Stuck in a vault with magnetizing distractions

Using deep games to model a personal experience of loneliness

Faculty of Arts
Department of Game Design

Authors: Erik Norstedt & Felix Almqvist
Bachelor Thesis in Game Design, 15 hp

Program: Game design
Supervisor: Sabine Harrer
Examiner: Doris Rusch

06, 2021
Abstract

Designing games around complex emotions and experiences can be seen as quite difficult for game designers. Therefore, this paper sought to research how to convey the emotional state of an individual through design based on a chosen experience. The chosen experience was the feeling of loneliness with connection to the fear of rejection. This paper will be using Rusch’s (2017) method of designing deep games as a way of modeling an experience of loneliness as perceived by one of the authors. This model will be based on a conversation between the two authors with one acting as an experience expert and the other one as a listener. The results from this method seek to gain a catalog of experiences and thoughts about the experience expert’s feelings of loneliness that can be used to construct metaphors. These metaphors are then used to create game mechanics that combined hope to achieve a sincere recreation of the experience expert feelings of loneliness. This paper will go into depth on the design decisions made during the production of the deep game modeling the emotion loneliness.

Key words: Video games, Loneliness, Deep games, Modeling emotions.
Abstract


Nyckelord: Datorspel, Ensamhet, Djupa spel, Modellera känslor
# Table of Contents

1 Introduction 1
2 Background 2
3 Methodology 3
4 The Game: Magnetizing distractions 4
5 Analysis 9
6 Conclusion 10
7 References 12
8 Ludography 12
Appendix 13
1 Introduction

This thesis explores experiences of loneliness from a personal perspective with the goal of trying to model the experience through game design. The method chosen to create this design based on an intricate feeling/experience is a conversation that will be using Rusch(2017) Making Deep Games as a framework. Our research is based on this question: How can we model an experience of loneliness through deep game design?

Going from being in the same space as someone else on a daily basis to complete loneliness is an emotional change that can hit people hard. This is a fact that was incredibly relevant while this paper was being written, as the COVID-19 pandemic was well into its second year. When looking at the data gathered by the British Mental Health Foundation (2021) it was easy to see the increase in loneliness due to the pandemic, it should be addressed that loneliness is not a fact from an absence of people but a correlation. We acknowledge that there are many aspects of loneliness, however, we are trying to portray the specific aspect of loneliness that is fear or rejection. Fear of rejection has a tendency to increase a person's loneliness further by halting the initiation of interaction (Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider, 2013). What this is doing is that it is causing people to avoid interaction when it presents itself and having people choose isolation instead.

This is the case for Erik, one of the authors of this paper. The fear of rejection mixed with his loneliness is something that we have chosen to delve deeper into using designing games as a modeling tool to help convey the emotional state that Erik experiences. By doing this we aim to get a deeper understanding of how game design tools can be used to model more in-depth emotional experiences. This would be a benefit to the field of game design pertaining to storytelling through both gameplay and aesthetics in particular.

To summarize: we are looking into deep game design to model loneliness, specifically Erik loneliness and how his fear of rejection impacts it. To achieve this, we are going to be using Rusch (2017) Making Deep Games as a framework for our process when developing our game.
2 Background

In this section, we discuss previous literature on loneliness as a concept to contextualize our study and to further understand the feeling that Erik was experiencing. As we attempted to design a game we also sought to research previous games based on the topic of loneliness. This was to collect knowledge of how loneliness has been modeled previously so that we could learn from this way of modeling the complex emotions.

Asher/ Weeks(2013) describes loneliness as a feeling stemming from isolation due to actual or perceived insufficient social interactions either in quality or quantity depending on the person. For this thesis we focus on the quality interactions. This was used as our starting point for defining Erik’s loneliness. For this thesis we are looking at Erik’s isolation as such we argue that another definition would be a dull sense of isolation, while fear of rejection is our main focus as it has a tendency to increase other aspects of loneliness as well. We wanted to include the portrayal of the increase in loneliness caused by a lack of social interaction caused by the fear of rejection.

Fear of rejection is when an isolated individual stays away from starting interactions due to fear of being unwanted in the social situation. This is described by Cacioppo/Hawkley(2010) as a premonition of an unsuccessful interaction. The authors argue that when entering social interactions with the expectation of failure, more than often would lead to unsuccessful interaction, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is further expanded by Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider (2013) where Loneliness has an inertia of its own because the fear of rejection now fully keeps people from starting interactions.

