Acta Ludologica | **2025,** *Vol. 8, No. 2*

# Coping with Loss and Grief in Games: A Case Study of *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*

Lucia Novanská Škripcová

**Mgr. et Bc. Lucia Novanská Škripcová, PhD.**
*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava*
*Faculty of Mass Media Communication*
*Nám. J. Herdu 2*
*917 01 Trnava*
*SLOVAK REPUBLIC*
*lucia.novanska.skripcova@ucm.sk*

Lucia Novanská Škripcová is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Department of Mass Media Communication. Her research primarily focuses on new trends in media and media audiences, with a special interest and occasional ventures into digital games. She holds degrees in Mass Media Communication from UCM in Trnava and Journalism from UKF in Nitra. Among her most notable publications are works on community media as well as the potential of digital games for media education.

**ABSTRACT:**
This study examines the evolving representation of grief following the death of a loved one in digital games, focusing on the case study of *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. While earlier media often simplified and stereotyped grief, recent digital narratives offer more nuanced portrayals. Drawing on psychological models like the Coping Circumplex Model by Stanisławski and Dimensions of Coping Responses by Moos and Holahan, the paper analyses the coping strategies of four key characters, each embodying distinct ways of processing traumatic loss. The analysis highlights a progressive unfolding of grief within a complex, layered narrative that blends real and fictional worlds. *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* challenges traditional media stereotypes, with reversed gender roles in parental coping and contrasting narrative endings that emphasize either pathological withdrawal or acceptance and reunion. This research demonstrates how digital games provide unique narrative depth and interactivity, enabling players to engage empathetically with multifaceted emotional experiences. The study contributes to media studies and game studies by showing the potential of digital games as a medium for realistic, complex representations of human emotions, highlighting the importance of thoughtful narrative design in portraying coping strategies and grief.

**KEY WORDS:**
coping strategies, digital games, emotion representation, grief, narrative.

**DOI:**
10.34135/actaludologica.2025-8-2.112-125

# Introduction

Media representation of grief after the death of a loved one has undergone significant developments in recent decades. Whereas in the earlier phases of the portrayal of this theme we can refer primarily to the simplification and sometimes trivialization and stereotyping of grief, the media content of recent years has made significant advances in this domain.

Grief following the death of a loved one is a significant topic in psychology, with many theoretical approaches. The grieving process is often described through Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1989), the Five Stages of Grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005), or the concept of Continuing Bonds (Klass et al., 1996). In particular, the Five Stages of Grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) are often used in media content as a narrative model for the development of a character who experiences the loss of a loved one. However, as the authors of all the aforementioned theories say, grief is not a single emotion that is linear in nature. This is also why its media portrayal is quite challenging, and even more so when grief involves multiple people, such as all members of a family, as we will discuss in this article.

In order to understand the media portrayal of family bereavement, it is essential to distinguish between natural grief and traumatic loss (trauma). Grief represents a normal response to loss, whereas trauma involves a shocking event that significantly disrupts the sense of security and fragments memories. As Sullender (2010) states,

> Bereavement and trauma are interwoven and interrelated. All trauma includes some element of loss and grief, but not all bereavements are traumatic. Trauma introduces another emotional element or highlights one emotional element among the many associated with bereavement. That emotional element is anxiety or fear. (Sullender, 2010, p. 196).

In the case of family tragedies where the loss is associated with a violent or sudden event – such as a fire, car accident or violence – there may be traumatic grief that goes beyond the standard stages of grief. Granek (2014) says this is an extreme pathologization of grief and is also called complicated grief.

These psychological concepts have also found their place in media studies and the development of audiovisual productions, where they serve as narrative tools to portray grieving characters. Trauma studies are therefore not limited to psychology and psychiatry but also have a firm place in the humanities and culture (Whitehead, 2004). However, most academic texts on media portrayals of trauma and grief focus primarily on society-wide events such as wars or terrorist attacks, which traumatize not only the participants but also, secondarily, a wider audience (Meek, 2010; Kaplan, 2005).

Representations of grief in the media can sometimes be trivialized or stereotyped as a result of time and format constraints, commercial pressures, established genre conventions, and audience expectations that favour easily readable emotional shortcuts. At the same time, however, the specific form and depth of the depiction of mourning always depends on the creators' goals, cultural context, narrative structure, and aesthetic decisions of the work in question. In this text, I therefore leave media outside of digital games as a general context and focus on the specifics of interactive storytelling, where game mechanics and player participation create specific conditions for depicting and experiencing grief. These same production and reception dynamics can likewise operate within games themselves, risking similar simplifications of complex affect; in the adjacent case of mental illness, there is evidence that such dynamics do manifest, with up to 75% of portrayals in digital games described as negative and stereotypical (Buday et al., 2022).

