Getting through a Tough Day (Again)
What Possum Springs Says about Mental Health and Social Class

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The authors provide a deep reading of the fictional small American town of Possum Springs in the 2017 adventure game *Night in the Woods (NiTW)* to demonstrate how game architecture and environments have become richer and more complex spaces for narrative development and storytelling. The act of navigating the game's town, they assert, repeatedly creates its own narrative effect and commentary on the current issues of social class and mental health. They note that the game, through repetition and proceduralization, purposefully links the economic conditions of the town with the mental illness suffered by its characters and uses elements of interaction, dialogue, and exploration to highlight these issues. They conclude that *NiTW* offers a unique insight into the ways game designers can address complex topics through the careful and considered use of the cities, towns, architecture, and settings of the worlds their games inhabit. **Key words:** environmental storytelling; mental health; nodal space; procedurality; social class; spatial story telling; video games

Introduction

This article provides a deep reading of the fictional small American town of Possum Springs in the 2017 adventure game *Night in the Woods (NiTW)* to demonstrate how the architecture and environments of contemporary digital games have become rich and complex spaces in which players better understand various social, cultural, and political concerns. We chose *Night in the Woods* for several reasons. It has been both a critical and commercial success, which suggested a wide engagement with a broad audience. More importantly, it pays thoughtful attention to two largely neglected aspects of contemporary culture in video games: social class and mental health, and we appreciated its timeliness in addressing these topics at this moment in American history.

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Our analysis was prepared prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but we believe the game's critiques of the precarity of working-class existence and mental health issues and support structures are even more salient now. We argue that these elements are directly implicated in the game's spatial setting and architecture and deserve attention. Although most analyses of video games focus on their characters and narratives, we believe that attention to game setting or location is also key. In particular *Night in the Woods* creates a particular kind of setting and proceduralizes game play in ways that allow for a form of spatial storytelling or narrative architecture different from prior conceptualizations of the term and adds to how we can understand the evolution of video games.

Before proceeding with this analysis, we want to address critical issues surrounding the game's developers, because their own backgrounds were drawn upon in building the game and one of the developers was later accused by several people of abusive behavior. *Night in the Woods* was created by Infinite Fall studio, comprised of Alec Holowka (programming), Scott Benson (art and animation), and Bethany Hockenberry (writing) who were also the principal designers. Holowka often served as the team's public face, as he did in his keynote at the Meaningful Play 2018 conference when he addressed various mental health issues the game attempted to model in depth, pointing to his own struggles with mental illness as one guide (Holowka 2018). Yet Holowka's history was not the only inspiration for the game; other developers used their own backgrounds as reference. For example, Scott Benson—in an extended 2019 Medium post detailing the way he was abused by Holowka himself—also writes that he and Hockenberry largely conceived the working-class town setting. During development, he said, "I drove Alec to all of the places referenced in *Night in the Woods*. Because of his backseat approach to a lot of the non-design aspects of the game in 2014 and his absence in 2015, he didn't actually know much about what the game was about. We visited Vandergrift, a reference for the town center of Possum Springs. We visited the mining equipment graveyard in Blacklick, across the river from Saylor Park" (Benson 2019). Further, much of the working-class ideology depicted in the game was informed by Benson and Hockenberry's experiences, as Benson elaborates: "I'd have to explain why Bea, a character whose family situation prohibited her from attending college, didn't just leave and follow her dream. He [Alec] didn't understand why if anyone in town didn't like the town, why they didn't just move."

In 2019 several women made allegations that Holowka had sexually abused them. Following the accusations, members of Holowka's creative team said they

would no longer work with him, and a few days later Holowka committed suicide (Kim 2019). After the suicide, which occurred approximately six months after we first drafted this paper, we discussed how best to approach the issues surrounding it. We do not want to celebrate the work of anyone who has hurt and abused others, but we also realize the game itself was created by a collective, including individuals themselves harmed by Holowka. We concluded that it was necessary to acknowledge the harm one of the game's developers had inflicted on several people but also to acknowledge the value that the game and the messages it is trying to convey still holds. Specifically, we want to recognize that the designed mechanics in this game, the players' interactions with its environment, and its integrated depictions of the world offer ideas for future designers and developers who seek to represent complex, socioeconomic and psychological issues through games, and we hope that this work can be read in such a context.

A Walkthrough and Physical Description of Possum Springs, Pennsylvania

A brief overview of the game offers useful context for our discussion. The game's creators officially described *Night in the Woods* as "an adventure game focused on exploration, story, and character, featuring dozens of characters to meet and lots to do across a lush, vibrant world" (Night in the Woods Wiki 2017). It was released in 2017 by Infinite Fall studio, initially on Windows, Mac, Linux and the PlayStation 4, with later releases on Xbox One and Nintendo Switch. The game features anthropomorphized animals who live in the fictional town of Possum Springs, set in rural Western Pennsylvania in the United States. The game's artist and animator Scott Benson affirms that the characters in *Night in the Woods* should be understood as human (Benson 2017). The characters are also given sexual identities, although curiously race is not made explicit as a factor in character identity. Given that the characters are not explicitly coded for race or ethnicity, we do not specifically address this issue here, although we do believe it is related to socioeconomic class and an important element in working-class representations and in potentially limiting mental health treatment options.

