PLAYING AT DYING

Workshop Report

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Workshop Two: Prototyping and Playtesting

Workshop One: Ideation and Iteration

Participants: 2 game designers, 3 games studies academics, 3 death studies academics, 1 death doula, 1 hospice charity representative, 1 junior doctor, 1 bereavement counsellor (12 participants total)

Duration: 3 hours 30 minutes, plus 1 hour break for lunch
Space: English Faculty, University of Cambridge

Welcome

Participants received 'goodie bags' in the form of folders that contained pens, note-paper, post-it notes, worksheets, and a copy of three one-shot TTRPGs: The Quiet Year by Avery Alder, The Healer by Tamsin Bloom, and Princess and the Sword by Anna Anthropy.

After introducing the overarching aims of the research project **'A Good Death?'**, the facilitator talked through what was meant by **'ideation'** and **'iteration'**.

Ideation

- We want to collate a range of perspectives on **the intersection of play and death.**

- Initially, we want to cast our net as wide as possible to discover unexpected and unique insights.

- Then we want to move from breadth to depth, choosing certain pathways to expand and evolve.
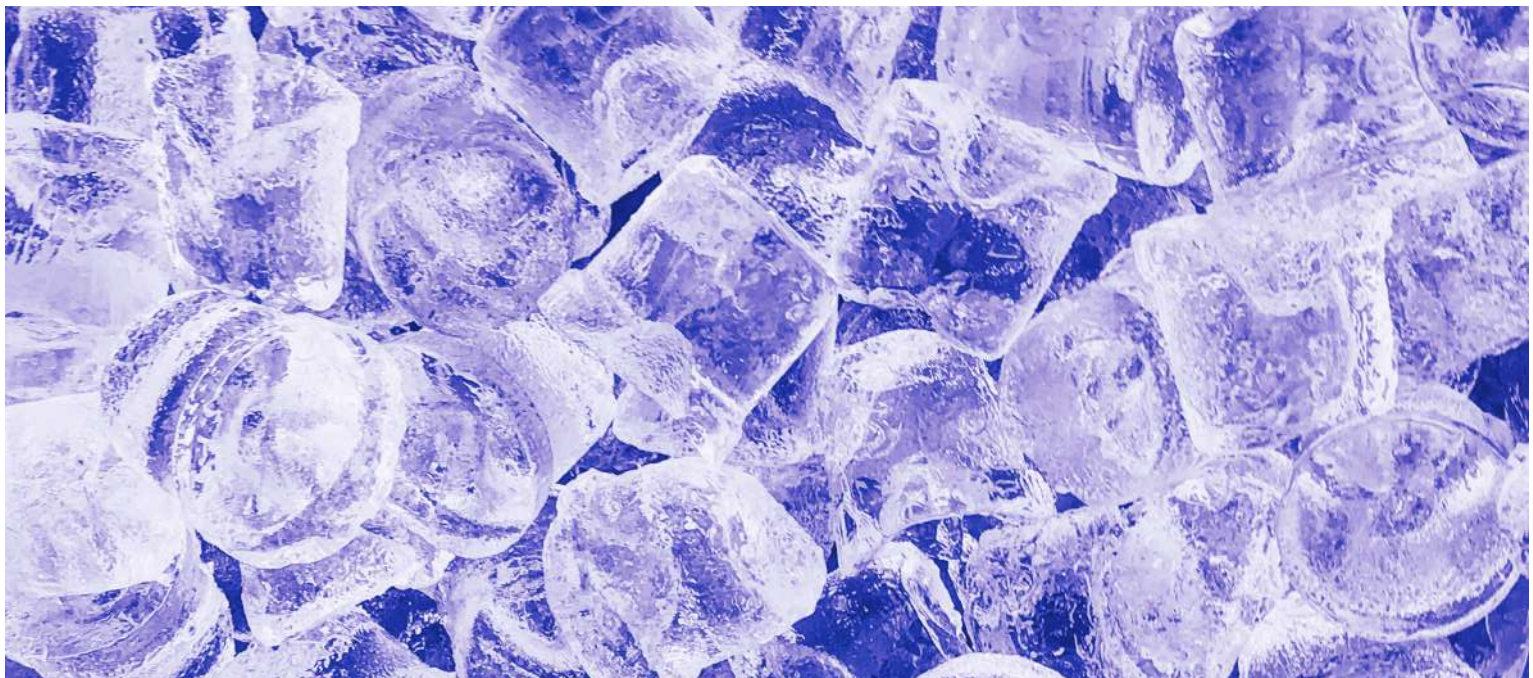

