the player navigates left and right to land on leaves and flowers; when he does, he is given a jump boost and continues upwards. Joyous music plays, and the colors are brighter and friendlier. However, the flowers and leaves become less and less common and eventually disappear, meaning that the player inevitably falls back into the forest stage.
• In the first version of the depression stage, the player is in a small room with a sinking, amorphous floor, and has nowhere to go but down; player movement is limited and slow and the player feels powerless and disarmed. Eventually, after descending down far enough, the player can be pushed into a dark pit and lose the game, or move against a downward tide and climb up towards a light that returns him to the forest stage, although when he returns he is not as effective in his movement and resonating.

• The game always follows the structure of forest stage, sky stage, forest stage, depression stage, forest stage, sky stage, forest stage, then depression stage again before ending.

Unlike the strategy of procedural rhetoric in the examples of *Disaffected!* and *September 12th*, the game’s main interaction is a representation of a literal action: using arrow keys to move a character through space. This is how the “abstract is made concrete” first before the representation of moving through space can then be mapped onto ideas of mood; upwards movement for happiness and downwards movement for depression. The cycle of moving up and down through happiness and depression is also another major message the game is making; no matter what the player moves from a happiness/sky stage to a forest stage to a depression stage, looping through this order to show the way that depression is not just a single state but involves moving through highs and lows. This break in linearity and revisiting stages reinforces how an experience like depression isn’t linear but cyclical, and interacting and experiencing that cycle maps onto how depression itself is cyclical.
Empathy and Players

Jonathan Belman’s and Mary Flanagan’s work in designing games to create player empathy serves as another strategy in game meaning-making. Unlike persuasive games, the ultimate goal of tailoring empathy within game design is focused on an emotional goal, rather than making a social political point through a model or a metaphorical representation of an abstract concept. The authors open with the claim that “Games are well-suited to this because they allow players to inhabit the roles of other people in a uniquely immersive way. One can read about Darfuri refugees in the news, but, in an admittedly limited sense, a game can allow one to be a Darfuri refugee” (Belman and Flanagan). There are two main ways of understanding empathy, Belman and Flanagan explain: Cognitive Empathy or Emotional Empathy. They state, “Cognitive empathy refers to the experience of intentionally taking another person’s point of view” while Emotional Empathy is further divided into parallel and Reactive Empathy, where Emotional Empathy “is roughly equivalent to the lay understanding of empathy as the vicarious experience of another’s emotional state” and reactive empathy “describes an emotional response that is unlike what the other person is experiencing” (Belman and Flanagan). From these definitions, Belman and Flanagan come up with a series of game design principles, but one in particular is important in the context of my own project:

Principle 3: A short burst of emotional empathy works well if desired outcomes to not require significant shifts in how players’ beliefs about themselves, the world, or themselves in relation to the world. But if
these kinds of shifts are a design goal, the game should integrate both cognitive and emotional empathy. (Belman and Flanagan)

The reasons I am mentioning intentional empathy in game design is because one of the goals of my model is to shift the player’s awareness, beliefs, and attitude towards a more dire and sensitive stance domestic abuse. As a result, I aim to invoke both cognitive empathy (by modeling the domestic abuse situation from the point of view of the abuse victim) and emotional empathy (by causing a parallel and/or reactive emotion in the player to the avatar).

**Third World Farmer**

In *Third World Farmer* the player is put in the role of a farmer in a generic African third world country, with the goal of attempting to survive and prosper given the difficulties the game provides. Designed as a serious game, it follows many strategies of procedural rhetoric, modeling a system of farming and using the difficulty as a rhetorical tool about the nature of poverty in Africa. However, or
perhaps because of this, it also works as an excellent example of cognitive empathy; it allows the player to inhabit the role of the third world farmer and through their failures understand why it is so difficult for citizens of third world countries to advance themselves and overcome the rampant poverty. In playing the game, many arbitrary and randomly generated events can completely set back the players marginal gains, and simple representations of education, buying modern equipment, and decent health care become luxuries or liabilities that take away from the player’s marginal wealth pool that can be drained away with one random disaster. By demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining proper health, education, and other modern standards we take for granted, we come to understand to a greater degree the position and situation of those in poverty.