In the top-down 2D game “Loneliness”(2010) the designer Jordan Magnuson tries to model loneliness through a very simple gameplay loop. He uses a simple metaphor for loneliness that complements the mechanics of the game. In Loneliness the player controls a small cube walking through a white void. Every now and again a collection of other cubes appear but if the player tries to approach them the cubes move away and proceed to fade away, leaving the player all alone. This game loop continues as the white background of the void slowly fades to black throughout the game. The game models a recognizable aspect of loneliness, specifically the experience of being rejected.

Looking at how the game is presented, something that stood out was the lack of colors. According to Joosten et al(2010) Who looked at the emotional response from players by changing the main colors of a video game. They concluded that game designers have the possibility to manipulate players' emotions by the use of colors. However, the effect works better on players not fully accustomed to video games. While color is not the main factor of a players emotional state we deemed it important as it is beneficial to conveying an emotion. Therefore, using what we learned about colors and how they were used in Magnusson game, we will use our choice of colors to instil the right emotion in our game.

Using what we have learned from playing Magnuson’s game we would like to create a different version of loneliness. This new version will be based on metaphors created by understanding Erik's experiences which are more focused on his personal loneliness. It will focus more on the fear of rejection rather than the experience of rejection that Magnuson(2010) is portraying.

In “Making Deep Games”, Rusch(2017) describes the method for making abstract emotions tangible to create games based on them. This is done by first understanding the core system of
the abstract emotion. The next step is creating metaphors to better explain this core system. These metaphors are then used as a basis for the design of the deep game that is being made.

3 Methodology

The reason we have decided to create a game is that we want to explore what we can create with games as a medium. We want to add our perspective and lessons to the already existing body of work that uses game design to model emotions (in our case, loneliness). We are hoping to achieve this by doing research through design and using reflective design (Sengers 2005). Sengers argues that reflection on the unconscious choices made that are based on cultural values is something to be combined? that can and should help improve technology design. This is done by analyzing the unconscious cultural assumptions and then combining it with design, the way we build technology and new computing approaches. By using this insight the end goal of our game will not be to playtest or somehow validate that we are modeling the right emotion, but instead discuss how the process itself has helped collaborate the design of the game and how it could be used in other projects.

We will be designing our deep game using Rusch’s Deep game design method(2017) due to it aligning with our goal of translating feelings into game mechanics. The strength of Rusch’s method lies within being effective at guiding experience into game creation by structuring emotions in a way that allows us to more easily find patterns. We can then start to design our game with the use of these patterns as the core system.

In her book Rusch(2017) describes a technique called “Conversing with the inner game designer” where one has a back and forth conversation to uncover the complex feeling which the game seeks to present and illuminate. The conversation is meant to be used as a means of creating ideas by using the most basic structural elements of games. The three elements are goal, conflict and win-and-lose. In an example the questions to bring out the structural elements which are important to the complex feeling started with “what exactly is the goal”(Rusch, 2017) then led by a series of follow up questions to create reflections and bring out the most important parts to the complex feeling in question. When adopting this to our research we had one person acting as the inner game designer with some preplanned questions in an attempt to bring out the three elements mentioned above. The one acting as the inner game designer will be Felix.

When thinking of loneliness for me, Felix, it is my apartment coming to mind. This feeling was increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic that was currently ongoing as of the writing of this paper. Therefore, enhancing the feeling of loneliness associated with a person's living space. Due to this when designing questions to further the conversation I decided to use Erik's apartment and the items inside as a conversation starter due to the association with loneliness.

Based on these initial thoughts, Felix developed questions based around Erik’s apartment and how the different items in his rooms affected him regarding his loneliness. These questions were meant to elicit insight that would be important to the loneliness we are trying to portray. One thing which deviates from Rusch’s Approach is that Felix decided to talk about Erik’s loneliness as in terms of objects. Thereby, abstracting it further, this was due to three factors. Firstly, since we changed the inner game designer to be another person and to make it easier to talk about with two different viewpoints to understand the extra abstraction helped.
Secondly, earlier in the project Erik had described his loneliness using an item, in this instance it was a battery. This led Felix to believe that letting Erik talk in terms of items being easier for him to express himself. Lastly, due to the time of writing this thesis it was during the Covid-19 pandemic, the isolation that came with it had increased loneliness in general therefor making a connection to the apartment that a person felt more lonely as of late would make an easier connection to the apartment and the things inside it.

Rusch(2017) also describes how to make use of gestals for game design around complex, abstract concepts. Gestals are a structure to help translate the concept into game rules and mechanics. The gestals are made up of five dimensions which are:

**Participants.** The people, animal or object that is performing or experiencing the gestalt.

**Parts.** all of the involved objects or the different activities.

**Stages.** the stages that the participant goes through during the gestalt.(initial, beginning, middle and end)

**Linear Sequence,** the sequence that the stages go through.

**Purpose,** what is the goal of participating in the gestalt.

Once the gestalt has been made and made the understanding of the source system better, we are going to recreate the gestalt using game systems to hopefully accomplish our goal of modelling Erik’s loneliness in a game.

