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## ***Night in the Woods. A Review***

Kathrin Trattner

### **Abstract**

Review of the game *Night in the Woods*.

**Keywords:** *Night in the Woods*, indie gaming, review, narrative, agency, queer, gameenvironments

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Cute girl: "So what's your story, Mae Borowski?"

Mae: "I'm a college dropout, a ghost is chasing me, and I recently met God."  
(*Night in the Woods*)

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Mae Borowski, the protagonist of Infinite Fall's *Night in the Woods* (2017), is not exactly someone you would call a hero. After leaving college, and for no reason apparent to the player, she returns to her hometown, Possum Springs, formerly a thriving mining town, but now suffering under economic hardship. Without a job – or much desire to obtain one – Mae spends her days aimlessly wandering around town, hanging out with her high school friends at diners, at band practices, and occasionally committing petty crimes. What, at first glance, may seem like an aesthetically appealing, hip, and witty portrayal of millennial boredom in small-town America eventually turns into something entirely different: a mystery narrative of unexpected depth. In addition, Mae happens to be an anthropomorphic cat.

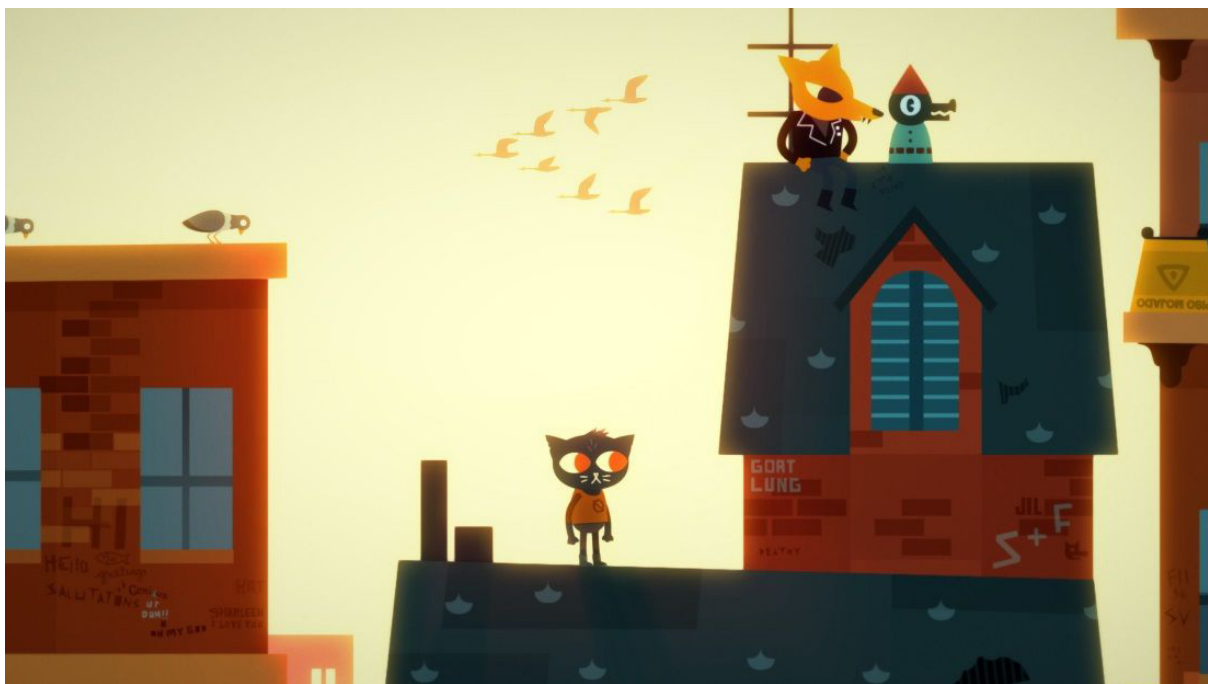


Figure 1. Mae and her friend Gregg on the rooftops of Possum Springs.

*Night in the Woods* started as a Kickstarter project in 2013 that quickly exceeded its initial aim of 50,000 USD by 400% (Infinite Fall 2013), providing proof of the indie gaming community's interest in the game from its very beginning. In terms of genre, *Night in the Woods* is difficult to categorize. The 2D side-scrolling game is at times a platformer, at times a dialogue-heavy adventure/exploration game. Furthermore, it includes several mini-games with varying mechanics. However, most of the time the player has little agency over Mae aside from running through town – atypically for side-scrollers, Mae runs leftwards – and the occasional dialogue choice, which generally has only a slight impact on her tone in conversations. Thus, gameplay itself, in terms of the player's actions afforded by the game's rules, is definitely not central to the experience of playing *Night in the Woods*: rather, the focus is on the story, which unfolds mainly through dialogues between Mae and different citizens of Possum Springs. Within its story, the game tackles surprisingly heavy subjects, such as mental illness, child abuse, and death, as well as sociopolitical issues surrounding the

economic downfall of small American towns like Possum Springs, and the cultural stereotypes that different characters are confronted with in this setting.