Iteration

- Now, we want to take the concepts we have identified as most fruitful and explore them further by experimenting with different versions and manifestations of these ideas. This is a recursive process – we can always go back to the drawing board (or ideas wall!). We want to discover both the heart and the edges of our chosen concepts.

- The iteration process is not intended to be outcome-oriented, and we will document all the stages of the journey as we go. However, by the end of the day, we may have a co-created set of concepts that distil what happens when we bring **'play'** and **'death'** into conversation with each other.

- We want to emphasise the fact that we are doing academic research and are therefore free from commercial pressures to make something 'good' that perfectly answers our brief. We are just as curious about the potential failings, shortcomings, and impossibilities of this project. These findings are as valuable to us as a 'successful product' would be.
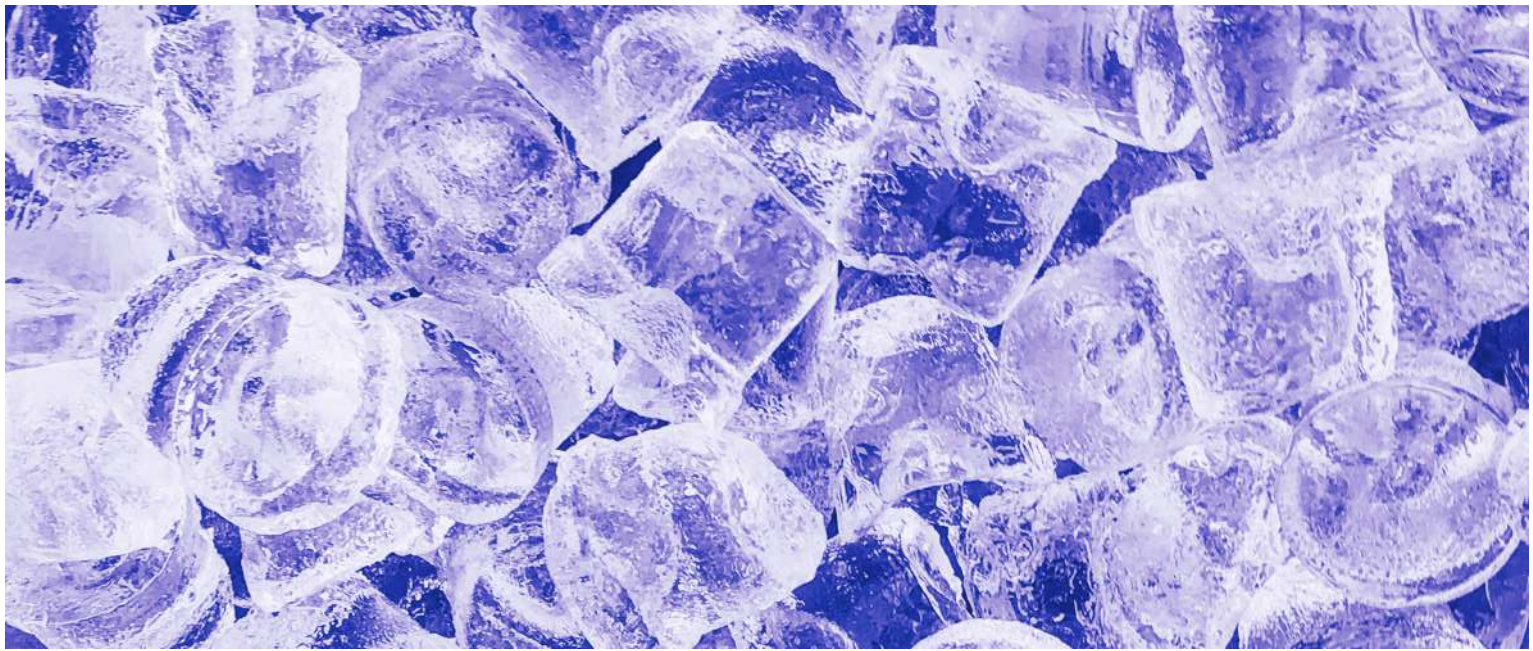
Icebreaker

"Play is _____", "Death is _____."

