

Ghosts of the Self and Society:Supernatural Horror
and Psychological Struggle in *Night in the Woods**
A Game Analysis

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*Game 471

Night in the Woods (2017, Infinite Fall) is a narrative driven game set in the fictional town of Possum Springs. This game follows the protagonist, Mae Borowsky, as she returns home after dropping out of college only to confront her personal psychological struggles and unravel a sinister mystery beneath her town. The supernatural horror themes seen in the Possum Springs community of *Night in the Woods* are used to depict individual and communal psychological trauma, mental illness, despair, and fear of the unknown. Through the combination of psychological literature, game criticism, and Nicolas Bourriaud's book *The Exform*, this paper attempts to answer how the game, *Night in the Woods* uses supernatural horror to depict personal, psychological struggle.

Night in the Woods plants its supernatural horror in the decay of Possum Springs, a town that characterized by the Rust Belt Gothic genre. As Mochocka and Walczak explain, Rust Belt Gothic transforms classic Gothic themes, such as haunting and decay, into narratives about post-industrial towns plagued by unemployment, social stagnation, and fading community identity¹. In this context, Possum Springs itself becomes haunted, not by ghosts, but rather by lost futures and broken economic promises. The game's repetitive structure, where Mae walks the same routes and sees the same people every day, mirrors the town's decline. Consalvo and Phelps note that this environmental and procedural storytelling presents a sense of entrapment and emotional weariness, reinforcing the connection between place and psychological state². A study on financial insecurity and mental health found a strong link between economic strain and elevated stress and anxiety levels³. The characters in *Night in the Woods*, like Mae's parents, Bea, and other residents, experience the trapped cycles of underemployment, grief, and exhaustion. As the Paste Magazine article argues, the game portrays these struggles through visible emotional exhaustion and generational tension⁴. The merging of economic and emotional ruin aligns with Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of the exform. In *The Exform*, Bourriaud describes how society casts out what it cannot use, things such as places, people, and histories. Yet despite being excluded, these things persist to haunt society⁵. Possum Springs, and the people in it, are exforms of the American Dream. They are discarded by capitalism but still present, lingering in memory and space.

While the economic decay of Possum Springs creates a backdrop of communal

¹Aleksandra Mochocka & Radosław P. Walczak, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) realism in *Night in the Woods*," *Anglica Wratislaviensia*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.19195/0301-7966.61.2.6> p. 80

²Mia Consalvo & Andrew Phelps, "Getting through a Tough Day (Again). What Possum Springs Says about Mental Health and Social Class." *American Journal of Play*, vol. 12, no. 3, July 21, 2021, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1284139.pdf> p. 351

³Ramona Nasr et al., "Financial insecurity and mental well-being: experiences of parents amid the lebanese economic crisis." *BMC Public Health*, vol. 24, October 31, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20544-3> p. 5

⁴Salvatore Pane "Night in the Woods is the Working Class Fiction I've Been Waiting For." *Paste*, April 18, 2017 <https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/night-in-the-woods/night-in-the-woods-is-the-working-class-fiction-iv-n-p>

⁵Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, 2015, trans. Erik Butler (London, UK Verso, 2016), ch 1-28

despair, *Night in the Woods* also explores psychological trauma on a deeply personal level through the main protagonist, Mae Borowski. Mae's erratic behaviour, dissociative episodes, and recurring dream sequences offer a view of her internal state, revealing how mental illness can manifest in surreal and haunting ways. Mae's behaviour throughout the game indicates a struggle with undiagnosed mental illness. She experiences violent outbursts, memory lapses, and what she refers to as "zero self control." Mae is an unreliable narrator due to her unstable perception of reality. As Kreitler argues, *Night in the Woods* deliberately destabilizes empathy by presenting mental illness not through clarity or resolution, but through ambiguity. Mae is not a character that presents inspiration or recover, rather she is complex. Kreitler writes that the game "forges empathetic bonds while complicating players' empathy, balancing sameness and difference between playable character and player,"⁶ presenting mental illness as a deeply human yet deeply private experience. This instability becomes most evident in the dream sequences. These dreams are not only symbolic of her inner struggles, they are sites where the supernatural and psychological merge. As Mochocka and Walczak explain, in particular, the game's fourth act blurs boundaries between hallucination, magic, and metaphor. They argue that the supernatural may not be real but rather be a reflection of Mae's perception filtered through trauma and dissociation⁷. This meshing between psychological distress and horror aligns with Giovanni Caputo's research on strange face illusions and dissociative states. In clinical studies, mirror gazing under low light conditions has been shown to trigger feelings of derealization, identity fragmentation, and visual hallucinations⁸, all things that are experienced by Mae later in the game. Her encounters with cultists, ghosts, and monstrous beings can be read as externalizations of a self she no longer recognizes. Even outside of her dreams, Mae shows classic signs of dissociation and depression. She describes a "little hole" inside of her, one that she can't explain but constantly feels. This internal void parallels with what is used to describe as detachment from trauma. As her past slowly comes to light in the game, especially her violent outburst in school, it becomes clear that Mae's present day instability is rooted in her unsolved trauma.

