



## I'm Not Okay

*A Narrative Analysis of the Game "Still There"*  
by Chad Briggs

**Launch Trailer:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=733Fx\\_h8FIk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=733Fx_h8FIk)

**Playthrough:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AydJTW8kgDI>

**Platform:** Steam (PC/Mac) and Nintendo Switch

**Genre:** Point and Click Adventure Game

**Release Date:** November 20, 2019

**Developer:** GhostShark - **Publisher:** Iceberg Interactive

**Lead Narrative Designer:** Daniele Giardini - **Lead Game Designer:** Davide Barbieri

Everybody runs. We suffer heartbreaking loss, then we run from it. We suppress it. We bury it. We try all the easy, quick band-aids one can muster to return to a life of normalcy without confrontation. We seek the comfort of tangible things that we can grasp and make sense of. But if our nature is to run far away from reconciling the death of a loved one, then the inevitable question posed by the game *Still There* is: How far is far enough? *Still There* is a point and click adventure game that immerses the player in the isolation and daily grind of running a decaying space lighthouse, all as a mechanism to avoid coping with the lingering trauma of a tragic loss.

*Still There's* gameplay is confined to one room, with a dash of hidden objects and electrical engineering puzzles thrown into the mix. The player is only allowed to scroll left and right on the

screen, panning around the station. This serves as the base navigation mechanic for the entire game, along with cutscenes allowing dialogue-only interaction when the player character is dreaming or in an altered mental state. The game draws you in with lush, hand painted graphics tinged with neon-flavored analog glows. This graphic look is but one of the many layers of future-past tech vibes found in the game. The visuals, along with the intuitive interface and rewarding engineering puzzles, keep the fun level high and make the player want to spend time in this world.

The developers attempt to tackle a fascinating challenge: How to best serve the player the struggle of working through loss and grief if the player hasn't personally experienced the tragedy?

The game manages to firmly anchor us in this experiential grieving process by relying on two components: Letting the gameplay enable the player character's self-neglect and the supporting characters show us the way past the veils of denial. The puzzles created by the gameplay are often mundane, served up as routine maintenance at the bequest of the faceless, monolithic corporation that owns the lighthouse. The tasks are comforting and familiar because we've done the domestic variations ourselves: washing dishes to forget about an argument with a spouse or working on home projects to avoid the realities of a recent layoff. Much like their real life counterparts, these game mechanics distract our minds with repetition and routine, allowing it no room to drift towards more taxing existential problems that loom nearby.

Uncovering the player character's suppressed despair isn't the real trick of the game's character development. The real trick is in the dialogue choices that enable the player character, and by extension the player themselves, to realize that meaningful human connections help us navigate through the emotional brambles surrounding a personal loss. That same lesson is learned alongside another hard one as the characters we grow attached to throughout the game are placed in peril: The salve of new human connections always comes with the risk of additional loss and trauma.

The only playable character game is the faceless protagonist, **Karl Hamba**. We play the game looking through his eyes as we observe our cramped, utilitarian living space at the edge of the galaxy. The game makes it clear from the opening act that Karl is in heavy denial as he dreams of his estranged lover, Hani. He is floating aimlessly in an abstract void as her voice implores for him to "wake up and smell the coffee".

The conversation reveals two key pieces of information. First, they have lost their daughter in a manner yet unknown and Karl does not know where she is. Second, Hani point-blank asks Karl "How are you Karl?". The two dialogue responses are "I'm okay." and "I'm not okay." Even if the player attempts to choose "I'm not okay.", the game forces the cursor over to "I'm okay" illustrating just how deep denial runs in Karl's psyche. This gameplay mechanic serves as a remarkable simulation for the player to experience the powerlessness of rational thought against a mind mired in denial and depression.

The game's cast of non-playable characters are written with a lot of love, lathering rich layers of meaning into the game's story. As the day-to-day life of maintaining the space station tempts us with false inner peace, the NPCs beckon us forward to become whole again. To drive home the isolation theme, there are no physical characters present in the game, save for the ship's onboard AI named **Gorky** and your pet lizard. These two are the first major and minor NPC's we meet, with Gorky helping manage and run the space lighthouse known as the Bento.