**Abusive Game Design**

The idea put forth by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart, that a game’s design can be abusive towards the player, is one that resonates in many ways with this project. Abusive game design, as described by the authors, is intended to oppose the idea “Player Advocacy” in traditional game design and force players into uncomfortable positions: the ultimate goal of this is so “that players are forced out of their expectations and into an experience in which the importance of understanding the game system is eclipsed by that of understanding the designer behind the system” (Wilson and Sicart). Framing their argument around Foucalt’s notions of power, Wilson and Sicart explain how in “Player Advocacy” design “the power structure is between a player and a system, with the designer vanishing into the background” where the power structure is where meaning is formed (Wilson and Sicart). However, “Abusive game design is designed to break the ‘toolness’ of conventional game systems and, instead, create instruments that support a personal
relation between designer and player. The game object becomes a means for a
dialogue, rather than an isolated tool for play” (Wilson and Sicart). The game’s
focus then, is “not about mastering the system, but about knowing the designer”
(Wilson and Sicart), and in knowing the designer allows the player to understand
very directly what the designer is communicating through his or her system. Abusive
Game Design is an aesthetic choice that serves as a tool for meaning making
precisely because it defies expectations of “good design” and hence exposes its
own system to mediate meaning between the player and the designer.

Model of Abuse

Interpersonal violence comes in many forms surrounded by many different
circumstances; it is neither realistic nor the focus of this project to address the
variations that exist, issues of race/class/gender/sexual orientation/etc, or
exceptions and subtleties. For example, mutually abusive relationships and non-
violent controlling relationships do exist and are equally significant issues. However,
I have chosen to focus on a model of Interpersonal Violence that is framed within
the model of domestic abuse towards women by men. This form of IPV can be best
framed as “Intimate Terrorism”, where Intimate Terrorism “refers to physical violence
embedded within a general pattern of control,” as opposed to situational couple
violence, which “refers to the presence of one or more violent incidents without the
accompanying pattern of coercive control tactics (Johnson and Leone, in press)”
(Michalski 623). Hence, unlike other forms of IPV, Intimate Terrorism is defined by
“a spouse routinely abuses a partner, or exercises coercive control and domination”
(Michalski 619). The relationship is asymmetric, with a clear dominating victimizer
and victim, and elements of both non-violent control and violent outbursts.
Furthermore, I have chosen to frame the system of Intimate Terrorism within the context of a domestic setting with a female victim; again there are other situations in which Intimate Terrorism occurs but I have chosen to choose a representation that resonates with a popular understanding of IPV.

One popular method of understanding abusive relationships have been the recognition of an underlying system that seems to pervade most IPV situations; the Cycle of Abuse. Although case by case situations differ, for the most part the cycle of abuse has served as a common model for understanding and educating abuse victims and others about the nature of abusive relationships. The Cycle of Abuse is commonly recognized as going through the following phases:

- **Tension:** Abuse or threats of abuse hang over the abused party, and communication breaks down. There may be passive aggressiveness, anger, high anxiety, or abusive behaviors that emerge between partners. The victim will usually do whatever s/he can to avoid triggering an abusive outbreak, and may feel as though s/he is navigating an emotional minefield or “walking on eggshells”.

- **Outbreak:** High outbreak of physical, emotional, sexual, or other kind of abuse that may be anything from a short slap to a prolonged argument to an extended beating or rape. Outbreaks can escalate into very dangerous or life threatening situations.

- **Honeymoon:** Abuse is apologized for or denied, the abuser may be highly apologetic or make promises of reformation, there may be a showering of affection and “loving care”. On the other hand, the abuse could be denied or told it was “not as bad” as the victim thought it was, and the victim adopts
this interpretation. In any case, there is a form of reconciliation or denial, which temporarily calms the situation.

- Calm: During the period of calm, the relationship will slowly regress back to the tension stage, and the affection or promises dry up until the relationship returns to a state of tension.

These stages cycle into each other in this order, and have served as a model to help treat and educate victims and others involved in domestic abuse situations. In one sense, the cycle of abuse can be thought of a metaphor, a way of turning an abstract situation with no definite physicality (but definite physical consequences) into a more readily understandable and tangible idea. Another way of viewing the cycle of abuse is to see it as a system to be modeled by a series of procedures; there is a reason why terms like “systemic abuse” exists, for abusive incidents follow frighteningly consistent patterns. Finally, the cycle of abuse is used to educate and create empathy, to take the somewhat alien and unknowable experience of abuse and frame it in terms that those unfamiliar with abusive relationships can understand, and also serve as a shared model in which abuse victims can find common ground in their own abuse experiences, and empathize over a common experience despite differing situations.