We acknowledge that this study is solely based on modeling a feeling of loneliness that is not universal. It is focused on one specific person's feelings on the subject and can therefore not be understood identically as someone else. There might be some factors that will translate well and be recognized by a broader spectrum of people as similar to their feelings of loneliness, but that is not what we are setting out to do.

Something that we are keeping in mind throughout the process of understanding Erik’s feelings is that there must be a conversation to be had about personal boundaries with what he is willing to share about his emotions and experiences. To not emotionally harm Erik we are considering the ethics of our workflow. This includes asking for continual consent during both the conversation section of our method and during the production of the game.

The limitations that exist in our study that we will have to take into consideration during the designing process are mostly linked to more personal conditions, such as our boundaries as authors and as experience experts. Since we are modeling a person's feelings and emotions, and this person is also one of the authors it is important to respect what this person as an experience expert chooses to share or not.

### 4 The Game: Magnetizing distractions

In this chapter we will discuss the ideation process and how Felix created the conversation starters to make sure we had a conversation with an adequate number of metaphors to base the game on. We will go on to talk about how we used these metaphors to make design decisions that accurately modeled Erik’s experience, both what they meant to Erik and how we implemented them into the game as mechanics and features.
The conversation was held over zoom with cameras. In preparation, Erik had chosen three items that we went through. These are the main takeaways from the conversation summarized in terms of our goals at the end.

The first item we discussed was the front door. The door was described as hard to open and likened to a vault door. The door would stay closed unless he got an invite to socialize, this was likened to receiving the code for the vault. If he tried to figure out the code by himself or sent the invite himself, a failed attempt would add locks onto the door making it harder to open the next time. The fear of rejection was seen as a fear of adding more locks and increasing the feeling of being stuck in the room. Therefore, he pushed himself away from trying to get out of the door in fear of making it harder.

The second item was a laptop. Erik perceived this item as one of many “pillars” which drew him in and kept him in the room. They would effectively keep him from attempting to get out of his room similar to his fear of rejection that kept him away from his door.

The last item that was discussed was a clock. The clock had a loud tick so that whenever Erik was not preoccupied with any of his distractions the ticking made him feel like being stuck in the room with a ticking time bomb. It was one of the motivators that would push him towards trying to get out by himself.

During the conversation we also got information which inspired game design but not relating to the items. For example, the environment was described as dull inside with small barred windows which you could see outdoors which in contrast were full of vivid colors.

The goals for our conversation were goal, conflict and win & lose condition. We learnt that the goal was to push through a negative mindset and manage to fight bad habits. The conflict laid within the general feeling of being stuck in place. Both stuck in a negative mindset and stuck in a room by the door which was likened to a locked vault door. The win condition was to overcome the negative mindset and reach a phone to call someone, which opens the door. From the conversation we made the gestalt seen below.

**Erik’s Loneliness Gestalt**

*Participant:* Erik  

*Parts:* Distractions(shown as different household objects), Door(trapped inside), Clock(sense of urgency), Fear of rejection. Phone(goal)  

*Stages:* Being stuck, Distractions(getting pulled), fear of rejection (being pushed), contacting friend(s). Getting unstuck.  

*Linear Sequence:* Implied in the above. looking at it in a whole it is not a straight line as some of the stages go back and forth, mainly being pushed from fear of rejection back to getting pulled by distractions.  

*Purpose:* Interact with others / get out of your head

The actualization of the gestalt can be seen in figure 1.
During the conversation, I felt relieved by how easy it was to explain my feelings as metaphors and the questions were constructed in an open-ended way which allowed me to not struggle as much when it came to being as descriptive as I needed to be.

It was difficult to elaborate on topics and ideas related to my relation to how I view other people and how I have struggled reaching out to friends in an attempt to socialize. The reason that it was challenging for me was due to the fact that I started to compare myself to other people. Whenever I start comparing myself to other people or try to imagine what they think about me, I tend to spiral into negative thoughts. Luckily in the case of the interview I could ask for plenty of breaks and had success in removing myself from the reflection, effectively talking about it from what felt like a more objective point of view of my behaviour for interacting with others. Although when I was forced to “step outside” myself I felt that we always needed a bit of quiet or even a break so I could be more personal again. In the cases that I had a harder time answering questions, Felix was good at changing the wording of questions to make sure I understood better. This understanding and the constant check-ins if I was ok with the heavy topics discussed made the whole experience more welcoming and I felt as it resulted in me being able to better share my experiences. All of the questions did have a well-constructed follow-through to make sure that the topics were addressed on a deeper level. However, there were some places I think it could have gone deeper into my feelings on certain facets of loneliness. The major part of loneliness that we did not manage to converse about was how my physical being was being affected by my solitude. I think the reason this was not brought to the surface was due to the focus on the three items that were more linked with how I perceived my apartment and my loneliness and how my mental state was handling the isolation rather than my body did.

