

Grief in Video Games: Understanding Loss and Mourning with Narrative Design

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Abstract

The Purpose of the Study: This study explores how video games portray grief through storytelling, visual design, and gameplay. It argues that video games can express complex emotions like loss and healing by involving players directly in the experience, offering something unique compared to other media.

Literature Review / Background: As video games grow into expressive storytelling tools, researchers and designers have started to examine how they represent emotions. Works by scholars like Hocking, Isbister, and Ahmed show how game mechanics, visuals, and sound can shape emotional responses. This study builds on those ideas, treating games as emotional texts that combine narrative and interaction.

Method: The study uses a qualitative, interpretive method through thematic analysis. It focuses on ten narrative-based games: Spiritfarer, Firewatch, Gris, Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, What Remains of Edith Finch, Life is Strange, To the Moon, That Dragon, Cancer, Before Your Eyes, and The Stillness of the Wind. Each game is analyzed through story, visuals, sound, gameplay, and emotional tone.

Results: The findings show that grief is represented in many ways, from symbolic storytelling to realistic scenes and choices. Games combine sound, pacing, and interaction to create emotional impact. They offer players space to reflect and emotionally engage with the narrative, rather than just follow a story.

Conclusion: Video games portray grief well because they allow players to experience it actively. Grief is not just a theme but a part of game design. As games evolve, they offer meaningful ways to connect with loss, healing, and emotional expression through play.

Keywords: Grief, Video Games, Narrative Design, Mourning, Player Experience, Interactive Storytelling

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Video Oyunlarında Yas: Anlatı Tasarımıyla Kayıp ve Matemi Anlamak

Öz

Giriş ve Çalışmanın Amacı: Bu çalışma, video oyunlarının hikâye anlatımı, görsel tasarım ve oynanış yoluyla yas duygusunu nasıl temsil ettiğini inceler. Video oyunlarının kayıp ve iyileşme gibi karmaşık duyguları doğrudan oyuncu deneyimi aracılığıyla ifade edebileceğini ve bu yönyle diğer anlatı biçimlerinden farklı bir alan sunduğunu ileri sürer.

Kavramsal/Kuramsal Çerçeve: Video oyunları anlatı araçları olarak gelişirken, araştırmacılar ve tasarımcılar da bu oyunların duyguları nasıl temsil ettiğini incelemeye başlamıştır. Hocking, Isbister ve Ahmed gibi isimlerin çalışmaları, oyun mekaniği, görsellik ve ses tasarımının duygusal tepkileri nasıl şekillendirdiğini ortaya koyar. Bu çalışma, oyunları anlatı ve etkileşimin birleştiği duygusal metinler olarak ele alarak bu yaklaşımlardan beslenmektedir.

Yöntem: Bu araştırma, nitel ve yorumlayıcı bir yaklaşım benimseyerek tematik analiz yöntemiyle gerçekleştirılmıştır. Yas teması, anlatı odaklı on video oyunu üzerinden incelenmiştir: Spiritfarer, Firewatch, Gris, Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, What Remains of Edith Finch, Life is Strange, To the Moon, That Dragon, Cancer, Before Your Eyes ve The Stillness of the Wind. Her oyun, hikâye yapısı, görsel ve işitsel tasarım, oynanış mekanığı ve duygusal tonu açısından analiz edilmiştir.

Bulgular: Analizler, yası temsil etmenin farklı yollarla gerçekleştiğini göstermektedir: sembolik anlatılardan gerçekçi diyaloglara, çevresel ipuçlarından duygusal karar anlarına kadar çeşitli biçimlerde. Oyunlar, ses, tempo ve oyuncu etkileşimi bir araya getirerek duygusal etki yaratır. Oyunculara yalnızca bir hikâyeyi takip etmek yerine, bu hikâyeyle duygusal olarak bağ kurma ve düşünme alanı sunarlar.

Sonuç: Video oyunları, yası aktarmak için benzersiz bir potansiyele sahiptir çünkü oyunculara bu duyguyu aktif olarak deneyimleme imkânı tanır. Yas, yalnızca bir tema değil, aynı zamanda oyun tasarımının bir parçasıdır. Oyunlar gelişikçe, oyunculara kayıp, iyileşme ve duygusal ifade ile anlamlı bir bağ kurma yolları sunmaya devam edecektr.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yas, Video Oyunları, Anlatı Tasarımı, Matemi Deneyimlemek, Oyuncu Deneyimi, Etkileşimli Anlatı

Introduction

Grief is a profound human experience. It touches our emotional, psychological, and sometimes even spiritual parts. For a long time, stories in books, films, and theater have helped people understand and process grief. In recent years, video games have joined these forms of storytelling. Though still new in this area, video games have begun to offer powerful ways to explore loss and mourning. Because video games are interactive and immersive, they can experience emotions like grief more personally and actively. Developers have started telling

more emotional and thoughtful stories as the gaming audience ages. In these stories, grief is no longer just something happening in the background; it becomes the heart of the game. This paper explores how video games represent grief through story, structure, visual and sound design, and player interaction. It looks at how these elements combine to create meaningful emotional experiences, allowing players to see grief and feel and engage with it.

