

**Embracing Mortality: How Narrative Engagement and Eudaimonic Experiences
Contribute to Mortality Reflection in *Spiritfarer*, Explored through Diary Studies and
Interviews**

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Abstract

Introduction: This study explores how *Spiritfarer* encourages mortality reflection through narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences. In the game, players care for spirits and guide them to the afterlife while engaging with themes surrounding death. The narrative, characters, and gameplay mechanics encourage meaningful reflection on mortality. The game explores death positively, inspired by encounters with patients, caregivers, and personal stories. Experiential Learning Theory is used as a lens to analyse how participants reflected on mortality through a structured process of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualising, and potentially applying their insights.

Materials and methods: A qualitative approach was used, combining diary studies and semi-structured interviews with 11 players who each played the game for around 25 hours. The diary entries provided insight into participants' thoughts and feelings, while the interviews allowed for an opportunity to reflect more after finishing the game.

Results: Participants often shared feeling emotional connections to in-game characters and gaining new insights. Some participants shared they experienced a shift in their perspective on mortality, while others maintained their existing beliefs or found that their beliefs were reinforced.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the exploration of how digital games can result in meaningful reflective experiences. It highlights that games like *Spiritfarer* are able to facilitate emotional and philosophical engagement with complex themes such as death through narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements. These findings support the potential for digital games to serve as tools for eudaimonic experiences and meaningful reflection.

Keywords: narrative engagement, eudaimonic experiences, eudaimonic elements, mortality reflection, meaningful play, *Spiritfarer*

1. Introduction

In many cultures, death is a subject that people prefer not to talk about. Despite its inevitability, conversations about mortality are often avoided because of discomfort or fear. This avoidance can contribute to death anxiety, which is linked to worries, depression, and mental health conflicts (Yalom, 2008). In recent years, there has been growing interest in death-positive movements that encourage open conversations about death as a way to reduce anxiety and foster personal growth (TalkDeath, n.d.). Within these death-positive movements, digital games have emerged as a tool for exploring themes surrounding death.

Digital games are increasingly recognised as a medium for storytelling and meaningful engagement (Daneels et al., 2021). Some games are able to offer more than just entertainment, inviting players to reflect on complex themes. *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) exemplifies as a game that can offer reflections on life, death, and relationships. In *Spiritfarer* players are tasked with guiding spirits to the afterlife, while exploring themes of mortality, grief, and the fragility of life through its narrative and gameplay mechanics. Popular media have described *Spiritfarer* as an emotional experience that invites players to engage in personal reflection through its themes of care, loss, and farewells (Aris, 2024). The emotional storytelling of *Spiritfarer* raises the question about how a death-positive game can encourage reflection and potentially reshape how players think about mortality.

While previous studies have explored how digital games address death through mechanics (Cuerdo et al., 2021), representation (Melnic & Melnic, 2018), mourning practices (Gibbs et al., 2012), and even as a tool for education (Nicolucci, 2019), there remains a gap in understanding how narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences within a death-positive game can contribute to mortality reflection. Despite growing interest in the emotional and thematic depth of death in games, little is known about how narrative engagement and eudaimonic gaming experiences specifically contribute to players' personal reflections on death. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how players connect their experiences in *Spiritfarer* to thoughts and feelings about mortality. It explores how players relate to the game's narrative when reflecting on death, how they associate specific game mechanics with narrative engagement, and how they interpret eudaimonic elements in relation to their own views on death and dying.

To explore how *Spiritfarer* creates an opportunity for players to have these kinds of experiences, this thesis uses the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) as a guiding framework. This theory presents that learning happens in a cycle, consisting of the following

stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Reflection is central to this process, as it allows individuals to make sense of what they have experienced and connect it to broader ideas or aspects of their own lives. This can potentially lead to new perspectives or changes in behaviour. By using this framework, this thesis explores how games like *Spiritfarer* create opportunities for players to engage deeply with experiences that encourage reflection and personal growth.

By analysing players' experiences with the game through diary entries and semi-structured interviews, this research seeks to understand how *Spiritfarer* encourages reflection on themes such as loss, the importance of relationships, and the inevitability of death. The research question driving this thesis is: "*In what ways do players experience narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements in Spiritfarer, and what reflections on mortality emerge from these experiences?*"

This research question is explored through a literature review, methods explaining data collection, results examining *Spiritfarer's* role in reflection, and a discussion of its theoretical and practical implications. The study contributes to game studies in social sciences by offering insights into how engaging narratives and eudaimonic elements in games can encourage players to reflect on complex themes like mortality.

2. Literature review

This chapter explores key concepts and research that help explain how digital games can contribute to reflection on mortality. It examines death-positive games, eudaimonic gaming experiences, and the role of narrative engagement for reflection. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory is introduced to explain how players transform in-game experiences into meaningful insights. Building on this framework, this thesis explores how a death-positive game supports meaningful mortality reflection.

2.1 Death-positive games

Games can be used for more than just entertainment. They can serve as tools for education, training, and persuasion (Laamarti et al., 2014). These types of games can touch upon many topics that address complex issues, one of which is mortality. Games are important sources of storytelling. Death-positive games employ this potential by exploring themes related to death and dying in a positive manner. These death-positive games encourage players to reflect on their own mortality through engaging narratives and in-game experiences. While many game narratives primarily serve as a means of entertainment, certain stories within games possess the power to impact individuals' attitudes or beliefs and therefore stimulate reflection (Barab et al., 2010). Additionally, games can be deliberately used to convey meaningful messages and values (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Typically, in death-positive games, death is embraced as a natural part of life and the game's narrative encourages conversations or reflections on mortality. Death-positive games aim to confront the negative perceptions associated with death and promote open conversations about mortality. In death-positive games death is usually portrayed as a natural and inevitable aspect of life, rather than a subject to be feared or avoided. Death-positive games also explore diverse cultural attitudes towards death, as well as enabling players to reflect on their own mortality and end-of-life preferences (Ramée, 2020; Stavros, 2021; TalkDeath, 2020).

One notable example of a death-positive game is *Spiritfarer*. In *Spiritfarer*, the player plays as Stella, who is a spiritfarer, a character who helps guide spirits to the afterlife. As the spiritfarer, your main task is to explore the in-game world, meet different spirits, and help them in resolving their unfinished business before they can pass on to the afterlife. The spirits have their own unique story, personality, and needs. One of the core mechanics of the game is building relationships with the spirits by spending time with them, listening to their stories, and fulfilling their requests. By doing this, the player helps the spirits come to terms with their past.

The game offers a thought-provoking narrative that explores themes of loss, acceptance, and the importance of cherishing moments with loved ones (Boyd, 2021; Thunder Lotus Games, n.d.) The game was intentionally developed to explore death through care and emotional engagement, rather than confrontation and avoidance. It frames death as a natural part of life, emphasising acceptance and support during dying and loss. Inspirations from Greek mythology and Studio Ghibli films influenced the balance between serious themes and everyday moments (Corbett, 2021; Ellingsworth, 2021). Gameplay mechanics such as managing and nurturing a ship reflect relational care, encouraging players to engage with mortality's emotional aspects. The narrative and characters draw from the personal experiences of the creators to provide an authentic representation of end-of-life themes (Corbett, 2021). The game was developed to create a space for reflection on mortality and grief, using mechanics and storytelling that encourage players to engage emotionally with the experience of dying and letting go.

2.2 Eudaimonic Gaming Experiences

General forms of media entertainment, including gaming experiences, have been recognised as hedonic experiences, commonly referred to as enjoyment (Mekler et al., 2014). However, studies have found that certain games evoke responses beyond mere enjoyment. Known as eudaimonic experiences, these responses are characterised by feelings of meaningfulness (Daneels et al., 2021). These experiences involve “contemplating, introspecting, and experiencing greater understanding of essential values, fundamental beliefs, and important life lessons” (Oliver et al., 2016, p. 396).

Eudaimonic gaming experiences are different from hedonic gaming experiences. While hedonic gaming experiences are described as enjoyment (Mekler et al., 2014), signifying a pleasant experiential state encompassing physiological, cognitive, or affective components (Vorderer et al., 2004), eudaimonic gaming experiences go beyond mere enjoyment and are characterised as more complex, meaningful and reflective (Possler et al., 2020, Daneels et al., 2021). A study conducted by Daneels et al. (2021), identified four patterns in their analysis of conceptualisation of eudaimonic gaming experiences: appreciation, meaningful gaming experiences, emotionally moving, challenging and self-reflective experiences, and social connectedness.

2.2.1 Appreciation

Appreciation is frequently used to describe eudaimonic game experiences often referencing Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) definition, which describes appreciation as “an experiential state that is characterised by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being

moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience.” However, there is a lot of variation in how appreciation is conceptualised in different studies. Some research focuses on appreciation as an immediate emotional and cognitive reaction, referring to it as ‘eudaimonic appreciation’ (Daneels et al., 2016). While other studies adopt a broader perspective, using appreciation interchangeably with concepts like eudaimonia or eudaimonic entertainment experiences. These broader conceptualisations describe appreciation as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements related to personal growth, reflection, and insight (Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Wirth et al., 2012). This variation reflects a shift in media studies toward understanding media not only as a source of entertainment, but also as a means of meaningful engagement.

2.2.2 Meaningful gaming experiences

Eudaimonic gaming experiences have been operationalised in terms of meaningful, emotionally moving and emotionally challenging, and self-reflective experiences (Daneels et al., 2016). Meaningful game experiences go beyond mere hedonic enjoyment and are often intertwined with emotions and reflections on real life situations. They are broadly conceptualised in two categories. In the first category players often derive meaning from games by attaching personal meaning to in-game experiences. Rogers et al. (2017) have demonstrated that meaningful experiences result from fulfilling eudaimonic needs, such as gaining a deeper understanding of life. These meaningful experiences are filtered through the player’s personal perspective, including their body, mind, and the way they see the world (Conway & Elphinstone, 2019). By doing so, games help players make sense of real-life experiences by offering deeper insight into everyday situations (Arbeau et al., 2020), highlighting the close connection between the game world and the real world.

In the second category, players directly connect specific in-game experiences to their personal struggles. These moments can provide a sense of purpose during challenging times. For instance, people going through difficult life situations often find comfort and meaning in games, making their experiences more fulfilling and helping them cope (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019). Game experiences become meaningful when they offer insights into players’ lives, create connections with the real world, or convey lessons that can be applied to everyday situations (Carras et al., 2018; Daneels et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Emotionally moving, emotionally challenging and self-reflective game experiences

Several studies have highlighted the significance of emotionally moving and emotionally challenging experiences in gaming. These emotional moments are different from when players think deeply about the game’s meaning. Instead, they are about how players feel

during the game itself. Feeling moved usually means experiencing a mix of positive and negative emotions, like sadness and excitement, at the same time. This can be triggered by the narrative, characters, music, or moral choices in the game. Various scholars believe that being emotionally moved is key to finding deeper meaning, or eudaimonia, in games (Bopp et al., 2016; Cole & Gillies, 2019; Daneels et al., 2020).

Emotional challenge can be explained as a type of gaming experience “which confronts players with emotionally salient material or the use of strong characters, and a captivating story” (Denisova et al., 2017, p.2513). These emotional challenges are about easing tension built up in the narrative, identifying and connecting with game characters, and by emotionally exploring, understanding, and resolving ambiguity. Several studies have demonstrated that players faced emotional challenges when they were confronted with narratives that deal with difficult themes, such as death, illness and social issues, difficult decisions or moral dilemmas, and dealing with these emotions (Bopp et al., 2018; Denisova et al., 2017; Gowler & Iacovides, 2019). Bopp et al. (2018) found that players appreciated emotional challenges over non-emotional challenges, suggesting that these experiences are linked to eudaimonia.

Self-reflective game experiences encourage players to explore their thoughts and gain a deeper understanding of themselves in the gaming context (Daneels et al., 2021). Unlike meaningful and emotionally challenging experiences where players find personal significance in in-game elements or deal with complex emotional situations, self-reflective experiences focus on players reflecting and exploring their own emotions, perspectives, and reactions (Daneels et al., 2021). Self-reflective game experiences often manifest in two ways: perspective taking for empathy and personal growth and development. Through perspective taking players immerse themselves in the experiences of in-game characters, fostering empathy and understanding the characters’ struggles. This process of both perspective-taking and empathic concern can enhance players’ altruistic feelings, which are often linked to eudaimonia (Pallavicini et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2018). Additionally, self-reflective gaming has the potential to contribute to personal growth by boosting confidence and motivation, which can encourage players to apply these improvements to other areas of their lives (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019). Overall, self-reflective game experiences provide opportunities for deeper understanding, empathy building, and personal development (Daneels et al., 2021).

2.2.4 Social Connectedness

Games offer the unique opportunity of social connectedness as a eudaimonic experience, particularly when they focus on connections between players or with in-game characters (Daneels et al., 2020). Connecting with other players in games enhances eudaimonic

experiences by fulfilling relatedness needs, such as connecting with others and caring for others. Daneels et al. (2020) found that adolescent players linked social connections in gaming with eudaimonia. Additionally, some players turn to gaming to cope with difficult life situations and seek social connections through gaming. This allows them to meet other players who share an interest in gaming, helping them temporarily escape their daily struggles without needing to discuss their problems. Therefore, interacting with other players offers a form of support (Caro & Popovac, 2020; Iacovides & Mekler, 2019).

Engaging with in-game characters offers a unique form of eudaimonic experience, especially when players form connections with both playable and non-playable characters. For instance, players who feel a strong connection to their characters and take responsibility for their actions often experience a sense of eudaimonic appreciation (Bowman et al., 2016). Similarly, players who perceive their avatar as social companions experience this engagement as eudaimonic (Bowman et al., 2015). These players interact with their avatars as if they were real social beings, seeing the relationship as eudaimonic when it offered a sense of personal growth or helped them with self-discovery. Moreover, having meaningful interactions with humanised non-playable characters, who often have moral dilemmas, emotional depth, and flaws, also contribute to these reflective experiences in games (Coanda & Aupers, 2020).

2.2.5 Narratives and eudaimonic experiences

Narratives are a key element in supporting eudaimonic gaming experiences, especially when they involve emotional depth and moral complexity. The ANSA framework (Agency, Narrative, Sociality, Aesthetics) offers a more structured and psychologically grounded way to conceptualise how games foster meaningful experiences (Klimmt & Possler, 2021). Agency refers to the player's ability to influence the game according to its rules and mechanics, involving active decision-making and actions that affect game outcomes. A narrative is not simply a fixed storyline, but a dynamic component shaped by players' actions, decisions, and the pacing of their engagement. Sociality highlights the social interactions enabled by games, including communication, and collaborative or competitive play, where players collectively influence the game state. Aesthetics describes the sensory and stylistic qualities of the game, encompassing how visual, auditory, and haptic elements are combined to create the player's sensory experience (Possler et al., 2023). Together, these interactive elements shape the emotional and reflective potential of game narratives.