Games on IPV and Abuse

On top of the various games that employ strategies of expressive play, there are also games that already exist that address the issue of domestic abuse and interpersonal violence.
Tale of Tales’s game *The Path* is an interactive adaptation of the popular Little Red Riding Hood story, told by taking on the role of six different sisters aged from nine to nineteen. They are all themed as some variation of Little Red Riding Hood, with some presence of red in their outfits, and when the game starts the player is prompted to, as the sister, travel the path down to Grandma’s house. However, to “win” the game the player has to travel off the path, explore the surrounding forest, and then eventually encounter “the wolf”. During this encounter a short cut scene plays, then fades to black; when the player’s controls are returned the world’s colors are washed out, the body of the sister lies battered and abused back on the path, and the world is raining and unforgiving. Although nothing explicit is ever shown, it is implied that there is a narration of abuse, especially in the case of Ruby and Carmen who’s “wolves” are men they encounter.

Although *The Path* is ambiguous in its meanings and arguably about many topics, for the purposes of this project it provides an example of how a game has
effectively utilizes emotional empathy in the gamer through elements of abusive
design. The game’s first, among many, subversions of player expectations is that if
they follow the game’s prompt – to stay on the path and go to grandma’s house –
then they fail the game and get a “Game Over” screen. In defying the game’s
prompt the player is forced to “break the rules” provided by the game, which only
leaves on other option: exploration. Through this process of exploration, the player
can interact with objects they discover in the forest, but only if they let go of the
controls which suddenly brings the sisters to life as they interact with nearby objects
and start revealing their inner thoughts through text, sound, and superimposed
image. The effect is that the more the player explores then let goes, the more the
sister “comes to life” as a character and the player sees the sister less as an
avatar and more of an autonomous and likable character. Therefore, when the
player is forced to put the sister in line with the wolf to fulfill their own desire to win
the game, their expectations are subverted again; while winning should lead to a
reward, instead the player sees their character suffer and then loses the ability to
play her again, providing a noticeable absence and sense of loss. After exploring
with this character, investing time into her, and learning more about her, the player
forms an empathetic bond, but when the sister wakes up limping back to grandma’s
in the rain, there is an even stronger emotional reaction because the player feels
responsible for her demise. Through this specific interaction, the game is effectively
designed around creating strong emotional reactions, and serves as a model of how
to effectively create player discomfort that positively reinforces a message.

**Vampires**

Victor Gijsber’s *Vampires* is a tabletop RPG created to tackle the issue of male
dominance and abuse of women. This game serves as a powerful example of
abusive game design that also draws upon using metaphor, empathy, and
meaningful rules systems effectively. The game places the players in the roles of
vampires who can engage in either a *Conflict Scene* between conflicts with other vampires or an *Intimate Scene* with a woman. Conflicts are resolved primarily through a vampire’s blood pool, while blood pools are expanded upon through being intimate with a woman. However, this is an explicitly violent intimacy: players must have their woman experience pain, self-loathing, or despair so that they may continue to possess their woman. Players describe how they manipulate the woman’s pain, self-loathing, or despair in order to secure their blood, and are graded on how effective they are by the other players and the GM, where a higher rating equals a higher discomfort level of what the other players just heard. In short, you are not only describing methods of abuse and manipulation, but doing so in the presence of your peers who are judging you.