Grief originates from meanings such as *distress*, *suffering*, and *physical discomfort*. It derives from *gravare*, meaning to *make heavy*, *to burden*. This emphasis on weight points to the mental and bodily burden inherent in grief (Etymonline, n.d.). Psychologically, grief is defined as *the anguish experienced after a significant loss, usually the death of a loved one*, and this definition emphasizes that grief is not limited to death; it also includes emotional and physical symptoms such as separation anxiety, fixation on the past, and anxiety about the future (American Psychological Association, 2024). In the psychological model developed by Stroebe and Schut, grief oscillates between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented activities, involving the expression of pain, sharing of memories, and reconstruction of life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Visual arts serve as an important means of expressing grief. Cinema, in particular, is one of the most common ways of contemplating death and loss. In the research, *Gendered Grief: Depictions of Conjugal Bereavement in Contemporary Film*, Moran (2012) argues that films dealing with death and loss allow viewers to explore hidden aspects of grief; since death is not a daily experience in modern society, the media largely shape people's perceptions of death and mourning, offering viewers a chance to demystify the grieving process. From this perspective, it becomes possible to approach video games similarly to other art forms and cinema. Moreover, video games' interactive nature provides a unique engagement potential, allowing players to experience and express grief differently than passive audiences. A qualitative study on bereaved players revealed that video games often remind them of memories of their losses and help them construct new meanings through these experiences. Building on that research, the study highlights that video games can serve as a lifeline for players experiencing intense grief, allowing them to process their emotions and narrate their personal stories of loss. The findings suggest that video game environments can simulate subjective experiences of mourning, providing both memory-triggering and meaning-making spaces (Eum, K., & Doh, Y. Y., 2023)

Video games are unique in storytelling because they allow players to participate in the experience. Unlike books or films, games invite players to act, decide, and shape the story. This sense of control creates a safe, fictional space where players can explore difficult emotions like grief. By moving through these interactive stories, players witness and feel, respond to, and reflect on loss personally. Simulation games can promote empathy and emotional insight by

letting players inhabit another's experience (Bachen et al., 2016). Studying how games handle these themes can help future developers build more emotionally meaningful stories. It can also support using video games in therapy, education, or personal healing. Finally, it offers researchers new ways to consider how interactive media affects our emotional lives.

The main goal of this research is to explore how video games tell stories about grief. It looks at how games use story, visuals, sound, and player choices to express emotions like sadness, loss, and healing. This study focuses on single-player narrative games that deal with personal loss and mourning. It does not include multiplayer or action-based games that do not explore grief directly or emotionally. By studying a few selected games, this paper aims to show how interactive storytelling can help players connect with and understand difficult emotions through play.

This research uses a qualitative and interpretive approach. It focuses on how grief is portrayed in narrative-based video games through story, visuals, sound, and gameplay. Instead of collecting statistics or player data, the study explores how emotional meaning is created through the design of each game. The analysis is based entirely on my personal experience playing these games, with close attention to how their different elements work together to express grief.

I follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method with emotional theory as ludonarrative dissonance. This involves several steps: first, I familiarize myself with each game by playing it and taking detailed notes on emotional moments, key scenes, and design features related to mostly grief. Next, I code these notes, marking moments related to grief, emotion, memory, or loss. These codes are then grouped into broader themes, such as how grief is shown visually, how sound supports emotional tone, or how player actions reflect mourning and healing. Braun and Clarke's process continues reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they clearly capture the emotional experience across games. Finally, I define each theme and organize the analysis to reflect the games' emotional structure. This method treats games as emotional texts, allowing me to study not just what grief says about, but how to make players feel it.

Grief in video games can appear in many forms. It may surface in quiet scenes, difficult decisions, or small actions players perform during gameplay. This part of the research examines ten story-based games and how they portray grief through design and player experience. It focuses on how games help players feel and understand grief through their structure and mechanics. Each game is examined through four key aspects: storytelling, visual and sound design, gameplay, and emotional impact. These elements work together to create an

emotional experience that resonates with the player. The aim is not to determine which game does it best, but to explore how each one builds its own way of expressing grief.

There are some limitations about the games chosen for this research, such as the small group of story-based titles that deal directly with grief. Not every type of game or player experience is included. The analysis comes from my experience playing these games and is supported by academic sources and published materials. However, it does not involve interviews with players or statistical data. It is also important to remember that video games are personal and subjective. Each player may respond differently to the same scene or story. What is felt as powerful and emotional by one player might not have the same effect on another. Because of this, the emotional responses discussed in this study may not reflect every player's experience.

Emotional Theory

It looks at how games tell stories and how players connect with emotions through play. One key idea is that games are not just stories we watch, but experiences we participate in. This active role allows players to feel emotions more deeply because they are involved in the unfolding events. The research also draws from the concept of ludo narrative, which explores how gameplay and story work together to create emotional meaning.

Clint Hocking (2007) introduced the concept of describing moments in a game when the gameplay mechanics and the story conflict. For example, a game might tell a serious or emotional story about loss but still ask the player to perform actions that feel violent, rushed, or disconnected from that emotion. This dissonance can break the emotional immersion and weaken the story's impact. On the other hand, when gameplay and narrative are in harmony, when a player's actions reflect and reinforce the story's themes, *ludonarrative dissonance* occurs. Hocking identified this tension in *BioShock* (2007), where the story encourages moral reflection and empathy, while the gameplay rewards self-serving behavior. Building on this, Frédéric Seraphine (2016) recontextualizes Hocking's concept as a structural opposition between incentives (the ludic system that drives player action) and directives, the narrative system that conveys meaning. When these two structures contradict, players experience what Seraphine calls *emersion*, a rupture of immersion that draws attention to the underlying mechanics of play.

