

Storytelling Through Gameplay*

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Research Question: How does *Night in the Woods* use gameplay mechanics as a method of storytelling?

Topic Sentence: *Night in the Woods* uses gameplay mechanics as a method of conveying the story and make the player feel more involved in the story being told.

Thesis Statement: *Night in the Woods* uses gameplay mechanics as a way of effectively telling a story in a way that cannot be done in any other medium.

Outline

Intro

Night in the Woods uses gameplay mechanics as a method of conveying the story and make the player feel more connected to Mae.

Point 1

Games are a medium that the audience participates in, rather than passively watching. Through this interactivity, video games can, and should, effectively tell stories in ways that cannot be done in other media.

- Nicolas Bourriaud describes the *exform* as, “a point of contact, a ‘socket’ or ‘plug’, in the process of exclusion and inclusion - a sign that switches between centre and periphery, floating between dissidence and power.”¹ The town that *Night in the Woods* takes place in, Possum Springs, exists in the realm of the *exformal*, being a dying, run-down town that only people with personal connections to the town have any reason to live in or even visit. The game itself acts as a virtual *exform*, in a way. Although Possum Springs is fictional, it represents various towns in this type of decay. The game allows the player to experience this type of *exformal* town, through Mae’s experience, and it does this through its gameplay.

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¹Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, 2015, trans. Erik Butler (London, UK: Verso, 2016), x.

- The point is made that games are not just watched, but also moved around in.²
- “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.”³
- “beyond acting as nodal space, game architectures function as meaningmaking 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.”⁴
- “A game’s architecture plays a key role in shaping a player’s larger game experience.”⁵
- Some of the game’s buildings are places where the player interacts with people, but others just act as a backdrop.⁶
- It’s easy to tell that Possum Springs is a town in decline by just looking at the buildings as you wander around.⁷
- Entertainment is limited in Possum Springs, so Mae finds fun in other ways, which is reflected in the gameplay.⁸
- “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.”⁹
- “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.”¹⁰

²Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again): What Possum Springs Says about Mental Health and Social Class,” *American Journal of Play* 12, no. 3 (2020), 342.

³Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 342.

⁴Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 343.

⁵Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 343.

⁶Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 346.

⁷Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 348-349.

⁸Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 349.

⁹Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 349.

¹⁰Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 350.

- “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.”¹¹
- The game’s UI has both a gameplay and narrative purpose. The pause menu is Mae’s journal, and she writes and draws things in it throughout the game, which not only shows what she’s thinking about events in the game, but also shows the player’s progress. “At the back of the book is a note from her psychologist, Dr. Hank, which reads ‘When you feel out of control remember you always have. . . options’. These options include counting to ten or practicing positive self-talk, that is, coping mechanisms for countering an anxiety attack. At the same time, these options also refer to the settings menu, where players can adjust the sound, visuals, and mechanics of the game.”¹²
- *Night in the Woods* isn’t all serious either. There are various comedic moments in the game. The comedy of some of these moments is enhanced by the gameplay, where you play minigames related to what’s going on.¹³
- “[*Undertale* and *Night in the woods*] apply storytelling techniques that distinguish playing video games from the experience of other media forms and encourage an empathetic engagement with their fictional storyworlds.”¹⁴
- At the end of each day, the player has to choose which friend Mae spends time with, and has to choose one or the other.¹⁵
- *Night in the Woods* is not difficult. There are not very many skill-based challenges. There are no fail states. If you do badly at a challenge, the game continues, but the game keeps track of it.¹⁶ (There is also a minigame called “Demon Tower,” a game on Mae’s computer, that, unlike the rest of the game, is very challenging, but it is completely optional and playing it has no impact on the story).
- The game only has one save slot and autosaves, making choices more permanent.¹⁷
- “NITW uses the distinctive affective materiality of video games to build a foundation that gives the player a very specific framework for decision-making.”¹⁸
- “The experience of video games is distinctive because their modes of engagement can lead to players feeling responsible for the decisions they

¹¹Consalvo and Phelps, “Getting through a Tough Day (Again),” 350-351.

¹²Melanie Kreidler, “Playing with the Narrative of Mental Illness: Communication Beyond Serious Empathy Games,” *BiD* 52 (June 2024), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1344/bid2024.52.03>.

¹³Kreidler, “Playing with the Narrative,” 9.

¹⁴Kevin Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night, it should be you’: Responsibility and affective materiality in *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods*,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 2 (2022), 454-455, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211014434>.

¹⁵Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 456.

¹⁶Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 456.

¹⁷Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 456.

¹⁸Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 458.

make within the diegetic space of the game and its contextual storyworld.”¹⁹

Point 2

By controlling Mae’s actions, the player can relate to her and understand her thoughts and emotions in a deeper way than would be possible by simply observing a character in other media.