*Vampires*, despite being a non-digital game, builds upon what Sicart and Wilson describes as “social abuse” and what Belman and Flanagan outline as “reactive empathy”. The game’s metaphor, of using supernatural vampires to represent abusive men, allows the players to take an abstract identity of an abuser and inhabit it more readily by providing a system and a means of relating to their given role; by being a vampire who must overcome conflicts with other vampires, the player has an impetus to build their “blood pool” and feel more empowered by abusing their women. At the same time, the system of performing abusive behavior, then being critically judged by your peers is a form of what Sicart and Wilson identify as social abuse, where a player is not only asked to act in an abusive manner, but also do so publicly. The player is rewarded (in the blood points he earns) by how much he is able to discomfort other players, and the game encourages social discomfort. This social discomfort is due to the reactive empathy
reactions the player is meant to have in the game; while the player is playing as a vampire, Gijsber’s explicit goal is to have the players empathize with the abused female, or have a reactive empathetic reaction to their own actions and the actions of the other players. Gijsber’s final goal for a game session is that the player commits “open rebellion” against the game (Gijsbers “On Vampires” 3-4). Gijsber’s writes, “In other words, as long as the players do not break the power of the rules, as long as they take a submissive stance towards them, the women cannot break the iron grip of the vampires. But if the players were to overthrow the rules, the women could also overthrow the vampires” (Gijsbers “On Vampires” 3). Here submission to the game’s system is a submission to a system of abuse, and empathy with the women in the game opens up a questioning of the power structure of the designer’s rules and the player’s desires. Gijsbers concludes, “Vampires, then, is a game about itself and about roleplaying in general. It is about responsibility and the submission to power” (Gijsbers “On Vampires” 4). He makes his point about abuse by directly challenging the power structure of the designer-player, and by employing the expressive play strategy of reactive empathy. I would argue that a dialogue between the game designer and player opens up (the designer asks the player to simulate morally reprehensible acts) precisely because of the methods of empathy and the system of the game at work.

**Implementation of Theory**

*Love is a Struggle* attempts to draw from these theories in the following ways:

**Procedural Rhetoric in Love is a Struggle**

*LiaS* wants to draw from lessons of procedural rhetoric and create a game where interactions form a system that creates meaning, rather than a linear experience.
that tells meaning. *September 12th* and *Disaffected* are both non-linear “sim” games where the emphasis in meaning-making lies in how the moving pieces of the system interact. As I will get into with metaphors in game design, a similar process happens when trying to model an abstract concept such as Life, Depression, or in my case, abusive relationships.

**Metaphor in Design**

My own game will have similar goals in approaching IPV metaphorically as *Elude* does. Like depression, abusive relationships also have a cyclical model to draw from, and like *Elude, Princess* has a non-linear and cyclical design to it. Furthermore, I plan on using a 2d platforming design; the representation of physically moving through space can serve as a metaphor for the more abstract concepts surrounding abusive relationships.

**Empathy in Design**

As discussed above with procedural rhetoric and metaphorical design, creating a system to model the behaviors of abuse can help players lead to an understanding of real abuse; in learning how to play the game they learn the cyclical mechanics of abusive relationships. However, as I will outline below in my own design analysis, I aim to produce parallel sensations of anxiety and stress on the player that attempt to resemble to some small degree real anxiety and stress of having to navigate a tense abusive situation. In this regard my main focus is on cognitive empathy, but I also hope to produce emotional empathetic reactions by harboring a level of player investment in their character, then reacting to when their investment is lost.
Abusive Design in *LiaS*

*LiaS* is a metaphorical model of the system of abuse, and as a result, is also abusive: it is unfairly difficult, it is about a socially uncomfortable topic, and it is uncomfortable to interact with. The end effect is that unlike traditional game design where the player masters the system as the focus of the game experience, the focus is on understanding why the system is unmasterable and focusing the player not on the game itself, but the meanings of abuse it brings forward in its unfair model. My hope is that through the abusively difficult segments of the game, the player’s own anxiety and frustration will mirror the anxiety and stress of victims who face constant violence, just as the player does in the unfairness of the game’s design.
Design Overview

*LiaS* is a game designed to model the cycle of abuse abstractly and serve as a medium to both cognitively and emotionally communicate the experience of interpersonal violence to the player. By using a familiar game genre as the basis of my abstraction, I am able to subvert and play with player expectations.

In this design portion of the document, I will first go over the basic interactions in the game. The next portion will explain the overarching system, and how the game’s overall structure serves as a model for the system of abuse. I will then focus on the metaphors and intentions behind each individual level design.

In the game’s design I aimed towards the following goals:

- Model a game system that resembles “cycle of abuse” and perpetuates itself as a metaphorically abusive behavior towards the player.
- Creating a sensation of intimidation, powerlessness, and helplessness within the player that metaphorically maps onto the same sensations of an abused party.
- Messaging to the player the difficulty, inability, and danger that abused partners feel in relationships and produce an experience of cognitive empathy with abuse victims.
Interactions

In *Princess*, the player takes control of a woman avatar that runs and jumps through various “rooms” in order to escape an oppressive household environment. Each room presents a different challenge, and to beat it she must reach the door at the end. For the final room, she must escape through a window; when she does the player enters the last stage where the woman runs away from the home. If the player doesn’t perform well, the player is pushed to an “Outbreak” stage where they have to keep themselves from being pushed to the bottom of the screen. If they fail this, the woman dies.

