

# ETEC 544 65B 2023W2: Digital Games and Learning

## Field Note Taking Assignment.

### Session 1: Before Playing | 15-30 minutes

Each of these question aims to get at a general notion, “what expectations (about this game) am I coming in with?” The goal in this reflection is not to test the accuracy of your predictions; rather, the goal is to identify and reflect upon the assumptions and biases you, as an observer, are bringing into the experience, as catalyzed by the games’ promotional material, introductory screen, any other descriptive or suggestive information.

- With this in mind, respond to each of the following questions:
- What will I like / dislike about it?
- What will I find interesting about it/boring or tedious about it?
- What will I need to do in it?
- What will I need to learn within it?
- What will it be like / similar to (other games I have played)?

I anticipate that I will like the rendering of the scenery in the game because it will remind me of a visit to Iceland, and of the highlands of Scotland. I will also enjoy the challenge of the game, though I'm not sure yet what that will involve: the trailer video on Steam doesn't give much away. As for dislike, if the controls are difficult to master or if the game imposes annoying barriers to movement (*Dear Esther* was guilty of this), that will annoy me.

I think encountering the different landscapes in the game will be engaging, as will meeting other game characters. There may be some tediousness in the need to move from place to place.

I don't really know what I will need to do - I imagine I'll need to find clues and solve problems?

I'll need to learn how to control the fox and what movements are possible. I'll need to learn what is expected of me in the game.

I think it might have some similarities with *Dear Esther*, in that the environment is a beautifully rendered north European landscape.

### Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session one, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your expectations prior to playing, and what these expectations are based on. Include one image that catalyzed and/or supported your expectations.

I expect to enjoy the experience of exploring the landscape and wayfinding. I also expect to have to learn the objectives of the game and how to achieve them, as these won't be spelled out specifically.



*The landscape of Spirit of the North*

## Session 2: Solo Playthrough | 45 to 60 minutes

Play the game on your own: familiarize yourself with the controls, mechanics and interface; get an initial understanding of the game's narrative and its aesthetic. Your goal is to "get a feel" for what it is asking from you, in terms of: inputs, emotion, and attention.

Note: If you use outside help at any point, make a note of that. The effort here is not to do anything "correctly", but to diligently record whatever you do as you try to get a 'handle' on the game.

### Descriptive Notes

Just write as you play -- write anything descriptive, records of objectives, hints, fragments of ideas, anything. You may elect to write as you play (i.e. pausing the game) or right after you have completed a play session. Try to get at least 60 minutes of play time.

A snowy scene with a fox running across the screen in the distance. There's the sound of the wind, and also stirring music. There is a strange red mist in the sky that looks like a red milky way. Eventually the fox stops and I get the sense that it's time for the game to begin.

As I move the mouse around (I'm playing using a laptop with keyboard and mouse controls), the camera angle changes. I paused to write these notes and the fox has curled up and gone to sleep! I hit esc and this brings up a menu from which I can see the keyboard controls. I hit 'w' to start moving forward. The fox moves in the direction the camera is pointing, and I control the latter with the mouse. I can use the space bar to jump, which is fun.

The landscape is all white, with rocky mountains on the horizon, but what I assume to be may way is marked by cairns of stone. I head towards and between these. I go and examine one of the cairns, but I can't really interact with it. The pathway leads me to the entrance to an ice tunnel. As I enter the tunnel the wind sound fades, and the music starts up - a quiet piano music that's actually quite pretty. Very soon I come across a seated figure. It looks like a skeleton in ragged robes wearing an amulet around its neck. I can't interact with it, so I move on. The path is blocked by rocks, but to the left another path is available so I follow that.

The paths are made of volcanic black sand that reminds me of the beaches in Iceland. A shaft of light guides me towards an object - some kind of staff, and when I approach it the game tells me (by showing me an icon of a mouse with the left-click button highlighted) ho to pick this up. The fox picks it up in his mouth. I'm guessing, but I think this will somehow allow me to interact with the seated figure? I'll carry it back to him and see... As I get near to the figure a crystal in the staff starts to glow and spark, so I think it's somehow becoming activated and I'm on the right track. The mouse icon appears again - I have to left-click to drop the staff beside the figure. A hooded spirit emerges from the seated figure (his ghost?), thanks me by way of prayer hands, and the rocks that were blocking my path are gone. I also see a set of symbols that look like runes of people, one of which is greyed out - I think this means I have to find and 'release' more of these trapped spirits?