Initially there was much speculation about the particulars of the game's setting. Many fans discussed and debated (R/nightinthewoods, 2019, Possum Springs, *n.d.*) whether Possum Springs was representative of a specific town, or a sort of "everytown" facing an economic downturn. The game developers

have since confirmed in blog posts, talks, and interviews that the town and its environment are carefully based on a synthesis of locales they knew well: specific rust-belt towns in Pennsylvania outside of the Pittsburgh area (Benson 2019).

As a former mining town, Possum Springs has seen better days. Mae, the central character, has dropped out of college to return home, seemingly for no good reason. She attempts to pick up the threads of her old life, reconnecting with old friends Bea, Gregg, and Angus while reacquainting herself with her hometown. In addition to managing these ongoing relationships (along with regular chats with her parents), Mae is plagued by nightmares, perhaps triggered or magnified by the discovery of a severed arm near the town's diner, the disappearance of an acquaintance, and the eventual uncovering of a demonic ritual in which the village elders engage to keep the town from further decay. Although Mae and her friends can "defeat" the elders at the end of the game, it leaves unsaid whether the defeat will actually improve their situation or make it even worse. Other critics have pointed to the game's ending as a strange addition to an otherwise compelling and realistic portrayal of working-class life, and they also discuss the mental health of the game's various characters in depth (Oxford 2017; Spencer 2017). Given that the players spend a majority of game time in the "everyday-ness" of moving through the town and encountering (and reencountering) its mundanity, this will be the focus of our analysis.

Theoretical Framework

To undertake our analysis, we build a theoretical framework from several sources, including Henry Jenkins's articulation of narrative architecture (Jenkins 2003), Bernadette Flynn's examination of games as inhabited spaces (Flynn 2004), Georgia Leigh Star's patterns of spatial use in games (McGregor 2007), and Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2010), among others. As these authors note, the study of space or architecture in games is important, yet it has often been overshadowed by attention to character, identity, narrative, and story.

In some of the earliest writing on this subject, Jenkins's (2003) work appeared when game studies as a field debated how best to analyze games—as narratives or as rule-based systems. Jenkins believed that games could be both, explaining how, relative to digital games, "game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (121). Jenkins postulates that environmental storytelling in games happens in at least four ways: "spatial stories

can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene, or they provide resources for emergent narratives" (123). Jenkins's articulation of the narrative potentials for game architecture has been widely taken up (Shibolet 2014; Rouse 2010; Smith and Worch 2010) and expanded upon since then (Fernandez-Vara 2011). Yet Jenkins's work remains foundational, buttressing our argument that the town of Possum Springs does more than provide a simple staging ground for a story to unfold via cutscenes and dialogue. Instead, the town's architecture provides story-advancing information and resources for emergent narratives embedded within it. Furthermore, as the game pushes the player to enact daily movements throughout the town, it proceduralizes an enactment of social class as well as mental illness, which we then disentangle and explore.

Of course, players do not simply view these spaces as they would a documentary film, but rather as Flynn (2004) explains, "[G]ames are not only watched but also moved in, between, and around" (55). The act of in-game movement, traversing geography and using maps to orientate ourselves, "provides the basis for a particular type of spatial pleasure" (54). Like several authors, Flynn points out that where we play and how we play cannot "exist outside of cultural forces but is socially constructed and historically and politically constituted" (56). For Georgia Leigh McGregor (2007), such spaces are a key element in game structure and organization, acting as "a framework defining where we play and helping to configure gameplay" (2). Although both Flynn and McGregor assert the importance of understanding the physical location of game play (in a living room, on a mobile device), we also believe that the physical locations within games—their own architectures, spaces, and places—also are steeped in and respond to very specific historical, cultural, social, and political realities.

In these game-based architectural spaces, cities, towns, and villages function on two levels: first, as the context of the actions in which we engage while playing and, second, as a signifying system for larger meanings—as signs (McGregor 2007). Just like their physical counterparts, video game buildings, town squares, roads, and monuments not only denote function, they also connote "other more insubstantial meanings" (6). For McGregor, one such meaning is as "nodal space," in which "architecture acts as a container, both concentrating activity and defining the area of activity" (5). Nodal spaces draw from our knowledge of real-life environments (stores are where you buy things, inns are where you sleep) to ease us into recognizing the space and its affordance or limitations.