In the main portion of the game, the player uses the arrow keys to move the woman, the ‘Z’ key is used to jump, and the ‘X’ key can be held to make her float. The goal of the levels is to reach the green door and avoid the hazards in the
level. In the upper right hand corner the icons indicate to the player which powerups the player has collected in the game.

**Game System**

The game is divided into three states: the main portion where the player navigates a series of “rooms”, an outbreak state, and an escape state.

- **Main state**
  - The player is placed in a level where they must reach a goal, with a “hand” character that follows them and either assists them or hinders them.
  - If the player hits an obstacle or “dies” they are pushed “down” one level and the tension level rises.
  - If a player reaches the door at the top of the level they are pushed “up” a level and the tension level falls.
  - Tension constantly rises at a slow rate.
  - The higher tension is, the more likely the hand will grow dark and menacing, and it will chase the player. If it captures the player before they can finish the level, then the player will enter the “Outbreak State”
  - If a player has a low tension level, the hand will drop hearts that can be collected to lower tension.

- **Outbreak State**
  - Within the outbreak phase the player is pulled down into darkness, and the player must frantically press the up arrow key to pull themselves up.
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- If they are pulled to the bottom of the screen, they lose completely and the player avatar is killed, and the game ends.
- Every time the player enters an Outbreak Phase, it gets progressively harder.

- Escape State
  - The player is given a flat level and is chased by the black hand.
  - The player reaches the escape state by beating the final room in the main state.
  - If the black hand catches the player, the player goes through the outbreak state, then is returned to the starting room from the beginning of the game.
  - If the player reaches the end of the escape state, they leave the relationship and win the game.

Game Objects

- The jump powerup gives the woman the ability to double jump. If the player presses ‘Z’ while in the air, she gains an additional jump which helps her overcome taller obstacles and dodge hazards.

- The float powerup lets the woman float in the air. In order to do this, the player has to hold down the X key.

- Hearts are occasionally dropped by the hand. If the player collects them then the chance of the hand becoming a Black Hand is reduced.
The Hand moves through every level and grows or shrinks depending on how well the player is performing. If the player is performing well, the hand is tiny and will occasionally drop hearts that will keep the hand small and shrunken. If the player does not perform well, the hand grows larger it may randomly become the black hand, which will push the player into the “Outbreak Stage”

The Hand has a random chance of becoming the Black Hand in every level, and if the player comes into contact with it they will enter the “Outbreak Stage”. If they do, they could potentially lose the game. If the player performs poorly, the chance the hand will become the Black Hand increases.

Air Gusts will propel the player upwards if she passes through them.

Negative Air Gusts prevent the player from jumping through them.

Quicksand will disappear after being touched by the player.

There are various hazards in the rooms the player encounters, some such as fire or ovens will only harm the player when they are on. Others like chains or mines are always dangerous. If the player touches them they will lose the level.
Modelling Abuse

