

# Game Narrative Review

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**December 2019**

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**Game Title:** Where the Water Tastes Like Wine

**Platform:** PC, Playstation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch

**Genre:** Interactive Fiction

**Release Date:** February 28, 2018

**Developer:** Dim Bulb Games, Serenity Forge

**Publisher:** Good Shepherd Entertainment

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Johnnemann Nordhagen

## Overview

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The fire crackles and hisses as you approach, accompanied by the sound of gentle guitar. A shadowy figure sits on the other side, and their bright eyes rise to meet yours as you draw closer. You wait for a moment, silently asking for permission. They gesture with a calloused and grimy hand, then crack a bittersweet smile. A smile that holds the happiness and sorrow of a whole era, a whole country.

“So, traveler,” they ask in a gravelly voice. “Got any good stories?” You swap tales long into the night. There’s joy in them, but plenty of suffering, too, and the truest tales are the ones that are the least glamorous. You’ve both been traveling for what seems like an eternity over this land. It’s a land that’s a paradise for some and a prison for others, a land of opportunity and a land where dreams go to die. Each story woven is more spectacular and outlandish than the last, painting a brilliant, shining lie that you and your companion cling onto like a lifeline, still painfully aware of the dark and battered truth beneath. At some point, you know you’ll drift off into slumber. When the morning breaks, the fire will be stamped out, and your companion will be gone. You’re not upset--you’re both wanderers, after all, and the only way to survive in this land, a land that will chew you up and spit you out given the chance, is to keep moving. Yet, the travel and hardships are worth it just for moments like these, moments where you can share your tales with someone who understands, and for a brief period of time, fool yourself into believing there is somewhere out there where the water tastes like the sweetest wine.

*Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* is a rambling exploration of Americana, stripping away the glitz and glamor to reveal what's truly at this country's roots. The above paragraphs detail a typical encounter in the game, the kind you find dozens of throughout the game's 20 hour playtime. Your task is to cross the land, find stories, tell them, and somehow find the truth of this land that's ours, for better, or for worse. The player must become a master of listening, understanding, and storytelling, wandering the United States of America to discover what makes a story great, worth telling, and worth hearing.

## Characters

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In order to share and learn stories, the player must have people to share them with. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* boasts a diverse ensemble cast, all from different periods of American history, with their own stories to tell. I won't spend too long discussing each one, because who they are as individuals, while interesting, isn't particularly important. What's more important is how all of their stories come together to form a bigger picture.

- The Traveler
  - The player character. After losing a poker game to the Dire Wolf, they've been stripped of their flesh and skin and tasked to wander the land to collect and trade stories as a skeleton. The Traveler's personality is not expressed directly, but is instead hinted at through the quips and comments woven into the narration of the stories they experience. From the narration, we can gather that the traveler is a kind, patient drifter with a sense of humor, willing to take things as they come.
- The Dire Wolf
  - The Dire Wolf is a seemingly magical entity who's good at poker. He's obsessed with stories and cards (both playing cards and tarot cards), and he's the one who sets the Traveler on their quest after they lose a game of poker to him. The Dire Wolf desires authenticity from the stories he hears, and the way that he talks about America implies that he's been around for a long time.
- Quinn
  - Quinn is non-binary hobo kid from the Great Depression. Accompanied by their dogs, they ran away from their farm home after their parents refused to call a doctor for their ill brother, and their brother died as a result. Quinn doesn't trust easily anymore, and despite insisting that they're mature, they display many childlike tendencies.
- Cassady
  - Cassady is a romantic beat poet caught up in reminiscing about his lost love. After he and his partner had a nasty split, the manic energy that drove him to write also

drove him to travel. Now he wanders around, destitute, looking for inspiration and trying to distract himself from the fact that everyone he loved has left him.

