

Eidolon: Exploring the Complexities of Prolonged Grief Disorder Through a Digital Game

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Figure 1: The Protagonist (Left screen) interacts with A.I. (center screen) to create a digital version of his deceased sister (Right screen).

Abstract

Eidolon is an innovative first-person thriller game that explores prolonged grief through a thought-provoking narrative. The digital game integrates escape room mechanics based on the five stages of grief, providing an immersive experience that encourages players to reflect on emotional loss. By combining the realism of Unreal Engine and MetaHumans with live-action footage, *Eidolon* offers a unique approach to narrative that tackles complex psychological themes. Our game will potentially raise awareness of Prolonged Grief Disorder and contribute to the emerging research on how

emotionally challenging video games can positively impact players in meaningful ways.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

Keywords

Prolonged Grief, Digital Games, Metahumans, Escape Room, Thought-Provoking Narrative

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1 Introduction and Motivation

Grief, a universal and deeply human experience, is defined as “*the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person*”[3]. Grief is a dynamic process that oscillates between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, with individuals naturally shifting between confronting their grief and adapting to life changes [29]. Approximately one in ten bereaved adults experience clinically significant symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder [17], including persistent and pervasive grief response characterized by longing for the deceased or persistent preoccupation with the deceased accompanied by intense emotional pain [12].

Given the profound and universal nature of grief, cultures worldwide have developed a rich variety of means to express and navigate this experience [11]. Narratives and storytelling, in particular, serve as a powerful means of exploring grief, offering insights into its complexity and fostering empathy among audiences. Cinema has a long tradition in narratives, and in particular, thought-provoking narratives - stories that stimulate deep reflection and consider complex ideas - which are a powerful way to explore grief from different perspectives. For instance, films like *Inception* [21], *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [13] and *Manchester by the Sea* [16] use thought-provoking narratives to portray how grief affects the characters physically and mentally, encouraging the audience to empathize with the characters and their struggles [1, 14, 22]. In digital games, a similar effect can occur, but it can take on a transformative form. Players temporarily step into the character’s role, immersing themselves in experiences and emotions that might feel very different from their everyday lives [31].

Video games, through their ability to evoke a wide range of emotions — including discomfort and ambiguity — are uniquely suited to exploring themes of grief [24]. By employing metaphoric representations, games create spaces for interpretation, inviting players to actively participate in shaping their own understanding and meaning [24]. Commercial games such as *Gris* [30] and *What Remains of Edith Finch* [28] already started to explore grief in digital games, potentially leading players to reflect [24]. Although there has been research on grief in games, there remains an opportunity to explore this theme through thought-provoking narratives, such as thrillers or psychological horror. *Eidolon* is inspired by these games but explores the prolonged grief disorder. We also included other experiences, such as escape rooms where players have to solve puzzles, find clues, and accomplish tasks within a time limit to achieve a specific goal [20], to further immerse and engage players emotionally and cognitively [8, 23, 33].

We present *Eidolon*, a digital game featuring a thought-provoking narrative designed to explore an overlooked challenge: portraying Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) within a digital and interactive game. We aim to encourage players to reflect on their own grief experiences and learn more about PGD by controlling the character struggling with it. The game incorporates escape room elements [20], featuring puzzles and challenges inspired by the five stages of grief —denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance[15]. Additionally, by combining both live-action and digital elements using MetaHuman technology, *Eidolon* offers an immersive scenario and narrative that encourages players to reflect on their own lives. Our contributions are threefold: (1) a thought-provoking narrative

that explores PGD, (2) a gameplay inspired by the five stages of grief to raise player’s awareness of the grieving process, and (3) an immersive environment featuring escape room elements, puzzles, and MetaHumans integrated with live-action cutscenes.

2 Background and Related Work

Thanatosensitivity is a novel, humanistically grounded approach in HCI that recognizes and actively engages with the facts of mortality, dying, and death in the creation of interactive systems [19]. Research indicates that digital technology can facilitate an in-depth connection with the deceased [26]. A recent study, for instance, used deepfake technology and Virtual Reality to create an immersive experience where griever could see and hear their deceased family members [6]. Two recent games have been designed following the thanatosensitivity approach to explore the experience of grief through Virtual Reality Games [2, 25]. Both games use Virtual Reality to tell a story about a character going through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Both studies suggest that these games are a helpful mental health tool for discussing grief in the context of games. On the other hand, digital games that address this topic are rare, with examples in commercial titles such as *Gris* [30] or *What Remains of Edith Finch* [28]. *Gris* is a two-dimensional platform and art-based game with a narrative centered around the five stages of grief, where the main protagonist is dealing with the loss of her mother. *What Remains of Edith Finch* [28] is a first-person exploration game set in an ancestral home, where the protagonist uncovers different stories about multiple family members, exploring themes of free will, fate, memory, and death.

