When We are No Longer

Instructions & Analysis

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<https://people.duke.edu/~cl428/web/assignments/final_project/index/index.html>

(Note:This analysis can also be downloaded at the “reference” section of the website)

**Summary (Spoiler Alert):**

*When We are No Longer* is a choice based text adventure game, in which the player reads through the story and make choices as Akihiro, a young programmer who has recently lost their lover to an epidemic. They live in a world where they can communicate with the dead as “Spirits”, an entity that transcends the physical and can only be seen through a Projection device that is ‘Connected’ to the Spiritual network. The Spirits will only be Connected to the homes of their loved one, and the Projection Room is the main place for one to talk and spend time with the dead. Citizens of this futuristic city can purchase Offerings for the Spirits, which are real life objects that can be ‘transmitted’ to the Spirit Realm using the Connection, to ensure that the Spirits adapt to their new way of existence. The network is controlled and managed by a government organization called the G.D.O (Government Data Output), where Akihiro works as a part of the Maintenance Team. The story begins in the hospital, where Akihiro struggles to come to terms with their lover’s death. They later realize that not only is their lover’s Spirit not Connected, in their place is a ‘Spirit’ that looks and acts exactly like Akihiro, who is clearly not dead.

Akihiro then investigates the matter, accompanied by their ‘Spirit’, who is given the name Fuyuhiro. They eventually discover that the “Spirits” are A.Is created by the government using each person’s personality data. What Akihiro does after they find out the truth is determined by the player’s decisions up to that point, which leads them to one of the 3 endings.

**Ending 1**: The player will reach this ending if they have make choices that are based on Akihiro’s personal feelings and irrationalities, and establish an understanding with the G.D.O. Akihiro will using their knowledge of the system to retrieve the ‘Spirit’ of their loved one and satisfy their own need to see them again. The reality is what one chooses to believe in, and Akihiro chooses to believe that the A.Is are the Spirits of the dead. They will work with the G.D.O after this ending and become the new Executive.

**Ending 2**: The player will reach this ending if they keep a skeptical attitude towards the G.D.O and approach situations rationally. Akihiro will collaborate with Fuyuhiro to install a reverse engineering program that retrieves important government information, and do insidious damage on the G.D.O’s reputation in the public. It is implied that eventually people will find out the truth behind the Spirits, and decide for themselves what comes next.

**Ending 3**: The player will reach this ending if the they sway between rational and selfish thoughts, getting an “in-between” ending. Akihiro will create a virus which temporarily corrupts all the Spirits. They will be captured by the government and put in prison. The government will interrogate Akihiro and question what they wish to accomplish with such a rash decision, and that not everyone sees the “truth” as Akihiro does. The game will end with the public not believing Akihiro’s words, and label them as a criminal.

**Hidden ending**: This ending can only be reached if the player chooses to modify “personality data” and “heuristics” when they conduct an experiment to Fuyuhiro AND reaches Ending 3. A new choice will appear after waiting for approximately 4 minutes. In this ending, Akihiro will break Fuyuhiro of their limitations as a “Spirit” because they think that humans may not be as capable as A.Is because A.Is are more malleable. Fuyuhiro, free to control the entire G.D.O network, maximizes their capacity by merging the consciousness of all Spirits into one. This means that the world will be dominated by this A.I, who is no longer Fuyuhiro but instead a collective intelligence made up of data. The end ends on an uncertain note with Akihiro wondering what the future of humanity would be like under the governance of a machine.

**Main Objective:**

I created a story on this medium because I wanted to make a more dynamic story that illustrates the complexity of humanity, a topic that is often discussed in Techno-Orientalism. There is never only one side of the story, and story telling in real life is never one sided, so I wish to incorporate the player as a participant and influence the protagonist’s decisions.

All of the concepts in my game tend to be interrelated and cannot be categorized in separate themes, but major themes in the story *When We are No Longer* is the juxtaposition between religion and the technology that is often depicted in science fiction. The lyrics of theme song in the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell (1995)* made an analogy between the Puppet Master and a God, suggesting that Makoto’s union with the Puppet Master is actually a sexual act engaged with a God. I have also done something similar in my story by referring to the A.Is as Spirits of the dead, and by making everyone in that universe believe this to be the truth, I hope to describe a technologically advanced universe in a religious undertone. This is enhanced by the frequent mention of Offerings, that ritual that is still common in Asian societies today, where one would burn paper money to honor the dead, believing that their spirit would receive the ‘money’ and use it to make themselves happy in the world beyond.

In the game I hope to illustrate the mentality for believing in religion is fundamentally similar to the desire of becoming the Posthuman. As N. Katherine Hayles says in her *How We Became the Posthuman*, it stems from an impractical dream that life can be perpetuated with just the mind and without the body. Both technology and religion focuses on the idea of transcendence, and technological advancements has opened up a gateway for this religious fantasy to come true, which is where Posthumanism comes in. Thus, in this fantasy, the distinction between machines and humans are blurred, because the concept of the mind is equivalated with data and information processed through machines. In a sense, through transcendence through technology, we can become “God-like” in the religious sense.