The participants and facilitator introduced themselves, stating their names, their professions, and answers in response to the icebreaker phrases above.

Figure 1: A selection of post-it notes generated during Activity 1: Seeds.

Activity One: Seeds

This activity yielded the following words written on post-it notes:

Playing is...		Dying is...
Creative	Sharing	Private
Magic	Letting Go	Dark
Radical	Relief x 2, a Release	Sad
Stimulating	Negotiation	Isolating
Unreal	Timeless	Lonely
Easy	Revealing x 2	Serious Stuff, Serious
Not Always Good	Instinctive	Careful
Experimentation	Interesting	Uncomfortable
Connective	An Escape	Quiet
Imaginative	A Trial	A Process x 2
Communal	Important	Tiring x 2
Sociable, Social		Tragic
Regressive, Child-like, For Kids	Frustrating x 2	Lasting
A Safe Space, Safe	Freeing x 3	Peaceful
Carefree	Unpredictable	Final, an end, the end, ending
A Learning Experience / Learning x 2	Universal	Unknown x 2
Avoidable	Meaningful	Anxiety-inducing
Competitive	Necessary	Scary
A Human Right	Natural x 2	Disappearing
Energising		Upsetting

Interactive	Vulnerability	Loss x 2
Consequence free	Intriguing	Challenging x 2, Difficult, Hard
Joyful		Equalising
Fun x 2		Beautiful
Enjoyable		
Practice		
Light		
Meaningless		

The voting process demonstrated the capaciousness of both concepts – many words caused a split vote and participants discussed aloud how the word might belong to either category. **Recurrent themes that proved particularly divisive included ideas relating to 'release' (e.g., 'freeing', 'relief', 'letting go', 'an escape') and ideas relating to 'naturalness' (e.g., 'natural', 'instinctive', 'universal', 'timeless').**

In contrast, there was marked consensus about other words. **Words connoting negative affect were often unanimously voted into the 'dying is…' category (e.g., 'upsetting', 'scary', 'dark', 'sad', 'lonely')**, with only the moderate dissent from those in death-adjacent professions. **Words associated with high levels of energy or with levity (e.g., 'energising', 'stimulating', 'light', 'consequence free', 'carefree') were assigned to the category 'playing is…' without much debate.** The facilitator occasionally prompted participants to consider what the implications would be of categorising these words differently **(e.g., 'what is dark play?', 'what would it mean for death to be consequence free?').** The group could think of many pertinent answers, but it was felt that these exceptions served to prove the rule.

During a coffee break, the facilitator grouped synonyms and connected words together **(see overleaf).**

Figure 2: Photograph of the board with post-it notes grouped by facilitator.

Figure 1 close-up: A selection of post-it examples generated from Activity One: Seeds.

Activity Two: Branching Out

The facilitator explained the next activity and asked participants to group themselves according to whether they wanted to be **'cartographers'** or **'character designers'.** This resulted in one group of character creators and two groups of cartographers. The facilitator then distributed the relevant worksheets and materials to each of the three groups.

Each group was invited to select one circled collection of words from the whiteboard to serve as their set of prompts.

Cartographers

The first group of cartographers selected a circle of prompts that related to **play.** They focused on ideas of safety, freedom, sociability, joy, and regression. Following a long discussion, participants started to sketch out ideas on small pieces of paper **(Fig. 3 overleaf).** The facilitator encouraged this group to not worry about creating something perfect but to allow themselves to make mistakes and create something messy. The facilitator also reminded them of the time limit for the activity to encourage them not to get stuck in the planning phase.

