

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1354-750X>

Magdalena Bednorz

Wydział Humanistyczny  
Uniwersytet Śląski

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE OF LOVE AND LOSS: EMOTIONAL GAME DESIGN IN *EMILY IS AWAY*

**Abstract:** The article aims to shed light on the relationship between digital media and emotional experiences such as love and loss. It follows Lee Mackinnon's theoretical assumption that love can be considered and experienced differently depending on the technological system which facilitates it, broadens that assumption to the wider range of emotional social experiences, and employs that view in analyzing the emotional game design of *Emily Is Away* – an interactive story about a relationship with an old high school friend as depicted in conversations via instant messaging client. In doing so, the article aims to investigate how the digital context and mediation of personal conversations through instant messengers can influence the ways in which we experience drifting away from people we once considered important, crafting a set of cultural associations later to be used within a text of culture. It focuses on the accessibility and immediacy of contact via internet contrasted with the spatial divide, as well as the capacity for representation of uncertainty and longing in the visual form on the interface. It also discusses the seeming universality of the depicted emotional experience, as it became recognizable enough to be thematized into a game which relies on the feeling of nostalgia. Finally, by exploring the emotional design of the game on the levels of its aesthetics, narrative, mechanics and procedures, the article attempts to show the potential of the digital medium to represent and/or reproduce such experiences and emotions, thus broadening the spectrum of our cultural emotional experiences.

**Keywords:** digital games, game design, emotional design, discourse machines, new media, agency, nostalgia

### Introduction

As a game about the emotional impact of growing up and growing apart from your childhood friends, about unresolved feelings and unspoken confessions, with the underlying theme of longing, Kyle Seeley's *Emily Is Away* – an interactive story about a relationship between the player character and their old high school friend,

depicted in a series of conversations through an instant messaging client – provides a compelling case for a detailed analysis of medium-specific emotional game design. The conversations at the heart of the game concern various personal issues and range from simple jokes and picking favorite songs, through questions about day-to-day activities, to deeper insights on the future plans of the characters and their feelings about both the outside world and each other. It is not, however, the topic of the conversations that seems to matter the most where the experience of *Emily Is Away* is concerned. Writing a piece with her take on the game, Julie Muncy noted the emotional impact the game had on her, pointing out the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia, which the game achieves by “capturing and reawakening such a specific moment in our technological and emotional development,”<sup>1</sup> referring to the game problematizing the experience of using the AOL Instant Messaging chat client in the early years of the XX century. Importantly, Muncy notices how the game makes use of its visual aesthetic design, as well as of the narrative setup and mechanics, to recreate the emotions associated with “those high school AIM chats”<sup>2</sup> the players might have experienced in their youth. While not going into detail on the specifics of such design, Muncy’s text provides a perspective which not only links the design elements of *Emily Is Away* to the game-related emotional experience of the audience, but also uses them as a tool to explore the digitally remediated process of communication – namely the AIM chats – through which the players’ ideas about technology and feelings developed.

Linking the technological and emotional development is the underlying idea in Lee Mackinnon’s article *Love Machines and the Tinder Bot Bildungsroman*.<sup>3</sup> Following Friedrich Kittler’s notion of *discourse machines* – defined as technical systems of socio-cultural communication, which possess the ability to shape the ways in which meanings, particularly those concerning social perspectives on love, are codified and circulated – Mackinnon claims that different systems of delivery influence our emotional experiences of love by making us consider it accordingly to each medium’s characteristics, as suggested by her comparison of the analog and digital technologies of communication.<sup>4</sup> In other words, how we perceive and experience love when it is mediated through digital means shapes such experience, for example often making it faster, more accessible, more open-ended and less deterministic, and the process itself changes our perspective on our emotions and how we act upon them. Following Mackinnon’s approach, but broadening that perspective to encompass not only strictly romantic feelings, but a whole range of social experiences that

