

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** GRIS

**Platform:** PC / Mac / Nintendo Switch / iOS

**Genre:** Puzzle Platformer

**Release Date:** December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Developer:** Nomada Studios

**Publisher:** Devolver Digital

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Conrad Roset

## Overview

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The world to someone in mourning often feels like a world without color.

There is a bleak, all-encompassing numbness, an aching empty space once occupied by a warm, talking, laughing body. Everything they once owned sits, untouched, gathering dust. It isn't... *sad*, per se, not always. It's numb. Hollow, and incredibly, crushingly lonely.

That is where GRIS starts. The 2D puzzle-platformer takes the player on a journey through the mental landscape of a grieving girl, beginning at the moment of loss and progressing through the stages of grief encumbered by many a puzzle and obstacle along the way. Gris, the main character, has lost her mother, who is represented in the world by a stone statue hundreds of feet high. A parent can seem that way to their child: infinitely tall, imposing, chipped in places but overall unbreakable. She holds Gris in her outstretched hand, her petrified form gazing lovingly at her daughter as Gris sings a beautiful melody.

Suddenly, cracks form in the stone underneath Gris's feet. Her hands fly to her throat as the singing stops. An attempt. A failure. Her voice is gone. As more fissures spiderweb through her mother's form, she runs, presses her back up against the statue, clinging for dear life.

Then, with a jarring noise, it breaks apart.

Gris falls...

And falls...

And falls. As she tumbles through the air, the opening credits play; the camera moves further and further away from her until she is barely visible, a speck in the center of the screen. When the credits are over, the downward movement of the camera stops at ground level in a monochrome landscape; Gris sits there, slumped, breathing slowly. It takes a couple of tries to get her walking, a couple of failed attempts that end in the girl falling to her knees. Eventually, she is able to run. The ruined landscape around her is a visual metaphor for her mind, everything but her own character sprite painted in shades of gray. The initial struggle, the broken girl. It's a clear picture of someone who has numbed the world around her until she can barely perceive it.

As Gris moves through this environment of crumbled buildings and half-buried pieces of the broken statue, she begins to work through the obstacles that seek to prevent her from moving on. One of the beautiful things about this game is the gradual progression through challenges. Some are more complex than others – layered problems that take time and effort to work through – and some are simple, like jumping up to a high platform. The goal of the level progression is to collect a certain amount of glowing white stars. These act as stepping stones. If all of them are collected, they allow Gris to cross a gap to access the next part of the level. Once that level's worth of stars outlive their use and the gap is crossed, they rise into the sky, forming a part of what looks like a constellation. With each level cleared, she works through a stage of grief, and another color bleeds back into Gris's world.

## Characters

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- **Gris** – The game's protagonist and the only human character. Her mind created the ruined, desolate landscape in which GRIS takes place. A slight, pale woman with rosy cheeks and a short bob of blue-green hair, Gris wears a layered gray dress that flows around her legs as she runs and jumps. As the player progresses through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, Gris gains new abilities that manifest through her dress, allowing her to more easily traverse through the landscape. By the end of the game, her dress can:
  - Form a hard cube around her body that lets her stand her ground against the red stage's sandstorms, ground-pound, and shatter cracked objects.
  - Transform into a wing-like state that lets her double-jump.
  - Envelop Gris in the form of a manta ray that lets her swim and dive faster.
  - Lift and float around her as she regains the ability to sing.The final ability is the only one that does not involve her dress: she regains her voice, and her singing brings life into the colorless foliage around her.
- **Statue** – Gris fell into this shattered state of grief because she lost her mother, who appears at the end of each level as a giant statue with her hand outstretched. She has a similar appearance to Gris but with longer hair and a more mature bone structure, her form spiderwebbed with cracks. In the completely-monochrome Denial level, she is mostly broken into pieces. The statue gradually becomes whole again with each stage cleared. At the end of each level, in order to progress

the game, Gris climbs into her mother's hand. It is not necessarily a character in that it has desires/goals, but because it is a reflection of Gris's mother, it is important to include the statue as a significant figure.