Gorky is owned by Brane Co., the company that also owns the Bento. The very first salvo of dialogue between Gorky and Karl make two things clear: The two give each other an immense amount of daily trolling and the bureaucratic shadow of Brane Co looms large even in these far corners of the galaxy. Not only does Gorky chide Karl for being a few minutes late, he also tells him those minutes will be deducted from his pay.

Gorky is far more than the station's sassy Alexa, however. The writers dangle you on both sides of whether Gorky is truly sentient, or merely some sort of mildly advanced AI chatbot. His emotions are also represented by low-rez, monochrome emoji faces that underscore the low tech nature of the space station. These emojis are simple but crucial for adding humor and personality to the player's only talking companion on the Bento. These quirks create a natural curiosity that propels the player's interactions with him. At one point the player can ask Gorky "Do you have a soul?" Gorky deflects with a hilarious emoji and the verbal response: "What kind of creepy ass question is that??" Not exactly a yes, but not exactly a no.

Gorky has a very satisfying character arc that shows personal growth is a two-way street in healthy human connections. Through the course of the game, the writers ensure the player can't help but endear themselves to Gorky and his wit. After all, the player shares the experience of him being Karl's only real buffer from mind-numbing isolation.

Near the end of the game, the player has to perform a "safe mode" reboot of Gorky in order to save the Bento from destruction. While in safe mode, Gorky remains offline with his entire archives exposed. The player discovers emails from Gorky to Brane Co. detailing evidence he has been manipulating Karl and hiding secrets. In those same emails, the writers drop hints that Gorky has doubts about being a corporate stooge, developing concern for Karl's well-being. When Gorky is brought back from the safe mode reboot, he and the player hash out his perceived betrayal. During this sequence, Gorky asks for two of the most human wishes of all: forgiveness and understanding.

The other NPCs you meet through dreams and external audio communications are equally effective. An important one on is **Hani**, Karl's ex-wife. We don't immediately know what caused the split, but there is early evidence that points to something tragic with their daughter Eshe. Karl never formally interacts with Hani. We learn of their past relationship entirely through emails the player can discover on the ship's terminal. Hani emails several times to check on Karl, reminiscing about their daughter. It appears to be a very one way communication, with Karl not

responding to much, if any, of what she sent. Through reading the emails it does become clear that Eshe has passed away, the details of her death still unknown. In spite of the divorce, the tragedy, and all the years between them, it is also very clear she still loves Karl considerably and her concern for him is genuine. When Karl dreams of speaking to Hani in his troubled attempts at sleep, she becomes the more vocal guiding light for him to move forward throughout the game. The guiding light comparison becomes quite literal, as during the dream sequences Karl starts to envision a diamond shaped glow that seems to be the source of the voices he's interacting with.

Another character Karl never interacts with directly is his dead daughter **Eshe**. Eshe and Hani switch back and forth as the guiding voice for Karl in his dreams, this shift serving to keep the player off balance as they attempt to grasp what's happening. It is there in this safer dream space Karl fully admits his grief and longing for his family, but cannot fully come to terms with it till the end of the game. As the player rummages through the space station, he can uncover a handful of scattered items like a photo and mug that will also prompt inner dialogue. Karl's ruminating on these items let the player experience how someone in denial surrounds themselves with keepsakes of grief, giving them an excuse wallow in the pain. These items are artifacts from many years prior, ultimately serving up Eshe as a metaphor for the past.

If Eshe is a metaphor for the past, then **Elle** certainly becomes a metaphor for the future and what could have been. We are introduced to Elle as a technician on a transport ship, the Corona, where she initiates a distress call that interrupts Karl's monotonous daily routine. This distress call becomes the catalyst that finally puts Karl on his road forward to reconciliation after years of stagnation. She tells Karl her ship is powerless from an accident and her crew members have run out of food. Elle paints a dark picture of what might happen next should the crew resort to more extreme measures for sustenance, prompting the first real stakes in the game.

In her starving, emotionally fragile state, Elle starts deliriously posing questions to Karl such as "How many times did you stop to truly consider if you wanted to live?" The player's growing attachment to Elle, along with confronting questions like these, are the clues that open the way for the player to navigate an emotional lifeline for Karl. As the conversations continue, Elle starts sharing personal information about herself. These personal tidbits spark paternal embers in Karl, who in a Freudian slip at one point calls her "Eshe".

