

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Night in the Woods

**Platform:** Windows, OS X, Linux, Playstation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch

**Genre:** Adventure

**Release Date:** February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017

**Developer:** Infinite Fall

**Publisher:** Finji

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Bethany Hockenberry and Scott Benson

## Overview

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*At the end of everything, hold onto anything.*

Mae Borowski is a college dropout, returning home after three semesters away at school. Struggling with depression, anger issues, and dissociative episodes, she returns to her hometown of Possum Springs in search some something safe and familiar. It doesn't take long for her to reunite with her friends, settling right back into the life she knew in high school: parties, hooliganism, and band practices.

But things have changed in the two years that Mae has been away from Possum Springs. Local stores have closed down, only a few remaining amongst the opening of several larger chains. Buildings once thriving are now decrepit and abandoned. And to top it all off, Mae begins to have strange nightmares involving ghostly spirits that leave her with ominous feelings about the future.

Feelings that become all too real when she witnesses a kidnapping occur on the night of the annual harvest festival. Disturbing things are happening in Possum Springs, and Mae's desire for understanding will drag her right into the center of them.

## Characters

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- **Margaret Borowski** – Mae is a young, female cat, and the lead protagonist of *Night in the Woods*. Headstrong and snarky, Mae is seen as a troublemaker by many in the town, something she fully plays into, often cracking jokes about performing heinous crimes. However, beneath her happy appearance lies a litany of mental health problems, ranging from depression, dissociative episodes, anger issues, and negative body image. She has large, red eyes that she refers to as nightmare eyes, a chip cut from her ear due to a dog bite, and is never seen without her iconic orange sweatshirt emblazoned with a null sign. She genuinely cares about others, and what others think of her, but she occasionally has issues understanding the perspectives of others until she says something she later regrets. When she does mess up, she goes out of her way to apologize for her actions and tries to make things right with the person she hurt.
- **Gregory Lee** – The best friend of Mae and boyfriend of Angus, Gregg, is an orange fox one year Mae's senior. He is loud, extremely excitable, and rebellious, traits that caused a quick friendship between him and Mae, and led to their tendency to commit petty crimes together during their high school days. After Mae left Possum Springs, Gregg got himself a job working at the Snack Falcon convenience store and stopped committing crimes. His usual outfit consists of a pair of jeans and a black leather jacket over a grey shirt, and he often keeps several knives on his person. However, like Mae, his cheerful exterior hides, or may be a symptom of, some mental health problems. It is speculated by several characters that he may have bipolar disorder, and Gregg himself admits to having both good and bad days when you choose to hang out with him. He thinks very poorly of himself, believing that he didn't have a future until he met Angus, and refers to himself as "parking lot trash". He fears constantly that he isn't a good person, and that one day Angus will see that and leave him.
- **Beatrice Santello** – Bea is a young, female crocodile and former childhood friend of Mae. Exceptionally intelligent and hardworking, Bea was the valedictorian of her and Mae's high school class, and although she aced her college applications, she was forced to remain in Possum Springs to help take care of the family business when her mother succumbed to cancer during her senior year, an event that led to Bea's personality becoming rather cold and aloof. She had been friends with Mae up until 7<sup>th</sup> grade, at which point they drifted apart. She met Angus the year after and became close friends with him, eventually taking both Mae and Casey's place in their band until Mae's return. She wears a long, black dress, leggings, and boots, with an ankh necklace. Bea's hardships have set her on

a path firmly grounded in reality and obligation. After losing her mother to cancer, her father's mental state deteriorated, leading to the loss of her childhood home. Bea felt forced to take up the responsibilities of managing the family business, resulting in a strained relationship with her father. Bea copes with her life by smoking heavily and occasionally going to parties hosted by her friend several towns over, where she pretends to be living her dream life as a college student.

