

Virtual Worlds, Real Emotions:

Exploring Grief's Sensory Disruptions through Abstract Narrative Gaming

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2025

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis
Master of Design
Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of abstract narrative gaming in opening a conversation surrounding the sensory distortions encountered in grief experiences. It posits that abstract narrative games offer a distinct medium through which to comprehend and represent the multifaceted nature of sensory distortions within the context of grief. Employing qualitative research methods, this paper analyses the nuanced experiences of players engaging with abstract narrative games using Unreal Engine 5. By shedding light on the territory of abstract narrative gaming within the realm of grief studies, this paper makes a significant contribution to opening the discussion of grief and sensory perception, ultimately emphasising the potential of these games as a means of exploring and portraying intricate emotional states.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

Jeremy Mayvin Jose Majoe
02 / 05 / 2025

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following:

1. My supervisor Gregory Bennett, for his comprehensive help with the structure and making of this exegesis to align with the produced game
2. My supervisor Masaya Todoroki, for his extensive help with the making and designing of the produced game to align with this exegesis
3. AUT (Auckland University of Technology), with their supportive help for this project as I was working and studying full time

Ethics Statement

Ethics are not required for this project as there was no human participation.

1. Introduction:

This project explores the intersection of abstract narrative gaming and the sensory distortions experienced during grief. It investigates how abstract narrative games can serve as a unique medium to represent and facilitate conversations on emotional complexities tied to grief, particularly through the lens of sensory perception. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *How can the role of abstract narrative gaming open a conversation surrounding the sensory distortions encountered in grief experiences?*

The project examines how abstract narrative games, developed using Unreal Engine 5, offer a novel approach to understanding grief by immersing players in environments that mirror the multifaceted and often disorienting sensory experiences associated with mourning. Through qualitative research methods, including player feedback and narrative analysis, the project investigates how these games represent and communicate emotional states tied to grief, adding to the growing body of grief studies and game design with expanding the scope of emotional storytelling in gaming.

What makes this work particularly compelling is its focus on uncharted territory—abstract narrative gaming as a tool for exploring grief. While much research has focused on grief from psychological or sociological perspectives, the potential of video games, especially abstract ones, to create immersive experiences that replicate the sensory distortions associated with grief remains relatively unexplored. Grief, as a psychological and emotional state, is often accompanied by sensory distortions, such as the blurring of time, spatial disorientation, and altered sensory sensitivity (Parkes, 2006). Abstract narrative games, which frequently utilise non-linear storytelling, symbolic environments, and immersive audio-visual experiences, offer a compelling medium for conveying these sensory disturbances. Some notable examples suggest the potential of abstract gaming to represent the sensory experience of grief, though the full extent of this ability has not been widely studied. In *Gris* (2018), the game's dreamlike, color-shifting landscapes and subtle environmental changes reflect the protagonist's emotional and sensory journey through grief. The minimalistic art style and haunting soundtrack convey the sensory disorientation and emotional numbness that often accompanies mourning. Similarly, *Inside* (2016) uses oppressive, monochromatic visuals and eerie sound design to evoke a sense of confusion and helplessness, mirroring the sensory overload or disorientation that can accompany grief. The game's abstract narrative and haunting atmosphere illustrate how grief can distort an individual's perception

of the world, leading the player to feel trapped in a surreal, uncontrollable environment. These examples demonstrate how abstract games can evoke sensory experiences of grief. However, the scholarly discourse on the role of abstract narrative games in exploring the sensory dimensions of grief remains limited. Although some research has examined how games represent grief broadly or metaphorically, Reay, Ma, Mankee-Williams, Pavarini, Shaughnessy, and Bhui (2024) suggest that contemporary game mechanics can metaphorically express grief, enabling players to navigate loss through symbolic actions like carrying burdens, rebuilding relationships, or performing farewell rituals. However, how abstract games manipulate sensory experiences to reflect the complexities of grief remains underexplored. This gap in research highlights the need for further academic inquiry into how abstract narrative games can offer unique, immersive opportunities to represent the sensory distortions inherent in the grieving process. By investigating this underrepresented medium, the project aims to shine a light on how interactive storytelling can facilitate a deeper understanding of emotional states, potentially helping those navigating grief to relate to their experiences in new and insightful ways.

The project is driven by the desire to answer several key questions: How can abstract narrative games challenge traditional narratives of grief? In what ways can these games evoke sensory experiences that mirror the distortions often felt during mourning? And, ultimately, how might these games create new spaces for empathy and connection, offering players a platform to reflect on their emotional journeys through gameplay? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to a broader dialogue about the role of video games in emotional storytelling and the potential of abstract narratives to communicate complex psychological phenomena.

2. Contextual/Literature Review

2.1 Empathy through Narrative: Exploring Grief and Sensory Perception in Gaming

My project focuses on investigating the role of abstract narrative gaming in opening a conversation surrounding the sensory distortions encountered in grief experiences, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* serves as a crucial reference in this exploration. The game delves into the complex lives of the Finch family, using atmospheric storytelling, sound design, and environmental cues to depict the fragmented and distorted nature of grief. Through its abstract narrative structure, *Edith Finch* presents each family member's story as a vignette, allowing for a deep exploration of how grief can disrupt sensory perception and distort one's sense of reality. In the story of 'Barbara Finch', the atmospheric storytelling shifts into a comic-book format, symbolising how memory can become fragmented and distorted by grief. The transition between comic panels and live-action moments reflect the disconnection between past and present that often accompanies loss. This storytelling technique mirrors the abstract narrative approach in gaming where, *"Non-linear storytelling in interactive media allows for a more authentic representation of mental health struggles, where progress is not always forward-moving, but rather an unpredictable cycle of relapses and recoveries."* (Manni, 2021). The sound design further enhances this disorientation, for example, the vignette of Gregory Finch, where the auditory experience transitions from the innocent splashing of water in a bathtub, to a sharp, dissonant shift as his tragic death unfolds. This shift in sound highlights how grief distorts sensory perception, turning once familiar and innocent sounds into symbols of tragedy. Additionally, the environmental cues in *Edith Finch*, like the surreal transformations in the story of 'Molly Finch', where the world bends and warps around her, embody the sensory distortions that often accompany intense emotional experiences like grief. These environmental shifts emphasise the way grief can warp one's perception of the world, making familiar places feel alien and distorted. Similarly, the decaying Finch house itself acts as a metaphor for the lingering effects of grief, its crumbling structure evoking the emotional and psychological decay caused by years of loss. Through these carefully crafted sensory elements, 'Edith Finch' opens a conversation about the sensory distortions inherent in grief, using abstract narrative techniques to represent how grief impacts the way we perceive the world and our memories. This approach serves as a key inspiration for my own game, which aims

to explore and represent the sensory disruptions caused by grief through an immersive, abstract narrative framework.

While *Silent Hill 2* was briefly considered as an alternative reference point, I decided against drawing from it due to its focus on horror elements. *Silent Hill 2* excels in creating fear and anxiety, but its emphasis on grotesque imagery and terror diverges from my project's focus on exploring the nuanced emotional and sensory dimensions of grief. Unlike *What Remains of Edith Finch*, which delves into grief through fragmented memories and emotional storytelling, *Silent Hill 2* centres on psychological horror without offering the same introspective, empathetic exploration of loss. Therefore, *What Remains of Edith Finch* serves as a more fitting model for my project, offering an example of how to blend narrative, sensory design, and emotional depth in a way that can evoke empathy and a deeper understanding of grief.

Reflecting on my own encounters with grief, particularly the loss of family members, I began considering the multi-dimensional nature of grief. This led me to develop prompts that guide my research and game design. These prompts focus on key aspects of grief and sensory distortions, like how grief impacts the protagonist's perception of the world. For example, questions like "What does the protagonist miss the most about the person they've lost?" helped me explore how sensory memories (e.g., specific scents or sounds) may become distorted by grief. Similarly, prompts like, "How does the protagonist cope with their grief?" allowed me to investigate how different coping mechanisms might manifest in the game, perhaps through changes in the environment such as shifting colours, distorted space, or fragmented sound. Reflecting on, "What are the key memories that define the protagonist's relationship with the deceased?" helped me explore how grief distorts memory, making it fragmented and disorienting. Each of these prompts allowed me to understand deeply how grief affects emotions but also distorts sensory experiences. The narrative in *What Remains of Edith Finch* captures how grief alters perception, and I aim to similarly depict grief through sensory distortions in my own game.

In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, surreal glimpses into the deaths of each family member are portrayed through abstract, often dreamlike sequences that powerfully convey the fragmentation and emotional intensity of grief. In the story of 'Gregory Finch', the sequence depicting his death in a bathtub transforms from playful innocence to a tragic and distorted reality, emphasising the tension between life and death. This surreal mechanic serves to highlight how grief distorts sensory perception, transforming ordinary experiences into something unsettling and warped. As Fullerton (2024) argues, the abstraction of emotional and sensory

experiences in narrative-driven games creates an immersive space where players can confront complex emotions in ways that conventional media cannot. The game's non-linear storytelling structure further blurs the boundaries between past and present, presenting memories of loss in fragmented forms that reflect how grief can distort one's sense of time and reality. These fragmented memories, distorted by emotion, appear as vivid and immediate as the present, much like the experience of grief itself, where the past is often relived with intense emotional clarity. As Neimeyer (2001) notes, video games that employ fragmented narratives can evoke the psychological effects of grief by manipulating temporal and emotional structures, allowing players to experience the disorienting impact of loss in a way that reflects the complexity of human emotion. By collapsing the distinction between past and present, *Edith Finch* illustrates how grief intertwines memory and emotion, blurring the lines between them. Through these techniques, the game offers a profound exploration of the ways in which grief distorts perception and emotional reality, allowing players to engage deeply with the sensory and psychological upheavals that accompany loss.

My game will take inspiration from this by creating environments that shift and change to reflect the protagonist's fractured memories and emotions. Grief in my game could be conveyed through surreal environments that mirror the protagonist's disoriented sensory experiences, whether through visual distortions, disorienting sounds, or warped space. The protagonist's emotional journey—similar to 'Edith's'—will explore the tension between connection and separation from the deceased.

My project aligns with research of Belman and Flanagan (2010), who argue that, "empathy improves people's attitudes and behaviours towards other individuals or groups, while a lack of empathy is associated with more negative attitudes and behaviours". My goal is to foster empathy in players by allowing them to step into the protagonist's shoes and experience the emotional and sensory turmoil of grief. By exploring prompts such as, "How does the protagonist feel connected to or separated from the deceased?" and "What emotions does the protagonist struggle with most after their loss?", I aim to guide players through the complex emotional landscape of grief, encouraging them to empathise with how these emotions warp the protagonist's perception of the world. By inviting players to navigate these layers of loss, memory, and sensory distortion, my game will create a deeper understanding of grief and how it impacts relationships and perception, aligning with Belman and Flanagan's assertion that empathy influences how we relate to others.

2.2. Abstract Visuals Controlling Emotion in Narrative Gaming

In contrast to digital practices, Gail Sibley's artwork *Farewell (for Ray)* offers a profound exploration of grief and remembrance, rendered using Great American and Mount Vision pastels on Canson Mi-Teintes Touch (white) paper. The choice of medium is significant, as the tactile and visual qualities of pastels on textured paper add depth to the emotional narrative of grief. The title itself, "*Farewell (for Ray)*", evokes a personal and emotional connection, focused on themes of saying goodbye and navigating the experience of loss.



Figure 1: "*Farewell (for Ray)*" by Gail Sibley

Sibley's use of pastels likely incorporates a delicate and nuanced color palette, ranging from sombre tones to moments of luminosity or warmth, reflecting the complexities of grief. The tactile nature of the pastels enhances the emotional impact, giving the artwork a sensory dimension that mirrors the fluidity of emotions while experiencing loss. The work serves as a visual poem, capturing the intricacies of farewells, memory, and the enduring presence of those we've lost. This piece has inspired me in my own exploration of abstract art, providing insight as I develop abstract narrative gaming that incorporates sensory distortions and emotional states.

In my own game development using Unreal Engine 5, I have designed abstract visuals to represent the emotional turmoil and sensory distortions of grief. I utilise material shaders and Niagara systems to create different emotional experiences. For example, warm-coloured particles during *Calm and Acceptance* create a peaceful, glowing effect, simulating the emotional release that comes with accepting loss. In contrast, chaotic, sharp-coloured particles during *Overwhelming Turbulence* immerse the player in the emotional chaos of grief, forcing them to confront the disorienting flood of emotions that often accompany intense loss. Static geometric shapes during *Shock and Numbness* convey cold detachment, reflecting the emotional paralysis early in grief. Meanwhile, fiery particles during *Anger and Frustration* evoke the raw intensity of grief's anger, drawing the player into the uncontrollable emotions associated with loss. Dark, fragmented visuals during *Sorrow and Depression* convey feelings of isolation and despair, paralleling the fragmented mental state that grief often induces.

These shifting sensory experiences in the game aim to emotionally connect the player to the protagonist's internal state through the visual language of the game. The rhythmic tension and release embodied in these visuals, much like the emotional highs and lows of grief, create an immersive experience that allows players to *feel* the protagonist's journey, not merely understand it. Through abstract visuals, the player is invited to experience grief's distortions first-hand, fostering empathy and a deeper emotional engagement. This transforms the game from a passive experience to an active emotional journey where the player's senses are engaged to reflect the cyclical and unpredictable nature of grief.

I draw a parallel between Sibley's use of colour and my own approach to evoke complex emotions within players. As Rose (1991) explains, "the emotionally expressive power of art—not to be confused with the artist's own emotions—has to do with the way sensuous aesthetic forms highlight the rhythmic changes of tension and release inherent in ordinary perceptual experience". This concept is central to abstract narrative gaming, where the goal is to evoke the emotional experience of loss through aesthetic forms, not just depict grief. In this way, grief is not just about the emotions but also how our perception of the world changes—how sound, sight, and the passage of time can feel warped or distorted.

In my game, sensory elements such as colour, sound, and space serve as metaphors for the emotional cycles of grief. For example, moments of emotional tension might be represented by overwhelming, jarring visual or auditory stimuli—chaotic soundscapes or distorted environments—that embody the raw, unprocessed pain of loss. These moments of intensity can give way to more

subdued, fragmented environments, where time feels distorted or fleeting, mirroring the emotional numbness or quiet sadness that follows grief's peak moments.

The previous statement from Rose (1991) helps distinguish between the artist's personal emotions and the "sensuous aesthetic forms" that can convey grief's impact. In abstract narrative games, the goal is not to mirror the protagonist's grief directly but to use the game's aesthetic language to evoke the emotional experience of loss. This approach allows for a deeper engagement with how grief distorts perception, creating an environment where the player feels the tension of grief as they navigate a world that feels unstable and unfamiliar. As the game progresses, sensory "releases" can occur, where the emotional weight of grief briefly lifts, only for the tension to return, emphasising the cyclical nature of grief.

Using abstract forms to represent the sensory distortions of grief offers an opportunity for players to experience the emotional depth of grief first-hand, instead of only understanding it intellectually. Through these sensory changes, players can embody the emotional journey of grief, allowing them to process the experience in an immersive and transformative way. This approach aligns with Rose's view on the transformative power of abstract art to express grief's ineffable qualities, inviting players into a deeper empathy for the protagonist's experience of loss.

Gail Sibley's painting *Farewell (for Ray)* offers a poignant representation of grief, employing abstract forms and muted colours to evoke the fluid and fragmented nature of loss. The painting's ability to distort emotion and perception through abstract visuals has inspired me to incorporate similar aesthetics in my own game, creating an environment where grief's sensory distortions can be directly experienced. This abstract visual language allows players to connect with the emotional landscape of grief, inviting them to feel deeply the disorienting effects of loss. Games such as *Journey*, *The Path*, and *Martha is Dead* use abstract or surreal visuals to similarly explore emotional complexity and grief. In *Journey*, the visual shift from expansive deserts to vibrant landscapes, paired with minimalistic design, reflects the emotional arc of the protagonist, transitioning from isolation and sorrow to acceptance and understanding. The game's minimal narrative and abstract art style leave room for personal interpretation, allowing players to reflect on the emotional journey of loss in a non-verbal manner. *The Path* uses dark, atmospheric environments to embody the isolation and confusion that often accompanies grief. The game's portrayal of fairy-tale characters navigating a haunting, fragmented forest mirrors the unsettling and distorted perceptions that arise from grief. *Martha is Dead* employs a more realistic aesthetic but uses visual dissonance and environmental distortion to evoke the psychological breakdown of the protagonist as they process trauma and loss, demonstrating how grief warps the relationship

between memory, perception, and reality. These games, through their use of abstract and surreal visuals, challenge traditional narrative structures and offer players an emotional engagement that mirrors the sensory disruptions experienced during grief. Inspired by Sibley's emotive abstraction, my project aims to use similar visual strategies to create an immersive environment where the sensory impact of grief can be felt, fostering a deeper connection to the emotional realities of loss.

2.3. Sensory in Grieving: The Integration of Embodied Experience and Game Design

Yarmisha Cofield's influential paper, "*The Dance/Movement Embodied Experience of Grief and Loss Using the Five Senses: Development of a Clinical Method*" (2023) offers a unique perspective on addressing grief through dance and movement therapy, focusing on sensory integration. Cofield's methodology details a clinical approach that utilises the five senses to facilitate a profound exploration of grief in therapeutic settings. By emphasising movement and embodiment, Cofield encourages individuals to connect with their physical and emotional experiences, deepening their understanding of processing grief. This work enriches the field of embodied therapeutic interventions in mental health care, providing valuable insights for practitioners.

The integration of sensory experiences in Cofield's approach deeply resonates with my game design, where I aim to incorporate movement not only visually, but within the narrative structure as well. In my game, emotional movement will guide the player's experience, drawing inspiration from the way Cofield uses dance and movement to reflect the emotional landscapes of grief.

While Cofield's model primarily focuses on sensory immersion, it is essential to consider the cognitive aspects of emotional processing, which are highlighted in the framework by Huang and Tettegah (2014). They suggest that players' full participation and control in the game may solicit emotional fluctuation in response to the 'ups and downs' (i.e., frustration, anxiety) of the game-playing process. This concept of emotional fluctuation within gameplay mirrors the emotional rollercoaster of grief, where feelings of pain, frustration, and fleeting relief constantly ebb and flow. Players can experience these shifts that offer a direct connection between gameplay and the sensory distortions of grief.

Grief is inherently unpredictable—filled with moments of sharp emotional intensity followed by moments of numbness or calm. By allowing players to engage with fluctuating emotional states in an abstract game environment, I present grief not just as a concept, but as a sensory, active experience in the player's journey. This approach allows players to *feel* the emotional turbulence of grief in a way that traditional storytelling cannot achieve. Rather than observing grief from afar, players engage with its emotional and sensory distortions, making the experience more embodied and personal.

The significance of this design choice lies in the shift from intellectual understanding to embodied experience. Players will experience sensory overload through chaotic

visuals or jarring soundscapes during overwhelming grief moments, allowing them to feel the disorientation and emotional intensity that often accompanies grief. Conversely, when the sensory environment transitions to calmer visuals or serene audio cues, the player experiences a momentary sense of relief, mirroring the quieter, more accepting phases of grief. These emotional shifts in gameplay mirror how grief distorts perception, where chaos can give way to calm—and calm to chaos. By allowing players to participate in these sensory shifts, the game shows that grief is not just intellectual—it's a complete reworking of perception and experience.

This type of sensory engagement opens a unique dialogue about the complexities of grief, which traditional storytelling methods struggle to evoke. By making the player an active participant in the emotional distortions of grief, the game allows for a deeper, more empathetic connection to the experience. This design shift invites players to actively process and reflect on grief's emotional and sensory distortions.

The integration of cognitive functions and empathetic engagement is key in making a game's emotional narrative resonate deeply. While Huang and Tettegah's framework explores emotional fluctuations in gameplay, it overlooks the specific role of sensory engagement. Cofield's work fills this gap, showing how sensory-focused methods like guided imagery and movement can deepen emotional processing. Inspired by Cofield's therapeutic techniques, I aim to create immersive sensory experiences that engage players' emotional and physical landscapes through abstract meshes and movement dynamics, reflecting Cofield's therapeutic elements. Her research underscores the transformative power of storytelling and sensory immersion in emotional engagement, inspiring my exploration of these themes within game design.