By the end of the game, once it's revealed that Elle and Karl are trapped in a tear in space and time, a conversation with Karl's dead daughter connects the dots between the events of Elle's life and the life Eshe's might have had. The game drops this connection as more of a strong suggestion than confirmed fact, leaving the player to take away their own interpretation of whether Elle and Eshe were actually the same person, some alternate universe version of one another, or just two people with a coincidental amount in common.

These key, touching pieces of writing, along with tense gameplay segments that hang Elle's life in the balance, are some of *Still There's* more fully realized experiences that enable the player to truly live in Karl's skin. We share his growing hope, whether delusional or not, that he has been given a second chance to save his daughter. This hope is never explicitly stated, which makes the game's success at making you feel it all the more impressive.

In a sense, the lighthouse also is haunted by the spirit of its former operator, **Salvatore**. We learn entirely of Salvatore's personality through the player's exploration of various junk items and doodles he left behind on the Bento. A great majority of the items left behind are sexual in nature, usually in the form of crude humor. Such items are raunchy pin up photos, futuristic playboy style magazines, and in one puzzle, a vibrating dildo jammed in the maintenance panel the player must remove to proceed. The humor around Salvatore is the only real potentially polarizing aspect of the writing in the game.

In a game that deals with so much sadness and loss, using sexualized humor to lighten the mood is a tricky thing. Some players will certainly eat it up and others may find it distracting and off-putting. From a purely psychological standpoint, the sexual items on the ship are not entirely unfounded when you consider the operators of the space lighthouse live in solitude for years. This aspect, along with the game's general humor being very effective in eliciting laughs, seems to keep the sexual humor from feeling out of place. Besides adding humor to the story of the game, Salvatore exists as a character for only two other reasons, leaving clues to the engineering puzzles and adding to the conspiracy at the end when we discover he too was manipulating Karl as a Brane Co. agent.

Being stranded in a space lighthouse on the edge of the universe gives Karl limited options for rescuing Elle. His only hope comes in the form of **Grey Di Maggio**, the captain of a warship owned by the Great Low, another competing corporation in the *Still There* universe. Grey's ship is the only ship remotely near Elle's coordinates and with the resources to help. Grey is written as a career corporate ladder climber, who is a stickler for the rules and refuses to let anyone get in her way of career advancement. She becomes the human antagonist of the game, Karl and the player attempting to use her fear of besmirching her storied resume in order to have her deviate from her course to save Elle and the Corona.

Grey is written to be more than just a simple roadblock however, she's written to serve as the flip side of the coin to Karl's new condition. Where Karl is now actively trying to put someone else's life before his own, daily routine and corporate responsibilities be damned, Grey is the summation of a life of pursuing self-serving interests at all costs. Seeing Grey's actions and dialogue play out results in the player feeling doubly resolved to rescue Elle, lest we become so selfish we end up lacking empathy like her.

Another nice touch is that the writers sneak in humanity to the culture of **Brane Co.**, which serves as a distant, soulless corporation for most of the game. Brane Co.'s image of profit over human lives peaks at the end of the game as you discover damning evidence of the foul play in

Gorky's memory banks. Their narrative takes a hard turn when the writers introduce dialogue with a Brane Co. scientist immediately after the find. Chief scientist **Deirdre Janevic** informs you that the Bento is actually at the nexus of one of the biggest time anomalies in the known universe. Initially thinking the anomalies were benign quirks, Brane Co. kept the lighthouse operators in the dark to their true purpose while using AI to monitor the effects on human bodies. She admits that in Karl's case the effects are much more catastrophic. The Bento, along with Elle's ship, is sliding through time unpredictably which that prevents rescue of either.

As she apologizes with apparent sincerity for what seems to be a fatal gaffe, Deirdre implores the player to finish rebooting Gorky and transmit the time anomaly research he has accumulated during the recent events on the Bento. At stake are the lives on Elle's home world, which threatens to be engulfed by the growing tear in time. She claims if they have the information, they can possibly prevent the planet from being lost in the wake like Karl and Elle are currently experiencing.

