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The Unemployed Flâneur: The Weight of 'Playful' Walking in *Night in the Woods*

[SLIDE 1] I'm here today to discuss *Night in the Woods*, an independent videogame developed by a team of democratic socialists. I've displayed three images here: two screenshots from the game, and Picasso's *Trois Femmes.* My aim here is to draw out the connection between the three, to locate the semiology of Night in the Woods and in doing so to consider the following question: what is the hole that lies at the center of everything, that the character in this image is naming? To answer such a question we must of course actually discuss the game itself. *Night in the Woods* tells the story of Mae, a 20-year-old woman who returns to her hometown of Possum Springs, a fictional, destitute Pennsylvania mining town, after dropping out of college due to a mental breakdown. **[SLIDE 2]** She moves back in with her parents and attempts to reconnect with her friends Gregg, Bea, and Angus, who never got the chance to escape their hometown for a host of reasons, economic and emotional. **[SLIDE 3]** The first half of the game operates in a realist mode wherein little of note occurs: the player controls Mae each day as she wakes up in the afternoon, walks to the meagre downtown area of Possum Springs, and meets up with one of her friends at their job and asks if they'd be interested in hanging out after they finish their shift, followed by a scene of Mae and her friend of choice doing something together and discussing the stasis of living in a dead-end town. Mae's return home becomes a kind of nostalgic tourism, as she is housed and fed by her parents and wakes up late enough in the day to have her attempts to see friends be largely unhindered by the latter's work schedules. She is free from financial responsibility and from the socio-temporal structure of work, a freedom which leads to a certain level of resentment from the townsfolk and her friends, due to her unwillingness to get a job, and apparently squandering the opportunity of attending college.

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. Walking is transit absent its practicality: as Frederic Gros writes, "Walking is the best way to go more slowly than any other method that has ever been found… If you want to go faster, then don't walk, do something else: drive, slide, or fly."[1] 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. That Mae's sole mode of transportation is her two legs is subversive insofar as it is the mode of transport that is permitted by (or at the very least complementary to) her position outside of the system of wage labor. Such freedom is built into the temporal logic of the gameworld itself: As in many narrative-driven games, time does not move forward until the player takes certain actions to move the story forward; until they do, Possum Springs will hang in a single time of day, as though the Earth's rotation had been brought to a standstill. Mae (and the player) are therefore completely freed from the bounds of temporality itself, be it regulated clock-time or concrete time. It is tempting, then, to view Mae's walks about Possum Springs as an "inoperative operation,"[2] insofar as Mae is removing the utility from movement and thus releasing it from its economic purpose.

[SLIDE 4] It is similarly tempting to cast Mae as a contemporary flaneuse. However, if Mae is a flâneuse, then we must move beyond the notion of the urban stroller as the philosophical, masculine poet of Baudelaire and Sartre, invisible in the crowd, suffering from an

[1] Ibid. 2

[2] Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Destituent Power," in *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society* 32, (2014) p. 70.

enlightened alienation. First, the relaxing of the ruthless gender hierarchies (relative to the particular condition of modernity from which the flâneur emerges) allows a young woman to traverse a town alone with relative freedom. But it is the socioeconomic condition of Possum Springs that convert the flâneur from a vaunted literary category to a truly fringe element of society. The conditions of exteriority and anonymity inherent to the flaneur, the ability to see without being imprisoned by surrounding looks,[3] are undone by the surveilling gaze of the few remnants of a dying town. The intimacy of Possum Springs, brought about by its very destitution, ensure that the objects of the flaneur's gaze always gaze back. **[SLIDE 5]** As such, Mae's lackadaisical trips about town are noticed and remarked upon by the townsfolk; such as her cruel next-door neighbor, and her working-class best friend, both of whom openly criticize her refusal to enter the workforce.

And it is the very framing of Mae's flanerie as refusal that contains her play, sealing her off from inoperativity. For all its subversive qualities, pushing against the boundaries of utility, Mae's free movement is still a solitary act which must still contend with the social primacy of work, with a hegemonic conception of being that conceives of poverty as one's ontological foundation. Mae's inoperative movement does not rise to the valorization of the self as a form-of-life nor as a postwork being: the skepticism and scrutiny of her peers reinscribes Mae back into a binary of work/nonwork by casting her play as refusal. Her play is not intentional: to others she is always playing precisely because she is not working.