Player interactivity allows narratives to be shaped through decisions, such as dialogue choices, moral dilemmas, or relational development. This active involvement can lead to stronger identification with characters and makes the story feel more personally meaningful

(Lee et al., 2006; Wellenreiter, 2015). Such narrative agency strengthens players' feelings of autonomy and relatedness, which are two core psychological needs identified in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and are essential for eudaimonic experiences. When narratives present complex moral situations or emotional challenges, they are more likely to evoke emotional engagement and self-reflection (Daneels et al., 2020; Mekler et al., 2018; Whitby et al., 2019). These experiences can lead players to reflect on personal values, social issues, or complex themes, particularly when games evoke eudaimonic feelings (Possler et al., 2018)

Narrative complexity, especially when tied to emotional or moral dilemmas, can encourage players to reflect on their own values and consider broader social or ethical questions. These experiences are particularly likely to support eudaimonic engagement when players feel emotionally connected and morally charged by the story (Possler et al., 2018). The ANSA framework helps clarify how narrative and agency interact to foster this kind of reflection. As players make decisions that influence the story, their sense of involvement deepens in ways that align with what Barab et al. (2010) describe as transformational play, where in-game choices encourage reflection on meaningful ideas and their application in real life.

Previous research has explored many aspects of eudaimonic gaming experiences, including appreciation, meaningful engagement, emotional challenges, self-reflection, and social connectedness. However, the specific relationship between these eudaimonic experiences and players' reflections on mortality remains underexplored. While it is well established that games can evoke meaningful and reflective experiences, there is still a limited understanding of how eudaimonic elements contribute to players' engagement with themes of death and dying. This highlights the need for further research into how such experiences relate to mortality reflection.

SQ1: In what ways do players connect eudaimonic game elements to their thoughts about death?

2.3 Narrative Engagement

Engaging narratives in serious games have the potential to be an effective tool for reflection. Kolek et al. (2023), observed that the duration of exposure to a narrative game correlates with the strength of its impact on players' implicit attitudes towards the themes in the game. This suggests that longer narrative games may have a stronger influence on players' implicit attitudes toward the game's themes. Narrative persuasion in games can be achieved

through scripted narratives and alterbiographies (Calleja, 2009). Scripted narratives are pre-defined stories written by designers, while alterbiographies change dynamically based on the player's interactions (Calleja, 2009). Both types rely on three narrative elements: the characters, the story, and the space (de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, 2012). These elements play an important role in how players engage with a game and the narrative. Characters can foster emotional attachment and identification, the story provides meaning and structure to the game, and the space translates to a setting within the game that supports the narrative. Alterbiographies add one more narrative element, which is the player's interaction with the rules (Calleja, 2009). These narrative elements are relevant to this study as they help explain how players become cognitively and emotionally involved in a game's narrative, which is important for narrative engagement.

Narrative engagement is defined as “a state of intense cognitive and emotional focus on the story” (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013, p. 208). Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) argue that narrative experiences that are experienced as more engaging are likely to result in increased enjoyment and greater effects. According to Busselle and Bilandzic narrative engagement consists of four factors: narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). The first factor, narrative understanding, encompasses both understanding the narrative itself and the individual's ability to make sense of the narrative. The second factor, attentional focus, encompasses the individual's ability to focus their attention on solely the narrative without distractions. The third factor, emotional engagement, describes the individual's emotions and their connection with the story's characters, encompassing both experiencing the characters' emotions (empathy) and feeling for the characters (sympathy). The fourth and final factor, narrative presence, emphasises the importance of blurring the mental boundary between the game world and reality for players to fully enjoy the in-game narrative experience (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Narrative presence is defined as “the sensation of being present in a narrative world due to comprehension processes and perspective taking” (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013, p. 325). Narrative presence highlights the importance of players engaging with all elements of storytelling. Through seamless integration, individuals can become mentally absorbed in the story-world, thereby influencing their cognition, emotions, and behaviours in response to the narrative (Järvelä et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies conducted by Green (2004) and Green and Brock (2000) have found that individuals who reported being more engaged in a narrative also reported having stronger story consistent beliefs and attitudes. In conclusion, the use of engaging narratives in games has the potential to change attitudes (Barab et al., 2010; Kolek et al., 2023). Additionally,

narrative engagement, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence are important factors that contribute to narrative engagement (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). These findings suggest that narrative-driven games can influence players' thoughts and emotions, highlighting the crucial role of storytelling in shaping attitudes and beliefs (Järvelä et al., 2022; Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000).

To better understand what drives narrative engagement, it is essential to examine the game mechanics that shape players' interactions with the story and the game world. Video games are interactive digital experiences that typically involve players engaging with virtual worlds through various controls and interfaces. Within these virtual environments, game mechanics encompass the diverse actions and interactions available to players and computer-controlled game characters within a game. These mechanics shape how players engage with and influence the game environment, including activities such as running, crafting, chatting with in-game characters, and completing quests. Each of these actions are constrained by the game's rules and context (Sicart, 2008). These rules not only dictate what players can do within the game but also establish the boundaries and opportunities that define the game environment. Ultimately, game mechanics are the foundational elements of game design, shaping the player's experience and defining the challenges and possibilities within the game world. They provide the structure through which players explore, strategise, and ultimately immerse themselves in the virtual world and story (Fabricatore, 2007). Narrative game mechanics shape narrative engagement by structuring how players interact with the story, make sense of its events, and emotionally connect with its characters and events.

While narrative engagement is widely recognised as essential for fostering emotional and cognitive involvement in game narratives, the specific narrative mechanics that support this process remain underexplored in the context of death-positive games. Narrative game mechanics shape how players interact with, interpret, and emotionally connect to the story. These mechanics therefore play a central role in facilitating narrative engagement. This connection is especially relevant in games that address themes of death and loss, emphasising the importance of understanding which narrative game mechanics foster meaningful engagement with the story.

SQ2: What narrative game mechanics are associated with players' engagement with the story?

2.3.1 Mortality Reflection Through Narrative Engagement and Eudaimonic Experiences

To explore how games can prompt their players to reflect on mortality, it is important to first define the concept of accepting death and explore factors that influence it. Death

acceptance is “the deliberate, intellectual acknowledgement of the prospect of one’s own inevitable death, and the positive emotional assimilation of the consequences” (Klug & Boss, 1976, p. 230). In other words, death acceptance means consciously accepting the reality that death is an unavoidable part of life and emotionally coming to terms with it in a positive and healthy manner. It goes beyond mere intellectual understanding and involves an emotional acceptance and assimilation of the significance of one's own mortality. Previous research highlights several factors influencing death acceptance, including religion, age, and gender. For example, religious belief is often linked to higher levels of acceptance and reduced death anxiety (Harding et al., 2005). Age also plays a role, with older individuals tending to develop a more neutral acceptance of death, likely due to increased encounters with loss and reflection on mortality (Erikson, 1963; Gesser et al., 1987; Wong et al., 1994). Additionally, studies indicate that women generally report higher death anxiety than men, which may result in lower death acceptance (Russac et al., 2007; Saeed & Bokharey, 2016).

Being at ease with one’s own mortality and emotionally coming to terms with it in a healthy and positive manner is closely linked with narrative engagement in death-positive games. These games portray death in a positive manner, aiming to encourage open discussions about death and challenge negative perceptions of mortality (Ramée, 2020; Stavros, 2021; TalkDeath, 2020). Through narratives that explore death, loss, and acceptance, death-positive games offer the unique opportunity to explore how narrative engagement can encourage reflection on mortality. Narrative engagement, understood as the emotional and cognitive focus on a story, can be shaped directly by specific narrative game mechanics such as character arcs, player choice and quests, and story progression (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013, Calleja, 2009).

These narrative game mechanics contribute to the ways players interact with and interpret the narrative, thereby influencing the depth of their engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Calleja, 2009). These mechanics guide players through the story’s events and dilemmas, facilitating emotional connection and meaning-making, which are essential processes for reflection (Järvelä et al., 2022). For example, choices embedded in narrative mechanics can prompt players to consider the consequences of death and loss, encouraging self-reflection and perspective-taking (Calleja, 2009; Sicart, 2008). This interactive involvement helps deepen narrative presence, allowing players to mentally immerse themselves in the game world and relate the themes to their own experiences (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013).

These kinds of narrative experiences in a death-positive game have the potential to lead to mortality reflection, which is conceptualised in this study as: thinking more deeply about what death means and how it relates to one’s own life and loved ones. This type of engagement

plays an important role in how players connect with the themes of a game, particularly when those themes are about mortality and loss. Narrative engagement has the potential to lead players toward adopting new perspectives (Green & Brok, 2000; Green, 2004). By confronting players with complex themes like mortality, narrative-driven games can prompt meaningful reflection on what death means and how it relates to their own lives.

Games that encourage these reflections often feature eudaimonic elements such as appreciation, meaningful gaming experiences, emotionally moving, challenging and reflective experiences, and social connectedness with in-game characters. When players encounter narratives that are emotionally moving and meaningful, they are prompted to reflect and contemplate their personal values and beliefs. This deep engagement with the narrative fosters a connection with the characters and the moral dilemmas they face, aligning with the concept of narrative presence, in which immersive involvement can blur the boundary between the game world and reality (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). As players emotionally engage with the narrative, they may find themselves reflecting on real-life situations, ultimately reshaping their beliefs towards similar themes presented in the game (Green, 2004; Järvelä et al., 2022). Studies suggest that longer exposure to engaging narratives correlates with stronger impacts on implicit attitudes, reinforcing the idea that eudaimonic experiences can serve as powerful tools for personal growth and transformation (Barab et al., 2010; Kolek et al., 2023). Therefore, when narrative engagement is combined with eudaimonic gaming experiences in a death-positive game, it has the potential to create a space for players to reflect on mortality.

Despite the recognised importance of narrative engagement for reflection, there is limited understanding of how specific narrative game mechanics within death-positive games contribute to mortality reflection during and after gameplay. Investigating these mechanics is essential, as they directly influence players' emotional and cognitive connections to the game's themes. They also facilitate opportunities for meaningful reflection on death and loss. This highlights the need for research addressing how narrative game mechanics support mortality reflection in a death-positive game.

SQ3: In what ways are specific narrative game mechanics connected to players' reflection on death?

2.4 Experiential Learning Theory

The experiential learning theory (ELT) developed by Kolb (1984), conceptualises learning as a process in which knowledge is created through experience. It is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge

results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.14). The ELT is a four-stage learning cycle in which the learner goes through all stages. The four stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2010). In the concrete experience stage, the learner is confronted with a firsthand experience, which is either a new experience or a reinterpretation of an existing experience based on new concepts. The learner often learns through hands-on involvement, e.g., playing a game. This stage is followed by reflective observation, in which the learner reflects on their experience based on their existing knowledge. In the third stage, abstract conceptualisation, the learner’s reflections are translated into theories or concepts to make sense of the experience. Finally, in the active experimentation stage, the newly formed ideas are tested to see how they work in the real-world, which leads to new experiences and restarts the cycle. These stages form a learning process that starts with hands-on experience to reflective analysis, understanding what has been experienced, and application in the real-world.

This learning process, especially the concrete experience followed by the reflective observation phase, provides an opportunity for understanding how players could engage with and reflect on difficult themes like mortality in a game. In a death-positive game that encourages reflection on its themes, these stages help explain how narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences deepen understanding of mortality. Through the lens of Kolb’s ELT players are not just experiencing the narrative but are also processing and reflecting on these in-game experiences. These reflections have the potential to change their perspectives, allowing them to learn from the game’s themes.

Although Kolb’s ELT is not used for data analysis in this thesis, it provides a valuable framework for understanding how narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements in a game could prompt players to reflect on mortality. According to Kolb (1984), learning is a cyclical process that consists of grasping and transforming experiences. In a game focused on existential themes, players engage with the narrative and the eudaimonic elements through both concrete experience and reflective observation. Through concrete experience, players directly interact with the game world. Through reflective observation, players absorb the narrative, the events, and reflect on what these might mean. This could result in them gaining a deeper understanding of mortality. Kolb’s ELT suggests that going through all of these stages, in which players experience, reflect, conceptualise, and act, they can gain meaningful insights into their own understanding of mortality. Therefore, using the ELT’s lens helps frame how a game might prompt reflection through its narrative and eudaimonic elements.

Despite being developed in the 1980s, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) remains relevant today because of its flexibility and applicability across many contexts, including digital media and interactive experiences. Recent studies apply ELT to various game designs, from aligning player types with learning styles (Bontchev et al., 2018) to creating educational board and digital games using ELT (Ho et al., 2022; Liu, 2025) and enhancing ethical awareness through gameplay (Sadeghi et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate ELT's continued value in designing and analysing its role in engaging and reflective digital experiences.

Although ELT has been shown to be a useful framework for understanding how games can encourage reflection and learning, it has not been applied to examine how players connect in-game experiences with personal reflections on mortality. This study seeks to address this gap by examining players' own descriptions of gameplay experiences and how they interpret and relate these experiences to their reflections on mortality themes.

SQ4: In what ways do players relate their experience of the game to their reflections on death?

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore how narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences in a death-positive game contribute to reflections on mortality. The method consists of two primary components: diary entries and post-play interviews. To encourage reflection on mortality participants were asked to fill out a scale measuring death acceptance before and after gameplay. Given the focus on identifying whether participants began to reflect differently on mortality or gained new understandings throughout the study, a longitudinal approach was necessary. A diary study was chosen because its qualitative nature is suitable for capturing participants' experiences over several weeks. The diary study allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, feelings, and attitudes as participants regularly document their reflections in diary entries throughout the duration of the study. To finish the study, participants took part in post-play interviews. The post-play interviews provided an opportunity for participants to elaborate on their diary entries and discuss topics that may not have been addressed before. This offered a richer understanding of their experience with the game and how it contributed to their reflections on mortality. By combining diary entries with post-play interviews, this study aimed to gain a deep understanding of how narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences in a death-positive game contribute to mortality reflection. The data collection methods for this thesis were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente under application number 240415.