<sup>1</sup> J. Muncy, *Return to the 2000s with This AIM-Inspired Chat Game*, Wired.com 2015, October 30, <https://www.wired.com/2015/10/emily-is-away/> (accessed: 12.11.2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> L. Mackinnon, *Love Machines and the Tinder Bot Bildungsroman*, “e-flux journal” 2016, #7, June 21, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/74/59802/love-machines-and-the-tinder-bot-bildungsroman/> (accessed: 12.11.2019).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

accompany love in social communication – such as expressions of longing or loss – the following article focuses on a detailed analysis of emotional game design in *Emily Is Away*. In doing so, it aims to explore how the game makes use of the digitally mediated experience of instant messenger conversations to illustrate the emotional impact of longing for people we once considered extremely important but now are drifting away from, thus placing AIM chats as one of the instances of the digital discourse machines facilitating experiences of love. Finally, through the critical analysis of the ways in which the particular elements of game design attempt to invoke such emotional experience, the paper explores the potential of the game itself to not only comment on the emotion-shaping potential of the digital medium, but also by itself work as a discourse machine by encoding and distributing, capturing and reawakening, the understanding and experience of love, longing and loss in the fictional, cultural context.

## Emotional game design – critical approaches

Within the field of game studies, the interest in the emotional aspects of games and gaming seems to have been growing in the past decade, and the scholarly approaches focused on the emotional and affective potential of games have become plentiful. They encompass a wide spectrum of perspectives, including ruminations on the techniques of game design, descriptive studies of player engagement, and more critical views on the ways in which relationships and feelings are depicted within particular titles. While trying to employ critical study of game design, it seems then worthwhile to investigate such approaches and the analytic lenses they can provide.

It seems important to note that the interest of game scholars in those topics on the one hand seems to derive from the strong agreed-upon conviction that games have unique potential to affect their audiences in an immersive way, while “[e]motions sit at the heart of a game player’s level of engagement”<sup>5</sup> and on the other – it draws from and mirrors the general turn in humanities towards emotions and affects, visible within social, cultural and literary studies.<sup>6</sup> The approaches developed in the broadly understood field of humanities, and specifically within the cultural-analysis-oriented approaches, seem to establish a basis for critical approaches towards love and emotions depicted and circulated through various media, and more so – a basis which keeps in tune with Mackinnon’s idea of love discourse machines. Discussing the characteristics and objectives of critical love studies, Michael Gratzke in his article *Love Is What People Say It Is* emphasizes the discursive, performative and relation-

<sup>5</sup> P. de Byl, *A Conceptual Affective Design Framework for the Use of Emotions in Computer Game Design*, “Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace” 2015, no. 9(3).

<sup>6</sup> As discussed by: M. Gratzke, *Love Is What People Say It Is: Performativity and Narrativity in Critical Love Studies*, “Journal of Popular Romance Studies” 2017, iss. 6; P. Clough, J. Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2007.

al nature of love, which develops constantly against a changing normative cultural framework, and thus should be judged against its socio-historic and socio-cultural context.<sup>7</sup> Assuming such a perspective allows to discuss the cultural representations of love and related emotional experiences critically, as parts of a larger discourse, as both designed against that cultural framework and working as a part of it.

The possibility of a detailed analysis of emotional cultural representations seems to be applicable within design studies as well. On the one hand, it can be traced to the growing interest in affective design, a “shift towards a more encompassing conceptual approach that includes affective or emotive processes”<sup>8</sup> as identified by Annette Aboulaflia and Liam J. Bannon. On the other hand, the more rhetorically oriented approaches to design studies<sup>9</sup> provide a critical perspective to be applied in the readings of communication between a specifically designed product and its receivers or audiences. They suggest the intrinsic link between design and rhetoric, as design is usually oriented at inspiring some sort of pre-supposed response.<sup>10</sup> In doing that, they allow for a critical analysis that would entangle such practices. It seems, then, possible to conclude that a similar take can be applied while exploring those design elements which seem to inspire emotional experiences in digital games.

This conclusion seems to be supported by Gordon Calleja’s influential study on player involvement. In his article *Digital Game Involvement: A Conceptual Model*, Calleja writes: “[g]ame design, like other forms of textual production, is imbued with the rhetorical strategies of affect”<sup>11</sup> and, associating the rhetorical power of a medium with its modes of representation, adds that “unlike other forms of text, this rhetorical power is emphasized by the conjunction of textual interpretation and the performed practice of gaming.”<sup>12</sup> He thus suggests that while emotional game design can be perceived, and discussed, in terms of its persuasive, response-inspiring power, in order to do so, the unique characteristics of the medium have to be taken into account. In her detailed study of emotional game design, Katherine Isbister seems to echo this statement, claiming that “games have the capacity to take us into different emotional territory than any other medium.”<sup>13</sup> In her book, she identifies the distinguishing techniques of emotional game design to achieve this effect in establishing flow, providing choices, and making use of physical input on the side of the players. In turn, while approaching this topic, Penny de Byl lists a different set of components that

