

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Spiritfarer

Platform: Nintendo Switch / PS4 / PC / Xbox One / Stadia

Genre: Indie, Adventure

Release Date: August 18, 2020

Developer: Thunder Lotus Games

Publisher: Thunder Lotus Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Nicolas Guérin

Overview

In Spiritfarer, you play as Stella, a new Spiritfarer who welcomes spirits aboard to her ferry. Fulfill these passengers' last wishes and accompany them in the final moments of their life. As Stella, find meaning in life and learn to say goodbye.

Characters

- **Stella** - The Spiritfarer, the player's avatar. She is a young girl wearing a large, star-shaped hat. With her cat daffodil, she manages the ferry and looks after the spirits. When the spirits are ready, she brings them to the Everdoor and sends them to the afterlife.
- **Hades** – A huge, owl-like ghostly figure. Throughout the game, Hades gradually reveals Stella's memories through illustrations.
- **Lily** – Lily is the spirit form of Stella's younger sister. She explains the memories revealed by Hades towards the end of the game.

Spirit Characters

- **Gwen** – A sarcastic, pragmatic deer spirit. She was the first spirit character Stella meets as the Spiritfarer. She helped guide Stella as she started her journey. She grew up in a dysfunctional family and had a complicated relationship with her father.
- **Atul** - A stubborn outgoing frog spirit. He was Stella's uncle. He was a handyman who helped with construction on the ferry. He appeared to be cheerful all the time, until his sudden disappearance. He is the only character who is not taken to the Everdoor by Stella.
- **Summer** - A spiritual vegan snake spirit. She loved nature and meditation. She worked as an agronomic engineer until she got cancer (referred to as

the Dragon in the game) from using the chemicals. After leaving the corporation, she fell in love with Stella's aunt Rose and lived happily together with her until she passed away.

- **Alice** - A sweet and bright old hedgehog spirit. She was a stay-at-home mom. She enjoyed cooking and fashion. A large part of her life was devoted to taking care of others. She suffered from dementia in her later life.
- **Astrid** - An elderly lynx spirit who fought for political causes. She could not leave her husband Giovanni, despite being cheated on again and again. Their relationship brought her lots of heartbreaks but she was the only one by his side when he passed away.
- **Giovanni** - A witty, flamboyant lion spirit. He was Astrid's husband. He liked to charm everyone and was always involved in a new romantic relationship. He tried to live life to the fullest by enjoying simple pleasures in life.
- **Beverly** - A tiny owl spirit. She was Stella's old neighbor. She enjoyed talking to Stella about her past with her children and her husband David. Until her memory started to fade and she kept repeating the same event.
- **Gustav** - An artistic owl spirit who can be a little smug at times. He was an event organizer and art curator. He believed that art is the proof of our existence and brings meaning to life.
- **Bruce & Mickey** - Bruce was a mean, demanding hummingbird who did all the talking for the duo. Mickey was a water buffalo who remained quiet (later revealed to have already died). The two of them were inseparable, both participated in dangerous illegal activities.
- **Stanley** - A curious, happy child mushroom spirit. Unlike other spirits, Stanley was grown from seed. He had a beetle friend, Jacob. He loved doing experiments and putting on plays.
- **Elena** - A strict, serious dog spirit. She was a teacher and liked challenging her students. She was never impressed by any student. She valued discipline and simplicity.
- **Buck** - A basilisk spirit that calls Stella Commander. Buck is already dead when he boarded the boat, therefore he stays on the boat and cannot go to the Everdoor.

Breakdown

With dragons, giant turtles that you can plant trees and rocks on, and even an island made of giant ads, upon entering this world, the player slowly unearths the symbolism just beneath the fantastical. The game does not tell you whether the spirits are alive or dead, why they are here or why they manifest in the form of animals. I interpreted this as a liminal space between the living and the dead when death is close but has not taken you. The world is ephemeral and hazy at times, reflecting our tenuous understanding of human consciousness. As a Spiritfarer, you aid others in navigating and providing a reason to the surreal. Eventually, it is revealed that this was all a part of your own death, your journey to the Everdoor. Upon reaching the Everdoor, the spirit simply becomes a beam of light and vanishes. The game does not try to imagine what happens after death because

it is not the story it tries to tell. This ambiguity is core to the concept of death. Perhaps we will never know the answers and through this ambiguity, Spiritfarer conveys that maybe the answer isn't important.