Digital games as a medium for depicting complex human challenges and emotions, as well as trauma and grief, present a special case. On the one hand, "games offer unique technological affordances for portraying trauma, inaccessible to non-interactive media" (Kuznetsova, 2017, p. iii). On the other hand, they can reinforce simplified and stereotypical views of trauma and coping (Ng, 2019). In recent years, however, the positive potential of games has also become more apparent: Eum and Doh (2023) argue that digital games can have a therapeutic effect and provide positive interaction with memories instead of passive grieving. Meaning-making is a key process in doing so, where games facilitate positive reappraisal of traumatic experiences.

In summary, there are two dominant ways of looking at grief and associated themes in digital games, namely ludic and narrative. In the ludic conception, the player can experience grief as if it were their own, through game mechanics that grief, or elements of it, can simulate. These include e.g. the inability to temporarily control an avatar, unexpected changes to game controls, etc. Suitable examples of this type are *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Inside* (Playdead, 2016) or *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo Studio, 2019). In narrative, grief is part of the story, but we can debate whether this is a simplistic depiction of grief that may contribute to the aforementioned stereotyping and trivialisation, or a thoughtful to sophisticated depiction of grief that allows the player to not only feel the emotion, but also to empathise with the character experiencing the grief. Suitable examples of this type are *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2018), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *Martha is Dead* (LKA, 2022), and last but not least, as we will attempt to prove later in this text, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (Sandfall Interactive, 2025a).

# Methodology

The research material for this article is the digital game *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*, or rather its characters and especially coping strategies involving the loss of a family member. The game was released on April 24, 2025, for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation and Xbox. At the time of writing this article, it is therefore a new game, which has not yet been covered academically in any article or publication. In terms of genres, the game could be classified as an RPG with both action and adventure game elements. We choose this research material for several reasons: 1.) The game is new and therefore provides the most up-to-date perspective on the issue of updating the topic of portrayal of grief in the media; 2.) The game is successful, as evidenced by the 3.3 million copies sold within a month of its release (Sandfall Interactive, 2025b), but also by the many positive reviews, both from review sites (Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 & Sandfall Interactive, 2025) and from the players themselves. Nearly 3.5 months after release, the game has an 'overwhelmingly positive' rating on Steam from 101,542 players by August 2025 ("Clair Obscur", n.d.), with the game often being described as a serious contender and possible future Game of the Year winner for 2025; 3.) As it is primarily an RPG, it provides a narrative-heavy experience that easily allows the audience to 'empathise' with the characters and experience the story with them, or through their eyes.

The ambition of the research is to explore how the individual characters who are members of the Dessendre family *in Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* cope with a traumatic event – a death in the family. The intention is to highlight the different coping strategies for dealing with loss and trauma and the different internal processing of grief in each of the characters. The reason for the selection of this theme is that it is a major plot point that runs throughout the narrative and is a major source of conflict between the characters.

Given the characteristics of the object of study, we apply qualitative research methods, namely a combination of thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis will focus mainly on the themes of grief and trauma as consequences of the death of a family member. We use narrative analysis purposefully, as the coping strategies of the characters cannot be discussed without describing their behaviour during the storyline. However, we will describe the narrative chronologically and not as it unfolds during the course of the game, as the game operates with many flashbacks and multiple intertwined storylines.

To identify coping strategies of characters, we use the Coping Circumplex Model (Stanisławski, 2019). The CCM is a model based on two main dimensions, which are problem coping and emotion coping. Their combinations and opposites, such as problem solving (P+) versus problem avoidance (P-), emotion regulation (E+) versus emotion suppression (E-) together form the eight styles of the Coping Circumplex Model: "Problem solving (P+), problem avoidance (P-), positive emotional coping (E+), negative emotional coping (E-), efficiency (P+ E+), helplessness (P- E-), preoccupation with the problem (P+ E-), and hedonic disengagement (P- E+)" (Stanisławski, 2019, p. 4). In addition to this model, we also use the Dimensions of Coping Responses (Moos & Holahan, 2003), which define four basic types of coping responses based on a combination of focus of coping and method of coping: "cognitive approach, behavioral approach, cognitive avoidance, and behavioral avoidance" (Moos & Holahan, 2003, p. 1391). Although these theoretical models are primarily used in psychology to classify coping structures with stress, we would like to suggest that they are a useful tool for identifying the coping strategies of each character in the analysed material, as each character represents a different way of coping with a tragic event. The research categories are:

a. *Characters and narrative*. In this category, we are primarily aiming to present the complex issues, relationships and dynamics between the members of the Dessendre family (Alicia, Aline, Renoir, Clea, Verso). We deliberately ignore the many minor characters who, while they do complete the narrative or move it forward, are not part of the Dessendre family (or are just part of the fictional world of the Canvas, such as Gustave, Lune, Sciel, Monoco, Esquie, etc.).
b. *Coping strategies*. In this section, we attempt to categorize the different types of coping with trauma and grief by the different characters, to point out their differences, but also the media stereotypes (mainly related to parenting) that the father and mother of the family represent. Due to the nature of the research category, we intentionally exclude the character Verso and analyse only the remaining family members – Alicia, Aline, Renoir, Clea. For these characters, we will first briefly describe their behaviour, or rather their reactions to loss and the ways in which they cope with grief, as they represent different strategies. Based on their emotional reactions throughout the story, we will classify them into the appropriate category under the concepts of CCM and Coping Responses.