- Rose
  - Rose is a soft spoken and sweet hippie from the summer of love. She now rambles around America searching for the kind of love and comradery that only existed for a fleeting few months, despite the fact that, deep down, she knows that it may never be found again.
- August
  - August is an old navy sailor who served during World War 2. His ship went down and he was the only one who survived. August loves fantasy, and read all sorts of dime novels as a child. His penchant for fantasy, combined with his survivor's guilt, left him disconnected from his family and trapped in his own mind.
- Fidelina
  - Fidelina is a curandera, a Mexican medicine woman. She left her village after they decided they had no need for her knowledge, which they saw as antiquated hocus-pocus. Desperate to be needed but finding no place that needs her help, she wanders America searching for people to heal and souls to save.
- Ray
  - Ray is an example of the classic cowboy archetype. He explores the open frontier, herds cattle, and shirks the law, with only his horse for companionship. He loves being a cowboy, but the frontier era is coming to a close, leaving him fighting to stay relevant when his job and the exploration he loved will soon be obsolete.
- Bertha
  - Bertha is a mother and dust bowl refugee who moved from Oklahoma to California in search of work to make a new life for herself. Her husband and children traveled with her, but after finding work grueling and hard to come by, her husband took her children back to Oklahoma. Considering the state of their farm before they left it, she's assumed that they're as good as dead.
- Dehaaya
  - Dehaaya is a kind and spiritual member of the Diné tribe who was involuntarily relocated as part of the Long Walk, when over 10,000 Native Americans were forced to march to a desolate reservation and were held captive by the U.S. Army. During the Long Walk, Dehaaya witnessed much suffering, and while she is kind and patient to travelers, she is very cynical about America--specifically, this new America that has been taken over by colonizers.
- Little Ben
  - Little Ben is a miner who was part of a tragic mine collapse that happened as a result of mismanagement. In order to try and prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again, he's become a union organizer who pushes for ethical working

conditions in the mines. He's convinced that he's doing the right thing, but since he's up against the entire coal mining industry--a formidable adversary--he has to keep moving and can't trust anyone.

- Dupree
  - A selfish, compulsive gambler from the roaring 20s, Dupree travels around the south craving the unpredictability of cards and dice. She's gambled all of her money away and alienated her friends and family, and now uses her charm to make friends with travelers on the road in hopes of tricking them into playing games of chance with her.
- Jimmy
  - Jimmy is a preacher who's spent his entire life moving from place to place. At first, he traveled with his father, but once his father died, he just kept moving. Jimmy was never formally trained as a preacher, but has a knack for memorizing scripture and saying what people want to hear. Because he is not an "official" preacher (and preaches to anyone, regardless of faith), he often feels like an outcast or a grifter.
- Mason
  - Mason is a veteran of the Great War, World War I. Dejected and cast out from his family after losing his leg and his brother in battle, Mason wanders the Eastern Seaboard in a depressed haze, telling anyone who will listen about his woes.
- Franklin
  - Franklin is a pullman porter. Being a pullman porter takes up most of his thoughts and time, and he's quite good at it. Unfortunately, along the way, he's lost his identity to that job, which requires him to be superficial and happy at all times--after all, he lives and dies on the good will of his customers.
- Shaw
  - Shaw is a sharecropper, former convict, and former slave. He owns nothing, and travels job to job, just trying to get by. He's deeply aware of the injustices America has done to his people, and in order to ignore it and keep himself from drowning in despair, he keeps moving.
- Althea
  - Althea is a blues singer with incredible skill. She says she's sold her soul to the devil for her abilities, though whether that's literal or metaphorical is unclear. Now that her money has dried up and she has no more gigs to play, she wanders America waiting for the devil to come and claim her.
- Rocio
  - Rocio is a migrant worker. She works in the fields, trying to make an honest living for herself and support her family on the other side of the Rio Grande. She

tries to stay upbeat, but the work is hard, and she constantly worries about her mother and children.

- The vignette characters
  - There are literally hundreds of smaller stories scattered across *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, and since almost none of these stories are connected, they all have their own cast of characters that are introduced with only a few words. These vignette characters generally appear only once, and don't get much development as a result. However, considering that interactions with this extremely vast cast of one-off characters comprises almost half the game, they are worth mentioning.