- **Angus Delaney** – Angus is a large bear and boyfriend to Gregg. Quiet and shy, Angus is a solitary individual, preferring to spend time either alone or with Gregg. Due to his extremely abusive upbringing, in which his father beat him regularly and his mother withheld food and locked him in the pantry, Angus developed a tendency to hide his emotions, often appearing subdued. During this time, he tried to communicate psychically to his neighbors, hoping they would help him, although it never worked. This led to a skeptical nature and a love of science, trusting only in things that could be proven to be true. Despite this, Angus genuinely cares for other people, and deals with his own stress by cooking. Feeling trapped in Possum Springs, a place that sometimes makes him feel like a failure, he and Gregg intend to move away as soon as they save up the money to do so.
- **The Cult** – The Cult is the primary antagonistic force of the game. Made up of several well-off members of the Possum Springs community, the Cult worships an evil God-like creature known as the Black Goat that lives in a pit hidden within the shut down mine. The Cult was originally formed by Ed Skudder, who stumbled upon the pit and the Black Goat while searching for missed minerals in the mine. After his coworker Jim Dorney fell into the pit, Jim was contacted by the Black Goat, promising him that if sacrifices were brought, the town would keep on going and not fall into ruin as it had been since the mines had shut down. Jim preyed on the desperations of his fellow ex-miners, bringing them to the pit to “hear the song”, and formed the Cult, working since the 1990s to continue bringing sacrifices to the Black Goat, 39 by the time of the game's end. The Cult's one rule: Don't take anyone who will be missed.

### **Minor Characters:**

- **Casey Hartley** – Best friend to Mae and Gregg, former drummer of their band, and partner in petty crimes, Casey was the first victim of the cult within the time span of the game. He talked often of jumping onto the trains running through town and just leaving, riding the rails to his heart's content, and so it was assumed to be when he was kidnapped and sacrificed by the Cult.
- **The Borowski Family** – Stan and Candy Borowski, Mae's father and mother, are hardworking members of the Possum Springs community. Mae's father worked in the mines before they shut down, and has had several jobs since then as the town's economy died. Mae's mother was forced to get a job doing administrative

work at the church after an incident 6 years prior to the game when Mae seriously injured a young man at a softball game during a dissociative episode.

- **Jeremy Warton** – Germ Warfare, and he will correct you profusely if you try and call him Jeremy, is a good friend to Gregg and Mae. A young bird a few years the group's junior, Germ isn't seen to have many life ambitions, often hanging out around the abandoned Food Donkey alongside the "Crust Punk" drifters that pass through the town on the trains. Even so, Germ has a large love for nature and the environment, taking care of a raccoon that he found just outside of town that he named Rabies.
- **Eide** – A member of the Cult, Eide is the primary antagonistic character found throughout Night in the Woods. He is the member seen abducting a kid during Harfest, and found stalking the members of the group during their investigations into the abduction. He is seemingly blessed by the Black Goat, as he has the ability to move through walls and perform actions no human should be able to.
- **The Black Goat** – A god-like being living within "The Hole at the Center of Everything" within the abandoned mine. The Black goat sings to those seeking answers, those that have nothing else to turn to and offers them an evil deal. If they will sacrifice people to feed its hunger, it will grant their wishes, or grant them powers beyond the abilities of normal people. It is vicious, and is said to have roamed through various locations before ending up in the pit in Possum Springs.
- **The Sky Cat** – A god-like being that Mae encounters within her nightmares. The Sky Cat claims to have been visited by many beings through the ages, all coming to ask it questions that have no meaning. It claims not to be a god, but views all of eternity as happening in instants, with the start just moments ago and the end only moments away. It is uncaring and distant to all but itself, taking no stock in the people that have visited it. It says Mae is swimming out to sea, towards dark beings, and that she will be forgotten.
- **The Janitor** – An unknown, older bird that claims to be a janitor. He is the first person Mae sees upon returning to Possum Springs, fixing a door that he just broke inside the bus station. He shows up a few times through the story after that, first playing the Forest God at the Harfest stage play, then saying he is fixing a door during a dream sequence while Mae recovers from falling off a cliff, and finally during the epilogue, providing Mae some helpful advice before disappearing. He is kind, but distant for most of the game.

## Breakdown

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Night in the Woods is a narrative-heavy adventure game that focuses on the themes of mental illness, self-improvement, faith, and uncertainty. It does this in an unusual way: by restricting the choices and gameplay of the player.