<sup>7</sup> M. Gratzke, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> A. Aboulaflia, L.J. Bannon, *Understanding Affect in Design: An Outline Conceptual Framework*, “Theoretical Issues in Ergonomics Science” 2004, no. 5(1), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> To mention a few: G. Ballard, L. Koskela, *Rhetoric and Design*, in: *International Conference on Engineering Design (ICED13)*, Seoul 2013; G. Joost, A. Scheuermann, *Design as Rhetoric: Basic Principles for Design Research*, Symposium of Swiss Design Network, Zurich 2007.

<sup>10</sup> G. Joost, A. Scheuermann, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> G. Calleja, *Digital Game Involvement: A Conceptual Model*, “Games and Culture” 2007, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 245.

<sup>13</sup> K. Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 131.

facilitate engaged gameplay, pointing towards the interface design, narrative, and relationships players establish with both player- and non-player characters.<sup>14</sup> While, as the mentioned studies illustrate, the list of the medium-specific means of emotional facilitation and expression imbued within game design can be varied, and in studying them academics focus on different aspects of games, the generally agreed upon statement seems to be that games differ in their expressive and rhetorical means from other media, and thus any analysis of their design has to be aware those unique elements.

A similar sentiment can be found in Jonne Arjoranta's more critical text on game hermeneutics. Arjoranta, as if compressing the above-mentioned examples into two main categories, writes: “[g]ames differ from most other forms of media by being procedural and interactive. These qualities change how games create and transmit meaning to their players”<sup>15</sup> and claims, that it is the procedurality that really separates games from other media in terms of their means of expression and communicating meanings.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, he establishes a clear connection of his thought to that of procedural rhetoric – one of the more recognizable approaches to the potential for transmitting cultural meanings within game mechanics in the field of game studies. Procedural rhetorics, as coined by Ian Bogost, refers to the inherent capacity of game rules to represent cultural and social processes during gameplay. In Bogost's words: “[t]he rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game”<sup>17</sup> and they do so by allowing the players to explore the topics concerning processes they know from the material world, while “[t]hat representation is composed of the rules themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, following Kenneth Burke's approach to rhetorics and defining it as the ability of symbolic systems to facilitate identification and make statements about the world and human action, while expanding it to the digital medium, Bogost links the potential of games to make such statements with the layer of game mechanics. In that, he both provides foundation for medium-specific rhetorical game analysis, and suggests the direction in which such analysis might head. He not only claims that the persuasive power of rules is equal to that of words or visual metaphors, but also states that procedural rhetoric is uniquely suited to represent processes, and as such it can serve to “expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior”<sup>19</sup> while approached analytically and viewed through a critical lens.

While the primary interest of Bogostian proceduralist readings seems to concern the underlying ideologies and power structures as represented in the rules of digital

<sup>14</sup> P. de Byl, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> J. Arjoranta, *Do We Need Real-Time Hermeneutics? Structures of Meaning in Games*, in: *Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play*, vol. 6, 2011, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> I. Bogost, *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, in: K. Salen (ed.), *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

games, the very idea of procedural rhetorics and the potential of games to depict meaningful processes seems perfectly applicable to emotional experiences and discourses of love as well. Such sentiment can be noticed in Doris C. Rusch's paper *Mechanisms of the Soul* in which she discusses digital games' capability to express human condition. She claims that "the game-part brings in the affective strength of the real world activity and the fiction contextualizes those game emotions and enables players to attribute them to the events in the gameworld"<sup>20</sup> and while the fictional aspect provides the clearest and seemingly most obvious connection to human experience, the true and most unique potential of the medium lies in the power of digital games to express such experiences and communicate emotions through procedures. She goes as far as to say that "[p]rocedural expression is a terrific tool to enhance our understanding of the social, mental and psychological processes."<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Rusch does not dismiss the importance of narrative and visual design to craft such processes. All those aspects of a game provide unique means of expression, and as such, often work together in the production of meaning. Thus, a critical, rhetorically-oriented analysis, which encompasses not solely the procedural aspect, but discusses the fictional alignment and the visual aesthetics as well, can – and seemingly should – be employed in order to provide a comprehensive, full reading of the take on the human experiences which the game tries to represent.