Despite these efforts, a significant opportunity remains to explore how games can further raise awareness about prolonged grief disorder by incorporating thought-provoking narratives. This exploration is particularly valuable within genres like horror and psychological thrillers, where the emotional depth and tension can enhance the portrayal of complex psychological states. Psychological thrillers are character-driven narratives in which the protagonist faces both physical and psychological challenges. Often, the physical challenges serve as external manifestations of their internal psychological struggles [27]. Similarly, psychological horror stories are also focused on exploring the emotional and psychological states of characters to achieve the effect of frightening players [18]. These type of games can lead to transformative experiences. Previous research [4, 5, 7, 10, 32] has explored how emotionally challenging video games can positively impact players. For instance, Tomé et al. [32] examined how a psychological horror game like *Silent Hill 2* prompted players to reflect on their own lived experiences and mental health awareness in the real world. To address these opportunities, we designed *Eidolon*, a game with a thought-provoking narrative centered on the playable character unable to grieve his deceased sister due to intense emotional pain. The narrative encourages players to learn more about Prolonged Grief Disorder while reflecting on their own experiences.

3 *Eidolon*

Eidolon is inspired by thought-provoking narratives that explore how trauma influences individuals experiencing grief or emotional

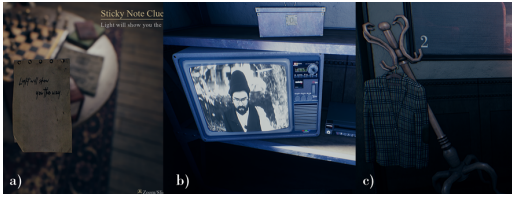


Figure 2: a) Players can inspect objects to learn more about them. b) Players can see VHS tapes to know more about the siblings' backstory. c) Over time, the environment transforms noticeably.

distress. The narrative is influenced by films such as *Inception* [21], *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [13], and *Manchester by the Sea* [16], as well as video games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* [28] and *Gris* [30]. Additionally, we were inspired by the five stages of grief [15] to design the narrative and gameplay of our game.

Narrative. *Eidolon* opens with a montage of the siblings sharing happy moments before the brother suddenly awakens in a surreal dream world. In a cold white room, an artificial intelligence (AI) program, *Mnemosyne*, questions him about his whereabouts. As the protagonist explores his surroundings, more footage of his past is revealed, and he must answer the AI's questions to uncover details about himself. This interaction was designed to allow players to learn more about the main character. *Mnemosyne* is an advanced AI designed to help individuals reconnect with their deceased loved ones by creating realistic digital versions of them within dreamscapes based on the user's memories. This process, known as creating an *Eidolon* is used to help people process their traumatic experiences through dreaming. The protagonist, *Tommy*, consents to this process and submits the memories of his sister, hoping to see her again. Using his submitted memories, *Mnemosyne* recreates a digital version of *Emily* and places them in their childhood home. While the reunion initially provides comfort, *Mnemosyne* starts erasing *Tommy's* memories of *Emily*, claiming that removing them will bring him peace. *Tommy*, unwilling to forget his sister, resists the erasure process in the dream world. He must escape their childhood home to prevent *Emily's* complete erasure and preserve his connection to her.

Gameplay. *Eidolon* is a first-person exploration video game that utilizes escape room mechanics that require players to solve puzzles and uncover clues to escape the dream world [20]. Players can interact with objects, such as paintings, to inspect them for hidden details (see Figure 2a). They can also watch VHS tapes to learn more about *Tommy* and *Emily's* backstory (Figure 2b). The game features a 20-minute timer, representing the time remaining before *Mnemosyne* erases all *Emily's* memories. Every five minutes, *Mnemosyne* informs the player of the progress of the erasure process as a percentage. As *Mnemosyne's* presence intensifies, the house environment becomes increasingly unstable. Objects disappear, and others fall (Figure 2c), heightening the sense of urgency and reinforcing the narrative tension.