While the player feels compelled to stick it to the corporation and not hand over the data, you weigh your need for revenge over saving the lives of potentially millions of colonists, some who are friends and lovers of Elle's. While mostly portrayed as an entity existing solely to create shareholder value, the writers layer further dimension by showing even a company like Brane Co. has people who are trying to make a difference while indentured within the large corporate machine.

However, the writing in this section has a missed opportunity. The writers structure the dialogue and its choices where you take Deidre's words at face value, rather than offering the option to believe you are being fed more lies to bend you to the corporation's will. A little extra work to write the choice NOT to send the research to Brane Co., in addition to the already existing option not to back up Gorky when you finally leave the Bento, would have painted the player's perception of Karl's growth and transformation in a very different light, with minimal impact to the rest of the games narrative structure.

One character in the game has no human qualities or speaking roles at all, but still looms large as subtext for the entire experience. That character is the **Bento** itself. The art direction and general appearance of the Bento is visualized as something that is crammed together from a considerable amount of analog, old-school-looking tech. The player uses a modem to communicate, a periscope to view the stars outside, and configures remote computers using a MIDI keyboard. Consequently, this old technology is breaking down and in constant need of repair, only to be cobbled back to minimum functioning level, never improved. This mirrors Karl's own condition and his bare minimum mental health maintenance at the start of the game.

Additionally, the space lighthouse's very purpose plays a key role. Its function is similar to that of the lighthouses of old that dotted shorelines on Earth. Passing ships will ping nearby space lighthouses, triangulating their position from the pings, in hopes of arriving safely at their ultimate destination. At the start of the game Karl is adrift, alone and grieving internally. By the

end of the game Karl has used the Bento for its original purpose: Letting it help guide him on his way through grief by communicating with Elle and others.

The gameplay is also largely a success, managing to sync with the story perfectly in many cases. The visuals of working and living in the real world spatial equivalent of a tiny studio apartment helps convey the needed claustrophobia and intimacy. Before receiving the distress signal, you are run through rote, simple tasks of day to day life on a space station. This involves tasks such as preparing food, recycling waste, marking the day with chalk on the side of a wall, and taking medicine to help you sleep. The formal job oriented tasks from Brane Co., in addition to Gorky generated lighthouse maintenance tasks, are delivered via email to supplement your daily personal ones. The majority of these tasks are designed to be boring and simplistic by nature, combining items in the right order to achieve the desired result. In the repetition of executing them, Karl's mind (and the player) both get temporary reprieve from focusing on the grief that threatens to consume you.

The engineering puzzles for fixing and maintaining the Bento are especially well crafted as there is very little hand holding through the process. Some earlier puzzles have Gorky giving you small bits of guidance, but on the whole the task descriptions are scientific and sparse, forcing you to "learn" the proper process on your own. The biggest set of clues to achieve these tasks resides in a very functional Technical Manual resting on the console desk. This contains all the necessary clues you need to solve the puzzles, but the game makes you work for it by keeping the clues in diagrams and schematics accompanied by complex sounding engineering captions. In some cases there are no captions or text descriptions at all. When you do eventually solve the puzzle of the moment, the player gets a rush of accomplished satisfaction from feeling like you really knuckled down and scienced the shit out it on your own. This good-luck-figure-it-out approach has its drawbacks however, as a few of the later puzzles in the game seem a bit too complex for the clues left behind to solve it.

The dialogue functionality in the game is easy to use and snappy, but mostly a linear experience. There are many points in the game during conversations that you are allowed to choose your own response, but the responses themselves don't vary enough to be drastically different options. These choices also appear to have no real impact on the story except for one or two smaller sections at the end. This seems to be an intentional choice by the developers to not only keep the player focused on the main narrative of dealing with loss, but let the player's own imagination determine how much guilt and responsibility you bear for the game's events.

By the end of the player's experience in the Bento, *Still There* admirably succeeds in what it set out to do: Letting us step into the shoes of a man who realizes running from his past is no longer an option. The game not only uses surprising, clever mechanics to illustrate the protagonist's personal issues, but also pulls off the feat of making the player feel like an actual engineer. Picking up the instruction manual and solving problems with ingenuity and elbow grease has never been as much fun. It is an astounding, truly moving journey and a thoughtful examination of how we deny lingering grief, how we find closure, and how we move forward again.