

Workshop Two: Prototyping & Playtesting

Participants: 3 game designers, 3 games studies academics, 1 death studies academic, 1 death doula, 1 hospice charity representative, 1 bereavement counsellor (10 participants total)

Duration: 3 hours 30 minutes, plus 1 hour break for lunch

Space: English Faculty, University of Cambridge

Welcome: Re-capping Workshop One

The facilitator welcomed participants back and started by discussing emerging news of genocides in Palestine and Sudan. The group reflected on death, privilege, and inequity, and drew lines around the limits of the collective expertise in the room. The group acknowledged that **'good deaths'** should be a fundamental human right, but that they were unequally distributed across race, class, ability, and gender – as well as across geographic lines. This discussion yielded no 'solution' – indeed, this was not the intention – but it did yield important questions about how the group should proceed in light of our shared aims to facilitate better conversations about death and dying.

Activity One: Better Conversations

The facilitator had written the shared aim **‘To create a playful experience that facilitates better (self?) conversations about death’** on the whiteboard.

The facilitator led a discussion on where conversations about death seemed to ‘go wrong’ and what limitations prevented better conversations. Contributions from this discussion were recorded on the board. They included:

- 1) **Fear of upsetting the other person**
- 2) **Unpleasant reality**
- 3) **Not wanting to face it**
- 4) **No social script**
- 5) **Conversations get ‘shut down’**
- 6) **Lack of understanding (particularly amongst young children)**
- 7) **Finding the space**
- 8) **The feeling of a loss of safety**
- 9) **The sense that voicing it makes it real**
- 10) **The loss of possible futures**
- 11) **The disruption of a self-narrative**
- 12) **The ‘untimeliness’ of death**

The facilitator then picked a different colour board pen and asked the group if they wanted to expand on any of these points, perhaps with suggestions for how these obstacles could be tackled.

For **‘Fear of upsetting the other person’**, the group pointed out that ‘upset’ was necessary and unavoidable. They also noted that this issue amounted to **‘fearing a feeling’**, suggesting that greater acceptance of a broader spectrum of feelings would help to alleviate this concern. Finally, the group discussed **‘wanting to protect’** each other from this feeling, and how a more helpful and caring alternative would be ‘wanting to prepare’ each other for this feeling.

For **'No social script'**, the group discussed the idea that it is important to have these conversations modelled so that people can learn through observation, but that at the same time there was not a 'correct' path. This led to the idea of **invitations and questions**, rather than social cues. Invitations and questions allow for some uncertainty, whereas a script suggests a safe, directed exchange.

For **'The untimeliness of death'**, the group commented that media frame life stories as having a 'beginning / middle / end' and that we therefore make mental maps of our lives with chronological milestones spaced evenly across it. This timeline falls apart in the face of the untimeliness of death, resulting in some dying people embracing a 'Christmas in July' approach to time and closure.

After participants had had an opportunity to flesh out some solutions for each obstacle, the facilitator then asked how **playfulness** might augment these strategies. She changed pen colour again to record this discussion on top of the existing shared notes.

For **'Fear of upsetting the other person'**, the group further suggested that cooperative play could shift these dynamics, giving conversation partners a shared goal to achieve together. Equally, the asymmetry of some cooperative games could bring to the fore the tensions at play in these delicate conversations. Finally, the group talked about games as a **'safe rehearsal space'** and that events in games happened to our 'playing selves', which feel more '3rd person' than our everyday selves. This distance allows us to take greater social risks, but also allows us to reflect on our own behaviour more critically.

For **'Unpleasant reality'**, the group discussed **the 'half-real' nature of games**: the idea of role-playing in games connected to the concept of 'Christmas in July'. Games allow players to live out certain **'conditional' realities**, which can lessen the sense of loss and regret that accompanies the realisation that some milestones will not be achieved. They also commented on the difference between a satisfying playing activity and a 'pleasant fantasy', noting

that it can sometimes be satisfying to lose a game, for instance if there is a sense that one has had a worthy opponent, or that the rules were fair, or that the experience was enjoyable despite the outcome. This in turn led to a conversation about games without fail states and, in particular, games that encourage subjective self-expression that invites players to decide themselves on the value of the outcome.