Continuing along the path I come across a sort of mobile with dreamcatchers hanging from a rock. I can't interact with it, so I carry on. Just ahead is a sleeping 'spirit' fox. I approach it. Again I have to left-click to interact. The fox awakens and there's a short animation where it (she?) flies off into a cavern and perches on a rocky ledge. I get the impression that I should follow (this is the 'spirit of the north' that lends the game its name). When I get near to the ledge where she is sitting, the camera briefly pans to her. I don't see the left-click help icon again, but if I left click I bark and she wakes up and carries on leading the way.

I like the way the game is teaching me how things work by letting me play and find out for myself. To get to the high precipice she's on I have to use the jump controls (spacebar) and it takes me a few tries. Again, the game is teaching me its controls as I play. She flies off again. I jump down and follow the way she went. It seems I can swim!

The game world is really big and I am worried about getting lost or disoriented. Eventually I see her perched on a rock ahead. I bark, she moves on. This time the game shows me that I can press shift to run. I run to keep up with her and she leads me to a long ice-slide. These ice slides are fun!. Soon I see another of those mobile things with dreamcatchers. I wonder if these are just to let me know I'm going the right way. A lot more sliding later and I see a ruined stone building. The fox spirit is on top of it. I go to explore At the doorway is another skeletal figure and nearby is an other staff. I go through the 'free the soul' routine and I see I have now released two. It looks like I somehow missed a soul back there somewhere though. I'm not sure if that matters. I bark to get the spirit fox to move on. At the entrance to a cave she sits and barks. I think she's telling me to carry on.

More sliding and swimming and the music takes on a more ominous tone. She has led me to a stone ramp that I go up. It's made of columnar basalt, like Giant's Causeway, which is kinda cool. There's a stone pillar at the top with runic carvings that glow red as I approach. I seem to be sneezing now. And it looks like I died! Did I do something wrong? Apparently not - it's just the end of that chapter. The spirit fox comes and barks a bit and the pillar collapses and we all fall into a void.

I'm alive again and it's Chapter 2. I am limping and moving very slowly though. I follow the spirit fox - I can't run or jump anymore. The music is now quite sad. She barks and panels on the cave walls light up. We pass a statue of a fox. The illuminated panels seem to show the mountains I've just crossed in Chapter 1. Perhaps there will be more and they will map my onward journey? On no! I'm whimpering now. This is almost unbearably sad. We are coming to a shaft of light that illuminates a rough stone circle. I enter the circle and die again - end of chapter 2?

Apparently not yet. My dead fox levitates and becomes part spirit - glowing patches on my fur. I think this game is about my foxes journey to the spirit world - he's dying! I come across a blocked path and this time the game shows me to right-click to unblock it. I'm following a glowing orb thing. And now it's Chapter 3 and my fox seems to be back to normal...

## Analytic Notes

After playing, consider your experience more holistically -- What problems did it present me with?

What options did it give me (to address those problems)? When and how does the game invoke gender, class, race, violence in ways that might be problematic? What about learning? Does anything stand out as a 'defining' or 'unique' feature of the game?

The first problem was figuring out exactly what was expected of me. By trial and error I was able to find the controls and the means for moving the fox. The next problem was determining where I was meant to go. It's a big game world and there are no restrictions on which direction to move in. The game gave me some clues and cues as to where to go - the stone cairns, following the fox etc. The game provided cues when it came to picking up and using resources, by means of graphic instructions that appeared when they were needed.

The game doesn't really invoke gender or race roles, but one characteristic is the blending of various cultural symbols - Nordic and shamanistic along with American Indigenous tropes and symbols (the dream catchers, for example). I'm not sure if First Nations people would recognize or appreciate the way their culture has been amended and appropriated to create the game aesthetic.

I think the music might represent a unique feature of the game - the music changes depending on the situation - minor key music evokes a sense of sadness, the music changes depending on the environment the player is navigating. I don't know if it's unique (not having played enough games), but the way the game 'teaches' the player as the game progresses seems quite unique to me.

