

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Night in the Woods

**Platform:** Steam, Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One

**Genre:** Adventure

**Release Date:** January 10, 2017

**Developer:** Infinite Fall

**Publisher:** Finji

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Bethany Hockenberry and Scott Benson

## Overview

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*Night in the Woods* is a single-player narrative driven adventure game focused on Mae, a young woman, returning to her parents' home after dropping out of college. Through her lens, players observe the disenfranchisement of the denizens residing in a small mining town inspired by those in the Rust Belt [1]. Through day-to-day interactions, Mae observes the changes to the town both economically and socially since the closure of the coal mine. Each story beat brings her into the woods and further into the mystery surrounding the disappearance of her friend, Casey.

Aside from the overarching plot, the player participates in moments created through voluntary exploration. Each day brings new opportunities to be involved in the lives of other characters, thus affecting their relationship with Mae. These collections of micro stories create custom player experiences that can change with each playthrough.

## Characters

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There is an extensive number of characters in the town of Possum Springs. Each has their own charm and contributes some knowledge of the goings on within the unassuming Pennsylvanian location. These are the characters that make the most impact upon the player and the story.

- **Mae Borowski** – The protagonist and recent college dropout. She's a zoomorphic humanoid black cat with large red eyes and crippling depression. She is the lens through which the town is explored and interacted with. She is the bassist for Gregg's band. As the story is unveiled, the player learns that she suffers from a sort of dissociative mental disorder. This is revealed through a series of

nightmares as well as a confirmation from her in a conversation with Bea during *The End of Everything*.

- **Candy Borowski**– Mae’s Rubenesque, bookish, religious mother. The stress of life slowly gets to her over after Mae returns home. She has concerns about the financial state of the family and the possible pending loss of their house.
- **Mr. Borowski** – Mae’s father, a former glass factory worker, miner, and current deli worker. It’s insinuated that he is a former abusive alcoholic that was a danger to his family.
- **Gregg Lee** – One of Mae’s friends, a hyper fox with an anarchist view and a penchant for committing crimes. He works for the Snack Falcon and is the guitarist for his band.
- **Bea Santello** – Mae’s ex-best friend, a somber crocodile who is forced to take over her parents’ hardware store. She has a troubled home life with her single father. Both are still emotionally dealing with her mother’s untimely passing due to cancer during Bea’s senior year of high school.
- **Angus Delaney** – Gregg’s quiet, nerdy boyfriend that works at the local video rental store. As a brown bear, he takes the rank of tallest of the group, yet is the least intimidating. He is intelligent and reserved, save for when his friends get hurt. He seems to have family issues of his own that are revealed through small hints. His father and Mae’s father previously worked and drank together.
- **Jeremy “Germ Warfare” Warton** – A friend to Gregg and Mae. A dark teal bird that is the only audience to Gregg’s band practice. He has a dark past with a brother who died and an initial reluctance to allow people into his home space. He has a strong affinity to his grandmother and values what she has to say very highly. He romanticizes the reclamation of the large parking lot at the end of town and rides his bicycle due to his environmental sensibilities.
- **Mr. Chazokov** – Mae’s former high school astrology teacher. He’s a robust, teal bear with an infectious laugh and a fascination with dusk stars. The player can join him upon his roof and find constellations. The lore that accompanies their discovery revolves around ideas of industrialization and the obsolescence of labor sectors.

## Breakdown

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The narrative of *Night in the Woods* focuses on the meandering changes of life within a town in the Rust Belt through the lens of a resident who is also an outsider. Mae, the hooligan protagonist of this game, provides a lens of change and romantic history of Possum Springs as she returns and reacquaints herself and the player with what it means to live there. Through the narrative exploration involving platforming and interaction with the environment, the player discovers the whimsical melancholic tone of the town. Even in the introduction, there is a powerful sense of abandonment as the player takes a lonely trek through the woods. They pass by factory ruins, climb upon refuse from a defunct sawmill, and jump high up the disused boat shaped playground equipment that is atop the land the sawmill once stood. The player is not just being fed story through Mae’s

dialogue, but also through the environmental narrative told by rust, trash, and silhouettes in the dark.