3. Methodological Framework

The core of my methodology centres on practice-led and practice-based research. These frameworks are effective in art and design, emphasising learning through creation, experimentation, and reflection. By prototyping, testing narratives, and adjusting interactions, I have established a feedback loop between practice and theory.

Practice-Led Research: This method is essential for exploring how grief can be represented through visual and interactive elements in a game. Practice-led research highlights the designers role as a practitioner, where creating the work generates new insights and understanding. In designing game levels, I have tested how elements like environment, visual style, and interactive cues influence the player's emotional engagement with grief. Through mood-boarding/mapping, I visually represent key narrative moments and emotional beats that evoke the protagonist's experience of grief. This allowed me to experiment with the placement of specific game events and how the design might amplify or undercut the emotional weight of each moment. By developing storyboards for each level, I ensure the pacing and emotional flow align with grief's core themes, while identifying areas for improvement through further prototyping and feedback.

Practice-Based Research: The practice-based element of my research involved creating concrete design artifacts—prototypes, environments, mechanics, and visual elements—focused on grief. This method allowed me to develop and refine the game's mechanics iteratively, ensuring that the emotional experience is effectively conveyed. For instance, I used prototyping/experimentation to create abstract visuals and interactive elements, like floating objects and gradually distorting walls in the fathers room, to represent the mental fragmentation caused by grief. Through prototyping, I experimented with visual and mechanical designs to see how players respond emotionally to different representations of grief. This approach not only tests the theoretical underpinnings of grief but also grounds them in tangible, interactive game experiences.

Action Research: I utilised action research throughout the development of my game. This framework involves a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which is particularly beneficial for refining and improving designs through playtesting and feedback. After creating initial prototypes and implementing specific narrative techniques, I conducted playtests with target players to observe how they interacted with the game and experienced its emotional content. The feedback from

these sessions allowed me to assess the effectiveness of my design choices in conveying grief and influence player empathy and emotional responses.

4. Documentation of Process

In the early stages of conceptualising my abstract narrative game, I used a practice-led research approach, involving mood-boarding and mapping. Starting with words that related to grief, I created a mind map and collage to visually explore the themes and emotions of loss. However, as I progressed, the imagery and connections shifted, focusing more on horror and death than on the nuances of grief.

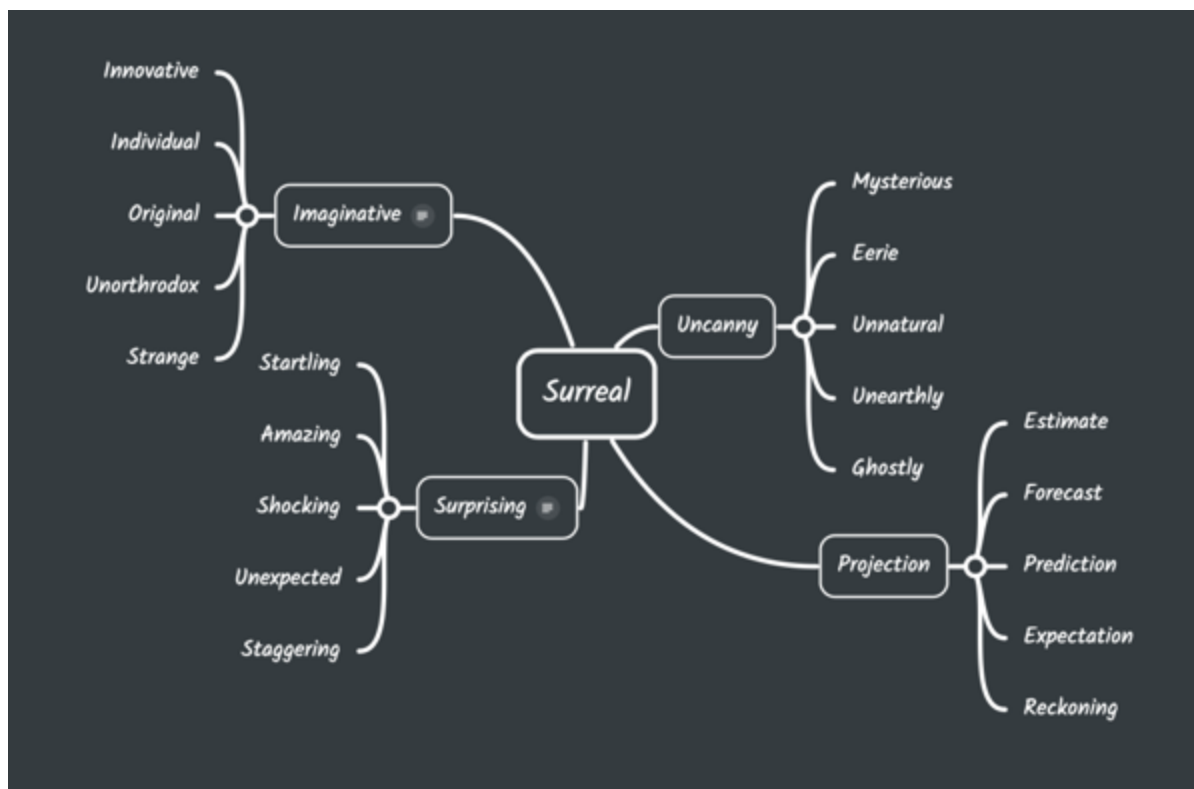


Figure 2: A word-map on the word 'surreal' to brainstorm similar words to generate ideas

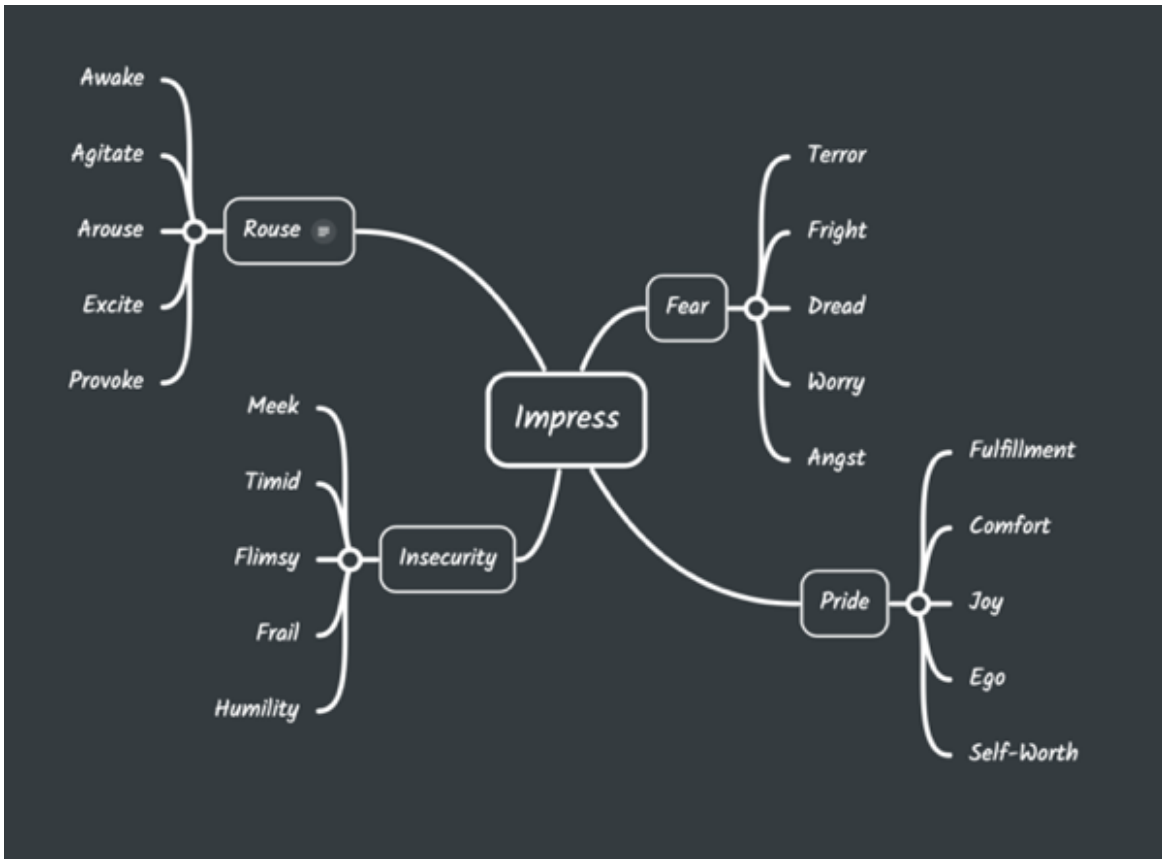


Figure 2.1: A word-map on the word 'impress' to brainstorm similar words to generate ideas

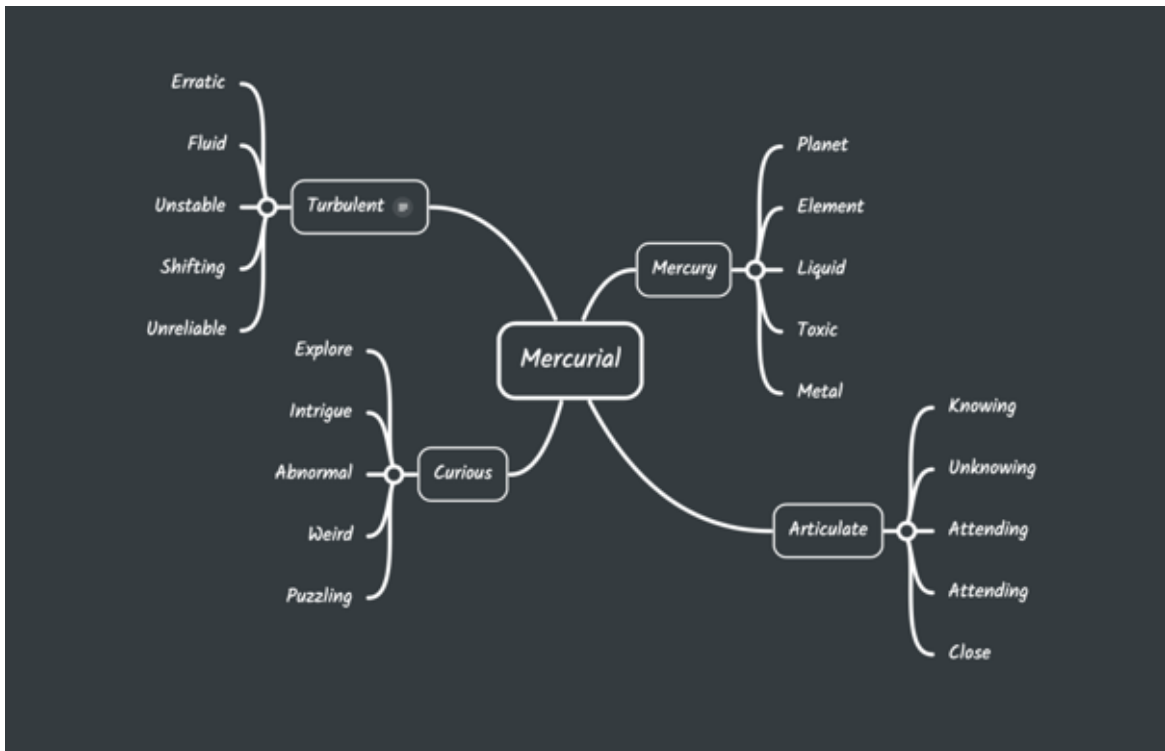


Figure 2.2: A word-map on the word 'mercurial' to brainstorm similar words to generate ideas

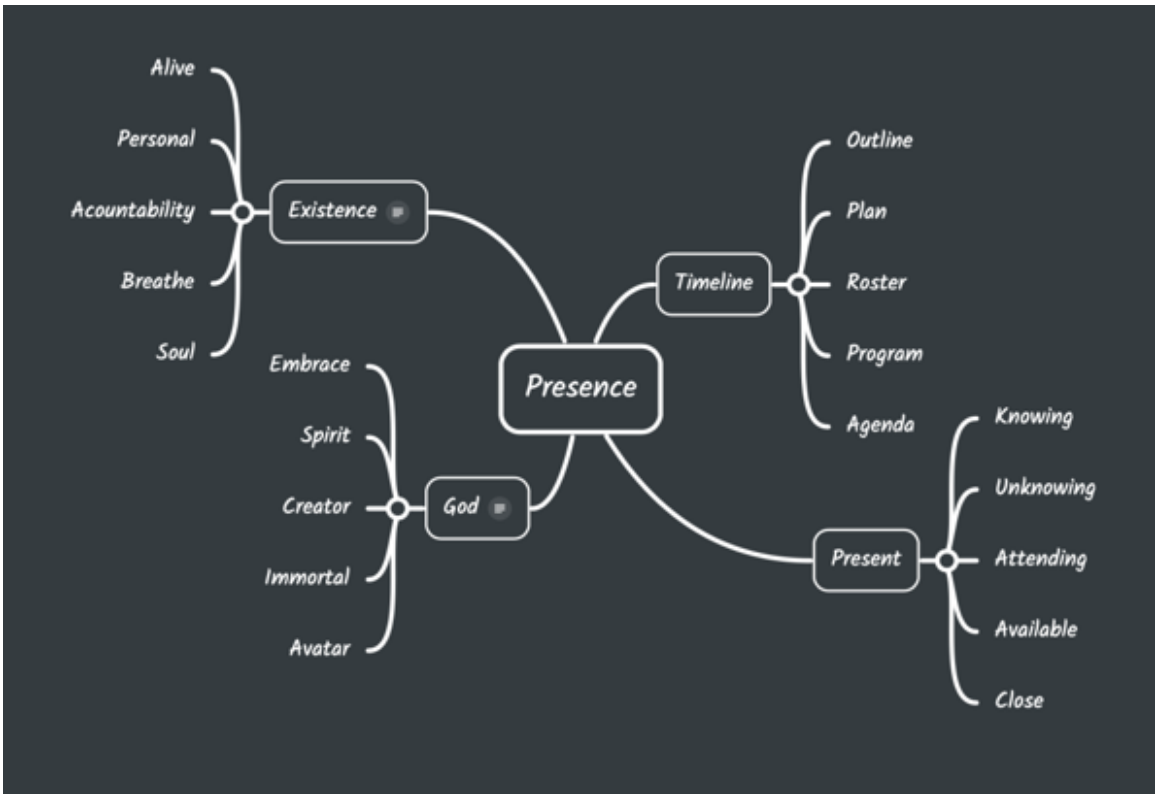


Figure 2.3: A word-map on the word 'presence' to brainstorm similar words to generate ideas

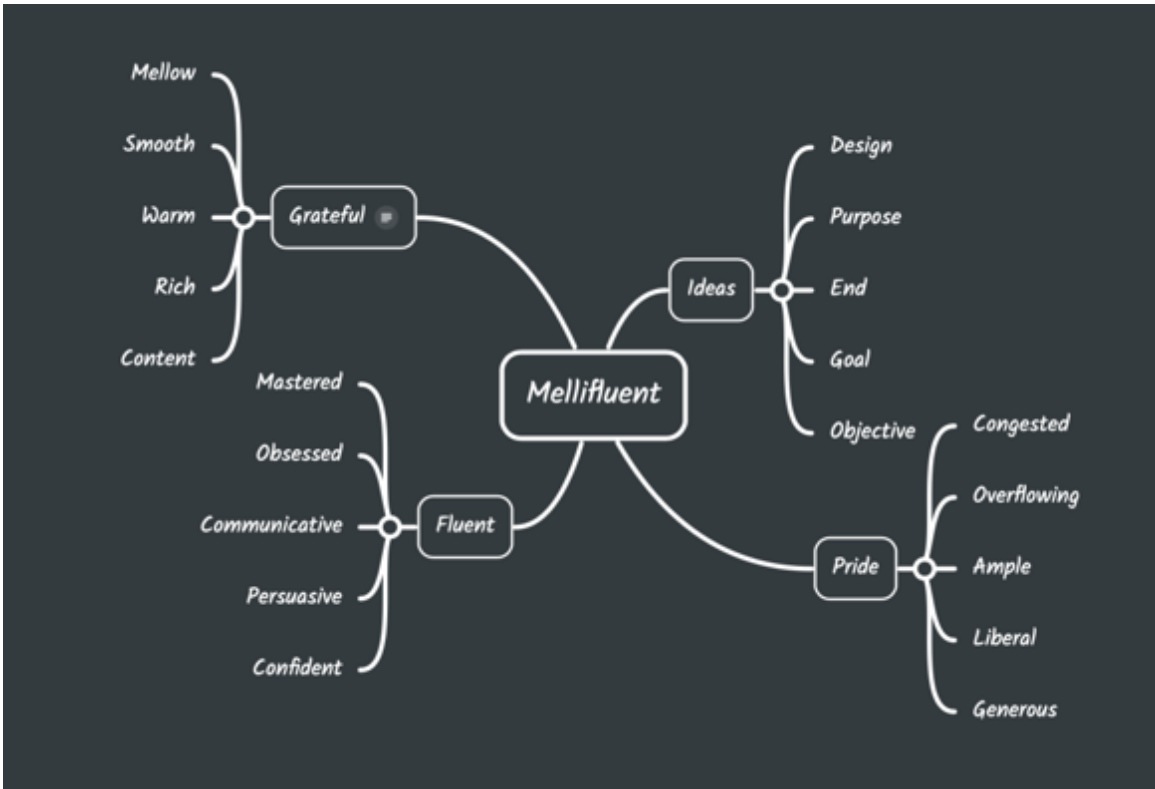


Figure 2.4: A word-map on the word 'mellifluent' to brainstorm similar words to generate ideas

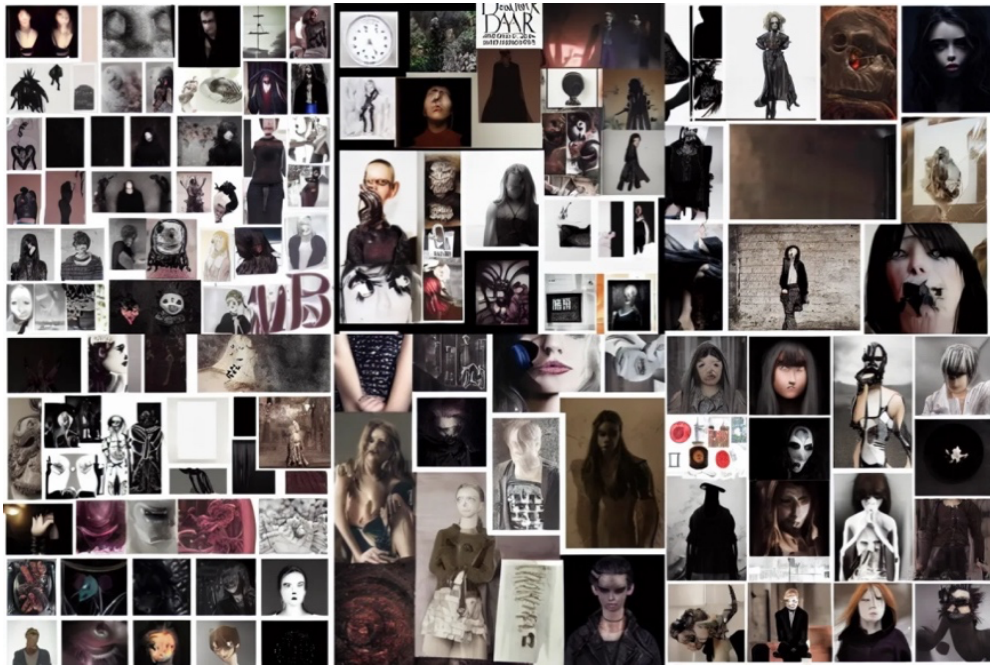


Figure 3: A mood-board that incorporates all the words from the word-maps



Figure 3.1: A mood-board that incorporates all the words from the word-map

This unexpected shift led me to research analogue horror, this was valuable in constructing the atmospheric depth I envisioned for the game. Analogue horror, with its eerie, nostalgic and unsettling familiarity, resonated with the sensations of disorientation and distortion that can accompany grief. Mark Fisher (2016) describes this kind of horror as “the eerie, where something is present where it should not be,” which aptly captures the destabilising experience of loss. Derrida (2012) discusses “hauntology”—a term that suggests the past never fully disappears but instead lingers, much like how grief continues to exist in fragmented, unexpected moments. These theoretical perspectives helped me recognise how my early designs, while thematically compelling, were deviating from the primary objective of representing grief.