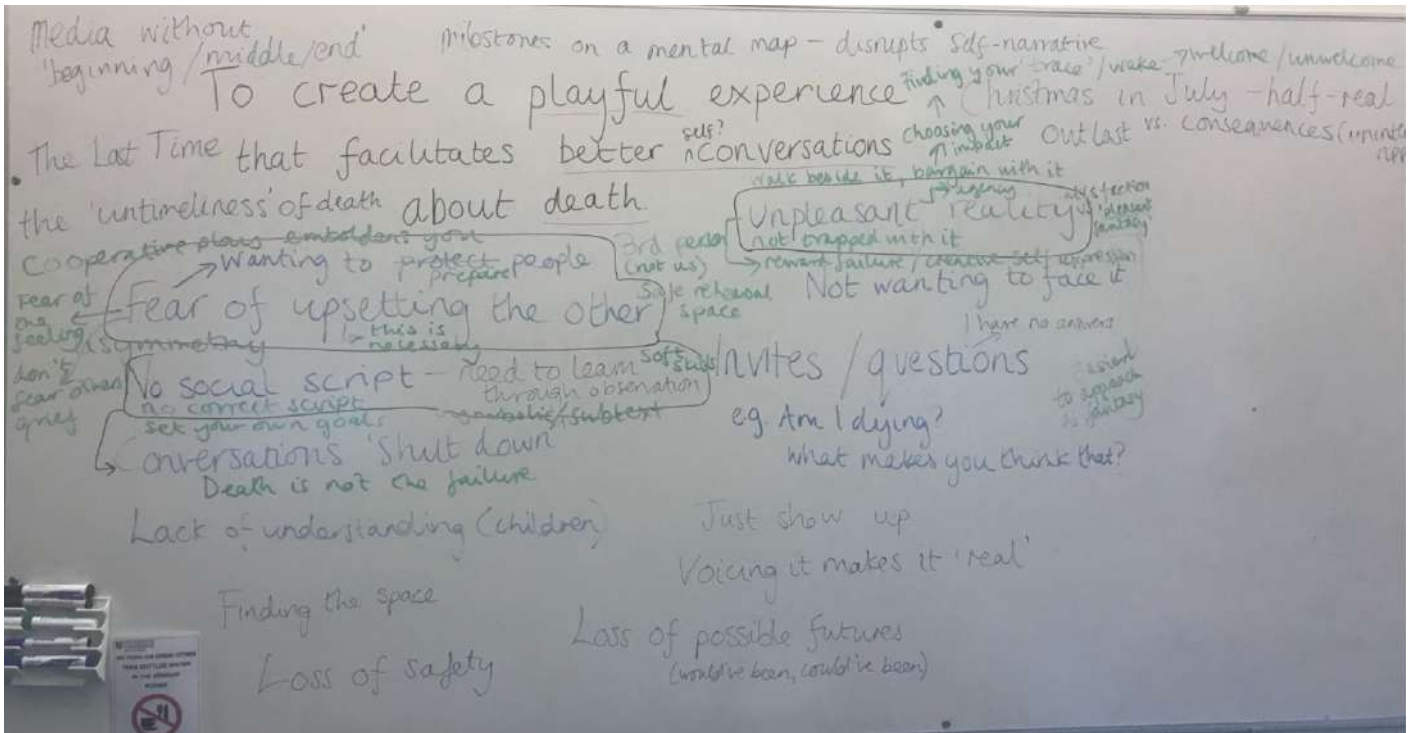
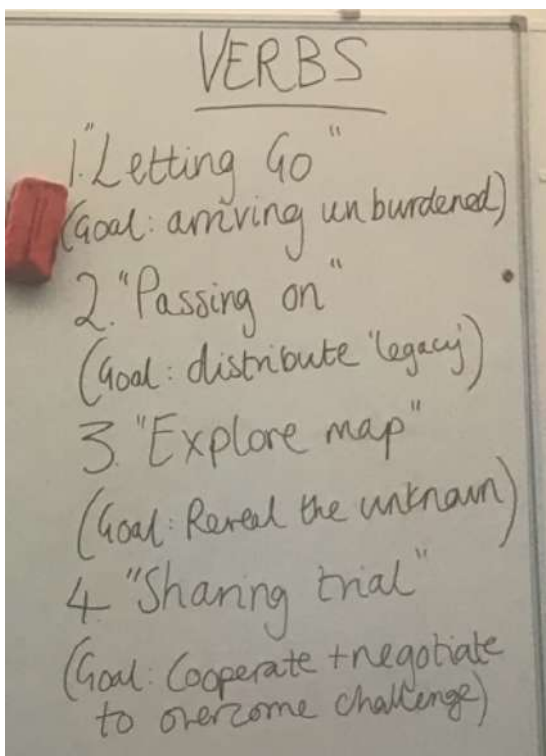


Figure 9: Whiteboard recording opening group discussion for Workshop 2.