Rather than treating dissonance as a design flaw, Seraphine argues it can serve as a purposeful narrative strategy, allowing players to confront moments of moral or emotional discomfort. This view is particularly relevant to games exploring grief, where mechanical disruption or emotional contradiction can mirror the instability of mourning itself. A momentary

break between what the player does and what the story feels can evoke the fragmentation of loss, the sense that one's actions no longer align with inner emotional reality. In this sense, ludonarrative dissonance, when deliberately used, becomes a tool for representing grief authentically, transforming the player's awareness of gameplay into a shared emotional language between designer and player (Seraphine, 2016, pp. 2-3, 6-8).

In psychology, the concept of affect refers to the biologically grounded component of emotion. Silvan Tomkins defined affect as an innate, preprogrammed mechanism that produces predictable physiological responses when triggered (Tomkins, 2008, pp.133-135). However, in adults, these biological impulses are shaped through complex ideo-affective structures intertwined with cultural schemas, narratives, and personal life scripts. Through these structures, individuals construct how they feel, interpret, and express emotions (Frank & Wilson, 2020, pp.4-6). When affect theory is applied to game studies, it becomes clear how ludonarrative dissonance relates to the activation and regulation of affective systems. In grief-centered games, the player's actions (such as repetition, failure, and persistence) function as affective triggers, aligning or conflicting with the emotional flow of the narrative.

In cases of ludo-narrative dissonance, game mechanics can weaken emotional resonance and diminish the experiential depth of the grief process. However, when narrative and gameplay are in harmony, the act of play becomes a carrier of affect, allowing grief to be experienced through representation and action and interaction. From this perspective, the element of memory in grief-themed games functions as an affective cue: actions such as revisiting a place or touching an object can reactivate past emotional states. Since affect is not merely a cognitive label but a bodily response, these cues can produce somatic echoes, such as muscle tension, trembling, or shortness of breath. The interactive nature of games makes these echoes more dynamic, as the player can choose whether to re-experience these emotional triggers.

As Sara Ahmed (2014, p.4) explains, emotions are not just internal feelings but are shaped by cultural and social narratives. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed argues that emotions stick to objects and ideas through repeated social associations. This means that our feelings are learned through cultural practices and shared stories. When applied to games, this theory helps explain why small, everyday moments in gameplay, such as caregiving, remembering, or letting go, can carry deep emotional weight. These moments draw on shared human experiences and cultural understandings of grief, making them resonate more with players.

Jesse Schell (2020), in *The Art of Game Design*, emphasizes that emotional engagement in games comes from how different design elements are carefully integrated. Schell argues

that mechanics (how the game is played), feedback (how the game responds to the player), pacing (the rhythm of events), and narrative all work together to create a meaningful player experience. When designers thoughtfully align these tools, they can guide players through genuine emotional arcs. For grief, this might mean using slow pacing, ambient sound, and subtle interactions to mirror the emotional weight of loss, allowing the player to experience sorrow not through exposition, but through immersion. Together, Ahmed and Schell show how grief in games is constructed both culturally and mechanically, through what the player brings to the experience, and how the game invites them to feel.

Emotional design plays a central role in how video games communicate feelings such as grief. Katherine Isbister (2016, p.4), in *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, explains that emotional experiences in games are not created solely through narrative. Instead, they emerge from game mechanics, character expression, social interaction, and sensory feedback. Isbister's framework emphasizes how design elements can be intentionally used to support emotional connection between the player and the game world. According to Isbister, emotional engagement in games often happens through *micro-interactions*, small but meaningful moments, like a character's gaze or a reaction to the player's actions. These design choices can build empathy and help players relate to game characters more deeply. Isbister also discusses how interface feedback, pacing, and character behavior can encourage players to feel emotions more vividly, often without explicit storytelling.

In the context of this study, emotional design connects the storytelling, visual and audio style, gameplay, and player choices. For example, a game may use slow pacing, soft lighting, and limited interaction after a character's death to give space for reflection. These moments, though subtle, contribute to an intense emotional atmosphere that lets players feel grief actively. By applying Isbister's framework, this research highlights how games use such design techniques to evoke grief through plot and how players interact with the world and receive feedback from it.

As Isbister (2016) explains, emotional engagement in games often comes from small moments such as gestures, reactions, or feedback that connect players with the characters. Combined with Seraphine's (2016) idea of ludonarrative dissonance, these moments become where the balance or conflict between story and gameplay is most visible. A short pause in movement, a slow response, or losing control for a moment can turn a simple mechanic into a symbol of loss. In games about grief, this tension gives meaning rather than breaking immersion. The gap between what players do and what they feel reflects mourning itself, when emotions and actions no longer move together.

Case Studies

The following case studies explore how grief is represented, felt, and performed in narrative video games through the interaction between story, mechanics, and player experience. Each game was selected for its distinctive approach to expressing loss and emotional recovery through play rather than exposition.

While the theoretical foundations have been outlined in the previous section, drawing on affect theory (Tomkins, 2008; Ahmed, 2014), emotional design (Isbister, 2016), and the concepts of ludonarrative dissonance and harmony (Hocking, 2007; Seraphine, 2016), the analyses below apply these frameworks in a close interpretive manner. Instead of relying on repeated citation, each game is examined through how its design, atmosphere, and interactivity embody emotional processes of grief.

This method emphasizes the experiential dimension of mourning in games: how players enact care, remembrance, or letting go through their own actions. The discussion focuses on how mechanics become metaphors for emotional states, and how the player's engagement transforms loss from a narrative event into a lived affective encounter.

Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020)

Spiritfarer tells the story of Stella, a gentle ferry master who guides lost spirits to the afterlife. Each spirit carries memories, regrets, and emotional attachments that shape its journey. As Stella, the player, listens, cooks, builds homes, and offers comfort until each spirit is ready to depart. Grief in Spiritfarer does not arrive through sudden tragedy but through small, repeated acts of care and companionship. Every farewell becomes both an ending and a quiet celebration of love that once existed, turning the passage of time into a cycle of remembrance and release.

What makes the game powerful is the way it blends feeling and action. The story's emotional tone is not delivered through cutscenes or dialogue, but through what the player does. Each act of feeding, hugging, or crafting is not only functional but expressive, transforming gameplay into emotional labor. The alignment between the story's meaning and the player's activity creates a sense of ludonarrative affect, a moment when the mechanics themselves carry emotion. Repetition becomes reflection; care becomes a form of resilience. Through this harmony, Spiritfarer transforms interaction into a language of empathy, where grief is not explained but felt through the rhythm of play.

The emotional atmosphere of the game grows from small, sensory details. The warmth of color, the softness of animation, and the gentle rise and fall of music together create a space

that invites calm attention rather than urgency. Players are encouraged to slow down, to breathe between moments of departure. This deliberate pacing turns silence into an emotional cue and allows space for reflection. The emotional design feels bodily, as if each gesture, hugging a spirit, steering the ship, or standing in the rain, echoes through the player's own rhythm of movement.

In Spiritfarer, grief becomes an interactive process of care. The tension between holding on and letting go defines not only the story, but the experience of play itself. Through its emotional design, the game turns mourning into participation. Players do not simply witness loss; they perform it, sustain it, and ultimately transform it into understanding. Spiritfarer shows how a video game can translate the language of emotion into action, and how play can become a quiet act of love.

Firewatch (Campo Santo, 2016)

Firewatch explores grief through distance, silence, and withdrawal. The player inhabits Henry, a man who retreats to the Wyoming wilderness after leaving behind a painful personal life and a wife suffering from illness. His solitude becomes both refuge and burden, creating a world where grief takes the form of quiet isolation. The only voice that reaches him is Delilah's, another lookout, who speaks to him through a walkie-talkie. Their conversations unfold slowly, building a fragile intimacy shaped by uncertainty and avoidance. What remains unsaid between them carries as much emotional weight as what is spoken. Grief here does not erupt in visible sorrow but lingers in pauses, hesitations, and the persistent hum of loneliness that fills the empty forest.

The design of Firewatch turns this emotional stillness into a form of play. The player's main action is movement; walking, looking, and listening, yet these simple mechanics serve as emotional devices rather than challenges. The slow pace and limited interaction mirror Henry's emotional paralysis. Dialogue choices allow players to shape the tone of connection with Delilah, but no choice truly changes the outcome. This lack of control reflects the helplessness that often accompanies loss, when effort and understanding cannot repair what has already broken. Through this structure, Firewatch transforms the act of exploration into an emotional process, where walking through silence becomes a metaphor for moving through grief.

The visual and auditory design deepens this affective experience. The golden light of sunset, the vast emptiness of the forest, and the absence of human presence create a mood that feels both beautiful and heavy. Sound replaces music: wind, distant thunder, and footsteps on dirt. Each quiet moment expands the sense of isolation, turning emptiness into emotional

space. The environment does not simply decorate the story; it becomes its emotional language. Every horizon line and stretch of silence speaks to what Henry cannot say aloud.

Firewatch's power lies in how it refuses resolution. The story ends not with closure, but with acceptance that some emotions remain unsettled. Grief is not conquered but carried, softened only by fleeting moments of connection. By combining silence, movement, and minimal dialogue, Firewatch transforms emotional distance into participation. The player does not overcome Henry's grief but learns to inhabit it, to feel how absence can echo through space and time. Through this quiet design, the game shows that grief is not always about what happens, but about what remains when nothing else does.

Gris (Nomada Studio, 2018)

Gris tells a story of emotional loss through abstraction and movement rather than words. It begins in silence, with a fragile figure wandering through a crumbling world of grey tones and empty spaces. From the very first moment, the game communicates numbness and paralysis. The absence of dialogue invites the player to feel instead of interpret, to move through emotion rather than describe it. As the journey continues, color slowly returns to the environment. Each hue signals an emotional shift. Blue carries the heaviness of sadness, red burns with frustration, and green brings renewal and calm. These transitions mirror how grief evolves, moving from stillness to acceptance without ever truly disappearing.

The watercolor world of Gris becomes the surface of its emotions. The fluid lines, the softness of texture, and the rhythm of light all express inner change. The music rises and falls like breathing, shaping an atmosphere of quiet reflection. The player's small movements such as jumping, gliding, or standing still echo the character's emotional transformation. Nothing in Gris feels rushed or forced. Every moment invites attention, encouraging the player to slow down and sense how space and sound communicate feeling.

Mechanically, the game contains no enemies or failure. Its focus is on exploration and transformation. Each new ability gained represents an emotional adaptation, a metaphor for the strength that emerges through vulnerability. Becoming heavier allows grounding after a fall. Gliding through air suggests surrender and release. These gestures turn play into a form of emotional language. They do not resolve grief but allow players to move within it, to inhabit sadness as part of a living process.

Gris does not seek closure. It embraces grief as something that shifts, softens, and reshapes over time. Through its visual poetry and attention to motion, sound, and touch, the game transforms silence into understanding. What appears wordless becomes deeply expressive through color and movement. In the end, Gris is not about escaping sorrow but

about living alongside it, finding beauty within fragility, and recognizing that grief continues to change just as the world of color does.

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons (Starbreeze Studios, 2013).