Figure 4: Analogue Horror Monster Concept by Deviant Art



Figure 4.1: Analogue Horror Monster Concept by Unictool



Figure 4.2: Images from the 'Mandela Catalogue' by Alex Kister

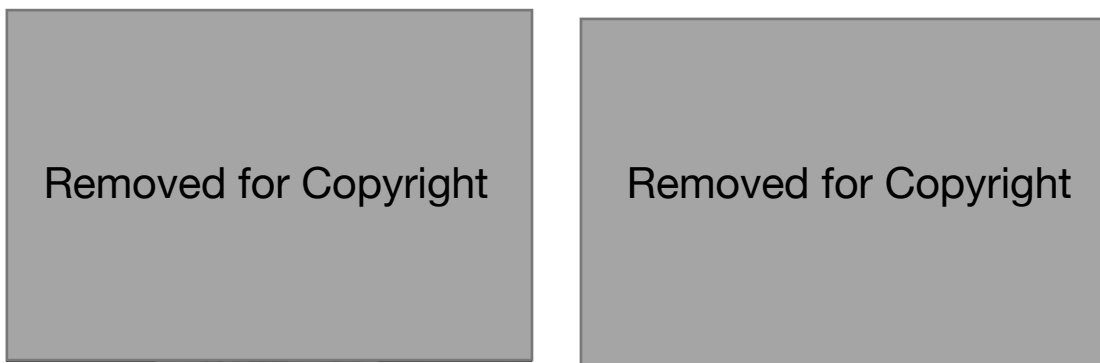


Figure 4.3: Images from the 'Mandela Catalogue' by Alex Kister

These explorations provided rich material for game design, however, steered the project away from its original intent—opening a conversation about grief through sensory distortions. Recognising this divergence, I returned to the foundation of my research, creating a word map focusing on different frameworks for understanding grief. This second phase of mapping emphasised three key narratives: the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005), reconnecting with memories (Neimeyer, 2001), and the dual realities experienced by those grieving (Attig, 1996). These frameworks provided unique ways to structure the game and engage players with the emotional landscape of loss. As Candy and Edmonds (2018) suggest, practice-led research allows for “productive failures” that guide creative refinement. This process was instrumental in shaping my final vision. This practice-led approach, emphasising reflective adaptation, allowed me to refine my creative and research trajectory, ensuring that the final game remains an evocative exploration of grief rather than a traditional horror experience.

Word Map 1: Journey Through the Stages of Grief

- 1. Denial**
 - Isolation
 - Shock
 - Numbness
 - Avoidance
- 2. Anger**
 - Frustration
 - Outbursts
 - Blame
 - Rage
- 3. Bargaining**
 - Regret
 - "What if"
 - Guilt
 - Negotiation
- 4. Depression**
 - Sadness
 - Hopelessness
 - Withdrawal
 - Overwhelmed
- 5. Acceptance**
 - Healing
 - Reflection
 - Peace
 - Moving Forward

Narrative Flow:

- The player begins in a fragmented, shifting world of **Lost Memories**, filled with puzzles that represent disjointed thoughts.
- Moves to **Rediscovery**, with vibrant, detailed areas where interacting with objects and characters brings back clear memories.
- Encounters **Conflict**, where the environment becomes turbulent, and the player faces challenging scenarios that evoke strong emotions.
- Progresses to **Understanding**, with peaceful, well-lit areas encouraging exploration and interaction, promoting emotional clarity.
- Ends in **Legacy**, a harmonious, balanced world where the player can reflect on their journey and see how their actions have honoured their past.

Dontnod Entertainment. *Life is Strange*. Square Enix, 2015. PlayStation 4.

A game based on your choices setting each chapter on each of the 5 stages of grief leaving you at the end wondering "What was the point of all this? Why did I get to play a game that give me all the choices yet in the end it didn't matter?" Well, isn't that what life is, an experience where you make choices, but your fate is death no matter what road you take to get there?



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Figure 5: New word map based on the 5 stages of grief to discover more ideas for the story

Word Map 2: Reconnecting with Memories

- 1. Lost Memories**
 - Forgotten Faces
 - Faded Places
 - Fragmented Events
 - Disconnection
- 2. Rediscovery**
 - Familiar Objects
 - Trigger Points
 - Vivid Dreams
 - Emotional Reconnections
- 3. Conflict**
 - Unwanted Memories
 - Overwhelming Emotions
 - Inner Struggle
 - Confrontation
- 4. Understanding**
 - Acceptance
 - Clarity
 - Perspective
 - Emotional Balance
- 5. Legacy**
 - Preservation
 - Honouring the Past
 - Moving Forward
 - New Beginnings

Narrative Flow:

- The player begins in a fragmented, shifting world of **Lost Memories**, filled with puzzles that represent disjointed thoughts.
- Moves to **Rediscovery**, with vibrant, detailed areas where interacting with objects and characters brings back clear memories.
- Encounters **Conflict**, where the environment becomes turbulent, and the player faces challenging scenarios that evoke strong emotions.
- Progresses to **Understanding**, with peaceful, well-lit areas encouraging exploration and interaction, promoting emotional clarity.
- Ends in **Legacy**, a harmonious, balanced world where the player can reflect on their journey and see how their actions have honoured their past.

Anapurna Interactive. "What Remains of Edith Finch." 2017. PlayStation 4.

Filled with grief and old memories. A very real and tangible experience based on atmosphere and visual bases.



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Figure 5.1: New word map based on reconnecting memories to discover more ideas

Word Map 3: Dual Realities of Grief

- 1. Present Reality**
 - Everyday Life
 - Mundane Tasks
 - Overwhelming Emptiness
 - Disconnection
- 2. Memory World**
 - Idealized Past
 - Happy Moments
 - Nostalgia
 - Unrealistic Expectations
- 3. Intersections**
 - Flashbacks
 - Overlapping Scenes
 - Jarring Transitions
 - Emotional Turmoil
- 4. Confrontation**
 - Facing the Past
 - Emotional Confrontation
 - Reconciliation Attempts
 - Real vs. Ideal
- 5. Integration**
 - Merging Realities
 - Emotional Acceptance
 - Healing Process
 - Harmonized Life

Narrative Flow:

- The player starts in **Present Reality**, navigating a dull, colourless world filled with routine tasks that emphasise their emotional state.
- Transitions into **Memory World**, a vibrant, exaggerated reality where everything seems perfect but is unattainable.
- Experiences **Intersections**, with gameplay that abruptly shifts between the two worlds, creating a sense of disorientation and emotional conflict.
- Moves into **Confrontation**, where the player must face difficult memories and reconcile the differences between the real and idealized past.
- Concludes in **Integration**, a balanced, unified world where elements from both realities merge, symbolising acceptance and emotional healing.

Jenkins, Henry. "Game design as narrative architecture." *Computer 44*, no. 3 (2004): 118-

130. https://www.madwomb.com/tutorials/gamedesign/Theory_HenryJenkins_GameDesignNarrativeArchitecture.pdf

"How are interactions organized and solicited? How does one event flow into another? How does the overall experience "hang together"?"



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Figure 5.2: New word map based dual realities to discover more ideas for the story

Beyond mood-boarding and mapping, I engaged in practice-based research through prototyping and experimentation to refine my approach to abstract narrative game design. To develop a clearer vision, I produced 42 A5 pieces inspired by the words *Hot*, *Cold*, and *Dry*. Such sensory-driven creative exploration aligns with Candy and Edmonds' (2018) assertion that practice-based research in the creative arts fosters "tacit knowledge acquisition," suggesting that engaging with materials in an open-ended manner allows for intuitive and embodied learning. This approach was crucial in forming a deeper understanding of how visual abstraction can represent emotional states in grief.



Figure 6: Created A5 canvas' using paint, pencils and felt tips based on the words 'Hot', 'Cold', and 'Dry' to create further developments from the word-maps and mood-boards



Figure 6.1: Created A5 canvas' using paint, pencils and felt tips based on the words 'Hot', 'Cold', and 'Dry' to create further developments from the word-maps and mood-

Additionally, I experimented with shadows using burnt coal, which later became a foundational visual element. This aligned with Gombrich's (1960) idea that visual perception significantly shapes emotional resonance, as he explains how the mind actively interprets incomplete visual stimuli, imbuing them with personal meaning. In this context, the shadows function as metaphors for lingering memories and the presence of the absent, a crucial theme in grief representation. I explored character designs incorporating themes of darkness and death, stemming from my initial mind maps, while maintaining an abstract aesthetic. This thematic investigation parallels Fisher's (2016) argument that eerie and liminal aesthetics heighten emotional introspection by creating an unsettling yet thought-provoking experience. The concept of the eerie, as Fisher explains, is tied to an absence or unresolved presence, mirroring the way grief disrupts perception and creates a sense of dislocation.



Figure 7: Shadow figures made from burnt charcoal



Figure 8: Drawn dark character concept I based off 'Baraka' from the Mortal



Figure 9: Drawn gargoyle character concept I based off a mixture of Bloodborne and the Dark Souls game by FromSoftware



Figure 10: Drawn and coloured bearded character I based on Zeus and a mix of 'hot', 'cold', and 'dry' for the colour

A particularly interesting experiment involved sculpting donuts—an exercise in using abstract thinking to create meaning from seemingly unrelated forms. This aligns with Leavy’s (2009) belief that art-based research allows for unconventional methodologies to evoke new understandings. By engaging in non-literal representation, I explored how the mind reconstructs fragmented experiences into coherent narratives, a process closely related to meaning-making in grief (Neimeyer, 2001)



Figure 11: Created donuts as an exercise in using abstract thinking based off the word maps created previously

Following this artistic phase, I transitioned into prototyping within Unreal Engine 5, where I experimented with different visual effects and interactive elements. My first tests involved using Niagara particle effects with light sources to evoke different emotional responses. This approach aligned with McMahan's (2013) assertion that environmental aesthetics in games significantly impact player immersion and affective response, as lighting can serve as a powerful tool in guiding emotional engagement. The colour, movement, and intensity of light all contribute to different emotional interpretations, which is why these early experiments were crucial in understanding how abstract visuals could convey grief-related emotions. I decided against including prominent large particles as through feedback I found that it took away from the player's experience of the protagonist's grief.

<https://youtu.be/m1d6-IOMNU8> – Particle testing Yellow

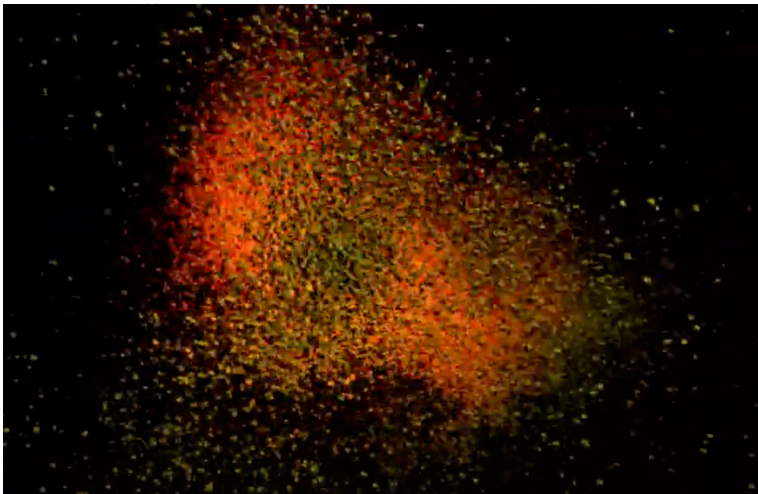


Figure 12: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing yellow particles

<https://youtu.be/Oq8j8Yfcbb8> – Particle Testing Black

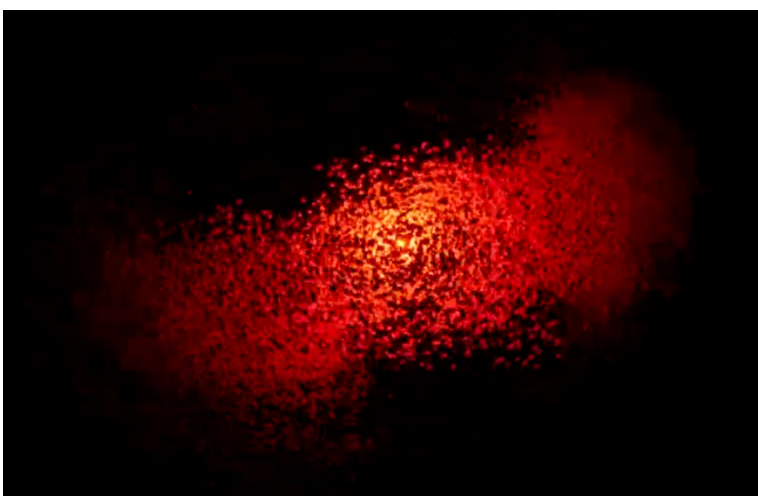


Figure 12.1: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing black particles

<https://youtu.be/xO-D34SQ0JM> – Particle Testing Blue

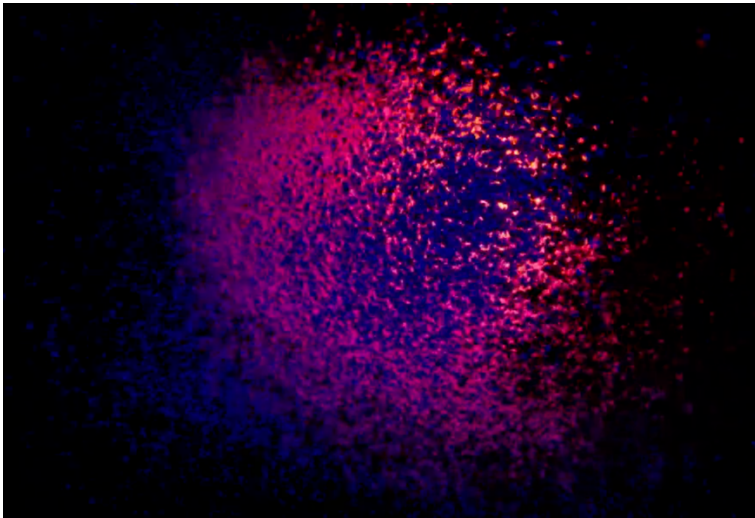


Figure 12.2: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing blue particles

<https://youtu.be/PZoKUO65GwY> – No light

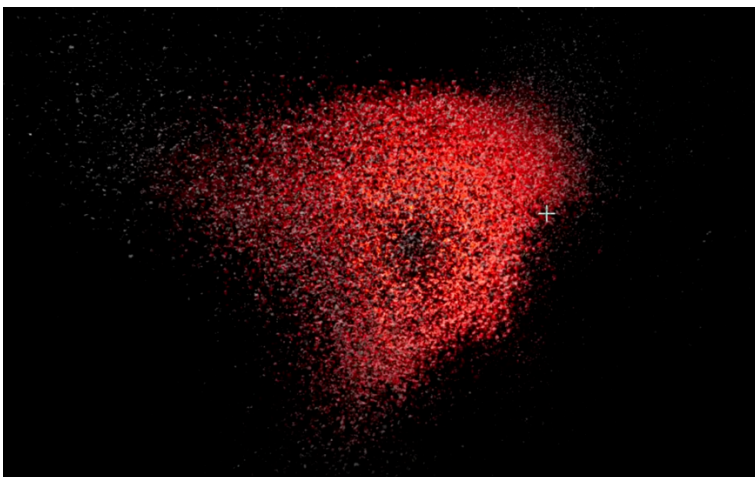


Figure 12.3: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing no light with white particles

<https://youtu.be/9X6xjUZEhIA> – In game



Figure 12.4: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing particles in game

I then developed an abstract visual mechanic where assets dissolve and fracture in game as the player approaches them, symbolising how grief can only be processed when faced directly. This mechanic reflects Bowlby's (1980) theory that grief necessitates confrontation and reorganization. According to Bowlby, avoiding grief leads to emotional stagnation, while direct engagement allows for adaptation. In my design, the player's forced interaction with dissolving elements mirrors this psychological process, reinforcing the idea that grief, though painful, must be confronted for healing to occur. This idea was taken through this process to the final game in the 'middle eastern village' level.

https://youtu.be/LT8MdGk_Zto – Disappearing Block

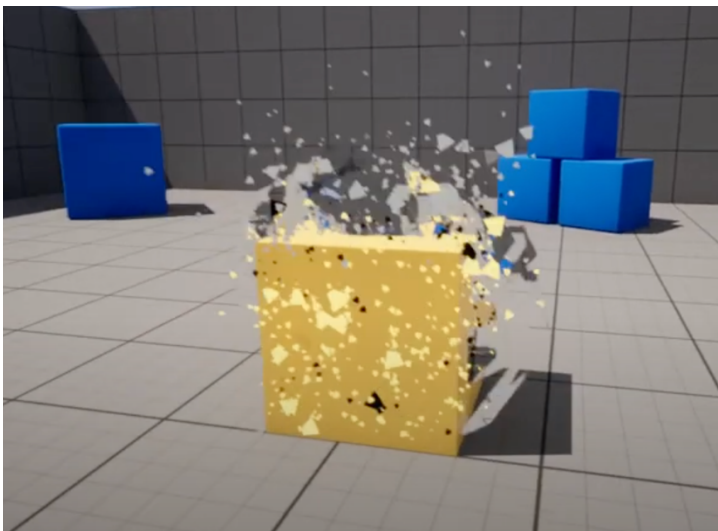


Figure 13: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing a disappearing block

https://youtu.be/RJf_WDloajY – Disappearing block in game



Figure 13.1: Screenshot from a Niagara system prototype testing a disappearing block in game



Figure 13.2: Screenshot from the final version of my game which incorporates the disappearing/illusion effect



Figure 13.3: Screenshot from the final version of my game which incorporates the disappearing/illusion effect

Additional experiments included abstract orbs, various visual effects, and unique material shaders designed to express different aspects of grief, struggle, and eventual healing. This reinforces Neimeyer's (2001) concept of meaning reconstruction, which posits that individuals must actively reshape their understanding of the world after loss. By creating interactive and evolving visual elements, I aimed to externalise this reconstruction process, making it a tangible part of gameplay. These materials were translated into assets in the game to reflect their corresponding 'understanding' of the world around the player. Some examples of this are shown with the figures smoke and shadows, symbolising a memory of grief, the teleporters having a dynamic electric blue, symbolising freedom and multiple others shown in the images below.