Any positive assertion of pleasure Mae might find in her flanerie is being constantly re-contained from the outside and as such redefined by negation: play becomes not-work. The inscription of seemingly autotelic play within the oppositional framework of refusal places Mae

[3] Stefan Morawski, "The Hopeless Game of *flânerie*", p. 185.

in a mode of ontological indeterminacy that colors our understanding of the character's mental health. Mae recounts how her illness begins in a monologue, which I've reproduced here:

[SLIDE 6]

> Do you know why I beat down Andy Cullen six years ago? I was playing this video game. And I was really into it. Played it like 24-7. Until this one afternoon, and suddenly, like, something broke. It was just like… pixels. The characters onscreen, I felt like I knew them. They weren't people anymore. They were just shapes. And their lines were just things someone had written. They never existed, they never had feelings, they never would exist, either. And it felt so sad. Like I'd just lost these real people. And this whole thing we had, it was just me, alone. And like that realization like dumped out of the screen and into real life[…] There was some guy walking by, and he was just shapes. Just like this moving bulk of… stuff. And I cried because nothing was there for me anymore[…] the next day was that softball game, and Andy was the pitcher when I was up. And he was just shapes too. Just lines someone wrote. Like nothing in there. And I was so scared and angry and just… I dunno. Before I knew it I was on top of him, smashing his face in with the bat. Just shapes. Red shapes all over the grass…

While there is not a direct causal relationship between the containment of Mae's play and her initial breakdown that occurs 6 years prior to the game's beginning, we can still see that this initial breakdown is caused by a failure of play. It should come as no surprise, then, that this dissociation Mae suffers from is ongoing, recurring through the entire game: we find out in the game's third act that she continues to be haunted by shapes in college, and the anxiety this way of seeing generates is the ultimate reason that she leaves school and returns home, and it is a mode of sight that permeates the entire game.

[SLIDE 7] Explaining how requires a brief description of the videogame's third act, which marks a shift away from the slow-paced realism and the introduction of a supernatural mystery story, the climax of which is the Mae and her friends' discovery of a cult operating out of Possum Springs. The cult lays the blame for Possum Spring's economic downturn at the feet of taxation and governmental regulation, and goes about solving their town's financial issues by sacrificing fringe members of society – "drifters, drunks, and delinquents," they say – to an unseen creature that lives in a hole in the abandoned mine near town. In exchange for the human

sacrifices, the creature apparently assures that some semblance of economic status quo is maintained for the town: the cult claims that as long as they continue the sacrifices, "Possums Springs survives." The cult speaks nostalgically of the town's bountiful past, and a member insists that "we can put this place back together, where it won't be just…" and Mae finishes the thought, inserting the final word: "shapes."

We see here the first answer to our starting question: the hole that lies at the center of everything, deep in the center of Possum Spring's bountiful past, is obviously the image of the constitutive exclusion that permits capitalism's very functionality, the human sacrifice that undergirds the fantasy of economic stability. But Mae also instinctively links that monster and the state of Possum Springs to her own mental deterioration, a connection that is suggested through the subtle ways in which the game's art style gestures to Mae's altered conditions of seeing. *Night in the Wood*'s visual aesthetic, as you've seen, is cartoonish, drawing on the art of children's books like those of Richard Scarry, depicting its characters as anthropomorphic animals, and rendering its scenes with an emphasis on clarity and simplicity. And it is that very simplicity that carries with it an additional layer of meaning vis-à-vis Mae's relationship to the economic system that she is immersed in. *Night in the Woods* frequently depicts objects so simply that portions of its world are reduced to geometric abstraction. **[SLIDE 8]** This is especially noticeable in the videogame's interiors, where the planes of depth of its exterior scenes are removed to the point where any trace of perspective or chiaroscuro are absent from the furthermost plane entirely, emphasizing the clearly discernable shapes that constitute each object. Take the interior of the 'Snack Falcon,' the game's fictional convenience store, which reduces its refrigerator to a series of increasingly smaller rectangles, and its drink machine to a collection of rectangles and T-Shapes (Figure 2). More striking is the back wall of the 'Video

Outpost "Too"' – the video rental store – which flattens its counter and back wall into a single plane, depicting its DVD rack, counter, cash register, and television entirely using different colored rectangles (Figure 3). Even the more complex objects that populate the interiors, such as the picture frames and grandfather clock in Mae's home, are rendered with a two-dimensional simplicity that makes the incomplete geometric forms (circles are reduced to arcs, rectangles with their corners rounded off, etc.) evident (Figure 4). *Night in the Woods* lays bare the constituent components of its world.

The starkness of the shapes clearly marks deterioration – both of Mae's mental state and the town itself – but it also signals an analytic mode that Mae is able to achieve through the indeterminate form of life she occupies. **[SLIDE 9]** The way in which that analytic mode functions can be explained through the videogame's subtle evocation of what Yve-Alain Bois refers to as the first period of Cubism's second proto-semiological phase, exemplified by Picasso's *Three Women* (1907) (Figure 5) and *Still Life with Liqueur Bottle* (1909) (Figure 6). "In the *Three Women*," remarks Bois, "the same geometric sign, the triangle, is used over and over with a different semantic function, each time determined by its context," a system that Picasso would generalize in 1909, meaning that the patterning unit would change, "becoming sometimes a lozenge, sometimes a square."[4] In this system, the grid of the pictorial surface motivates geometric patterning, granting the geometric units a "pictorial 'raison d'être' to the otherwise arbitrary geometricity of the unit itself."[5] While *Night in the Woods*' art still serves a mimetic function, moreso than Picasso's pieces, and clearly bears different concerns regarding the language of their respective mediums, this particular phase of Cubism is still instructive in

[4] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism" in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium, ed.* William Rubin, (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989) 180
[5] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," p. 181.

understanding how the relatively abstract geometric forms that are so overt in *Night in the Woods* function representationally; their arrangement within the frame, their "patterning" so to speak, grants them their figurative properties, bestowing the depthless shapes with their signifying purpose.