## Breakdown

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*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* opens with the you, a wayward traveler, entering a lodge up north. There's a strange poker game going on, and you decide to join in. You give everyone a run for their money, winning hands and eliminating opponents with ease. The only one who rivals your poker skills is a mysterious player across the table from you who keeps his face hidden. Eventually, it's just the two of you left. Your strange opponent offers one final round, winner take all. You get the best hand possible in poker, a royal straight flush, but surprisingly, your competitor goes all in. You decide to fold, but before you can, the stranger stops you, offering to let you wager your word. Win, and you get the whole pot. Lose, and you have to complete a task for him--whatever task he asks. You take him up on the offer, but once you reveal your respective hands, you notice that your adversary now has your royal straight flush, and all you're left with is a variety of tarot cards. Your opponent lights a match, revealing his face--you were playing against a dire wolf the entire time. He says you'll pay, but not necessarily with money. He wants something more: stories. He sends you on a mission, to travel the land, finding as many tales as you can. You're meant to listen to them, spread them, and parse for yourself what's true, and what's worth listening to. What's particularly interesting is that, barely five minutes into the game, the dire wolf makes a speech that lays out exactly what this game is all about:

*"You see, this land is built on stories. It's one big story, this country, woven of many small ones. Few of the small ones are strictly true, and the big story is mostly a lie...The more important stories are the true ones – the ones people will tell you about their own lives. Those often get lost in the weaves of the big story. The more true stories you can find and tell, the more you can weave that truth into the big story. Tarnish it a bit, perhaps, but isn't a dingy and battered truth better than a shining lie?"*

What's particularly clever is that, while your mission and the main thematic point of the game is introduced from the very beginning, the true meaning isn't clear until you're deep into your journey. The dire wolf is right--this land, the United States of America, is built on stories, and is often presented as a "shining lie", with the best parts idealized and the more uncomfortable parts glossed over, or even romanticized in some cases. Your goal is not only to

discover the true natures of the stories we tell to each other as people, but also to discover the true nature of this country. After playing the game, it's easy to see what the dire wolf's words mean, but to a fresh-faced player, it's simply a thrilling call to adventure. And, as extra incentive, the dire wolf tosses in this tasty tidbit: if you succeed on your mission, you might find that holy grail, the place where the water tastes like the sweetest wine.

After the dire wolf gives you your mission, he strips you of your skin and flesh, leaving you a literal skeleton of your former self, though whether or not other people can see your transformation isn't clear. He's sure to emphasize that you'll be able to feel "hunger, weariness, thirst, despair", citing them as key elements of storytelling that are often glossed over. There's something poetic about the idea of playing as a literal emblem of death wandering around America. In this country, so much of the past is presented in bright and glossy technicolor, skating over the uncomfortable and problematic, so having a battered and destitute skeleton wandering around trying to uncover the truth seems to be a deliberate bucking of this image often held about Americana. After being stripped of their flesh, you are sent out into the open world.

The entire United States is available to you after this point, and the narrative takes a decidedly nonlinear turn. While the entire opening section was presented in a linear, visual novel style, you are now left to wander around a flat, open map in a distant third person view. Icons representing stories pop up in the distance, and approaching them opens up a short story, or vignette, presented in the same visual novel style as the opening. You can experience the stories in whatever order you please, and each story (with a few exceptions) is completely isolated from each other, its own standalone narrative. The stories are fairly short, usually only about two minutes long, all narrated by a soothing, gravelly voice that makes you feel like a kid being read a bedtime story. Each story is also accompanied by a stunning illustration, giving a general impression of what the story is about. These vignettes range from the mundane (an old man watches seagulls, noting that the birds' presence means there's enough fish for good business this year) to the slightly odd (a woman lives under her house while cows live in her actual house) to the fantastical (a talking rattlesnake gives you a magic idol).

Worth noting is that you experience the events in the vignettes directly rather than the stories just being told to you. For example, you don't just hear about the ghosts in the Cincinnati Radio Hall, you meet them personally. You are also occasionally afforded limited options to change the course of these vignettes. These actions can be as small as refusing to light a person's cigarette and as large as rushing into a playing orchestra to try and stop the performance. While these options seem to usually err on the side of the more inconsequential, the fact that they are available is significant. These options, alongside the fact that each story is something you experience yourself, is one of the things that makes collecting these stories so compelling. It makes each story feel more personal, and it makes you feel like you are an active participant in your tales.

The types of tales you encounter change depending on where you are in America, and are pulled from a wide variety of backgrounds. Urban legends, Native American and Mexican-American folklore, cryptid encounters, ghost stories, and fictionalized events that sound like they really could have happened are all woven together to create a diverse and beautiful tale of the American experience. These stories often focus on hardworking, oppressed, or downtrodden folk, people so often lauded in American culture. History generally tends to focus on the societal triumphs of these people without the shape of their suffering ever really being explored. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* refuses to pull any punches. The despair and struggles that the dire wolf says are so often missing in these tales are thrown into sharp relief here.