The group then started to collaboratively sketch their map onto an A3 sheet of paper **(Fig. 4).**

**Figure 3:** Rough sketches made by cartographers mapping concepts relating to play.

Figure 4: Final map inspired by prompt words relating to play.
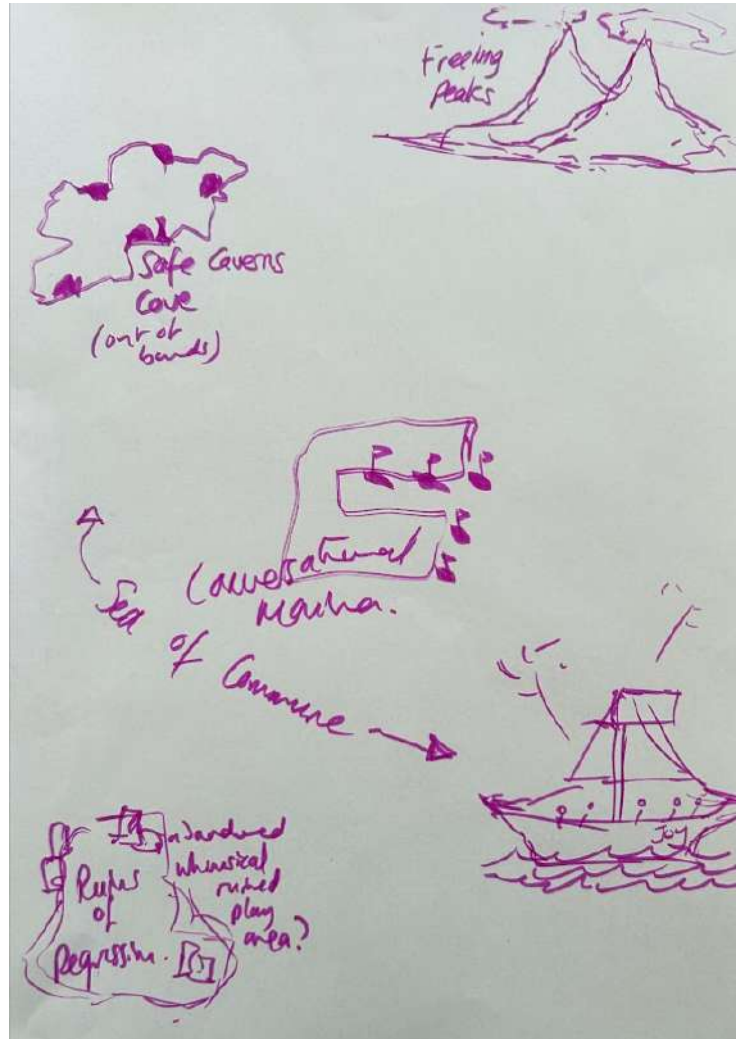
This group created an **'Archipelago of Play'**. The key locations envisaged by this group were **'Safe Caverns'**, **'The Freeing Peaks'**, **'The Joy of the Seas'**, **'The Conversational Marina'**, **'The Ruins of Regression'**, and the **'Sea of Commune'**. The Safe Caverns were described both as a refuge, but also as a space of avoidance. The Freeing Peaks were intended for challenging hikes with impressive views as a reward. The Joy of the Seas was a 'party boat' for high energy celebrations. The Conversational Marina was designed as a relaxed area for connecting with other sailors. The Ruins of Regression were both a childlike outdoor playground and the remnants of a historical castle fort. Finally, there was the Sea of Commune that connected the islands to one another.