If, as the abovementioned perspectives seem to suggest, digital games are particularly suited to the depiction of processes linked to human condition, including experiencing and communicating feelings, and if to do so they employ particular medium-specific design techniques, which encompass all the main aspects of game design, including visual, narrative, and mechanic-based means of expression, then a detailed analysis of those aspects in a particular title, such as *Emily Is Away*, can shed light not only on the details of emotional game design, but also on the very process they are employed to represent, or – the cultural rendering thereof as presented in the game. The following analysis will focus, then, on those game design elements, and, in touch with the rhetorical and critical perspective, discuss their potential to inspire particular emotional responses within the socio-cultural context invoked by the game.

### *Emily Is Away*: case study

From the very first moment when the game starts, *Emily Is Away* sends a clear message to the player, promising them an emotional experience. It opens with a familiar welcome sound which introduces a pixelized version of Windows XP welcome

<sup>20</sup> D.C. Rusch, *Mechanisms of the Soul – Tackling the Human Condition in Videogames*, in: *Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, vol. 5, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

screen, including the blue color theme, similar icon placement, and the most iconic user account pictures. Doing so, it immediately communicates a fair part of its emotional context to the audience, evoking the feelings of nostalgia not only by setting the events of the game in early years of the twentieth century, but also by applying a set of aesthetic references aimed at conjuring the specific, personal memories of those times.

Evoking feelings of longing for the past seems to be a popular notion in the broadly defined contemporary popcultural experience, but such a trend is also clearly visible within the field of game design. Maria Garda, describing in detail the nostalgia-oriented turn in design practices in games, divides this drive to revisit the recent past into two categories: restorative and reflective.<sup>22</sup> *Emily Is Away*, with its highly mediated and clearly fictional aesthetics, seems to fit within that second category. Garda defines reflective nostalgia as “based on collective memories about this period that are transmitted in media” and as “[referring] to an individual experience, linked to the process of cultural remembrance.”<sup>23</sup> Reflective nostalgia, then, turns an encounter with a text of culture to evoking the past, but this past is mediated through contemporary cultural frames, and reliant on deeply personal – even if shared – emotional experiences, which seems to be the exact process in Kyle Seeley’s game.

The actual gameplay of *Emily Is Away* follows the nostalgic undercurrent set by the beginning of the game. Once we click the user icon on the welcome screen, we initiate the game’s first chapter, and we are faced with a plethora of further Windows XP references, including the iconic default background picture, and the interface resembling that of AIM Instant Messenger; it is within that messenger that the main conversations – and thus the main narrative structure of the game – happen. Importantly, the game’s visuals are pixelized, and pixel art, or 8-bit style, can be identified as one of the main practices within the meta-context of nostalgic retro game design.<sup>24</sup> Thus, by employing such visual strategy, the aesthetic framing of the game suggests the reflective and fictional nature of the presented cultural experience, and seemingly announces that the nostalgic character is there to frame and evoke emotions and memories, not to restore or simulate the past experience exactly. That statement seems to be supported by the multiplicity of cultural references to be both discovered within visuals of the game, such as user icons, and verbalized in the chats the player character has with Emily. Moreover, nostalgia in *Emily Is Away* seems to be closely linked to the other aspects of emotional rhetoric in the game, as it not only sets the mood for exploring personal histories, by conjuring personal memories and encouraging reflective approach, but it also seems to mirror of the emotional states depicted within the narrative, as the longing for the past seems to work as a perfect analogy for longing for someone who is both familiar and unreachable.

<sup>22</sup> M.B. Garda, *Nostalgia in Retro Game Design*, in: *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*, vol. 7, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

Such longing is, in fact, the prevalent theme of *Emily Is Away*, which focuses on the conversations between the player character and their high school friend, Emily, and undertakes the themes of unresolved romantic tension and gradually drifting away from childhood friends after graduating high school. The very first conversation the player character has with Emily takes place during their senior year, and it concerns mainly common day-to-day problems – they discuss their friends, talk about music and a party they may attend. However, they also express concern and excitement for the future, as high school comes to an end, and they – especially Emily – seem to be worried that things will change between them. As the game progresses, in conversations consecutively year after year, the characters go on to discuss their college experiences, new friends and relationships, while they slowly become less and less engaged in each other’s lives, as evidenced by their questions about friends, boyfriends, or living situation. At the same time – as if to contrast the gradual detachment with the past closeness – they often go back to discussing past events (which the audience learns about through those conversations) as they reminisce about their friendship.