Designing the Cycle of Abuse

One of the main goals of this project is to create a system of procedures that depicts a system of abuse that encourages empathy and understanding. Part of my approach draws from a strategy of procedural rhetoric; I am choosing to model a known system, the cycle of abuse, and proceduralize it in such a way to make my point. However, unlike a persuasive game I am not having my game depict a literal model or a literal interpretation/narrative of a specific abusive relationship; instead of directly portraying the cycle of abuse and mapping gameplay directly on to each phase, I creating an abusive form of cyclical gameplay that both encourages the player to engage in it and emulates the abusive behaviors of IPV.
In this diagram I show how the player progresses through the various stages. When Tension is low the player is within the Honeymoon phase, where she is given leeway to make mistakes. However, in doing so this raises tension into the tension phase where the player can no longer afford to make mistakes, and the situation is in danger of turning into an outbreak. When tension sufficiently rises, the player enters outbreak and either dies or beats that area, and returns to the honeymoon phase. This serves as the main cycle of gameplay. However, the player can possibly reach the escape phase if they manage to beat the final level; however, if they fail they reenter the cycle of gameplay by reentering the outbreak phase. In this way the player is kept reigned in the cycle of abuse.
### Calm & Tension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Mechanic</th>
<th>IPV Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rising Tension/Slowly growing hand</td>
<td>In an abusive relationship, tension becomes the status quo of the lifestyle of those involved, and will build up until it breaks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Tension increases chance of Outbreak</td>
<td>As more and more tension rises in an abusive relationship, the chance of an outbreak naturally rises accordingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incredibly difficult levels with major setback as</td>
<td>Outside of violent outbreaks, abusive relationships are also constantly abusive in other ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment form an abusively designed gameplay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficulty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although dependent on tension, Outbreak occurs</td>
<td>In a real outbreak arbitrary and random factors can trigger an outburst of violence, even if everything seems calm on the surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>randomly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When an Outbreak occurs the benign hand in the</td>
<td>Outbreaks most often are understood to be incidents of physical violence, and are difficult for the victim to escape or outrun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stage turns into a Black Hand that will catch the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>player and transport them to the Outbreak Stage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One universal rule of what is normally considered “good” game design is to make sure that the offset of the chance a player would fail and the penalty for doing so is inversely proportional. If a game was too easy and there was little to no punishment for failure, boredom would set in because there was very little engagement for the player since they would not need to be careful in carrying out what they find trivial
tasks. However, if a game punishes a player heavily with a high chance of failure all around, this can cause a high level of frustration and stress in the player. Traditional game would dictate that we avoid creating stressful and frustrating situations for the player. However, the goal of this game is not to entertain, but rather encourage feelings of anxiety as a means to express the feelings of stress and anxiety in a state of tension within an abusive relationship. Wilson and Sicart identify this kind of unfair or masochistic game design as a form of abusive design that can help open up dialogue between players and designers.

By creating a situation where the stakes for failure are high, yet the only alternative is inaction (and hence inevitability), I’m trying to create a similar situation of paralysis for the player. By pushing the player’s progress back by a full level and visibly increasing the level of tension in the relationship heavily punishes “mistakes” the player makes. My desired effect is that the player feels they are “walking on eggshells” or constantly in fear of advancing, knowing that one small slip up could potentially trigger their untimely demise. Levels are designed in such a way to include several forms of challenges, whether they be timing based, speed based, or reactive. As a result, in presenting a wide range of challenges to a player, I am also hoping that the player, upon encountering a particular challenge they are not necessarily skilled at, will fail at a particular spot again and again having to retrace their work over and over.
**Honeymoon**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Mechanic</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hand Drops Heart Powerups</td>
<td>The powerups represent affection and, if collected, continues to perpetuate that affection by keeping the tension level low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Powerups Decrease Tension</td>
<td>If the hand’s size represents the risk of abuse, the honeymoon is when the player does not need to worry about the hand erupting into an abusive “Black Hand”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level/Hand Size</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successive Outbreaks lower the frequency of Heart Powerups</td>
<td>In many domestic abuse situations, the honeymoon phase becomes shorter or disappears over time as the abuse can make less and less effort to perpetuate the abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting Heart Powerups do not advance the player towards the end goal in a meaningful way</td>
<td>The Honeymoon is a means of control that keeps the victim within the cycle of abuse by helping convince him or her that things are in fact alright when they have not been resolved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the honeymoon phase is recognized as a distinct phase from the other stages in the cycle of abuse, I chose not to literally set it apart in my metaphorical model. Rather, within the main stage of the game if the player has managed to keep the tension level low then the player is rewarded with falling hearts that represent affection. Usually tension is low when the player is performing well, or
has just emerged from an outbreak stage. These rewards are temporary and minor, and eventually they disappear. The player though can feel relieved during this phase, and afford to make more mistakes because even if they do, they will be able to collect heart powerups that relieve some of the tension and high punishment of the game. However, with each outbreak that occurs the number of hearts should decrease, communicating how in abusive relationships honeymoon phases can become less and less frequent and altogether disappear, until it reaches the point that between violent outbreaks there is no need for the abuser to act as though there is need for reconciliation, denial, or respite from the abuse. Furthermore, collecting these hearts and affection powerups do not actually contribute to the progress of the player; in fact they may be in places which are difficult or impractical to reach for the player. They merely encourage the player to devote more time within the level than to spend energy escaping it, which serves as a parallel for how the affection during a honeymoon stage serves to snare a victim back into the cycle of abuse and keep them from escaping.
Outbreak

