

# Going Through the Motions: The Mechanics of Grief in *Gris*



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Unlike in real life, emotions in *Gris* are beautiful. The game, developed by Nomada Studio and released in 2018, tells the story of *Gris*, a young girl going through a difficult loss. The audience can fill in the blanks as to what *Gris*'s trauma was (or perhaps it's just a proxy for our own) because the trauma isn't the point. *Gris* is a game about healing in the aftermath.

Though we never really know what happened to *Gris*, it's clear she's lost something dear. We never really *need* to know, either; *Gris* uses its gameplay to tell a story and deepen its minimal narrative. *Gris* doesn't (and at first, cannot) speak. Instead, her actions, and by extension, the player's abilities, communicate the narrative. If

ludonarrative dissonance is when gameplay and narrative are at odds, this is its opposite — a ludonarrative harmony where gameplay and mechanics bolster and support one another to give a game more depth.

*Gris*'s mechanics double as metaphors, offering insight into how she perceives the world and how she heals. When *Gris* opens, she sits in the cracked palm of an enormous statue. She tries and fails to sing, and the statue shatters, sending her downward into a landscape that is bleak, broken and gray. On the ground, she's barely able to stand, let alone take a few steps. The end of the game tells a different story, as *Gris* has regained the ability to run, jump, glide, sing, swim, and steel herself against environmental threats, effectively going through the five stages of grief.



At the beginning of the game, landscapes in *Gris* are broken and pale.

Each stage of grief translates to a level in the game, and at the end she returns to the statue a little more healed. Once *Gris* goes through each stage, she begins the next level at what can only be called a temple. Like the statues, the temple is an important motif, and the player returns to it throughout the game. I interpreted the statue to be indicative of *Gris*'s confidence, her ability to protect herself, where the temple represented the progression of her emotional state.

At first, the temple is the same broken gray as everything else. Once Gris goes through a stage of grief (represented by the environment regaining its colors one by one), the temple becomes livelier. Cool blue water pools at its base, yellow lights give the stone an inviting luminance, and flowers burst into colorful pink bloom when Gris sings. One detail I both appreciated and found interesting is that the temple itself remains the same throughout. The light and flowers, for all their beauty, don't hide the temple's flaws, the cracks and scars in the stone that will surely remain long after Gris has healed.

This is one of the things I liked most about *Gris*, the reminder that grief is not a journey from which you'll return unscathed. All of our experiences, good and bad, shape us: our perceptions and relationships with ourselves. In *Gris*, this is represented by the temple, which retains elements from each section of the game. After learning how to jump, Gris can jump to the next level of the temple and next stage of the game. When she regains the color blue, water floods the floor, allowing her to swim below and explore a new area.

Regardless of what Nomada Studio intended, I think this is an effective narrative mechanic. Grief is a complicated thing that (at least in my experience) makes it difficult to think about anything but its source. I thought *Gris*'s metaphor of the barren temple was apt, as Gris is, at first, unable to do anything but dwell on what has happened — that mental is space devoid of the happier memories and emotions it must have once held. And then, slowly, that changes. Time heals not *all*, but *enough* that makes it possible to carry on. The flowers bloom again. Gris remembers the things that make life worth living.

Despite the temple's recurrence throughout the story, *Gris*'s narrative is mostly linear as Gris works through the five stages of grief. Each stage can best be described as a level, almost like the kind used in a more traditional side-scrolling game. Instead of coins or experience, Gris regains an ability and a color until, by the end of the game, the landscape becomes a riot of rainbow watercolor.

In the practical sense, I liked that this design prevents players from experiencing the game out of order. *Gris*'s journey is linear in the way that the five stages of grief are linear, the visualization of a pattern rather than a roadmap that goes from grieving to

not in five simple steps. The stages are a framework; in *Gris* they're an achievement earned at the end of each level of the game.

When playing, I found myself alternating between two extremes, where I would either languish, stuck on a puzzle, or barrel forward, unintentionally missing items and achievements. The latter made me think about how our traumas change us, what else we lose in our loss; how the side effects of grief aren't always just sadness but memory loss, confusion, and inability to focus. How time keeps moving even when we aren't. How progress — the process of moving on or regaining agency or whatever healing looks like — is made in unexpected stumbles and leaps.

That isn't to say completing a stage is an easy achievement, though — I found the journey through each level sometimes confusing and often recursive. The levels are purposefully disorienting, with many requiring the player to return to the same place over and over before making forward progress. In this I saw the pattern of an anxious thought, the tendency to overthink things to a fault.

Perhaps *Gris*'s loss really is just a stand-in for the player's. Watching *Gris* try and fail to do the things she loved reminded me not of grief but of burnout, the total system shock of being totally incapable of doing a thing you love even if you've done it every single day for years. The knowledge, the framework, the building that houses it all is there, but inside it's empty. Until it's not. It'll all come back eventually, but it takes time.

*Gris* has other setbacks, too. When *Gris* reaches the second stage, gusts of wind send her tumbling, momentarily stalling progress. In the next stage, an inky black bird bursts into the sky. Its screeches are another momentary setback that send *Gris* backward. In an underwater level, the inky darkness takes the form of an eel that chases her through twisting caves. This is the closest to combat *Gris* ever gets, but even then, you can't touch the darkness or even fight it, really. It's just a momentary setback akin to the intrusive depressed and anxious thoughts that linger long after a traumatic event has occurred, the kind of thought that arises without warning or mercy. They don't physically harm *Gris*, but they're impossible to ignore.

After all, *Gris* is deathless. Some areas are more difficult than others — there was a platforming section that required precisely timed jumps that I struggled with for multiple play sessions — but there are no fail states. *Gris* never has to restart a level, and she never loses lives when she falls. The only thing *Gris* loses is time. It's up to the player to get back up and keep trying. There is no fail state, only the promise of progress if you can just get up and try again. After all, the only way out is to keep moving forward.