# Results

**a) Category: Characters and narrative**

For the clarity of the following section, we will first summarise the characters appearing in the game and assign to each of them their alter egos/painted versions, summarising their back story and their main characteristics. These are the characters that are part of the Dessendre family, which is the main object of research:

- Alicia Dessendre / Maelle / Painted Alicia – the younger daughter, the main protagonist of the narrative. In the imaginary world, she forgets her identity, does not recognize the members of her real family or herself. Alter ego Maelle is brave, listens to her inner voice, has deep inner connections with the other characters. The real character Alicia, on the other hand, is fearful, hiding from the world because of her physical disfigurement from a fire. There are three versions of this character in the narrative – Maelle, the alter ego in the fictional world, Alicia, the real character, and Painted Alicia, created in the Canvas by her mother Aline.
- Verso Dessendre / Verso – the son, who died in the real world in a fire in which he tried to save his sister Alicia. In the fictional world, there is only a projection/image of him, created out of grief by his mother. The imaginary world is originally his child creation. Verso is fearless and friendly, but an identity crisis emerges after learning the reality. He also appears in the fictional world as a version of the child, but in this one he has only a supplementary function and does not interfere with the plot.
- Clea Dessendre – the elder daughter, she is only a marginal character in the narrative, appearing minimally. Unlike the other members of her family, she despises the fictional world and tries to live in the real one, in which she seeks revenge on the perpetrators of the fire that destroyed her family. In the fictional world, she tries to help her father, albeit in unorthodox ways, to return her mother and Alicia to the real world.
- Renoir Dessendre / Curator / Painted Renoir – the father of the family, in most of the narrative he appears as Painted Renoir – the antagonist, a creation of Aline, who is responsible for the deaths of many characters in the fictional world. In reality, however, he only wishes to save his collapsing family and return them to the real world, putting an end to the imaginary world. His alter ego Curator does not speak, but is a supporting

character to the main protagonists. There are a total of three versions of Renoir in the narrative – the Curator, the real Renoir, who is good-hearted and means well for his family, and the Painted Renoir, who was created by Aline and is the antagonist.

- Aline Dessendre / Paintress – the mother of the family, who has gone mad with grief from her son's death and lives in an imaginary world in which she created her son's projection. From the beginning of the story, her alter ego Paintress is portrayed as the main antagonist of the story.

The narrative consists of two storylines that do not unfold chronologically, but intersect in the plot and are revealed to the player sequentially as the motivations behind the actions of each character and their relationships. To simplify the narrative, we describe the story chronologically rather than as it unfolds in the game, to avoid many flashbacks and the gradual revelation of the characters' backgrounds. At the same time, we omit many subplots and conflicts, as the aim is not to present the story in its entirety.

The story is set in a fictional world that is inspired by Paris. The Dessendre family is a family of painters and consists of parents Aline and Renoir, and children Clea, Verso and Alicia. The parents lead the children to painting, their canvases are alive, and it is possible to enter them as if entering an imaginary world. After a conflict with the Writers, who cause a fire in the Dessendre family home, son Verso dies in an attempt to save Alicia, who is left disfigured. Mother Aline, out of grief, enters Verso's Canvas, as she does not want to give up her last memory of her son. In the Canvas (in an imaginary world), she creates copies of her family members, including the dead Verso, and constructs a copy of her real world – the city of Lumière (again inspired by Paris). As she spends too much time in the Canvas and her real life is practically non-existent, Renoir, and later Clea and Alicia, enter the Canvas after her, in an attempt to help the mother overcome her grief and bring her back to reality by force – the destruction of the imaginary world. Mother Aline adopts the form of her alter ego, The Paintress. When Alicia enters the Canvas, she is overwhelmed by Aline's power and forgets about her real life, becoming the alter ego Maelle.

A separate story takes place in the fictional world of Canvas. The premise is that every year the Gommage occurs – all the citizens of the city of Lumière die at the age drawn by the Paintress on the Monolith, with this age decreasing every year. Each year, a group of volunteers embark on an expedition to stop the Paintress. In the current year, Maelle is also joining the expedition. After the ship lands, most of the expeditioners are slaughtered by the local creatures and an older man (Painted Renoir), but in the background Maelle can be seen being rescued by an unknown man (Verso). The surviving members of the expedition reunite gradually and look for a way to accomplish the goal of their mission. They find Maelle in a lavish house (a copy of Dessendre's family home) in the presence of the Curator (Renoir's alter ego) and set out on their expedition.

