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Spiritfarer: A Relaxing Exploration Around Themes of Death and Loss

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Abstract: Spiritfarer is a cozy resource and relationship management game focused on caring for passengers and helping them to address their unfinished business before ultimately guiding them to the afterlife. The game features repeated learning opportunities for practicing the grieving process in a safer game-based environment as well as requiring players to learn the unique needs of each other character that make them human. This Well Played session will demonstrate critical game design elements that align with the embedded opportunities for learning.

What is Spiritfarer?

Spiritfarer is an adventure game developed by Thunder Lotus Games that provides a relaxing change of pace to the resource management genre. The game was released in August 2020 and Thunder Lotus Games has continued to support and develop additional game experiences through the release of three content packs throughout 2021. In Spiritfarer you play as Stella (and her cat Daffodil in co-op mode) who has been entrusted to serve as the new farer of the dead by Charon.



Figure 1

Screenshots from Spiritfarer: (A) Player is organizing buildings for the boat, (B) Stella taking Gwen (a spirit) to the Everdoor, (C) Stella being given a task by Stanley (a spirit), and (D) Stella tending to garden with help from Summer (a spirit) by playing music.

As the new Spiritfarer, Stella must meet the needs of the spirits aboard her ship. She does this through mining, fishing, harvesting crops, cooking, sewing, and crafting supplies to collect materials that are needed to care for her spirit passengers and to expand the boat (see Figure 1C). In contrast to most resource management games, the resource collection is de-emphasized with there being more of a focus on relationship management. The gameplay experience leads players to explore islands across the sea where they can meet new spirits, gain new abilities (see Figure 1D), and collect materials to upgrade the boat and complete tasks. Tasks within Spiritfarer are situated around caring for passengers and helping them to address their unfinished business before they are ready to pass through the Everdoor, the gateway that releases the spirits into the afterlife (see Figure 1B). As new upgrades are completed, the player is able to organize structures that are added and must 'Tetris' the improvements to fit on the deck (see Figure 1A); giving each player's ship a personalized feel. The spirits that Stella meets throughout the game all represent people from her life that she grew up with or provided care for as a palliative nurse. Each spirit that is brought on board offers the player new opportunities to engage in mini-games that provide new forms of resources needed to complete quests and upgrades.

A Relaxing Game About Death: Opportunities for Society & Learning

Although Spiritfarer was developed primarily as a commercial game, it does present characteristics of a serious game (William & Yang, 2022) -notably with the goals of building awareness of coming to terms with death and engaging in the grieving process. It also presents opportunities for Social Emotional Learning (Weissberg et al., 2015) with gameplay revolving around the player learning how to be a caretaker and to meet the unique needs of each spirit. Spiritfarer also acts as a form of a 'grief practice sim' where players come to terms with their own death (Stella's) through assisting other spirits in moving on through the Everdoor. Through the gameplay experiences, players are able to develop a deeper sense of empathy and to see the humanity in the characters as they pass on. This Well Played session will demonstrate game design elements which facilitate player experiences concerning the opportunities for learning that take place within Spiritfarer. The cozy aesthetic of the game balances the "heavy" nature of the grief content, and the calming resource mechanics to create a relaxing journey to the end.

References

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