3.1 Participants

Fourteen participants were initially recruited for the study, of whom eleven completed it in full. The remaining participants withdrew due to personal reasons or stopped responding during the course of the study. For this study, younger participants were recruited, as they are often recognised for having lower levels of death acceptance (Gesser et al., 1987) and typically are more familiar with games. According to recent statistics from Statista (2024), individuals in younger age groups constitute a significant portion of active gamers. This indicates that they are more inclined to follow through with the game and the study. Out of the eleven participants, two participants identified as non-binary, eight identified as women and one as a man. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the diary study and interview, as well as their interest in this study's topic and the game *Spiritfarer*. Seven out of eleven participants were students at the University of Twente, recruited through the test subject programme of the University of Twente, called SONA. The other participants were recruited through social media and poster distribution.

3.2 Materials and instruments

This study used the game *Spiritfarer*, a diary study, and semi-structured interviews to explore how narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements in *Spiritfarer* prompted participants to reflect on mortality.

3.2.1 *Spiritfarer*

The study was built around the game *Spiritfarer*, chosen for its reflective narrative and death-positive themes. *Spiritfarer* offers a narrative that addresses death in a positive manner, emphasising the natural and inevitable aspect of life while also exploring its emotional impact. In *Spiritfarer*, players assume the role of Stella, who is the spiritfarer entrusted with caring for and guiding spirits on their journey to the everdoor, the gateway allowing spirits to pass on to the afterlife. What makes *Spiritfarer* suitable and engaging is its emphasis on connection and empathy with the spirits. After Stella meets a spirit, they often invite themselves onto her boat, where she tends to their needs, offering comfort, companionship, and assistance on their journey to the afterlife. The game mechanics revolve around managing the ship, which can be expanded and evolved as new spirits come aboard. Players are tasked with completing spirits' requests that serve as an act of care and compassion and help guide spirits towards the afterlife. This includes activities such as growing crops to prepare meals, mining resources, fishing, and expanding houses for the spirits. Players also engage in interactions such as hugging the spirits and listening to their stories, which contribute to the connection between players and spirits (Thunder Lotus Games, n.d).

Furthermore, the depth of the character development makes the game engaging, as the characters are based on genuine human experiences, drawn from real-life encounters with patients, caregivers, and personal reflections of the *Spiritfarer* team on the impact of those who have passed away (Couture, 2023). Each spirit has a unique background and complex emotions. Players forge meaningful relationships with the spirits, uncovering their fears, regrets, and wishes as they journey together. Players spend a lot of time with the spirits, helping them to fulfil a final wish or listening to their heartfelt confessions. This deepens the bond between players and spirits, making the final farewell a significant moment.

While the game mostly follows a scripted narrative, meaning a pre-fixed story, the game also contains elements of alterbiographies (Calleja, 2009). Players can influence the pacing and order of events in *Spiritfarer* by choosing which spirits to help first and how much time they spend on mini-games or tasks. Drawing on the work of de la Hera Conde-Pumpido (2012) and Calleja (2009), the narrative experience in *Spiritfarer* can be understood through four narrative elements: characters, story, space, and the player's interaction with the rules. The characters are

important in creating an emotional bond between player and character. Each spirit has a unique personality, background, and journey, which is intended to encourage players to form a deeper attachment. The story provides structure and meaning to the gameplay experience. As Stella, you help spirits come to terms with their pasts, which in turn confronts you with themes of mortality, loss, and acceptance. The space within the game, particularly the boat and the surrounding world in which you travel, is a setting in which the player experiences the game and forms connections to the spirits. Lastly, the player's interaction with the game's elements shapes the personal experience. Whether the player prioritises tasks, explores new routes, or forms new connections with spirits influences how the story is experienced on a personal level.

3.2.2 Diary study

During a diary study, participants are asked to regularly record their experiences, thoughts, and behaviours in a diary over a period of time. These diaries serve as the primary research tool, stimulating participants to reflect on their experiences and thoughts as every entry requires reflective evaluation. Diary studies are acknowledged for their high credibility and validity as the entries are written by the participants themselves (Bolger et al., 2003; Olorungemi, 2023). This method also allows for capturing rich, longitudinal data in participants' own words, minimising retrospective bias and enabling rich insights into the evolution of experiences over time (Alaszewski, 2006; Conner & Lehman, 2012). A diary study was chosen for this study as it allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' thoughts and experiences while playing the game *Spiritfarer*. The approach is especially useful for exploring complex and personal experiences like narrative engagement, eudaimonic experiences, and reflections on mortality. By capturing participants' thoughts and feelings in the moment, it offers depth and context that might be missed through other approaches (Bolger et al., 2003; Shiffman et al., 2008).

The diary study questions were developed with the stages of the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) in mind, to capture the reflection process. The main focus of the questions, however, was on narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements in *Spiritfarer*, as these are the main constructs of this study. The questions were designed to explore reflection and to understand what drives narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences within *Spiritfarer*. The questions guided participants in describing their experiences with the game and their reflection on its themes. First, participants were asked to describe their concrete experiences with the game, such as recalling what they experienced within the game that week. This helped form a starting point for their reflections. After describing their concrete experiences,

participants were asked to describe and reflect on any emotional response they may have had, considering feelings of empathy and sympathy towards characters, moments of absorption in the story, and how their emotions influenced their experience that week. Then participants answered questions related to abstract conceptualisation, where they could connect any in-game experiences to their personal lives. Moreover, participants were asked if they gained any insights about mortality and death after gameplay. Finally, the diary prompts participants to consider if any of the newly gained insights changed their perspectives or could be translated to behavioural intentions, which aligns with the last stage of the ELT: active experimentation. This structured approach ensured that the diary entries captured both what participants experienced and how they processed and learned from their in-game experiences.

While the diary study questions were primarily developed to explore narrative engagement, eudaimonic experiences, and the reflection process guided by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, they also broadly align with the core dimensions in the ANSA framework, including aesthetics, narrative, sociality, and agency (Klimmt & Possler, 2021). Together, these questions support a comprehensive understanding of players' experiences, as the questions prompt participants to reflect not only on emotional and cognitive responses, but also on how the game's narrative and social interactions contributed to their engagement and reflections.

To help participants initiate reflection on mortality they completed a pre-play reflection exercise based on an adjusted version of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) scale. The DAP-R assesses various aspects related to mortality, including fear of death (FD), death avoidance (DA), and different attitudes towards death, like approach acceptance (AA) and escape acceptance (EA) (Wong et al., 1994; Gesser et al., 1987). For the purposes of this study the scale was adjusted to focus on participants' reflections on mortality, rather than measuring death acceptance directly. The adjusted scale kept statements that encouraged participants to reflect on death as a natural and inevitable part of life, such as "*Death is a natural aspect of life*" and "*Death should be viewed as a natural, undeniable, and unavoidable event*". The adjusted scale consisted of 15 statements, with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The DAP-R dimensions and statements can be found in Appendix 1. After completing the pre-game scale, participants were asked to reflect on their own mortality and the game's themes of death in their diary entries. This approach enriched the obtained data from the scale by providing contextual depth added by the participants themselves. By recording personal reflections and experiences over time, the diary study allowed for a deeper exploration of the participants' reflection on mortality, narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences.

Its longitudinal and reflective nature is especially valuable for capturing evolving thoughts and insights that emerge through repeated personal reflection (Alaszewski, 2006).

The diary entries were supposed to be written within 15 minutes after finishing the required five hours of gameplay per week, as this was favourable for recall accuracy and reliability of the participants' experiences and thoughts (Bolger et al., 2003). They were provided with a guide based on the literature to help articulate their thoughts and experiences effectively. Participants were encouraged to make notes during gameplay on memorable moments or those that contributed to their reflection. This approach was designed to get more in-depth responses and provide a richer understanding of players' narrative engagement, eudaimonic experiences, and reflections on mortality. The diary guide can be found in Appendix 2.

A predetermined schedule was made to check in with participants on a weekly basis. During the weekly check-in participants were asked about their progress and were helped if needed. In case participants were stuck in the game, they were encouraged to visit the *Spiritfarer* wiki, which is an online encyclopaedia that provides information about the game, gameplay mechanics, quests, and the storyline or look up some helpful YouTube videos.

3.2.3 Post-play interviews

After completing the diary, participants took part in an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes to discuss their experiences with the game, their engagement with the narrative, their eudaimonic experiences, and their reflections on mortality. The purpose of the interviews was to give participants the opportunity to elaborate on their personal experience with the game and the topics related to the study. The interviews were semi-structured, providing participants to discuss the game and their experiences, while also following a structured framework to explore the study-related topics in more detail. The interview questions were designed around the core constructs of the study, including narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements. Elements from the ANSA framework (Klimmt & Possler, 2021) are also reflected in the questions. The added value of using semi-structured interviews for this study was that they allowed for an in-depth exploration of the topic. Additionally, for some participants, questions were added based on their diary entries, further enriching the interview. The post-play interview questions can be found in Appendix 3.

Moreover, the semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing questions to be adapted based on the conversation's direction and enabling deeper exploration of responses that required further explanation (Jamshed, 2014). As the game touched upon sensitive topics,

participants were given the opportunity to talk about potential struggles they may have encountered, which was not recorded. The post-diary study interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. All collected data, including the diary entries, the interview recordings and transcriptions, were anonymised to ensure privacy. Names were removed and each participant was assigned an identification number.

3.3 Study procedure

Before data collection started, a pre-test was conducted with individuals not involved in the study. They were asked to evaluate the instructions of the diary study and the guide that would be provided to the participants. The goal of the pre-test was to ensure clarity of the diary study questions, minimise errors, inconsistencies, and uncertainties. The pre-test procedure was conducted in person; recordings were made with the consent of the pre-test participants.

To recruit participants for the diary study, a call was posted on social media and LinkedIn. Interested participants were contacted by email and provided with an informed consent form. Before participation, they were asked to complete a short pre-screening to ensure they were comfortable with the study's themes and did not experience severe death anxiety or distress related to the topic. Once the signed form was sent back, a starting date was agreed upon, and participants received a key for *Spiritfarer*, which was bought by the researcher, and the diary guide.

Participants in this study were asked to play and complete the main story of *Spiritfarer*, which takes approximately 25 hours (IGN, 2020), over five weeks while keeping a diary to record their experiences with the game. Consequently, participants approximately played the game five hours per week. Participants were informed that completing the main storyline was not mandatory, even if they reached the 25-hour mark. They were also free to play more than five hours per week or exceed the total 25 hours to avoid disrupting their natural engagement with the game. Before playing the game, participants were informed about the aim of the study, and the procedures involved in the diary study. In practice, finishing the game within 25 hours proved challenging, just two participants succeeded in finishing the main storyline during the study. Moreover, five participants shared that they intended to keep playing the game after they finished the diary study.

After completing the five-week period, participants took part in a semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences with the game, their engagement with the narrative, any eudaimonic experiences, and their reflections on mortality.

3.4 Data analysis

Both the diary study entries and interview transcript were coded using the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory involves the development of theories or insights directly from the data using different stages of coding (Given, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the initial phase of coding, open coding was used, involving the thorough examination of the interview transcripts. During this phase, descriptive codes were assigned to parts of the transcripts that described specific key concepts or themes. For example, when participants described their thoughts and feelings about death or mortality, these parts were assigned the code “mortality reflection.” This method helped organize similar data into groups while keeping different data separate. After the initial phase of coding, the descriptive codes were examined to find relationships between the different codes and identify any connections or patterns within the data. In the last phase of coding, called selective coding, the codes were refined, and the main ideas and themes were brought together (Given, 2008). This process was repeated until saturation was reached, meaning that no new concepts or themes emerged from the data.

Due to time constraints, intracoder reliability was used. The data was re-coded by the same researcher after an interval to ensure consistency (Given, 2008). During this second round of coding, adjustments were made to certain codes where interpretations had developed or become clearer over time. This iterative process was continued until a stable and saturated coding scheme was achieved. The coding scheme can be found in table 1. A list with all codes used can be found in Appendix 4.

Table 1

Coding Scheme

Question	Theme	Example Codes
SQ1	Appreciation	Art Appreciation
	Meaningful Gaming Experiences	Character Reminds Participant Of Real People In Their Life
	Emotionally Moving and Self-Reflective Experiences	Feeling About Character Interaction
	Social Connectedness	Emotional Involvement
	Eudaimonic Elements	Comment About Gameplay Mechanics
	Mortality	Mortality Reflection
SQ2	Narrative Understanding	Story Comprehension
	Attentional Focus	Storyline Immersion
	Emotional Engagement	Emotional Involvement With Characters
	Narrative Presence	Feeling Present
	Narrative Mechanics	Comment About Gameplay Mechanics
SQ3	Narrative Mechanics	Comment About Gameplay Mechanics
	Mortality	Comment About Death Positivity In Game
SQ4	Experience of the Game	Emotional immersion
	Personal Reflection	Personal Reflection
	Mortality	Perspective Change

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in this study included ensuring informed consent, particularly regarding the sensitive nature of the topic of mortality. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential emotional impacts to facilitate their voluntary participation. Moreover, participants' mental well-being was prioritized by ensuring that participants did not have any underlying mental health concerns related to death. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained to protect participants' personal information shared through the diary entries and interviews, respecting their rights to privacy and anonymity. Lastly, participants were offered support resources addressing the sensitive themes explored in the study, and they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time to prioritise their comfort and agency.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, exploring how participants experienced eudaimonic elements and narrative engagements, and how these experiences contributed to their reflections on mortality. The sections in this chapter correspond to each of the subquestions of the study. The first focuses on eudaimonic experiences, followed by how narrative mechanics contributed to narrative engagement, then a discussion of how narrative game mechanics contributed to mortality reflection, and finally an exploration of how the overall game experience resulted in reflections on mortality. In the following sections, diary entries are cited as DP(participant number), e.g., DP01, and interview quotes as IP(participant number), e.g., IP01.

4.1 Mortality Reflection through Eudaimonic Elements

Participants consistently described *Spiritfarer* as more than just a meaningful or emotional engaging game. Playing *Spiritfarer* and encountering its eudaimonic elements resulted in personal reflection, particularly on mortality. Through its aesthetic style, emotionally resonant character arcs, and the emotional atmosphere generated by small, intimate mechanics, the game made players pause, contemplate, and reflect on the inevitability and complexity of death. These eudaimonic experiences, which were centred on emotional depth, meaning, and personal insights, served not only to make the game more moving, but opened a space for serious thought about mortality, the value of relationships with others, and how we process loss. In this section, the role of eudaimonic elements is explored and how these resulted in deep reflection on mortality throughout the gameplay experience.