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Mechanic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The penalty for failing an Outbreak stage is permanent game loss</td>
<td>Outbreaks in violence can lead to life-threatening violence towards the victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each successive Outbreak stage becomes more and more difficult</td>
<td>As domestic abuse relationships advance, they become more and more dangerous for the victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The player avatar is avoiding a large fist that represents the abuser, and is weighed down by a visible chain</td>
<td>Outbreaks of violence are when it is most clear that there is a victim and victimizer in the relationship, and that one is exerting control over the other. The victimizer is actively trying to avoid violence, and feels the most helpless during this time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The outbreak phase occurs outside of the rest of the game with its own mechanics. I set it apart as its own game phase as a way to mark it off as a period of real danger to the player avatar. Unlike the rest of the game, the outbreak phase involves a dexterity game, where the player has to rapidly press one key in order to win or lose; the player must dodge left or right to avoid crushing hands that will push them back down, but most of the time they will be unable to dodge it. If the player is pushed to the bottom of the screen, they lose the game entirely while if they reach the top, the resume back at the level where they left off before the outbreak.
What is most important about this phase is that the greatest player stake and investment, the ability to continue playing the game and their progress, becomes threatened every time this occurs. Furthermore, a visual indicator (the increased size of the hand which pushes down, the increased weight of the chain on the player) and increased difficulty with each outbreak represents how with each successive outbreak, the risk of real danger increases; if outbreaks were easily manageable by the player and surmountable, then they would not feel as though they are in any real danger. The purpose for having a button-pressing mini-game is to create a mechanic which encouraged physical speed and physical franticness, something that could literally raise blood pressure. In one way, the mechanic of pressing a button rapidly to push against the downward force works as a metaphor for fighting for ones life and safety, and that fight becomes harder and harder with each progressive outbreak of violence.
Winning the Game / Leaving the Relationship

If the player is able to reach the top level they will find a window they can “escape” from. They will run out of the house and to safety, but be chased by the hand and if caught, will enter the “Outbreak Phase” again then sent to the bottom floor of the house. Inevitably, the hand will be faster than the player and should be designed to catch the player every time they try to escape. This design is meant to illustrate the difficulty of actually reaching escape, and the difficulty of breaking free of the cycle in a positive way.
Level Designs

Each room in the Main Stage has a purpose and theme that tie into a sensation, metaphor, or meaning that I am transmitting about domestic abuse. Although intentionally subtle, the goal is that each room micro-level also evokes meaning to the player. Although the prototype will not include all the levels in the game, I have concepted to varying degrees designs of various levels in the game.

Room 1 (Implemented)

Room Theme: Constantly and frantically sinking, inescapability and inevitability. At this point the player should be well aware that they have sunk tremendously low and are in very significant danger. The high difficulty of the level and the literal sinking should evoke a sense of hopelessness. This is the second level themed to be inside the basement.
Gameplay Challenge: The room consists of mostly quicksand that, once touched, disappears. The player will have to jump and dig through it to reach the top of the level.

Room Theme: Underground, inside the basement. The level is covered in chains and there are undertones of sexual bondage and servitude with the chain imagery. The slavery imagery serves as a representational metaphor for abusive relationships being oppressive and harmful power relationships.

Gameplay Challenge: This is a highly difficult platforming stage that, while it has no moving parts, requires precise jumping skills.
Room Theme: Inside the oven. In this particular case the domestic appliance has engulfed the player, and is a place of entrapment and danger. The representation of being “trapped inside the oven” also serves as a metaphor for the relationship itself.

Gameplay Challenge: This level requires precise timing and patience, which works against the player’s desire to finish levels quickly in order to keep the hand from growing and tension from building up. The faster the player beats levels, the more likely the tension level can remain low. However, this level forces the player to take their time due to the number of fires switching on and off.
Room Theme: A kitchen, filled with ovens. The household appliances and domestic duties of cooking are used as a form of oppression, and the kitchen becomes a location of danger and abuse.

Gameplay Challenge: Timing and jumping. The player must make sure not to be on the ovens when they are on, and also use the moving platforms to get across the stage.
Room Theme: Beginning to fall into the relationship, sinking into what will become the cycle of abuse. The support and affection literally crumbling beneath the player. 

Gameplay Challenge: Somewhat easy challenge, merely jump from the ground to the goal, but requires the player to “fail” this level in order to pick up the jump power up from the level before. Only with the powerup can the player advance.
Room Theme: A literal minefield that has to traversed carefully. Is meant to evoke the sensation of crossing an emotional minefield or walking on eggshells psychologically.