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons tells a story of love, loss, and emotional growth through the shared journey of two siblings searching for a cure for their dying father. What begins as an adventure filled with wonder slowly transforms into a quiet and deeply emotional experience. The brothers travel together, help strangers, and overcome challenges, but the bond that defines the story is broken when the older brother dies. This turning point changes the nature of play itself. What was once an act of cooperation becomes a confrontation with absence. Grief is not only part of the story but is also felt directly through how the game is played.

The game's core design turns its emotional themes into a physical experience. Each brother is controlled by one side of the controller, creating a direct connection between cooperation and touch. The player must coordinate both hands to move forward, linking their own rhythm to the unity of the brothers. When the older brother dies, one side of the controller becomes inactive. The loss is felt not through dialogue or cinematic display but through the sudden emptiness in the player's hands.

This moment embodies the idea of ludonarrative dissonance because it makes emotion emerge through control rather than explanation. When one brother dies, the player immediately feels the loss through the change in gameplay. The hands that once worked together are now divided, and the empty side of the controller becomes a physical reminder of what is gone. This shift breaks the connection between movement and meaning, turning the player's own action into an emotional experience. The game no longer allows the same coordination, and that absence creates a quiet sense of grief. The player does not just see loss happen but feels it in their body through disrupted rhythm and incomplete control. The missing function becomes a form of mourning, showing how mechanics can carry emotion without the need for words or cinematic display.

The world of Brothers changes alongside this emotional shift. Its storybook landscapes, filled with vivid colors and fantastical creatures, gradually lose their warmth. The journey becomes quieter, emptier, and more restrained. Music that once carried momentum gives way to near silence. The faint sounds of wind and footsteps replace orchestral cues, emphasizing isolation and reflection. These design choices align the rhythm of play with the rhythm of grief, turning atmosphere into emotion. The world no longer invites exploration; it asks for endurance.

In the final sequence, the younger brother must cross water, an act he could never perform without his older sibling. The game requires the player to use the now meaningless control that once belonged to the lost brother. Through this gesture, memory becomes agency. The player must act through absence, using what is gone to move forward. This mechanic transforms grief into participation, fusing emotion and gameplay in a single motion. The experience of Brothers shows how video games can express grief not through words but through touch, rhythm, and design. By connecting story and control so completely, the game turns loss into a lived experience, allowing the player to feel how absence changes not only the world but also the way one moves through it.

What Remains of Edith Finch (Giant Sparrow, 2017)

What Remains of Edith Finch tells the story of Edith, a young woman returning to her family's large and silent house after years away. Her family is marked by a long line of early and unusual deaths, and as she walks through the house, she moves through layers of memory and time. Each room has been sealed like a monument, filled with personal objects that remain untouched. The player explores these spaces and enters short, self-contained scenes that reveal moments from each family member's life. Every story ends in loss, yet not all are purely tragic. Some are whimsical, others dreamlike, and a few carry quiet despair. Together, they create a portrait of grief that feels personal and generational, showing how families live with memory and how loss becomes part of their identity.

The house itself acts as both setting and storyteller. Every room is designed to express personality and emotion through light, space, and the placement of objects. The player learns who each person was without any exposition, simply by observing the environment. These spaces are then transformed into short playable memories, each rendered in a distinct visual style and soundscape. One unfolds like a comic book, another like a child's daydream, and another like a surreal film sequence. This variety in tone and design turns the experience into an emotional collage, where each fragment captures a different aspect of grief. The changing forms allow players to feel intimacy with each life, even though each story lasts only a few minutes.

The act of play deepens the emotional connection. Movement, observation, and interaction replace traditional storytelling. The player's participation transforms remembrance into a shared experience. Loss happens through the player's own actions, creating a sense of closeness that feels immediate and lived. This alignment between gameplay and emotion reflects the idea of ludonarrative affect, where the mechanics of interaction become emotional cues. The player does not simply witness the end of each life but performs it, giving weight to every gesture and transition.

What Remains of Edith Finch does not define grief as sorrow alone. It presents a mixture of emotions where wonder, nostalgia, confusion, and tenderness coexist. The game does not try to explain why each loss happened, but instead explores how these stories are remembered, retold, and carried forward. Through its fragmented structure and careful design, it turns the act of play into an exploration of memory. By the end, the house feels both full and empty, alive with voices that linger in objects and spaces. The game becomes a reflection on how families turn pain into narrative and how remembering the dead becomes a quiet form of love.

Life is Strange (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015)

Life is Strange tells the story of Max, a photography student who discovers she can rewind time, and her best friend Chloe, whose life is marked by loss, rebellion, and grief. What begins as a story about teenage friendship soon becomes a deep exploration of memory, responsibility, and the emotional consequences of trying to change fate. When Max returns to Arcadia Bay after years away, she finds Chloe angry and adrift, struggling with the death of her father and the mysterious disappearance of her friend Rachel. Max's supernatural ability initially feels like an escape from pain, a way to repair the past and protect the people she loves. However, as the story unfolds, every use of this power introduces new consequences that cannot be undone. The more Max intervenes, the clearer it becomes that grief cannot be avoided or erased. The game transforms her power into a metaphor for mourning itself, showing that loss lingers even when we try to reverse it. The emotional bond between Max and Chloe grows heavier with each choice, shifting from friendship to something deeper and more fragile. Their connection becomes a space where care, guilt, and love overlap, reflecting how grief often reshapes relationships.