4.1.1 Aesthetic and Symbolic Triggers for Mortality Reflection

While many participants commented on the visual and musical style of *Spiritfarer*, their reflections often entailed more than simple admiration. The game's aesthetic design seemed to carry emotional weight, functioning as a symbolic space through which players could process themes of death and loss. DP02 described watching the stars of the departed spirits in the night sky as “*a beautiful expression*” that was “*touching*”. This moment resonated not only because of the visuals but also because it evoked the idea of continuity after death. It suggests that the deceased are not simply gone but continue to exist in a different form within the world. The stars functioned as symbols of memory and presence, reminding players of those who had passed within the game.

This type of symbolic resonance also emerged through the physical traces left behind on the boat after a spirit leaves. DP06 noted that the empty houses of former spirits prompted

reflection, saying, *“It made me reminisce and remember my connection to those characters.”* They also wrote, *“It is also cool keeping all the past spirits’ houses on the boat, as these prompt me to reminisce and remember my connection to those characters. This makes me feel connected to the game world overall and also encourages me to connect with the spirits while they are still on my boat.”* Rather than erasing these spaces, the developers of *Spiritfarer* chose to keep them. This design choice showed how something could still feel present, even after it is gone. The empty spaces quietly reminded players of the characters who had once been there. Navigating a boat that still contained the traces of spirits who had left encouraged players to confront the lingering effects of loss. It echoes the way we live among reminders of those who have passed through objects or spaces that carry emotional weight after a person is gone.

Participants also responded to atmospheric transitions that carried symbolic significance. Visual events like eclipses or meteor showers did not serve a mechanical purpose, yet they marked important emotional thresholds. IP02 described one eclipse as *“stunning,”* saying, *“I just stopped playing for a moment and thought about what it meant. It was one of those pauses where I felt like the game was telling me something, even if it didn’t say it directly.”* These moments invited players to slow down, not through explicit instruction but through mood and pacing, encouraging them to reflect on the emotional weight of the journey. Because *Spiritfarer* did not provide a clear explanation, players could attach their own meanings to these transitions, which made the reflection more personal.

Music played a similarly important role. The music used in *Spiritfarer* added depth to moments of loss or transition. For some, the music created comfort, as DP08 said the music *“added to the experience”* of a spirit’s departure, amplifying the emotional weight of the moment. DP09 highlighted how music played a significant role in *“pulling you in”* during important narrative moments. Together, these aesthetic and symbolic elements such as visual design, ambient music, and the lingering presence of objects worked together to evoke subtle emotional responses. Rather than functioning as background features, they played an active role in supporting how players emotionally engaged with the game’s story. These elements evoked feelings of meaningfulness that encouraged players to reflect on death. Instead of depicting mortality directly, the game approached it through atmosphere, metaphor, and emotional tone.

4.1.2 Character Connection and Reflection on Mortality

Participants were especially likely to reflect on death when they recognised aspects of themselves or their loved ones in the spirits they cared for. These emotional identifications often led to meaningful contemplation of loss, illness, and what it means to say goodbye. Rather than forming surface-level connections, participants often described feeling deeply connected to

certain characters, especially when those characters' personalities, struggles, or backgrounds echoed their own lives. As characters revealed their regrets, vulnerabilities, and memories, players were prompted to think about their own experiences with grief, the passage of time, and the reality of mortality.

DP01, for instance, resonated strongly with Gwen, whose struggles with family expectations and ambition mirrored their own challenges. They explained, "*Gwen's struggle with her family issues and ambition felt close to home. I've been dealing with family expectations and the weight of personal goals, so her story reflected a lot of what I've been feeling lately.*" This sense of relatability was also found in Jackie's story, as DP01 reflected that Jackie's battle with self-loathing helped them appreciate themselves and others more. Through these in-game experiences, DP01 shared that they had learned to "*appreciate me for me and appreciate other people for being themselves and being in my life.*" This illustrates how players' identification with characters could become a means for considering emotional growth and unresolved feelings, particularly in the context of loss and acceptance. This aligns with the concept of relatedness explored by Bopp et al. (2019), where players experienced sympathy toward characters because they recognised shared personal experiences. Many participants highlighted that recognizing these similarities deepened their connection with the characters and made them feel understood.

Similarly, DP06 reflected on how a particular in-game moment triggered self-reflection on their own social anxiety and their tendency to distance themselves from others, even when others were being kind. They explained that the game "*helped me reflect on difficult relationships*" and that they realised such challenges "*are more than likely rooted in peoples' own issues, not my actions.*" These reflections reveal how the game's depiction of emotional struggle invited players to reconsider the nature of interpersonal conflict and how that may shape the way we understand others at the end of life.

Some participants felt especially connected to characters whose stories touched on illness. Summer's and Beverly's journeys were mentioned by DP06, who described how their narratives resonated with personal experiences of illness. DP05 felt a connection to Atul's desire to unite his family, relating this to their own role of keeping their family together. In these cases, the emotional arcs of the characters brought forward reflections on the importance of relational bonds and the legacy people leave behind.

Other characters resonated with participants because they reminded them of people they had lost. Eight out of eleven participants mentioned Alice's storyline as especially impactful, as her struggle with dementia closely resembled experiences with family members who had

suffered from the same condition. DP09 shared, “*She has the dementia, so she doesn’t recognize you, but she has some bright moments where suddenly she does remember something... that also hit really close to home.*” This recognition of cognitive decline and the painful disconnection it brings allowed participants to process past experiences with mortality and ageing. Similarly, DP11 described Alice’s story as “*meaningful*,” because she reminded them of their own grandmother. These reflections suggest that Alice’s story prompted players to revisit memories of caregiving, witnessing decline, and coping with loss, making the emotional experience of the game more personal and resonant.

Atul was another character that stood out for many participants. His cheerful demeanour and positive energy made him feel familiar and emotionally accessible. DP11 noted, “*Atul was quite memorable, because this is how aunts and uncles in my family interact with me as well.*” This familiarity increased the emotional weight of his sudden disappearance. For some, this abrupt ending echoed real-life losses. DP01 reflected, “*It mirrored real-life experiences where people leave unexpectedly, and it made me reflect on how I handle unresolved emotions in the face of loss.*” This illustrates how the game’s narrative choices could provoke not only sadness, but also deeper reflection on the emotional aftermath of death and how people come to terms with unresolved goodbyes.

For others, Summer’s battle with illness evoked difficult personal memories. IP09 described Summer’s speech about the struggle to accept her illness and inevitable end as particularly relatable, noting that it had “*a really big impact*” on them. They explained that this emotional moment paralleled their own experience of losing a close friend during the study: “*I have a friend (24F) who got cancer at the beginning of this year... The parallels to Summer’s story are hard to miss.*” This personal connection made the game feel not only immersive but emotionally significant. Furthermore, it underscores how the game’s narrative design was able to encourage reflection on real-world illness and mortality.

Some participants explicitly reflected on how their personal loss or experience of tragedy deepened their connection to the characters. DP11 stated, “*That made me relate and understand them more, which in turn pulled me into the story more.*” Similarly, DP05 commented, “*The closeness and realness of some characters to people I could relate to in my daily real life really enhance my absorption.*” These reflections suggest that the emotional realism of the characters was crucial in creating the conditions for players to reflect more deeply on mortality.

However, not all characters triggered the same level of emotional engagement. DP10 pointed out that it was hard to connect to some characters, saying, “*It’s difficult when you don’t*

relate to them at all,” and added that emotional connection also depended on “*whether you like them or not.*” Characters that were not liked by participants included Giovanni, Bruce and Mickey, who were described as “*not sympathetic at all*” by DP04. This illustrates that relatability was a key factor in whether a player emotionally engaged with a character and, in turn, whether they experienced meaningful reflection on death and dying. However, even characters that felt unpleasant at first, like Bruce and Mickey, changed positively as players uncovered their motivations and emotional histories, as discussed by DP07 and DP09. DP07 wrote, “*In the end at the everdoor, I started to feel something for Bruce and Mickey when he was explaining why he was acting this way.*” That said, DP06 described that while many spirits could be “*overly self-important or mean,*” being able to understand their emotional pain and inability to respond to kindness helped them to empathize with those characters. These multidimensional personalities of characters made them feel more real, adding emotional weight to the story and strengthening the participant’s bond with the characters.

In summary, emotional connections to characters served as an important mechanism through which participants reflected on mortality. When participants recognised their own experiences in characters’ struggles, they were more likely to engage with the game’s themes in a personal and meaningful way. These reflections went beyond simply responding to the game’s story and were shaped by participants’ own experiences, which added emotional weight to their interactions with the characters. While not all participants related to every character, the moments where personal connections did occur often contributed to deeper thought about loss, relationships, and the fragility of life.

4.1.3 Emotional Farewells and Mortality Reflection

The everdoor, where players accompany spirits in their final moments, stood out as one of the most emotionally impactful events of *Spiritfarer*. These scenes were not just the conclusion of a spirit’s story but functioned as meaningful rituals of farewell. Almost all participants described these departures as moving, particularly because they made the finality of death feel emotionally real. DP04 described these moments as “*devastating*”, adding that “*knowing I would never see them again made it incredibly hard to let go.*” The experience of parting with characters at the everdoor made players reflect on how farewells in the game echoed the emotional difficulty of real-world goodbyes. DP09 supported this by saying “*It felt so real to have to say goodbye... It made me think of people I’ve lost and how I never really had the chance to say goodbye properly.*” Through these experiences, the game created a space for players to confront unresolved emotions around death and reflect on the emotional complexity of saying goodbye. IP04 expressed that seeing the spirit’s come to terms with their

death “*really helped me thinking about it,*” suggesting that the game’s framing of death in a positive manner helps participants reflect on death.

Stanley’s farewell stood out in particular because he is just a child. His departure carried a different kind of emotional weight. DP01 wrote, “*Stanley’s final goodbye was incredibly emotional. He had been such a bright spot in the game and losing him was heartbreaking. I cried when I had to take him to the everdoor.*” Witnessing Stanley’s departure through the everdoor reminded participants of the unfairness of loss at a young age, IP01 said that “*Losing Stanley was unbearable. It felt so unfair, and I wasn’t ready for it.*” These reactions to losing Stanley, align with Eichner’s (2016) argument that child characters in game evoke empathetic feelings, such as sympathy, concern, and a sense of loss similar to that of a parental figure. Stanley’s departure not only elicited grief but also raised questions about the fairness and timing of death, prompting participants to confront emotionally difficult aspects of mortality.

For some participants, the emotional weight of the everdoor was intensified by the game’s structure, which allows players to decide when to bring the spirit that wants to leave to the everdoor, rather than being forced to do so. DP05 shared that they postponed Alice’s departure because they were “*not ready to handle her passing.*” Similarly, they compared the everdoor to real-life funerals and mourning, explaining that “*you are pushing this moment as much as possible, because you know you’ll never see the person again.*” This reflection shows how the game is able to mirror real-life experiences, where the process of preparing to say goodbye can be as emotionally challenging as the moment of saying goodbye.

Some participants highlighted how the emotional significance of farewells was shaped by the personalities of spirits and the bonds formed through interaction. IP06 reflected on the impact of these moments: “*They definitely moved me by dropping off the characters at the everdoor or like, I guess kind of their thinking around when they were ready. And I think the character interactions were a big part of fuelling that emotion.*” DP04 also shared how they felt really sad when Summer left, saying, “*The moment that was emotionally moving was taking Summer to the everdoor ... I had tears in my eyes when she left. I just loved her spirituality.*” These reflections suggest that the process of saying goodbye gained emotional depth through the personalities, timing, and relationships formed with the spirits throughout the game.

Together, these everdoor scenes functioned as emotionally charged moments that invited players to confront loss, grief, and the emotional reality of mortality. The farewell scenes were opportunities for players to reflect on how death is experienced emotionally, both in the game and in real life.

4.2 Narrative Engagement through Narrative Mechanics

Spiritfarer engaged participants not only through its story, but through the way the story is gradually revealed, shaped, and experienced by the participants through the game's narrative mechanics. These mechanics include quests, character interactions, task-based progression, and pacing. This combination draws participants into the narrative world, helping them feel emotionally invested in the journeys of both the spirits and Stella. Although not every participant immediately understood or connected with the story, its gradual unfolding led most of them to deeper engagement with the in-game world and the spirits.

4.2.1 Understanding the Story through Gameplay and Metaphors

Half of the participants experienced confusion with the story of *Spiritfarer*. This confusion was mainly at the beginning of the game, which is caused by the slow reveal of the main character's purpose and the general storyline overall, as explained by DP02, "*The start of the narrative is quite confusing, you're just suddenly the Spiritfarer. It's not clear who you are and why you are this person.*" Additionally, some participants mentioned difficulties in fully grasping the story. Some participants initially found it difficult to connect the game's metaphorical world with their more literal expectations. For example, IP03 expressed confusion about why the spirits still needed food, asking, "*What do you mean? You still want food? You're dead. So why can't you just starve?*" This highlights a moment where symbolic meaning behind feeding spirits, which represents care, was not immediately clear. While most participants gradually came to understand and accept the game's metaphorical language, a few, like IP03, found these elements confusing or at odds with their own assumptions about death. This suggests that the game's narrative mechanics demand a certain openness to interpretation that not all players may have initially. Moreover, IP05 noted that being in a "*gaming mood*" sometimes made it hard to focus on the storyline's meaning and depth, as they sometimes skipped dialogue to progress more quickly, and that they might not have fully absorbed the narrative. This slow narrative reveal resulted in creating barriers to engagement, but as participants continued the unfolding of memories, conversations, and events revealed more of the story. DP07 described how "*seeing Stella's memories and realizing all characters had something to do with her personal life*" helped them make sense of the story and Stella's role within it.

This understanding of the story grew even more through the game's quests and character backstories. These quests are not only goals, but serve as narrative devices, allowing players to learn more about the characters and their personal stories through gameplay. DP06 shared that each time they completed a task, they "*felt very connected with the characters, especially*

through their back stories and emotional responses.” Spiritfarer blends gameplay with narrative, using tasks to support story development and help players understand the characters more deeply.

Participants also highlighted the use of metaphors as a tool for narrative understanding. One notable experience was DP09’s realisation what Summer’s struggle with the ‘dragon’ meant, sharing, *“I finally figured out that Summer’s ‘dragon’ is cancer. It clicked for me when she said something along the lines of ‘I thought it was calming down and I was doing fine, but now there’s a second one.”* This kind of symbolic storytelling helped players think more deeply about the characters’ experiences and made the narrative more engaging.