Gameplay Challenge: Precise controlling and jumping. There are lifts that can move the player upwards, but the player must dodge the hazards littered across the stage.
Room 7
Room Theme: A bedroom themed room. Eyeball enemies follow the player as she navigates the hazardous level. The representational metaphor is how the male seeks and gazes at the female body, and how this becomes a harmful and dangerous thing for her.
Gameplay Challenge: Avoiding slowly closing in hazards while navigating a field of hazards. Based on precise controlling and jumping rather than timing.

Room 8
Room Theme: Another bedroom themed room. The final stage before the escape state, where the player is close to freedom and winning. The focus should be on the closeness of the goal and the sensation of upwards movement.
Gameplay Challenge: Another level focused on carefully navigating a set of obstacles.

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I have also included two levels that begin to outline an alternative strategy to level design that helps support and evoke the process of abuse. After feedback from my defense, I realized I needed to address a gap in meaning between the moment to moment interactions and the meanings of abuse I was trying to portray. As a result, I’ve sketched a pair of levels that attempt to move forward towards a solution to this problem. The strategy is to have each level operate on a different mechanic,
In this level the player must collect a certain amount of money scattered across the level to advance. However, the hand will chase the player and steal money it collects from her, and because there is only a limited amount of money on the level if she fails then she is stuck until outbreak occurs. The sensation of economic abuse, where the victim is controlled by having her finances stolen or controlled by the abuser (Outlaw), is metaphorically realized by having the player’s hard work snatched up arbitrarily and unopposed by the figure of the hand, the abuser.
**Alternative Room 8 (Psychological Abuse)**

This level looks like a relatively normal level, except every time it generates some of the platforms will randomly disappear, and furthermore the controls will reverse randomly on the player. The game abuses the player’s psychology and expectations, as real psychological abuse is about trying to undermine the victim’s reasoning and logic (Outlaw), and by literally randomizing what surfaces are real and fake the player’s expectations and reasoning within the 2d platformer model is completely undermined.
Conclusion

Goals Met

Based off the feedback of my defense and peers, I’ve concluded that this project has succeeded in several ways. Firstly, on one level this project has managed to approach the topic sensitively and carefully, such as no egregious breach of messaging has been made. In my model and portrayal I believe I have been sensitive to the subject matter and have created a model that does not contradict itself or my stated goal of using the cycle of abuse as a rhetorical model. I also believe the game’s higher level system, of cycling from Gamestate to outbreak state and back, succeeded in mapping to the cycle of abuse and as a high level design has a strong and sound theoretical base.

Future Work

This project, although successful, still suffers from a few issues. Part of this is a result of the prototype nature of the work, a lack of formal playtesting, and from earlier design decisions and directions that I initially took.

*Redesign the Level Design* — Although I believe the overlying upper-scale design was a success at creating a meaningful model of abuse, I felt that the moment to moment gameplay and level designs do not effectively signal or communicate a domestic abuse situation clearly. To some extent I have already implemented a pair of levels to address this issue, but they only begin to address the greater problem of how the details of the play experience translate to a more viscerally emotional experience, rather than a cognitive one.
**Framing** – Not addressed in this design document or the game is the question of how this game is presented, and whether it is made explicitly about abuse in its presentation or not. Although so far it has been designed to not bring up the term directly, it is a question that to some extent still needs to be addressed.

**Player Testing** – I believe that a strong next step after addressing the redesigns and framing would be to formally playtest the game and get feedback on whether my strategies were effective in communicating my intentions. I believe the major pitfall of this project was that short of the final week and defense, I have not been able to collect ample playtest data to measure my claims and gauge the effectiveness of the project artifact itself.

**Polish** – Simple things such as a framing menu system, sound, music, and other elements are currently not in the submission. In adding these elements, certain elements of the game can be signaled better helping the player interact more easily with the project.

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*Love is a Struggle* I believe contributes to a larger goal of helping games realize new strategies of communicating and addressing more complicated, sophisticated, and emotionally charged issues. With the goal of creating a game that seeks to address domestic abuse issues I believe with my varying degrees of success this project can help work in dialogue with other game experiments and projects that also hope to broaden the horizons of games as a communicative medium.
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*Game Design*


IPV Resources


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