The design of Arcadia Bay mirrors these emotional tensions. The town is ordinary yet filled with quiet detail, from photographs on walls to the way light filters through windows. The familiar spaces of bedrooms, schools, and diners evoke both comfort and melancholy, creating an atmosphere where memory and place become intertwined. The visual tone feels soft and slightly dreamlike, as if everything exists on the edge of remembrance. The use of natural sound, ambient noise, and acoustic music supports this intimacy, grounding moments of supernatural time travel in an emotional realism. The game encourages stillness. Players can sit, listen to music, and observe the world around them. These moments of calm are as significant as the choices themselves, allowing time for emotional reflection. The mechanics of rewinding time, at first empowering, gradually become heavy with moral weight. Players learn that every attempt to control fate introduces new forms of pain. This growing awareness turns agency into empathy. The player begins to understand that the power to change events is also the power to wound.

As the story progresses, Max's emotional struggle becomes a study in how grief operates across time. The ability to revisit moments of happiness and pain blurs the distinction between past and present. Every rewind is an act of denial and remembrance at once. The player participates in this cycle of emotional repetition, reliving moments not to change them, but to understand them differently. This loop mirrors how grief often returns in waves, unpredictable and unresolved. The narrative structure of *Life is Strange* invites players to feel this rhythm, not through dialogue or exposition but through the emotional texture of play. The passage of time becomes an emotional medium, carrying the weight of things left unsaid.

The final decision, whether to sacrifice Chloe or the town, transforms the game's themes into direct experience. This moment is not just a narrative climax, but a point where choice becomes emotional performance. The player must confront the limits of love and the inevitability of loss. The decision holds no clear right or wrong answer; instead, it asks what kind of grief the player can live with. This merging of mechanics and emotion captures the essence of ludonarrative affect, where play itself becomes a language of feeling. The consequence is not simply story progression but an embodied experience of sorrow, care, and acceptance. The silence that follows the ending reinforces this emotional weight, allowing space for reflection. *Life is Strange* reveals grief as an ongoing and transformative process. It is not about erasing pain, but about learning to exist within it, to hold on and let go at the same time. Through its pacing, design, and emotional interactivity, the game becomes a meditation on memory, love, and the fragile beauty of impermanence.

To the Moon (Freebird Games, 2011)

To the Moon tells the story of two doctors who use a memory-altering technology to fulfill the dying wish of an elderly man named Johnny. His request is simple yet mysterious. He wants to go to the moon, though he cannot remember why. The doctors enter his memories and move backward through his life, uncovering fragments of love, regret, and misunderstanding that slowly reveal the reason behind his wish. What begins as a technical mission becomes a deeply human story about memory, connection, and the quiet persistence of grief. The game does not treat sorrow as a single event, but as a feeling embedded in everyday life. It explores how moments that seem ordinary or incomplete can shape the emotional landscape of a lifetime. The act of traveling backward through time transforms grief into a process of rediscovery. Players piece together how joy and loss coexist, realizing that the things we forget can carry as much weight as what we remember.

The visual and auditory design of *To the Moon* strengthens this emotional journey. Its pixel-art style evokes nostalgia, recalling older role-playing games that many players associate with childhood. This familiar simplicity directs attention away from spectacle and toward feeling.

Each scene is built with care, using soft colors, quiet spaces, and gentle lighting to emphasize the fragility of memory. The music, composed mainly for piano, is the emotional heart of the experience. Melancholic themes recur at key points, linking moments of love, regret, and revelation. The repetition of certain melodies mirrors the way memories return in cycles, often when least expected. The result is an emotional rhythm that moves with the same tenderness as the story itself, creating a sense of calm reflection rather than dramatic intensity.

Gameplay in *To the Moon* is intentionally minimal, allowing players to focus entirely on emotional engagement. There are no enemies, puzzles, or time limits. The player walks through memories, interacts with objects, and collects fragments that unlock the next moment in Johnny's life. This restrained design becomes part of the storytelling. The absence of challenge or failure gives space for attention and empathy, reinforcing the idea that grief is not something to overcome but something to understand. The player's slow, deliberate movement through these memories mimics the process of emotional reconstruction, where meaning is assembled piece by piece. The gameplay becomes a quiet companion to the story's tone, reflecting how remembering can be both painful and necessary.

To the Moon captures the essence of grief through its harmony between story, design, and emotion. It portrays mourning not as despair but as an act of remembrance, a way of reconnecting with what has been lost. The game's final moments, where fragmented memories come together in clarity, do not offer resolution but acceptance. Love is shown not as a cure for sorrow, but as something that endures within it. Through its gentle storytelling and emotional structure, *To the Moon* demonstrates how video games can translate the language of memory into play. It becomes a meditation on how people live with absence, how memories both comfort and wound, and how grief, when experienced with tenderness, can transform into understanding.

The Stillness of the Wind (Memory of God, 2019)

The Stillness of the Wind tells the quiet story of Talma, an older woman living alone on a small, isolated farm after her family has moved away. The game begins without urgency or clear goals, drawing the player into a slow rhythm of everyday life. Talma feeds goats, collects milk, plants vegetables, and cooks meals. Each task is small, repetitive, and deliberate. Through this repetition, the player begins to feel the weight of solitude and the gentle passing of time. Letters from family members arrive occasionally, filled with stories about distant places and unsettling hints that the world beyond the farm is changing. None of this is shown directly. Instead, the world's decline unfolds through absence, silence, and routine. Grief appears not through events but through the growing stillness that surrounds Talma's life.