But beyond acting as nodal space, game architectures function as meaning-making devices in multiple ways. They force players to navigate in particular ways or directions. Their elements are specifically arranged and change (or not) over time. And their architecture encourages particular patterns of exploration and movement. All this, too, in combination with the larger meanings of the architectural elements as well. Game towns and cities can be pleasurable to explore (invoking Flynn's spatial pleasure), but they can also be repetitive, banal, or limiting. A game's architecture plays a key role in shaping a player's larger game experience. Game architectures provide histories and community contexts for characters, clues, and puzzles to solve, and convenient settings for items or nonplayer characters (NPCs). They often help set a game's overall theme or mood—scifi, fantasy, western, or others. Writing about level design and the things game developers may learn from architecture theory, Chris Totten (2014) believes that such design is "an art of sight lines, pathways, dramatic lead-ups, and ambiguity about the nature of where you are going" (n.p.). Game architectures can also be considered active agents, offering narratives that directly inform the arc of player interaction and experience. In this sense, environments are themselves characters, with their own back stories, motivations, and insights.

To categorize different sorts of game environments better, McGregor (2007) delineated "prevalent patterns of spatial use" in games, identifying six different forms (3). These include spaces that directly challenge players (*Tomb Raider*), spaces that provide a setting for contests (*StarCraft*), spaces where game elements can represent "other non-spatial game components" (*Civilization,* where farmland equals food production), creation spaces where players build all or part of the world as part of game play (*Minecraft*), backdrops that provide no interaction whatsoever (the crowd in a *Forza* racing game), and the aforementioned nodal spaces where social patterns of use are included to add legibility to the game.

Although McGregor does not create a chronology for the development of these different types of game spaces, we can see how some have developed as the medium has become more sophisticated. In early games, many elements of the environment were not interactive, with a few interactive elements sprinkled among the more static scenery. Thus, the role of such scenery had effects similar to matte paintings or static sets in early theater and film, namely to establish a mood, introduce a theme, and perhaps provide narrative scope, but rarely to convey plot in and of itself. Indeed, the overlap between the terminology describing NPCs and interactive elements versus the underlying environment can be illustrated in the concept of player versus environment (PVE), a term

that gained popularity with the rise of massively multiplayer online worlds like *World of Warcraft*. In such PVE experiences, the "E" referred most often to the creatures and monsters that players needed to overcome (which were driven by artificial intelligence scripts, not by another player) in addition to the architectural features and characteristics of the world itself.

More recently, however, the term "environment art" has taken hold within the development community via new conceptual categories for artists, such as those found at Glassdoor (2020), to signify a focus not just on the look and feel of the world itself but on how these elements define and extend the context in which the game occurs and are representative of histories, contexts, and narratives from a thematic perspective. This is in keeping with a long-standing tradition in more formal art contexts, which is illustrated in the Tate Museum's definition of environmental art as "art that addresses social and political issues relating to the natural and urban environment" (Tate Museum 2020, n.p.). Such definitions are also at work in game studies examinations of environmental storytelling and how spaces can tell stories in ways that differ from more traditional game narratives (Fernández-Vara 2011) that are encoded in visual aesthetics at multiple layers.

Finally, to this discussion of game environments and storytelling, we add Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric. As Bogost (2010) explains, video games offer us a new means of persuasion due to "their core representational mode, procedurality." This procedurality functions as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions" (ix). Simply put, games can make arguments about the way things are or should be by providing players systems to explore that offer rewards and punishments, advancements and dead ends, for doing (or not doing) different things. Mostly Bogost's work has been used to interpret how games create meanings from the choices offered to players; here we instead highlight how a game's lack of choices can also push players into different kinds of interpretations.

Positioning Possum Springs as an Environmental Storytelling Device

Before we move to a deeper analysis of *Night in the Woods*'s Possum Springs, we think it useful to provide an overview of its architecture and features and how it supports environmental storytelling. The town of Possum Springs features the usual town elements—homes, stores, and other buildings—to enter and explore,

a setting for various characters with different stories to tell, with careful attention to using the town as a rich environment for the game's action, including a unique history and setting (see more about the town at https://nightinthewoods.gamepedia.com/Possum_Springs).

Possum Springs is marked as working-class and as in decline in several ways, some static and others changing over the course of the game. One of the most obvious involves how the game portrays business—or more specifically the kinds of businesses it presents. Commerce in Possum Springs is depicted as largely low-end retail and service oriented. The town's meager offerings are hardly exciting: a pawn shop (Fat Pocket Pawn), bar (Miller's), hardware store (Ol' Pickaxe), video/DVD rental place (Video Outpost "Too"), a convenience store (Snack Falcon), call center (Telezoft), the Social Security Administration office, two restaurants (Clik Clak Diner and Pastabilities, which closed and reopened at the end of the game as Taco Buck), and a grocery story (Ham Panther). The town also houses a church (The Church of the First Coalescence), Trolleyside News, the Town Centre Family Practice (where Dr. Hank works), and several closed enterprises, including the Food Donkey (grocery store), Husker Bee Ballroom, and the Party Barn.

If we take this group of businesses and community spaces as the sum total of Possum Springs, we quickly see a town quite limited in its offerings. Pawn shops and call centers are not the province of the upwardly mobile—or even the solidly middle class. Call center jobs are often minimum-wage, hourly positions with no opportunity for advancement. There is no larger industry or business present, indeed no schools, hospitals, or other social services beyond the Social Security office. One grocery store has closed (Food Donkey), and the one remaining (Ham Panther) is likened to Wal-Mart for its low wages and dead-end positions. The town lacks spaces for amusement and recreation, although Mae and her friends do occasionally sneak into the closed Husker Bee Ballroom for band practice. Mae's friends work at the convenience store, video rental shop, and the hardware store—all offering service jobs with no upward mobility and little or no creative challenge.

