

# **Widower: An Interactive Narrative Horror Video Game**

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Analyzing profound works, elaborating on the inner workings of video games and their intricacies, video games can be interpreted through various lenses. Interaction and play lie within the core of video games, making for an immersive experience. While other forms of entertainment and media are consumed languidly, video games require active participation. The player is presented as an agent, making choices, solving problems, and shaping their experiences. Effectively, video games are comprised of various innovations that allow them to be active, such as exploration, narrative, player agency, challenges and rewards, and rules. Depending on the perspective and concept in which they are depicted, video games may be categorized by their narrative, interactive art, cultural representation, psychological and emotional impact, mechanics, gameplay, or technological innovation. Through engagement and creation, video games provide a significant platform, offering exclusive insight into human behaviors, values, and technological advancement.

### **Plot of Widower**

Widower is an enigmatic, interactive, narrative-based video game, underscoring the prevalence of mental health and its consequences, due to unrecognition, within young adults. The player plays as the protagonist, Willow Woods, an eighteen-year-old girl who grew up in Deadwood, Oregon. Throughout the narrative, the player learns about Willow's life in the last six months and the difficulties she faces when grieving the death of her mother. While coping with the death of her mother and experiencing

emotional dysregulation, Willow begins to resent her father. Her father, Vincent, the town psychiatrist, married only after a month of losing his wife to Willow's excessively perfect stepmother, Elizabeth Woods. To Willow, something is off; She believes that Elizabeth is deceptive and hiding something far more important than the facade she puts on.

After losing her grandmother, her father's mother, the Woods family inherited the small estate. While packing up boxes in the attic, Willow discovers a leather-bound journal that is written in her Mother's handwriting. As Willow begins to read the journal, it depicts that Willow's mother would like to be resurrected. Following the directions in the journal, Willow will uncover the materials needed for a sacrifice to bring her mother back to life. Through the narrative, the player will make choices, effectively choosing whether Willow will complete the sacrifice correctly or not. As the player makes the choices, the two different endings will become apparent: Willow uncovers the Stepmother's evil, realizing that she is a demon who wrote the book to fully possess a human and Willow murders her or, Willow is blinded by the want to resurrect her mother and will complete the sacrifice at any cost, causing the demon to take over her body.

### **Game Inspiration**

I have always been infatuated with things unusual and eerie. Growing up, my Father introduced me to horror movies early in my life, and they have been a significant

part of it ever since. As I grew older, I became interested in certain genres of horror, like possession films and psychological films. From my interest in these types of films, I knew I wanted to create a game that inhabited these characteristics, as well as provided a sense of nostalgia.

At a young age, I played games on PlayStation 2 such as Silent Hill, Resident Evil, Fatal Frame, and Manhunt. Thus, I was heavily inspired by the unnerving and ominous aesthetic associated with these games, often accompanied by psychological elements and absurdity. The environments of these games are often composed of foggy mist, corroded buildings, deterioration, and mental collapse, adding to an unsettling atmosphere. Much of the horror genre is based on subconscious distress, panic, and guilt, invoking feelings of discomfort through uncanny experiences and a deep narrative plot. Combining all of these elements, I decided to pursue a literary narrative game, as I feel it best suits my skill set. As an English major, I have the strength of writing a moving and descriptive narrative, which I think I can provide within the Inky framework.

### **Type of Game and Medium**

Janet Murray is known for her compelling book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), which elaborates on narrative story spaces and player agency. Murray argues that digital media provides a new narrative platform compared to traditional media. Games, Murray claims, are procedural, participatory,

spatial, and encyclopedic, allowing the player to become an active participant in deciding how the narrative plays out. Interactive fiction provides a foundation in which players decide between various choices presented to them, thus changing the plot of the narrative based on pre-determined strands affected by the player's choices. This structure is defined as “branching,” offering players a more participatory way to play the game (Murray). Narrative games focus on central themes and messages that shape the player's path, often relating to human experience and exploration of identity. Due to the interaction between player agency and storytelling, these themes are not just underscored but lived.

Narrative games portray humanity as they create layered stories that reflect real emotions and lived experience. An example of this is *Life is Strange*, which explores loss and friendship through choice-made gameplay. With the support of Murray's claim, her arguments are relevant to the prospect of horror games, as they appeal to strong emotions, player agency, and immersive landscapes, affected by player choice and experience. Horror video game narratives are often received well by game critics, as they comprise themselves of deep storytelling and emotional depth. Effectively, they provide intricate character development, moral ambiguity, and harsh environmental outliers that affect the whole of the narrative. Narrative horror games set themselves apart from other interactive choice-based games, as they embody a sense of vulnerability and psychological tension when the player chooses routes posed

throughout the game, often revealing deeper themes regarding mental health, such as trauma, guilt, and mortality. The immersion within horror games allows players to actively possess a role in how the narrative develops, allowing horror narratives to be an impressive and sinister form of storytelling.