- **Robot** – The only major interaction Gris has that is not one-sided towards a lifeless statue is with a little robot that lives on the forest floor in the game's green-themed Bargaining level. It is initially scared of Gris: it starts following her around after she knocks an apple from a tree that it eats. However, if she turns around to look at it, it burrows into the ground, disguising itself as a plant. However, as Gris knocks down more apples for the robot to eat, it starts to warm up to her: it no longer hides if she turns toward it, and eventually, it aids her in solving puzzles by jumping when she jumps and slamming the ground when she does so. It is a very simple character, with the desire to be fed and to give back to Gris in return for her kindness, before it rejoins its family.
- **Amalgam** – There is no official name for this force. It is a coagulation of fluttering black moths that lies dormant in the Anger level, in the deepest reaches of Gris's consciousness. It was trapped in jars in this underground cavern likely to mirror Gris's own repression of her guilt and grief, but it escapes when Gris reaches that level. First, this amalgam takes the form of a bird, its size easily towering over Gris's tiny body. It later shifts and changes with the world, transforming into an eel and then undergoing a third metamorphosis at the end of the game.

## Breakdown

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A note, to start out: Gris's story is very, very vague. This is an intentional decision. My interpretation of the plot is, I believe, fairly solid, but the story is unspecific so that each player can interpret it differently, which is part of where the beauty of the game lies. I call the statue her mother because in the game's extra cutscene, Gris and what looks to be her mother sit together playing with stars. It's not a confirmation, but to me it was fairly clear.

The stages of GRIS and the stages of grief are one and the same. First, the world is gray. This stage represents denial. Gris ignores her feelings, instead fully embracing the gameplay without any influence from the world. She is out of touch with herself – she can run and jump, but if she tries to sing (the user presses L, on PC) it comes out as a whimper and she puts a hand to her throat, shaking her head. No other abilities exist. Some gaps are too wide to cross – this comes across to the player as 'invisible walls,' or areas of the level that are inaccessible. It feels restricted and bland with not much variation in the gameplay other than platforming and collecting stars to cross into the next part of the level. This functions excellently as a tutorial level / prologue; it weaves the flow of a video game into the mood and story. Finally, once every obstacle is cleared, the collected stars hovering around Gris's dress, she finds her mother's outstretched hand among the rubble. She comes face to face with what she has been denying all this time. Signified by climbing into the statue's hand, she comes to terms with it. Her tiny body lifts into the air, and from her, a new color, freed, bleeds outward into the world.

The color is red. Suddenly, the landscape is greatly changed. What was once a lifeless wasteland full of debris now contains sharp red rocks, sand, and shy, robotic hermit crabs who take shelter underneath said rocks. This stage is also wracked with

intermittent, overwhelming sandstorms that flood the screen dark red. Every part of the game feeds into the violence of the storms. The soundtrack becomes louder, more frantic and dramatic. Gris is physically unable to combat them when they blow through, as they blow her backwards and immobilize her in a defensive position with her arm over her face; she can only move normally if she is under a roof. She has no agency in the matter other than hiding, avoiding... until she steps onto a podium and the stars floating around her dress fly up to create part of a path in the sky. In exchange for the stars, the world gifts Gris with a new ability: her dress turns into a hard cube around her body, and she slams down onto the ground with enough force to break cracked pieces of the environment and make the creatures scatter and hide.

She slams into the ground, then again, then again until she falls dozens of feet into an underground chamber filled with statues of her mother. Some of them are cracked. It feels abandoned. Dormant. It's important to note that this chamber, like the first level, is monochrome. Climbing onto and shattering them earns the player the "Anger" achievement, and three uses of the new ability frees a fluttering mass of once-dormant black moths from the chamber. They escape, carrying Gris back up into the world proper, and fly up into the sky.

There is a reason being angry is called "seeing red." This level represents anger as a stage of grief. It blows in, passionate, destructive, coming in waves. It immobilizes Gris. It chokes the air and darkens the sky. The only color in her world is *red*. The way the ground-pound ability communicates with the anger theme, however, is not obvious on the surface. It's more nuanced than the color red or a vicious, paralyzing sandstorm. Gris's abilities manifest as she comes to terms with her feelings. In response to anger, she develops armor. She can harness the force of her anger in a way that helps her move forward rather than creating an uncontrollable, debilitating storm.