Several murals grace parts of the town showing its history. All three depict citizens of the town; mining gear like pickaxes, helmets, and lanterns; and wagons of coal. Yet the images are clearly all of past enterprises, now vanished, as game characters tell us. The graffiti that appears on one of the murals midway through the game, in the Trolley Tunnel under the town, is one indication that mining has long been gone as an option for the current town residents who are

Figure 1. Mae talking with some teens that hang out in the Trolley Tunnel beneath the town; the mural behind them has just recently been defaced (author screenshot)

instead relegated to service-level jobs, if they are employed at all.

While some of the businesses serve as sites for interaction with friends or town citizens, many more are not interactive, seemingly to function only as McGregor's backdrop space. For example, the Telezoft call center (see figure 2) cannot be entered or explored—or even clicked on—to provide more information or back story. Yet Telezoft manages to tell its story differently, via the workers who stand outside the business on their breaks, talking and smoking. Their dialogue changes from day to day, as they discuss how much they dislike their jobs and rumors of new businesses opening.

The experience of moving through Possum Springs, of seeing how the town changes during the time frame of the game and understanding how the player is guided spatially through the town, unlocks further details that are revealed day-by-day. The way that *NitW* guides the player-as-Mae through the town therefore becomes key to understanding not just the town but also how repetitive acts in game play can function procedurally as metaphors themselves (Bogost 2010).

To understand the town's role in the game, we consider two central themes in relation to *NitW*: how socioeconomic class and mental health concerns are represented, narrativized, and proceduralized throughout the game, and in particular, by moving through and having interactions with Possum Springs itself. This approach both highlights how the urban and rural spaces within

Figure 2. The Telezoft call center in Possum Springs (author screenshot)

games exert agency and emphasizes our two underdiscussed issues—class and mental health—in compelling and complex ways given the actions of Mae, her fellow residents, and the town of Possum Springs itself. These elements and this setting purposefully seek to balance these two themes. Indeed, they feed off each other.

Possum Springs and Social Class

Although research on representations of gender, race, and sexuality have become common in game studies, "class differences are often overlooked" as part of those dynamics, according to Adrienne Shaw (2014) in one of the few volumes that even touch on the topic. Yet, as she goes on to say, class, too, can function as an identity and "a site of community identification" (149). Part of the reticence for doing these analyses may stem from difficulties in pinning down what we mean by class. Shaw points out the businesswoman Barb in *Diner Dash* (148), mentions Mario's original occupation as a working-class carpenter, and indicates the "Noble Lady's Boots" and "Lower Class Outfit" that *Fable II* offers to players

Figure 3. Mae and the closed Party Barn (author screenshot)

(31) as demonstrations of how games can make class visible yet fail to provide a useful way to think about class in broader terms.

Despite a lack of consensus from researchers about how to define class as a concept and what it comprises, most scholars agree there are a combination of class-related factors that allow us to see how different economic, social, and cultural contexts can result in very different ways of seeing and accessing the world around us. For this analysis, then, class (also referred to as socioeconomic class), refers to "a combination of economic (income, wealth) and social factors (family background, education, occupation, social prestige)" and can be "expressed in lifestyle, values, behavior, manners" (Deery and Press 2017, 6).

Possum Springs is a town hanging on by its teeth and clinging to its past proud history as a mining town while offering its current citizens fewer and fewer meaningful work experiences or ways to make more than a subsistence living. Traversing the town does not take long and tells a story of downward mobility simply by reading the storefronts that still exist—such as the closed Party Barn as shown in figure 3, (a "renovation opportunity" now for sale)—and are regular features of the town's main street. Cars and old people on motorized scooters bustle along to other places (possibly to the town's one doctor or the Social Security Administration), teenagers hang out by the river and on rooftops, and

regulars congregate outside the neighborhood bar. From Mae's first day back home, the player realizes this is not an urban center or some chic neighborhood. It is a town that urban planners would classify as ripe for revitalization, if only some new businesses would move in. What we do see—and experience—are clear indications that the American Dream of upward mobility has vanished from this place. Instead, poverty and working, service-class jobs that are largely dead-end take center stage. One morning during her daily rounds, Mae overhears a worker outside the telemarketing agency tell her colleagues that later in the day she is going to pretend to vomit to get out of work to interview at the local Ham Panther. Although the Ham Panther, as its character notes, "ain't an art gallery in Paris" (Night in the Woods Wiki 2017), the job is still considered a step up from answering phones all day.