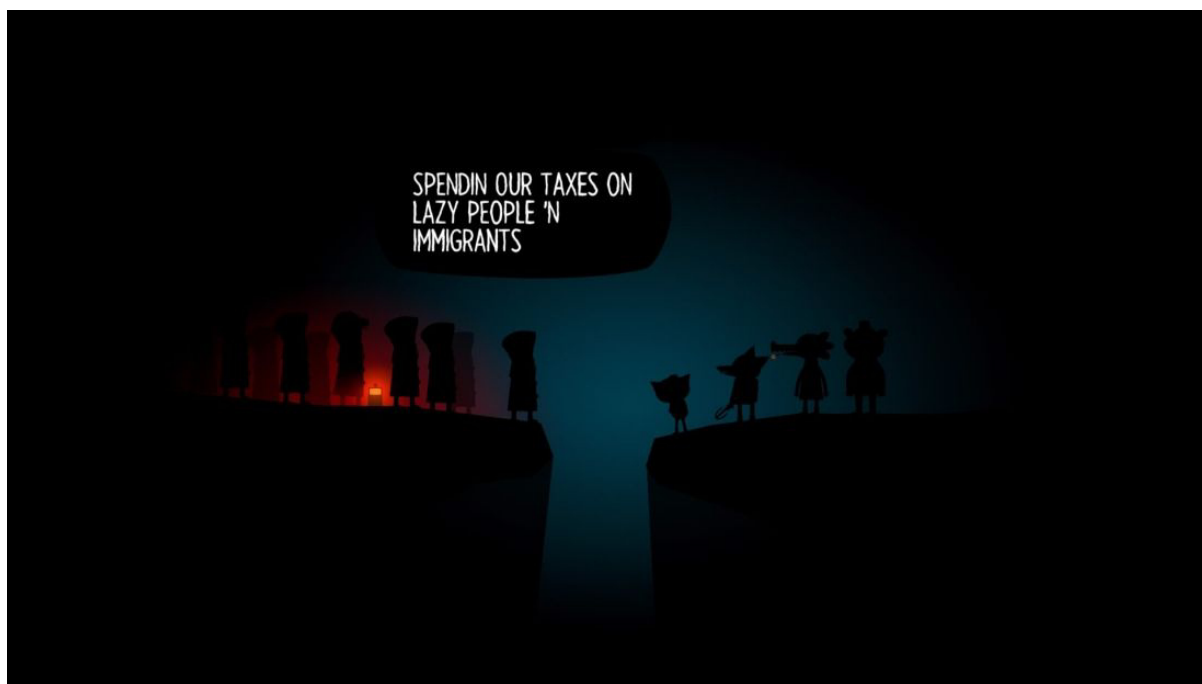


Figure 2. Stereotypes and racism in a rustbelt town.

With around ten hours of gameplay, *Night in the Woods* is considerably longer than many other similar adventure games. Particularly in the beginning, time appears to pass quite slowly in Possum Springs, as the player lives through the monotony of Mae's life back in her hometown. Moving through the town center, with its many abandoned shops and run-down structures, Mae encounters the same people day after day, having or listening in to similar conversations about mundane issues like why the shops keep closing or why the townsfolk do not unionize. There is little room for interaction with the virtual space or even the people in it. Every day starts the same way: Mae usually wakes up at some point in the afternoon and makes her way downstairs, where her mother has a piece of well-intentioned, yet at times passive-aggressive, parental advice, which Mae typically takes with a subtle grunt or moan before making her way out into

town, where she meets the same people and does just about the same things. Not much else happens in the first half of the game which may seem tiresome in terms of the player's limited agency and the slow narrative development; in fact, it is exactly this monotony of movement, people, and conversation, in addition to the limitations placed on one's own actions and the general lack of direction in which the gameplay reflects Mae's state of mind, on the one hand, and millennial boredom in a small rustbelt-town, on the other.