The story of Spiritfarer is one about life and death. Unlike the kind of death in a first-person shooter game, Spiritfarer addresses the topic in a more realistic and personal way. Saying goodbye to loved ones is an experience most of us have had. But how can a game awake that memory? If the narrative starts like this: You are Stella, a nurse taking care of patients dying of fatal disease. One day, you found out that you are dying. The story would not work. Because the player did not live Stella's life. Therefore, cannot feel Stella's feelings. Becoming the Spiritfarer allows the player to live Stella's life in an imaginary realm. Do the work she did, meet the people she met, and have the feelings she had. The player then truly becomes Stella. When it is revealed that Stella is not a Spiritfarer, but a nurse. Gwen is not a deer spirit, but Stella's best friend. The player can connect the imaginary world with reality.

It is crucial to Spiritfarer that the player is able to resonate with the spirits. Otherwise, the narrative would not be as effective. Because in the end, the closer the relationship is, the more weight their death carries. Spiritfarer did a great job forming these relationships because the background stories of individual spirits are very believable and relatable. Being inspired by real stories in the game's team member's life, each story is complex and unique. None of the characters are purely good or evil. They all struggle in their own ways. Astrid for example failed to leave her husband Giovanni even though he cheated on her repeatedly. She hated him for his disloyalty but missed him when he was gone. Such contradictions make the characters human and make us relate.

In Spiritfarer, the narrative and gameplay are designed for each other. Without the narrative, Spiritfarer would be like many other adventure management games where the player explores the world, chops down trees, and mines rocks. The narrative gives these activities meaning. Doing mundane tasks becomes an act of caring, just like we care for our loved ones in real life. After growing corn from seeds, watering them, harvesting them, making them into popcorn, Atul tells you that he used to make popcorn for his family:

It makes me miss my kids a whole lot. I used to make bags of popcorn on movie night for them. Even with the TV turned up, you couldn't hear the actors talking. The crunching was so loud. It was the only way to calm those little monsters down. I wish I was still there. To see them laughing. For them to fall asleep on me. Thank you for this popcorn.

The gameplay is the player's way of giving and the narrative is the return. This back and forth exchange makes the spirits important to the player.

The gameplay also assists the narrative in many instances. Each character is related to specific activities in the game. Even after they are gone, the activity becomes a part of the memories with them. Summer is always missed when the player gets rocks from the

dragon; Atul is always playing the flute when lightning hits. The gameplay especially helps in the Alice storyline. As an old grandma, Alice starts to have trouble walking. She asks the player to move her house to the ground floor and help her walk to the dock in the morning and back in the evening every day. This gameplay detail makes the narrative more believable. While they do the walk, the pace of the game slows down. It becomes a ritual and gives the player a moment to reflect on their relationship. As Alice's dementia gets worse, she forgets about who Stella is and mistakes the player as her daughter Annie. The player has to change into Annie's outfit, pretend to be Annie in order to bring Alice to the Everdoor. The gameplay makes the ending especially powerful when Alice has her last clear moment and realizes that Stella's not Annie.

You're... You're not Annie, are you? Yes, of course... I guess I have been rather forgetful, recently...

Even taking the spirits to the Everdoor helps tell the story. The player has to make a decision to send the spirits away. Going to the Everdoor and boarding that boat with them allows the player to say goodbye when they are ready. This decision is not forced upon them, but their own.