Mae's friends have similar issues with their own work, which is also dead end. Gregg works seven days a week at the Snack Falcon to save enough money to get out of town and move to Bright Harbor, while Bea appears stuck helping her father run the local hardware store, despite her desperate wish to attend college and make something of her life. Mae herself voices no plans for work, for which her mother increasingly calls her to task. But social class isn't simply tied to the job a person holds (or loses). Possum Springs's social and cultural context is likewise limited. Entertainment is hard to find—there is a video rental store (an anachronism even Mae points out), a bar (which Mae is too young to enter), and a church (where Mae's mother works). Fun must be found in other spaces, including parties in the woods, driving to the nearby mall, breaking into deserted buildings, and destroying abandoned cars. These experiences are represented in game dialogue as natural extensions of what Mae did growing up in Possum Springs. This suggests Possum Springs (and by extension Mae's childhood) lacks in opportunities for enrichment that the middle class now claims for its children through organized activities such as music lessons and travel. Mae (and her friends) instead likely had a working-class experience—which they still enact—via "long stretches of leisure time, child-initiated play, clear boundaries between adults and children, and daily interactions with kin" (Lareau 2011, 3). Together these places and activities form a fairly accurate picture of downward mobility in Rust Belt America.

Writing about the ways that class encompasses us, Deery and Press (2017) reiterate that, "for each of us, our class position affects *how* we will live and how *long* we will live, how we will be cared for and educated … and what experiences and pleasures are open to us" (emphasis in original, 3). For Possum Springs, such

opportunities are few and far between, with hanging out, drinking, and delinquent behavior some how forming a key part of these experiences and pleasures.

Possum Springs signposts class clearly through its representations—both its images and its narratives, which you discover as you explore the town. But more than that, the way the town—and the navigation and play inside it—creates a routinization of daily living that is equally noteworthy. Possum Springs does not function as a resource for Mae to exploit in ways that other video game towns might—space works in a different way here. There are no supplies to be bought, no companions to recruit, and sleeping in bed at night does not replenish Mae's health in any way. There are few puzzles to solve in the town and no game rewards—such as increased wealth or status—for doing so. Even if Mae discovers baby rats in an attic and feeds them, for example, this leads to no larger changes in the town or for Mae herself. The player as Mae can hop along the power lines and rooftops and discover a few additional locations and characters and unlock a few Steam badges but is never required to do so to complete the game. Instead, the town seems intent on swallowing Mae into itself and keeping her there. No cell phone service provides a link to the outside world, and the continuous construction near one end of town provides another barrier to exiting.

In some ways the game resembles Molle Industria's *Every Day the Same Dream,* a game featuring an unvoiced, white male protagonist who leaves his wife and apartment each morning to go to an unnamed desk job in a featureless office. The game involves the repetition of days for approximately a week, featuring one small difference each day. The larger point of the game is its commentary on the numbing experience of a middle-class, capitalist experience of work and life. Similarly, Mae as every person is forced into the only option available—making a daily circuit during which only small details vary.

Yet *Every Day the Same Dream* critiques the desk job and patriarchal heteronormative middle-class life. *Night in the Woods* looks further down the ladder to the convenience store clerks and support workers whose jobs often (invisibly) support those other positions. Furthermore, Mae is no mysterious stranger or even hometown hero—the normal trope for a video game protagonist. Instead, she drags her past behind her, never able to escape her history of violence and possible mental illness. As one neighbor reminds her when she goes onto his porch, "Small town polite's all you got kid. So watch it." Mae can try to steal pretzels from a snack stand and rearrange posters on a community bulletin board, but otherwise her options for making a mark on the town—whether to improve or destroy it—are limited. Just like any other citizen of a small town in

America, Mae's choices are dismal—stop by stores to greet friends, engage in petty crimes, and see if anything has changed, no matter how small.

Social Class and Environmental Aesthetics

Taken as a whole, the visual aesthetic of *NitW*—offering a nuanced depiction of social class—takes environmental storytelling in games to a new level. Indeed, it actualizes the helplessness of those caught in such spaces in ways that many traditionally lauded films and artworks cannot. The economic collapse and associated decay of towns like Possum Springs constitutes the subject of numerous documentaries and paintings. They seek to capture the loss and devastation of these areas in conjunction with the pride and grittiness of their residents. For example, in 1931 John Kane painted *The Monongahela River Valley,* depicting the vibrancy of commerce, the growth of industrialization, and American success. The painting hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art as an artifact of a time long past. Today, these same riverbanks have been captured by the photography of Pete Marovich's "Looking for Dream Street" project (Marovich, *n.d.*), and the raw power and emptiness of its images have been reviewed by the Carnegie Museum of Art (Newton 2017). The project offers "an ongoing photographic expedition to document the status of the old steel towns along the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers within approximately 40 miles of Pittsburgh, Pa." (Marovich, n.d.). Possum Springs seeks to capture similar aesthetic depictions for related reasons—indeed, the visuals of the game rely on the kind of elements documented in these depictions of economic destruction: row houses, abandoned storefronts, steel bridges, and so on. (An example of this visual synergy appears in figure 4.) But the game adds the process of navigating these spaces, which makes its users feel literally trapped by their boundaries in ways a noninteractive artwork simply cannot.

