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ENGL: 3500 Literary Games

## Paws Until Ready: Fragmentation, Grief, and Reconciliation Made “Cozy”

### Part 1: Inspiration

Through the medium of play, video games invite us to return to our native state of love, curiosity, and creativity—what one may call “the inner child.” However, it appears my “inner child,” like myself, has a few loose screws. Stupidly, she wants to touch everything. Wide-eyed, she reaches out again and again, as if she simply cannot learn that the stove is hot, or that wet paint rubs itself onto your finger and then onto your clothes. The consequences carry no weight. She seeks out games that treat her better than I do, games that hold her by the hand and tell her she’s safe to be curious—even about stoves, even about death.

I wanted to make a game that honored all of her favorites: *Spiritfarer*, *Disco Elysium*, and *Love, Ghostie*. I drew most heavily from *Spiritfarer*, almost entirely ripping off its premise. In both games, the player acts as a ghostly primary caretaker, building relationships with spirits as they prepare to move on into the next stage of death. Inevitably, this means the player must let go of their most beloved friends. In *Spiritfarer*, these friends are metaphorical animals, humans who take a creature form representing their most prominent traits. In my own game, the friends are literal animals, domesticated creatures who each, for some reason, cannot proceed beyond

purgatory. Since we have selectively bred domesticated animals to become reliant upon us, our responsibility to ensure their well-being parallels that of *Spiritfarer's* healthcare worker protagonist. However, in introducing a human-animal divide, my game makes the player an imperfect caregiver who, like all pet owners, must stretch their mind to accommodate the inhuman.

In my game, the player attempts to piece together an animal's mind through *Disco Elysium*-style fragmentation. Animal memories arrive as images, videos, prose, and poetry, as the player's brain attempts, and often fails, to translate non-human thoughts into something the human mind can read and interpret. Many memories contain allusions to Wallace Stevens, whose poetry questions man's ability to imagine a way of being other than his own. However, for the sake of the ghost pets, I implore my players to try. With time, they realize that the animal no longer needs them, that it instead wants a new friend whom the player must find via *Love, Ghostie*-esque spirit matchmaking. All that work to understand the animal, and it eventually just leaves for what's beyond. As in both *Spiritfarer* and *Love, Ghostie*, the passing is a sad moment, but the game's underlying love, comfort, and support catch the player before they hit rock bottom, cocooning the inner child who takes the player's fall.

## Part 2: Process

We, as a species, are naturally self-centered. It's not our fault—our brains simply translate the world through that which is familiar. The skill helps us relate to the

non-human, as we often assume they share a similar experience of the world; however, our mind's tendency to assume humanity means we frequently overestimate how much we understand the world around us. While trying to transcribe transcendent animal-human connections, I, like everyone before me, overestimated myself.

On the second day of my game development journey, I ran into a technical roadblock that would set the tone for the remainder of the development. Almost every 2D game in the world features textboxes, so they can't be hard to make, right? Wrong. I followed a YouTube tutorial, copied the code to the letter, and watched helplessly as my GDScript lit up like a Christmas tree. Apparently, Godot doesn't think Tween nodes are cool anymore. Apparently, Godot enjoys making me cry. First, it was the tween, but then came signals, collision shapes, and lines of dialogue mysteriously disappearing from the text queue. With everything going wrong, I realized I simply did not have the technical skills to make what I wanted.

Well, if I couldn't write outstanding code, maybe I could instead populate my game with worthy art, prose, dialogue, and poetry. Perhaps an animal's mind comes to the protagonist as the summation of these creative mediums, thoughts pieced together through partial fragments of art. I still love the idea, although I admit to having had ulterior motives at the time of its conception. Knowing my code sucked, I wanted to draw attention away, and, again, how difficult can creative writing and art really be? If I can write an essay, I can write a poem—said the mediocre poet.

However, I've come to appreciate my failures insofar as they serve my concept and themes. My pixel art is inconsistent, my dialogue is rigid, my poetry is notably beginner, and my code resembles a barn fire. Still, to imagine what is beyond the human is to fail to do so, and my jack-of-all-trades approach coincides with the confusion inherent in that struggle. I do not have a uniquely profound understanding of coding, writing, art, or animals. Like my protagonist, I realized my lack of knowledge and persevered anyway, finding meaning in progress rather than mastery.

### Part 3: Genre

I assumed that because my game looked nothing like *Animal Crossing* or *Hello Kitty Island Adventure*, it was only subjectively cozy. However, to be a cozy, a game just has to fulfill three requirements: ludic safety, abundance, and softness. When upheld, these tenets signal to the player that they are free to seek out the fulfillment of higher needs, such as relationship building or self-actualization (Waszkiewicz and Tymińska). Still, without significant conflict, players, feeling directionless, will struggle to realize these goals. For that reason, many people turn away from cozy games, but they shouldn't.

Cozy games have acquired the reputation of being “boring,” playing as nothing more than mildly comfortable monotony (Koramora), but cozy games are surprisingly well-equipped to challenge difficult themes and concepts. In Agata Waszkiewicz's Instagram bio, she writes that she “has [a] PhD (in video games),” which is the coolest

credential I have ever heard and also totally qualifies her to be my resident cozy game expert. Waszkiewicz argues that “sadness and grief have always fitted cozy aesthetics” (Waszkiewicz). Thus, thematically rich and grief-stricken games such as *Spiritfarer* are not cozy in spite of their narrative. Rather, the pain reinforces the coziness, as the gameplay provides a healthy, safe outlet for emotional discovery and personal reconciliation. There’s a place for simple, comfortable games. However, when a cozy game neglects to introduce conflict or struggle, it fails to fulfill its promise to the player, the promise that the player will be able to work toward personal and relational stability.