To illustrate this shift in mindset, after gaining this ability, Gris is faced with one last, never-ending sandstorm. Before now, they would blow in, last a few seconds and vanish. This one does not. It cannot be avoided. It cannot be waited out. Now, with her new ability, Gris can weather it: she puts her armor up and walks against the wind.

Now, the world has become a bit more lively. It's still mostly barren, devoid of life other than the scuttling hermit spiders, but progress is being made! The puzzles shift from jagged rocks and caves to elevated windmills in the clouds. Grief and anger evolve. Erratic moods rise into manic energy and crash just as quickly, made visually evident in the variety of puzzle designs in this level. She is working through her pain, moving forward – and, as she falls, then slides down a seemingly endless dune of sand, the game's true intro plays. The crescendo of strings evokes just as much warmth as the pinks and reds of the atmosphere, swelling with hope as Gris is positioned in front of the sun. It's the complete opposite of the cold grays of the denial level. This is an excellent example of the harmony of Gris's wordless narrative: every part of the game plays into the mood and the story. The music, the colors, the gameplay, the composition and design... all of these elements evoke the emotions we work through along with Gris.

The next color to bloom from Gris as she climbs into her mother's hand – the statue, notably, is still broken but has come together a bit – is green. Vines carry her down to a newly-born forest floor. The soundscape is rich with wildlife here, no longer the wasteland we saw in the denial and anger levels. No longer does Gris have to endure

them alone. However, while more hopeful, the music still feels incredibly lonely. It's soft, quiet, and the slow strings lament this empty world.

Three significant things happen in this level: she makes a friend, she gains a power, and she faces an enemy. Over the course of the level, she befriends a little robot with a taste for apples. The more apples Gris shakes out of trees for him, the friendlier he becomes, eventually paralleling her abilities to help her solve puzzles. When she ground-pounds, so does he. Their movement almost looks like a dance.

This little friend represents bargaining; if she cannot have her mother, she will try to fill the void with a replacement. Its status as the only living being with which Gris interacts over a long period of time creates a sense of attachment in the player. The metaphor extends into the entire environment: it's the creation of artificial life such as robots and cube-shaped apples to replace true life – Gris's mindscape does not create any truly organic forms. It feels, at first glance, welcoming and homely, but it is transient: you cannot stay in the bargaining stage forever. You cannot replace the person you've lost with a facsimile of life. She does not belong here. An apt comparison would be the attachment players tend to feel towards Portal's Companion Cube: they are alone in a harsh environment, with one companion to aid them. But just like the Companion Cube, Gris must eventually let go of her friend. It returns to its family underground, where it belongs and she doesn't, and she moves on alone. The emptiness at her side is felt twofold as she continues her journey.

Here, Gris gains the ability to double-jump. In the game, this manifests as her dress splitting into two wing-like sections that allow her to glide effortlessly in the air. The meaning of this power is less obvious than anger's hard shell. It is significant that it manifests during bargaining because the only time Gris was ever able to hover in the air was when her mother's statue was whole – so, when Gris wasn't grieving. Double-jumping is useful, but you will still fall; it's a compromise, a bargain, from floating. Even so, Gris is getting lighter. The game began with her walk being extremely slow and heavy. She could barely stand. Any time she tried to jump, she'd fall hard on her knees... and now she can glide. Bargaining being the middle stage is thus shown both positively and negatively in this power. It doesn't come across quite as strongly as the meaning in the other abilities, however. Perhaps if it formed actual wings that didn't work, or were obviously fake in nature, it would have been clearer; it takes explaining for many people to understand, and even this is a speculation on the meaning of the ability.