The presentation of social class and economic disparity has also been read by many critics as a commentary on—and representation of—the generational divide that surrounds discussions of these issues currently in America. The so called "boomer versus millennial" debate offers an example of intergenerational blame for the state of a changing economy, and popular critics have extensively examined the game in these contexts (Oxford 2017; Williams 2018; Greer 2017). With respect to environment as storytelling device, then, we find it important to note that the generational narrative over time is told geographically. Old people

Figure 4. Row houses in Monessen, PA. Cropped image of photograph by Pete Marovich (Newton 2017)

Figure 5. Row houses in Possum Springs from *Night in the Woods*, with visual elements similar to photograph by Pete Marovich. (author screenshot).

wither and die on porches and street corners, working-class folks are trapped in small stores, diners, or relevant break areas, and young people leave (if they can) and do not return. The plotline parodies the generational anger at the death of the town, making older residents killers in the woods, which functions as a metaphor that seeks to capture much of the anger and blame currently infecting modern American discourse. It is no accident that both of the major areas of the plotline are separated geographically. The elders have taken themselves out of the town, and thus out of its community, and they are shrouded in secrecy doing "what must be done" in the woods. This separation of action and area can be seen clearly on the map of Possum Springs presented by the Historical Society, as shown in figure 6, which further underscores the idea of generational divide and downward mobility. The old abandon hope; the young flee the map and do not return (if they can avoid it), the working-class citizens are trapped in the

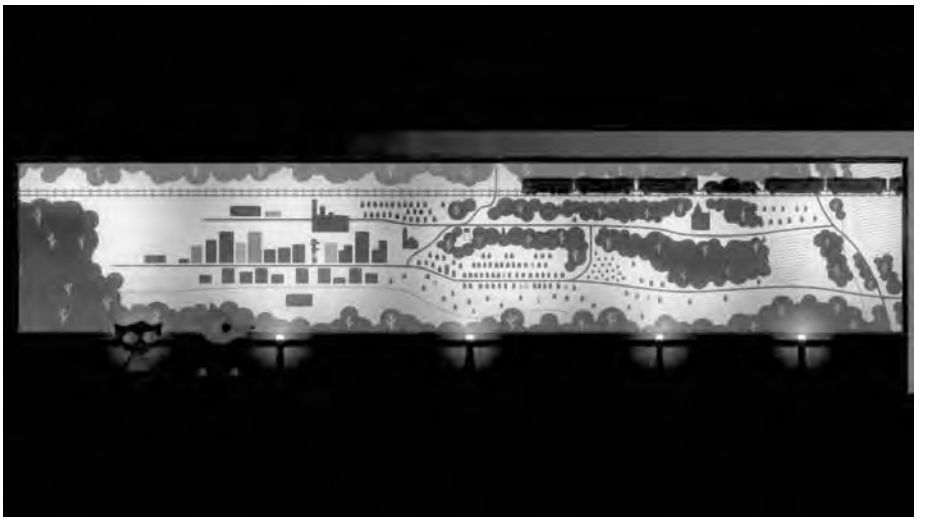

Figure 6. A map presented in-game from the Possum Springs Historical Society. From Possum Springs, n.d.

middle. The interaction of these two opposing communities gets told, in large part, by their interactions with the environment—through the game as world. They often appear to one another almost as visual scenery, and thus the game environment actively comments on this relationship and its broken quality in ways both procedural and profound. The ending feels jarring because it breaks this plane of division between these populations, which has been established from the start of the game and repeated and mechanized throughout.

Possum Springs and Mental Health

Although at first glance mental health may seem a topic separate from social class, its prevalence and options for treatment are deeply inflected by a person's class. Further, a key element of *NitW*'s (successful) depiction of depression in Possum Springs is its subtlety. For most of the history of video games, representations of mental illness have been limited to the use of the psycho killer as an obvious antagonist (Hazel 2019). But an increasing number of games have attempted to depict a wider range of mental health issues and pathologies, from fairly well-adjusted characters to the stereotypical homicidal maniac, with every imaginable trope in between—including the zoo specimen, dysfunctional

invalid, and paranoid conspiracy theorist (Shapiro and Rotter 2016). As Shapiro and Rotter point out in their analysis of the fifty best-selling games each year from 2011 to 2013, games—and especially large scale or "AAA" games—often mirror film in their tired reliance on a simplified, reductionist, and highly fictionalized portrayal of mental illness, which relies more on extending stereotypes than on authenticity. In a more recent study, Ferrari and colleagues (2019) examined nearly eight hundred video games on Steam, finding that "the majority of the games we reviewed (97%, 97/100) portrayed mental illness in negative, misleading, and problematic ways (associating it with violence, fear, insanity, hopelessness, etc.)" (8). There has been, however, a recent focus within the independent game community on games dealing with mental illness in a more realistic fashion generally, and, specifically, with depression as a core topic (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 2020).