The second group of cartographers created a map inspired by words relating to **death.** They focused on creating a space that could be travelled through, with the desired destination being the **'Sea of Letting Go'**. This group started sketching in pencil and then used felt tips to affirm their collaborative decisions. On the left-hand side of the map are the **'Sources of Vulnerability'**, which are glacier-melt lakes high in a mountain range. These sources flow as streams down to the **'Complex Valley'**, which is shrouded in thick fog. Some streams pass through the **'Forest of Upset'**, which is dense and difficult to navigate. Others by-pass the forest, representing the different routes people may take on their journey towards acceptance. Some streams pool in the **'Lake of Quiet'**, which was described as a place of peace or a place of eerie solitude depending on the perspective of the traveller. The streams converge on the **'Shore of Beauty'** and flow into the Sea of Letting Go.
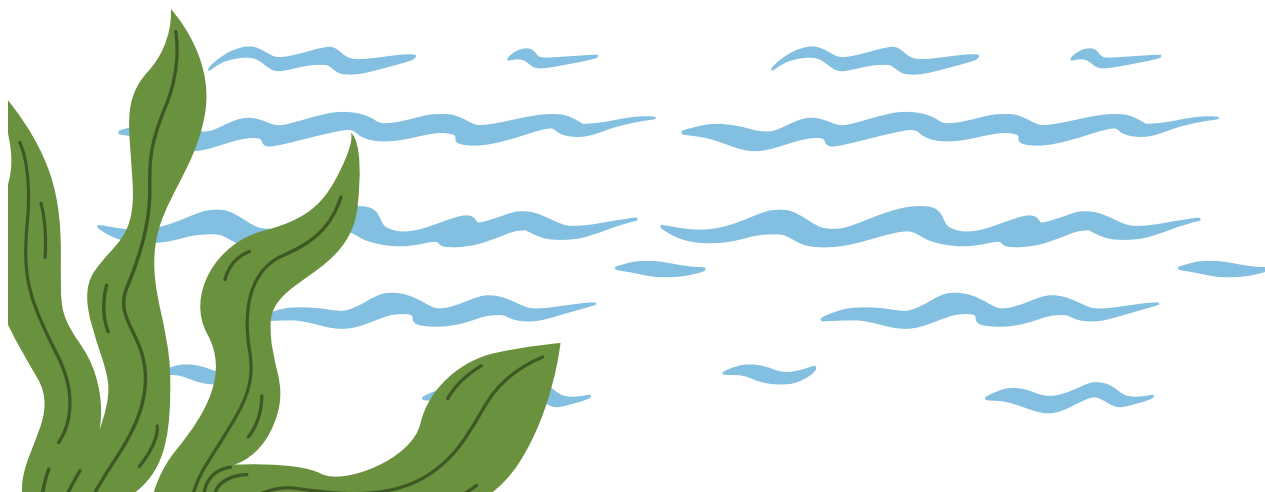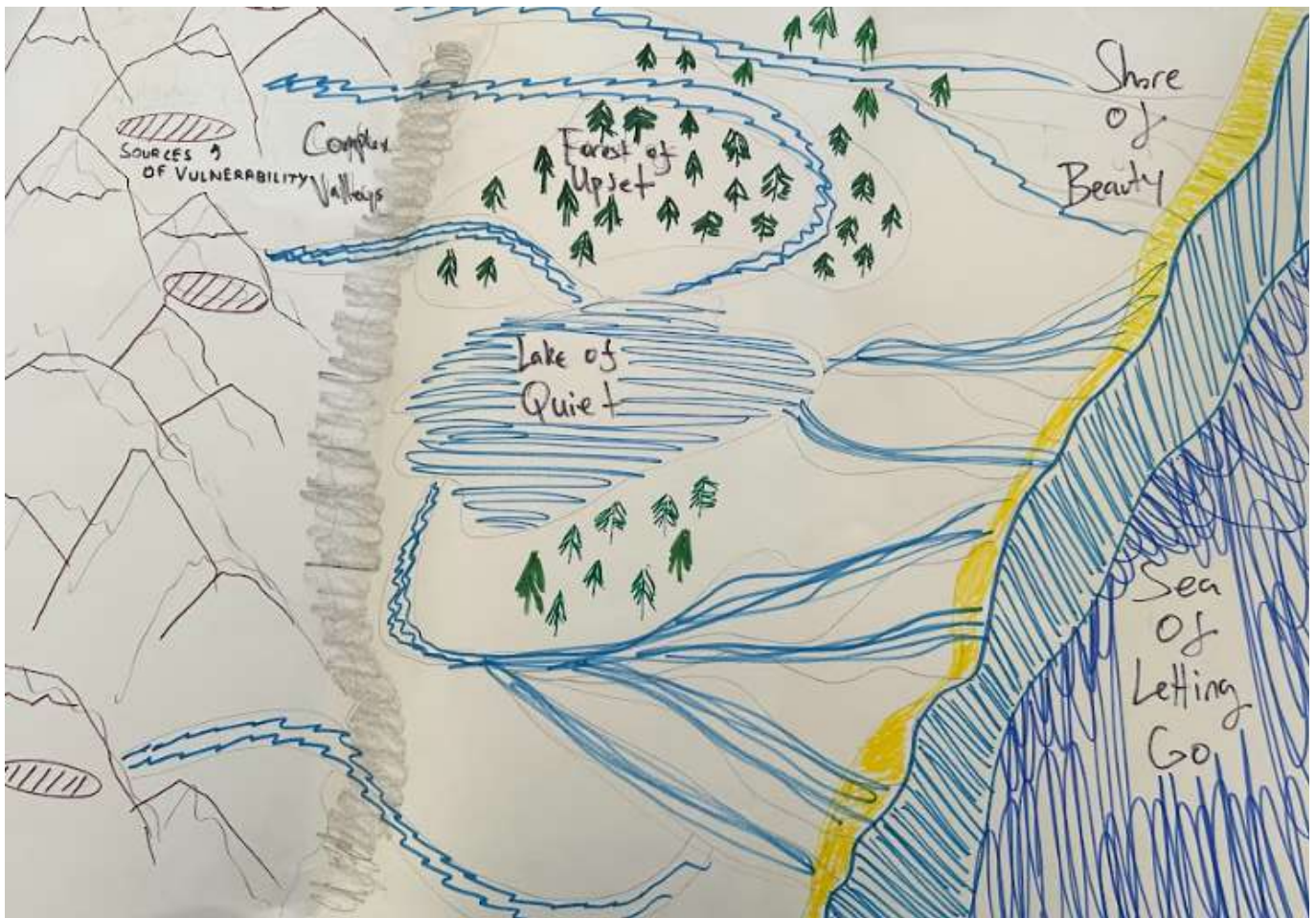
Figure 5: Final map in response to prompt words relating to death.