The green level is also when the game's main antagonist first appears. Remember the moths from that dormant monochrome chamber in the red level? They cloud the sky in black and form a giant, screeching, stomping bird which, like the sandstorms, blow Gris back and immobilize her. The bird is the manifestation of something from Gris's psyche. It could represent guilt, or fear of letting go, or the monster that is grief itself. Or it could represent all of these, formed into one giant beast. In order to progress past the bird, Gris has to be brave. She must approach it, let it screech at her so that she can cross gaps she would not normally be able to cross. She is leveraging, using her fear and pain and working through it, working with it to move on.

The bird disappears once the green puzzles are solved, but that is not the last we will see from it as Gris, alone, descends into depression. Blue bleeds out from Gris's form in her mother's hand. Everything – the forest, the robots, every nook and cranny and semblance of life – is drowned in a torrent of rain. It finally becomes noticeable that the

statue has started to slowly come together again; her head is half-formed, her torso elevated from the ground instead of shattered in debris.

By now, the world has become incredibly rich with color. Reds, blues, and greens mix to create rich purple and teal elements. Gris explores underground caves with glowing mushrooms and crystalline caverns that capture her form in ice for a precious second; she must use her wits to move past the puzzles in these areas, and swim – frustratingly slow – across bodies of water. This level is plainly gorgeous in design. Every sound and visual is finely tuned to stimulate the other senses; the player can almost smell the damp mossy caves, feel the sharpness of walking on ice. Then, a whole new world is unlocked when she gains her third ability: her dress takes the form of a manta ray over her nose, mouth, and body so that she can swim and dive fast, and breathe underwater. This ability obviously makes it much easier to navigate the completely-underwater second part of the level. The meaning doesn't stop there, however. The blue landscape was obviously created to be beautiful. It's a rich, alive environment, somehow moreso than the green level; it feels like life exists here outside of Gris. The plants and the fish and the mushrooms all feel more independent, and as a ray, she can be an observer; she is realizing the beauty and life in her own mind. Areas she never knew existed, areas below ground like underwater castles and caverns – more than any other area, this feels like an exploration.

Gris eventually comes face-to-face with her enemy again after unlocking the fifth color, gold. By now, the statue is complete. When Gris floats up from her hand, the statue awakens, her eyes opening – but the life is choked out of her a second later. This time, the amalgam shatters her mother's complete statue into pieces again and takes the form of an eel, chasing, snapping at Gris any time she falls behind in the chase. The destruction of the statue right when its eyes opened feels incredibly frustrating, overshadowed only by the fear as the eel gains on Gris. This manifestation of the monster gives it, not more meaning, but another trait: before, it stayed a bird, caged Gris, kept her away from itself and tried to control her movements. Now it evolves and adapts to the environment. This makes the manifestation of her pain much, much more insidious. It splits into two smaller eels when she goes down a forked path; it never slows down. She must escape with the help of a stone turtle that she awakened earlier on a whim, as its light seems to drive the eel away.

By the time Gris escapes the amalgam, gold has shimmered into the world primarily in the form of a giant moon. She is above ground again. But... the statue is in pieces. Gris now must go back above ground to the ruins she has explored thrice before. The way the game presents the same area in different ways is incredibly smart. As more life is added to it, more colors and complexity, the gray buildings and red caves from earlier become unrecognizable. There is water here to dive into. There are red moths that allow her to double-jump high up onto tall structures. There are cracked pieces of the environment to smash. Every part of her journey thus far is manifested here, right where she started. Look how far she's come.

But there's still one more stage to reach. Acceptance, embodied in gold. Using every tool made available to her on this journey, Gris solves puzzle after puzzle and gains star after star before reaching the platform where those stars can give her an ability. Up until now, pressing one of the available buttons on whichever platform the game is running on caused Gris to whimper or choke. Now, she can use it to sing.

Her voice: the thing she treasured, the thing she lost at the very beginning, has returned to her. When Gris sings, light erupts around her. She floats, her dress rising to form waves of fabric, but the dress isn't the source of her power this time. It's coming from her. Buds and dead plants bloom in the radius of her voice. It heals things that are broken. And if nothing else, we know of one broken thing that Gris loves.