Games focusing on depression that strive for a more realistic, authentic portrayal of the experience often seek to foreground the condition as a core component of the entire experience. They will seek to make a game about mental health first and foremost in a way that minimizes or even erases other game elements. Perhaps the best known of these is *Depression Quest* by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Issac Schankler, an interactive fiction game released in 2013 that invites the player to play through experiences directly as a character suffering from depression. *Depression Quest* is also famous for the role it played in catalyzing the GamerGate movement in 2014, when many critics contended it was not a "real" game and was therefore not deserving of their attention. Yet unlike traditional real games, *Depression Quest* features realistic depictions of mental illness. (For more on the discourse about real games, see Consalvo and Paul 2019).

Depression Quest, despite the number of people who identify with its portrayals, can be regarded as taking a very direct approach to the subject, in ways that can feel heavy handed to some players. Similarly, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice,* a winner of the people's choice award at Games 4 Change in 2018, also featured a very direct, overt portrayal of mental illness, although it should be noted that it depicts a form of psychosis, not depression. *NiTW,* in contrast, never explicitly foregrounds itself as a game about mental illness or depression. Instead, the interpretation of Mae (and other characters to varying degrees) is specifically left to the player, and aspects of mental illness remain purposefully vague. This allows the players (if they wish) to disassociate their own feelings from those of Mae (third-person versus first-person embodiment), but also forces them to consider Mae as an individual, in combination with her actions

and in comparison to how the town thinks of her based on past history. It is this marriage of a slow-burn discovery of Mae's personality and internal motivations and the relentless engagement with the environment over the course of the days *NiTW* takes place that allows for the successful depiction of depression and anxiety through a proceduralized form. In this more abstracted and proceduralized treatment of the subject, the game resembles in design and approach *Elude* (Rusch 2010) and *Fragile Equilibrium* (Phelps 2018), both of which also deal with depression using such methodologies and mechanics as discussed in detail by Phelps, Wagner, and Moger (2020). *NiTW* is rife with juxtapositions in which both the interaction with the game and the action therein are a form of commentary on living with depression.

The game's core loop takes Mae through the day, from waking up in the attic of her parents' house through talking with and hanging out with friends, exploring a bit of the town, and then returning home. Although Mae and a friend or parent will occasionally go to a different area or scene (such as a party, the mall, or an abandoned building) there are no secret areas to unlock, and the town does not grow appreciably larger over time; the player as Mae does not gain access to more places or more abilities. Instead, the player's journey is repetition, day after day including the same places and the same people. This can be comforting, frustrating, and boring, sometimes all at once. Yet, considered metaphorically, this daily foray, engaged in over and over, serves at least two purposes. First, from Mae's perspective as a person suffering depression, it becomes an achievement (she got out of bed, she went outside) but also a limiting one (she dropped out of college, and now this small town is literally her entire world). There exists no way out and no large breaks in her routine. Mae's journeys through the town embody a form of repetition at the core of popular coping mechanisms for depression—i.e., continually evaluating activities and their effects on mood and emotion and thereby seeking to recognize a pattern of destructive thoughts and triggers. Similarly, psychotherapeutic treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) often attempt specific behavioral activation—that is, providing daily structure and encouraging new activities and analyzing and reflecting to break destructive and repetitive forms (Muñoz and Miranda 2000). Mae continually acts, but largely takes the same actions and largely without effect, so reflection becomes a downward spiral. Thus, not only is the repeated routine a statement on economic instability and lack of opportunity, the fact that this interaction is both comforting and frustrating provides a poignant statement about depression itself and even about its treatment. As a

game design, this interaction seeks to amplify the metaphor through repetition (Bogost 2010), and we find it noteworthy that it is rooted in the navigation of the game environment. Furthermore, reflecting the game's take on small-town life and class issues, the town and its working class and poor people form a repeated chorus of despair, all telling a similar story of everyday money concerns and a lack of hope. They (and the town) are not asking Mae as player to save them, because she cannot do so. Together, these elements represent a near perfect representation of Beck's "cognitive triad of depression" (Beck 1967; McLeod 2015), namely a negative view of self, the world, and the future.

Many people who suffer from depression describe feeling increasingly isolated and unable to form meaningful bonds with others (Barnhill 2014; Mayo Clinic 2018; Roehr 2013). Some use sarcasm and humor as avoidance mechanisms, and these are clearly on display in Mae's character and in how she relates to other characters in the game, which resonates with many of the players drawn to this portrayal (Ashley 2018). At one point in the game, one of the characters says to Mae, "If anyone's going to ruin your night, it should be you." This statement was also used by Kevin Veale (2019) as the title of his article analyzing the game to understand how "the player would respond in the same situation, and to tell a story that uses their perception of responsibility to explore themes of rural marginalization under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope" (2). But this also speaks to the role of isolation and self-loathing in those suffering from depression and to situations in which friends and family are often unequipped to be care givers and provide the necessary emotional network of support. Further, the phrase emphasizes how depression gets stereotyped both by those suffering from it and, more generally in a cultural context, written off by various individuals and groups as feeling bad or something to just get over (Porter 2013; Pies 2008). Thus, the social-class and economic issues that form the backdrop of *NiTW* directly intertwine with the portrayal of depression and anxiety core to Mae's character. Similar to our discussion of heroism relative to economic concerns, no opportunity exists for Mae to win against depression. It is presented as a condition to be lived with, rather than defeated or conquered (Parker 2019), and this is in keeping with a larger analysis of the treatment of mental health in video games. In their review of games exploring mental illness, Ferrari and his colleagues (2019) write that "unfortunately, little or no hope for recovery was present in the identified video games, where mental illness was often presented as an ongoing struggle and an endless battle with the mind and oneself" (1). This is certainly the case in Possum Springs.