To conclude this discussion, the facilitator recorded on the whiteboard some of the **'verbs'** or **'core player interactions'** that brought together ideas from the previous workshop with new actions emerging from this discussion of 'better conversations'.



Figure 10: List of 'verbs' recorded on whiteboard that connect ideas from the previous workshop with this workshop's discussion of 'better conversations'.



Activity Two: Player Experience

After a coffee break, the facilitator explained that the game design process often starts with a focus on **player experience**. Using the **Player Experience Sheet**, the facilitator described common player experiences that game designers might aim to elicit.

The facilitator then asked the group, in light of the discussion surrounding ‘better conversations’, **what kind of player experience do we want to aim for? What mechanics would support this experience? What visual and tactile qualities would support this experience? What themes would support this experience?**

Lunch

Activity Three: Cards & Boards

The participants split into two groups. The facilitator suggested that the groups could either **‘mod’ a well-known card game or board game** to reflect some of the concepts discussed at the workshops (giving the example of how the ‘discarding card’ mechanic in UNO might connect to themes of unburdening) or they could **develop an original game concept** that had emerged from our discussions.

The facilitator spent time with each group acting as a scribe to record their developing ideas. Then the facilitator encouraged participants to use the prototyping materials to model parts of their ideas. The game designers were able to support this process, drawing on their familiarity with rapid prototyping.

1. Guess who? but evocative objects related to death and legacy - a test to see if you have the same answers
2. Battleships, but you both have the same metaphoric map and you place symbolic items
↳ a 3rd random player (Death) like a minesweeper element
3. Happy families but you are collecting a 'non-set' that evokes your thoughts about death → creating a bouquet where the flowers have symbolic meanings
4. A deck-building game to create your "perfect" funeral or the "perfect" legacy for yourself or for a pre-created character
5. A reverse trick-taking game where you work together to give a character closure or a 'good death'
6. A character is dying and facing challenges/ has wishes. You deal cards to try to resolve as many parts as possible before they die - like Codenames - multiple cards could cover 2 or 3 problems? Storytelling game. Dice ticks down each turn. Dice could be used to show how you want to allocate dice - 10 dice each at the start?

7. You could roll a dice to show how many turns you have (ticks down one per turn) ~~or~~ shuffle in an end card into the deck which could be drawn at any time.

The first group began by discussing how they could modify popular board games to express some of the key ideas around death and dying.



Figure 11: Transcription made by facilitator of opening discussion of Activity 3: Cards and Boards.

Their initial idea was based around the classic game, **Guess Who?** They discussed the fact that the dynamics of this game mirrored the dynamics of a conversation between a dying person and a loved one: each conversation partner had a different set of information, and both had to ask the 'right' questions in order to access the information of the other.

This **idea of hidden information** led to a conversation about the pen-and-paper game, **Battleships**. This idea was modded by suggesting the Battleship grid could be a symbolic map and the ships could instead be meaningful talismans. Each player had to guess where the other would choose to locate a meaningful talisman, which would lead to conversations about what death and dying meant to each person. It was suggested that there was an implied 'third player': **Death**. Death was randomly located on the map and could accidentally be encountered at any time.