The portrait of the Rust Belt experience is illustrated through the contrast of characters within the game. Though Mae is the main lens that the player experiences the story through, there are also others of various generations and backgrounds. Most of them are the disenfranchised remnants of blue-collar workers that are put through continuous cycles of employment and unemployment. There are those that are in the older adult demographic of Gen X or the Boomers that have the distinct air of being trapped. The most notable is Mae's father, a man who has worked in most of the back-breaking industry jobs in the town only to end up as a deli worker at the Ham Panther. He alludes to the fact that this job doesn't earn him enough money to support himself or his family. His glory days are represented by the murals illustrating the miners and their contributions to society that have now been forgotten by a majority and are vandalized by the town youths. There are also those that return, but only to visit. The "smart" ones with prestigious careers and educations that allowed them to escape the town. The player can meet a student attorney or reunite with Mae's ex-boyfriend who is also only there in transit. They have no attachment to this space. They are gone, just like the businesses that have been empty since Mae arrived. Then, there are characters like Mae, her friends, and other young people that are in between being stuck and being free to move on. Each goes through their own journey of betterment that allows them to remain in the town for the time being but aspire to something greater. Bea wishes to go to college, Gregg wants to move out, and Mae wants to break free of her mental illness. They relate to the closing of the restaurant, Pastabilities with the taco shop opening in its place. Each of them is mutable and capable of moving forward in their lives in the town, rather than staying in the past or entirely living in the future. These are the characters that live and develop in the moment, just as Possum Springs does for the player on a day-to-day basis.

Through the lens of subtle change, the player can pick up on each new arc of the story. Moments in time like the change in Mae's mother's expression at the breakfast table, or the movement of one of the minor characters from job to job creates the sense of a living narrative that unfolds for the player on a cyclical basis between day and night. Even the support characters subtly change throughout the process of the player making the choice to spend time with them. Bea reveals that her home life has been progressively more difficult with her single father that is unsupportive of her wishes in life. Gregg shows his sense of underlying maturity in the face of his superficial bad boy image. Festive decorations are slowly put up in preparation for the town's fall festival. And even in the background, silhouetted figures provide silent progression to the story.

One of the major turning points that was led up to through Mae's strange dreams is the kidnapping of the boy at Harfest and the introduction the mystery of why. The musicians and the aggressive silhouetted animals all hint toward the existence and purpose of the cult within the town. As Mae awakes the musicians and runs over parts of the town or imagery of industrialization, such as the train carrying the town, she reveals a song. That song and the lanterns awakening the town represent the revitalization of Possum Springs and the return to the glory days of a hard labor industry. This is the cult's aim through the

sacrifice of those that they deem to not be contributing to society. All the sedentary silhouettes of people in the town that remain faceless seem to represent those that were sacrificed to the cult's god at the bottom of the hole. They are people that are disposable while those like Mae and her friends are worthy, in their eyes, of picking up the mantle of town protectors. At the end of each of the dreams leading up to the kidnapping, there is always a large animal silhouette that bears down upon Mae, as if to consume her. These images seem to correspond with the relationships with her friends and the manifestation of Mae's mental disorder and how it is consuming her. At the end of each dream, Mae dissolves into shapes. This is how she describes her mental disorder, which is at the center of why she dropped out of college and returned to Possum Springs. This is the only place she feels safe and normal at, while in college she was trapped by her deteriorating psyche. Through the solving of the mystery through both investigation and the exploration of her dreams, Mae comes to terms with this. She wishes to live and continue to better herself. She discovers a desire for her own freedom.