Indeed, the game intertwines social commentary on the issues of mental health and social class to devastating effect. Just as the town knows Mae as a delinquent based on her past history, one of the defining actions of that history involves beating up a boy for no reason, presumably while in a dissociative state (Spencer 2017). The doctor Mae consults in town proves virtually useless and simply provides her with a diary, the same cure he proposed for Selmers, another resident with an opioid addiction (see figure 7). We can read this as a commentary on the present availability of mental health care in poor and rural areas in the United States. The National Council for Behavioral Health noted in 2018 that "there is also a large disparity in access to mental health care based on level of income and location. Individuals located in rural areas and of lower income are less likely to say that mental health services are extremely accessible to them" (Cohen Veterans Network 2018).

Further, the way Mae's reputation for past action and breakdown continually defines her reputation and interactions offers a direct comment on the stigma surrounding mental illness. This has been a frequent topic of discussion on a podcast run by *NiTW* programmer Alec Holowka, featuring interviews with people who have experienced mental illness (Holowka and Vanderhart n.d.). Mae's (and presumably her parents') reactions to her mental health issues are further magnified

Figure 7. Mae (behind the car) talks with Selmers (to the right) about their doctor's approach to various health issues (author screenshot).

by considering their working-class position. As Calarco (2018) argues, working-class parents believe that "letting children avoid consequences and rely on adults to solve problems for them would undermine their sense of responsibility" (40). In contrast, middle-class parents often try to "protect their children from consequences" (36), such as the backlash Mae faced from her past actions.

Through these design decisions, *NiTW* provides an interesting case for using the environment of a game as a designated actor. The town of Possum Springs does not merely provide a setting, or distant history, or game clues. The proceduralized and repetitive interactions with the environment force players to consider directly their engagement with the core themes of the game in specific ways. Thus, this work is highly significant and somewhat unusual for a narrative adventure game. It replaces a core motivation and player type, which could be categorized as the explorer under Bartle's foundational taxonomy of the four player types—explorer, achiever, socializer, and killer—generally found in games (Bartle, 1996), and subverts the thrill of exploration to monotony. The game uses the fact that it takes places in Possum Springs—and the necessary and proceduralized elements of interacting with its environment—to present an apathetic disinterest in the world.

Conclusion

Night in the Woods illustrates how concepts such as "spatial storytelling" or "nodal space" can be deployed successfully in a game, but it also takes theorization in this area further by demonstrating that it is not simply the placement or organization of such elements within a game that helps to generate meanings for players. Instead, we note how the act of navigating the space of the town itself repeatedly creates its own narrative effect—and offers a commentary on larger issues. In accordance with—and extending—the work of Jenkins (2003), we suggest the environment may be a stage for storytelling, but it is only through the performance of play itself—here the daily repetition of movement throughout the town—that the game's larger meanings are revealed. Thus, although the game represents the town as downwardly working class and its buildings and residents trigger stories as Mae talks to them or even simply passes by them, only through the repeated loop of making that daily outing does despair take hold.

The visual and aesthetic design of the town is carefully considered from beginning to end and relies on several cultural and iconic elements that help define

the economic reality of the town and the despair of its residents. Row houses, rusted bridges, abandoned storefronts, and broken windows inform a visual rhetoric at once both slightly romantic and depressingly desolate. The game draws from American styles and themes both in its architecture and the structures of the town, as well as direct visual relationships of other artforms that have sought to capture the same overall narrative. But the game repositions these elements by using its interactive form and then pointedly limiting that interaction.

The game situates itself relative to several traditional tropes in games and media. It uses a main protagonist and mystery setting to encourage exploration and offer a puzzle-based adventure feel, and then it very pointedly fails to afford the player the ability to save the town from economic despair. It encourages, and sometimes forces, exploration and repeat journeys, but replaces the inherent joy of exploration with a hollow monotony, a purposeful reflection on both the suffering inherent in clinical depression and in some ways its associated treatment. The game purposefully links the economic conditions of the town with the mental illness suffered by its characters and, through repetition and proceduralization, uses elements of interaction, dialogue, and exploration to highlight these issues to incredible effect. In this manner, *NiTW* offers a unique insight into the ways designers address complex topics through the careful and considered use of the cities, towns, architecture, and settings of the worlds their games inhabit. The structural patterns of interaction with these environments directly contribute to the overall narrative of the game in profound ways. As a design technique, these elements are relevant for consideration, adaptation, and extension into future works and other designs. In this way, *Night in the Woods* and its associated critiques have contributed broadly to the overall literature of game design and game studies.

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