

Road to Acceptance: A Gamified VR Narrative Journey Through the Stages of Grief

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper presents *Road to Acceptance*, a gamified virtual reality (VR) experience that brings awareness about the five stages of *grief* through a fantasy narrative. *Grief*, a universal human experience, manifests in five stages outlined by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005): *Denial, Anger, Bargain, Depression, and Acceptance*. These stages characterize the emotional journey faced by those grappling with loss, whether it be the passing of a close friend, family member, or loved one.

Virtual Reality (VR) holds promise as a unique medium for fostering narrative innovation in socio-emotional learning applications (Bailenson 2018, Mado et al. 2020, Rueda and Lara 2020). It can enable users to actively step into someone else's perspective, contemplating their emotions, beliefs, and experiences, often referred to as "Virtual Reality Perspective Taking" (VRPT) (Mado et al. 2020, Rueda and Lara 2020). In this context, VRPT serves as a powerful pedagogical tool to shed light on the complexities of grief, offering valuable insights into the diverse emotional paths individuals may traverse. The use of VRPT enables players to embody and respond to other person's actions and words while considering their character's values and desires, making it primarily a cognitive form of empathy (Rueda and Lara 2020).

While grief is an inevitable reality for all, understanding its depth and impact is often hindered by societal taboos. Gamified environments can effectively promote additional, informal resources for learning and destigmatizing grief. For instance, Roth et al. (2019) developed a VR experience titled *5Days* to convey the intricacies of

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grief to medical students and personnel. Commercial non-VR games like *Medagon* by Blind Sky Studios (McGuire 2020) and *GRIS* by Nomada Studio (Sandra and Mutiaz 2021) use environmental and level design to deconstruct grief and its surrounding taboos. However, little research has been done on promoting an empathetic understanding of grief through immersive storytelling and VR gameplay.

Leveraging VR's interactivity, immersion, and presence to reinforce the theme of grief and the socio-emotional learning objectives of the experience, we propose a gamified VRPT environment, *Road to Acceptance*. In the game, the user plays a bereaved husband who has destroyed the world in his grief. Through this roleplay, we aim to utilize VRPT in a fantasy narrative to foster connection and understanding between the user and the story.

The game experience starts with a cutscene animation that introduces the gameworld lore, the user's objective, and the main character, Eldevu. The animation is narrated as Eldevu's memories before the death of his wife and the subsequent events that led him to destroy the world as a reaction to his mourning. The player's mission is to help Eldevu seek redemption by restoring the world. This is achieved through the act of "letting go", symbolized by returning the magical gems that the main character previously used to destroy the world.



Figure 1: Two snapshots of the cutscene animation (top image) and a zoomed-out overview of the game world where the story takes place (bottom image).

By using animation as an introductory narrative vehicle, we allow the player to understand the context of the character and bring the player inside Eldevu's head as he processes his bereavement. This is complemented by communicating gameplay instructions through voiceover in the form of the characters' musings about what they are experiencing in each stage of grieving. This mechanic reinforces VRPT by deepening the player's understanding of the character's emotional journey and shifting the player-avatar relationship by making "us", the user, become the avatar for Eldevu as they can go through these stages with the assistance of our actions.

Mirroring how coping with grief is experienced non-linearly in real life, we apply this modality in our traversal of stages in the game. The player chooses between the teleportation gems and game artifacts used in the application to transport to a specific mini-game, symbolizing a respective stage of grief. Each mini-game presents a task and offers the user words of encouragement through voiceover narrations and embodied interactions, such as shattering glass containers in the stage of anger or exchanging items with a non-playable character in the bargaining stage. With each task to complete, the game's goal is to bring Eldevu closer to their closure and acceptance of their loss.



Figure 2: Two snapshots of the restored world after the game experience is complete (both images).

The user demonstration of the experience was presented to approximately 20 attending participants at the Interactive Media Showcase at New York University, Abu Dhabi. The Showcase's participants highlighted ease of story understanding and plot immersion through the introductory animation, the worldbuilding, and the level design for the stages of grief. Recommendations were given on reducing the length of the experience and reducing the distances between the stages. Future works on probing users' changes in knowledge, attitudes, and awareness of grief stages before and after the experience can be conducted through further qualitative studies.

We acknowledge that coping with grief is not a fantasy story. Grief is a complex emotion—a single narrative representation can not capture the complete spectrum of natural responses to grief. With this project, we hope to make mental health tools and applications accessible to a greater audience, and with VR and storytelling technology, this becomes possible. Stories help us feel seen and heard, and grief is there to be just that: felt.

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