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## „Elude“ – the making of an impossible game

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### Zusammenfassung

Right after the Games for Health Conference in 2009, Doris C. Rusch and Attila Ceranoglu decided to work on a game about depression: A game that actually intends to make the feelings of depression itself experientially tangible to players. They decided to use the internet and virtual reality to reach the digital natives easily, and to raise awareness of the difficulties and problems of depression amongst young people (and therefore become more willing to either seek help for themselves or others). But how to create such a game about depression? How to create a game that would be no fun? Rusch and Ceranoglu found the answers and now „Elude“ is done!

### Keywords

game design, emotional health, depression, serious games, metaphors, abstract concepts

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### 1. Why a game about depression?

The Games for Health Conference should come with a warning: „careful, this venue can lead to game projects you never even dared to think about!“ Because that’s what happens, when you bring game designers and psychotherapists together. You might just end up making a game about depression. No, not a feel-good, fun game to alleviate the symptoms of this dangerous mental illness. A game that actually intends to make the feelings of depression itself experientially tangible to players! A game that intentionally conveys the

experience of loss, frustration, longing and abysmal sadness. At least, that's what Atilla Ceranoglu, M.D., the psychotherapist I met at the Games for Health Conference in 2009, and I decided to work on. Why? Because depression is one of the most pressing mental health issues out there with 2.2 million people in the US suffering from it. Only about 40% of them actually receive treatment, partly due to the fact that depression is socially stigmatized and partly because there is a lack of awareness for its symptoms. Further, depression is not just painful for those who experience it first hand, but also for caregivers. Friends and relatives of people who suffer from this emotional disorder have trouble understanding what is going on with their loved ones. They feel helpless and consequently have to cope with their own complex feelings of anger, guilt and sadness.

We felt that an easily and widely accessible game that modeled the subjective experience of depression (or at least some salient aspects of it that were shared by most forms of depression) could help to raise awareness for this affliction and improve understanding of its symptoms. For one, it would be a good way to reach the „digital natives“. More young adults would be aware of depression and become more willing to either seek help for themselves or help a depressed friend to receive treatment. Games further enable players to explore new identities. A game that put you in the shoes of someone who is living with depression could help alleviate social stigma because players would experience for themselves that being sucked into the „black hole“ had nothing to do with their skills or strength of character. It just happened. This experience should also help caregivers to understand on an emotional rather than cognitive level that they were not responsible for the mood struggles of their loved ones.

## **2. Carefully approaching the beast**

While it was straightforward enough to decide on the purpose of the game – to reach out, inform and raise awareness for depression e.g. as part of a psycho-education package in a clinical context – designing the actual game was not. I had a hard time wrapping my head around the concept of depression. Of course, I did my research and spent some agonizing hours with William Styron's short and rather readable biographical essay „Darkness Visible“ and some more hours with Julia Kristeva's long and rather unreadable „Black Sun“.

I topped it off with Freud's work on melancholia and medical articles on depression helpfully e-mailed to me by wonderfully knowledgeable and patient Atilla, who was never tired of answering the many questions that resulted from that reading. All of that combined with my own rather dark mood at that time (which wasn't improved at all by this intellectual diet) helped me to get a pretty vivid picture of what depression was all about – or rather what it was not: e.g. there is no game in depression! Depression is about loss: loss of meaning, goals, control, agency, a sense of self, focus, energy and voice. And – as Stuart Brown so aptly puts it in his book on „play“ – depression is the opposite of play! So, how the heck was I supposed to make a game about that? What would players DO? Sit and mope?

Maybe shuffle their avatar very slowly from the left to the right corner of the screen? It was a conundrum. On the one hand I wanted to make something that

could actually be played and which was engaging enough so anyone would care to do so. On the other hand, I wanted to avoid making a game that made depression seem „fun“. I decided that I couldn't focus solely on the dark phases. I had to model other mood states as well.

The game would not just be about loss, but also about that which was lost. This way, players had something to play with and the loss of it would be more keenly felt, too. I knew I had to show the contrast between the playful life in which one has agency and perspectives and passion and the phases in which all of this is taken away. I had to establish goals in the game the player would actually want to achieve, let him/her have his/her piece of heaven so I could take it away at the right moments and induce some emotional suffering. With my former project on drug abuse I learnt how to turn players into „addicts“; by making „Elude“ I became a certified sadist. Dare I wonder what will be next?

### **3. From abstract to concrete**

With the theoretical design considerations in place, I could finally start to worry about translating the abstract ideas into something more concrete. The core metaphor of the game is the gamespace as emotional landscape. The game models the inner world of someone suffering from depression. By exploring the rules and behavior of the world, the player gains insight into some of the psychological mechanisms of depression and how it interferes with „normal“ life or even happiness. The core conflict of the game is thus the struggle with depression itself, the tendency of one's mood to drag the avatar down into the black pits of sadness and desperation.