- Fracture test 2 <https://youtu.be/O9VaP0SvyUY> – Niagara effects

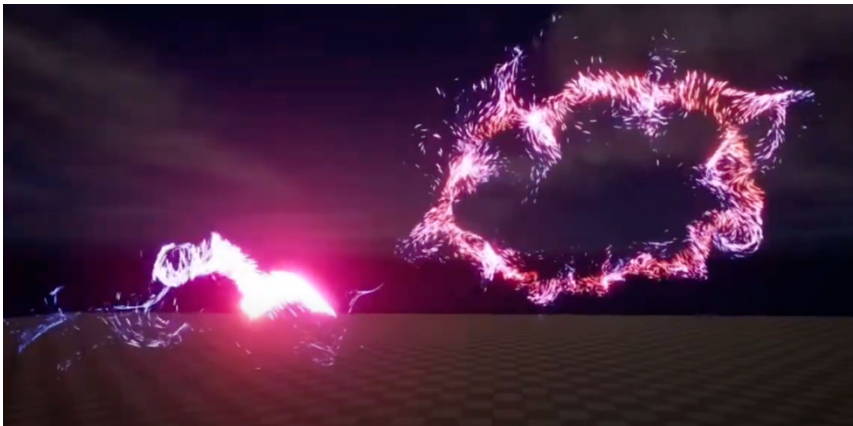


Figure 14: Screenshot from a further developed Niagara system prototype

<https://youtu.be/ChcHQfOyS8M> – Abstract structures



Figure 15: Screenshot from an animated abstract mesh test structure in game

<https://youtu.be/SlaNTqU1qNE> – Abstract orbs

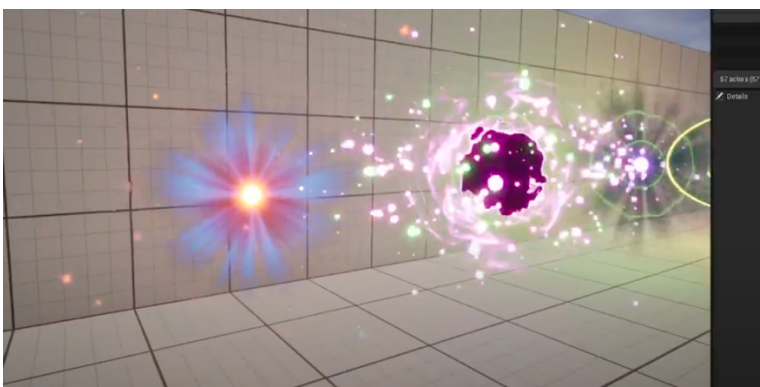


Figure 16: Screenshot from further developed Niagara system and material prototypes as orb forms

<https://youtu.be/oCfbb9dHtOg> – Abstract sky



Figure 17: Screenshot from a further developed Niagara system to test an abstract sky using visually overwhelming colours

<https://youtu.be/nGVrqoqFIU0> – Abstract other world sky

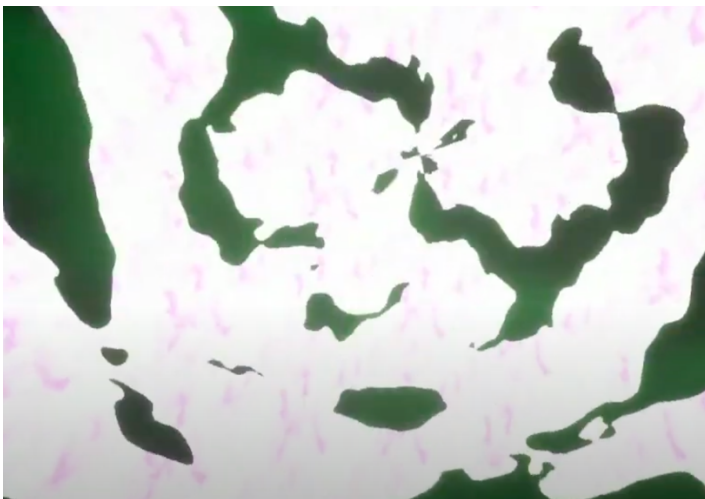


Figure 17.1: Screenshot from a further developed Niagara system to test an abstract sky using visually overwhelming colours

<https://youtu.be/UcLW-HQU2JM> – Colourful hanging particles

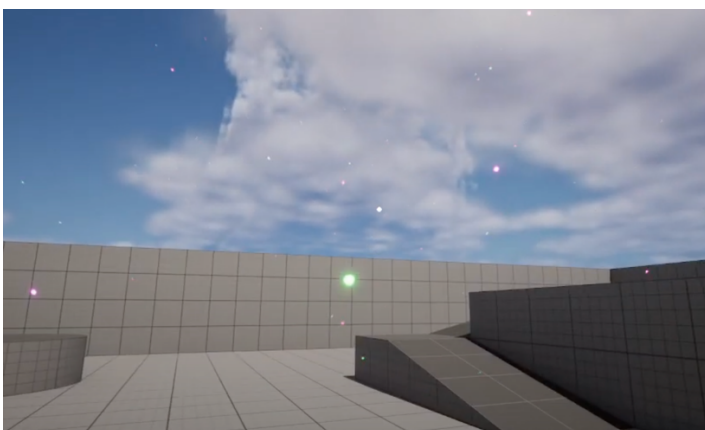


Figure 18: Screenshot from a hanging-coloured particle test in game, a softer approach to the abstract

https://youtu.be/wU_cNe9-Dkc – More material orbs

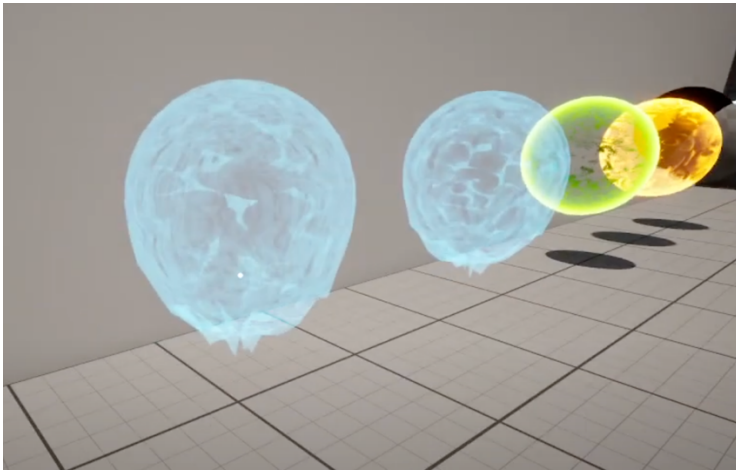


Figure 19: Screenshot from further developed Niagara system and material prototypes as orb forms



Figure 20: Screenshot from final game where the tested effects and material are in use, a cloud of smoke



Figure 20.1: Screenshot from final game where the tested effects and material are in use, a teleporter to the next level

Inspired by Freud's (1917) concept of *mourning and melancholia*, in which unresolved grief becomes a persistent psychological weight, I introduced a mechanic where objects fracture and break apart to depict the disintegration of the human psyche. Freud describes melancholia as a state where loss becomes internalised rather than processed, leading to a fragmented sense of self. This concept directly influenced my use of fragmentation mechanics, where breaking objects visually represented the internal turmoil and fragmentation of identity experienced in grief. However, through playtesting, I found that the fractured assets proved too visually distracting, detracting from the core emotional experience, leading to their exclusion. This was translated into the village level and communicated to show the breaking down of the players psyche.

<https://youtu.be/OcziltGimG4> - Fracture test 1

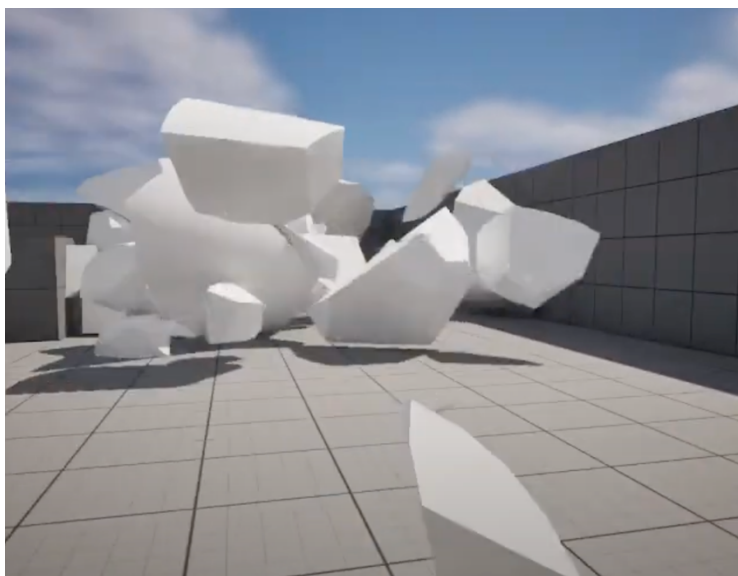


Figure 21: Screenshot from a fracture system prototype in unreal engine 5 testing fracturing with natural gravity

<https://youtu.be/i2S83E9Ve5Q> – Fracture test 2



Figure 21.1: Screenshot from a fracture system prototype in unreal engine 5 testing fracturing with no gravity

<https://youtu.be/5QWNOh0PL3M> - Fracture test 3



Figure 21.2: Screenshot from a fracture system prototype in unreal engine 5 testing chaos system

<https://youtu.be/WliDiCzB-Z4> – Fracture test 4



Figure 21.3: Screenshot from a fracture system prototype in unreal engine 5 testing chaos system in a controlled environment, breaking and restoring assets

https://youtu.be/E7_IJ2YeClS – Fracture to repair



Figure 21.4: Screenshot from a fracture system prototype in unreal engine 5 testing chaos system in a controlled environment, breaking and

Similarly, I experimented with a slime effect that clings to assets when the player moves near them, representing how grief lingers and must be actively processed to move forward. This aligns with Butler’s (2004) discussion on the precarity of grief and the struggle to detach from loss. Butler argues that grief makes individuals vulnerable, binding them to the past while challenging their sense of autonomy. The slime mechanic embodies this struggle, as it metaphorically represents the emotional weight that must be acknowledged and gradually released. The slime became a staple in my game being part of every level and showing the descent into madness the player is going into. I also added some moving slime to symbolise the parasitic nature of grief how it controls you and changes your mental outlook where Averill and Nunley (1988, 80) argue that as grief becomes studied further, it “will inevitably accrue some of the aspects of a disease, and it will lose some of its meaning as an emotion.” It shows that grief can be seen as both, a natural emotional response and as a condition that can be pathologized. The authors discuss how grief can be perceived as an invasive force that disrupts normal functioning, resonating with the idea of grief acting parasitically. I first decided to add these aspects to every level but through more prototyping and feedback from peers, I decided to gradually add more hints to this ‘slime’ idea into each level symbolising how as you keep travelling further into conquering grief the harder and messier it gets. As O’Connor (2022) puts it, “Grieving is not a linear process. The further we go, the more our brains work to reconcile an internal world where the loved one still exists with an external reality in which they do not. This conflict does not simplify—it deepens, demanding constant cognitive and emotional adaptation.”

https://youtu.be/RhAn_9qWaYQ – Slime attach



Figure 22: Screenshot from a test prototype of the slime effect in an early build of my game taken from unreal engine 5



Figure 22.1: Screenshot from the parasitic versions of slime scattered within the penultimate level of my game



Figure 22.2: Screenshot from the parasitic versions of slime combined with fire, confronting chaos in the farm level



Figure 22.3: Screenshot from the final version of the slime effect in the final version of my game

Another key decision was incorporating the burnt coal shadows into the final game, using them to represent the protagonist's father. This decision tied directly back to my early artistic experiments and reinforced the game's overarching narrative themes. Derrida's (2012) concept of hauntology—the idea that the past never fully disappears but continues to exert an influence—provides a theoretical underpinning for this design choice. By embedding the father's presence in shifting shadow forms, I sought to illustrate how grief manifests through memory, absence, and the persistent trace of what once was.

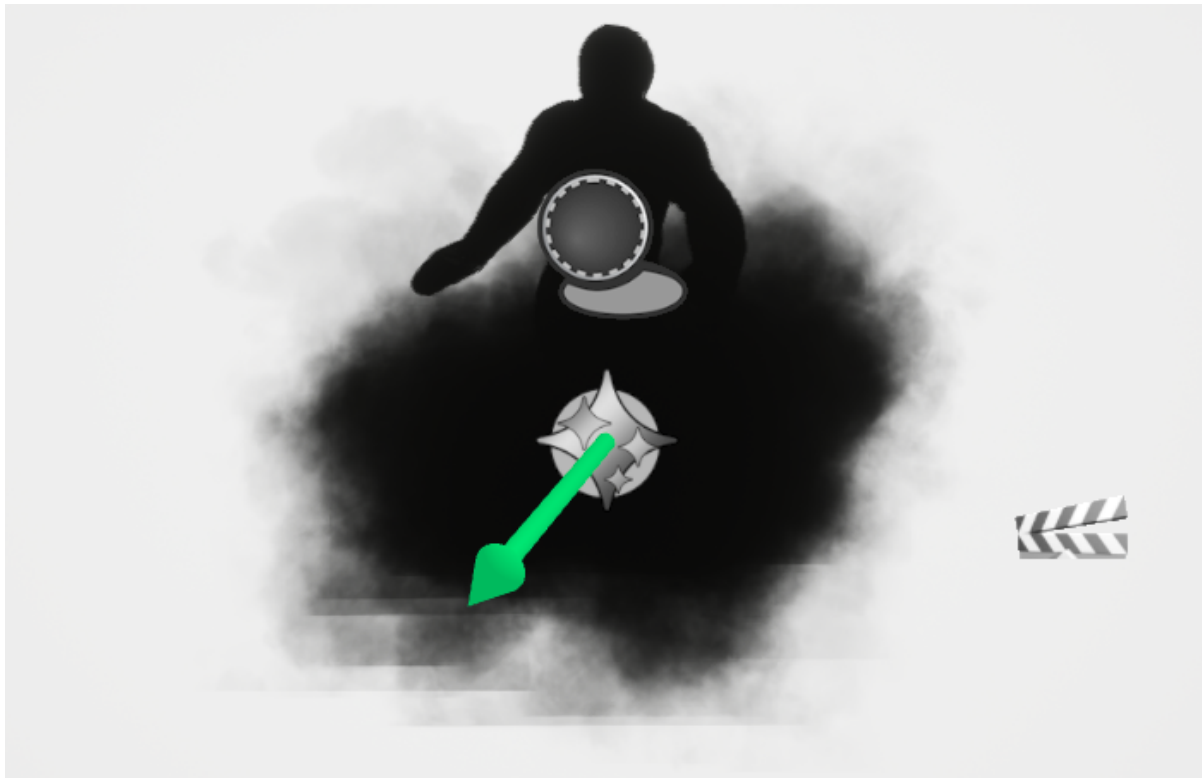


Figure 23: Screenshot of the the burnt coal shadows figure into the final game

Reflecting on this journey, I recognise that each phase of experimentation and prototyping was essential in shaping the final game. Without the process of practice-based research, I would not have arrived at the visual language, mechanics, and interactive elements that best communicate the complexities of grief. As Candy and Edmonds (2018) emphasise, practice-based research provides “new insights embedded in creative outcomes,” reinforcing the value of hands-on experimentation in refining abstract narrative design. This iterative approach exemplifies the importance of creative exploration, demonstrating that the outcome is deeply informed by the conceptual and material research that preceded it.

Building on the insights gained from practice-based research and the earlier practice-led approaches (such as mind mapping and collage), I engaged in action research to refine my game design iteratively. Action research, as defined by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), is a continuous cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection, making it particularly suited to an iterative game development process. Initially, my focus leaned toward horror elements, leading me to construct various gameplay scenarios involving lighting conditions and player experiences with fear. These scenarios included moving in complete darkness, moving in light, encountering a monster in darkness, and facing a monster in light. The purpose of these experiments was to provoke different forms of fear, using death as a thematic tool to parallel reminiscence and grief. This was heavily informed by my earlier exploration of analogue horror and *déjà vu*, concepts that played a key role in shaping the atmospheric tension in my early prototypes. As Barthes (1980) suggests, the experience of loss is inherently fragmented, like the disrupted, eerie repetitions found in analogue horror aesthetics. However, as I progressed, I realised that while fear could evoke strong emotions, it did not necessarily foster the reflective space required to open a nuanced conversation on grief.

<https://youtu.be/gQ5SPN2eWbg> – Moving in Light



Figure 24:
Screenshot of a
moving in light
scenario

<https://youtu.be/uv16G3FJGhc> – Moving in Dark



Figure 24.1:
Screenshot of
a moving in
dark scenario

<https://youtu.be/6Lwrlvm0Ky0> – Provoke with light monster



Figure 25:
Screenshot of
a provoking a
monster in
the light
scenario

https://youtu.be/OKF_qbaPWLo – Provoke no light monster

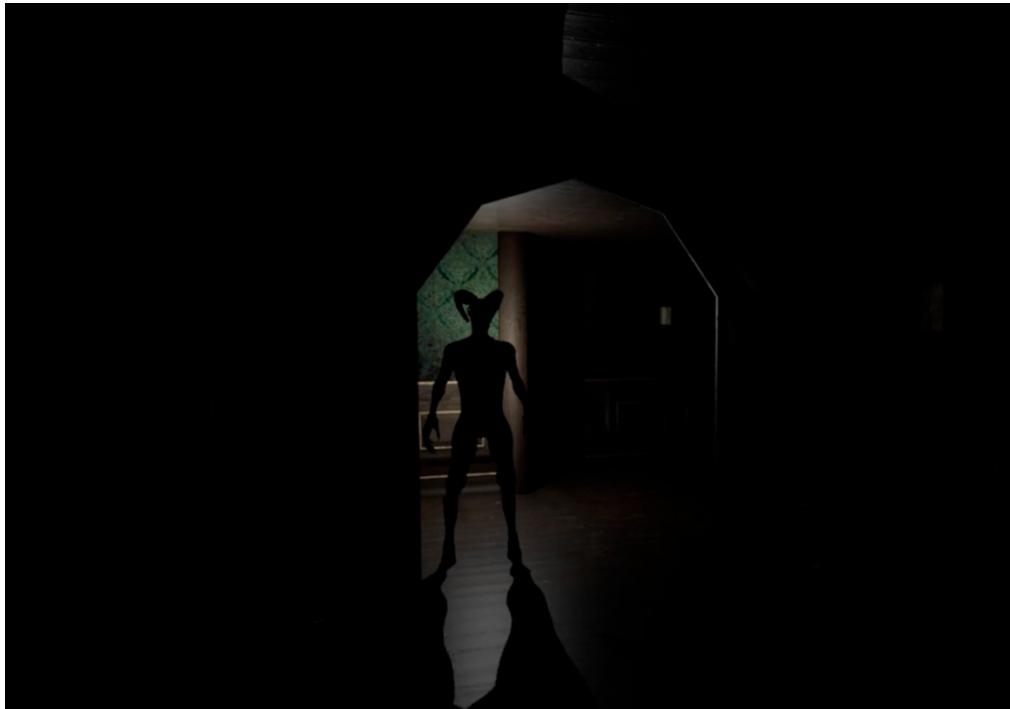


Figure 25.1:
Screenshot of
a provoking a
monster in the
dark scenario

Playtesting and feedback from peers and colleagues became a crucial part of my action research cycle. Many testers perceived the game as a horror experience rather than an exploration of grief, demonstrating a disconnect between my design and my research question. This feedback was pivotal—it required a reassessment of my approach to ensure the game facilitated a conversation about grief rather than solely evoking fear. Schön (2017) emphasises the importance of reflective practice in action research, stating that “the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique.” My own surprise at how my game was being interpreted drove a major shift in my iterative process.

Using these insights, I shifted towards designing grey boxed environments with a structured progression aimed at guiding the player through a journey that gradually unfolded grief. I developed and iterated on four distinct passes, starting from a basic grey box prototype and gradually integrating assets, mechanics, and polish based on ongoing playtesting. This step-by-step refinement process allowed me to adjust the game’s emotional and narrative impact without committing too early to final aesthetics or mechanics. Kolb’s (2014) experiential learning theory supports this iterative approach, asserting that learning occurs through cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. By continuously testing and refining my ideas, I ensured that my mechanics were aligned with my theme rather than distracting from it.

The environments in the game each represented different aspects of the protagonist's grief journey:

- Father's Room – The origin of grief, where loss is first established, drawing on Freud's (1917) notion of "mourning work" where one must repeatedly confront loss to process it.
- Middle Eastern Town – The setting of the father's death, emphasizing themes of loss and displacement, echoing Butler's (2004) assertion that grief is intimately tied to cultural and social contexts.
- The Farm – A childhood space tied to memories of the father, highlighting nostalgia and longing, aligning with Proust's (2013) concept of involuntary memory where environments trigger grief through sensory experiences.
- The Brown Yuck – A metaphorical space representing the deepest point of grief and emotional turmoil, mirroring Kübler-Ross's (1969) model of grief's depression stage.
- The Forest – A symbolic space where the protagonist ultimately finds peace and freedom from grief, symbolizing acceptance and renewal, which Neimeyer (2001) describes as the reconstruction of meaning after loss.

With the lack of level design and exploration with the 'Fathers room' and 'Forest' level, I decided to create these levels with no grey box but to use the same principles I used with the previous levels. This proved helpful, enabling me to save weeks of time and most importantly helped me to make art decisions on the spot. For example, I started creating the room as a 'child's room' but I felt that a child wasn't appropriate for the themes that I was aiming for so I changed this to a 'fathers' room'. This was proven helpful as this change helped me set the tone for the game from the very beginning going through to the end.