The amalgam makes one last stand at the end of the game. Up until now, every star Gris collected has flown up to become part of an unreachable path in the sky. The end of her journey, the promise of freedom. Now that it's complete, she has the ability – through her pseudo-flight, the world helping her with boosts from the red moths – to reach the path. The amalgam rises from the deep and faces Gris... and reveals its true form. Green hair that mirrors hers, empty white eyes, a human face: as suspected, it's her. Her own darkness, rather. It swallows her whole, brings her into a monochrome space with the broken pieces of her mother's statue – where, finally, Gris has the opportunity to heal it. Her voice begins to heal, like it's healed before, bringing the pieces of the statue together. The amalgam can fill the entire space now, though. It floods everything in darkness. Choking the statue, enveloping Gris in inky liquid, it is relentless, but her hope and determination to put her mother back together keep Gris singing even when it's about to *drown* her.

During this stage, it seems like Gris is going to save her mother. Instead, her mother saves her. The statue's voice cuts through the darkness, creating space for Gris to sing more, and they enter into a duet to banish the force of unhealthy guilt from their world. Colors – red, blue, green, yellow – erupt from their bodies. We are shown the world rich with rainbow life as the two finally, after all this time, reunite. As a tear rolls down the statue's face, Gris kisses her cheek, then steps off of her outstretched hand to finally walk up into the sky and out of this world. She's ready to move on.

Acceptance is not an easy stage to reach. It is emotionally tumultuous. It's painful to let go. It's easier to hold onto the person you lost with all your might, to live in your guilt like it's home. Gris shows us that in the final scene. It's an active fight within herself. She cannot do it alone; the (literal) construction of her mother that she's created must help her in that final, desperate step. But she reaches it, after all of that work. That's acceptance.

## **Strongest Element**

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The construction of a narrative told through design was extremely successful. Every element of this piece of art feeds into the story of Gris's journey, even if in very subtle ways. Every sound contributes. Every flower, every scene layout is important for the greater whole. Most of all, it tells an emotional, riveting story without using a single word. The soundtrack and visuals team up to do a lot of the work; there is a contrast between living and lifeless that plays off of the organic, vibrant, emotional music. Gris herself is the only truly organic form in this world other than the plants, which she cannot interact with. That increases the feeling of loneliness in the player, which mirrors Gris's own state; even the most interactive characters are not alive. The emotions the game makes us feel are mirrored, strengthened, by the music.

## Unsuccessful Element

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The vague storyline of GRIS does not end up resonating with everyone as Nomada might have intended it to. The wordless narrative is supposed to prompt different interpretations of the story between players, and for many, it does – but for many, it does not. That’s the main reason the game has mixed reviews; most of them talk about the lack of specificity and how that prevented them from connecting with a game that needs the player to connect to it. For everyone who has played it, it is beautiful. But the story does not always get across; that’s the issue with creating such a purposefully vague plot. It isn’t going to hit as often as the designers want it to.

## Highlight

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There is a moment, late in the game, when the world has just turned gold. Gris has made her mother’s statue whole again. She opens her eyes, looks at her daughter – and in that moment the black-sludge grief amalgam wraps around her and destroys the statue once again. It spends the next ten minutes chasing Gris, first as its original bird form. Once she turns into a ray and dives into the water to escape, it forms into a giant eel and follows her even faster, snapping at her heels. It’s up to the player not to get bitten as it gains quickly on her vulnerable form. The music is menacing, terrifying, just like the eel, which evolves and adapts every time Gris seems to gain the advantage. All the player can do is time their dashes right so that the eel doesn’t chomp down on Gris. Just when it seems like all is lost, the eel’s jaws closing around her one last time, something bursts through its body to dissipate it: a glowing stone turtle that, earlier in the game, Gris had brought to life. It was a decision that seemed throwaway at the time. Now, protective, it guides her away from the darkness.

While all of that feeds into this moment being the game’s highlight, this is also the only moment in GRIS where there is a genuine, unexpected jumpscare. The eel vanishes for a time, during this chase, and just when everything is quiet it bursts through again in a cacophony of noise. This is not a horror game. Jumpscare were not part of the expectation going in, which makes it all the more terrifying. That, combined with the unexpected hope of the turtle coming in to save Gris, makes this moment truly special.