Yve-Alain Bois' understanding of Picasso's work as bearing a fundamentally semiological function seems to be derived from an interview with the artist, where he states that Surrealism represented "something that is more real than reality." Bois links Picasso's statement to the Russian formalists' idea that "the only reality is that of language itself," concluding that "when Picasso spoke of 'something more real than reality' he too meant that reality exists only insofar as it is constituted of, and by, a system of signs."[6] The geometric signs that Picasso deploys in the beginning period of his second proto-semiological phase reveals the arbitrariness of the way in which our reality is constructed, and *Night in the Woods* geometrical patterning can be understood as the same method transplanted into a different style. *Night in the Woods* reduces objects to their most basic geometric forms, and organizes those forms in such a way as to reconstruct a space that is comprehensible as a kind of reality, albeit one whose gross constituent units are immediately apprehensible. The space that emerges is incoherently coherent, its representational system of rectangles and circles made overt.

[SLIDE 10] This incoherence, this breakdown of the world into shapes, is the failure of a semiotic system of representation, it is the laying bare of the seams of the world. This system is semiotic and as such is ideological. Ideology is, as Althusser defines it, a lived relation to reality that is structured by and within the unconscious, it is the unity of one's real relation and imagined relation to the world. Ideology is what mediates our experience of the real, a will

[6] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," 172

expressed toward the world that allows the individual to experience the world as something simple and coherent.[7] What *Night in the Woods* is doing via its subtle reinscription of Cubism, is providing a visual representation of the breakdown of the unity of the ideological relation to reality. Herein lies the rest of the answer to the question: the hole at the center of everything is the nonexistent origin, it is, as Agamben identifies through Hegel and Benveniste[8], the originary negativity on which human consciousness, expressed through language, rests. It is the vacuum which ideology abhors. It is the sinkhole that is covered over by language. Mae's perception of the world as arbitrary shapes given meaning only through their context of placement, is a representation of the reality's unicity revealing itself as the product of a system from which she has been excluded. Ideology revealing itself is not an immediately liberatory realization: on the contrary, it is traumatic, haunting. But it is also the moment one's relation to reality can turn, for all reality is merely relation. At the end of *Night in the Woods,* Mae and her friends are left shaken by their encounter with the evil that lies beneath their town, but they are also indignant, triumphant, alive. One leaves them with sense that if the psychic disjunction of being excluded from one system of reality can be survived, then another system may eventually be written in its place. Thank you.

[7] Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism," in *For Marx*, trans Ben Brewster, (New York: Verso Books, 1965) p. 232-234.
[8] Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, Translated by Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p. 35-37.

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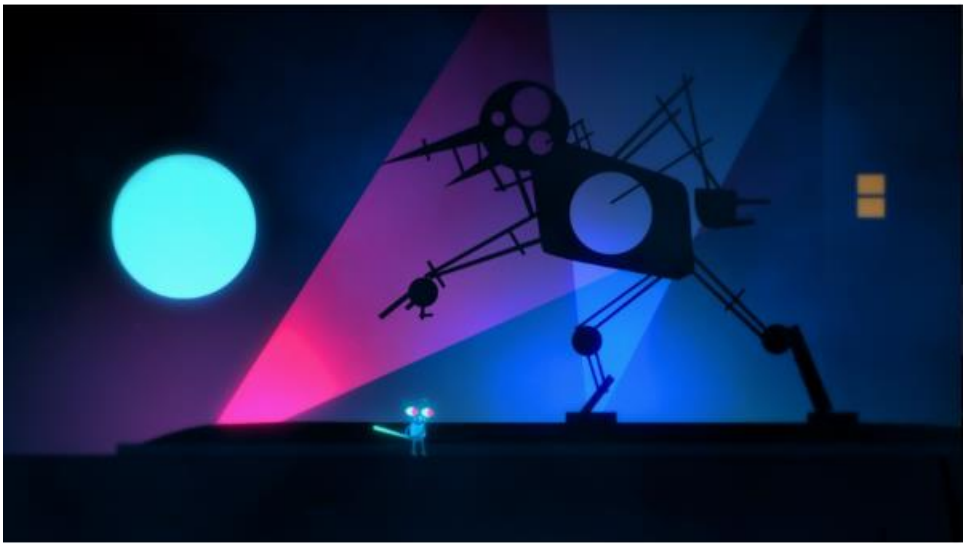

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