Village pass 1:

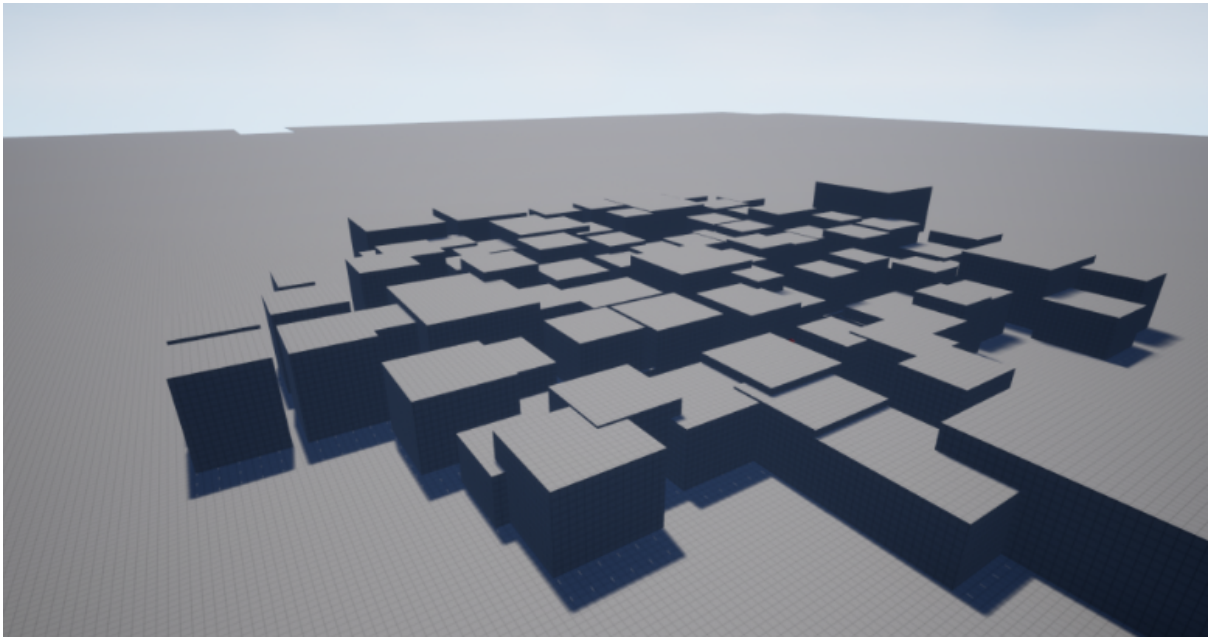


Figure 26: Screenshot of the blocking of the middle eastern village

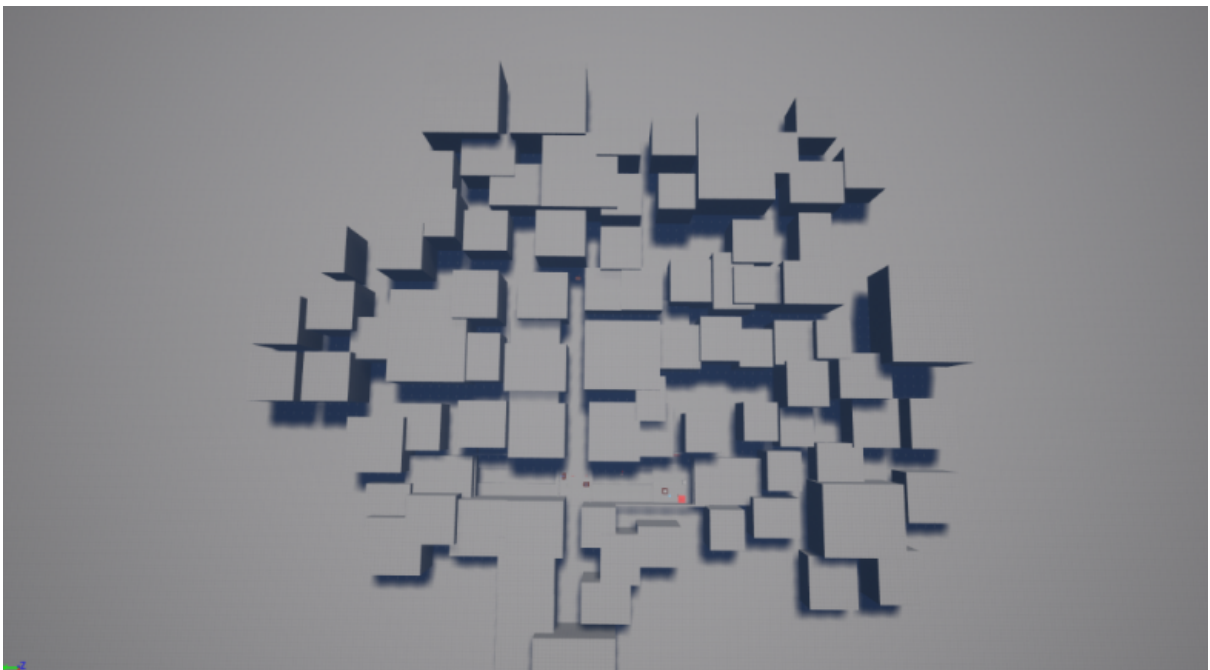


Figure 26.1: Screenshot of the blocking of the middle eastern village

<https://youtu.be/q3pC52Fsxfo> – Village pass 2

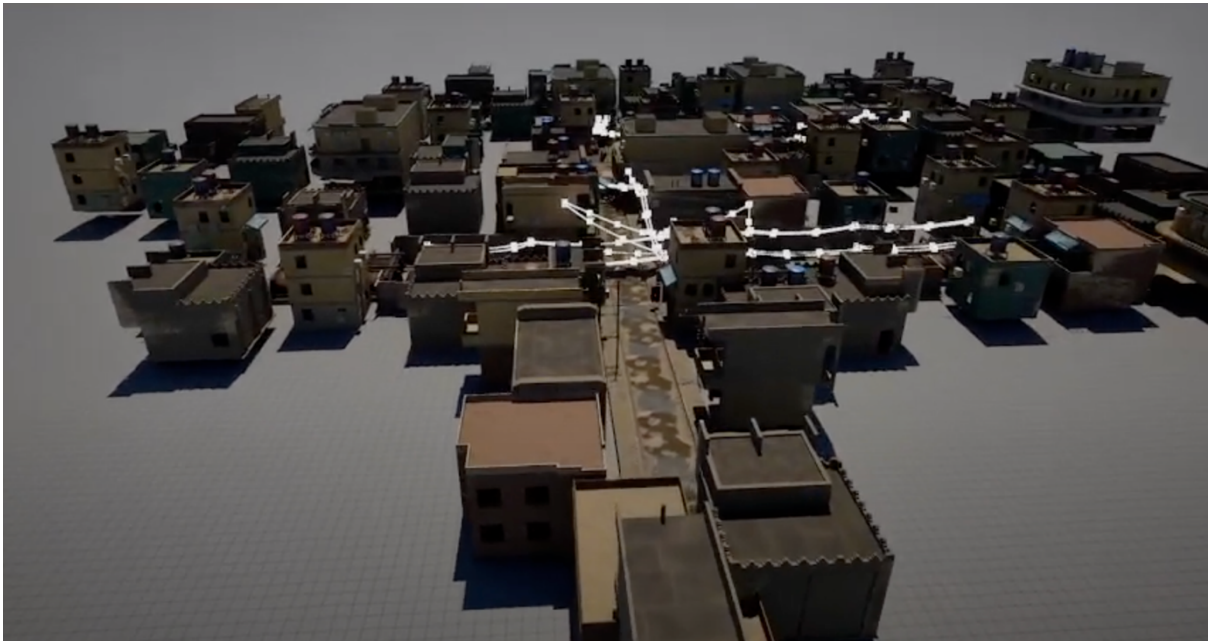


Figure 26.2: Screenshot of the second pass of the middle eastern village

<https://youtu.be/Sm0VM5dAE> – Village pass 3



Figure 26.3: Screenshot of the third pass of the middle eastern village

<https://youtu.be/7XTkBXUNIWc> – Village pass Final

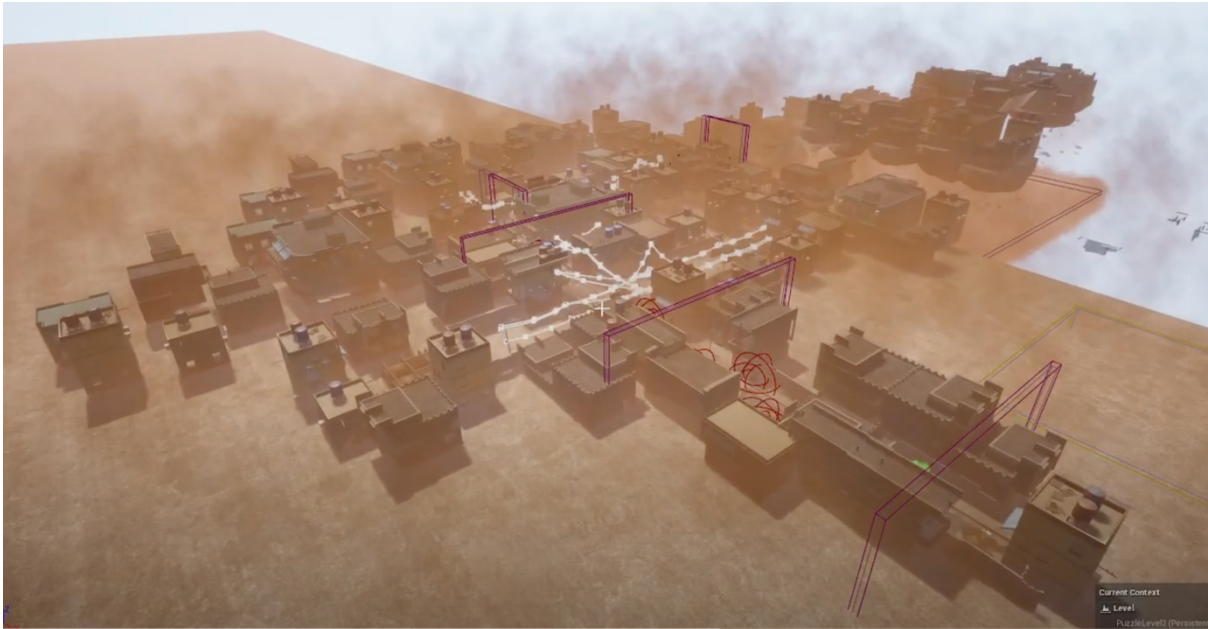


Figure 26.4: Screenshot of the final pass of the middle eastern village

Farm Pass 1:

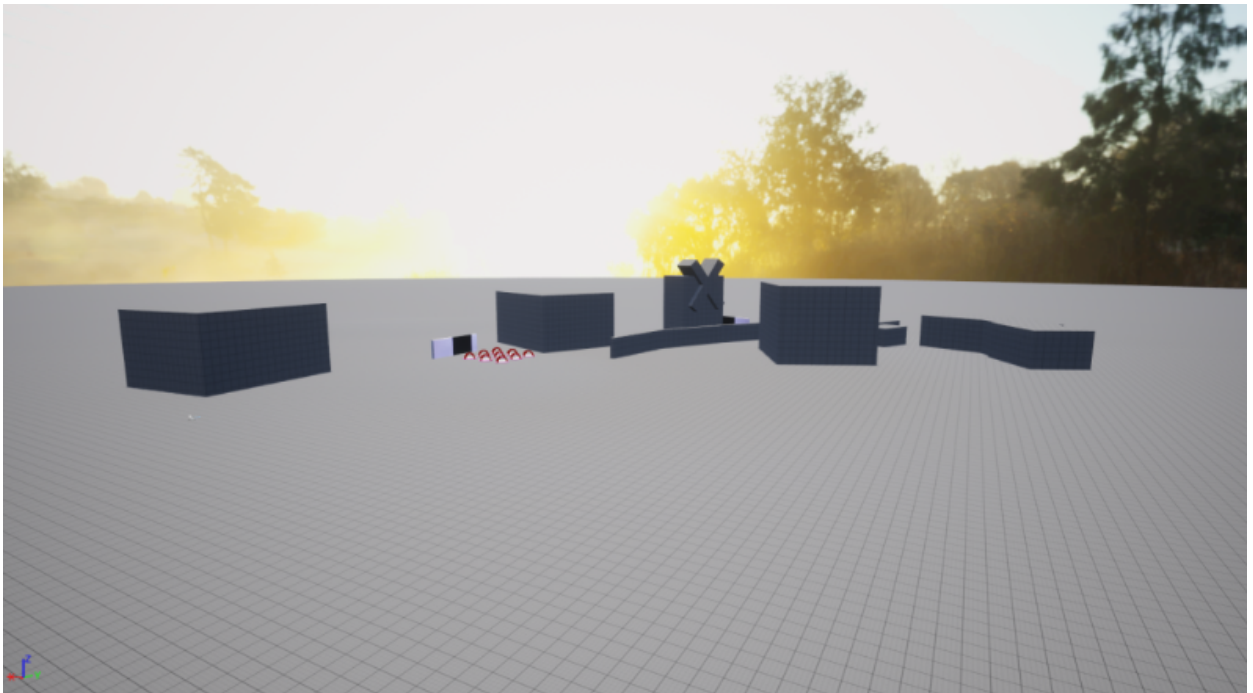


Figure 27: Screenshot of the blocking of the farm

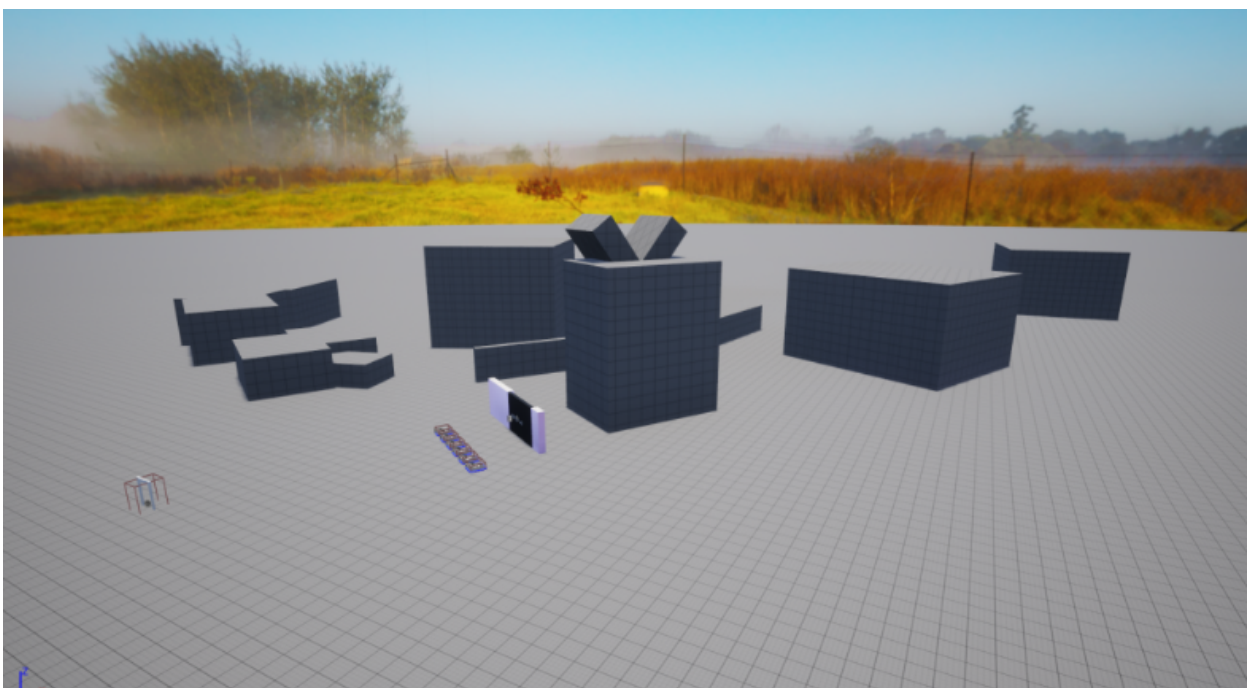


Figure 27.1: Screenshot of the blocking of the farm

<https://youtu.be/stUZSQ53NIA> – Farm pass 2

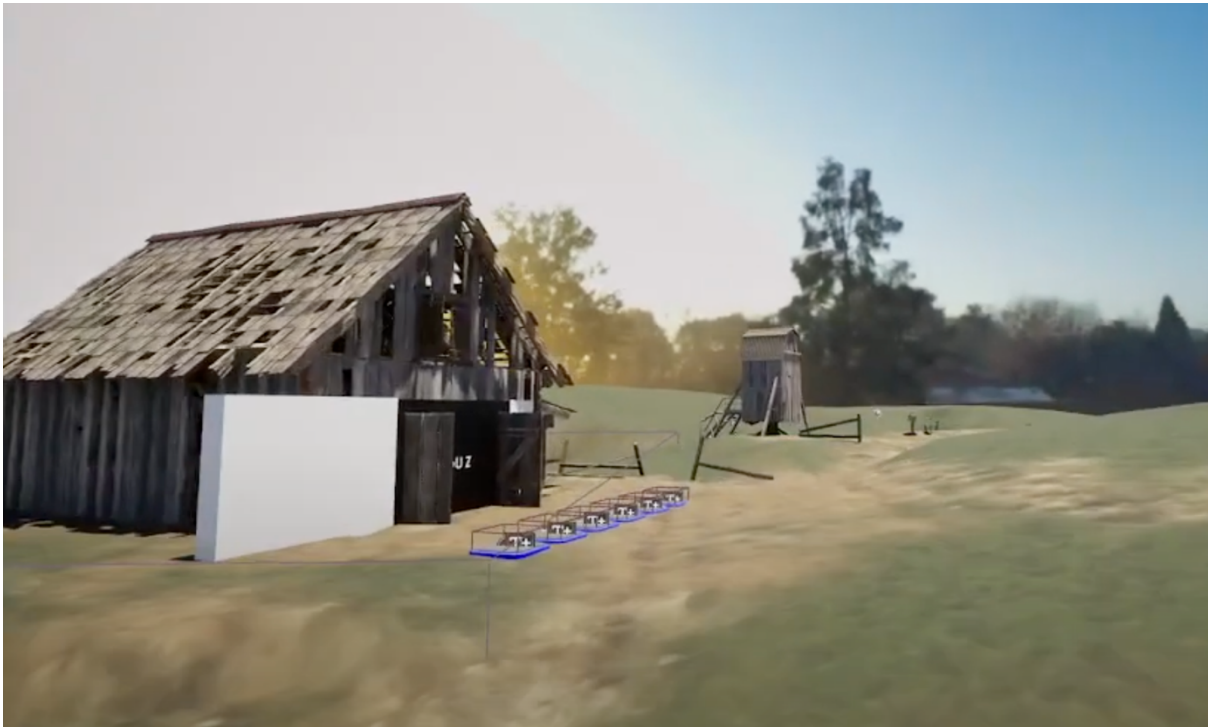


Figure 27.2: Screenshot of the second pass of the farm

<https://youtu.be/rzEXcbbYtOg> - Farm pass 3



Figure 27.3: Screenshot of the third pass of the farm

<https://youtu.be/7iMPyRrvgl4> – Farm pass Final



Figure 27.4: Screenshot of the final pass of the farm

Yuck pass 1:

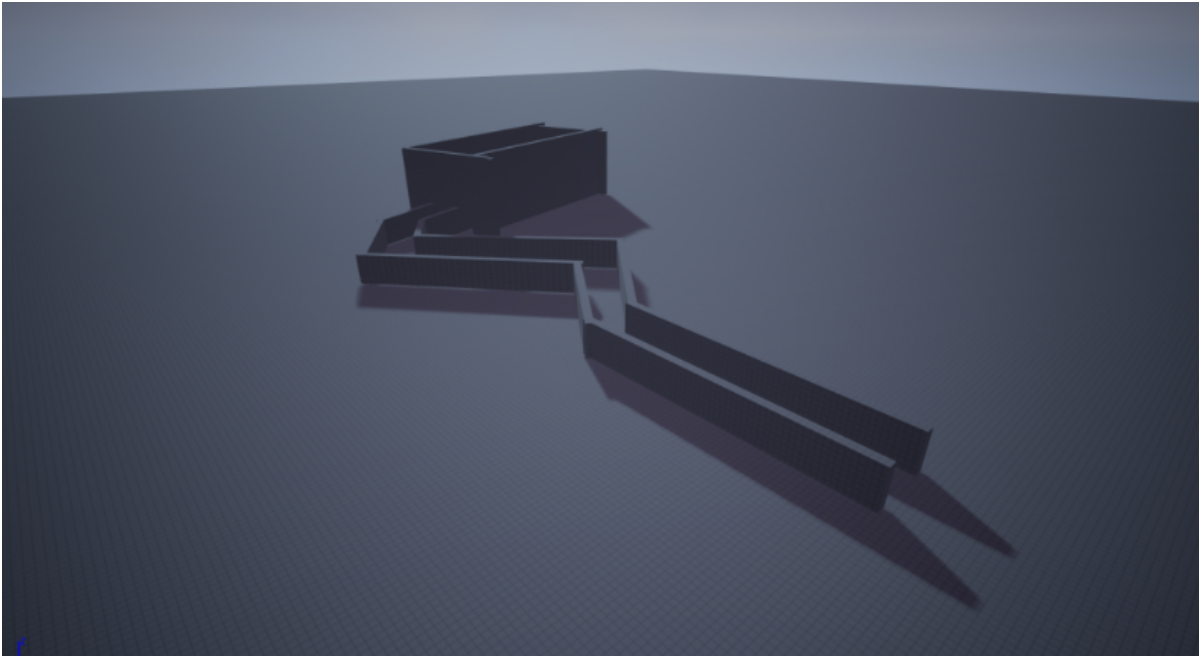


Figure 28: Screenshot of the blocking of the brown yuck

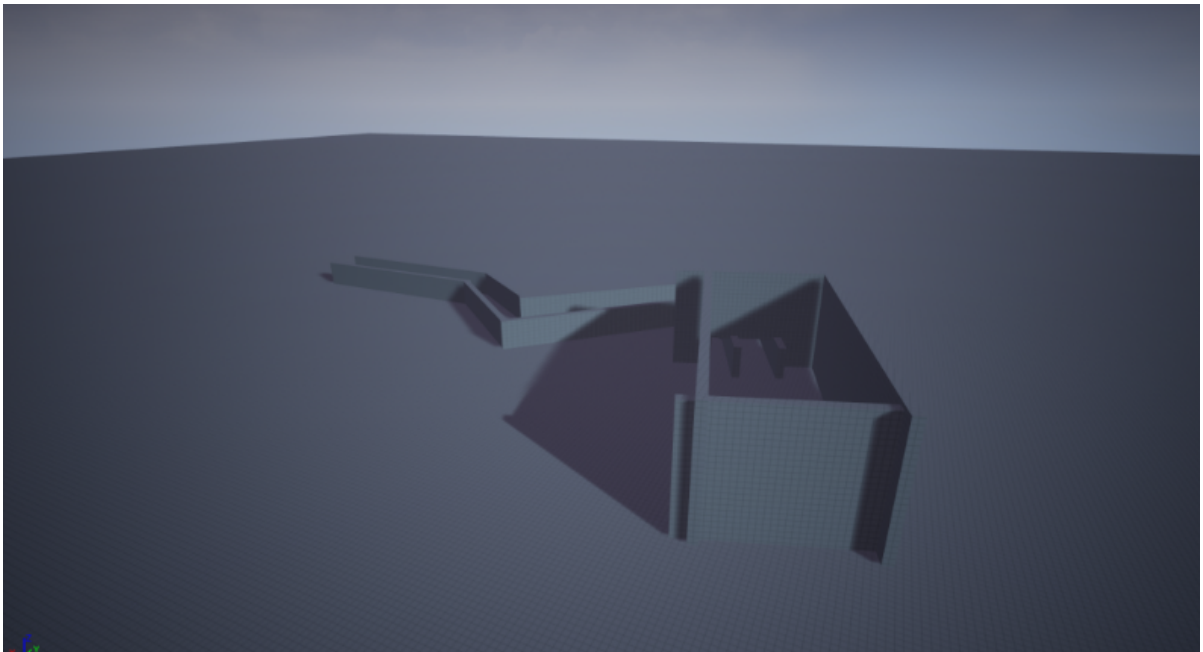


Figure 28.1: Screenshot of the blocking of the brown yuck

<https://youtu.be/FLtb33eNPL0> – Yuck pass 2

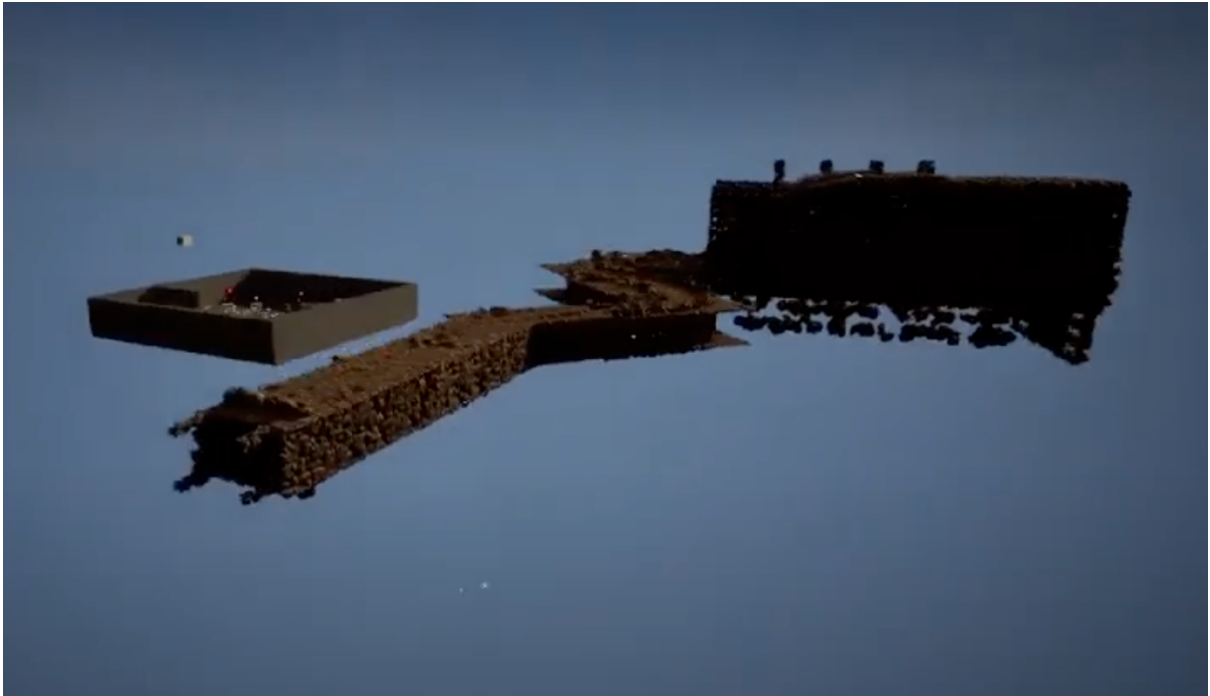


Figure 28.2: Screenshot of the second pass of the brown yuck

<https://youtu.be/pp3EvxdSczU> – Yuck pass 3

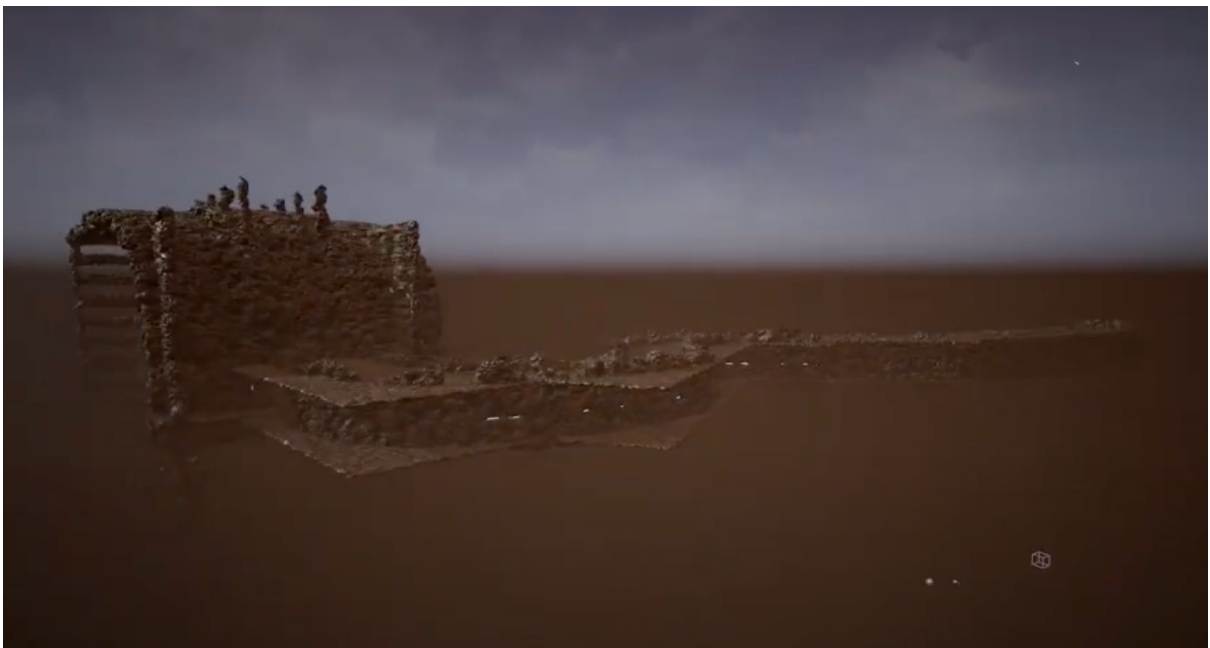


Figure 28.3: Screenshot of the third pass of the brown yuck

<https://youtu.be/DkJ9bWjGhbl> – Yuck pass Final

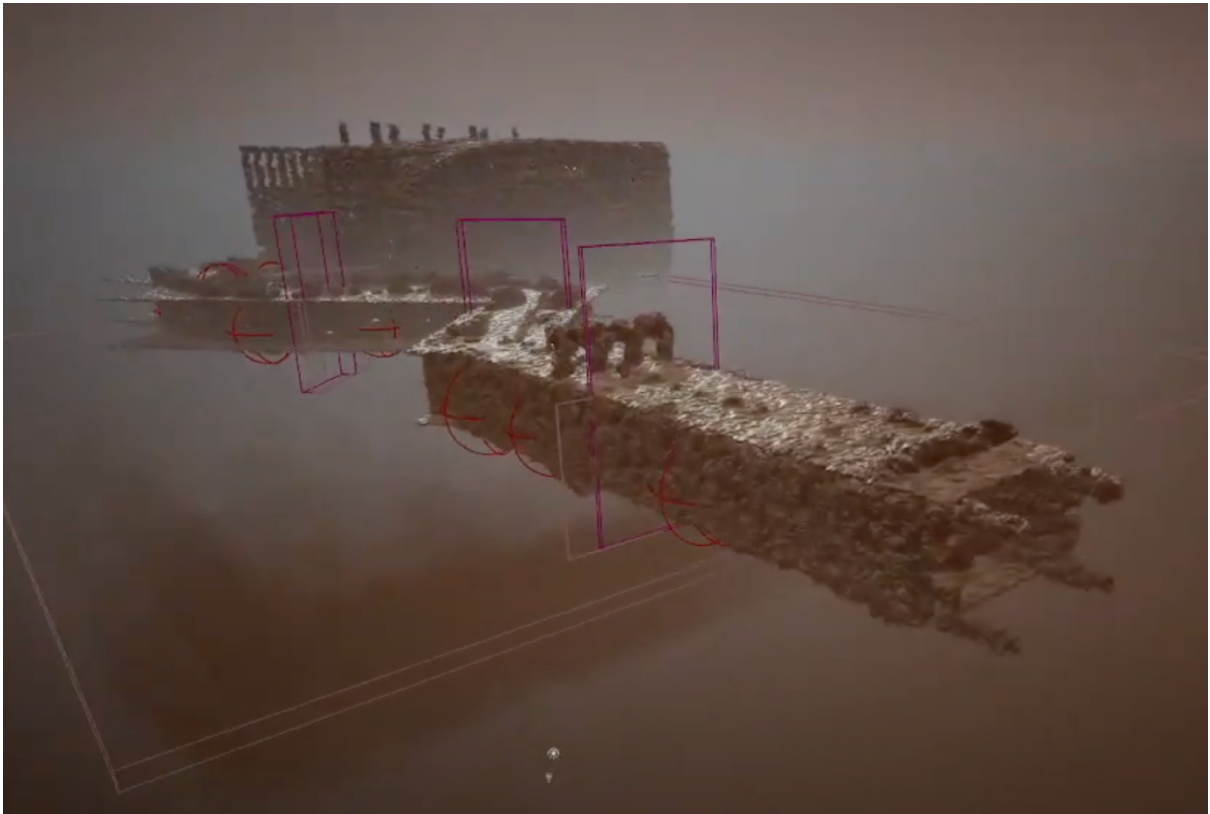


Figure 28.4: Screenshot of the final pass of the brown yuck

<https://youtu.be/efclMyDhBf4> - Room pass 1

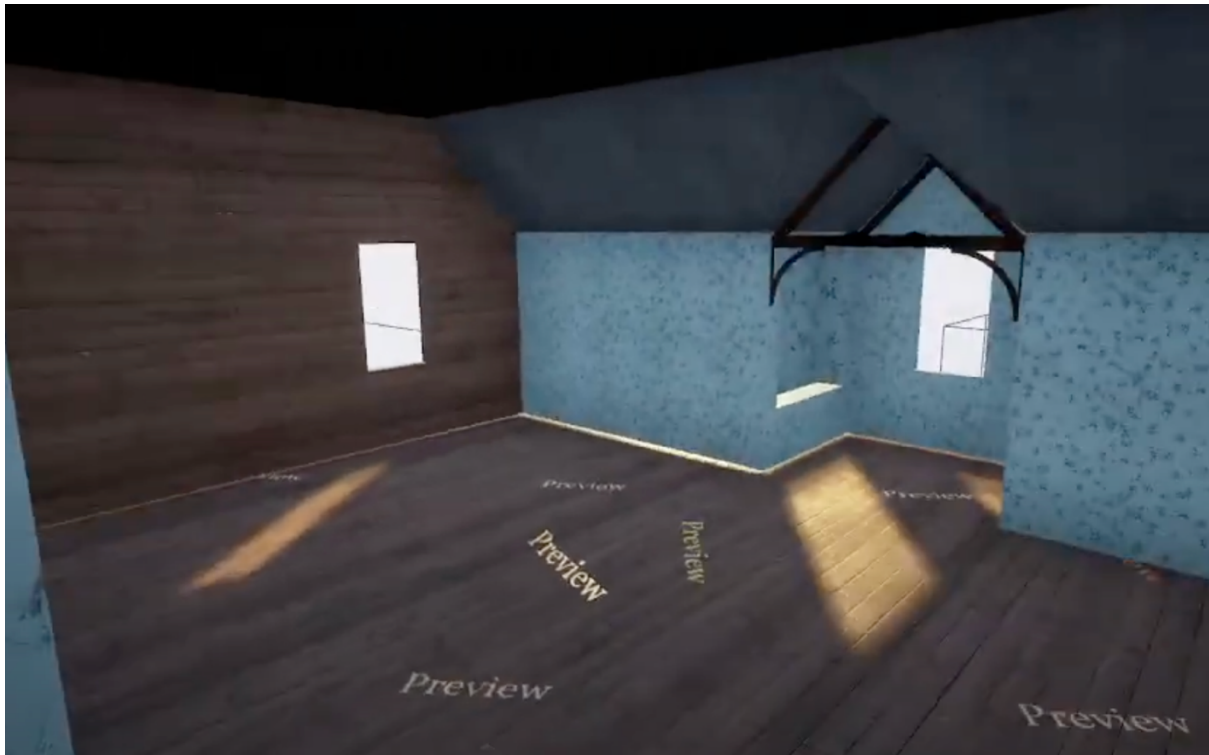


Figure 29: Screenshot of an early pass of the child's room

<https://youtu.be/-hc4HxED2pM> – Room pass Final

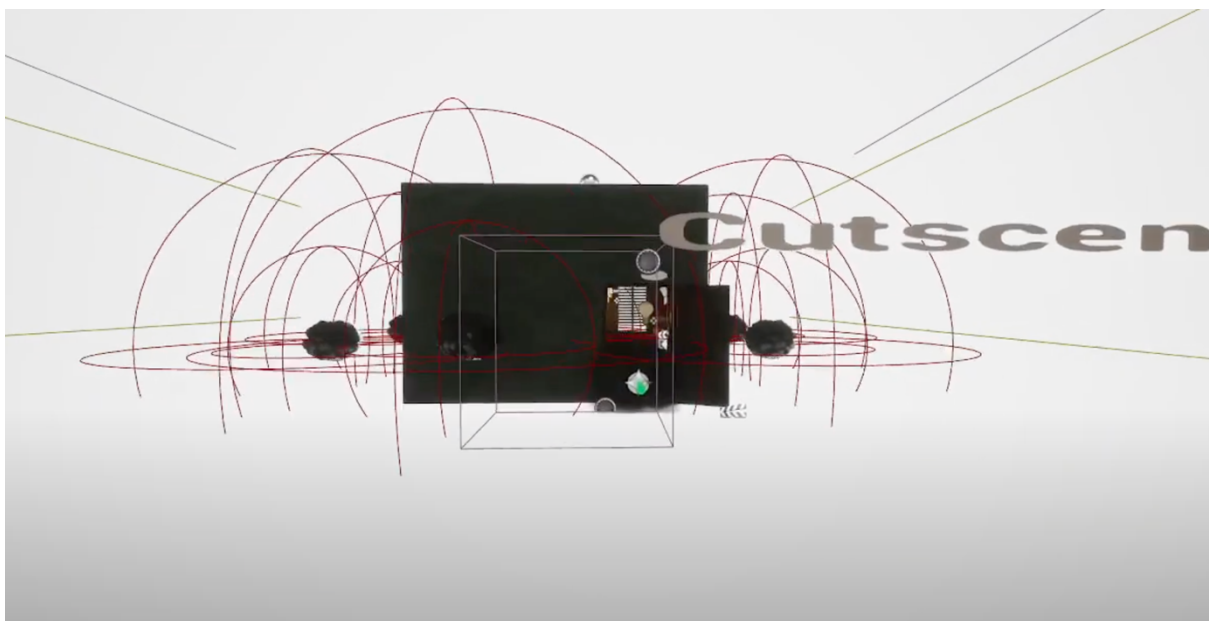


Figure 29.1: Screenshot of the final pass of the now father's room



Figure 29.2: Screenshot of the final pass of the inside of the now father's room

<https://youtu.be/oAJER0IDCoU> – Forest pass 1



Figure 30: Screenshot of the first pass of the forest

<https://youtu.be/bFdHxDsnMFo> – Forest pass 2



Figure 30.2: Screenshot of the second pass of the forest

<https://youtu.be/kETBalpA-Xs> – Forest pass Final



Figure 30.1: Screenshot of the second pass of the forest

Through additional playtesting, feedback indicated that while the narrative progression was clearer, the gameplay itself felt “too boring” and did not sufficiently engage players beyond its symbolic and atmospheric elements. This prompted a deeper investigation into how interactivity could better support the themes of grief. Gee (2005) argues that game mechanics should reinforce narrative immersion, stating that “good games marry mechanics with meaning in ways that traditional media cannot.” In response, I introduced puzzle mechanics specifically designed to integrate with the theme of grief.

The puzzle designs evolved through iterative playtesting, utilizing the same multi-pass technique as the level design. Each puzzle was directly linked to the grief journey:

- Teleporting between broken buildings – Representing the fragmented nature of memory and reflection, requiring players to navigate between past and present spaces. This aligns with Derrida’s (2012) concept of hauntology, in which the past lingers and disrupts the present.