## Affective Notes

Playing and analyzing games are subjective activities -- as you played, you were likely: engaged, irritated, startled, sympathetic, angry, bored, etc. Identify the affective responses you had while playing, and do your best to account for the in-game circumstances that gave rise to them (i.e.

where, when, intensity, etc.) Don't worry about being exhaustive, just mention what you think matters.

I was definitely engaged when I came across the seated skeleton figures - it was obvious that I needed to do something, and it was engaging to figure out exactly what I should do. My sympathy was evoked quite dramatically towards the end of chapter 2 when my fox character began whimpering as he limped along. That, coupled with the music, created a very sad atmosphere that was really effective.

The sliding sequences and some of the heights and drops created a sense of vertigo (I'm afraid of heights).

## Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session two, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your experiences of learning this new game, and what specific elements/skills/etc., based on your experience of solo play, to be the most important in getting a 'handle' on the game. Include at least one image that demonstrated this/these crucial game elements/skills/characteristics.

Being allowed to learn how to play the game *as I played it* rather than through following some instructions, was an important element for me. The freedom to roam around and discover resources that I needed to use (e.g. to liberate trapped souls) was also important.





*Following the Spirit and using in-game resources.*

## Session 3: Video observation | 45 to 60 minutes

Watch an online video of your game, either via live-streaming (Twitch.tv) or conventional video (YouTube). Get a sense of how an expert plays that game: see how they understand and react to the game and how that differs from YOUR playthrough; see what it is like to watch the game not just as a viewer, but as a mass media spectator. Again, organize your account into three kinds of notes.

## Descriptive Notes

Document what the player is doing, paying attention to, ignoring, prioritizing, but also what they are talking about (i.e. what they verbally frame as important during the playthrough). Make notes of what the player is paying attention to, prioritizing, and/or ignoring and if and how that is different from your play.

Spirit of the North PC Gameplay Full Playthrough With Commentary. Robert Greenstreet.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jviz8wd\\_d4A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jviz8wd_d4A)

"Very pretty landscape". "How do I sprint. OK so that's how I jump" - he's concerned with learning straightaway how to control the fox. He figures out how to wag the tail. He is frustrated by his speed being limited in the early parts of the game. He's complaining that it takes too long to get to the story, though he understands that they are setting up the ambiance and tone of the game. I was less concerned with the slow start, perhaps because I'm not as experienced in gaming as the player.

Like me, when he encounters the skeleton he tries to interact with it, but he quickly figures out that he needs to go somewhere else - perhaps this is a common element of games, the unwritten but understood 'grammar' that if you can't immediately interact with a resource you can probably find something nearby to help you. "So do I take this over to the skeleton? I guess so." He immediately understood that the body runes represented the number of bodies/spirits he needed to find. "I'm gonna make sure to check every nook and cranny" - that didn't occur to me to do, and that's probably why I missed some of the spirits in my playing of the game. The player didn't figure out how to make the spirit fox continue along - he tried to jump up, when all he needed to do was to bark. When he comes to a blocked path he says "Ok that's gonna open up later, I can tell". He is obviously familiar with common game designs and has expectations of the game that I did not have.

He is again frustrated by being made to move at a relatively slow pace. I didn't mind as it allowed me to look around at the landscape.

He explores side paths and finds things that I missed. He is much more likely to follow paths that the spirit fox doesn't indicate, whereas I was more concerned with following the 'correct' path.

Because he didn't miss any of the bodies he unlocked a reward - a new skin for the fox - I will need to replay to get that! He makes another link that I missed - the red light that lights up the megalith at the end of chapter 1 is the same light that lights up the skeletons as their spirits are released.

The player also notices a difference between blue 'nice' stones and red 'angry' ones - I missed that nuance when I played.

## Analytic Notes

Review your descriptive notes and consider the problems the player encountered and the strategies/ solutions that they enacted. Furthermore, consider how the player navigated/commented on issues/ structures of race, gender, class, and violence. What did you notice about the game when you watched, as opposed to when you played? Hold off on making any big conclusions for now.

The player had expectations of the game that a more experienced gamer would have - he wanted to move fast, he wanted to know what his character needed to do, what the objectives of the game were. He did comment that the spirit fox was supposedly female, but didn't really talk about structures of race or gender in the game (at least not as far as I was able to watch him play). The main difference in watching rather than playing was being able to take a step back and follow the path the player took. When I was playing I had to concentrate on where I was going and where I had been. The game environment made much more sense watching somebody else play than trying to navigate it myself.