### **Concerns Regarding the Design Process**

Designing and writing a video game has been both a challenging and an insightful experience. The main issues I had with the design process of my narrative were the coding and keeping track of my narrative strands. While I am an English major, I found it difficult at times to write out where I wished for my story to go. I had all these great ideas bouncing around in my head, though the issue was just implementing them into an interactive, narrative framework. Moreover, I am not the type of person to write an outline. Though I feel that in some aspects having an outline for this project would have allowed me to channel my thoughts properly when planning out branches for the player to choose from, creating a narrative web in which the routes the player could have taken would have also been beneficial.

Through the challenges of implementing my text into code, I found it very beneficial to watch YouTube videos to brush up on certain types, and resort to Chat GPT if I was experiencing persistent issues. One aspect I enjoyed learning how to do was to implement photos into my Ink code. As I wanted my narrative to feel like a visual novel, I saw it imperative to implement photos in some manner. While the

images do not show in the actual code preview, they pop up in the web browser, which I found to be neater. The code itself was challenging to me in general, as I have never done so before, though the point of this class is to push your boundaries when you are not familiar with an aspect. While my code is very beginner-level and not that intricate, I hope the bits of the story that have been written feel immersive. Moreover, I think a big critique is that I bit off more than I could chew with the story. I did not have the ability, nor enough time, to implement all the aspects and events that I had wanted to within it. I will partially admit this is an effect of procrastination, however, I think other factors also affected my level of completion, such as graduating, mental health, and other heavy workloads. If I were to build a project later on in the future, I would effectively use my time more wisely.

### **Reinforcing Ideas**

When looking at the storyline for my game, I feel as though it is very straightforward. My game has only two endings to work on right now, the good ending and the bad ending. The bad ending, as of now, entails Willow completing the ritual effectively, thinking she would bring her Mother back. Though she gives full power to her stepmother demon, by which she will gain full power and use Willow's body as her new vessel. Perhaps when thinking forward, another bad ending could be implemented, contributing darker themes related to mental health, such as suicide. The good ending, however, illustrates that Willow has managed to kill her stepmother and prevent her

family from getting torn apart and murdered. Although she does not see her actual mom again, in both endings, she is content knowing that her family is safe. As for a more open-ended ending along the lines of mental health awareness, Willow can either be sent to the mental hospital as she created the whole scenario in her head, or the stepmother claims she is crazy, as she has killed all her family, when in reality it was the demon.

As of now, I have thought of some of the objects the player must collect in order to figure out the truth of the story such as, a page from her mother's journal, a lock of her mother's hair, a mirror shard from a family heirloom, silver key tied to an unopened box, a childhood drawing, and mundane things like herbs and candles. Though, as far as easter eggs go, I need to allow the player to collect a multitude of items in order to unlock the reward. Such as they must have already found four candles in the house, and then they are given the choice in order to light them to see the writing on the wall. I think in the future, it would be beneficial to add attributes such as Easter eggs to make the gameplay more challenging, even going so far as to collect them all. This furthermore allows for player agency and participation, as it gives the player incentive to complete the game in all ways available.

Within *Widower*, I designed the game's resource system to stress the importance of mental health through depictions of warning signs and objects. Willow's distress and overly pessimistic attitude are the first clues that she shows she is struggling. Moreover,



the album she finds in the garage and the journal in the attic serve as objects helping her regulate her emotions, understanding her grief, while also offering information needed for the narrative. Moreover, only stated for a split second and will hopefully be elaborated more on in the future if I continue the game, her relationship with her friends portrays the importance of reaching out for support, but also depicts in-game emotional distress. Depending on the path the player chooses, Willow will either heal or become more distraught when looking for a way to bring her Mother back, face her emotional agony, or grow her emotional isolation. These applications reinforce the prevalence of being vigilant to signs of someone struggling with mental health, and that it is not simply a theme in a video game, but a real-world hindrance.

### **Final Thought**

Interactive narrative video games offer a powerful platform for providing immersive and emotionally sound player engagement. These forms of video games allow players agency and to engage with characters, choices, and the consequences they must face based on their choices. Through the Widower, players will navigate and decide from pre-written strands of dialogue to choose the outcome they want. Through the immersive narrative, players will view the distress and grief experienced by Willow, underscoring the importance of recognizing mental health symptoms. Through video game creation and engagement, players will ultimately be given insight into real human experiences, emotions, and thought processes.

Works Cited

Murray, Jannet H. "From Additive to Expressive Form." *The Free Press*, Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, N.Y., 1997, pp. 65–94.