4.2.2 Engagement and Transportation through Narrative Mechanics

Another factor that played an important role in participants’ engagement with the story was the sense of transportation created by *Spiritfarer’s* mechanics. The game’s slow pace, daily routines, and rhythm-based mini games encouraged players to be present in the moment, allowing them to feel more grounded in the world. DP01 explained that *“the slow-paced mechanics of travel and farming added to the immersion once I accepted them as part of the game’s contemplative rhythm.”* By giving players the opportunity to pause and reflect, the game built a kind of meditative engagement with the narrative.

The repetitive tasks, such as fishing, cooking, gardening, and playing music, required focus. DP02 described how the timing involved in these mini games made them *“feel more present,”* adding, *“I have to wait for the fish to bite, I have to play guitar in time, I have to move the loom at a certain pace.”* These tasks fostered a sense of engagement and responsibility. DP05 reflected that these activities *“really made me into the game because I knew it would be a way to help or relieve the characters.”* These repeated tasks supported a stronger sense of involvement, helping players feel more engaged in the game world and more connected to the characters they cared for. Furthermore, participants often became so engaged that they lost track of time. DP06 recalled playing for three hours without realizing it, and DP02 similarly noted that what felt like a short session ended up being over an hour. This indicates a strong level of engagement where players feel emotionally and mentally absorbed because of the game’s mechanics.

In addition to these gameplay elements, participants described a strong sense of presence that developed through narrative immersion and identification with the protagonist. Many participants linked this feeling to Stella, the main character. DP11 wrote, *“I felt like I was playing Stella this week, even trying to mimic some of her expressions that she did, while interacting with all these new characters and situations.”* This suggests that DP11 felt

personally connected to Stella's role, embodying her position through both actions and emotion. This deep connection helped players feel truly part of the game world.

Character interactions further supported this sense of transportation. DP11 reflected that during dialogue with the spirits, *"I felt like I was actually having these conversations with these spirits."* The tone and structure of these exchanges encouraged emotional presence, making conversations feel real rather than scripted. DP06 similarly felt immersed through encounters with characters like Hades and Susan, who spoke in ways that acknowledged the player's role directly. This helped DP06 feel as though they truly were Stella, stating that *"they were speaking directly to me."* Even when Stella's name was used, DP06 felt addressed personally, noting, *"I still feel present and like the characters are talking to me directly in some capacity."* These reflections demonstrate that the game's dialogue design promotes player immersion by having characters speak to the player's in-game role and presence. This interaction style supports emotional presence, which enhances the overall experience of transportation and facilitates deeper engagement with the game's themes.

The structure of the narrative itself also helped sustain this feeling. DP06 explained that *"the narrative mechanics, with the story being revealed slowly through interactions, helped build this sense of connection and increase my presence in the world."* The gradual storytelling approach allowed players to absorb the story at their own pace and feel involved in its development. DP01 supported this by saying, *"It made the world feel lived-in, and I started caring for the characters' well-being, which grounded me in the game."* These examples show how storytelling and emotional investment worked hand in hand to deepen engagement.

Emotional events in the game further reinforced this presence. DP01 described the impact of Atul's departure, stating, *"I felt very present, especially after Atul left. The emotions I experienced made me feel like I was truly part of this world, dealing with real losses."* This moment highlights how the game's narrative weight could blur the line between fictional and personal experience. In sum, these reflections suggest that *Spiritfarer's* narrative mechanics, character interactions, and task-based gameplay fostered a sense of transportation. This transportation was shaped not only by emotional moments in the story, but also by the player's continued engagement with the game's pacing and rhythm.

4.2.3 Emotional Connections through Narrative Mechanics

Spiritfarer's narrative mechanics also played a crucial role in evoking emotional responses from participants. These responses were often tied to specific character arcs and the way the story unfolded through narrative mechanics. For example, Alice's physical decline was expressed through gameplay, where players were required to assist her more over time. DP01

described how this increased a sense of responsibility “*amplified the emotional weight of her story,*” making Alice’s memory loss feel more emotional and real. DP06 even adjusted their actions to accommodate Alice’s struggle, writing, “*I started walking slower for Alice, not because I had to, but because I wanted to respect her fears.*” DP05 was so affected by the approaching event of her death that they “*stopped playing at some point because I felt I was not ready to handle Alice passing.*” This response illustrates how the game’s narrative can evoke strong emotional reactions that may interrupt or delay a player’s progression.

Moreover, mentioned a lot, was the mechanic to give characters hugs. Hugs specifically helped participants with bonding to the characters, as IP05 said, “*Hugging was quite moving for me because I come from a very non-hugging family. When you hug them and they respond warmly, like Atul saying ‘You’re my favourite little niece,’ it felt personal.*” IP01 reinforced this sentiment: “*Oh, my God, I hugged them so much.*” IP04 mentioned Stanley specifically when giving hugs, saying, “*He doesn’t reject your hugs ... I used to hug him all the time whenever I could, because his story to me was really sad because he’s just a child.*” This illustrates how participants actively chose to hug characters, making their emotional bond with the characters stronger.

However, some participants expressed that having too many spirits on the boat often became overwhelming. DP06 mentioned that they “*felt detached*” at times due to the number of spirits on the boat, and DP09 mentioned that Giovanni’s storyline about infidelity made it difficult to care about him. Similarly, DP01 noted that sometimes “*the game felt more like task management than an emotional journey,*” which made it harder for them to feel involved with the characters. These moments show how the narrative mechanics can both foster and hinder emotional engagement, depending on the player’s personal responses to the characters and situations.

4.3 Mortality Reflection through Narrative Mechanics

While meaningful connections played an important role in how participants reflected on death, the structure and delivery of *Spiritfarer*’s story also contributed to these reflections. The game’s narrative mechanics did not just support the themes of mortality but shaped how players engaged with them. These mechanics contributed to the ways in which players engaged with the idea of dying.

4.3.1 Narrative Pacing and Reflection

Several participants described how the game’s gradual storytelling encouraged reflection. *Spiritfarer* did not present its narrative all at once but unfolded it slowly through

dialogue, memory fragments, and character quests. For some, this slower pacing appeared to support a reflective mindset, although they did not always describe these reflections as being directly about death.

DP01 described how the pacing of the game made them reflect on the small moments and people in their life, saying, *“It made me slow down a bit more... This game... made me reflect more on the small moments in life and appreciate them a lot more and appreciate people in my life more.”* While this reflection does not explicitly mention mortality, it shows that the gradual unfolding of the story led them to think more carefully about life, and the importance of appreciating it while it lasts.

At times, the game’s narrative pacing disrupted the sense of control players had grown used to. The sudden disappearance of Atul stood out as a moment when that control was taken away. DP01 wrote, *“The moment I realised Atul was gone without a goodbye was incredibly meaningful. It made me think about sudden loss in real life and how we don’t always get a chance to say our goodbyes to the people we love.”* Similarly, DP10 described being caught off guard by his absence, sharing that *“Atul suddenly was gone, which got me quite emotional, and I couldn’t really carry on playing the game for a while.”* These responses suggest that by breaking from its established narrative pacing and denying players the chance to prepare for his departure, the game encouraged reflection on the emotional reality of abrupt loss, where closure is not always possible. Within the ANSA framework, agency refers to the player’s ability to shape narrative outcomes through interaction, which is typically maintained through the game’s interactive systems that allow players to influence progression via their own choices and actions (Klimmt & Possler, 2021). This moment, however, disrupts that sense of agency. With the player’s influence temporarily removed, the emotional response may have intensified, highlighting how narrative control can be used to temporarily withhold agency in ways that shift the player’s role from active participant to affected observer.

While not all reflections were directly about death, these responses suggest that the game’s pacing encouraged players to think more deeply about endings, absence, and emotional closure. In contrast, sudden narrative shifts, such as Atul’s disappearance, brought the emotional weight of loss to the surface. These shifts in pacing prompted players to engage with the uncertainty of goodbyes.

4.3.2 Saying Goodbye

Spiritfarer gave players control over when to bring each spirit to the everdoor once the spirit was ready to go. This created a narrative pause where players had to decide whether they were emotionally ready to say goodbye. This mechanic introduced a layer of reflection that

extended beyond simple task completion. The ability to postpone a spirit's departure created space for hesitation. Several participants described this element of control as emotionally impactful. DP06 described one of these departures as "*particularly emotional*", adding that "*I felt connected to the characters who decided to pass through the everdoor; as they were in reflective moods, and this made me reflect on my own life and experiences.*" This illustrates that the timing of farewells in *Spiritfarer* encouraged players to engage with their own thoughts and feelings, guided by the reflective moods of the spirits. Choosing when to say goodbye became a moment for personal reflection, where players could think about their own experiences.

Other participants reflected on how the game's pacing, specifically the ability to space out these goodbyes, allowed them to process what the departures meant. DP06 explained, "*I didn't want to do too many close together because they did get me thinking about death and mortality and quite emotional. Delivering them to the everdoor was definitely a powerful mechanic.*" This highlights how the game's pacing offered a way to reflect and regain emotional balance before moving on to the next goodbye. It suggests that the game's pacing gave players time to sit with each loss and think about what it meant to them personally. Later DP06 also admitted that "*the frequent loss and goodbyes... made me a bit more hesitant to get attached,*" suggesting that the repetition of farewells could lead to emotional caution, which mirrors real life where loss can make people more guarded.

While players had the choice to delay departures, there was still a sense that some things were beyond their control. This balance between choice and inevitability shaped how participants thought about death in the game. As IP07 put it, "*I think that tension between you having control and the character deciding, I think is quite nice for getting you to... contemplate the inevitable nature of death.*" This suggests that moments where the game shifted control away from the player encouraged reflection on how death is not always something we can prepare for. The unpredictability of when a spirit felt ready to go mirrored the reality that loss often happens unexpectedly and not on our terms.

These reflections suggest that players were encouraged to think about death through the way the game handled timing and emotional readiness. The option to wait, to hesitate, or to decide when a farewell felt right encouraged players to reflect on their own emotions and experiences with saying goodbye.

4.3.3 Symbolic Storytelling and Mortality Reflection

Spiritfarer's use of metaphor and indirect storytelling often led participants to reflect on characters' stories and their meanings. Rather than presenting each death explicitly, the game used symbolism and suggestion to convey themes like emotional decline, identity loss, and

memory loss. DP01 wrote, *“I found Alice’s struggle with memory loss very moving, as it felt like a reflection of how we lose parts of ourselves before death.”* This reflection suggests that *Spiritfarer* portrays death not as a single moment, but as a gradual process. DP01’s reflection shows how Alice’s memory loss symbolised the slow fading of identity that can happen before death. Instead of focusing on the finality, the game encouraged players to think about the emotional changes that lead to it.

DP06 described how *“some of the characters wanted to visit an old home or place, and others wanted to see an old friend. This highlighted the importance of history and relationships in the narrative.”* These requests gave weight to the characters’ final actions, encouraging players to think about how people often look back, revisit important places, or reconnect with others when approaching the end of life.

Furthermore, *Spiritfarer* uses symbolic elements that represent illness. Some participants recognised that the dragon Summer is fighting was not just a fantastical creature, but a representation of her cancer. This realisation made participants more attentive to Summer, as DP05 described, *“I think that for example, when Summer needed a temperature control system, I felt like I was in a rush to bring all of the materials to build it because I wanted to solve her issues and felt bad.”* This sense of urgency and emotional investment suggests that the Summer’s illness encouraged players to feel personally responsible for her comfort before her departure, deepening their empathy.

4.4 Game Experience and Mortality Reflection

For many participants, *Spiritfarer* was more than just an emotional story. It became a space for meaningful contemplation about death, grief, and the importance of presence in life. Participants reflected on their own experiences with loss, their personal fears surrounding death, and the value of the present moment. While some of these reflections emerged from specific story arcs or character farewells, others were shaped by the overall design and emotional tone.

4.4.1 Life Appreciation and Being Present

During and after gameplay, participants reflected on several aspects of mortality. They described fear, acceptance, and reflections on the inevitability of death and its emotional impact. DP06 found that their perspective on death, which was more focused on fearing dying, shifted during the study. During the study, Florida suffered because of two hurricanes, and because of the game, DP06 found that they started to think more about *“the hard work and pain involved in recovery or injury by these events than I am scared of the isolated concept of dying,”* which was *“a change from the past, where I was primarily focused on the uncertainty of what comes*

after death.” Later they expanded this reflection by emphasising the importance of the presence, writing, *“I am spending more time thinking about the present moment, and how our lifespans are not certain.”* This suggests that the game offered a way to relate to death not only as a future concern but as something that brings meaning to the present.

DP01 described a similar shift in perspective. Rather than seeing mortality solely as the moment of death, they began to understand it as a gradual process, saying, *“This week, I started to think more about how we lose parts of ourselves before we die. Mortality isn’t just about the end – it’s about the small losses along the way.”* *Spiritfarer* thus encouraged reflection not only on final goodbyes, but also on the gradual changes and small losses that are part of the experience of dying.

4.4.2 Grief, Memory, and the Process of Letting Go

For other participants, experiences with death, whether this was in real-life or with in-game experiences, reinforced the idea that loss is unpredictable. IP01 reflected how being confronted with an unexpected death deepened their understanding of its inevitability, saying, *“That’s going to happen someday, because that’s the only constant in life is that we die eventually.”* Similarly, the sudden disappearance of Atul left a strong impression on most participants, with IP02 reflecting that they had assumed they would have a choice in when to let him go. This let them realise that in reality goodbyes are not within our control. IP07 reinforced this idea pointing out that Atul’s disappearance reinforced the idea that *“life can suddenly stop,”* mirroring real-world experiences where people pass away without warning. DP01 added another layer to this realisation by reflecting that *“death isn’t just a single moment, it’s a process,”* and that the game made them realise that death is not just the physical process of letting go, but also the emotional process of letting go. Playing *Spiritfarer* resulted in deep reflection and meaningful conversations. For some participants, the game made them reflect on how quickly life passes by and how one should appreciate the people in their life while they are still here. As DP01 shared, *“Atul’s sudden departure made me think about how we need to appreciate the people in our lives while they’re here, because we never know when they’ll be gone.”* Additionally, the game made participants reflect on health and being present. As IP10 shared, *“It made me realize how grateful people should be as long as they’re healthy,”* while IP09 reflected on their newfound appreciation of not waiting around to do fun activities with others or alone, saying, *“I do feel like now I more easily do it or reach out to someone and I’m like, oh, shall we do this? Or I just go by myself if there’s something I want to do.”* Similarly, IP08 reflected how the characters’ stories and farewell scenes left a lasting impression, *“It kind of reinforced the idea that I already had, that like, you know, like try to do good deeds or like,*

try to be nice to anyone because it could make a lasting impression on them.” This sentiment was supported by IP08 who emphasized the importance of regularly checking in with others, as characters in the game who felt most supported were those looked after the most often.

