



Whispering Willows REVIEW

The Good:

Poignant story of human foibles spanning centuries and generations; supernatural aspect is well-integrated into the plot; ability to swap between human and spirit forms to solve quests; excellent writing; apt soundtrack; attractive art.

The Bad:

Few and often banal quests with dull, tiresome gameplay; *hours* of avoidable backtracking; some areas are confusing due to repeated use of same art; long stretches where nothing noteworthy happens; no sense of tension or peril.

Our Verdict:

Whispering Willows has an engaging story and superlative production quality, but fails to build on its strengths, eventually becoming an exercise in drudgery due to its insipid quests and irritating game design.



Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — September 22, 2014

The Willows estate, once a luxurious haven for a group of white settlers in the Wild West of newly-colonised America, has jealously guarded its secrets over the centuries even as it crumbled to ruin. The latest is the fate of Elkhorn, the groundskeeper, who has gone missing while tending to the mansion. Shaken by a frightening premonition of his impending doom, Elkhorn's young daughter Elena ventures into the malevolent clutches of the estate in a desperate bid to rescue him, thus setting off a chain of events that literally opens up numerous cupboards and crates full of skeletons, and eventually unearths a dramatic saga of death and destruction from a bygone era.

Whispering Willows, developed by Night Light Interactive, is suitably titled as solving the mystery of Elkhorn's disappearance hinges upon Elena deciphering the whispers and echoes of the past, of those who lived – and died – at the estate. It's a lengthy adventure lush with attractive side-scrolling screens and an intriguing backstory of how the West was won by the ambitious Wortham Willows, but falls short of its potential by failing to capitalize on its supernatural premise. There is no sense of tension to match the spooky atmosphere; the few inventory-based puzzles are too simple and insipid, and the game quickly becomes an exercise in drudgery as Elena is made to trek across the sprawling estate again and again and *again* in search of banal items like knives and rags.

My first run – or more accurately, lazy stroll – through the game took over six hours as Elena moved with all the alacrity of a tween en route to a math exam rather than one trying to save her father from the clutches of evil. Night Light has since released a 'Run Elena!' patch, and now she can run while traversing the estate's grounds (not indoors, though, because her mother wouldn't approve), which eases the frustration somewhat. But the soul-sucking backtracking is still there, and along with the already sparse interactivity, it ensures that this otherwise superlative production ends up being exhausting instead of exhilarating.

The story is divided into four chapters based on Wortham's life. He started as a bright young prospector keen to set up a new phase of his life with his beloved wife, but her death on the fateful trip plunged him into deep depression. He eventually emerged from this low point to rebuild his life, but in the process developed an insane, dangerous obsession that cost the lives of many people, including most of the Elkhorn tribe and his own friends as well. These people now inhabit the mansion as ghosts and are illustrated in gruesome detail showing how they died. There are ghosts with mangled body parts, some with knives sticking out of them or their heads half blown off by musket fire, and even a ghost-dog with a peculiar half-skeleton body. The creepiest creatures of the lot, however, are a bunch of bony white, chittering, spidery *things* that scurry about the mansion unless locked up in cages.

Elena learns the history of the estate from the numerous notes scattered about, written by its erstwhile residents: Wortham, his lover Fleur La Rue (a local dancer with whom he had a clandestine affair), and his longtime friend and aide Darby O'Halloran. The counterpoint to the settlers' stories comes from the notes of Flying Hawk, a shaman of the Elkhorn tribe, who gives his version of the events as the white folk ventured into their territory and set down roots. Clues to Elkhorn's disappearance come from cryptic notes left behind by him, providing insight into his investigation into the mystery of the estate. The notes, collated into a diary along with Elena's own increasingly disturbed observations, provide intimate glimpses into the thoughts and emotions of these people as circumstances unravel, adding shades of grey to an otherwise typical tale of modern, aggressive invaders violently overthrowing a native tribe. The deeply personal motivations that fuel each character's choices, above and beyond the sociopolitical prejudices between communities and people, gives the story a depth that *almost* compensates for the weak gameplay. The supernatural aspect blends well into the story given the mystical background of the Elkhorn tribe, and is used with a rare finesse that does not reduce it to a mere plot device.

The playing world is large, with many nooks and crannies. Elena's quest starts in the catacombs below the estate, then expands to include the massive, three-storey mansion, a guest house, a conservatory of long-dead shrubbery, an observatory with a spectacular telescope, and a garden with a hedge maze. The mansion has several rooms with attached baths, a library, a music room, a multi-level kitchen, a wine cellar, an elevator, several crawlspaces and a basement. Though some locations are strategically opened and sealed off as the game progresses, for the most part you are free to explore as you wish. Presented as a cross-section, the decrepit mansion with its peeling wallpaper, dusty upholstery and ruined furniture looks like a morbidly charming dollhouse. But while the rooms are easy to navigate due to their distinctive designs, nondescript places like the catacombs and the hedge maze quickly become confusing as the same art is repeated for shelves, crates, barrels and statues. The extra wandering trying to get your bearings adds to the backtracking, and by the halfway mark you start to wish desperately for a map that would allow teleportation between at least the key locations.