## Affective Notes

What affective responses did you observe the player having while playing? What evidence did you have of their affective response/s? What did they choose to focus on? How were they different from responses and focus/foci you had? Pay specific attention to instances where you were surprised by something the player said or did. And if possible, reflect on how affective responses impacted the 'learning' or 'engagement' you think can be recognized and documented from this observed play session.

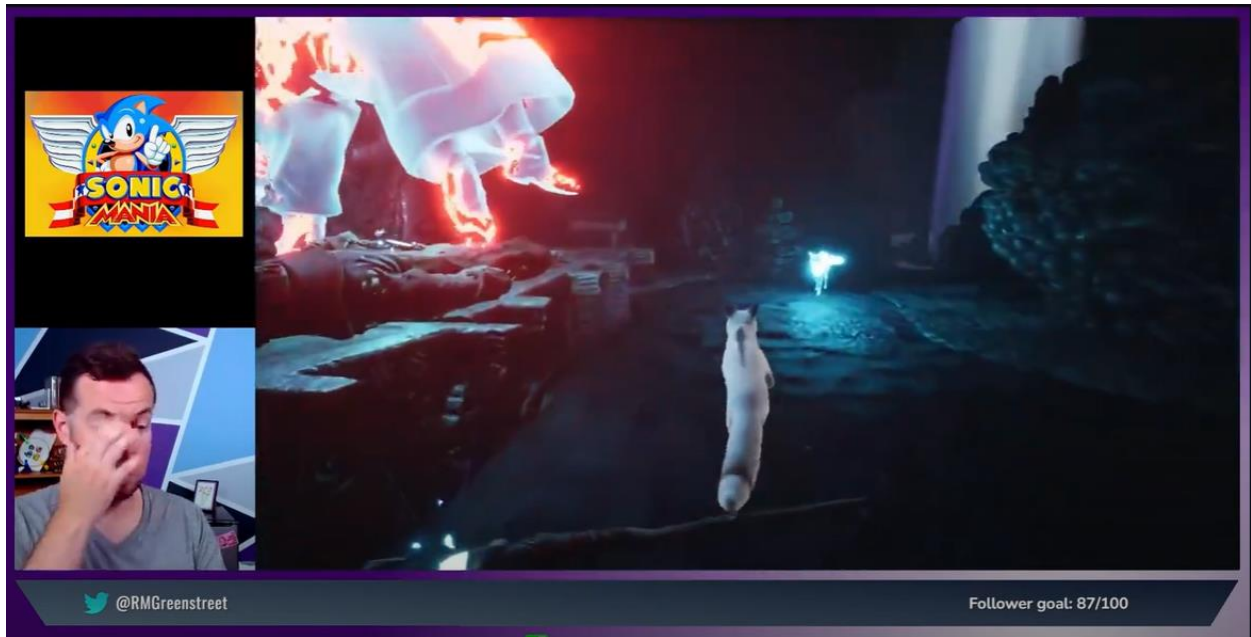
He used adjectives like 'pretty' quite a lot to describe the graphics, landscape etc, suggesting an emotional response to the game environment. He expressed frustration at being made to proceed slowly in the early stages of the game. I shared his appreciation of the game environment but was not frustrated by the initial slow pace. Once he got to grips with the objective (freeing souls) he seemed to be in a hurry to complete the tasks rather than soak in the game atmosphere. He was chatting with people on his livestream as he played, which meant he was less engaged overall. He seemed to be unaffected by the music/ambiance/.

## Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session three, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your observations of a more skilled player playing this game. Include one image that supports your conclusions.

The experienced gamer had an understanding of video game 'grammar' that helped him to predict what was expected of him and how to react in novel situations. On the flip side, being experienced he didn't really stop to enjoy the experience, and seemed to want to move along collecting trophies - I don't think that's the sum total experience of a game like this. (see image of him moving on rather than watching a soul being freed)





Experience player doesn't wait for animation

## Final Bridge

The final "bridge" is to put all that together in an analytical and summative "case study" of the game that should be no more than 1000 words. Make sure you make careful and direct connections to the course readings where possible and relevant.