4.4.3 Beliefs, Doubts, and the Afterlife

Some reflections even revealed a tension between different philosophical and spiritual understandings of death. Some participants, such as IP05, expressed the belief that death is final and that there is *“no light or anything ... when you die, you die.”* Others found themselves questioning their previously held beliefs. DP08 for instance, reflected that even in the fictional world of *Spiritfarer* which presented a representation of an afterlife, spirits still encountered struggle and hardship, prompting them to think about whether *“heaven is only theoretically ideal.”* IP06 who was raised in a Christian environment reflected how their exposure to different religious beliefs led them to consider that various ideas of the afterlife might coexist. This was reinforced by *Spiritfarer*’s depiction of the afterlife, saying, *“Maybe all these other ideas around going back to universe or reincarnation or whatever kind of all clicked... I just kind of felt that I was able to hold these ideas together more comfortably, which was quite nice.”* These reflections illustrate how *Spiritfarer* did not impose a single vision of what comes after death but instead created the opportunity for players to explore, question, or reaffirm their own beliefs. By presenting multiple perspectives, the game allowed for both certainty and ambiguity to coexist in participants’ interpretations of mortality. *Spiritfarer* also prompted reflection regarding personal struggles and the importance of relationships and being there for each other. DP05 reflected on their own personal struggle with honesty, writing, *“It was very hard for me because personally at the moment in my life I am trying to be more honest, and I run into a similar situation when someone told me that I should not have been honest about my feelings, the narrative really pulled a string into my own life.”* Moreover, IP08 and IP11 reflected on the importance of relationships, where IP08 shared *“The more that you invest in a relationship, the happier and more fulfilling you’ll end up being.”* IP11 was moved by Alice’s relationship with her daughter, which prompted reflection about their own relationships with people in their life. This led to the realization that it is important to express love and care to those that are important to you, recognising that life is too short to hold back this kind of affection. They shared, *“It made me remind me, hey, I have people around me ... Don’t waste time. If you care about someone, tell them, because life is too short.”* Additionally, IP08 shared that the game made them realize that what you say to people matters, saying, *“I think also more of what you say to people or with what intention you say stuff to people. Because then some of the storylines were about, uh oh, I wish my last words to this person weren’t that, or I wish I could have told this*

person this and this. And yeah, I think that was another insight that the game provided me with.” Lastly, some participants reflected on themes such as grief and loss. Gwen’s intention to leave through the everdoor prompted reflection on loss for DP06: *“I felt deep sadness and sympathy for Gwen when she said she was ready to move on through the everdoor. This made it hard to send her through and made me reflect on how sadness and loss when someone dies are mostly about yourself, not the person you are losing.”* This suggests that narrative elements in the game can prompt players to reconsider their emotional responses to loss and think more deeply about the nature of grief.

4.4.4 Emotional Impact and Varying Degrees of Change

Furthermore, many participants highlighted the emotional weight that comes with death. DP11 wrote about the importance of cherishing your loved ones while they are still alive, saying, *“If you care about someone, you should tell them while they are still around.”* They also reflected more broadly on the role of mortality in shaping how people value life, writing that *“people maybe not appreciate happiness and the little things in life if it were longer or endless,”* which highlights how mortality gives life meaning. Similarly, DP10 felt emotional by how Stella, the protagonist of *Spiritfarer*, was unable to say goodbye to Atul, which made them reflect on expressing appreciation to loved ones before it is too late. This sentiment was further reinforced by DP07, who acknowledged that while they were already quite accepting of death, the game strengthened this awareness of how quickly life can be over and people can be gone, saying, *“Anyone can just be gone from one day to the other, so I will keep considering this in my mind in a healthy way.”* They also shared that they *“have always been quite accepting on death, but this game makes it stronger.”* IP04 found reassurance in the way spirits accepted their fate, saying that seeing them go through the everdoor helped them think about their own mortality.

For some participants engaging with different viewpoints on death allowed them to reconsider their own understanding of mortality. DP06, who experienced death anxiety and fear of what comes next, found that their perspective shifted toward a more peaceful acceptance of death, describing it as *“more like a promise of peace than a threat or deadline.”* This shift was not about desiring death but rather about finding comfort in the idea that it might bring relief from life’s anxieties and struggles. Similarly, they acknowledged that seeing various characters come to terms with their own deaths allowed them to slowly process these ideas. IP06 explained that *“Having the characters be different people kind of helped with that processing,”* highlighting that *Spiritfarer*’s portrayal of different perspectives helped them become more open to other death perspectives they initially did not resonate with. IP09 also reflected on this

shift, saying that witnessing different perspectives on death made them “*able to accept it a bit better,*” especially when death was portrayed as a release rather than something tragic. Through these different perspectives and *Spiritfarer’s* narrative participants were able to deepen their personal understanding of what death might mean.

However, it is important to note that not all participants experienced a change in their perspective on mortality. Several participants explicitly stated that their views did not change. DP03 wrote that they “*did not notice a difference in my perspective on mortality,*” while IP08 reflected that the game “*didn’t so much impact how I feel about my own mortality.*” The game, however, does focus more on others’ mortality, such as friends, family, and loved ones. Other participants, like IP10 and IP11 shared that they could not recall specific in-game moments that made them reflect on mortality or that the game already aligned with their views on mortality. DP04 similarly wrote, “*I still hate the thought about death, and I don’t think that will change.*” IP01 stated, “*My perspective on death didn’t really change*” and DP08 shared that they “*haven’t noticed a change in my perspective on mortality.*” While many participants were encouraged to reflect on mortality by *Spiritfarer*, it did not lead to new insights for everyone. Some participants found that the game’s themes resonated with their pre-existing beliefs, or the game did not prompt deeper reflection on death.

During and after gameplay participants were confronted with the fragility of life, loss and the importance of appreciating the present. While some remained anxious about death, others found comfort in viewing death as a transition, whether this is to an afterlife or simply the conclusion to a life lived to the fullest. Regardless of their individual beliefs participants were confronted with *Spiritfarer’s* theme of mortality, which made them reflect on mortality and gave them a deepened understanding of mortality.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study by answering the main research question: “*In what ways do players experience narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements in Spiritfarer, and how do these experiences prompt them to reflect on mortality?*” The results are discussed by connecting them to existing theories and frameworks. Furthermore, this chapter also discusses emergent themes, the theoretical and practical implications of the study, and the study’s limitations and suggestions for future research. Lastly, the contributions of the study are summarised.

5.1 Main findings

5.1.1 Key Findings

This section discusses the key findings for each subquestion, highlighting their connections to existing theories and frameworks.

SQ1: In what ways do players connect eudaimonic game elements to their thoughts about death?

The findings suggest that playing *Spiritfarer* contributed to various forms of eudaimonic engagement, especially around themes of mortality, emotional depth, and personal meaning. The game’s aesthetic style, symbolic visuals, and ambient music created an atmosphere inviting reflection on death and loss. Design features such as the lingering presence of former spirits and natural phenomena like eclipses elicited subtle emotional responses and allowed space for personal interpretation. Moreover, emotional connections to characters played a central role in this reflection. Participants varied in how they related to the game, some identified closely with spirits whose personalities or situations resembled their own, while others connected more with events that reflected personal life experiences. In both cases, the game helped bring up emotions and memories players had not fully explored before, fostering deeper understanding and new personal meaning. However, not all participants felt this deep connection because when characters or stories lacked personal relevance, meaningful engagement was often limited. These connections brought attention to grief, illness, relationships, and acceptance, making mortality feel more immediate and tangible.

Furthermore, the farewell scenes at the everdoor were notable for encouraging confrontation with the emotional finality of death. The player’s ability to choose when to accompany spirits reflected aspects of real-life farewells and mourning. The emotional weight of these moments often stemmed from the bonds formed with spirits throughout gameplay. In conclusion, the findings indicate that *Spiritfarer’s* eudaimonic elements can lead to reflection

on mortality by engaging players emotionally and personally. However, the depth of reflection depends on individual relevance and prior experiences. This suggests that games' potential for facilitating mortality reflection is shaped by how players relate to the content rather than the game alone.

The metaphorical atmosphere of *Spiritfarer*, along with its cosy and gentle aesthetics, plays a central role in shaping the kind of reflection the game fosters. Rather than presenting death in graphic or explicit terms, the game employs symbolic elements that combine with its soft visuals and calm pacing to support emotional engagement. This creates a space in which players can engage with mortality in a way that feels emotionally safe and contemplative. These aesthetic choices show how a game's visual and emotional tone can guide engagement with difficult themes. This perspective aligns with the ANSA framework proposed by Klimmt and Possler (2021), which highlights aesthetics as a key factor in shaping meaningful gameplay experiences. It also reflects Possler and Klimmt's (2023) findings that aesthetic design can trigger both intuitive emotional responses and deeper, reflective processing. While visual elements may initially evoke affective reactions like sadness or awe, they can also invite personal interpretation and emotional insight, leading to memories, meaning-making, or existential reflection. In this way, the aesthetic design of a game is not merely decorative; it actively shapes how players connect to emotional themes like loss and continuity and can support eudaimonic experiences rooted in reflection and emotional resonance.

Participants often described emotionally difficult moments that led them to reflect on their own lives, particularly on loss, caregiving, and personal growth. These findings support earlier research suggesting that emotionally rich and morally layered stories in games can evoke meaningful reactions (Bopp et al., 2016; Cole & Gillies, 2019). Several players found themselves relating to characters whose struggles mirrored their own. They often described how the game's narrative themes made them reflect on personal experiences related to family members, loss, and illness. In these moments, the game prompted players to revisit and reflect on personal memories and emotions. Many of these moments were described as emotionally intense and challenging. This reflects what Bopp et al. (2018), and Denisova et al. (2017) refer to as "emotional challenge", where players confront emotionally charged material or complex characters and narratives. These experiences are not always seen as conventionally enjoyable but are appreciated for contributing to thoughtful reflection and emotional engagement. For example, some participants expressed wanting to delay goodbyes until they felt ready, engaging with the story's emotional complexity. Rather than seeking simple conclusions, participants

seemed to engage with the story in ways that acknowledged emotional complexity. This suggests that eudaimonic engagement can involve holding difficult feelings without resolution.

Several participants described forming attachments to spirits in ways that mirrored real-world relationships. Some felt responsible for characters' wellbeing or experienced a real sense of loss when they departed through the everdoor. These reactions align with research by Bowman et al. (2016), Coanda & Aupers (2020), and Daneels et al. (2020), who emphasise that meaningful interactions with non-playable characters can foster feelings of personal growth, self-discovery, and social connectedness. Daneels et al. (2020) highlight that social connectedness through relationships with in-game characters is a significant form of eudaimonic experience. These findings also align with the narrative layer of the ANSA framework by Klimmt and Possler (2021), which highlights emotional connections with narrative protagonists and non-playable characters as fundamental elements to eudaimonic responses in games. These connections enriched players' reflective experiences during gameplay and often encouraged them to think more deeply about their own emotional relationships.

SQ2: What narrative game mechanics are associated with players' engagement with the story?

Spiritfarer's narrative engagement is supported by several key game mechanics that work together to draw players into the story. The gradual revelation of the narrative through pacing and unfolding character backgrounds encourages players to actively piece together Stella's purpose and the spirits' stories. This slow storytelling requires sustained attention and promotes deeper emotional involvement by allowing players to engage with the story over time. Quest and task-based progression functions both as gameplay goals and narrative devices, enabling players to learn about individual characters' struggles and histories through meaningful activities that connect gameplay directly to the unfolding narrative.

Additional mechanics further support narrative engagement by fostering immersion and emotional connection. Metaphorical symbolism embedded in characters and events invites players to reflect on deeper themes beyond the literal story. Daily routines and rhythm-based mini-games create a contemplative pace that grounds players in the game world, enhancing a sense of presence. Interactive dialogue mechanics allow players to participate in conversations and build relationships with spirits, encouraging perspective-taking and emotional involvement. The ability to hug characters adds a feeling of closeness to bonding, strengthening emotional ties. However, the complexity introduced by multiple character arcs and the slow narrative reveal can challenge some players' ability to follow and connect with all storylines. Overall,

these mechanics collectively contribute to narrative engagement by encouraging active interpretation, emotional investment, and sustained presence in the game's world.

Player experiences revealed how the quest and task-based progression functions both as gameplay objectives and narrative tools. For example, players learned about individual spirits and their struggles by completing tasks that directly related to those characters' personal stories. This integration of gameplay and narrative aligns with Sicart's (2008) and Fabricatore's (2007) idea that game mechanics shape not only player actions but also how players experience and make sense of a story. In *Spiritfarer*, a death-positive game, mechanics such as crafting, cooking, and fulfilling final requests were used to gradually uncover each spirit's personal story and emotional journey. These mechanics invited players to engage with themes of death, memory, and farewell not through cutscenes or dialogue alone, but through repeated intentional gameplay actions. As described in the literature, game mechanics shape the boundaries of player interaction and define how players explore and engage with the story world (Sicart, 2008; Fabricatore, 2007). In this way, *Spiritfarer's* mechanics supported narrative engagement by linking story progression to meaningful tasks grounded in character relationships, encouraging players to stay emotionally and narratively involved throughout the game.

Initially some participants experienced confusion due to the slow pace and gradual reveal of Stella's purpose and the characters' backgrounds. This pacing seems to be a deliberate choice that encourages players to piece together the story through their own active engagement over time. This requires players to stay mentally engaged as they make sense of different parts of the narrative gradually. At the same time, this slower reveal can make it harder for some players to follow the story immediately, which might affect how they connect with the game at the beginning. This aligns with Busselle & Bilandzic's (2009) description of narrative understanding, which involves active cognitive engagement to make sense of the story. While this process can deepen players' overall engagement, the slower unfolding of the narrative may initially challenge some players' emotional connection at the beginning of the game.

The findings show that *Spiritfarer's* narrative engagement comes not only from the story itself but also from how the game's narrative mechanics slowly reveal the story and build relationships with the characters. This gradual way of revealing the story, which happens through gameplay and character interaction, helps pull players deeper into the game world and encourages emotional involvement. This aligns with Busselle & Bilandzic's (2009) idea that engagement arises from both understanding the narrative and connection emotionally with it, facilitated here by the way the story unfolds through character interactions.

SQ3: In what ways are specific narrative game mechanics connected to players' reflection on death?