During this journey, Maelle has several nightmares and visions in which she sees Verso, Painted Alicia and Painted Renoir, but these images and their dialogues make no sense to her as she does not recognize any of the characters. The next time she encounters Painted Renoir, he kills Gustave (Maelle's best friend and father figure), and Maelle experiences another vision in which she overhears Renoir and Aline talking about her arrival in the Canvas. Verso enters the situation and his conversation with Painted Renoir shows obvious tension and disapproval. Verso then joins the rest of the expedition, with their goal no longer just to destroy the Paintress, but also Painted Renoir. As the expedition progresses, they arrive at a replica of the Dessendre house, where they encounter the Paintress, Painted Alicia, and Painted Renoir, and after the duel, Maelle has another vision in which Painted Alicia shows her the burning house. However, the house subsequently disappears, and the group proceeds to follow the journey to the Paintress.

At Monolith, where the Paintress resides, they encounter the Painted Renoir again and, with the help of the Curator, destroy him. The encounter with the Paintress that follows is full of twists and turns. The Paintress is confused and does not know what is reality and what is illusion, thinking that the members of the expedition are Renoir's creation to banish her from the Canvas. She attacks them, but in the last phase of the fight she stops attacking and tries to protect the members of the expedition. In the end, she dies in Verso's arms, by Maelle's hand.

After the expedition returns to the city of Lumière, Verso reads a letter from Painted Alicia, in which she describes two versions of the family – the Painted and the real version. For the first time, however, she describes the creator of the Gommage (the death of all the citizens of Lumière at a certain age) as Renoir/Curator, not the Paintress, who is at least trying to warn the citizens when she can no longer protect them. The purpose of Renoir's action is to control Aline's oldest creations, since she no longer has such control over them. Therefore, after the Paintress' death, there is no one left to protect the citizens, and the Gommage of all the residents occurs. Only Verso and Maelle/Alicia, who has remembered her origins and family relationships, survive. For Verso, there arises an identity crisis as he is just an imaginary creation with the memories of the real Verso, who is dead. They meet the Curator, who transforms into the real Renoir, praises Alicia/Maelle for getting Aline away from the Canvas, and makes clear his intention of destroying the Canvas. Maelle/Alicia disagrees with his decision, and after Renoir's efforts to make the Canvas an inhospitable place and to kill Verso, Alicia/Maelle realizes her power to paint, and thus to bring life back to the characters in the painting, and together they flee the town.

Alicia/Maelle paints back the members of the expedition, and gradually all the members of the previous expeditions, to help them in their fight against Renoir. Together they return to the capital as a last resort to save the imaginary world – Canvas, which Alicia/Maelle wants to stay in, not to be destroyed. At the end of their journey, they are met by Renoir, who tries to explain to Alicia/Maelle why she cannot stay in the Canvas. The latter, however, disagrees and decides to fight him. During the fight, Aline comes to help the expedition. After the defeat, Renoir tries to show Alicia/Maelle his everyday reality in which Aline has gone mad with grief and points out the complete breakdown of the family due to grief and living in the Canvas, calling the family members living corpses. Eventually, he leaves the Canvas and allows Alicia/Maelle to stay in it for a while longer, even though she has come to this result by lying. The twist comes with Verso, who, upon seeing a grieving Aline, realizes that he is the source of all the conflict and that if Alicia/Maelle stays in the Canvas, she will perish in it. He challenges her to a duel for the future of the Canvas. At this point, the narrative splits into two possible endings to the narrative:

- *"A Life to Paint"*: If Alicia/Maelle wins, Verso begs her to erase him, because he does not want that kind of life. She disagrees, and a cutscene follows, set several years later, which features all the members of the expedition (even the originally dead ones that Alicia brought back to life). In it, Verso plays the piano in front of the theatre, but it is clear from the scene that he does not want to and is forced to do so. The last scene shows Alicia/Maelle going mad and losing herself in the Canvas, she is in control of the Canvas and her intention is to live her whole life in it.
- *"A Life to Love"*: If Verso wins, Alicia/Maelle fades out of the Canvas and gradually all the characters die as well. However, what follows is a real-world scene in which the Dessendre family reunites at Verso's grave and displays inner peace and acceptance of their loss. In the last scene, Alicia sees the members of the expedition in front of her as they wave and gradually disappear.