The game's objective is to tap one's (limited) potential for happiness and spend as much time out of depression as possible. Of course, the player has only partial control over that, making it clear that depression is mostly not a matter of choice or (lack of) skill. At some points a depressive phase can be avoided and the time spent in the dark hole can be cut short a little, but there is no way to circumvent depression completely. The game leverages a common spatial metaphor to represent mood states: „up“ is „good“ (as in „feeling high“), „down“ is „bad“ and in between is „normal“.

The core gameplay happens in normal state and follows a rather conventional platformer mechanic. To reach happiness one has to work one's way upwards towards a level goal at the top of the screen and against a downward moving force. The purposeful upward movement is helped by „passion“ which is represented by power up objects that provide short term goals that lead the way to happiness, and facilitate movement. They need to be activated by the player. It is important that passion is not just lying around. We need to actively identify the things that „resonate“ with us and help us „fly“. Hence, the passion power ups have a life of their own. One time they resonate. Another time they might not. The things we love doing today might not work for us tomorrow. This is true in the best of times, but particularly so when our mood deteriorates. Less and less things „speak“ to us, nothing seems fun anymore. Thus the onset of depression is characterized by a loss of passion objects as well as a loss of voice with which the avatar can call out to the those objects to make them resonate.

#### **4. Structure fosters creative freedom**

These design specifications were pretty much in place before the summer started. I cannot emphasize enough how important this preparation work was. With the general vision being so clear – both, for how the system should work and for the emotional experience it should enable – I could give the team a lot of creative freedom. They used it well. Within the first week, they already made several, very distinct prototypes that all captured the core ideas. I had defined a structure – an experiential gestalt – and they found several new but suitable metaphors to represent it.

In one prototype, the downward moving platforms were translated into a waterfall with the water acting as antagonistic force. In another it was mountain climbing and strong wind complicated ascension. With the gestalt being so tangible, it was easy to check whether an idea they came up with „worked“ or not. Finally the team decided to situate the game in a forest (no, we were not aware of „Limbo“ at the time!) with branches taking the place of platforms and vines that chased after the avatar and dragged him down.

#### **5. From experience to metaphor and back**

I liked the slight shift in metaphor the forest idea brought with it – that the enemy (depression) lay dormant for some time in the depths of one´s soul (not like the wind or the water which worked from above) and when it woke up, crept up to the avatar from below. I found again that there is a hermeneutic back and forth between an experience that conjures up a metaphor and the metaphor which illuminates the experience. This also proved true for the „passion“ objects. For the longest time, our artists were unhappy with the idea of representing passion through objects. Objects that didn´t belong in a forest would look weird, they argued. (I couldn´t convince them that the forest was a symbolic space and that it really didn´t matter if there was stuff lying around one wouldn´t expect in a „real“ forest.) How to represent something as representation, they wondered. Just put all the passion references into picture frames? What would begood symbols for friendship, art, music or sports?

A first attempt resulted in nostalgic looking things one would find in granny´s attic (and yes, I take full responsibility for that, because that´s the stuff I love!): an old teddybear, a gramophone, a children´s bicycle etc. However, there were several problems with this: first, these objects did not look like anything a teenage boy (= the avatar) would be particularly passionate about. Second, they were just lying there and after a while players would begin to see through their fictional skin to their function. Their „passion-ness“ would be lost.

Finally, the team found a solution they all liked (me included): birds! It is the perfect metaphor for passion, because birds do not just evoke associations to things one can be passionate about. They are incorporated passion. The concept of passion is presenting their behavior and thus remains vivid and fresh throughout the game. The birds fly up towards happiness, point the way to the goal. It makes intuitive sense that touching them would lend you wings as well.

But there is also the literal side of the image: birds as animals. E.g. they have a fine sense for danger. It's plausible that they would fly off at the onset of depression, because depression is danger. A flock of birds taking off together is thus a great way to signal the coming threat to the player, creating a feeling of foreboding.

## **6. „Elude“**

And so the story ends. „Elude“ – what everyone involved used to refer to as „the depression game“ – is done. Maybe a word on the title, which we came up with in a furious one-hour-title-brainstorming-session: not only does „Elude“ play on the elusiveness of happiness, it also alludes to the wish of the avatar/player to elude the darkness. But more interestingly, „Elude“ quite literally means „loss of play“. This closes the circle of a project which began with the observation that depression is the opposite of play and thus making a game about it should actually be impossible.