The design of *The Stillness of the Wind* transforms repetition into emotional expression. The visual style is simple and muted, painted in soft tones that suggest memory rather than immediacy. Every scene feels fragile and unfinished, as if it might fade away at any moment. The soundscape mirrors this fragility. Instead of a musical score, the player hears the wind, animal sounds, and the quiet creaking of the house. This sensory minimalism creates an atmosphere where emotion grows naturally, not through dramatic cues but through silence and rhythm. The farm becomes both home and echo chamber, a place where grief accumulates through the ordinary.

Gameplay reinforces this sense of quiet endurance. There are no traditional objectives, no markers of progress, and no victories. The player performs the same small tasks every day, and over time, these actions begin to feel heavy. What once seemed peaceful starts to feel lonely. The repetition that defines Talma's world becomes a mirror of emotional persistence, showing how grief can live inside habits and gestures. The act of continuing becomes its own form of storytelling. Through this structure, the game achieves a strong sense of ludonarrative affect, where emotion and gameplay become one. The slow pace, lack of dialogue, and deliberate control scheme turn the player's experience into a bodily understanding of loss.

As the story nears its end, the game does not offer clarity or closure. The world fades quietly, and Talma's final moments are ambiguous. What remains is a lasting emotional presence, a sense that grief is not an event but a rhythm that continues. *The Stillness of the Wind* turns the simple act of repetition into an emotional language. It invites players to inhabit stillness, to notice the beauty and sorrow hidden in routine, and to understand grief as something that exists not in words or endings but in the quiet endurance of everyday life.

Before Your Eyes (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021)

Before Your Eyes tells the story of a soul reflecting on its life after death, guided by a ferryman who helps it revisit moments of childhood, family, creativity, and loss. The player steps into this journey, moving through memories that begin with warmth and joy but slowly reveal the undercurrents of pain hidden beneath them. Each scene unfolds as a reflection on how beauty and grief coexist. There is no single tragedy or clear turning point. Instead, the story changes gradually, carried by tone, silence, and fading color. Grief appears not as an external force but as something woven into the act of remembering. It lives in moments that pass too quickly, in words that go unspoken, and in the ache of wanting to hold on when time keeps moving forward. The game does not define grief or explain it. It allows players to feel its rhythm, to move through memory as through water, and to understand that remembrance is itself an emotional act.

The design of Before Your Eyes mirrors the texture of memory. The visuals are soft and fluid, resembling painted fragments that blend and blur together. Scenes transition without cuts, flowing from one to the next as if recalled through feeling rather than logic. This seamless movement creates a sense of emotional continuity, where joy, confusion, and sorrow exist side by side. The sound design reinforces this effect. The music is quiet and carefully timed, rising gently during moments of connection and fading into stillness when words or memories disappear. The voice performances carry sincerity and intimacy, grounding the ethereal atmosphere in human emotion. Together, these design elements make the story feel alive yet fleeting, like remembering a dream you know will fade when you open your eyes.

The most powerful part of the experience comes from the game's unique mechanic. Before Your Eyes uses a webcam to track the player's blinking. Every blink moves time forward, sometimes skipping seconds, sometimes entire moments. A conversation might end before it finishes, a memory might vanish before it is understood. This design turns the player's body into part of the storytelling. It creates a direct connection between physical action and emotional consequence. The inability to stop blinking becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of holding on to time. Even when players try to keep their eyes open, their body's instinct takes over, forcing them to let go. The result is a physical experience of grief. The story does not allow control over what is kept or lost, just as memory and life do not.

This mechanic transforms something as small as blinking into a profound emotional language. The player is no longer only a witness to the story but a participant who feels its fragility in every movement. Each blink becomes a reminder that moments cannot last, no matter how much we want them to. The simplicity of this act makes grief tangible. It turns loss into sensation, allowing players to experience impermanence through their own bodies. Before Your Eyes becomes a meditation on time, memory, and love. It shows that grief is not a single wound but a constant presence in how we remember, how we see, and how we continue. The game offers no answers or resolutions, only understanding: that the beauty of life exists because it ends, and that every blink, every moment of letting go, is what gives memory its meaning.

That Dragon, Cancer (Numinous Games, 2016)

That Dragon, Cancer tells the story of a young boy named Joel and his family's journey through his terminal illness. Created by Joel's parents, the game transforms the moments that follow them. There are scenes of laughter, feeding ducks, and quiet play, yet also hospital rooms, medical machines, and sleepless nights filled with uncertainty. Grief is not confined to the end of the story but is present in every moment, existing in the fragile balance between hope and despair. The game captures the emotional tension of parents who continue to nurture and believe even

as they begin to understand the inevitable. Rather than explaining grief, it allows players to inhabit it through silence, small gestures, and the slow realization that love can remain even when life cannot.

The visual and sound design deepen this emotional landscape through restraint. The characters are modeled in soft, abstract forms with faces left blank, allowing players to project their own feelings into the scene. The world is pastel-colored, gentle, and quiet, more like memory than realism. The voices of Joel's real family appear throughout, adding a layer of intimacy that no fiction could create. These recordings capture the exhaustion, confusion, and unspoken faith of parents facing something they cannot control. The music is sparse and tender, leaving room for silence to become part of the storytelling. Sound carries emotional truth: the echo of footsteps in a hallway, the distant hum of a monitor, the soft voice of a parent reading a bedtime story. The world of *That Dragon, Cancer* does not invite urgency but stillness. It holds the player in moments that stretch and linger, asking them to stay present when the instinct might be to look away.