Strongest Element

The moment in Spiritfarer when it is revealed that Stella was dying herself is powerful. Before this moment, the story has been about others, others' life and others' death. What do we do when a loved one dies? How do we fill the void and live on? This is the point when the focus is shifted from dealing with the death of loved ones to the death of oneself. It is a moment everyone is going to face at some point. A moment that is scary, yet unavoidable. It also brings deeper meaning to the previous narratives in the game. Because of the relationships Stella forms, with Atul, Gwen, Summer, Alice..... The life she touched and helped, her life became meaningful. This realization brings closure and courage for Stella to face the unknown, face death.

Unsuccessful Element

Atul's disappearance in the game does not have the intended effect on the player. After having meals with everyone, Atul, Stella's uncle disappears and is never to be found again. This plotline could have been a valuable moment because we don't always lose our loved ones the same way. Sometimes they simply disappear and we don't have the opportunity to say goodbye. However, the way the story is told leaves the player more confused than anything else. With a text saying "Atul has disappeared", the player has no way of knowing whether Atul cannot be found again, or he just went on a vacation. This leaves the player confused and unable to have the intended complex feeling about this event. Since the player cannot contact Atul and have the realization that he can no longer be reached in Spiritfarer, the game needs a more direct and clear way to show the event. One possible solution might be showing his house in a completely different state. All belongings packed and gone. Another possible way of showing is through the emotions of Stella. Dissonance occurs when Atul is gone yet Stella is still smiling. A series of

illustrations or animations showing past memories with Atul and the empty house he left could communicate the plotline more effectively.

Highlight

The best moment in Spiritfarer is when Stella has sent all the spirits away and it is just the player and the empty ferry. This is when the player realizes the meaning of life. On a ferry with orchards and gardens, planting things has become meaningless. There is no one to plant them for, no one to cook for. Gwen is not there to appreciate the black coffee you make for her. And Bruce and Mickey are not there to demand fancy meals. Without them, there is nothing left to do. Nothing worth living for. At this moment, you know you are ready to go, ready for the next stage, no matter what that might be.

Critical Reception

- IGN, Tom Marks, 9/10- Compares to The Last of us Part 2, a game that also discusses death, Marks describes the Spiritfarer as “a warm bubble bath”. He appreciates how unique each character is and how wonderful the writing is. While not all the characters are strong, the ones that he connected with made him sad to say goodbye to. He delayed taking the spirit to the Everdoor because of how attached he became. “Full of charming characters with somber, touching stories.....the journey to Spiritfarer’s Everdoor is definitely one worth savoring.”
- PCGamer, Rachel Watts, 85/100 – Watts talks about how the player gets to know the characters through doing daily tasks, about their preferences, and backstory. Caring for the characters and learning about them helps form a close relationship. She enjoys how complex the characters and stories are. All characters are unique to their own. One negative comment Watts has is the ambiguity of the world. Unsure about what this realm really is, she finds it confusing at times about the characters’ intention and purpose. However, she thinks the vagueness worked for the Everdoor since no one knows what happens after death. Overall, “aspects of the world are a little abstract, but the concept and emotions are crystal clear.”

Lessons

- Write personal, relatable stories to connect with the player. Spiritfarer’s success cannot be separated from its great backstories. The story doesn’t need to be complicated to move the player. It needs to be relatable. As simple as Atul’s movie nights with his family, this experience everyone can relate to brings the character closer to the player.
- Narrative and gameplay should support one another, instead of being separate elements. When narrative and gameplay are designed for each other, both elements improve in the game. For example, the narrative makes the tasks meaningful, while the tasks help guide the narrative.
- Let the player control their own feelings. Give the player some space and allow them to make decisions based on their feelings. Forcing the decisions on them when it seems to be the right turning point in the story would not work. For

example, the player could bring the spirits to the Everdoor when they are ready for it. If the event happens automatically, the player would lose autonomy and be unable to feel the intended emotions.

Summation

Spiritfarer is a truly unique and ambitious game for its discussion on life and death, a topic that not many dare to address. A lot can be learned from how Spiritfarer is able to address this complex topic so well, convey the feelings and emotions intended. It goes beyond being entertaining and can positively affect one's attitude on life.