



UNCOVERING THE UNSEEN: DESIGNING INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF SUICIDAL IDEATION IN ADOLESCENT POPULATIONS

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Abstract. *This article presents the design and development of "Sentinella," a Virtual Reality game narrative created for adolescent populations to aid in the identification and prevention of suicidal ideation. It details the asymmetric interactive narrative structure, which uses a "Sentinella Mode" mechanic to translate subtle psychological symptoms into observable environmental clues, fulfilling targeted narrative goals. Developed in collaboration with the Guanajuato Health Secretariat, the educational game utilizes ethical, art-driven principles to responsibly address the serious public health problem of youth suicide.*

Keywords: *virtual reality, suicidal ideation, interactive narrative, adolescent populations.*

This article examines and shares the process and development of the Virtual Reality game narrative, "Sentinella," focusing on the design of the asymmetric interactive narrative using the Sentinella lenses. It details how the application translates abstract psychological symptoms into tangible environmental storytelling, enabling the player to identify hidden suicidal tendencies within non-player characters through targeted narrative goals. The overall game narrative is based on helping to identify patterns of suicidal behavior in time to prevent the affected people from fulfilling the act. The narrative aims to be friendly but concise, as suicide is a serious topic that especially affects the young population. This Virtual Game narrative serves purely educational purposes, designed to inform and protect young and vulnerable people about this public health problem.

Suicide constitutes a significant public health problem, with Mexico demonstrating a comparatively high rate [4]. This issue is compounded by the proliferation of harmful mental health content on popular platforms, often driven by algorithms that expose vulnerable young populations and can even glorify aspects of mental discomfort [1]. The Sentinella project, developed in collaboration with the Guanajuato Health Secretariat (SSG) for high school students (ages 12 to 18), creates an educational Virtual Reality game narrative. The game's core goal is to immerse the user as a Sentinella – a gatekeeper – to watch and analyze subtle signs of suicidal ideation (e.g., changes in behavior, social media posts) among non-player characters, enabling timely identification and prevention.

The narrative is constructed using principles of art as a means of subtle self-expression and emotional processing, a concept broadly supported by research across psychology and neuroscience, which suggests engagement with the arts helps externalize and regulate intense emotions [2].



Given the gravity of the subject, the narrative design adheres to strict ethical guidelines to avoid issues with harmful online content. Specifically, we commit not to romanticize suffering, aestheticize suicide, or explicitly depict methods of death. Our approach focuses on experience, distress, resilience, and connection, acknowledging that while artworks may be inspired by individuals who experienced profound psychological distress, art alone cannot replace medical, psychological, or social support. This responsible exploration informed the construction of our main characters, who are based on the thematic, emotional, and aesthetic elements of renowned twentieth-century artists.

We explored artworks by artists who took their own lives, which inspired our narrative. We constructed it starting from our target audience; we chose to depict common experiences of adolescents in secondary education, going through school, and sharing time in spaces adapted for public education like classrooms and libraries. We decided to design a total of six characters, including two background characters and four principal ones, based on renowned twentieth-century artists across different disciplines. Rather than literal representations, each character interprets the thematic, emotional, and aesthetic elements of the selected artist's work, translating them into original character designs. Next, we will describe all the characters introduced in the narrative. Alexa Pinedo is based on Alejandra Pizarnik. Pizarnik was an Argentine poet whose work is characterized by introspection, fragmentation, and an exploration of silence, identity, and inner conflict; her writing often addresses themes of absence and vulnerability. The character inspired by Pizarnik reflects these qualities through a rather direct visual language. She is an introverted figure who displays vulnerability through an introspective posture and emotional fragility in her expression. The character often writes her feelings in a diary and composes deep, personal poems and reflections in her notes. Diana Araujo is based on Diane Arbus. Arbus was an American photographer known for her direct, often unsettling portraits that challenged conventional representations of normality by focusing on marginalized or unconventional subjects. Her work emphasized authenticity, vulnerability, and intimacy. This character draws inspiration from Arbus's more extroverted attitude. She is a very active and prolific photographer, taking self-portraits alone or with friends, and often can be seen taking photos of the most mundane things. It is harder to acknowledge their fragility, but she usually takes their polaroids on black-and-white film to express their emotional struggle more.

Conrad Cobián, who referenced Kurt Cobain, the frontman of the band Nirvana, became an emblematic figure of the grunge movement. His work expressed themes of alienation, emotional struggle, and resistance to commercial and cultural expectations, blending vulnerability with raw energy. The character inspired by Cobain incorporates elements of contrast and instability. He's a musician who tries hard to express his identity, even if it means wearing a school uniform every day. Displaying a rebel attitude, he can be found practicing guitar in the library, writing songs on minor keys, and wearing a Walkman.



Ruben Villas is based on Robin Williams. Robin was a performer renowned for his improvisational energy, rapid shifts between humor and seriousness, and his ability to convey deep emotional complexity beneath comedic expression. His work frequently combines joy, introspection, and melancholy. This character reflects a duality between exuberance and vulnerability. Expressive gestures. He is the one who tries hard to make everyone around him happy, but has his own deeper personal struggles. He can be seen making jokes or posting comic drawings around class and would often wear a clown nose or practice ball juggling.

It is also important to note that none of these representations is a direct homage to these artists, but rather to their works. These references honor their artistic contributions, not the circumstances of their deaths.

To complement Sentinella's narrative, we decided to implement a game mechanic that changes how we “see” the virtual environment; we called it “Sentinella Mode” (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Comparison of the virtual environment with Sentinella Mode turned off (a) and turned on (b), illustrating the mechanic that allows players to identify subtle clues of suicidal ideation by inspecting and hearing details not normally visible



It works like a scanner, helping the player hear and inspect details of objects in the scene that would not normally be visible without turning on this feature. It is important to note that these signs, which can only be seen in "Sentinella Mode", are very important because, on many occasions in real life, before considering suicide, the affected person gives faint clues that almost always go unnoticed, and those around them think they are only doing so to get attention or to cause trouble, when in fact they are trying to communicate something. That is why our intention in the narrative is for the user to act as a sentinel, remaining alert to details and signs.

In conclusion, the "Sentinella" project offers a unique, art-driven approach to suicide prevention by translating complex psychological symptoms into a tangible, interactive narrative experience. The core design element, the Sentinella Mode, is crucial; it mechanically embodies the need for attentive observation, allowing players to identify subtle, often-missed clues of suicidal ideation hidden in the environment and in characters' expressions. By framing the player as a "Sentinella," a gatekeeper, this VR game emphasizes the community's role in prevention. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the successful development of an educational, research-informed narrative design aimed at fostering proactive, empathetic identification of distress among young, vulnerable populations.

References

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