Certain narrative game mechanics in *Spiritfarer* are closely tied to players' emotional and cognitive engagement with mortality and their reflection on death. The game's storytelling unfolds gradually through dialogue, memories, and quests, creating a slow and reflective pace that many players felt encouraged them to focus on small moments and relationships. Sudden narrative shifts, such as the unexpected disappearance of a character, interrupt players' sense of control and bring attention to the emotional experience of abrupt loss and uncertain goodbyes. These moments often shift the player's role from active participant to affected observer, emphasising themes of endings and absence.

The mechanic that allows players to choose when to say goodbye to spirits at the everdoor introduces pauses that invite emotional readiness and personal thought. Players' ability to hesitate or space out farewells offers moments for processing loss. The tension between player choice and the spirits' readiness reflects the unpredictability of real-life death, where control is limited. Metaphor and symbolic storytelling present death as a gradual process involving identity and memory loss, with emphasis on personal history and relationships. Representations of illness and emotional struggle add layers to emotional complexity, supporting engagement with mortality as an ongoing experience rather than a singular event. Together, these narrative game mechanics create a context for reflection characterized by emotional depth, uncertainty, and personal significance. This suggests that their design, along with metaphorical and symbolic elements, plays a crucial role in shaping how death-related themes are experienced and reflected upon during and after gameplay.

The findings suggest that specific narrative mechanics in *Spiritfarer* play an important role in the way players engage emotionally and cognitively with themes of mortality. These manifest through emotional responses and personal interpretation. This supports the idea that narrative-driven games can foster narrative engagement, which has been shown to influence players' thoughts, emotions, and beliefs (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000).

The slow deliberate pacing of the narrative creates an opportunity for players to absorb emotional content and engage thoughtfully with themes of mortality, such as loss and farewells. By gradually unfolding events and character interactions, the game encourages reflection rather than rushing through the experience. For some, this pacing echoed the gradual process of coming to terms with death, allowing them more time to process emotions thoughtfully. This aligns with findings from Kolek et al. (2023), who argue that longer narrative exposure in games strengthens players' implicit attitudes and allows more time for cognitive and emotional

immersion. In *Spiritfarer*, this slow unfolding of the story appears to be a deliberate narrative strategy, one that invites players into a rhythm of contemplation and emotional engagement, encouraging them to reflect on loss and mortality rather than move quickly past it.

SQ4: In what ways do players relate their experience of the game to their reflections on death?

Players connect their experience of *Spiritfarer* with their reflections on death by engaging with how the game presents mortality and invites meaningful engagement. Players' connection between their experience of *Spiritfarer* and thoughts about death reveals a rich and layered engagement with mortality. Rather than simply presenting a story about dying, the game creates a space for reflection on personal experiences with grief, mortality, and the importance of being present in life. A central theme in participants' reflections was a shift in how they viewed death. Some moved beyond seeing it as a final moment, instead understanding mortality as a process involving gradual loss, emotional letting go, and a heightened awareness of life's fragility. One participant described death as "*losing parts of ourselves before we die*," expressing a more nuanced perspective that moves beyond seeing death as a single event.

The emotional and narrative elements led players to process complex feelings through interactions with characters and storytelling. This allowed players to explore their own beliefs and feelings about death in a personal and philosophical way. While some participants reported a renewed appreciation of life and relationships, such reflections did not always result in clear changes outside the game. Engagement with these themes varied depending on individual background and emotional readiness. How players relate the game to their thoughts on death varies, shaped by their personal background and the emotional meaning they find in the story and characters.

This variation in how players relate their gameplay to reflections on mortality can be understood through the lens of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), highlighting the stages players may move through as they engage emotionally and cognitively with the game's themes. ELT describes learning as a cyclical process starting with concrete experiences, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In the case of *Spiritfarer*, the concrete experience begins with players' direct interactions with the game's story, characters and themes. Mechanics such as caring for characters, guiding spirits through their personal journeys, and saying goodbye are narrative elements that serve as lived experiences within the game. Encounters like the sudden disappearance of Atul offer metaphors for unexpected loss, encouraging players to confront

uncertainty and lack of control often present in real-life farewells. This unpredictability increases the emotional stakes and can prompt deeper reflections on mortality.

In the next stage, reflective observation, players process these experiences by connecting them to their own memories, feelings, and prior understandings of mortality. Several participants reported a shift in how they conceptualise death, seeing it less as a singular event and more as a gradual process involving emotional detachment and loss. The game helped some shift their focus away from anxieties about what follows death, encouraging presence and learning to let go. This reflective observation aligns with Kolb's idea that reflection allows learners to make sense of their experiences and develop new insights (Kolb, 1984). Several participants described this change in focus as a valuable takeaway from their gameplay, reinforcing how interactive digital experiences can contribute to meaningful reflection. During the abstract conceptualisation phase, these reflections develop into broader perspectives on death, grief, and the value of life. Players reconsider spiritual and philosophical beliefs, often engaging with open questions that the game intentionally leaves unresolved. *Spiritfarer's* symbolic and interpretative presentation allows space for personal meaning-making and existential reflection without pushing toward a fixed view. The final stage, active experimentation, may occur beyond the game itself. Some participants described a heightened appreciation for everyday life or renewed desire to prioritise relationships and express affection. However, these reflections were not consistently accompanied by concrete behavioural changes. This highlights both the promise and limits of experiential learning through games. While virtual experiences can prompt meaningful reactions, the translation of insight into real-world actions is neither guaranteed nor uniform.

Kolb's model presents learning as an ongoing cycle, and the findings suggest that for some players, *Spiritfarer* initiates a process of reflection that may continue beyond gameplay. Yet, this continuation is not guaranteed. Some participants described lasting shifts in their appreciation of life or relationships, others experienced more subtle changes, and some did not report any noticeable changes at all. This variation highlights the complex and individual nature of experiential learning, where emotional and cognitive engagement can foster personal growth but does not necessarily lead to immediate or observable behavioural change.

5.2 Emergent Themes

This section presents themes that emerged inductively from the data. These themes include several insights that were not anticipated prior to analysis, highlighting new perspectives uncovered through participants' experiences.

5.2.1 Small Gaming Moments

One unexpected finding was the role of small gameplay moments, such as gardening, cooking, and hugging characters, which fostered engagement and emotional attachment for some participants. These repetitive daily tasks helped strengthen emotional bonds between participants and in-game characters, contributing to meaningful connections and social connectedness. In turn, this made the impact of some characters' farewells even more intense. This finding aligns with Lewis et al.'s (2008) conceptualisation of character attachment, which consists of four dimensions of attachment: identification, control, suspension of disbelief, and responsibility. The small, routine tasks in *Spiritfarer* appear to enhance both identification with the characters and a sense of responsibility for their well-being, which deepened participants' emotional investment. Bopp et al. (2019) describe character attachment as "the sense of liking, connection and closeness a player feels to any in-game character". This character attachment is reflected in how participants interacted with the in-game characters through interactions and care-giving tasks. These findings support previous research suggesting that emotionally engaging relationships with in-game characters, which are built through both narrative and interactions, can lead to eudaimonic gaming experiences (Bowman et al., 2016; Daneels et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Emotional Disconnection

An important emergent theme from the participant responses concerns how certain gameplay elements can disrupt emotional engagement and reflection, despite the game's overall narrative design. Many narrative game mechanics in *Spiritfarer* supported players' reflection on mortality. However, an emergent theme from the data revealed moments when the mechanics were less effective, showing how narrative engagement can be disrupted during gameplay. Some participants reported feeling emotionally detached at times, particularly when the narrative pacing slowed or repetitive tasks distracted from the main story. For these players, *Spiritfarer* occasionally felt more like task management than an emotional or reflective experience. This occurred when multiple quests and spirits accumulated or when players were stuck. According to them, these moments shifted the focus from processing themes of mortality to simply completing objectives.

These findings highlight how emotional disconnection can arise when gameplay demands disrupt the pacing of the narrative. This underscores the importance of carefully balancing gameplay and story elements to support player reflection, particularly in emotionally-driven games like *Spiritfarer*. To better understand this dynamic, the findings can be situated within

established theoretical frameworks that explain how narrative immersion and cognitive overload affect player engagement.

This finding can be understood in relation to narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000), which suggests that deep immersion in a story influences emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. However, the data suggest that such immersion can be disrupted when gameplay causes cognitive overload (Sweller, 2011), shifting players' focus from emotional reflection to task management. As a result, players experienced less emotional involvement and were less likely to reflect on the game's themes, which may cause them to miss the underlying message. While *Spiritfarer's* overall design encourages reflection on mortality, these findings highlight the importance of balancing task quantity and narrative pacing to sustain emotional engagement and allow players to fully process the game's messages. This differs from narrative transportation theory by emphasising that players' engagement depends not only on story content but also on how gameplay delivery affects immersion. In this study, the findings show that even games designed to promote reflection on death can experience moments of narrative disengagement that reduce emotional depth. Therefore, players' ability to engage with complex themes relies on consistent pacing and integration of story and gameplay throughout the experience.

5.2.3 Metaphors and Mortality Reflection

This emergent theme expands on the metaphorical atmosphere and gentle aesthetics discussed earlier. *Spiritfarer's* symbolic elements like the everdoor and the boat invite players to engage in personal interpretation. These metaphors provide points for deeper reflection on mortality and meaning. The atmosphere sets the emotional tone, while the narrative metaphors offer pathways for existential thought and eudaimonic experiences. Together, they show how the game blends mood, symbolism, and reflection to support meaningful engagement with difficult themes.

Although this study focused on narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences, some participants described moments of reflection less connected to story progression or dialogue and more linked to metaphorical elements within the game world. Symbolic elements such as the everdoor, the dragon, and the constellations were often interpreted by players as metaphors for death and departure, illness, and remembrance, inviting personal reflection on these themes. This form of engagement aligns with the analytical approach to aesthetic appreciation described by Leder et al. (2014) and Possler and Klimmt (2023), which suggests that interpreting and making sense of aesthetic qualities can lead to existential reflection. While those models emphasise formal aesthetics like visual or auditory style, the reflections reported

here centred on metaphorical meaning woven into the narrative and environment. Although metaphorical interpretation is not itself a eudaimonic experience, it often accompanied eudaimonic responses, including meaning-making, emotional depth, and existential reflection. These findings show a close connection between metaphorical narrative elements and players' interpretation of aesthetic features. While existing theories provide valuable insights into both narrative engagement and aesthetic appreciation, the specific ways in which narrative metaphors function as aesthetic elements that contribute to reflective meaning-making in games may not yet be fully addressed. This study points to a promising area for future research.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This section discusses the theoretical significance of the study's findings by relating them to relevant existing frameworks. It highlights ways the results support, challenge, or expand current theories to deepen understanding of the topics.

5.3.1 ANSA Framework

The ANSA framework highlights agency as a core component of meaningful player experiences, defining it as the player's ability to influence narrative outcomes through their choices and actions (Klimmt & Possler, 2021). Prior research on poetic gameplay and disorienting dilemmas has explored how intentionally disrupting player agency, such as breaking gameplay expectations or altering interaction possibilities, can foster reflection and eudaimonic experiences (Mitchell, 2016; Chew & Mitchell, 2020; Wong et al., 2021). Building on these ideas, this study provides empirical evidence illustrating how a narrative-driven suspension of agency, exemplified by the sudden disappearance of Atul, elicits strong emotional responses of abrupt loss. This moment highlights a shift in the player's role from active agent to affected observer, emphasising the emotional and narrative mechanisms through which withholding agency can deepen meaningful engagement. By grounding these theoretical concepts in rich qualitative data, the findings nuance the ANSA framework's understanding of agency as a dynamic experience shaped by intentional pacing and narrative design. While aligned with existing studies, this research offers valuable empirical support and elaborates on how temporary loss of control can enrich player reflection and emotional resonance.

5.3.2 Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

As discussed in relation to subquestion four, the structure of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory helps make sense of how players move through different stages of emotional and cognitive engagement while playing *Spiritfarer*. Building on this alignment, the present

section explores how the findings extend and deepen ELT, particularly by emphasising the emotional dimension of learning through digital games.

What these findings add to the existing understandings of ELT is a clearer recognition of the emotional impact as a key component supporting the learning process. The game's themes of grief, impermanence, and love are expressed through emotionally authentic characters. This allows players to engage with complex feelings in a gentle, low-pressure setting. This emotional immersion helps players process difficult emotions at their own pace, preparing them to face similar feelings in real life. Although Kolb (1984) acknowledges the role of emotion within the learning process, he does not identify it as a distinct stage in the learning cycle. The findings of this study suggest that the emotional weight of an experience plays a particularly important role in how learning unfolds through *Spiritfarer*. In the context of this study, emotional engagement appears to support how players absorb and make sense of their experiences. Furthermore, the findings emphasise that individual background and emotional readiness contribute to how players move through the learning cycle, highlighting the personal nature of experiential learning in the context of mortality reflection. This variation suggests that experiential learning is not a uniform process but one that relies heavily on the emotional meaning a player attaches to the experience.

While Kolb's model provides a theoretical foundation, the findings suggest that experiential learning in digital games involves a strong emotional dimension that is not explicitly accounted for in the original model. In particular, the emotional tone of an experience shapes not only initial engagement but also how players reflect and form broader perspectives. Digital games like *Spiritfarer* offer emotionally rich, symbolic environments where players can safely explore difficult topics such as grief and mortality. This suggests that games may be uniquely positioned to facilitate emotionally grounded experiential learning, where personal relevance and emotional readiness influence how the learning process unfolds. In this way, the study extends Kolb's (1984) model by underscoring the importance of emotional engagement and personal relevance in facilitating reflection and personal growth through digital games.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study can be used as a guideline for game developers seeking to design eudaimonic and reflective games. Based on the findings, the following table summarises practical implications for eudaimonic and reflective game design. This guideline can be used as a strategy to create eudaimonic moments in games, resulting in experiences encourage personal growth, reflection, and emotional depth.