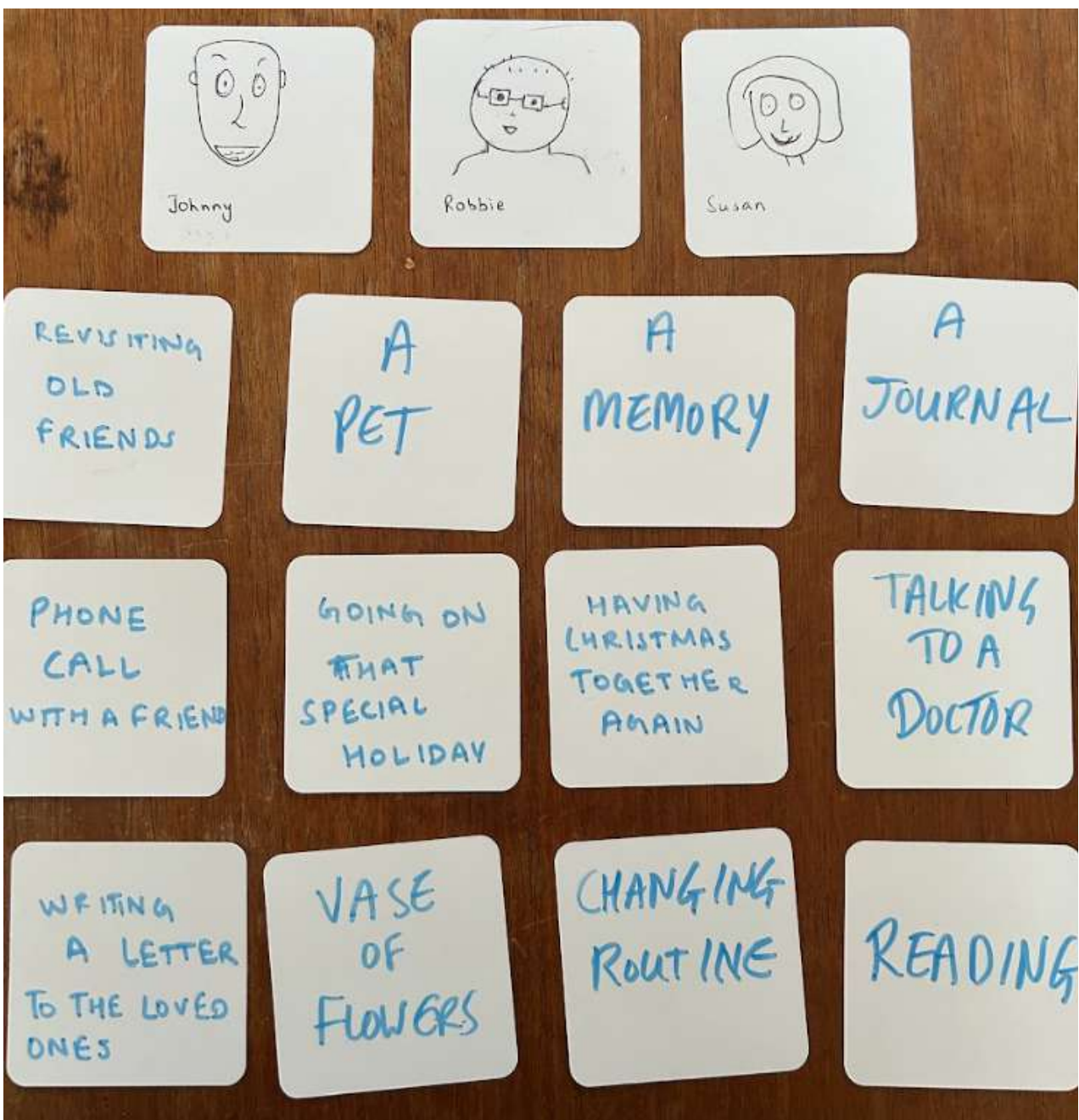
The **idea of making meaningful connections between symbolic objects** led to a discussion of a mod of **Happy Families**, where players had to collect a personal, subjective 'set' of cards that expressed what a '**good death**' meant to them. This evolved to be collecting a bouquet of flowers, where each flower had a symbolic meaning presented to players in the form of a Victorian-style botany book. This idea was re-imagined as a more complicated deck-building card game, where you had to construct the 'perfect' funeral or the 'perfect' legacy. There was a sense that the indirect competition common in deck-building games wasn't a good fit for the theme, and so it was instead suggested that they design a reverse trick-taking card game, where players work cooperatively to give a pre-written character a good death.