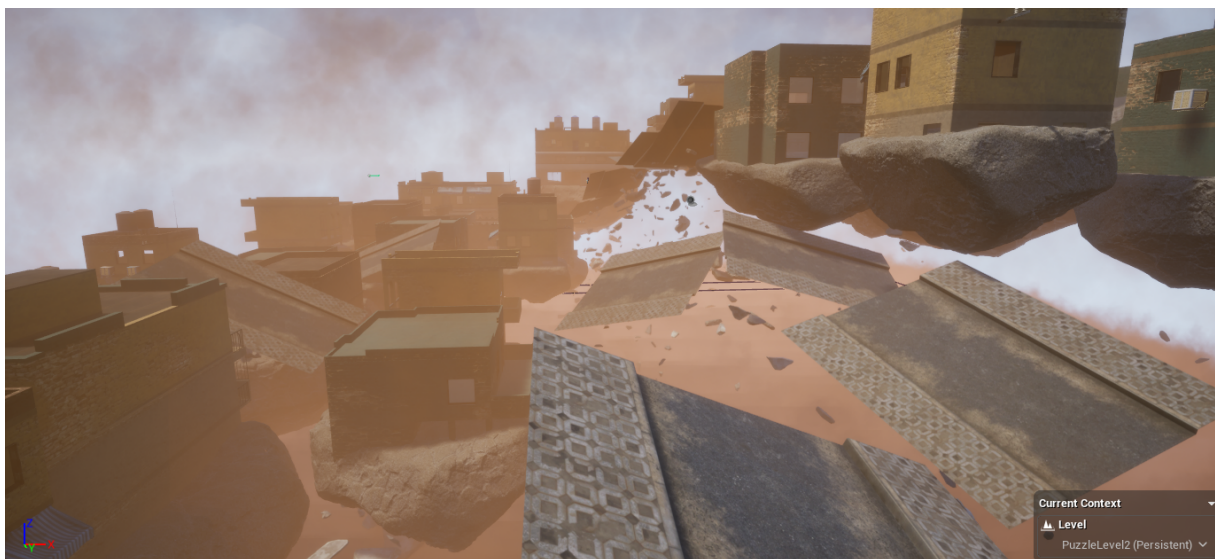


Figure 31: Screenshot of platforming seen in the Middle Eastern Village to use the teleporter

- Button sequence riddle – Players must press buttons in the correct order based on a riddle, with each button representing an object tied to the father. The final input reveals a word that encapsulates the emotional meaning of the puzzle, reinforcing the act of remembering and understanding. This mirrors Barthes’ (1980) exploration of how objects serve as mnemonic devices in grief.



Figure 32: Screenshot of button sequence puzzle seen in the Farm

- Blocking the advancing hands – A visual and interactive metaphor for the protagonist still holding onto grief, requiring players to actively prevent the hands from reaching a central point, symbolising the struggle to let go. This reflects Bowlby’s (1980) attachment theory, which posits that grief is a process of gradually releasing emotional bonds.

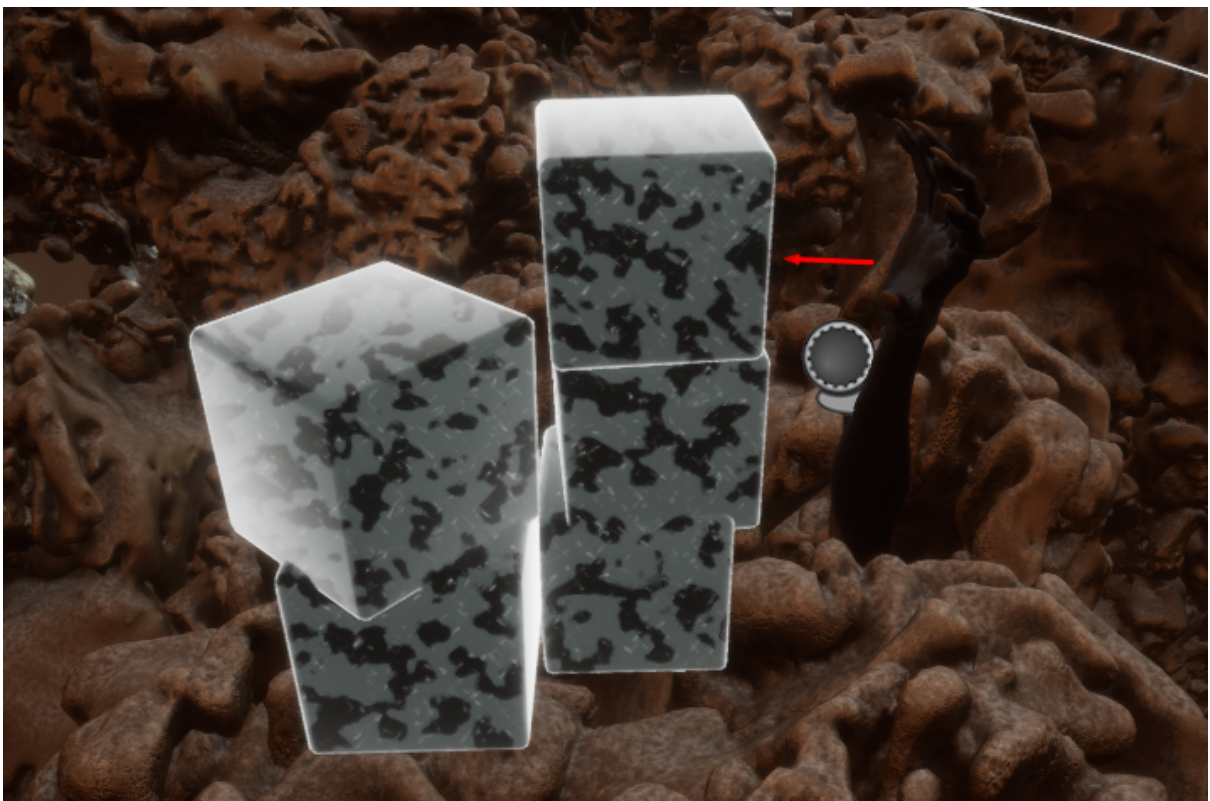


Figure 33: Screenshot of the blocking hands blocking the passage seen in the Brown

-

<https://youtu.be/ThcjLrNrNyA> – Button puzzle

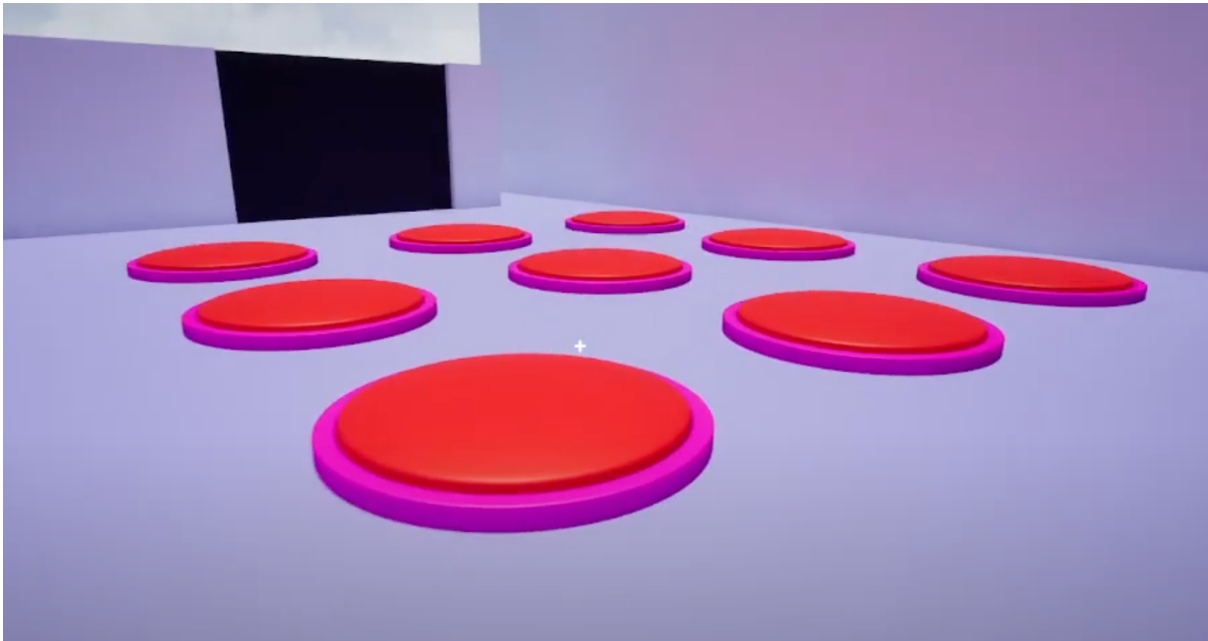


Figure 34: Screenshot of button sequence puzzle testing

<https://youtu.be/hEGHRoTUpN8> – Word puzzle



Figure 34.1: Screenshot of word puzzle testing which was left out of the final game

<https://youtu.be/DZWDCSZDKOM> – Laser puzzle

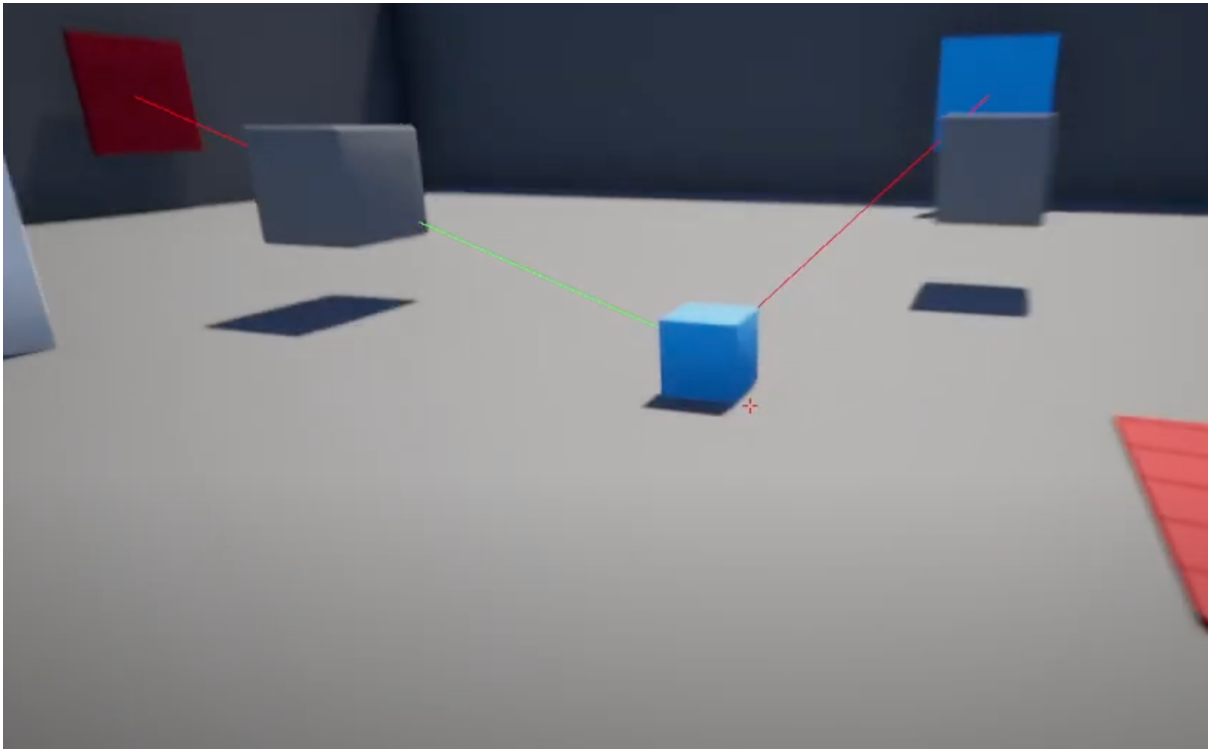


Figure 35: Screenshot of blocking line puzzle testing

<https://youtu.be/KruK88YwM6U> – Teleporter

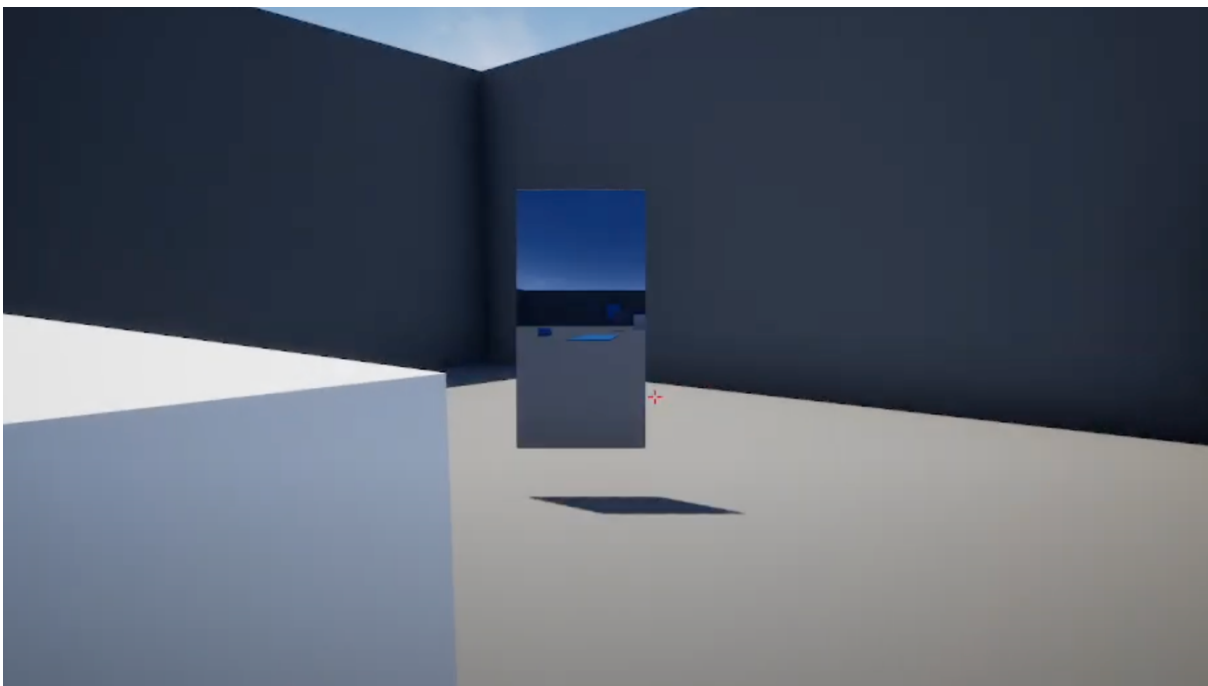


Figure 36: Screenshot of the teleporter testing

In the development of these processes, I sent multiple versions—ranging from version 1_0_0 to the final submission—out for feedback, reaching out to diverse groups of testers in different locations. This interactive process proved invaluable, as it allowed me to gather perspectives on both the gameplay mechanics and the emotional depth of the game’s handling of grief. I didn’t just send the final versions for review; I also revisited and shared older iterations, some of which I had discarded earlier in the development process. This approach helped me rediscover ideas and refine them, leading to new insights or bringing back concepts that were previously overlooked. As McNiff and Whitehead (2006) argue, action research is a powerful tool for evolving creative practice, ensuring that artistic and interactive elements remain responsive to both theoretical underpinnings and player reception. This process ultimately allowed my game to transform from an unintended horror experience into a thoughtful and nuanced representation of grief through interactive storytelling. Through this process, I was able to answer my research question—how to open a meaningful conversation about grief—by testing the game with a wide range of people. The feedback helped me improve the game’s emotional resonance and narrative, ensuring it effectively engaged players in a dialogue about grief while refining the mechanics and overall user experience. This feedback loop, grounded in continuous reflection and adaptation, was central to the development process and ultimately guided the game towards its final form. The game versions I created and sent out can be found in this link:

[Builds](#)

4.1. Level 1: The Fathers Room – The Fragmentation of Safe Spaces

The player awakens in a dimly lit bedroom, the air heavy with the scent of old memories. Shadows stretch unnaturally across the walls, bending and curling like reaching fingers. A half-folded shirt lies on the bed, an old perfume bottle rests on the dresser, a clock ticks—out of sync, erratic, broken. The first subtle glimpses of slime appear at the edges of perception, creeping into corners and under furniture. It moves slowly, almost imperceptibly, embodying the quiet but inescapable build-up of grief. This manifestation aligns with the concept of “affective residue” in loss, where spaces become imprinted with the emotional weight of the departed (Massimi & Charise, 2009). The game begins with this gradual intrusion, mirroring how grief seeps into everyday life, distorting what was once familiar.

To represent the fragmentation of safe spaces, I relied on Materials and Shaders to hyper fixate on, for example alcohol and cigars are in pristine condition which contrast to the father who was struggling with these items. In the early iteration, these assets were aggressive, and objects seemed too abstract, which created disorientation and confusion so I replaced these aspects with what I have currently. I also used the Sequencer, Unreal Engines cinematic tool, to choreograph these movements and magnify these assets, but it soon became clear that this constant chaos was overwhelming and hindered player engagement.

Failure and Reflection: The initial design lacked emotional nuance, and after observing player reactions in test sessions, I adjusted the pace of the environment making the play space larger. Using Blueprints, I refined the sequencer behaviour to be slower and more gradual. I incorporated subtle variations in the Particle System to create the effect of the walls aging slowly, with crisper assets, which allowed players to better process the environment’s meaning.

The slime was implemented using Particle Effects and a Material Function that allowed the gooey substance to appear more prominent early on and then retreat as the player progressed. This effect was initially too invasive, so I tweaked the opacity and flow of the slime over time using Blueprint-driven transitions. The result was a more emotionally balanced representation of grief, where the environmental shifts were no longer jarring but subtly evolved, maintaining player focus on the emotional narrative.

Success: The shift to crisp assets with meaning in both the walls and the slime created a more cohesive emotional narrative, effectively showing grief’s slow

progression and transformation over time. By using Unreal Engine 5's real-time dynamic systems, I was able to iterate quickly, testing various approaches to ensure the environmental changes mirrored the protagonist's mental state without overwhelming the player.

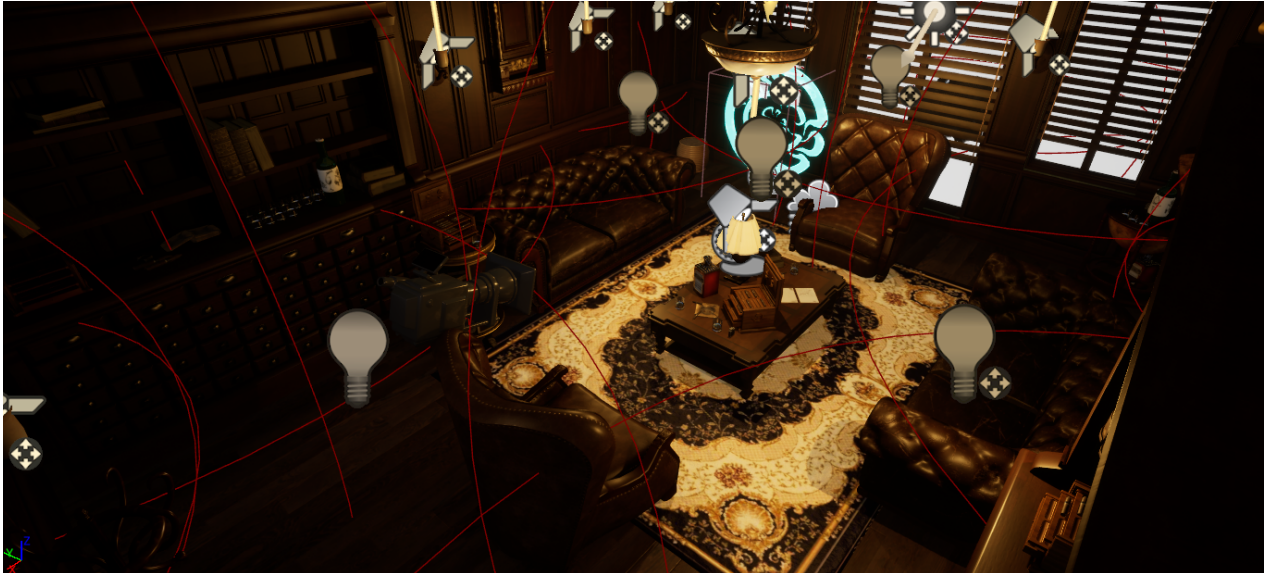


Figure 37: Screenshot of the final version of the Fathers Room

4.2. Level 2: The Middle Eastern Town – The Fragmented Trauma

Upon stepping outside, the surroundings dissolve, morphing into a Middle Eastern village—the place where the family member died. The air shimmers with heat, yet the buildings around the player float, untethered, detached from the earth. Walking is impossible; the ground no longer holds certainty. This setting captures the disorientation of grief, where the world feels unsteady, unmoored from reality. It echoes the “derealisation” described in grief psychology—where environments that once felt stable become alien (Neimeyer, 2001). Navigation requires the player to use a mirror, teleporting from building to building. Each time the mirror is held up, the reflection distorts, shifting the player's form, stretching features, breaking symmetry. This mechanic represents the fragmented and nonlinear nature of mourning—identity warps in the wake of loss, each reflection a different version of the self, each jump a fractured memory of trying to move forward. The level ends with a thickening of the slime, dripping from rooftops, staining surfaces, marking the growing weight of unresolved sorrow.