An important aspect of the narrative of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* that is never fully explained is the time period the game takes place in. Many different periods of American history are represented here, with all sorts of stories spanning the years between the 1840s to the 1960s. Despite the fact that these stories all take place at different times, the difference never feels particularly jarring or unrealistic. The writers did an excellent job of picking and choosing what periods and parts of America they wanted to represent, parts that generally end up being the most iconically “American”. As a result, these stories are connected by their importance to American history and culture, and by their overarching themes. Hope, love, humor, fear, and sorrow--all are explored, and the presence of one or more of these elements in the forefront of each story helps tie the tones of the wide variety of stories together. After all, love is love, whether it’s found at a lighthouse in Maine or in a dilapidated shack in Kansas.

As previously mentioned, stories change across America, spanning many different environments and cultures. Mexican-American folklore is most likely to be found in the southwest US, while stories about fishing and the sea are more likely to appear in the northeast or northwest by the coast. The representation of different cultures is thoughtful and (as far as I can tell) accurate, and helps to support *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*’s central principle: In order to understand this country we live in, we have to understand its “dingy and battered truth”. We cannot get the full picture by observing the homogenized depiction of Americana so often presented by mass media. We have to explore our differences as much as we have to explore our similarities, and *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* effectively fosters that mindset, especially when it comes to sharing the stories of those often ignored throughout history. Despite the clear diversity in these stories, they too are connected by the threads mentioned in the previous paragraph: No matter what part of America you’re in, your collected stories will always be tied together in one way or another.

Of course, gathering stories is only part of the main goal in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*. Just as important (if not more important) are the people you share stories with during your travels, represented by eye-catching fireplaces topped with unique icon styles on the overworld. These characters are drifters, just like you. They’re scattered all over America, though each vagabond will often stick to their own general territory. Once you decide to have a fireside chat

with one of these vagrants, you spend a night of sharing stories with them. These vagrants are from a wide variety of eras and backgrounds, much like the topics of the vignettes, though, like the vignettes, they share several common threads. Most notably is that every vagabond carries deep sadness within them, often buried under a veneer of hostility, cheerfulness, or sometimes apathy. It makes a lot of sense; the circumstances that have made them vagabonds generally mean that they've lost their entire family, or at least some family members, one way or another. Those who haven't lost family members are usually experiencing some other kind of crisis: a crisis of identity, of their employment, or otherwise. In their suffering, they are connected.

As the night wears on, you swap stories with these vagabonds. They ask for stories from certain categories: happy, sad, scary, exciting, or funny. Different vagabonds prefer different types, and you can't tell the same story twice to the same person, even if you leave the campfire and return. The game doesn't tell you what type of story each one is, so it is up to you to remember what the stories are about and figure out what story best fits the vagabond's request. Stories are divided further into other categories by topic, including travel, love, death, and authority. If you tell a story that the vagabond likes, then they will share a bit of themselves with you, based on this second topic. For example, if you tell a story about love, then they may share with you a story about their lost love, or love for their family.

After talking to a vagabond for the first time, your eye may be caught by a new, strange icon on the map. Upon approaching it, a new vignette will appear, though this time, you are listening to a story being told. Soon enough, you'll realize that it's one of your stories that's being told, though with some sort of wild and new twist to it, brought on by its telling and retelling. These interactions are how stories grow and get spread. You are given the option to confirm or refute the story's crazy new element, but whatever you choose, the outcome will still be the same. The story will have already grown in the telling, wild and beyond your control.

One of the especially thoughtful elements about this system of storytelling is the variety of ways that a story can grow in the telling. It could be a misprint by the newspaper, buddies at the bar telling tall tales, or a brother recounting a ghost story to his younger sibling. It's an interesting idea, and it's very fun to see your stories grow and expand. Once your stories have grown in the telling, they will have more of an impact on the vagabonds you meet, and telling them stories of the right category that have grown in the telling will make them like you faster. On the surface, it makes sense that stories told and retold by many people will be more polished and thus have more of an impact on the people you meet, but there's also something to the idea that these stories become the "shining lies" that the dire wolf warns you about. While certainly compelling and interesting, the expansions on your stories simply aren't true. It's also significant, then, that these "shining lies" have more of an impact on the vagrants you run into. These vagrants are already living the "dingy and battered truth", and there's something comforting to them about imagining a world where the fantastic yarns you spin are real.