**b) Category: Coping strategies**

Each of the family members is a different representation of coping with family trauma, causing internal conflicts between them. We could argue that the source of the conflicts is inherently the absence of empathy, because although some members (e.g. Renoir) try to show others his reality and thus justify his actions, there is no understanding of his motives among the other members. The coping strategies of the members of the Dessendre family could be simplistically divided into rational (Renoir, Clea) and emotional (Aline, Alicia). However, emotions and coping with loss, trauma, and grief (even if only of characters in the fictional narrative of a digital game) are not so easily defined. To complete the analysis, we thus use a combination of two approaches from psychology, namely the Coping Circumplex Model (Stanisławski, 2019) and Dimensions of Coping Responses (Moos & Holahan, 2003). In the following section, we use almost entirely the real names of the characters as they exist in the real world to avoid unnecessary complications in the text.

Alicia is a representation of forgetting, denial, and emotional disconnection from oneself in response to a tragic event. It is important to add, however, that due to the 'fragmentation' of the character into several versions, we witness multiple types of coping with grief. The real Alicia appears only marginally in most of the narrative, and when she does, her grief is more internal. She tries to help everyone but does not know how. Her amnesia of tragic events does not primarily happen as a result of grief (it is a combination of entering the Canvas and Aline's power), but we could argue that it is a direct metaphor for this state, when she is reborn as Maelle and forgets about reality. She only gradually learns about the tragic background of her story and the world in which she finds herself through other characters. Interestingly, all the characters to whom she has a deep emotional attachment are not real and exist only in the fictional world of the Canvas (Gustave, Sciel, Lune, Monoco, Esquie, Verso), which metaphorically demonstrates her emotional distance from her real family. Her reaction to the death of her brother and the state of her family could be described as a traumatic reaction. The reason may also be survivor's guilt, as she was indirectly responsible for the fire that caused Verso's death.

Alicia fits into Problem Avoidance (P-) in CCM – she avoids the problem (loss), she completely disconnects emotionally, thus the E dimension is not positive or negative, rather she has no emotions in this state resulting from the death of Verso. With her transformation in the narrative, as she learns of her true background and abilities, she transitions into Efficiency (P+ E+) – actively using her abilities, trying to save the world of the Canvas and her family, believing in the possibility of a solution, and having hope. However, in the ending "A Life to Paint", in which Alicia stays in Canvas, we could talk about a transformation into Hedonic Disengagement (P- E+). In Coping Responses, we might speak of cognitive avoidance in her case, as her emotional disconnection is effectively a resignation to the traumatic event.

Aline is a representation of the surrender to absolute grief, she hardly lives in the real world, she simply survives. She has escaped into the fictional world of the Canvas, which contains the last memory of her dead son. In her case, the painting serves as a token, a last emotional link. In order to begin her journey of healing and coming to terms with her loss, she must get rid of the Canvas, even if she cannot do so herself. Her husband, Renoir, has been trying to get her out of the Canvas for a long time, by force and/or trickery and deceit. Aline is so absorbed by the Canvas that when she meets Verso in it, she considers him to be merely a trick of Renoir's to deceive her. Several scenes in the storyline clearly indicate that the marital relationship between Aline and Renoir before Verso's death was unconflicted, one might even say idealistic, happy and fulfilled. After death, even in the fictional world of the Canvas, it is full of conflict and hatred. Aline cannot see past her grief

nor appreciate Renoir's efforts to help her; she sees everything as an attack on her. She considers her grief as the only correct response, she puts her real family in second place and does not care about them. Aline's coping with reality could be described as traumatic grief – she is emotionally overwhelmed and escapes into fantasy. Both grief (painful attachment to her son) and elements of trauma (she remains 'trapped' in suffering without moving forward) are present. In terms of stereotypes, we might call her a hyperprotective mother, but only in relation to her son. The other two daughters are, we might say, indifferent to her. Aline's portrayal of Alicia in Canvas (Painted Alicia) makes her grief explicit – Alicia looks like a ghost, as though she was the one who died instead of Verso, pointing to unresolved resentment. Aline in the Painted version – the Paintress – assumes the stereotype of the silent parent, she merely witnesses the actions of the Painted Renoir, she does not interfere with him in any way. This inactivity partly confirms the stereotypical concept of female passivity.

Aline in CCM represents Helplessness (P- E-) – she avoids solving the problem, she has created a fictional reality, she maintains positive emotions through the world of the Canvas (later in the narrative, these emotions change into negative ones towards all those who are trying to get her out of there and return her to real life). Her focus is not on dealing with the problem, but on suppressing it completely, just as she suppresses her emotions. She therefore avoids not only the problem (P-), but also her emotions (E-). In Coping Responses, we can speak of behavioural avoidance as she actively creates a new world around herself to replace the loss.

