"A Safe Space to Think About Grief": Reflecting on Bereavement Through Video Games and Experiential Metaphor

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Technology has the potential to support bereaved individuals in their grieving experience and, in turn, enhance their mental well-being. Using video games and the concept of experiential metaphor as an example, we designed and are conducting a qualitative study to investigate how interactive technology design supports individuals to reflect on their grieving experience. We aim to generate design recommendations for bereavement-focused systems and artifacts that promote mental health and well-being.

1 INTRODUCTION & PAST WORK

Supporting the grieving experiences of bereaved individuals is important for their mental well-being. Bereavement can lead to longer-term psychiatric distress [3], and COVID-19 has further exacerbated these challenges faced by grieving individuals [11, 14, 21]. Technology can support these mental health challenges [5, 6, 9, 20], and recent work has offered design implications for these supportive technologies [1, 4, 15]. However, more work is needed to elucidate how technology can effectively support the unique, individualized experience of the bereaved.

Video games are one example of supportive technologies where immersive interactions could support bereaved individuals in their grieving experience. Video games have been identified as a method of coping with grief [10, 16, 17], and as a catalyst for personal reflection on bereavement [7, 13]. We are interested in examining the support offered by video games, and understanding its implications for the design of bereavement-focused systems and artifacts.

In this research, we are particularly interested in exploring the concept of experiential metaphor [18]. Experiential metaphor is a novel, emerging aspect of these grief-focused games, which argues that games can provide moments onto which players can "project" their personal experiences. The player recognizes an in-game experience as similar to a personal experience [2] and interprets that in-game experience through the lens of their similar personal experience. This individualized interpretation supports comprehension, engagement, and meaning-making while playing [2, 18, 19]. The concept has been explicitly applied to grief-focused games to encourage bereavement meaning-making [12]; its implicit themes of projection and interpretation are also present in past work on grief-focused games [7, 13, 17]. We see experiential metaphor as potentially offering insights into the design of interactive systems and artifacts supporting the mental well-being of bereaved individuals.

2 METHODS

We designed and are currently conducting a qualitative diary and interview study, approved by Indiana University's Institutional Review Board (#15813). We are investigating how experiential metaphor supports bereaved individuals in interacting with the grief-focused video game, GRIS, and in reflecting on their personal experiences. While designing our study, we consulted with an experienced Death Studies researcher (refer to Acknowledgements).

2.1 Study Activities

In our finalized study design, participants complete three activities:

(1) An initial 30-45 minute interview, in which we discuss their previous bereavement experiences
(2) An independent play-through of the video game GRIS, during which they complete six diaries on their experiences playing the game
(3) A follow-up 30-45 minute interview, in which we discuss their experiences playing through the game

For each activity listed, participants are compensated $10, $15, and $10 USD respectively. For activity 2 specifically, we provide participants with a temporary copy of GRIS.

2.2 Eligibility & Recruitment

Individuals are eligible to participate in the study if they experienced bereavement, defined as a "significant loss of a loved one", 2-8 years ago. We established the 2-8 years criterion for both practical and ethical reasons. Losses further than eight years could be too far removed to generate actionable insights; losses sooner than two years could call for more emotional support than we are qualified to give our participants. We allow case-by-case exceptions for losses sooner than two years.

We recruit participants through All-In-4-Health, a volunteer registry for research studies conducted by academic institutions within the state of Indiana. All of our participants, therefore, are current residents of the US state of Indiana. Interested individuals take our screening survey and are contacted via email if eligible.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

We included several ethical considerations in our study design to be mindful of working with bereaved individuals.

- In recruitment materials and interviews, we emphasize that we are researchers, **not** licensed therapists, and that study participation is not equivalent to grief counseling, therapy, etc.
- When participants are enrolled in the study, they receive a list of bereavement support resources via email; during their independent play-through, they additionally receive weekly check-ins via email.
- If diary entries / weekly check-ins suggest that activities are negatively impacting a participant's mental health, we pause their participation and encourage them to seek counseling support.

2.4 Video Game Selection

For study activities, we selected GRIS[1], a 2019 2D platform-adventure game by Nomada Studio[2]. GRIS tells the story of Gris, a young woman who has lost her mother. Its goal, as described by its developers [8], is empowering the player to project their experiences onto Gris' experiences and create their own meanings. Because the game's narrative focuses

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[1]https://store.steampowered.com/app/683320/GRIS/
[2]https://nomada.studio

on personal loss and its goal strongly aligns with the concept of experiential metaphor, we saw the game as an excellent fit for our study.

3 EARLY FINDINGS

As of submission, five participants (refer to Table 1) have completed our study. Though we continue to recruit, we present some early findings from these participants.

ID #	Age (yrs)	Gender	Ethnicity	Loss Gap (yrs)	Diaries	Difficulty Playing
3	34	Female	White	3	1/6	High
4	29	Female	White	3	6/6	Moderate
5	26	Male	Latino	5	6/6	Low
6	34	Female	Latino	2	6/6	Moderate
7	27	Male	White	3	6/6	Low

Table 1. Completed participants' self-reported demographic and study-related information

3.1 Projection of Personal Experiences

Participants who completed all six diaries (P4, P5, P6, and P7) all reported projecting their personal experiences onto the character of Gris. Participant 4 recounted how she *"was able to relate to [Gris' journey] a lot,"* noting that for both her and Gris' grief, *"everywhere you turn, there's no right path"*. Participant 5 described how the character's personality reminded him of his own: just as Gris needed *"to grow...to achieve new things,"* he had to *"take what [he had] to grow."* Participant 6 felt that Gris' bereavement struggles represented her own. The *"very tough, tough moment[s]"* where *"she was lost"* seemed connected to the *"different stages"* that P6 experienced when bereaved. And Participant 7 saw Gris' recovery of her voice (a "power" within the game) as mirroring his own temporary loss of self when bereaved: *"it did remind me... I really just wasn't myself for a long time after [my loss]."*

3.2 Opportunities for Personal Reflection

Participants' projections led to opportunities for personal reflection. While considering how both she and Gris had felt lost, Participant 4 reported realizing that *"when it comes to my family, when it comes to myself, it's like I don't have any [coping skills]"*. Following the finale in which Gris faces herself, Participant 7 described realizing, *"I was holding myself back from being able to move on."* And while considering how Gris faces adversity, Participant 5 reflected that *"every time we face a difficult time, it seems to be the first time ever"*. Participant 7 more broadly described the experience of comparing herself to Gris as *"a very safe way to think of my own grief,"* noting *"it was kind of like I have a guidance."*

4 FUTURE WORK

We plan to complete our study, aiming for 9-12 total participants, and more thoroughly analyse our interview data via qualitative coding. We also plan to more thoroughly explore past HCI and health literature on designing for the bereaved and reflection. Our analytical goals are to understand how our participants engage with experiential metaphor and how their reflection on past experiences can be applied to bereavement-focused design.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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