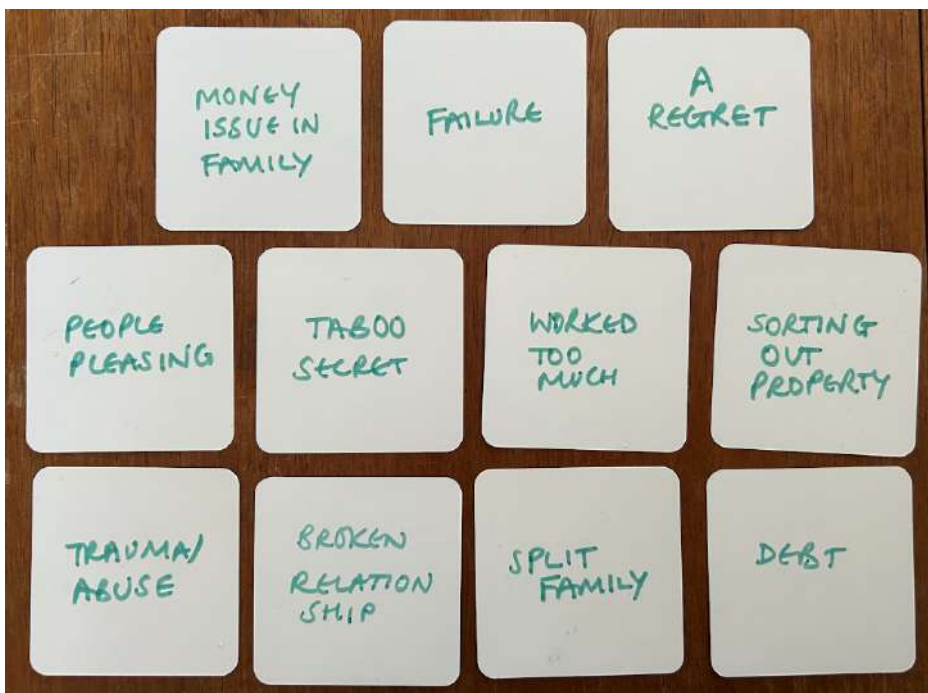
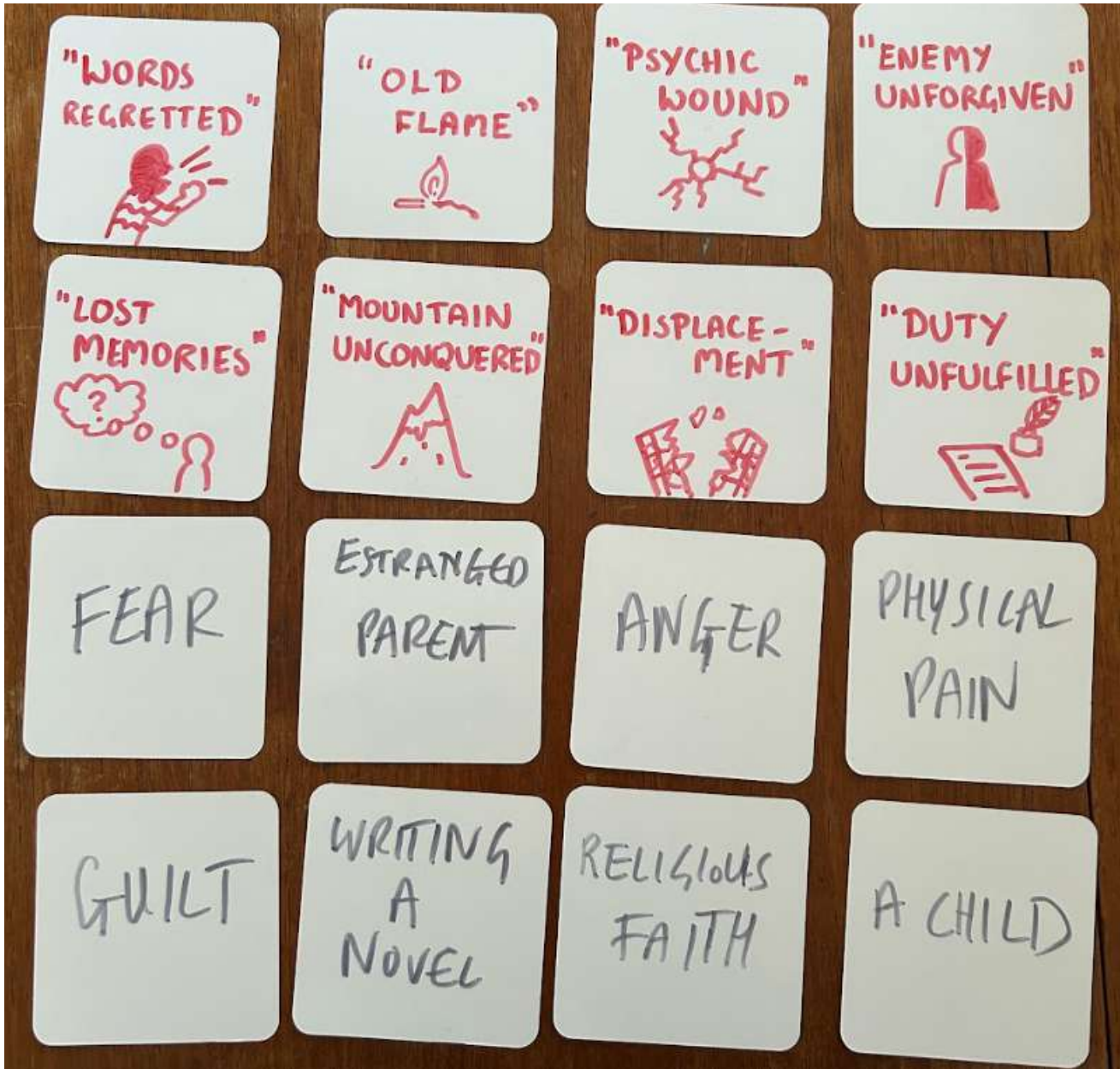
This final idea was then pursued in greater detail. The social board game **Codenames** provided inspiration for a strategic mechanic where players could resolve multiple needs with a single card. It was felt that the game should incorporate an element of collaborative storytelling, similar to some tabletop role-playing games. To introduce some ludic tension, it was decided that the