A story can grow twice in the telling before it has reached its "final form". Surprisingly (and delightfully) enough, twice in the telling is enough to completely twist the story from what

it originally was, and excellently illustrates the way that stories really do grow when repeated. Mundane stories can become ghost stories, and simple love stories can become beacons of goodness and hope. Seeing how stories evolve is a good way to incentivize players to keep their story portfolio diverse, as well. You can only “equip” so many stories at a time to share with vagrants, so it’s worth mixing it up to see what stories will change in the telling, even though it can be tempting to only equip the best ones.

Vagrants slowly become friendlier with you the more you run into them, and if you tell them stories that they like. If you become close enough friends with a vagrant, then you’ll be able to see their “true form”. Their true form changes the vagrant’s appearance, and pushes the strongest aspects of their personality to the extreme. Their true form relates to something about their backstory or life either symbolically or literally, bringing their truest, most vulnerable aspects to light. For example, Quinn, a non-binary hobo kid who’s convinced that they’re mature and has learned that they can’t trust anyone except their dogs, becomes a literal pack of snarling dogs with a trench coat clutched around them. They’ve learned to stick to their own, and meet any dishonesty or disingenuousness with hostility, much like a pack of snarling dogs. Additionally, the fact that they’re all in a trench coat, clutching their arms around them, evokes the “two children in a trench coat” gambit, where multiple children don an oversized trench coat to appear as an adult. Quinn, despite wanting to appear mature and wise to the tricks of the world, is still just a kid in a trench coat pretending to be an adult. Additionally, when a vagrant’s true form is revealed to you, their most extreme personality traits are often all that’s left of them. As a result, they often become more volatile--Quinn becomes more suspicious and hostile around you, despite having already been friends with you. Finally, if you tell enough stories to a vagabond’s true form, they will disappear from the map, never to be seen again. Sometimes they find some solace before leaving, but it doesn’t always happen. After all, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* aims to show the truth of life in America, warts and all, and in life, you don’t always get the closure you want.

The game ends once you’ve revealed the true form of each vagrant. You don’t have to have encountered every vignette in the country in order to complete this requirement, indicating that the stories of the vagrants were more important to the tapestry than the random, fantastical tales you encountered. The game seems to say that, in the end, when examining the history of America, it’s best to ask the people most affected by it--the people at the epicenter of change, who had to keep working and keep moving to survive, whether they liked it or not. These stories, stories about people who worked and lived hard, are the most important when contextualizing the overall story of this country.

At the end of the game, your quest was seemingly for naught. You never do find the place where the water tastes like wine. In fact, the Steam achievement associated with finding the place where the water tastes like wine is unattainable without hacking--there is no such place. At the end of the game, you simply tell your final stories to the dire wolf, your verbal tapestry woven of the hopes, dreams and sufferings of the downtrodden people of a nation. He commends

you for the love evident in your story collection, then sends you on your way. You did not find where the water tastes wine, but hopefully your journey was worth it.

## Strongest Element

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The strongest element of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is the unified voice with which the stories are told. Behind the scenes, it's an impressive feat, considering that there are over 16 writers on the game, and each vagabond is written by a different writer. Even without knowing about the team behind the game, it's impressive, considering how much the stories vary by inspiration, location, and subject matter. What makes these stories mesh is that all these stories, from vagrants to vignettes, from Maine to Missouri, are all told with the same feeling and voice behind them. Despite the significant differences between the stories, they all feel like "American" tales. They have unifying themes that tie them together—love, sorrow, death, travel—all themes present in the greatest of stories and folklore. By making one or more of these universal themes the main focal point for each vignette, the overall tone of each story ends up echoing the other stories written around the same theme, making them seem similar despite their distinctness. The reason that the stories feeling unified is so important is because *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* wants you to create a tapestry of Americana, but a tapestry is only as good as the sum of its parts. As a result, those parts must be both unique enough to be interesting, and similar enough to mesh effectively, and *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* walks that line with aplomb.