- There is no real goal in *Night in the Woods*. Most of the gameplay is just wandering around, getting to know the characters.²⁰
- “More than anything, *Night in the Woods* emphasizes the boring things, the routine, and frames it with the stress of being a young, unemployed, queer, mentally ill, or otherwise vulnerable person trying to exist in society.”²¹
- You don’t “win” *Night in the Woods*. The game just ends, like how the characters in the game can’t “win” life, or solve the systemic problems they’re dealing with. “To wait for the game to start implies you are playing a game that is, somehow, winnable, but *Night in the Woods* is not a game you can win. It’s just a slice of Mae’s life, in which players exist for a moment in time. Besides, no one is going to win life forever in their twenties. The true joy of *Night in the Woods* and, I think, the reason so many people find enjoyment or catharsis or community or value in it is because it lays bare anxieties specific to an enormous segment of its audience without expecting the players to fix systemic issues. Instead, it gives them a space to live in that messiness and say, ‘You know what, this is garbage.’ Simply put, it makes players feel seen without infantilizing or making fun of them.”²²
- “*NitW* certainly meanders. Players are free to explore Possum Springs at their leisure, completing short outings and minigames that allow you to get to know other characters. It’s a game without real objectives, and even the antagonistic cult members are casting a wider net. Mae is ensnared in their activities, but never an intentional target. I think this is part of the reason the game feels so meandering. There’s no real way for Mae and her friends to take action against the cult members. Sure, they’re the game’s main antagonist, but they’re also a symptom of a systemic problem. That also doesn’t mean there isn’t value in a game that takes its time, because it allows for a richer development of the characters and environments. More than anything, *Night in the Woods* emphasizes the boring things, the routine, and frames it with the stress of being a young, unemployed, queer, mentally ill, or otherwise vulnerable person trying to exist in society.”²³

¹⁹Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 463.

²⁰Madison Butler, “Two Years Later, *Night in the Woods* is Still Relatable,” *Sidequest*, May 28, 2019, <https://sidequest.zone/2019/05/28/two-years-later-night-in-the-woods-is-still-relatable/>, n.p.

²¹Butler, “Two Years Later,” n.p.

²²Butler, “Two Years Later,” n.p.

²³Butler, “Two Years Later,” n.p.

- In his conference paper, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” Justin Keever discusses how *Night in the Woods* uses walking around as its central gameplay rather than as a utility to get from place to place.²⁴
- This represents how she refuses to get a job and spends her days playing rather than working.²⁵
- Letting the player walk around freely, as well as the fact that time essentially stays frozen until the player does something to move the story forward, represents Mae’s relative freedom from responsibility. She doesn’t want to get a job and is financially supported by her parents.²⁶
- “The ‘play’ of *Night in the Woods* is primarily the free movement of walking, an act of transit made playful insofar as it avoids the imperatives of consumption and utility in her movements.”²⁷
- “Movement, for Mae, is pleasurable: there’s a bounciness to her animation, and when she jumps you can see the edges of her mouth curl into a smile. If movement facilitates anything, it is play: walking is the means by which Mae connects with her friends, and therefore the means by which she engages in the games of thievery and destruction and musical performance.”²⁸
- “walking is the means by which Mae connects with her friends, and therefore the means by which she engages in the games of thievery and destruction and musical performance.”²⁹
- “*NITW* prioritizes narrative and embraces ‘exploration and finding, collecting, and piecing together fragments of information to create a story’ (Stang et al. 2019, i). Much of players’ time in *Possum Springs* can be described as a side-scrolling walking simulator and thereby centers around ‘slowness, discovery, and the mundane’ (Krampe 2023). This design choice also serves as a metaphor for Mae’s (re)construction of her life, subtly hinted at by genre-unconventionally moving to the left. In this setup, players are given agency in how they go about this endeavor.”³⁰
- The player has a lot of freedom to choose what they do each day; who they choose to talk to and where they go. At the same time, the player has limited choices in dialogue, which don’t change much about the outcome of the story. This puts them in the same mental space as Mae.³¹
- The gameplay being aimless reflects Mae’s aimlessness in her life. “The first few hours of the game call attention to Mae’s aimlessness. *Night in*

²⁴Justin Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur: The Weight of ‘Playful’ Walking in *Night in the Woods*,” *After Work Conference*, 2019, <https://www.academia.edu/download/58571221/AfterWorkNITW.pdf>, 2.

²⁵Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” 2-3.

²⁶Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” 1-2.

²⁷Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” 2.

²⁸Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” 2.

²⁹Keever, “The Unemployed Flâneur,” 2.

³⁰Melanie Kreidler, “Playing with the Narrative of Mental Illness: Communication Beyond Serious Empathy Games,” *BiD* 52 (June 2024), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1344/bid2024.52.03>.