I would like to argue through the story that this “God-like” version of humanity is no longer the same as the human version of ourselves, because the standards in which we understand the world is shifted through this transition. The story is mostly in agreement with Hayles that humans and machines are not the same thing and do not share the same experiences due to their physicality, in Ending 1, Akihiro perceives their lover’s A.I as another version of the human counterpart, and because of this, they eventually wed with their “Spirit”. This demonstrates that this interpretation differs amongst the various definition of ‘same’. Just like how Ending 3 questions the canon of “truth”, ultimately, the discussion of Posthumanism and religion explores how we define ourselves as human, and the multiple endings of this game hopes to demonstrate how identity can be interpreted in different ways.

In the following section I will highlight the main features of the story and explain how they contribute to the central theme of the story.

***Akihiro vs Fuyuhiro***

The main plot of the game begins when Akihiro encounters their own “Spirit”. After their parents give the Spirit the name Fuyuhiro, the two are often seen investigating together throughout the story. While it is constantly mentioned throughout the story that Fuyuhiro behaves in the same way as Akihiro, this starts to change as they investigate together and learn the true nature of the Spirits. As the story goes on, Fuyuhiro gradually starts to differ from Akihiro in terms of their capabilities and their knowledge, and in the end Akihiro and Fuyuhiro are no longer seen as the same. Fuyuhiro becomes much more capable than Akihiro, but is bound by their own incorporeality, while Akihiro, despite being less knowledgeable, can move freely in a corporeal world and take action against the government. The two of them perform different roles in the story, and this contrast summarizes my previous point stating that humans and machines cannot be the same.

***Capabilities and limitations of A.Is***

In continuation with my previous topic, Fuyuhiro and Akihiro reacting differently to the same course of events is not sufficient as an argument because this does not highlight Fuyuhiro’s identity as a machine. However, the second half of the story delves into the composition of the A.Is in the *WWNL* universe and reveals that because they are not real spirits and rely on computer logic and programming, they can thus be modified accordingly. Akihiro, in order to investigate further, conducts experiments on Fuyuhiro to see if they could successfully modify an A.Is behavior. Based on the types of experiments, Fuyuhiro would react in violent ways when their data is modified, and while these types of experiments to living beings would cause severe ethical controversy, both Akihiro and Fuyuhiro go through with the experiment because they have already subconsciously accepted that A.Is, due to their modifiable nature, are not ‘alive’. This arbitrary distinction is also shown in the Christmas episode of the *Black Mirror* series *“White Christmas”*, where A.Is are created to assist their human counterpart and are abused into submission when they display any rebellious behavior. A power dynamic is established between the modifier and the modified, and through this means the “Other”, as expressed in Techno-Orientalist terms, is successfully identified.

However, in the hidden ending, this “weakness” of the A.I renders A.Is to be superior. Their ability to be modified gives them potential to achieve beyond human capacity using its identity as a “we”, forming a collective consciousness. By giving Fuyuhiro the ability to modify themselves on their own will, they become the ideal Posthuman in Hayle’s definition, because they are in complete control of their existence. Yet at the same time, humans can still technically be identified as superior because humans are the ones that enabled the A.Is. I hope to use this duality of being both the superior and the inferior to reflect the Techno-Orientalist notion of a technologically superior and racially inferior.

***Gender Fluidity and “They”***

Everyone in the WWNL universe use a gender neutral third person pronoun “they”, suggesting that none of them identify themselves as either male or female. Implied gender in names are often mashed up with contrasting traits in the character’s body and dress. (For example, the bartender Anival is described to wear silver nail polish, and the Executive Giano of the G.D.O wears suits and high heels). We are currently seeing a trend where we prefer to have a choice in terms of our identity, and that is exhibited in the rise of a newly defined non-binary gender, a “gender” that transcends the biological “sex”. This represents the desire for us to take control over our physicality, which is a very Posthuman progression. Although preferring to choose our own gender may give us more agency to express our individuality, in the context Posthumanism, it ironically pushes humans towards the singularity of machines, where everyone becomes a “they”, just like the “we”. Through amplifying this current trend in my story, despite the constant differentiation between the A.Is and the humans, I wish to communicate the lingering desire for us to become the A.Is, the Posthuman, and the “God”.

**Game Cheat Sheet:**

**Ending 1:** “It is lonely when..”🡪 “Impressive”🡪 “Home”🡪 “Yes”🡪 “Have I died?”🡪 “Hospital”

🡪 “Spirits never existed..”🡪 “Connection&Heuristics”

**Ending 2:** “It is lonely when…”🡪 “Sketchy”🡪 “Natt’s house”🡪 “At least I still get to…”🡪 “Yes”

“This cannot be me”🡪 “GDO”🡪 “Those fucking…”🡪 “Heuristics&Connection”

**Ending 3:** “There is something special”🡪 “Sketchy”🡪 “CyBeer”🡪 “No”🡪 “This cannot be me”🡪

“GDO”🡪 “Those fucking..”🡪 “Heuristics&Personality”

**Hidden ending**: Same as ending 3, when reaching “the End”, enjoy the music and a new option will

replace “The End”.

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