## **Strongest Element**

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One of the strongest narrative elements is the environmental storytelling of Possum Springs. Throughout the time that the player spends in the town, there are subtle changes that are brought up by Mae, or only found through elective discovery because of player exploration. It is revealed through dialogue that there are stores that have closed, such as the Food Donkey, but the player doesn't know that it had been open since 1972. This creates a sense of loss for the town because of the current job disparity. Something that had such longevity fell to a disastrous economy.

Soon after the player begins to experience the town, another establishment closes before their eyes, Pastabilities. The previous night, Mae goes out with her friends to the diner, but she complains that she'd rather go to Pastabilities for their pizza. The following day, the doors to Pastabilities are posted with a sign indicating that it is permanently closed. The player didn't even get to participate in the enjoyment of that restaurant before the opportunity is seized from them. This moment creates a sense of loss for the player when, in previous days, that restaurant was still there.

There are other stores that are closed from the start of the game, leaving the streets of the town feeling vacant. This is a contrast to the vibrant foot traffic that the player sees within the space. There are cars and pedestrians that frequently pass Mae by in the town, indicating that there is a thriving culture. That there is hope for this town to pick up and move on from the past.

The grandest gesture of hope comes from a combination of two events in the town. One that the player can participate in, the feeding of the baby rats that reside in a defunct parade balloon, and the opening of a new store. Hope blossoms as the three small rats, through feeding and nurturing from the player, becomes a massive horde of rats that appropriate and reclaim the space that the old Food Donkey occupies. Soon after, a taco restaurant finds a home within the old Pastabilities building and collects a character that seems to be constantly floating between jobs. Both events illustrate how Possum Springs, and, by extension, Mae can move on from their past and continue onto their futures.

## Unsuccessful Element

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While the narrative is effective, there are moments that feel like the writing funnels conflicts in a single direction, in an obvious way. A noticeable example of this is during a fight with Bea. As the conflict shifts toward a breaking point, there are retorts where each option seems like a redundant rewording of the other answer. It makes previous choices feel like there is less player agency.

## Highlight

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The most striking moment within *Night in the Woods* isn't a moment of levity, or one of humor. It's one of the most real moments and highlights the financial strain of families trapped in the lower middle class. The infamous, heart wrenching fight between Mae and her mother.

Every morning since Mae's arrival back home, she interacts with her mother. Candy starts off being gentle and supportive, but as time passes, the player finds that Mae's mother becomes melancholier, and the stress of life wipes the superficial smile from her face. Each day comes with a new press for why Mae dropped out from college in her sophomore year. Each encounter is more insistent than the last. The bitterness and disappointment come through with pointed comments, each brushed off with nonchalant responses until what is truly wrong comes to the surface.

The conversation starts out abnormally, this time it is Mae that must press. It is Candy that doesn't want to answer for what is wrong in her life. She doesn't want to engage. The roles have been flipped. The mother fires back, asking the usual question of "...do you feel like talking about school yet?" No answer that Mae gives will heal that wound. Even if it is an honest, "I just felt like it wasn't where I should be," where, though vague, is also close to the truth of the matter. All the issues begin to explode to the surface. The broken expectations of educational success that could have delivered Mae out of the Rust Belt existence. The legal trouble that Mae got into and had to be bailed out from. The massive debt that her parents undertook to give her a better life that may claim their house. Mae dropping out from college made all their efforts and financial struggles for nothing. And then it ends, not with a screaming match, but with profound, empty silence.

This is the moment where the magic ends. That gentle illusion of a supportive, perfect family abruptly stops, though the little clues were there that point toward the contrary to begin with. The fact that both forgot the day that Mae was supposed to come home. How her parents are never in the same room. They don't even seem to be in the house at the same time. They work on opposite ends of town and rarely even talk about each other. All of those things that don't slap the audience in the face, but rather make them stop and think about how the family dynamic works. This is a turning point where that home life reveals the deeper cracks of how broken things become beneath the surface when families don't communicate candidly.