Renoir represents the acceptance of a tragic event. Despite being overwhelmed by grief, he tries to focus on what is important – the remaining family members and their psychological well-being. We can assess that he is the linking element of the family, which he keeps first in his list of priorities. He is willing to sacrifice anything to bring his family back together and overcome the family trauma/grief together. At a certain point we encounter the stereotypical predispositions typically attributed to fathers in media representations, such as the silent father. Renoir breaks out of this stereotype, and it is he who becomes the bearer of family values and family cohesion. He tries to be a good husband and save his wife, a good father and protect his daughters, he is willing to overlook his daughter Alicia's lies in order to make her happy. We could interpret that to reflect adaptive grief – he regulates his own pain and focuses on keeping the family together. In terms of stereotypes, Painted Renoir takes on the stereotype of the overprotective parent who is willing to kill to protect his (fictional) family. Thus, there is a marked clash between the stereotypes of the real Renoir and Painted Renoir, but in both cases he fulfils the stereotype of an active man (oriented toward action or destruction), in contrast to his passive wife.

In CCM, Renoir exemplifies Efficiency (P+ E+) – he actively tries to deal with the problem of his family falling apart due to loss (which he succeeds in doing in the ending of "A Life to Love"), in terms of emotions, the positive ones are predominant – he is hopeful of change. In Coping Responses he presents a cognitive approach as he acts mainly logically and tries to transform the situation into a positive one.

Clea represents repression of emotions and emotional insensitivity. Despite being affected by her brother's death, she considers herself the only rational part of the family. Unable to understand the deep emotional experience of others, she prefers to focus her emotions on her version of problem-solving, which is revenge on those who caused Verso's death. She clearly demonstrates political awareness and steps into a leadership role among the Painters and takes on the family's tasks in the real life. She despises the way her parents are coping with the loss of their son; in some scenes, it seems as if she despises painting itself. Despite representing other coping strategies, she sides with her father through her actions, as he is the only one in which she sees any semblance of

rationality in an effort to change the current state of the family. However, it should be added that she does not care whether Aline returns from the Canvas or not. Her main intention is to resolve the situation as soon as possible, by any means and with any outcome. Her cold rationality is also the reason why she despises others, literally saying, "Grief is no excuse. We're all grieving", thereby justifying her actions. Just as she shows a dismissive attitude towards Aline, she also shows it towards Alicia. She displays a cognitive processing of grief, while suppressing emotional expressions.

Clea in CCM embodies Preoccupation (P+ E-) – she tries to find a rational solution to the problem (even if it is irrational revenge) but suppresses her emotions. In Coping Responses, we refer to a behavioural approach as she is trying to take concrete actions (problem solving) that are within her current capabilities.

*Table 1: Overview of the Clair Obscur: Expedition 33's character coping strategies*

| Character | Manifestations in the game | CCM | Coping responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alicia | Dissociative amnesia, reincarnation of trauma into another identity, emotional disconnection | Problem Avoidance (P-), later in the narrative Efficiency (P+ E+), in "A Life to Paint" ending Hedonic Disengagement (P- E+) | Cognitive avoidance coping |
| Aline | Rumination, living in memories of son, social escape, illusions | Helplessness (P- E-) | Behavioural avoidance coping |
| Renoir | Trying to process grief in an integrated way, keeping the family together, dampening conflict | Efficiency (P+ E+) | Cognitive approach coping |
| Clea | Cold rationality, hypercontrol, plan revenge on the guilty | Preoccupation (P+ E-) | Behavioural approach coping |

*Source: own processing*

As we can see, each of the characters copes with the loss differently and experiences their grief in a different way. While for some characters we can speak of a 'normal' experience of grief, for others it borders on trauma, or traumatic grief. Interestingly, each character represents a different type within both the CCM and the Dimensions of Coping Responses, which creates both dynamics and conflicts between them. As individuals' coping strategies are person-specific, their varied representation in the media as well as the possible impacts on the surroundings are more than appropriate.

It is also interesting to note that Aline and Renoir are at opposite ends of the CCM model. While Renoir tries to solve the problem and regulates his emotions, Aline avoids the problem and does not regulate her emotions in any way. Sisters Alicia and Clea also present different approaches, but not necessarily contradictory ones. Alicia first avoids the problem and then moves on to solving it and actively regulating her emotions, while Clea tries to solve the problem from the outset, but without emotions or with negative emotions.

# Conclusion

In the analysed material, the game *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*, several actualisations form in terms of the representation of grief and coping strategies. In the theoretical part of this paper, we mentioned that the narrative representation of grief in some media

contents simplifies this process to an extreme degree or uses it as a 'spicing up' of the plot or the characters. In this case, neither trivialisation nor sensationalisation occurs, as the grief motive in the family is only revealed to the player in the later parts of the narrative. At the same time, it is only after this revelation, and effectively at the end of the game, that the realization comes that the individual members of the Dessendre family are metaphors for different coping strategies for grief, as we have pointed out using CCM and Coping Responses. All of these expressions take place in the fictional universe of the Canvas, which is intertwined with the real world. However, the real world is only marginally present. At the same time, we would argue that Canvas itself is a metaphor for grief, or rather the emotional state that the grieving person enters. The reason for this assertion is that this is the place where all members of the Dessendre family meet, and it becomes a 'battlefield' for their emotions, where they fight with themselves, but also with each other at the same time.