## Unsuccessful Element

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Ironically, one of the greatest strengths of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, the collection of stories system, is also one of its greatest shortcomings. When you hear a story, it gets "added to your inventory". You can never hear it again, and it is reduced to a single sentence describing in occasionally vague terms what happened. You may have had a haunting encounter with a mysterious yet dejected looking goat monster looking pensively at a river by a burning house in the woods, where you made eye contact with it before it screeched and flew off into the night, but the moment you've finished that encounter, it's reduced to "the story about the goat creature in Leeds". Already it's a bit sad to have your hard-earned stories that you're emotionally attached to get summarized in a way that may leave out your favorite aspect of it. However, the worst part is that when your stories are spread, you don't get to hear the whole revised story--you just hear how the sentence updated. So, the goat creature in Leeds may be updated to "the story about the devil that burned a house down". While seeing how the story evolved is still interesting, since you don't actually hear the story again, you only get the general idea of how the story changed. I understand that it would quite literally triple the amount of work in this already massive game to rewrite each story with each telling, but it does sap them of a bit of their power to have them boiled down this way. You have to do the imagining of the retelling for

yourself when you share that story or hear it evolved, which takes away from the magic. This reduction of each story makes it easier to see stories as tokens or abilities to level up, instead of the complex and beautiful tales that they are. Instead of sharing stories that you want to see the evolution of, you may end up min-maxing the use of your stories to get to a vagrant's true form faster, which undermines the thoughtfulness present in so much of the game.

## Highlight

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The highlight of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is the first time you see a vagrant's "true form". The reveal of a vagrant's true form is the first time this "dingy and battered truth" that the dire wolf talks about at the beginning of the game is truly revealed. By the time you see a vagrant's true form, they have already told you their entire backstory. Their true form shows you who they are at their core, and how their experiences have affected them. I'll use the World War 2 sailor August's form as an example. August felt like his entire life ended when his ship sank and left him the sole survivor. After returning from the war, he made a family for himself, but still struggled to escape his past. As a result, his true form is representative of the guilt that haunts him. He is tied to a crying albatross, a literal demonstration of the phrase having "an albatross around your neck" (meaning that you've got something weighing you down). He's in a puddle of water, and hands, presumably the hands of his deceased crewmates, are reaching up to drag him down into the deep water below. He is slumped over and dejected, refusing the slightest struggle. His words have no fight left in them, and he sounds depressed and resigned to his fate.

The main reason that the first time a vagrant's true form is revealed is the highlight is because the revelation really does show the heart of what *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is about. All the vagrants in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* are from some of the most iconic periods of American history, and are often the iconic representations of these times--for example, a frivolous gambler from the roaring 20s always searching for her next thrill, a hobo kid from the Great Depression out for adventure, a cowboy from the 1880s defying laws and exploring the land. The process of making these parts of American History iconic has also romanticized and idealized them. Even eras that were undoubtedly bad at the time have deep, revered roots in a lot of American culture today. Seeing a vagrant's true form reveals the darkness not often acknowledged in these parts of history. That lighthearted gambler? She's blown all her money and has no real relationships with friends, family or otherwise, since she sees everyone as her next mark to trick. That hobo kid who's always on the hunt for adventure? Their brother died because their parents didn't have enough money to call the doctor, so they ran away from home thinking their parents didn't care about them or their brother, trusting nobody except for their loyal dogs. That rebellious cowboy? He's acting out and breaking the law in a desperate attempt to stay relevant and have something new to explore before the frontier dies for good and he becomes obsolete. Every vagrant's true form reveals that the narratives we built around these times and these people obscured the sad and uncomfortable truth about them.

## Critical Reception

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*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*'s storytelling received almost universal praise. Allegra Frank of *Polygon* said that the game's "greatest success is in capturing the wonderful, unpredictable nature of unraveling the moments that comprise our lives", and that it would be better as more of an interactive storybook as opposed to a game. Despite the fact that they praised the stories in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, they took issue with the fact that the stories themselves and the system for swapping them feels cold and transactional, and said that "turning them into one-line memories robs them — and the art of storytelling — of what makes them special". They gave the game a 7.5/10.