The detailed nature of the closeness the characters share, or used to share, and how they act on it, is seemingly left for the players to decide. The game’s main mechanic is based around making choices, namely – picking a dialogue option from a set of three. The choices range from minor ones in terms of the possible outcome (for example, in the very beginning the choices are simply different renditions of hello) to more meaningful ones. The latter include decisions which determine the player character’s course of life, such as picking a college major, and attitudes expressed towards Emily. The choices which concern Emily shape our character’s relationship with her, and thus seemingly influence the game the most. An example of such decision can be found within the very first conversation, when Emily asks whether the player character will be attending the party. Not only does our answer influence which background characters Emily ends up with, but it also provides a possibility to have a romantically loaded moment with her, an almost-shared kiss during the party, referenced in later chats. However, even the smallest, seemingly least impactful of the choices works as a part of a larger mechanic, which seems oriented at evoking and strengthening the feeling of agency on the side of the player.

The interest in agency within the fields of game studies and game design can be traced to Janet Murray, who in her seminal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* defines it as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, digital games, thanks to their interactive nature and ability to provide immediate feedback to the player’s input, have the power to make their audience believe they participate in the gameplay and the production of the meaning within it. Importantly, as evidenced by further studies in the field, the feeling

<sup>25</sup> J. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Free Press, New York 1997, p. 123.

of agency can be read as illusory, an element of game design used to encourage engagement, while in truth being only a result of pre-established game structures, which hold the power to predict player responses.<sup>26</sup> In *Emily Is Away* the crafting of agency is predominantly linked with picking the dialogue options. Furthermore, the feeling of meaningfulness of player's choices, which seems derive from the genre convention of visual novel games, is emphasized within the game itself by additional informational statements, such as "Emily will remember that" appearing on the screen after making a seemingly impactful decision. Moreover, the game allows the player to customize their character by coming up with their real and screen names, choosing their avatars, and even deciding what color scheme to apply to their instant messenger window, further inspiring the feeling of at least partial control over the game. This agency-based engagement is also present within one of the more interesting mechanics of interaction the game employs – namely, in making the player type in selected responses by physically smashing random keys on their keyboard, where individual strokes mirror the strokes of the character. Employing such mechanic broadens the range of engagement-oriented design practices by mixing the narrative-based, choice-oriented type of interactions with kinesthetic one. The game seems to utilize all those design techniques rhetorically to inspire engagement and identification, as, according to Leah Miller "Agency in gameplay offers a clear message: 'In a way, this is happening to you.'"<sup>27</sup> That sentiment seems to be prevalent in *Emily Is Away*, especially when such additional design elements as making actual names from the player's Steam friend list appear on the buddy list of AIM within the game are taken into consideration.

However, the incorporation of the abovementioned design techniques within the game does not seem to be aimed solely at encouraging engagement. The real rhetorical intent of such agency-oriented game design in this particular title seems to be revealed further in the game. The more we talk to Emily, and the further in the game we are, the more often we encounter seemingly important choices which, while emotionally impactful at the moment of making the decision, do not seem to have major consequences; or at least, the consequences do not change drastically depending on what we choose. One of the most important decisions, and the situation which feels the most impactful for the player's character's relationship with Emily happens mid-game. Emily goes through a recent breakup with her boyfriend, and, devastated by the situation, asks if she can come visit us in college for a few days. Deciding whether to let her, as well as deciding whether to set boundaries before her arrival, can have multiple possible consequences: she can come and the characters can either end up having a one night stand or go on not addressing their romantic tension at all, or the player character can refuse to let her come altogether. While the consequences seem

<sup>26</sup> D. Arsenuault, B. Perron, *In the Frame of the Magic Cycle: The Circle(s) of Gameplay*, in: B. Perron, M. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, Routledge, New York 2009, pp. 109–132.

<sup>27</sup> L. Miller, *Invitation: Granting Emotional Access through Romantic Choice*, in: H. McDonald (ed.), *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, CRC Press, London–New York 2018, p. 160.

varied, no matter what choice the player makes, their character always ends up in the same place as far as Emily is concerned – for one reason or another, she feels betrayed and uncomfortable. Whether it is because she feels like the character used her vulnerability, or because she feels like they broke their promise to always be there for her, no choice allows for a happy ending. Stripping away the actual impact those choices can have on the result of the game, as well as gradually taking away the previously established feeling of control, seems to encourage the feeling of powerlessness, corresponding to the emotional situation of the player character.