In Night in the Woods, the gameplay choices are limited. For the most part, the game functions with the player controlling Mae. Through Mae, the player can explore the town by walking or jumping through it. She can leap up onto telephone lines, explore the rooftops, and even go inside some buildings. In certain areas Mae can interact with the scenery to get a line or two of dialogue expositing on her connection to the area, or she can talk to most of the local townsfolk, but that is the extent of her general gameplay mechanics. Some dialogue options may give you a choice in how you respond to them, but beyond a slight difference in information Mae is provided, the overall plot is not impacted. You simply explore, learning more about the members of the town, their problems, and how they fit into this small little world. The game only progresses along the storyline once the player has talked to either Bea or Gregg, which will pull the player into either band practice, a Guitar Hero-like rhythm game, or a storyline segment exclusive to the person the player chose to hang out with. Outside of these two characters, the town is fully open to discover. The player can choose how much of the world they see and interact with. And while the story is complete and understandable by only interacting with Bea or Gregg and playing only through the story segments, doing so misses out on the greater picture that the game provides.

Possum Springs is a town on the verge of death. Everywhere the player looks, something is going wrong. Buildings are boarded up, sometimes literally, as they sit empty and decaying. Businesses are closing, only to open a week later as something new. Statues on the exteriors of buildings crack and break apart, elevator call buttons fall off and shock people, and massive storms roll through the town every few years, causing untold levels of destruction. Not even the citizens are free from the decline. Every day, as Mae walks through the city, community members will talk about how they think they need to get a new job, or a second job, because they aren't making enough money to make ends meet. Their hours are being cut, bills are piling up, and emergencies drain their savings. Mae's own family is suffering through this as her father is forced to work a low paying, back breaking job at the Ham Panther grocery store while Mae's mother works at the church, and even between the two of them they are unsure if they will be able to keep their home for much longer.

The town, once booming and thriving due to the local mine, has become a mere shadow of what it once was. More than two decades on from its closure, the impact continues to be felt. As more and more residents move away, either to attend university or at a hope for a better life, the town gets worse and worse. Less workers means less income to local businesses, which means a further tightening of hours and wages, which causes the spiral to tighten ever inwards. It is no wonder, then, that when the Black Goat sings to Ed Skudder, telling him that there is a way to save his beloved town, he latches onto the opportunity, and brings he fellow former mine workers to hear the Black Goat's song.

As the tagline of the game says: At the end of everything, hold onto anything. And for the Cult, that anything is the Black Goat's promise that it will restore Possum Springs to its former glory.

This is the faith and uncertainty of the Cult. They wholeheartedly believe in the Black Goat. They fear that without continuing to sacrifice people to the Black Goat, Possum Springs will die. The kids will continue to move away, storms will continue to destroy the city, and one day soon Possum Springs will no longer exist. They would prefer the stagnation of the town, keeping it in its perpetual decline, to seeing it end.

This is, of course, not a sentiment shared by the protagonists of the story. And each of the protagonists has their own tales of mental illness, self-improvement, faith, and uncertainty. For Mae, those stories come mostly through the interactions with the townsfolk, and especially with her mother. For Bea and Gregg, we learn it through their exclusive storyline choices, and for Angus, we learn it mostly through how other characters treat him, and through his own small story segment.

Each character's story is portioned out to you depending on your choices on who to interact with. For most days, the player can choose to end the day by hanging out with either Bea or Gregg. The player will then be treated to a story segment featuring Mae and the player's choice, often including a small mini-game. While the player can choose to hang out with a different character each time the choice is offered, it is recommended to hang out with the same person each day, so as to fully experience their storyline.

Should the player choose Gregg, the player is treated to several events involving Mae and Gregg's return to committing crimes. This includes stealing from the abandoned Food Donkey, and then destroying an abandoned car and taking its battery to build a robot the very next day. However, the more the player drags Gregg back into his old habits, the more silent and sullen Angus gets. It comes out that Angus had a horrible childhood, abused constantly by his parents. When he met Gregg, he felt like Gregg saved him. And in turn, Angus provided Gregg a rock, and steadying figure that he could rely on, one that tempered his impulsive nature. Gregg feels like he doesn't deserve Angus, that he needs to change and become better for Angus, and fears that if he doesn't, he will lose him. As much as he enjoys doing crimes with Mae, he recognizes that he needs to stop endangering his future, and that both he and Mae need to grow up, and change into better people. In the end, both Gregg and Angus hold onto each other, to support each other in the good times and the bad.