Intricate Making in Unreal Engine 5: For the Middle Eastern town, I utilised Nanite to create a detailed, fragmented environment with high-quality models. The goal was to create a surreal, disjointed world where buildings seemed to float in mid-air, symbolising mental fragmentation. I initially designed the town with floating buildings that were fully destructible, relying heavily on Chaos Physics and Chaos Destruction to simulate buildings collapsing in real-time. This was visually striking, but after feedback from playtests, it became clear that the aggressive destruction mechanic was too chaotic and detracted from the emotional resonance of the trauma. Players found it hard to focus on the narrative while navigating a constantly crumbling world.

Failure and Reflection: Upon reflection, I scaled back the destructibility of the environment. I replaced fully destructible buildings with static meshes that floated with gentle animations, controlled by Blueprints that altered their position based on emotional triggers. I retained the fragmented nature of the world but focused on maintaining a sense of stability in certain structures, allowing players to navigate the environment with a clearer sense of progression.

Success: The revised town allowed for both the emotional depth of trauma and an engaging, navigable world with the removal of 50% of the destruction. The combination of Nanite for high detail and Blueprints for interactivity helped create a world that felt fragmented but still grounded in its emotional implications. The slime

was kept sparse in this level, acting as a subtle undercurrent of grief that remained present but less physically dominant. This helped maintain emotional consistency while allowing players to reflect on their trauma through gameplay.

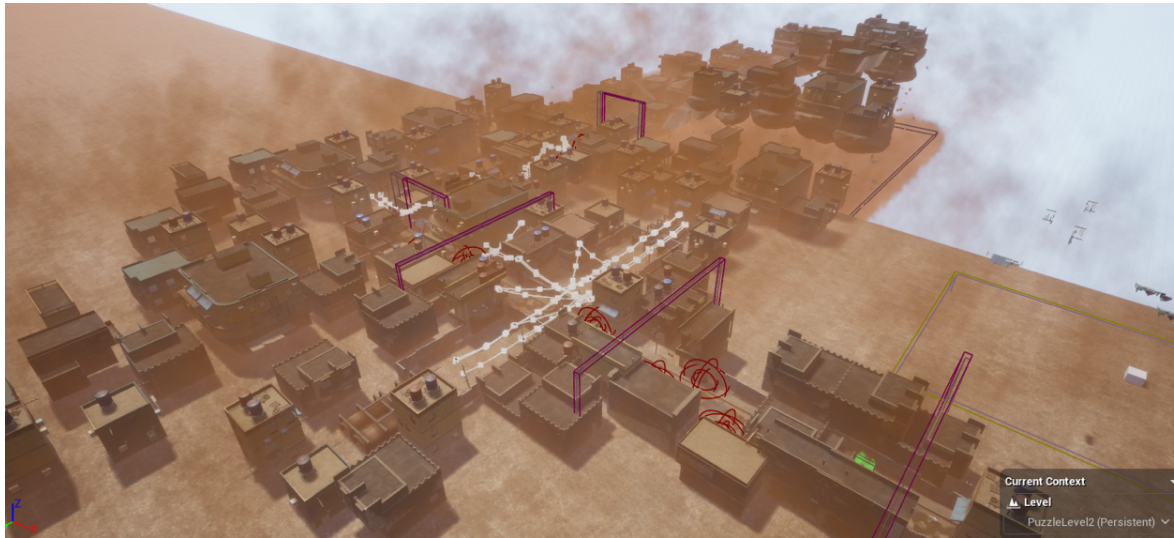


Figure 38: Screenshot of the final version of the Middle Eastern Village

4.3. Level 3: The Farm – The Struggle to Articulate Grief

The next environment shifts to a vast farm where the player spent childhood with the lost family member. Here, golden fields stretch beneath a painted sky, yet something feels wrong—the air is heavier, and the soil clings to the feet, making movement laborious. The slime is more visible now, no longer hiding at the edges but coiling through wheat stalks, coating barn doors, leaking from cracks in wooden fences. The player must collect fragments of old letters and photographs, piecing them together to unlock pathways. This mechanic symbolises the necessity of confronting the past, of reconstructing a coherent narrative from loss. The act of remembering is crucial, yet here it is tactile, uncomfortable, as the slime thickens with each memory uncovered, signifying nostalgia’s weight and the struggle to hold on while still moving forward. This concept aligns with continuing bonds theory (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 2014), emphasising the tension between preservation and progression in grief.

Intricate Making in Unreal Engine 5: This level introduced a more mechanical gameplay system, focusing on the difficulty of articulating grief through word-based interactions. I designed the environment using Landscape Tools to create a rural, expansive farm setting. The challenge was integrating emotional triggers within a natural environment that allowed players to interact with objects tied to memories of the deceased.

I utilised Blueprints to create a dynamic word selection mechanic, where words would only appear after players interacted with emotional objects, like a tractor or a hay bales. These interactions were set to trigger Audio Cues and Visual Effects, like slight changes in lighting or object animation, to symbolise the emotional clarity that comes when the protagonist is ready to express their grief.

Failure and Reflection: The mechanic of word selection initially lacked depth and felt mechanical. The interaction was too rigid, and players didn’t connect with the emotional struggle of articulating grief. After playtesting, I introduced more nuanced cues, such as Ambient Sounds that indicated when the player was close to discovering the correct words, also, Cinematic Sequences that triggered small emotional cutscenes when the words were unlocked. This helped reinforce the idea that finding the right words was not a simple task but an emotional breakthrough.

Success: The revised interaction system allowed players to feel the weight of grief through moments of emotional clarity, and the Blueprints provided a seamless

connection between the gameplay mechanic and the narrative. The slime in this level was more subdued, representing the transition toward articulation and emotional expression, though it remained present to show that grief, even when articulated, does not disappear entirely.



Figure 39: Screenshot of the final version of the Farm

4.4. Level 4: The Abstract Brown Yuck – Confronting the Deepest Trauma

The penultimate level is the most overwhelming. The environment is grotesque, shifting and pulsating. The walls coated in thick, suffocating layers of slime, dripping in slow, viscous movements, almost breathing. The space is unrecognisable, an abstraction of grief at its peak—a manifestation of trauma, distorted and inescapable. Here, the player must cut off dark tendrils that connect to the exit door. Each severance is accompanied by an auditory distortion, as though voices from the past are being drowned out, fading away. This action symbolises the severance of unhealthy attachments to grief, the necessary breaking of chains that hinder acceptance. Cutting these ties aligns with meaning reconstruction theory (Neimeyer, 2015), where transformation through grief necessitates both confrontation and release. The process is unsettling, reinforcing the notion that grief is not only an emotional state but a visceral, sensory one that must be physically and mentally engaged with before it can be overcome.

Intricate Making in Unreal Engine 5: The “brown yuck” level posed a unique challenge, aiming to represent the suffocating and chaotic nature of deep trauma through abstract design. I used Unreal’s Post-Processing Effects to create an oppressive, surreal atmosphere, manipulating Colour Grading to evoke a sense of emotional heaviness. I also employed Niagara Particle Systems to generate thick, swirling clouds that enveloped the environment, reflecting the suffocating feeling of unresolved trauma.

I created time-reversal mechanics, which used Blueprints to alter the Time Dilation settings, allowing for moments where the player could slow down their surroundings to examine hidden emotional elements. I limited the use of time reversal to key emotional discoveries, ensuring that the player’s control over the environment remained meaningful. However, even though this was an interesting mechanic in my game, I felt like it took away from my research question where instead of the player understanding the weight of this final stage the protagonist is in, creates a ‘fun’ outlier which the level contradicts. Instead of this feature, I replaced it with obstacles with a ‘Rorschach’ material within it. This created both a symbolic and narrative focused mechanic where these visuals can serve as a mirror to one’s evolving internal state, particularly in the context of grief. *Just as “A Patient and a Therapist in Dialogue With Two Rorschach’s (2025)” quotes, “Could re-sitting the Rorschach Test yield different results? I believe myself to be in a different place psychologically, but have I really changed? And would the test reflect this?”* From

this statement I used this material specifically because the ambiguous nature of the inkblots allows individuals to project their subconscious thoughts and feelings, facilitating a deeper understanding of their emotional journey helping them ‘overcome’ grief in the context of my game.

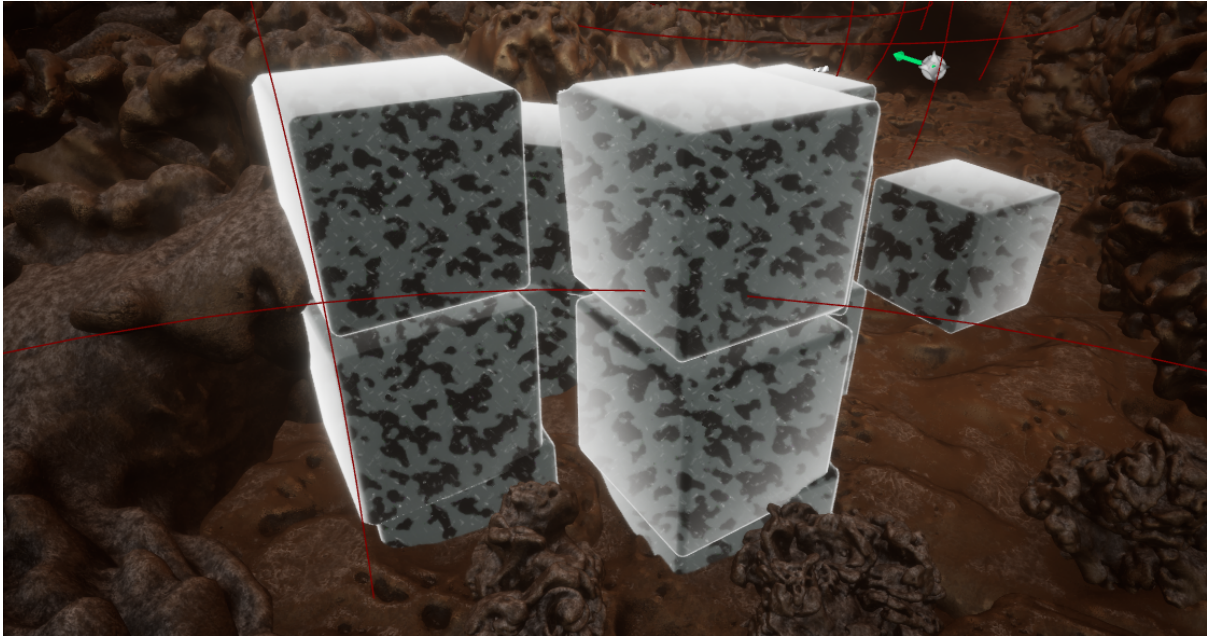


Figure 40: Screenshot of the Rorschach material in game

Failure and Reflection: Initially, the time-reversal mechanic felt too much like a puzzle-solving tool rather than a narrative device. After further reflection, I adjusted the mechanic so that it was tied to key emotional moments in the level, making the slow-motion effect more deliberate. This shift, achieved through precise Blueprint Scripting, allowed the player to uncover hidden memories, thus connecting the mechanic more closely with the protagonist’s emotional journey.

Success: The final level’s atmosphere, combined with the Niagara Particle System and Post-Processing Effects, conveyed the suffocating weight of trauma while allowing players to engage with the protagonist’s internal world at a more deliberate pace. The slime remained present in this level, symbolising the continuing struggle with grief and trauma, ensuring the emotional continuity of the protagonist’s journey.

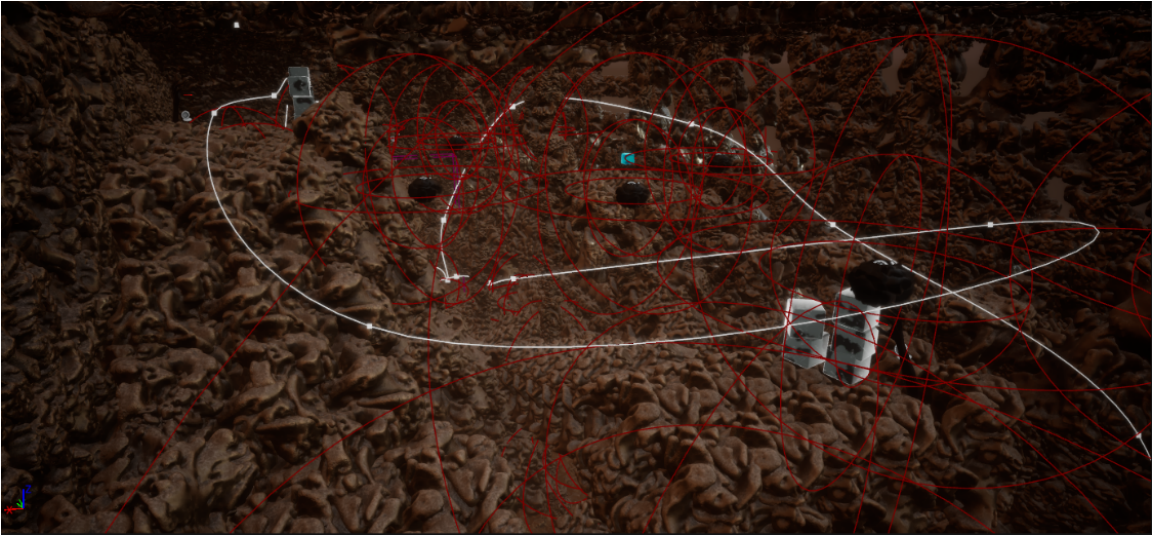


Figure 40.1: Screenshot of the final version of the Brown Yuck

4.5. Level 5: The Peaceful Forest – The Transformation into Acceptance

Then, suddenly, the player emerges into an open, boundless forest. The trees sway gently, sunlight filters through the leaves, and a river hums in the distance. There is no slime in sight. The absence of distortion, of weight, of suffocating remnants of loss, signifies transformation. This space represents the final stage of grief—where memories no longer suffocate, but coexist harmoniously within the self. The player can walk freely, unburdened. This stage aligns with Worden’s (2009) final task of mourning: reinvesting in life while maintaining a bond with the deceased. The forest is not an erasure of grief but an integration of it, a space where the loss is honoured without overpowering the present.

Intricate Making in Unreal Engine 5: The final level, set in a serene forest, required a balance between tranquillity and the continuing presence of grief. I used Unreal Engine’s Landscape Tools to create an expansive, calming natural environment, with soft lighting and atmospheric fog to evoke a peaceful ambiance. The lighting was key in creating a sense of acceptance, with warm, soft glows that suggested healing.

Failure and Reflection: Initially, I struggled with how to maintain the emotional depth of the level while avoiding a simplistic resolution. I experimented with different lighting setups and environmental features, but it wasn’t until I allowed a faint trace of slime to remain in the level that I felt the balance was right. This small detail, along with the soft ambient sounds and gentle animation of trees swaying, created a sense of acceptance rather than finality.

Success: The final level’s peaceful design, combined with the continued presence of the slime, conveyed the nuanced idea that grief doesn’t disappear entirely but becomes integrated into life. This balance, achieved through Blueprints, Landscape

Tools, and Material Instances, provided a satisfying and emotionally resonant conclusion to the protagonist's journey.



Figure 41: Screenshot of the final version of the Forest

As I moved through the *Documentation of Process*, it became increasingly clear that this project was as much about understanding grief as it was about designing a game. What started as a creative and technical challenge—mapping abstract visuals to emotional states—evolved into a deeper, more personal journey. The systems I built began to reflect parts of my own experience, often in ways I didn't expect. Moments of frustration, discovery, and revision mirrored the very emotions I was trying to represent—confusion, fragmentation, longing, and eventually, a fragile kind of clarity. Through this, I came to understand what Candy and Edmonds (2018) refer to as tacit knowledge: the unspoken insights that emerge only through doing. Iterating on design—adjusting particle systems, reworking level structures, or softening mechanics that felt too harsh—wasn't just problem-solving, it was emotional refinement. It became about creating space for grief to be felt, not just depicted.

This reflective, practice-based approach was essential. Each iteration, each failure, opened up a new understanding of how sensory distortions—visual, spatial, or auditory—could serve as metaphors for grief's impact. The feedback loops, both from playtesting and internal reflection, allowed the game to shift from something experimental to something emotionally grounded. In the following conclusion, I draw together these insights, considering how abstract narrative games might not only represent grief, but offer players an active, immersive way to process and engage with its complexity

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this project explored the role of abstract narrative gaming in opening a conversation surrounding the sensory distortions encountered in grief experiences. By developing a prototype in Unreal Engine 5 and applying qualitative research methods, I examined how abstraction in game design can convey emotional and psychological states—particularly the disorientation, fragmentation, and sensory distortion that often accompany grief.

What went well was the successful use of environmental design elements such as lighting, sound, and spatial ambiguity to create an emotionally charged atmosphere. These design choices effectively communicated a sense of psychological instability without relying on character-driven storytelling or traditional narrative. The use of abstraction encouraged personal interpretation and introspection, aligning with the unpredictable and subjective nature of grief. Unreal Engine 5 provided strong visual and technical capabilities that supported these goals.

However, the project also faced challenges. Technical limitations and time constraints meant that some interactive elements had to be simplified or removed. As a result, the final experience lacked the depth of interaction I initially envisioned. I also did not incorporate user testing or address accessibility and emotional sensitivity in depth, which limited the project's capacity to consider a diverse range of player responses. These areas were consciously deprioritised in favour of focusing on conceptual and aesthetic development within a limited timeframe.

Despite these limitations, the research question was addressed meaningfully. The project demonstrates that abstract narrative games can communicate complex emotional states, offering a platform for exploring grief in ways that resist fixed meaning and allow for personal engagement. Ultimately, this project highlights the potential of abstract narrative games to contribute to grief discourse by offering unique sensory and emotional experiences beyond conventional narrative frameworks.

Reflection:

Reflecting on my work, if I were to do this again, I would build in time for iterative testing, collaborate with people who have lived experience of grief, and integrate more robust interaction and accessibility features. These lessons go far beyond technical refinement—they speak to a fundamental shift in how I now understand creative research and emotional storytelling. In hindsight, even though I had a lot of playtesting I did not include ethics. This led to much of the emotional tone in the game being developed in isolation, as this was a piece based on my own experiences, shaped by my own reflections and scholarly readings. While that was meaningful, it also meant the project missed the richness that shared stories can bring. Working alongside individuals who have directly navigated grief could have opened new pathways—offering perspectives that might have challenged or deepened my own assumptions, and brought more authenticity to the experience I was trying to design.

I also came to realise how much more could be done in terms of interaction—not just in terms of player agency, but in how players emotionally *move through* the work. If I were to begin again, I would explore branching paths that respond to how players choose to engage with loss, avoidance, anger, or acceptance. I would pay closer attention to sensory accessibility, considering how grief might be expressed through multiple modalities, whether visual, auditory, or tactile. Having undertaken this massive scholarly journey, I now see game development not just as an artistic pursuit, but as a profoundly relational one. The process of building a world to hold grief must be as careful, open, and multi-voiced as grief itself. If this exegesis has taught me anything, it's that the emotional power of a game lies not only in what it shows—but in how it listens. The next project I create will begin from that listening place—with more time, more collaboration, and a deeper commitment to creating work that doesn't just express emotion, but invites others into its complexity.

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