What we realized through the conversation was that the core system of Erik’s experience of loneliness revolved quite heavily around feeling stuck inside his apartment. Getting out of the
apartment was a struggle of both fighting the urge to distract himself with mindless entertainment and having a hard time calling people due to fear of rejection. Building on his first item’s description of his front door feeling like a vault door, we decided to have the game be set inside of a large vault and the main goal would be getting out of said vault(Fig.2).

![Fig.2 Erik's real door compared to its metaphorical counterpart in-game](image)

We also added a visual element of showing the goal of leaving the vault by having small barred windows with a lustrous outside environment to juxtapose to the bleak insides of the vault (Fig.3).

![Fig.3 The dark interior of the vault juxtaposed with the colorful outside](image)

To add to the dullness of the vault we also incorporated a background ticking of a clock, to give players the same auditory sensation that Erik experiences daily. This ticking sound doesn’t have a game mechanical output, but it is instead implemented to make the player think about time in the sense that it's passing by as they are locked in the vault.

The next task was designing the mechanics around the fear of rejection as reported by Erik: the distractions, the interplay that existed between them and how they were placed in the space of the vault.

We started by discussing how to escape the vault, and subsequently win the game. This goal was to make it to a phone that was placed at the other end of the room compared to where the player starts. The player had to make it to this phone to communicate with someone to hang out with, thus managing to overcome loneliness and getting out of the vault. As was discussed in the conversation, the two things keeping Erik from calling people to socialize with are distractions and the fear of rejection, and to model these obstacles we wanted to show that there existed a bit of interplay between the two of them.
We modeled the distractions to function as magnets scattered throughout the large open vault that would pull the player towards them (Fig.4). Getting out of the magnetic zones will require the player to button mash in a way to simulate the struggle of letting go of distractions. After managing to fight through the field of different magnetic diversions players would be faced with a small hallway leading to the phone mentioned earlier.

Moving towards this phone will cause the player to be pushed back in a similar fashion to the magnets in the previous section, however this time the way they are moved is inverted. While the players are pushed there are sound clips playing phrases of common thought that Erik would think of in order to avoid calling people. An example of this would be *I don’t think anyone would answer. They would just be annoyed if they did* (Erik). We went for this audiovisual approach to this part of the game as it might not have been as clear as to what we were trying to model in this specific instance without the inner monologue of Erik’s thoughts. The pushing effect of the fear of rejection that we wanted to show through design was the interplay that the distractions played when Erik would avoid calling people. After failing to battle his fear of rejection Erik tended to engross himself in one of his many distractions, we made the level reflect this by having one of the magnetizing distractions right behind the point they would be pushed to by the phone area (Fig.5). This helped sell the point that the distractions were never out of play, much like how Erik could always fall back to his distractions after giving up on socializing.

If the player managed to make it through the pushing and reach the phone a sound clip of someone agreeing to hang out with the player would play and all of the pushing and pulling mechanics would be turned off. The camera pans over to the vault door that is shown to be pushed open with the vibrant outdoors being seen through the opening in the door. The
lighting in the room is turned up a bit and the clock ticking sound is turned off. This instance of turning off all the objects and effects that increase Erik’s loneliness is to show the immediate positive effect that making plans for socializing had on Erik’s physical and mental well-being.

After the camera pans back to the player they are free to walk through the room towards the now opened vault door with no obstacles to worry about. When reaching the door the game slowly fades to white and the application closes down.

5 Analysis

In this section, we will discuss each step of our design process, the knowledge we gained, and how each decision allowed us to model loneliness. The focus here will first be on how the method of working with creating metaphors through conversation helped the modeling process. The second focus will be on the influence of the three objects that Erik chose to talk about had on the game and how it benefited the process.

Working with metaphors during the conversational part of the research helped us build a library of ideas that could be used as a basis for multiple aspects of the game design. Examples of this in the final game are all of the metaphors that describe or include a visual description of Erik’s perceived loneliness lent themselves to build the space/level of the game.