We could attribute a similar interpretation to the contrast between real death and death in Canvas. Paintress tries to warn the inhabitants and prepare them for their own death, which, thanks to this knowledge, is peaceful and allows the inhabitants of Lumière to live their lives to the fullest and say goodbye to their loved ones at the end. This seems to be in direct contrast to how Aline lost her son – tragically and unexpectedly. In this interpretation, Canvas helps her cope with her loss.

Given the extent of the game, and thus the narrative itself, which is only gradually revealed to the player, the game offers sufficient opportunity to portray the authenticity of the characters' emotions. Individual characters become representative of these emotions, which we can associate with psychological concepts of coping strategies and grief coping. However, this is not a trivialized representation – given the complexity of the narrative, which shifts between the real characters, their projections of the real self in Canvas, the painted versions of them created by Aline, the presence of purely fictional supporting characters in Canvas, and so on. The game's distinct strength, therefore, is that grief is neither easy nor immediate, but is revealed in successive layers, which facilitates an authentic experience and prevents the trivialisation of the grieving process.

Interesting in terms of the narrative construction of the characters is how much they fulfil some of the psychological attributes we discussed in the theoretical section (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Klass et al., 1996). The characters go through different stages of grief processing, but they also return to it, they do not proceed linearly between stages, and at the same time each character goes at his or her own apparent 'pace' and is in a different stage. From this comes the relationship between mother Aline and daughters Alicia and Clea, which is complicated as she effectively ignores her daughters and wallows in grief for her son. The distancing of parents from living children at the expense of a dead child is also described by Rubin in the case of wounded families. He states that the relationship with the deceased is so overpowering that the parents lose their relationship with the other children as well (Rubin, 1996), thus this is a realistic construct.

We would conclude that the portrayal of grief is realistic and is not used for dramatic effect. The findings show that the different characters represent different coping strategies for dealing with loss: Alicia escapes into fantasy and creates a new identity, Aline freezes in the past and displaces the present, Renoir represents an attempt to functionally overcome grief for the benefit of the family, while Clea reacts actively to the point of aggression. These variations allow the player to experience the variety and ambiguity of grief in a family setting.

There is also considerable actualisation in terms of the stereotypisation of individual characters and their experiences. Father Renoir and mother Aline effectively exchange media stereotypes – Renoir becomes the pillar of the family, fighting to save it,

while the mother mentally detaches herself from the family and distances herself from the real world, disrupting the binary gender patterns from earlier depictions of grief. This gender bias in the form of mourning and grief processing, as described by Martin and Doka (2000), is that grieving women tend to be more receptive to support from those around them because they tend to experience their grief more openly. Men, on the other hand, tend to withdraw and seek distractions. However, these authors and many others (Thompson, 1997; Robb, 2025) add that this is the result of social norms and constructs, or gender-structured patterns, and therefore evolves over time (Corr et al., 2009). In this light, the game disrupts some gendered expectations even as it reproduces others, and the analysis proceeds from this mixed pattern rather than from a claim of outright subversion.

A form of updating also occurs in the shape of the story's two possible endings – "A Life to Paint", that is, Alicia's staying in Canvas, represents a form of abandonment of herself, one could argue even a willing madness. It is thus a kind of extreme form of pathologizing grief, as described by Granek (2014). On the opposite side stands the ending of "A Life to Love", which ends with the destruction of Canvas and the reunion of the family. However, we do not observe any idealized or romanticized version, quite the opposite. The family does reunite at the grave of the dead Verso, but the whole scene remains realistic – the characters must let go of the constructed, idealized existence and face the loss of loved ones directly. No deus ex machina, no miraculous reunion – just an acceptance that the only way forward is through acceptance of reality and love for one another. In Alicia's case, also an imaginary farewell to fictional characters.

The media representation of grief and its portrayal is evolving, not only in terms of complexity, but also in the handling of the topic. The media characters in the analysed game *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* are not uniform and flat, but through their construction and place in the narrative, they allow the player to experience their emotions along with them. The theme of grief in the family is also not a primary one and is only effectively revealed in the second half of the game (although it should be added that the player encounters death and grief in the first few minutes of the game through fictional characters. From the player's perspective, the game begins with Gustav's arrival to Gommage, where he witnesses the death of many friends and mourns them. Later, the player experiences the surprising death of Gustav himself, mourned by Maelle, etc.).