Such a feeling of powerlessness is further invoked through another game design device. Throughout the game, the mechanics of typing-in the dialogue options sometimes involve the player character backspacing within their reply. The game establishes that process slowly, as sometimes the character edits individual words or letters. In the final conversation, however, the backspacing becomes extreme – if we talk to Emily and try to ask her meaningful questions, all of them will turn into casual small talk. “Can we talk about things?” will become “do anything fun recently?”, “could I see you this summer?” will turn into “are you doing homework?”, while “is this it for us?” will transform to “how’s the weather?” Finally, once all other options are exhausted, the only three choices that the player is left with say the same thing: “goodbye.”<sup>28</sup> Not only does changing all the options into the same one illustrate the character’s thought process in this conversation and provide some semblance of closure, but it also plays on the visuals of the game, metaphorizing visually the true lack of choice the player is left with. Therefore, *Emily Is Away* utilizes what Sterczewski identified as the rhetorical power of subverting the player agency for expressive impact.<sup>29</sup> It uses the conventional ways of crafting the illusion of control on the side of the player, only to strip it away and expose the actual lack thereof in climactic moments. In doing that, the game crafts an analogy between the audience’s experience with the game mechanics and the loss of control the player character faces in their relationship with Emily, or in other words – it invokes the emotional experience of helplessness.

Moreover, it does so in a visible way by graphically depicting the character’s backspacing within the game’s interface. It is that very moment, when the game makes the strongest claim on the emotion-shaping potential of internet-based communication, linking instant messaging with Lee Mackinnon’s notion of digital discourse machines. *Emily Is Away* makes use of the particular power of the digital interface to work not only as an in-between space of human-computer interaction, but also as a place of cognition and action, in which our choices are actualized and visualized. In Johanna Drucker’s words: “Interface, like any other component of computational systems, is an artifact of complex processes and protocols, a zone in which our be-

<sup>28</sup> K. Seeley, *Emily Is Away*, Windows, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> P. Sterczewski, *Gra w utratę kontroli. Słaba podmiotowość, kwestionowanie racjonalności i problematyzowanie utożsamienia w narracyjnych grach komputerowych*, “Replay” 2014, no. 1, pp. 49–58.

haviors and actions take place. Interface is what we read and how we read combined through engagement.”<sup>30</sup> In paying attention to the details of the usually neutral practice of editing the typed-in line, *Emily Is Away* shifts its audience’s attention to how digital interfaces allow for us to visualize our choices and thoughts, play with them and consider them, through this semi-real visualization, before pressing enter and sending them to the person on the other end. In a context similar to that which the game attempts to recreate in order to illustrate such claim, this practice can lead to a situation in which we are faced with our feelings, our hesitation about what to say, actualized on the screen in front of us. Such very clear visualization of the in-between space of communication that the interface represents seems to illustrate the power of the digital technology to allow for a more reflective approach towards social communication, including the ways in which people experience their own feelings.

It is not, however, the only unique aspect of digital technology as a medium of emotional experience which *Emily Is Away* seems to explore. Through its very setup, in which the game links heavily emotional and personal topic with the immediacy of the conversations via instant messengers, *Emily Is Away* seems to highlight the clash between the immediacy and accessibility of digitally-mediated contact, in which the spatial divide does not seem to be much of an issue anymore, and the personal rift between people who grow apart due to their emotional differences, rather than any external factors. In doing so, the game illustrates the capability of the digital technology to both enhance communication and brutally pinpoint any possible weak elements thereof, as the characters are left with nothing else to discuss, and the rupture between them in the last moments of the game is represented on the interface in the form of logging off.