This is a moment of pause and reflection of Mae's and the player's day to day actions. What they do with their lives each day doesn't just affect them, but those around them in

ways that are unintended, but still harmful. The burden of potential being placed on Mae's shoulders may not have been something she wanted, but if she didn't communicate her intentions and troubles earlier, then there's no way for her parents to know or understand what to do about it. The struggles are parallel and equal. No one is in the right, but there are many wrong things that could have been made right with a little more consideration and a lot more communication.

## Critical Reception

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Publisher: PC Gamer

Reviewer: Andy Kelly

Score: 82/100

Andy Kelly's overall response to *Night in the Woods* was positive. They acknowledge that the game deals with heavy topics with reverence, but not without a sense of humor. That despite the stylized and cartoony presentation of the world and characters, their issues are real and relatable. As this reviewer puts it, *Night in the Woods* "Captures nuances of modern life...with genuine heart,"[2] The low points for this reviewer mainly focus on the length of the dream sequences and the load times. These seem minor compared to their praises that they give to the characterization of Mae and her companions and the detailed snapshot of everyday life.

Publisher: IGN

Reviewer: Chloi Rad

Score: 8.7/10

Chloi Rad's response was also positive overall. They delve more into how the gameplay connects well with the narrative of the protagonist, Mae, being an explorative delinquent. Miniature games within the game itself give players their own narrative rewards for participating in that exploration. They found that the dialogue was "...both entertaining and endearing".[3] The highlights of the interactions come from the history that players get to choose for themselves through the dialogue trees. Moments like this allowed the reviewer to feel like they are an active part of the retelling of memories for Mae. These characterizing moments help to shape the game as being relatable. The diversity in choices in who to rekindle relationships with and who to forge new ones with allows for the opportunity to replay with different results in a satisfying way. They felt that the tone of the interactions didn't feel "...forced or unnatural..."[3], thus keeping them invested into the story even after their initial completion.

## Lessons

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- Creating an authentic representation of real-world experiences involves not just the understanding of the narrative, but the awareness of the history and current socioeconomic systems that thrive within it.
- An immersive world is built on moments and micro interactions, as much as it is with major story beats and overarching plot. Allowing the player to interact with

- the world on a small scale, especially in titles with extensive reuse of environments, creates variation and investment into the space.
- The illusion of choice, when used improperly, can leave a player feeling as if they have no agency within the game space.

## Summation

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*Night in the Woods* is a brilliant piece of storytelling that has so much to unpack. There are many micro stories within this adventure that have been explored and many more that have yet to be written about. There is something in the writing that can speak not only to Millennial and Zoomer generations, but to the Boomer and Gen X demographics as well. The struggles of being in a stagnating economy. Lending companies that take advantage of the disenfranchised. The contrasting hope and despair that comes from ingrained religious presences. Modern romanticism of bygone eras in history. The unwillingness to embrace change or societal advancements. Daily struggles of homelessness and the societal alienation that comes with it. The lack of understanding of mental illness and how to deal with it both on an individual as well as societal level. None of these have clear, clean answers, but rather an understanding of the fact that everything is continuously progressing forward. That is the true relatability of *Night in the Woods*.

## Sources

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[1] Wong, Kevin. "Night In The Woods Is An Affecting Portrait of A Rust Belt Community." *Vice*. N.p., 7 Mar. 2017. Web. 19 Jan. 2020.

[2] Andy Kelly, 2017-02-28T10:18:21.58Z. "Night in the Woods Review." *Pcgamer*, 28 Feb. 2017, [www.pcgamer.com/night-in-the-woods-review/](http://www.pcgamer.com/night-in-the-woods-review/).

[3] Rad, Chloi. "Night in the Woods Review." *IGN*, IGN, 8 Feb. 2018, [www.ign.com/articles/2017/02/25/night-in-the-woods-review](http://www.ign.com/articles/2017/02/25/night-in-the-woods-review).