The climactic reveal of a cult operating beneath Possum Springs shows the game's strong shift into supernatural horror. The cult is composed of older townspeople that have been secretly sacrificing members of the community to the mysterious "Black Goat" entity to keep the town from "dying". On a narrative level, it explains the disappearances, like the one of Casey, and rumors that haunt the town. However, on a symbolic level, it represents the intergenerational trauma and moral decay of a community that sacrifices its future to preserve its

⁶Melanie Kreitler. "Playing with the Narrative of Mental Illness: Communication Beyond Serious Empathy Games." *BiD*, vol. 52, June, 2024, <http://fima-docencia.ub.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/22315> p. 3

⁷Mochocka, "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) realism", p. 89

⁸Giovanni B. Caputo "Strange-face-in-the-mirror illusions: specific effects on derealization, depersonalization, and dissociative identity." *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, vol. 24, no. 5, April 3, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2023.2195394> p. 598-601

past. This act of sacrifice reflects structural violence. The cult's victims, like Casey, had no clear place in Possum Spring's economic order. These victims were not chosen at random, they were chosen because they were outsiders, drifters, or young people without a direction, which reflects on the ways that real world institutions marginalize the vulnerable⁹. The Kotaku Review describes this turn as a strange and unexpected shift, yet ultimately argue that the horror twist is earned since it dramatizes the game's central concern the fear that things will never get better, and the desperate things people do to avoid facing the truth¹⁰.

Beyond dialogue and narrative, the game uses procedural repetition and environmental design to reinforce its themes of psychological and communal trauma. The way the game is structured, with players guiding Mae through the same town layout everyday, creates a sense of routine that embeds emotional meaning into the architecture and layout itself¹¹. Possum Springs is designed to evoke stagnation. The town's visual landscape, with boarded up store fronts and empty lots, tell a story of decline. These things are not just background details but rather are narrative elements that symbolize blocked futures, dead ends, and the quiet violence of poverty. Repeating the same walking routines, seeing the same NPCs in the same places, this shows the numbness of living in a place where nowhere to go, both emotionally and economically. Possum Springs is filled with spaces and people pushed to the margins of social relevance, this echoes Bourriaud's *The Exform*¹². The player is immersed in the routines of these forgotten lives. Rather than escape or action, the gameplay centers on small conversations, stalled dreams, and fading connections, all of which build a sense of quiet despair that underlies the eventual horror turn. The town functions like a psychological map. The broken infrastructure and looping days mirror the characters' emotional states. Trauma is not only told but rather lived through repetition and lack of progress. The supernatural horror that erupts late in the game feels like it is earned because it emerges from a place that has long been haunted, not by monsters but by memories.

Night in the Woods uses supernatural horror to explore both personal and collective trauma. Mae's dissociation, the town's economic decay, and the cult's desperate rituals are not just eerie plot points but rather metaphors for psychological struggle and social exclusion. The game's slow pace and repetitive structure mirror emotional stagnation, while its dreamlike horror sequences reflect Mae's fractured mental state. By grounding its horror in the everyday realities of working class despair and mental illness, the game reveals how trauma haunts both people and places. Drawing on Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of *The Exform*, it shows that what society casts out, like Mae, Casey, or Possum Spring itself, continues to shape societies core¹³. In the end, *Nigh in the Woods* is not

⁹Bourriaud, *The Exform*, Ch 2

¹⁰Riley MacLeod, "Night In The Woods: The Kotaku Review." *Kotaku*, February 24, 2017 <https://kotaku.com/night-in-the-woods-the-kotaku-review-1792726026> n.p

¹¹Mia Consalvo "Getting through a Tough Day (Again)" p. 351

¹²Bourriaud, *The Exform*, Ch 1

¹³Bourriaud, *The Exform*, Ch 1

about ghosts in the traditional sense. It's about the things we try to forget like pain, failure, fear, and how they quietly shape us.

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