Adam Smith of *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* had a similar take. He called the game "a beautiful and wonderful depiction of a country haunted by its own past and occasionally in awe of its own possibilities", but similarly took issue with the way that the stories became "trinkets" once they entered your inventory. He also criticized the the long stretches of walking from one place to another, feeling that it made him lose the plot a bit in the long ramble between stories.

Tyler Wilde of *PC Gamer* was not as favorable in his review. He criticized the slow pacing of the game, and said that the sheer number of stories meant that many of them lost their meaning. He did say, though, that "there's some lovely, tragic prose tucked away" in the game and praised the depiction of oppressed and downtrodden people often not heard in American history. He ended his review by giving the game a 58/100, lamenting that, due to the pacing and slow gameplay, "I've never had a short story anthology work so hard to keep me from reading its stories".

## Lessons

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- **Do your research.**
  - One of the main reasons that *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is so compelling is because it strips away the superficial veneer covering much of American history. In order to do that effectively, this history has to be portrayed accurately. The *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* writers clearly put in a significant amount of effort to portray their characters accurately. As a result, the stories end up being so much more compelling. Also worth noting is that *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* represents people of many different cultures and backgrounds thoughtfully and respectfully, by pulling from extensive research. This research allows the game to portray a broader and more meaningful picture about America as a whole, and appeal to more people of all walks of life.
- **Explore the unknown hiding behind the familiar.**
  - *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* takes a location most (if not all) players will know, the United States of America, and chooses to explore some of the most

iconic and romanticized time periods of the country's history. What *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* excels at is exploring parts of these historical periods that are often brushed under the carpet, providing an entirely new perspective to these times and tropes that are so commonly known. On the surface, everything is normal, but there's something surprising and compelling about digging deeper into parts of history that are usually only thought of on a superficial level.

- **Intertwine story and gameplay**

- Many parts of the game (such as the long walks between stories and the transactional nature of “upgrading” stories) are very removed from the core narrative. This harsh divide between gameplay and story was commented on in reviews, and seems to be one of the main reasons most reviewers' final impressions of the game weren't exclusively favorable. I believe that if gameplay and story were more closely intertwined, then the developers may have been able to soften some of that divide.

- **Keep the heart of your story clear and obvious.**

- *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* has a wide variety of stories to tell, but the heart of these tales is usually the same. As I've mentioned earlier, not only is this an impressive feat, but it's also a key part of what makes the game great. By using the same overarching themes in the stories of the vagrants and the vignettes, the writing weaves a complex and intricate tapestry of the country that, despite being different, is unified and easy to understand. It would be much more difficult to grasp the main ideas in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* if these ideas and solidified values weren't clear in every story.

- **Innovation isn't always the answer.**

- *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* has a spectacular and unique story, and the way it's presented is completely novel. There are basically no comparables I can think of of this game—it's entirely unique. However, that may have served as a detriment to its performance. Johnnemann Nordhagen, the main creative lead on *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, wrote an in-depth postmortem taking a comprehensive look at the development and post-release life of the game. Despite the stellar story, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, at the time of the postmortem, suffered from lackluster sales. While the sales figures aren't strictly related to the narrative of this game, general consensus is that one of the reasons this game was difficult to market and sell is because its core focus and narrative design is so different and experimental. While general storytelling is a concept most people are familiar with, the way that it's presented in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* may be jarring enough to alienate people right off the bat.

## Summation

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*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is a fascinating and touching exploration of American history and the stories that surround it. The narrative tells us that many of our favorite tales, and the tales on which this country's legacy rests, are the stories that are polished to be bright and shiny, with the tough parts buffed out in the telling and retelling. But ignoring the "dingy and battered" truth does a disservice to us all. It means that we walk this land and live our lives without truly understanding what history our society and principles come from, and we tell our stories without understanding what really went into them. It makes sense that this has been the outcome of generations of storytelling--it's comforting to live a shining lie, since it means that we don't have to look critically at parts of our history that are uncomfortable to think about. But this land is our land, whether we like it or not, and we have to be able to acknowledge the origins of our stories in order to learn and grow from them. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* shows us that it's a long and painful process, parsing truth from lies, examining the tales of hardship that we would like to forget. But someday, hopefully, we can come to terms with our own history, and finally accept that there is no place where the water tastes like wine.

## Citations

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