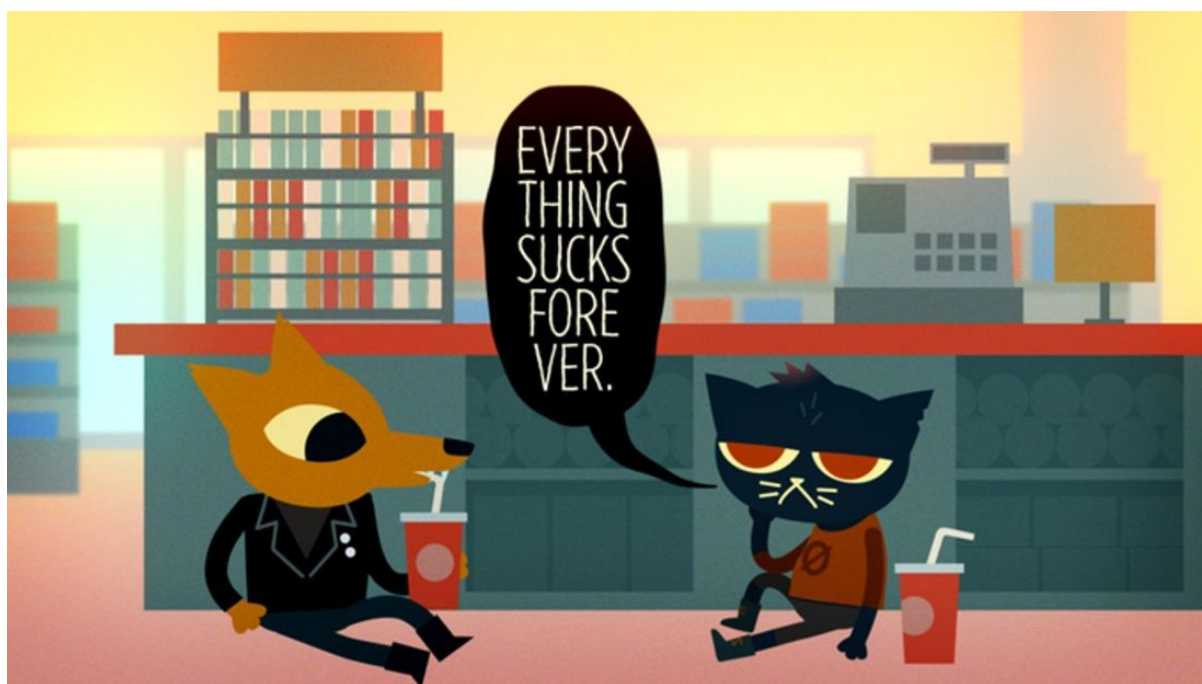


Figure 3. Mae Borowski's disillusionment.

However, later in the game, as the narrative begins to pick up speed, it becomes clear that the long, dull hours of Mae's daily life in Possum Springs have actually been crucial to what the game is really about: the in-depth characterization of its cast. In the circle of friends with whom Mae spends the majority of her time, there is Bea, a chain-smoking goth-crocodile who is stuck working at her father's hardware store after the death of her mother, and whose biggest wish – going to college – may very well never







Figure 4. Gregg and his boyfriend Angus.

Oddly, among these nuanced, and at times deeply suffering characters, the (literally) too-cool-for-school protagonist Mae is the least relatable – a bold choice by the game designers (McElroy 2017). The player experiences moments of frustration, when their only agency over Mae is choosing between two dialogue options, both of which will evidently lead to social disaster. However, these limitations not only reflect Mae’s tendency towards (self-)destruction, but, more significantly, a major theme of the game, present in the personal history of each character as well as Possum Springs itself: a total lack of agency over how one’s life turns out. Even Mae, undoubtedly the most privileged among her friends, having gone to and chosen to leave college, is trapped and incapacitated by her existential crisis and her anger issues. The player’s very limited ability to influence the course of events transpiring around Mae and her friends reflects the general lack of power to act that is so central to *Night in the Woods*.

Mae’s lack of agency over her life as well as her general loss of direction often make



her wonder about God’s existence. Religion is a recurring theme in *Night in the Woods*, and is often the topic of conversation among citizens of Possum Springs. At one point, in a dark and gloomy dream sequence, Mae meets a giant feline creature, who she at first believes to be God. However, the mysterious creature disappoints her by negating her assumption, and explains to her in strange words that there is no God: a conclusion that Mae is confronted with more than once. Overall, Possum Springs remains disenchanted and demystified a fact that Mae seems to struggle with. Through its character’s dialogues, *Night in the Woods* negotiates different views of and desires towards religion in a way so detailed that is arguably rare within video games.



Figure 5. In her dream, Mae meets a mysterious feline creature.

In the end, *Night in the Woods* is neither a cheerful adventure full of beautifully designed talking animals, nor a depressing story about the disillusionment of its suffering characters. It is a noteworthy game precisely because of its carefully nuanced characters and the complex sociocultural, political, and psychological issues it tackles

in an often-playful manner. *Night in the Woods* is not immersive through engaging gameplay. It is immersive first and foremost due to its characters, for whom the game takes a lot of time – some might argue too much – to introduce, develop, and provide with a history, which is precisely what makes it a noteworthy example of digital storytelling.

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