I once believed my game did not fit cleanly into the cozy genre, but I was wrong. By its formal definition, my game is unquestionably cozy. As the player is already dead, there’s no potential for their safety to be at risk, and the player (again, dead) does not have any lower-level Maslow needs to fulfill. Finally, the art, writing, and animations are all soft, promoting a low-stress play environment that feels both comfortable and manageable. There, in one fell swoop, my game has been crowned cozy. In exploring death, grief, and the struggles of human-animal relations, my game is not extending itself beyond the cozy. Rather, it is fulfilling its promise, allowing the exploration of pain to feel comfortable, safe, and cathartic.

## Part 4: Theme and Mechanics

Humans and domesticated animals are functionally inseparable, bound together by our evolution and codependence. However, we all too frequently fail our animals in life, often at the hands of our perpetual desire to humanize them. An animal's death evokes our ultimate responsibility and asks us the two greatest questions of human-animal friendship: when and how to let go. To answer these questions, I want to ask players to examine both an animal's life and its death. I want the player to grow and discover alongside the animal before ultimately realizing that, in the afterlife, the animal needs someone else. You find a partner for the pet and then let it move into its eternal life in a process that functionally mirrors a second death. Through the continual process of caring for and then releasing ghosts, the player learns about what it means to be an animal's advocate. Like my game, it is a perpetual exercise of love and grief, understanding and ignorance, as we continually learn that we have more to learn.

However, though I had lofty goals, my gameplay does not provide the agency necessary to trigger the personal and thematic transformations I had hoped for. In his "Agency as Art," Nguyen suggests that all video games have an implicit contract with the player: "If games can record and transmit forms of agency, then I can learn new modes of agency from a game" (Nguyen). If the game offers agency, the player will be malleable to the game's insights. Games can be incredible tools for social and emotional exploration, but they must first fulfill their end of the bargain. Lacking the

required technical knowledge, I couldn't make good on my end of the deal. As my game's creator, I failed to design a technical system robust enough to support the game's concepts. Instead, I offer scraps of agency, measly mechanics such as "click what I tell you to click" and "press enter when I say so." In practice, my rigid design alienates the player from my game and thus from its central ideas and themes. With a better understanding of game development, I would have liked to have designed more of a management and matchmaking game rather than a narrative. That design would not have undercut my narrative flow. Instead, it would have invested the player in the process of learning, growing, grieving, and, finally, letting go.

#### Part 5: What's to Come

An idealized version of my game would become more management-style, moving away from exposition and instead allowing the player to explore their own relationships to the animals, their stories, and their ultimate passing from the player's life. However, I would not wish to implement different endings, as they would inevitably vary in value and subsequently suggest that one player's journey is better than another's. No, I believe that, like a book, the story should end where it begins.

The player starts their journey with a goodbye, a seemingly final farewell to their beloved dog, Winter. However, unwilling to pass on without their dog, the player chooses instead to remain in a state of limbo, where they can not only take care of animal ghosts but maintain a flimsy relationship to their dog. At first, the dog

communicates through words, seemingly capable of human-level thought and connection. Eventually, as the player continues caring for ghosts, Winter stops reaching out, stops writing letters, and stops speaking. The process happens gradually, slowly enough that the player doesn't actively realize. However, as time progresses, the player begins to acknowledge that none of the other animals speak as Winter did.

Winter's speech at the beginning of the game is a manifestation of the player's anthropomorphisation of their dog, demonstrating the protagonist's fundamental misunderstanding of the animal mind. In death, the player commits to moving beyond these boundaries, learning to understand animals and their non-human perspective on the world. When Winter finally passes, joining the protagonist in the afterlife, she communicates as just another animal. For the player, this change isn't something to grieve. Rather, it's a beautiful acknowledgement of human and animal connection, a relationship that centers not just the human being. Winter and the player ascend into the next stage of their afterlife, now with a more profound love and appreciation for one another.

In that moment, the player must let go of one final thing: the game. With an experience that is beautifully brief, *Paws Until Ready* asks the player to love and grieve in a cozy, comfortable game about animals and death. Until the end, the game will never rescind its unconditional support of the player, of the inner child who loves animals and wants to know what it means to imperfectly and briefly understand them.



## Works Cited

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## Appendix

### How to Play:

Press enter to proceed past text boxes

Move with arrow keys

Click board

Click letter

Press enter when letter is done

Click balls

Press enter to leave memory

Go to dog

Stay near dog

Press enter at memories

Click buttons for choice

Click buttons for choice

Press enter at end



Between the knees, above the dirt, a friend  
Will toss a lamb, it lands unheard. For love  
Returns all things into the hands which send  
Them into flight again. All drift-less doves  
Will flock toward those they know. And dogs will catch  
Their toys like snow, whose flakes will not remain  
but slow when near enough for hands to snatch  
And throw no different to friends, who pain-  
-lessly will see their end. For grass forgives  
Imprints of feet, which crush its blades yet spare  
The leaves, who suck the soil through lungs alive  
And fetch the ghosts of friend canine, their air  
Still haunts the quiet space, which mourns a loss  
That yet regains—each part, a park, across