The decision for the spatial design of the game to be based on the “vault” metaphor that Erik brought up in the conversational section created a solid foundation. This foundation meant we had something that we could continue to build on the theme of loneliness with the other metaphors that we gathered through the conversation.

The pull and push mechanic was the larger mechanic in our game. The idea of this mechanic was something that built on the previous vault idea to show what was keeping Erik inside the vault. Its standalone implementation in the game does allow for modeling a part of the experience of loneliness. However, it is the interplay between the pushing and the pulling that manages to model the experience in the way that Erik experiences it (Fig.4). The pushing part of the mechanic is what we chose to show the inertia that Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider (2013) argues that the fear of rejection has on already lonely people. With this in mind, we managed to model a personal yet still common way of experiencing social isolation.

The ticking clock was one of the experiences that was not translated into a metaphor but was added to the game to mimic Erik’s apartment more directly. This design decision was made as we decided that what the clock added to Erik’s loneliness was atmosphere and mood. Just using the sound of the ticking to better model the sought experience was all that was necessary. We also supplemented the effect that the ticking sound had on the atmosphere of the game with the use of color. Since we were working with portraying emotions, we thought that it was important to look at what different factors can help us with said portrayal other than the gameplay. Knowing that color has an emotional effect on players(Joosten et al, 2010) we decided to color the inside of the vault in washed-out gray tones(Fig.6) and the environment outside with more vivid colors (Fig.7). This juxtaposition helped to model the way Erik viewed his apartment and how the rest of the world looks like through his windows(Fig.3). While we did not use color as a main aspect in the portrayal of loneliness we
sought to portray it. It was however something we kept in mind as to not try to clash with the emotion worked on.

Fig. 6 Color palette of the inside of the vault

Fig. 7 Color palette of the outside of the vault

6 Conclusion

We set out to learn how to model and better understand a complex emotional state through game design. The chosen emotion was “loneliness” and the focus of the research came to be Erik Norstedt, one of the authors of this paper. We chose to discuss loneliness due to it being a feeling that Erik had dealt with a lot and wanted to understand better. It is also important to note that the covid-19 pandemic was happening at the time of writing this paper. People isolating themselves from loved ones and interactions between friends being more limited, were both contributing factors to us deciding on the topic of our paper.

The way we decided to model an experience of loneliness was through Rusch’s(2017) framework where you model complex emotional experiences through the medium of games by using metaphors. To get a better understanding of Erik’s loneliness we used the inner game designer conversation with an extra layer of abstraction from talking about items. The conversation left us with a better understanding of the complex emotion we were attempting to portray, while also getting some concrete ideas for both our gestalt and gameplay mechanics.

The game we made based on the conversation was played out with the player walking through a room while distractions are pulling you away from reaching your final goal. The final goal was to reach the phone and call someone to ease your loneliness.

The conversation while giving us the results we hoped for came about in an unplanned way of the three items Erik was asked to link to his loneliness. The plan was for us to pick one item and focus on the metaphors around it for the game design. What happened in the end, is that when confining all the items to Erik’s apartment (level) they all played an important role in our design. Because the design was left open-ended to let Erik’s interpretation take the lead it became exploring one level through the lenses of three different objects.

For future research in adding to the body of work that pertains to deep game design we have noticed that it would be beneficial to have more than one approach to the subject when developing metaphors for a deep game. This is due to the method used lent itself well to
examine the mental part of Erik’s loneliness. However, Loneliness is a more nuanced experience. It is about looking at all of these parts that make up the loneliness of a given person, the mind, the environment, relationships and the physical. All of these different dimensions factor into an individual's experience of loneliness, and to best model something out of that experience it is important to examine more than one factor, or the model will fall flat.

Designing games around modeling complex, abstract concepts can be seen as quite difficult for developers, this study is meant to provide another perspective on modeling games after experiences. Furthermore, we can see this research being used to aid designers to add depth to places in their design where they want to achieve a more compelling emotional experience for the players.
7 References


Harrer, S (2018) Games and Bereavement. transcript verlag


8 Ludography

Loneliness(2010) - Jordan Magnuson
Appendix

Questions used in the inner game designer conversation:

preparation question before to give us a starting point:

How would you describe your loneliness based on an everyday object? (2-3 objects requested)

Questions if we get stuck else it will be follow up questions to Erik’s answers:

1) What is the goal of the object (in relation to loneliness not its function)?
2) attempt to find out what it can and can't do. dependant on what object Erik has decided on

example how follow ups will go with battery that never feels fully charged:

a) What can it do to charge itself?

b) Are there more effective things that it can't do itself?

3) What is the object trying to do?

a) What is stopping the object from achieving that?