Unlike film and TV series standards, where grief is either a dramatic climax or a visual backdrop, the game provides a space to follow the experience of grief in a long and nuanced way, which matches the actual variability of grief. The study thus contributes to an understanding of how complex human emotions can be captured through the medium of digital games. Of course, the chosen methodology also brings with it some limitations, notably the absence of analysis of aesthetics or audio design, which could further the understanding of the topic. Given the nature and theme of the research, we have also omitted supporting characters who are not part of the Dessendre family, but who contribute to the development of the narrative and all of whom are in some type of relationship with one of the characters analysed. Thus, further research could also systematically analyse the role of side characters or compare the representation of grief in games of other genres, or track player receptions and the possible therapeutic effect of these digital narratives – for those who come after.

**Acknowledgement:** *This study was elaborated within the research project supported by Slovak Research and Development Agency (APVV) No. APVV-21-0115, titled 'Hypermodern Media Culture – Film and Television Production as Mirror of Sociocultural Phenomena of the 21st Century'.*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


Asobo Studio. (2019). *A Plague Tale: Innocence* [Digital game]. Focus Home Interactive.

Bowlby, J. (1989). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. Routledge.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33. (n.d.). Steam. Retrieved August 4, 2025, from https://store.steampowered.com/app/1903340/Clair_Obscur_Expedition_33/#app_reviews_hash

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 @[expedition33official], & Sandfall Interactive [@sandfallgames]. (2025, June 10). *It's been one year since we revealed Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 – and what a journey it's been. Millions have joined* [Video]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DKrIdp0JAzp/

Corr, Ch. A., Nabe, C. M., & Corr, D. M. (2009). *Death and dying, life and living* (6th ed.). Wadsworth.

Eum, K., & Doh, Y. Y. (2023). A thematic analysis of bereaved adults' meaning-making experience of loss through playing video games. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1154976

Granek, L. (2014. The psychologization of grief and its depictions within mainstream North American media. In J. M. Stillion, & T. Attig (Eds.), *Death, dying, and bereavement contemporary perspectives, institutions, and practices* (pp. 104-120). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826171429.0008

Kaplan, E. A. (2005). *Trauma culture: The politics of terror and loss in media and literature*. Rutgers University Press.

Klass, D., Silverman, P. R., & Nickman, S. L. (Eds.) (1996). *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief*. Routledge.

Kuznetsova, E. (2017). *Trauma in games: Narrativizing denied agency, ludonarrative dissonance and empathy play* [Master's thesis]. University of Alberta.

Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Scribner.

LKA. (2022). *Martha is Dead* [Digital game]. Wired Productions.

Martin, T. L., & Doka, K. J. (2000). *Men don't cry, women do: Transcending gender stereotypes of grief*. Routledge.

Meek, A. (2010). *Trauma and media: Theories, histories, and images*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863190

Moos, R. H., & Holahan, Ch. J. (2003). Dispositional and contextual perspectives on coping: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *59*(12), 1387-1403. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.10229

Naughty Dog. (2013) *The Last of Us* [Digital game]. Sony Computer Entertainment.

Ng, C. (2019). Affecting reality: Intersecting games, trauma, and imaginaries. *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About: Machine Feeling*, *8*(1), 96-113. https://doi.org/10.7146/aprja.v8i1.115418

Ninja Theory. (2017). *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* [Digital game]. Ninja Theory.

Nomada Studio. (2018). *Gris* [Digital game]. Devolver Digital.

Playdead. (2016). *Inside* [Digital game]. Playdead.

Robb, M. (2025). 'The loss of my son defines me': Masculinity, identity and bereavement. In K. Jones, & M. Robb (Eds.), *Men and loss: New perspectives on bereavement, grief and masculinity* (pp. 4-17). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333999

Rubin, S. S. (1996). The wounded family: Bereaved parents and the impact of adult child loss. In D. Klass, P. R. Silverman, & S. L. Nickman (Eds.), *Continuing Bonds: New understandings of grief* (pp. 217-232). Routledge.

Sandfall Interactive. (2025a). *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* [Digital game]. Kepler Interactive.

Sandfall Interactive. (2025b, May 29). *Thirty-three days ago, we released Clair Obscur: Expedition 33. Since then, we've sold 3.3 million copies. Seriously. As of today* [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Pmg4qZXCL/

Stanisławski, K. (2019). The Coping Circumplex Model: An integrative model of the structure of coping with stress. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*(1), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00694

Sullender, R. S. (2010). Vicarious grieving and the media. *Pastoral Psychology*, *59*(2), 191-200. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0227-5

Thompson, N. (1997). Masculinity and loss. In D. Field, J. Hockey, & N. Small (Eds.), *Death, gender and ethnicity* (pp. 76-88). Routledge.

Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748618576.001.0001