Character Creators

The group of character creators selected a circle of prompts that related to **both death and play.** These were the divisive words that had been hard to categorise during the previous activity.

They began by collectively filling in the blanks on the adapted TTRPG role-playing worksheet for one of the words and discussing their ideas together.

After the facilitator reminded them of the time limit, they then quickly worked independently to each fill in an individual worksheet for one additional prompt.

Character Creator – Worksheet 1

1. Hi, my name is Heart full. (meanyful)
2. I'm infinite years old and stand 3 foot tall.
3. When people see me, they first notice my search for true meaning and my smile of gratitude.
4. I wear a heart on my hoof, and move with serenity + bounce.
5. I'm from the abundant woods where my people are known for compassion, kindness + strength
6. I believe in serendipity, but my generous side can get in my way.
7. I dream of being taller so people see I am as big as my heart.

Personal Inventory

1. My trusty gifting heart can
2. My burden I can't always reach.
3. My treasured possession, both can gifting antlers.

Character Creator – Worksheet 1

1. Hi, my name is Revealing (Reva)
2. I'm 2 years old and stand 4 tall.
3. When people see me, they first notice my moving antlers mirror, and smile
4. I wear reflections and move with patience
5. I'm from the woods, where my people are known for honesty
6. I believe in telling the truth, but my compassionate side can get in my way.
7. I dream of what it would be like not to be able to see.

Personal Inventory

1. My trusty mirror
2. My burden mirror
3. My treasured possession, mirror

Figure 6: Adapted TTRPG character creation sheets inspired by prompts that related to both death and play. These were filled in individually.