³¹Kreidler, “Playing with the Narrative,” 8.

the Woods is largely structured around short sequences and minigames involving acts of youthful mischief with Bea and accompanying friends Gregg and Angus.”³²

- “This wayward lifestyle later becomes a subject of contempt for Bea, who in a moment of vulnerability expresses to Mae her bitterness towards her and Gregg’s juvenile antics.”³³
- Penabella says, “The game ultimately values empathy and effort,” which I think is reflected in the fact that the main gameplay revolves around getting to know and doing stuff with the other characters. Relationship and friendship is a central theme in not only the game’s story, but also its gameplay.”³⁴
- Kevin Veale points out that choices in video games often are meaningful and have consequences in the game. Because of this, players of video games tend to feel responsible for their choices. “As a result, players can come to consider how they *would* feel about possible consequences to choices they are weighing, treating them seriously within the context of the storyworld.”³⁵ This is the case even if the choices being made are insignificant to the story or in general. This connects players to the characters they are playing as.”³⁶
- “Since these are video game texts, the modes of engagement frame the player as responsible for events within the space of the game, and that responsibility is central to the affective experience of playing.”³⁷
- In video games, the player controls the protagonist, and therefore is the one who responds to events and makes choices. In other media, the protagonist responds to events without the audience’s input.”³⁸
- In video games, the player can feel like they *are* the protagonist, rather than just observing and hopefully sympathizing with them.”³⁹
- From the intro of the game, the player learns about who Mae is, partially through gameplay; the actions that the player is able to take.”⁴⁰

Point 3

Unlike many other games, *Night in the Woods* has Mae fully be her own character, and not just an extension of the player. The choices that the player can make

³²Miguel Penabella, “Opened World: Standing Still,” *Haywire Magazine*, December 9, 2018, <https://haywiremag.com/columns/opened-world-standing-still/>, n.p.

³³Penabella, “Opened World,” n.p.

³⁴Penabella, “Opened World,” n.p.

³⁵Kevin Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night, it should be you’: Responsibility and affective materiality in *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods*,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 2 (2022), 454, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211014434>.

³⁶Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 453-454.

³⁷Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 454.

³⁸Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 455.

³⁹Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 455.

⁴⁰Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night,’” 455.

are limited by Mae's personality and what she would do.

- The choices that the player can make are limited because of Mae's personality. They can't make choices that Mae wouldn't make.⁴¹
- There is a feeling of uncertainty in *Night in the Woods*, as to whether the events in the game are really happening or not.⁴²
- "Its main theme—depression—is explored with the help of the round-the-clock mundane routine of the protagonist's activities (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127). As Caravella puts it, the game operates on "proceduralizing ethical decision-making"; it utilizes "repetition as a narrative mechanic" (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 128) and subverts established patterns of game design: it is an adventure game that fails to provide the possibility to explore (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 128)."⁴³
- The beginning of the game starts out with the player moving right to left. Most 2D platformers have the player primarily moving from left to right. Left to right movement usually represents moving forward, so moving right to left represents Mae coming back to her past.⁴⁴
- The player is not free to explore wherever they want. They are restricted to a specific area. This is not only needed for the game to work, but also symbolizes how Mae feels trapped, just like many of the other characters in Possum Springs, though in Mae's case, she was able to leave, but felt like she had to come back.⁴⁵
- A big theme of the game is that Possum Springs is dead. "the player exerts a highly limited influence on the game, but the restrained consequences of the limited choice that the player is given have a ludonarrative, symbolic function (Fiorilli 19). At one point in the game there are two dialogue options, one being 'You always have a choice', and the other—'You can always choose' (Fiorilli 38). Despite being alive, the character—and the player—are as helpless as the dead. Both dialogue options are rendered useless and as Fiorilli discusses it, death is the main theme of the game (19)."⁴⁶
- Through controlling Mae, the player can get to know who she is and relate to her by experiencing what she's experiencing and feeling what she's feeling through the choices they make, even though, in reality, they don't have much actual control over Mae's actions.⁴⁷
- The player can feel responsible for Mae's choices, even if all of the options

⁴¹Melanie Kreidler, "Playing with the Narrative of Mental Illness: Communication Beyond Serious Empathy Games," *BiD* 52 (June 2024), 10, <https://doi.org/10.1344/bid2024.52.03>.

⁴²Aleksandra Mochocka and Radosław Piotr Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism in *Night in the Woods*," *Anglica Wratislaviensia* 61, no. 2 (2023), 78, <https://doi.org/10.19195/0301-7966.61.2.6>.

⁴³Mochocka and Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism," 79.

⁴⁴Mochocka and Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism," 80.

⁴⁵Mochocka and Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism," 81.

⁴⁶Mochocka and Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism," 83.

⁴⁷Mochocka and Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism," 85-86.

are bad. This lets the player sympathize with Mae (456).⁴⁸

Conclusion

Night in the Woods takes advantage of what video games can uniquely do as a medium to tell its story in an effective way.

⁴⁸Kevin Veale, “‘If anyone’s going to ruin your night, it should be you’: Responsibility and affective materiality in *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods*,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 2 (2022), 456, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211014434>.