The game is entirely keyboard-driven and starts with instructions about the simple controls. But in a case of too much of a good thing, the instructions pop up repeatedly throughout the game – for example, every time you encounter a ladder, you are told how to climb it. The basic premise of the story is that the veil between the living and spiritual worlds is very thin at the site of the estate, which is smartly linked to the game's unique mechanism:

using the shamanic powers of a Native Indian amulet – a family heirloom – Elena can switch back and forth between her human and spirit forms. The amulet detects supernatural presences, and in her ethereal form, Elena can interact with the ghosts to gather information and trade favours to further her quest – unless they are the sort that wants to kill her, in which case she has to return quickly to her human form and scoot from the scene. As a spirit, Elena can pass through cracks and holes in walls and ceilings, ‘possess’ items like levers and crates and use them to access places her human body cannot reach, and passively observe past events during flashbacks.

Most of the quests involve doing tasks for the ghosts to relieve them of their miseries. The sequence of quests is linear, which keeps the game on rails despite the freedom to roam around as you wish, and at any time Elena has only a task or two on her agenda. The puzzles are primarily inventory-based and require you to collect everyday items like keys and shovels to do mundane tasks like unlock doors and crates. The real challenge – and easily the most interesting aspect of the gameplay – comes from using both of Elena’s forms in tandem to solve many of these situations, which requires you to pay attention to the surroundings and plan ahead. There are a few timed sequences when Elena is chased by evil creatures, but these require precision of planning rather than button-clicking alacrity. Elena can die, but if she does, she regenerates at the start of the sequence that caused her death. The game saves on its own, and the patched version allows you to reload from multiple checkpoints.

Kitted out in a hooded coat and combat boots, Elena carries the game on her slim shoulders with great dignity and courage of conviction. She possesses the nonchalance of teenagers and takes the ghostly goings-on at the estate in stride as she easily embraces the powers bestowed on her. There are moments when her inner child bursts through, like her consternation at the ancient luggage in the attic or when she declares what her mother would or wouldn’t approve of, but at the same time she is singularly focused on her objective to rescue her father. Over time, the revelations in the notes and the all-pervading aura of grief, loss and evil start to weigh her down, and she yearns to return to the safety of her home. But it is at these junctures that she displays a level of maturity far beyond her years, persevering with her mission despite her every instinct pushing her to abandon it. Revealed mainly through their notes but also during their chats with Elena, the guest cast also have complex, realistic personalities. Darby, a nervous wreck torn between loyalty to Wortham and guilt at his own misdemeanors, and the kind but insecure Fleur are both memorable even in brief roles. Their memories of Wortham highlight the positive aspects of his personality, and endow him with a humanity not often accorded to video game villains.

Whispering Willows is a good-looking game, with neatly drawn characters set against realistic 2D backgrounds. It excels in particular at the interior mansion decoration, with tastefully designed, colour-coordinated rooms that have era-appropriate décor and furniture. Dusty streaks of light disperse the gloom just enough to create an atmosphere of melancholy, and in places drama is added by roaring fires or flickering candles. There are a few slideshow-style cutscenes, but most of the action takes place within the game. Elena walks, crawls, climbs staircases and swaps in and out of her astral projections with impressive fluidity, and her spirit form is elegant, with airy movements and floating hair. There are some interesting in-game flashbacks of significant events from Wortham’s life, including a séance, and a lot of care has been invested in giving the many monochromatic ghosts personalised tics and gestures.

There are no voiced dialogues, but Elena articulates her reactions through a range of gasps and giggles, and is especially proficient with a *mm-mm* and a quick shake of the head when she doesn’t want to do something. Dialogues appear in boxes at the top of the screen, and are clear and instructive despite their brevity, which allows you to progress smoothly without wondering what to do next. Words and speaking styles are chosen carefully for each character to best illustrate their personalities and social status. In fact, a big strength of *Whispering Willows* is its writing, which is crucial since there is a lot of required reading for Elena. The notes describe the characters’ situations and dilemmas in eloquent detail, but at the same time do not wallow in verbosity, thus letting you *feel* each story without getting bogged down in reams of text.

Another plus is the understated soundtrack. The music is soft and spooky, with occasional ghostly whispers and echoes in the labyrinthine spaces. Doors open with chilling squeaks, the wooden flooring creaks and groans, and there are thumps and bumps in abundance, along with the unnerving chittering of the ubiquitous spider-like crawlies. The music gets more fervent during moments of crisis, so you get fair warning when extra caution is warranted.

There is much to appreciate about the production quality of *Whispering Willows* and its poignant story, which walks a tightrope between defining saviours and villains and keeps you engaged from the start of the adventure to the bittersweet end. It delves deep into the history of the colonisation of the United States by white migrants from Europe, but at the same time bases the story on individuals and their personal prejudices and motivations. Unfortunately, the simplistic – often to the point of boring – gameplay, along with poor design that attempts to prolong playing time by inserting *hours* of completely avoidable backtracking, reduces the experience to a grind. There are long intervals where nothing interesting happens, and there is no serious threat to Elena despite the dangerous scenario: there is no sense of peril, nor any scary moments, not even cheap thrills. You have little to do except read the notes, enjoy the scenery, keep the keys pressed while Elena ambles about the estate, and wish the game would end already. And that is extremely disappointing for a game made with obvious care, especially one which starts out with so much outstanding potential.