Table 2
Practical implications

Key game element	Recommendation	Eudaimonic Purpose	Example (Based on <i>Spiritfarer</i>)
Emotional narrative	Write character-driven stories addressing complex emotional themes relatable to players' personal challenges.	Encourages players to reflect on their own growth through characters' journeys.	Characters' unmet dreams make players reflect on their choices.
Connection to characters	Create characters with rich backgrounds and relatable personalities. Include gameplay mechanics that foster emotional bonds, e.g., hugs.	Builds empathy and promotes reflection on players' personal relationships.	Personal tasks build emotional bonds and self-reflection
Small, meaningful moments	Design simple, routine tasks that build emotional connections and encourage reflection on small actions.	Highlights the importance of small, meaningful actions in life.	Cooking favourite meals prompts reflection on small life actions.
Pacing and task management	Balance action-oriented gameplay with reflective moments, allowing time to process key narrative events.	Supports emotional engagement and strengthens player connection to the story.	Pausing at everdoor scenes helps emotional processing.
Self-reflective mechanisms	Include moments that encourage players to reflect on their beliefs, values, and life experiences through character interactions.	Promotes personal growth by linking players' experiences with those of the characters.	Helping characters find closure prompts closure on the past.
Emotional challenges	Present players with emotional dilemmas and storytelling that challenge their feelings.	Supports emotional growth through decisions and personal reflection.	Goodbyes make players face loss and letting go.
Symbolism	Use symbolic elements to represent emotional or philosophical themes.	Deepens player engagement and fosters thoughtful understanding.	Constellations symbolise those who have passed but remain present.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to consider when interpreting the findings of this study. One important factor is the different ways participants engaged with *Spiritfarer* and how far they progressed through the game. While two participants (P01 and P06) completed the main storyline, others met between five and ten spirits. For example, P02 and P11 reached their sixth spirit while P08 and P10 had only met five. This variation affected the stories and themes each participant experienced, especially since some of the game's most meaningful storylines happen later on. Because of this, not everyone saw the same key events or character arcs, which influenced how deeply they reflected on death and mortality. Although most participants showed a solid understanding of the game's main themes, differences in how far they progressed made direct comparison difficult. Building on this, future research could explore a broader range of games with mortality-related themes, such as loss or grief, to identify which narrative structures, gameplay mechanics, and design choices most effectively foster eudaimonic and reflective experiences. Applying frameworks like Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) could further illuminate how games fulfil players' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to mortality and meaningful reflection. Additionally, while some participants reflected on metaphorical elements tied to death, illness, and remembrance, others did not engage with these symbols. This variation highlights the role of aesthetic and narrative design in supporting meaning-making, as emphasised by the ANSA framework's narrative and aesthetics dimensions (Klimmt & Possler, 2021). Future studies could examine how different metaphorical designs influence reflective engagement across diverse player contexts, deepening understanding of how aesthetic features contribute to eudaimonic experiences.

Another limitation was that motivation and attention varied among participants. Six out of eleven were students who took part in the study in exchange for study credits, which might have affected how genuinely interested they were in the game. One participant mentioned playing during lectures, and another said they often skipped dialogue. These habits could have lessened their engagement with the story and the emotional depth the game offers. Future studies could benefit from recruiting a more diverse participant sample beyond student populations, including individuals from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences. This diversity could provide insights into how personal and cultural differences influence engagement with mortality-related themes in games, as well as the depth and nature of players' reflections.

Furthermore, the diary entries differed in quality. Some participants wrote detailed thoughtful reflections, while others kept their entries brief and less developed. This inconsistency may have limited how much insight some responses provided. Finally, one participant noted they did not fully understand a diary question in week four, despite regular check-ins intended to prevent any confusion. This suggests there might have been other moments when participants misunderstood questions without saying so, which could have affected the clarity or focus of some of their responses. To address these challenges, future research could therefore consider using real-time or immediately post-play data collection methods, such as voice recordings or video reflections, immediately after finishing a gameplay session. This could help participants provide a richer and more accurate reflection of their experience.

5.4 Conclusion

This study examined how players' reflections on mortality are connected to their narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences in *Spiritfarer*. Combining theories with qualitative diary entries and interviews, the research showed that the game encourages reflection on death and loss. Participants experienced emotional engagement with the narrative, especially through the farewell scenes at the everdoor, which often resonated with their own experiences and beliefs. Additionally, many described feelings of eudaimonia during and after gameplay, which deepened their emotional connection to characters. While most appreciated the emotional storytelling and meaningful content, a smaller group experienced changes in their perspectives on death or expressed an intention to change their behaviour. These findings suggest that the narrative engagement and eudaimonic elements of a death-positive game like *Spiritfarer* can foster reflection and personal growth.

This study contributes to meaningful play by demonstrating how a commercial game can serve as a tool for exploring complex themes. It addresses a gap concerning how narrative engagement and eudaimonic experiences combine to facilitate mortality reflection, reinforcing the idea that games can function as more than entertainment.

However, the study faced several limitations. Player progress varied, affecting exposure to themes and reflection. This variation affected the depth and nature of their reflections and make direct comparison across participants difficult. Additionally, motivation and attention levels differed, with some participants engaging less fully due to external factors like multitasking or limited interest. Variability in diary detail also limited data richness. Future research could expand by studying a broader range of games addressing mortality-related

themes such as grief and loss, exploring diverse narrative styles and gameplay mechanics and their contribution to eudaimonic and reflective experiences. Replicating this study within the framework of Self-Determination Theory could offer valuable perspectives on the underlying motivations that drive player engagement. Recruiting more diverse participants would help understand cultural and personal influences on mortality reflection in games. Additionally, examining how players interpret metaphorical and symbolic elements across different games could deepen insight into how these design features foster meaning-making and existential reflection. Finally, real-time or immediate post-play data collection could capture more detailed emotional and cognitive responses.

Overall, while *Spiritfarer* demonstrates potential as a reflective tool through its narrative and eudaimonic design, further research is needed to clarify how game design choices interact with player characteristics to influence mortality reflection.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R)

Table 3

DAP-R statements by Wong et al. (1994).

Statement
1. I believe that I will be in heaven after I die.
2. Death should be viewed as a natural, undeniable, and unavoidable event.
3. Death is an entrance to a place of ultimate satisfaction.
4. I believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world.
5. Death is a natural aspect of life.
6. Death is a union with God and eternal bliss.
7. Death brings a promise of a new and glorious life.
8. I would neither fear death nor welcome it.
9. I look forward to a reunion with my loved ones after I die.
10. Death is simply a part of the process of life.
11. I see death as a passage to an eternal and blessed place.
12. Death offers a wonderful release of the soul.
13. One thing that gives me comfort in facing death is my belief in the afterlife.
14. Death is neither good nor bad.
15. I look forward to life after death.

Note: Continuous colour evaluation scale ranging from: Deep purple – very bad to rich green – very good

Table 4

DAP-R scoring key

Dimension	Items
Neutral Acceptance (5 items)	2, 5, 8, 10, 14
Approach Acceptance (10 items)	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15

Appendix 2. Diary study guide

General questions
1. How many days did you play <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week?
2. Approximately how many hours per day did you play <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week?
Narrative engagement reflection (4 dimensions) & narrative game mechanics
1. Did you enjoy the game this week? If so, what aspects of the game contributed to your experience? Were there specific moments that stood out to you?
2. How well did you comprehend the storyline and themes presented in <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week? Did you find yourself fully grasping the narrative (the story), or were there aspects that you found confusing this week? (dimension: narrative understanding) a. Additionally, how did the game's narrative gameplay mechanics*, such as quests and character interactions, contribute to your understanding of the story this week?
* Narrative gameplay mechanics are ways that a game tells its story through what players do, like making choices, exploring the game's world, doing quests, or interacting with characters.
3. Reflect on your level of focus while playing <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week. Were there moments when you felt completely absorbed in the story, or were there any distractions that pulled you out of the experience this week? (dimension: attentional focus) a. Additionally, how did the game's narrative gameplay mechanics enhance or hinder your absorption in the storyline this week?
4. Reflect on any emotional responses you had while playing <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week. Did you feel empathy or sympathy towards the characters or certain situations? Did your emotions influence your game experience this week? (dimension: emotional engagement) a. Additionally, how did the game's narrative gameplay mechanics, such as the character development, impact your emotional engagement with the story this week?
5. This week, did you feel a sense of being present* in the game's world? Did the game's storytelling help you feel present in this world? (dimension: narrative presence) a. Additionally, how did the game's narrative gameplay mechanics, such as quests, character interactions, crafting, cooking, etc., contribute to your sense of narrative presence within the game's world this week?
* Narrative presence means feeling like you are actually inside the story because you understand it well and can see things from the characters' points of view.
Eudaimonic gaming experiences (appreciation, meaningful gaming experiences, emotionally moving and challenging experiences, self-reflective experiences, social connectedness)
1. Reflect on your gameplay experience with <i>Spiritfarer</i> . What were some memorable moments or challenges you encountered while playing <i>Spiritfarer</i> this week? (appreciation)
2. Can you describe a moment in <i>Spiritfarer</i> that felt particularly meaningful to you this week? What about this moment made it stand out? (appreciation)

3. Did any experiences in <i>Spiritfarer</i> resonate with your personal life this week? How did you relate these in-game experiences to your real-life situations? (meaningful gaming experiences)
4. Can you recall a specific moment in <i>Spiritfarer</i> that was emotionally moving for you this week? What made it moving? (emotionally moving and challenging experiences)
5. While playing <i>Spiritfarer</i> , did you find yourself empathizing with the characters and their struggles this week? How did these affect your understanding of their perspectives? Try to self-reflect how it changed your own perspective. (self-reflective experiences)
6. Reflect on the characters you've interacted with this week. Do you have a favourite character? If yes, who is it and why? (e.g., their story) (social connectedness)
7. How did you feel connected while interacting with the characters and progressing through the game's story this week? (social connectedness)
Impact death acceptance attitudes
1. Take some time to reflect on your own thoughts and feelings about mortality outside of the game. Have you noticed a change in your perspective on mortality this week?
2. Are there any insights or realizations about death acceptance that you've gained from playing the game this week?

Appendix 3. Post-play interview questions

Participation and consent

1. Do you consent to participate in this interview?
2. Do you consent to the recording of audio in this interview?

General questions

1. Did you enjoy the game *Spiritfarer*? Why or why not?
2. What are your thoughts on *Spiritfarer*'s perspective on death?
3. What are your thoughts on the art and music used in the game?
 - a. Did you feel like the art and music helped your engagement with the game?

Narrative engagement questions

1. What did you think of the story of *Spiritfarer*? Did it capture your attention and held your interest?
 - a. If yes: If you think back, what aspects of the game held your attention/interest the most?
2. Can you recall a moment where you could really resonate with the narrative of the game? What moment was that and why?

Death acceptance questions

1. Were there any specific moments while playing that made you reflect on your own mortality or attitudes towards death? If so, please try to describe one of these moments for me.
2. Were there any specific moments you still think about right now?
 - a. Did these moments affect the way you think about death? If so, in what way?

Gameplay mechanics questions

1. Did any parts of the game or interactions with the spirits help you understand death better? If so, please try to explain in what way.
2. Were there any parts of the game that you found difficult or made you think deeply? If so, please try to explain in what way.
3. *Spiritfarer* allows players to decide when to bring characters to the everdoor. How did having control over the timing of these goodbyes influence your emotions?
4. Many of the characters share personal reflections on life and death before they leave. How did these moments of dialogue influence your acceptance of death?
 - a. Did their personal stories shape your own understanding of mortality?
5. Throughout the game, players repeatedly guide spirits to the afterlife. How did this repetition of farewells affect your emotional engagement with the concept of death? Did it become easier or harder to accept as the game progressed?

Eudaimonic gaming experience questions

1. Appreciation: Did any experiences in *Spiritfarer* make you feel a sense of appreciation for life or the people around you? Can you describe these experiences and their impact on you?
2. Meaningful gaming experiences: Did playing *Spiritfarer* provide you with any new insights or understandings about the importance of relationships and farewells? What were they?

3. Emotionally moving and challenging experiences: Were you overall emotionally moved by any moments in *Spiritfarer*, and if so, what aspects of the game contributed to those feelings?
 - a. Can you recall a specific emotionally moving or challenging moment in *Spiritfarer* that you haven't mentioned yet? What made it moving or challenging?
4. Self-reflective experiences: While playing *Spiritfarer*, did you discover anything new about yourself, such as values, beliefs, or emotional responses?
5. Social connectedness: Did you form meaningful connections with in-game characters that haven't been discussed yet? How did these relationships affect your gameplay and your emotional state?

Open reflection on unaddressed thoughts or feelings

- This part is not structured. It's an open discussion.
1. Introductory question: To start our discussion, could you describe your overall experience with *Spiritfarer* and how it has influenced your thoughts and feelings about death and acceptance?
 2. Do you feel like there is anything significant that you feel has not been discussed yet regarding your experience with *Spiritfarer*?
 3. Would you recommend playing *Spiritfarer* as a means of exploring themes about death? Why or why not?

Potential struggles (redacted from interview results)

1. Did you experience any emotional or mental struggles while playing *Spiritfarer*? If yes, do you want to talk about it? Would you like some online recourses?

Appendix 4. List of codes

Appreciation
Art/music appreciation
Avoidance
Being stuck
Character complexity
Character development appreciation
Character engagement
Character reminds participant of real people in their life
Comment about death positivity in game
Comment about gameplay mechanics
Comment about realness of characters
Confusion with story
Distraction - outside factor
Distraction from emotional engagement
Distraction from engagement
Emotional immersion
Emotional involvement with characters
Emotional response
Empathy through character interaction
Feeling about character interaction
Feeling present
Frustration
Gameplay immersion
Mortality reflection
No mortality or death attitudes reflection
No perspective change
Not feeling present
Personal reflection
Perspective change
Real-life fears
Reinforced belief
Relatability with character
Story comprehension
Storyline immersion
Struggle with accepting death
Suspension of disbelief
Tragic event in participant's life

Declaration of academic integrity - M-COM Master Thesis

I herewith declare that my master thesis is the result of my own work and that materials regarding the works of others, contributing to my master thesis, have been correctly cited and/or acknowledged.

I furthermore declare that I have taken notice of the principles and procedures regarding research ethics and academic integrity as presented in the [UT Student Charter](#) and on the [website of the BMS Examination Board](#), or as mentioned otherwise during the course of my studies.

I finally declare that below actions regarding research ethics and academic integrity have been followed through:

1. In the case human test subjects were involved for data collection, I have filed a request for ethical review and my request has been approved by the [BMS Ethics Committee](#)
2. I have safeguarded the transmission of research files and documents, using my personal folder on the secure university network drive (P:\bms\cw\theses) or other means of safe data transmission.
3. I have stored my final master thesis and (raw) research data on my personal university network folder (P:\bms\cw\theses) or made it otherwise digitally available to my supervisors.
4. I have uploaded my draft master thesis, prior to the “green-light” meeting, for a plagiarism / similarity check on the M-COM Master Thesis Canvas website and I have shared the plagiarism / similarity report with my supervisors prior to the “green-light” meeting.
5. In the case AI generated content has been used, an appendix has been added in which I explain where and how AI generated content has been used for my master thesis (see info on [University of Twente website](#)).

Student name and signature:

Student name:

Signature:

Nienke van der Wee