Unpredictable

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I'm ageless and stand anywhere between 2 and 8ft tall
depending on my mood

When people see me, they first notice my patchwork cloak,
my asymmetrical twisting horns, and the way I seem to
blink in and out of focus.

I wear an ever-changing robe that seems to change
colour as it moves, and move in fits and starts, graciously
and then erratically

Nowhere

I'm ~~from that part where my people are known for~~
~~their enduring wisdom their neutrality, peacefulness and~~
~~even temper~~ I'm homeless, and do not know my people
~~believing in nothing but my love for everything gets in the~~
~~way~~

My trusty yo-yo
My burden a to-do list
My treasured possession a picture of the house I was born in

Figure 7: This character creation sheet was filled in collectively by the whole group as they discussed various creative directions they could pursue.

THE HOURGLASS
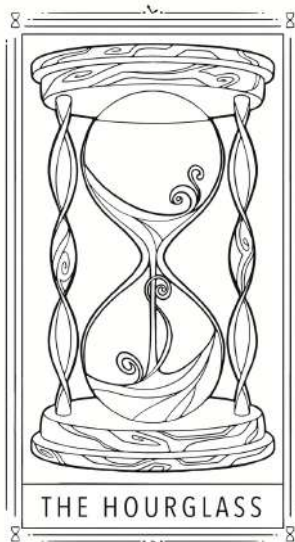
Sketches and line art examples of **character**, **place** and **object** card designs by **Abbie Foster.**

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This group decided to pursue a fantastical direction with their character design. They drew across myths, folklore, and contemporary fantasy literature to inspire their thinking. They leaned heavily into symbolism, archetypes, and metaphor. Specifically, they imagined a group of forest creatures that combined animal and human features.

The framing of the character outline – in particular, the conflict implied by the sentence **"I believe in _____, but my _____ side can get in my way"** – allowed participants to express the nuance and complexities of each prompt divisive prompt word.

This duality is also expressed in the capaciousness of the symbolic talismans. For example, **'the mirror'** as a significant object was listed both as a treasure and as a burden.

Cards showing **character**, **place** and **object** by **Abbie Foster.**

Presenting Back to the Group

At the end of the agreed time limit, the facilitator called participants back together to share their creative outputs.

Each group stood at the front of the space and explained their final maps and character designs. They talked through their design process, including false starts and what they felt they had failed to capture in their final offerings. This generated a lot of discussion, and there was a sense that the two maps and set of character designs would work well in conversation with each other – each filling the other's perceived gaps.

Activity Three: Pruning

After a short comfort break, the facilitator brought the whole group together once more. The facilitator gave a 15-minute presentation on what was meant by **'game mechanics'**, using props to illustrate familiar examples (e.g., UNO cards, playing cards, tarot cards, dice, meeples, and other board game components). The facilitator also introduced the concepts of **'win conditions'** and **'fail conditions'** and listed common examples from board games. Finally, the facilitator gave one definition of **'game'** that focused on the tension between goals and obstacles.

Following this short presentation, the group sat in a circle with their maps and character sheets in the centre. A conversation evolved organically about what would happen if the characters and maps were combined. The facilitator steered this discussion towards a set of **'verbs'** – things the players could do – or **'goals'** – things the players could achieve. The facilitator distilled from this conversation the following goals:

1) **Reveal the map.**
2) **Arrive unburdened.**

These were felt to be meaningful goals because they gave the player an active role – that of the 'revealer' – and the concept of 'unburdening' entailed the possibility of interesting decision-making.

This decision-making was expressed as deciding 'when to relinquish?' and 'what to relinquish?', with there being benefits and drawbacks to each choice and risk / randomness playing a role.

When the facilitator prompted the group to consider different playing dynamics, suggestions were made about **'social negotiation'** being a key part of the playing experience. This led to a discussion of the bargaining stage of grief and how this might be modelled within a ludic system.

Figure 8:
Facilitator's summary of final group discussion that combined the maps with the character profiles.

GOALS
1. Reveal the map
2. Arrive unburdened

Conflict / Choice

1. When to relinquish?
2. Social negotiation
   ↳ bargaining / betting