## Critical Reception

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**Source:** PCGamer

**Reviewer:** Philippa Warr

**Score:** 66

While Warr does not deny the fact that GRIS is beautiful, her review states that the beauty of it got in the way of the narrative about grief. There are ugly, destructive things about grief, and Warr does not believe that the game gets that across properly due to its hard focus on being beautiful. The ending, she also states, feels too closed; it suggests that grief ends with this reunification, but she disagrees with that idea.

**Source:** Forbes

**Reviewer:** Erik Kain

**Score:** “Buy on my Buy/Hold/Sell scale”

Kain's glowing review goes deeper into the game's visuals, score, and mechanics. He laces it with screenshots, as a review of GRIS is impossible without showing the beauty of the game along with it. He rates it higher than Edith Finch, stating that it reminded him of Journey, in a good way – the way the game takes the player through itself resonated deeply with him. He admires the way the game's architecture is indistinguishable from its story, citing Dark Souls as another series that does this well.

**Source:** The Guardian

**Reviewer:** Chris Moyse

**Score:** 100

“With GRIS, Nomada has created an abstract adventure, as beguiling as it is haunting.” This summarizes the review's thoughts on GRIS adequately. Moyse was blown away by the way GRIS took him on an “emotional rollercoaster.” Most of his review discusses the way the visuals and expertly woven soundtrack elicit emotional response in the player as a narrative in itself. The actual story he spends little time on, because it is his own interpretation that he doesn't wish to share, but he encourages the reader to discover their own story within it.

## Lessons

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- Making a vague story in order to resonate with people is always going to be a mixed bag. Some minds prefer having more space to project their own thoughts, while others prefer a more specific story to resonate with, if not relate to. The game's mixed reviews, despite unanimous agreement to its visual quality, illustrate this. To me, moments like the eel chase and the amalgam forming into a dark reflection of Gris resonate more than a very specific story about grief would, but that won't be the case for everyone.
- Every part of the design of a game should feed into the narrative. In GRIS, every sound and song is tied directly into the visual architecture, which is tied directly into the narrative of the game. This is something GRIS excels at. There is total cohesion of every element. The sandstorms in the red level are an excellent example of this. There is little warning when one is going to appear at first, until you know where to look, where to listen; the reason there are so many seemingly-random windmills in this environment? They start to spin when a sandstorm is impending. Noticing this helps the player better navigate Gris into shelter before the storm hits. The music also makes a dramatic shift, but not before a few menacing warning notes that give her a moment's warning.
- This game shows how meaningful it can be to elicit emotional response in a player narratively without using any elements but the world and the character. There is no HUD. There is no dialogue. The songs have no lyrics. It demonstrates the design expertise of Nomada's team, and it is a very deliberate decision; emotions themselves have no words, so it feels like the player is experiencing them in their rawest state. The rollercoaster the eel chase takes the player on shows this: terror with the jumpscare, hope with the turtle, creeping fear as they have no choice but to dash occasionally and no idea when this hell will end.

## Summation

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GRIS is undeniably gorgeous in every way. No one disputes that. What many people dispute is the meaningfulness of its narrative. “It’s beautiful, but there’s nothing to it other than that.” What a lot of reviewers and players seem to miss is the deeper meaning behind every seemingly-arbitrary element to the game. Its beauty does not have to be separate from its story. Viewing a game’s visuals and design as something different from its narrative, different from its coding, is a limited way of looking at games as pieces of art. It seems to be a common pitfall within the game design community to over-compartmentalize the components of a video game. Someone codes it, someone else writes the story, someone else does the art, someone else does the soundtrack. There are plenty of games in which these are indeed separate from each other, but the beauty of GRIS is that they are all one. They communicate with each other. Looking at one element while disregarding the others is missing the point of the game. The narrative IS the sound. It IS the visuals, it’s everything that the game is made of. Simply because it doesn’t tell a very specific person’s story of grief does not mean it isn’t a deep, meaningful narrative. It is. You just have to know where to look.