*Spirit of the North* is fun to **play**. So let's begin by talking about play before we move on to games, which might be defined as one of the ways we play. *Spirit of the North* encapsulates some of the formal characteristics of play as described by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*:

“Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly...It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 13).

*Spirit of the North* also exemplifies two of the four categories of play identified by Roger Caillois (1961), namely *mimicry* (I am not usually a fox) and *ilinx* (vertigo – the dizzying heights, steep drops and speedy sliding sequences along inclined glaciers invoke a very real feeling of vertigo).

If **games** can be thought of as ‘formalized play’ then *Spirit of the North* can stand as an exemplar, containing some of the formal structures that Fullerton (2018) identifies:

- *Premise*: The Steam description for the game states that you take on the role of “an ordinary red fox whose story becomes entwined with the guardian of the Northern Lights, a female spirit fox.”

- *Story*: Again from the Steam description: “The story takes root from various pieces of Nordic folklore. As you journey over the mountains and under red-stained skies, you’ll discover more about your companion and land left in ruin.”

*Spirit of the North* also displays many of the formal elements that Fullerton (2018) has identified as being common to many games:

- *Objectives*: among others, you need to free trapped souls
- *Procedures*: an example being the order of events, collecting staves to waken spirits, using magic plants to become suffused with the necessary energy to activate standing stones.
- *Rules*: There is a correct pathway to follow, and only certain manoeuvres are allowed.
- *Resources*: The game world contains a variety of resources that can be used to amend the environment to your benefit.
- *Boundaries*: There are areas in the world that are not open, and following rules and procedures, as well as using game resources, makes some of these boundaries disappear.
- *Outcome*: Although I have yet to finish the game, I anticipate an outcome, tied to the narrative of the game.

These can be thought of as elements of the game’s ‘grammar’, and as I learned, a more seasoned player has a more innate understanding of the grammar of games, making them more effective players.

In *Rules of Play* (2003) Salen and Zimmerman discuss at length **narratives** and video games. For them, “playing a game means interacting with and within a representational universe, a space of possibility with narrative dimensions.” They go on to pose the questions “What kinds of narrative experiences do games make possible?” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, Chapter 26). Salen and Zimmerman identify two structures of narrative play:

1. “Players can experience a game narrative as a crafted story, interactively told”
2. “Players can engage with narrative as an emergent experience that happens while the game is played.”

(Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, Chapter 26)

*Spirit of the North* has elements of both. A narrative exists prior to the game being played, but this is enhanced and revealed in more detail through playing the game. As Salen and Zimmerman say, “player choice leads to unexpected narrative experiences” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, Chapter 26).

The *Spirit of the North* narrative can be read as an environmental one: the Spirit leads the fox through the ruins of a vanished civilization (is this a warning about our own excess and hubris?). This is what Brian Sutton Smith (quoted in Salen and Zimmerman, 2006) has termed **rhetoric**. By this he means that it is “a persuasive discourse or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adapted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity or worthwhileness of their beliefs.” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2006, Chapter 30). While **ideology** is always implicitly present in a game, it can also be added by design. *Spirit of the North* seems to do this using the landscape and the music as elements to narrate an environmental eulogy.

A possibly more contentious feature of the game is the use and adaptation of disparate cultural traits to create a 'Nordic-like' experience and environment. This is realized through the game aesthetics – the way players are told how many souls they have freed and how many trapped souls remain, the patterns on the megaliths, and the wayfinding structures, which seem to incorporate dream catchers. While I haven't read any discourse on the problematic appropriation of First Nations culture in the game, it remains the case that dream catchers don't belong in austere Nordic landscapes.

The environmental themes in *Spirit of the North* bring to mind what Henry Jenkins has said about gender and games, and the lack of violence and general 'action' in *Spirit of the North* might lead to the conclusion that it belongs to a gendered genre (i.e., it's a girls' game). Initially seeing 'pastoral spaces' as characteristic of 'girl games' Jenkins goes on to discuss the possibility of gender-neutral games. Both "boy games" and "girl games" allow the exploration of physical environments but are really about the interior worlds of feelings and fears". (Jenkins 1998 in Salen and Zimmerman, 2006, p. 357). This captures the experience of playing *Spirit of the North* perfectly.

## References

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