time for each scenario would be limited, and would be decided by rolling a die.

Each turn the dice would tick down from whatever its starting value was to 1, when time would be up. An alternative would be to shuffle an 'end' card into a deck that could be drawn at any moment.

The group decided to explore this idea further through prototyping (Fig. 12-14).





Figures 12-14: Card prototypes of a collaborative game wherein players work to meet the needs of a dying person before time runs out.

The second group decided to further develop the idea from **Workshop 1** that brought together the symbolic maps and original character designs. They wanted to make a table-top role-playing game that used a combination of dice and cards to introduce chance events into a co-created narrative. They decided to stick with the verb **'letting go'** as the core mechanic, and therefore decided that the game would require players to collect and play cards until they have no cards left or they can no longer play the remaining cards they have.

They also discussed the **idea of giving cards to other players**, and whether this might be experienced as a gift or a burden.

The importance of choosing the right metaphorical framework for the game was emphasised. Ideas from ancient myths were suggested such as the Valkyries or the three sisters weaving and cutting the threads of life. Original metaphors were also discussed: the idea of 'dying in one's cowboy boots' led to a conversation about how footwear might play a symbolic role.

The aim of playing this game is to have empathetic conversations where players are encouraged to take on and advocate for viewpoints that are not their own. To facilitate this, each player would be cast as a pre-designed character with specific goals and conflicts. Some examples generated were:

- **A strong warrior who wants to die in battle, but is really over-powered and so often defeats his opponents with ease and therefore cannot be killed.**
- **A reclusive monk who wants to die naturally, but also wants to leave a memorable legacy.**

The groups presented their prototypes to each other and explained how to play them.

Fantasy framework TRPG
 Combo of dice + cards — encounters
 — characters
 ↓
 determines goals

empathetic conversations & perspective taking

Passive effect from holding them
 different effect when it is played - it aids someone.

Discarding your hand means the game completes for you.

Do you have to accept the gift/aid? Do they weigh you down.

A Good Death

Valkarie is "chooser of the slain"

3 sisters cutting threads

Different character builds
 what legacy do you want?
 what metaphor for death → return to earth
 ascending
 crossing a threshold
 going to sleep

Footwear for character?
 Dying in my cowboy boots

Inner obstacle - the strong warrior wants to die in battle but is really overpowered!



Figures 15:
 Constructing character frameworks: a strong warrior and a reclusive monk.

Reclusive monk wants to die naturally but also wants to leave a legacy → how to play against your best interests?
 Set actions for each character.

Next Steps & Thank Yous

All the knowledge from the death experts has allowed us designers to explore how to open up conversations about death using game mechanics in a really authentic way.

This has been incredibly energising for me as a designer

Really interesting, encouraging space for conversations around death + play!

Looking forward to seeing what comes with it!

Really enjoyable experience
- so so different to anything I have done before

Taking away ways to step into very different viewpoints and strategies from the gamers which has expanded my views on not just death but looking at life.

Brilliant ideas,
collaboration between everyone
So much knowledge / Great opening conversations
Thank you

The facilitator thanked all the participants and informed them about the project's next steps. Feedback and questions were then encouraged. Some feedback was given orally, and some feedback was submitted via written notecards.