Importantly, by meta-referencing the emotional practices within digital media of communication and thematizing them into a text of culture, *Emily Is Away* by itself seems to work as an instance of a digital discourse machine. It utilizes medium-specific means of expression in a very self-aware and reflective way, focused on making the audience reflect on their own perceptions of how they experience technologically mediated feelings and relationships. It does so both by thematically pointing them out, and by evoking the practices and feelings we associate with them, for a stronger rhetorical impact. The play the game makes on player agency would not work if the medium itself was not deeply participatory and interactive, and if it would not encourage emotional engagement on the side of the audience. In turn, the detailed exploration and simulation of friendship falling apart, as depicted in *Emily Is Away*, relies heavily on digital games’ ability to represent processes through an immediate feedback, gradually and consequently happening during gameplay. By employing those modes of expression, the game grants its players the chance to re-visit feelings of love, longing, and loss, in a deeply participatory and interactive context. Doing so, it proves the potential of games to let the audience experience culturally remediated

<sup>30</sup> J. Drucker, *Humanities Approaches to Interface Theory*, “Culture Machine” 2011, vol. 12, p. 9.

emotions, and, paraphrasing Lee Mackinnon, it illustrates how, through means of medium-specific design, digital games can facilitate, represent, and distribute the ideas and emotions we associate with feelings such as love and expand their audience's emotional cultural repertoire.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, by framing the whole game within the context of nostalgia, *Emily Is Away* seems to further comment on the universality of the depicted experience among its audience. On the one hand, it clearly relies on the familiarity of the players who belong to the generation which grew up using those specific technological means the game references. Much like earlier mentioned Julie Muncy, those players probably took part in similar social situations to the ones the game depicts, and did so through AIM or other very similar early instant messengers. The clear analogy, then, between their own personal stories and the one problematized by the game might serve as a proof that those interfaces have become an integral part of their emotional development, which *Emily Is Away* appropriates. On the other hand, much in accordance with the general quality of reflective nostalgia,<sup>32</sup> the subject matter of *Emily is Away* seems to be recognizable and relatable even without such personal history with the depicted interfaces, as similar experiences can happen through other means of personal communication via internet. As such, the nostalgic framing serves as a comment on the universality of emotionally-loaded experiences of internet messengers, while simultaneously pinpointing the moment in the past, where it became widespread.

## Conclusions

*Emily Is Away* uses its aesthetic and procedural design not only to allow the message behind the narrative – the story of two friends growing apart as they move on to the next stage of their lives – to come across smoothly, but also to “capture and reawaken”<sup>33</sup> the feelings we associate with such social situations. It employs medium-specific modes of expression to comprehensively depict love, longing and loss as both a cultural theme, and a procedural, gradual experience, which inspires particular emotional responses, and which a digital game can attempt to reproduce.

In doing so, it illustrates the role that the digital means of communication have in executing our decisions and mediating our communication, as well as in shaping the ways we experience conversations, relationships, and emotional situations. It addresses the issues of how immediacy of contact via internet may highlight the emotional disconnection between people, or how, in communicating through visual interfaces, we are often forced to face our uncertainty about expressing certain thoughts

<sup>31</sup> L. Mackinnon, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> As Garda claims – the lack of personal memories often is not a problem when it comes to texts invoking reflective nostalgia, as it can work on two levels of memory – personal and collective (M.B. Garda, *op. cit.*, p. 7).

<sup>33</sup> J. Muncy, *op. cit.*

and feelings, as we change our replies. In other words – following Lee Mackinnon’s idea – it demonstrates how the digital system of delivery works as a discourse machine, shaping our socio-cultural experience and understanding of love and related emotions.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, by referencing past interfaces and programs, *Emily Is Away* crafts a nostalgic feeling to the depicted experience, and through that suggests that technologies that mediate shared emotional experiences, become themselves part of them.

In turn, by remediating the personal emotional experience to utilize it in a text of culture, *Emily Is Away* showcases the persuasive and emotion-evoking potential of game design. The employment of medium-specific means of expression – such as building and breaking off agency to mimic loss of control – in order to inspire the emotional response on the side of the audience shows that as discourse machines digital media have the potential to facilitate our emotional behaviors, and that they in fact can participate in distributing codes associated with feelings throughout social systems. While discussing the characteristics of how discourse machines work and distribute such codes, Lee Mackinnon makes a claim that digital technology, when used as means of communication, can remind us of the complexity of both the human thought and experience, and the technical system itself.<sup>35</sup> *Emily Is Away* emphasizes the complexity of human interaction in the context of internet communication, and simultaneously channels that very complexity into encouraging further emotional responses. As such, it serves as an illustration of Lee Mackinnon’s statement and of the intricacy of the emotional relationships we establish through, and with, digital discourse machines.

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<sup>34</sup> L. Mackinnon, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem.*

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