The gameplay structure reflects the limits of control in the face of loss. The player can interact with simple elements such as toys, letters, and prayers but cannot change what happens. There are no puzzles to solve and no choices that alter the outcome. This absence of agency is meaningful. It mirrors the experience of families confronting terminal illness, where love is expressed not through fixing but through enduring. The act of playing becomes an act of care, where the player's attention replaces action. The design invites empathy through patience and reflection, creating an emotional form of participation that feels honest and human.

That Dragon, Cancer approaches grief not as a singular emotion but as a lived condition filled with contradictions. The game moves gently between joy and despair, faith and fear, presence and absence. Each moment reminds the player that grief is not only pain but also devotion, a way of continuing to love even when love has nowhere left to go. By blending real voices, poetic imagery, and contemplative play, the game creates a sacred space for mourning. It does not offer resolution or escape but allows the player to accompany a family through the unbearable and see how tenderness survives within it. *That Dragon, Cancer* becomes more than a memorial; it is an act of shared humanity that transforms grief into connection, showing that even in loss, love remains.

Conclusion

This research shows that grief in video games is not a single, fixed theme. It appears in many forms. It can be soft or overwhelming, symbolic or personal, visible or quiet. What makes

these portrayals meaningful is what the player sees or hears and what they do. Unlike passive forms of media, video games ask the player to engage with loss. Players move through it, respond to it, and sometimes resist it. Grief becomes something felt through play. Also, grief in video games extends beyond thematic representation; it emerges as an affective and embodied process mediated by narrative, design, and interaction. By engaging affect theory, this research demonstrates that games uniquely transform grief from a symbolic motif into a lived, participatory experience. Grief is not merely represented in these games; it is performed through play. The player's movements, pauses, and choices become affective expressions that make loss tangible and experientially real.

Tomkins's (2008) understanding of affect as a biologically rooted yet socially modulated system helps explain how emotional resonance is achieved through gameplay. Mechanisms such as slowness, repetition, or restricted agency in *Spiritfarer* and *The Stillness of the Wind* operate as affective triggers that simulate mourning's rhythms, the alternation between resistance and acceptance, motion and stillness. These design strategies parallel Stroebe and Schut's (2010) dual process model of grief, where individuals oscillate between confronting and avoiding loss. The cyclical routines embedded in these games mirror that emotional oscillation, guiding the player through reflection rather than resolution.

Hocking's (2007) concept of ludonarrative dissonance further illuminates how grief is intensified or diminished through design coherence. When mechanics and narrative align, as in *Firewatch* or *Before Your Eyes*, the player's constrained control mirrors the powerlessness intrinsic to grief. These games achieve ludonarrative dissonance, a harmony between what the player does and what they feel. Conversely, when mechanics contradict the emotional tone, the affective connection weakens, reducing the game's capacity to sustain mourning as an emotional process. Thus, design coherence becomes an ethical and emotional language for grief.

Ahmed's (2014) affective politics of emotion expands this understanding by situating grief within cultural circulation. Emotions "stick" to spaces, memories, and actions through shared narratives, and games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *To the Moon* exemplify this stickiness. Their spatial storytelling allows players to traverse environments where memory and mourning are interwoven. Each object, sound, and interaction becomes a carrier of affect, a tangible echo of the social and cultural layers of loss. Through these interactions, grief is collectivized; the player's experience merges with broader human narratives of remembrance and care. Design thus emerges as the primary architecture of emotional meaning. Minimalist visuals, ambient soundscapes, and the denial or granting of control, become tools for evoking affective depth. This resonates with Isbister's (2016) notion of emotional micro-interactions, where even small gameplay gestures such as pressing a button to comfort, holding still, or

blinking to remember generate profound empathy. In games like *That Dragon, Cancer* and *Before Your Eyes*, these gestures turn simple actions into emotional connections. A single click to soothe a child or a moment of stillness becomes a space where players confront their own feelings of care, helplessness, and loss. These micro-moments invite players into intimate emotional states where grief is not something to be solved, but something to be shared and understood through play.

Micro-interactions function as emotional bridges between player and character. They allow affect to flow through mechanics, turning gameplay into an act of emotional participation. Grief becomes not only a narrative theme, but an embodied experience that is felt and expressed through interaction. Meaning emerges through doing, not merely observing. Video games act as powerful affective environments that enable emotional learning and reflection. Unlike traditional media, they allow players to move through grief rather than around it. They create experiential spaces where loss can be revisited, understood, and carried. Grief is validated as an ongoing process rather than a stage to be completed. Through movement, repetition, and attention, games transform mourning into an active process where emotion, memory, and meaning converge.

The games explored here portray grief as it often unfolds in real life, filled with confusion, beauty, silence, and pain. In *Spiritfarer*, caring for spirits and guiding them to the afterlife becomes a ritual of acceptance. In *Before Your Eyes*, blinking binds memory to involuntary motion, turning time and perception into emotional triggers. In *That Dragon, Cancer*, small gestures such as offering food or listening to a prayer become fragile acts of love in the face of loss. Each transforms small actions into emotional language, making grief both playable and shareable. The player experiences these emotions not as a passive observer but as an active presence. Whether ferrying spirits, blinking through memories, or walking through a forest of absence, play deepens the emotional connection to experience. Video games show that they can hold more than action or challenge. They can carry emotional weight, sustain memory, invite reflection, and even offer healing.

In these moments, feelings are not solved but witnessed. Through movement, attention, and care, games help players understand grief in quiet and meaningful ways, not through explanation but through participation and presence. Play becomes an act of empathy, a way of being with loss rather than escaping from it. Video games remind us that mourning is not the end of a story but the continuation of connection, carried forward in every step, every choice, and every small gesture that keeps memory alive.

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