Game Implementation. The demo was developed using Unreal Engine 5.5¹ and utilized the free First-Person Horror Engine Kit

², which was customized to align with our creative vision. Unreal Engine enables to produce high-quality realistic graphics that create immersive scenarios and characters with remarkable realism. MetaHuman is a comprehensive framework that enables anyone to create, animate, and utilize highly realistic digital human characters [9]. *Emily's* MetaHuman was created using MetaHuman Creator³ and customized to closely resemble the protagonist's sister. The house assets were freely acquired through Epic Games' "Free for the Month" program⁴. Additionally, several paintings depicting grief were sourced from a public domain website⁵. The game uses live-action footage elements with gameplay to blur the lines between fiction and reality. Game characters' voices and movements were recorded by non-professional actors and *Mnemosyne* by a free text-to-speech tool⁶. The footage was recorded using an iPhone 14 Pro and edited in Adobe Premiere. Audio editing was performed using Audacity. The music and sound effects were freely downloaded from YouTube^{7 8 9}.

Playtesting. We conducted an informal playtest with eight participants (four males and four females), aged 18–34 years old. Playthroughs ranged from 44–60 minutes each. Following the playtest, participants completed a questionnaire to provide feedback on their game experience. Overall, the game demonstrates the potential for addressing PGD through video games. Participants noted that the narrative was engaging, but the gameplay required refinement, such as fixing some visual bugs, a user interface that was too minimalist, and limited audio cues, all of which would be improved in future iterations. Of the eight participants, five had prior knowledge of the stages of grief, two had no prior knowledge while one was unsure, but none were familiar with PGD before playing. When asked whether the game interested them in learning about PGD, four participants expressed interest in learning more, while the other four remained unsure. Additionally, when asked whether the game prompted reflection on someone they had previously lost, three participants responded affirmatively, and five did not.

4 Critical Reflection

Eidolon is an innovative first-person thriller game with a compelling and thought-provoking narrative that explores Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) — a condition affecting 1 in 10 bereaved individuals [17]. The game incorporates unique mechanics to represent the stages of grief, such as a progressively unstable environment and time-sensitive objectives, heightening player immersion and urgency. Early playtesting suggests that the game's engaging narrative encourages players to learn more about PGD, including its causes and symptoms. However, we acknowledge that emotionally challenging video games can positively impact some players, fostering empathy and awareness [4, 5, 7, 10, 32], while for others, they may evoke negative or distressing emotions.

²<https://www.unrealengine.com/marketplace/en-US/product/horror-engine>

³<https://metahuman.unrealengine.com>

⁴<https://www.fab.com/listings/b2760e03-30d9-42fb-be3f-857c21e3acc4>

⁵<https://picryl.com>

⁶<https://ttsmaker.com>

⁷Dramatic Sound Effect - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b-bevX0zc>

⁸Waves sound <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiBby5nTC78>

⁹Beethoven Moonlight Sonata - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q91NKLjXyYg>

¹<https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/blog/unreal-engine-5-5-is-now-available>

Given the sensitive nature of grief, we implemented features to minimize potential negative impacts on players. These include a content warning at the start of the game, alerting players to topics such as trauma and depression, and an in-game link to ICD-11 information on PGD, allowing players to access reliable educational resources. We also recognize that cultural and religious differences in grieving practices may pose challenges for some players to connect with the narrative fully. Future game iterations could address these limitations by consulting experts in cultural studies.

5 Conclusion

Eidolon is a first-person thriller game that uniquely explores the process of grieving through a combination of live-action storytelling and escape room gameplay. We designed the gameplay of *Eidolon* to integrate escape rooms, as game-based learning experiences that provide immersive environments to engage players emotionally and cognitively [8, 23, 33] and foster reflection on grief and its complexities. Early playtesting indicates its potential to raise awareness of PGD, demonstrating the value of thought-provoking narratives in digital games. By integrating MetaHuman technology with live-action and digital elements, *Eidolon* contributes to the emerging research on MetaHumans in game design, particularly in the context of grief. This innovative approach highlights the possibilities for digital games to address complex emotional experiences in meaningful and engaging ways.

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