Should the player choose Bea, the player is treated to several events showing how vastly different the two of them are. Mae is a wild child, whereas Bea is serious, and takes no nonsense from Mae. Mae drags Bea to a mall and steals stuff, and at the end of the night Bea makes Mae return the stolen goods. She accompanies Bea to a work call repairing a furnace and subsequently destroys it. She goes to dinner with Bea and her father, and almost every option Mae chooses will lead to a failed dinner. Finally attends a party a town over with Bea. This is when we find out that Bea is exceptionally angry with Mae for giving up on college. Bea wanted to attend college badly, but felt forced to stay home

and take care of her father and the family business, while Mae got to live out Bea's dream, only to abandon it. Through a long and emotional conversation, Bea accepts that she had been a bit too tied down in her obligations, and she needs to open up and have fun sometimes, whereas Mae needs to do the opposite. She clings to her job and her strained family in the face of her uncertain future.

Both of these storylines are impossible to miss. While the player may only see parts of each storyline in a playthrough, the game won't progress without experiencing these events. Important dialogue options can't be skipped, and mini-games can't be failed. For example, if the player fails at stealing during the trip to the mall, it will continue to give the player chances until they succeed. This is not true of the secondary storylines that play out across the two weeks in Possum Springs, of which there are many.

The secondary storylines that occur across the game can all be missed, and while they do contribute to the overall narrative of the game, expanding the world and the characters, they don't directly impact the core narrative like the sections with Bea and Gregg. The player can interact with several players every day, and in doing so work out their story. Talking to Selma every day and listening to her new poems will make her show up at the Library with a poetry group when you go there to research ghosts. Visiting the church every day lets the player learn about the kind-hearted pastor and the local drifter who sleeps across the road, as well as see your mother, who will eventually take Mae to a place she used to hang out at as a child. Mae can find rat babies in an abandoned parade float, nursing them back to health with stolen pretzels. Almost every character has something new to say each day that fleshes them out, and provides the player with small glimpses into the world as it changes.

And, at the end of almost every day, Mae falls into a nightmare, where she must explore a strange terrain to find four ghost musicians before seeing a large spiritual animal. There are 3 exceptions. The very first dream sequence, after a party where Mae becomes exceptionally drunk, has Mae find and destroy a large statue reminiscent of the one she said freaked her out at college. The second comes on the night she witnesses a kidnapping at Harfest (the local harvest festival), where the only action is walking slowly to the left through the woods, shrieks playing constantly until you come to an old abandoned well, at which point the audio changes to a deep rumbling sound and the dream cuts to black. The final time comes during the final dream sequence, in which Mae meets the Sky Cat.

While the events before Harfest mostly focus on character interactions and building the world in which the game is set, the story focus after the kidnapping takes a sharp turn to the activities of the Cult. While Mae can still interact with all the townspeople each day to find out what is going on in the rest of the town, the hangout sessions become opportunities to investigate the activities of the 'ghost' that kidnapped the kid. The player first visits the Library to research ghost activity throughout Possum Springs History, and then over the course of several days investigates those haunted locations, running into Cult member Eide spying on them each time. Finally, Mae and the group will head into the woods, and find proof of the Cult as they plan to murder one of their own. And, when

they are caught, they run, getting shot at as Mae falls off a cliff.

Finally, after a dream sequence where an injured Mae walks home through a barren and destroyed town, she returns to the mine to try and end the Cult once and for all. Joined by her friends, she learns that the Cult is trying to ‘save’ Possum Springs by sacrificing those that won’t be missed, including, in the past, her good friend Casey. They share this because they know that the Black Goat has been singing to Mae, trying to get her to join the Cult, to take over after the older generation has moved on. As they leave, Eide tries to drag Mae back down to the pit, causing a cave-in that traps the Cult in the mine with the Black Goat. After her near-death experience, Mae finally decides that she is done pining for a past that she can no longer have; she needs to grow up, keep moving forward, and hope for a better future. Because, even if it ends with her dying, and Possum Springs getting destroyed, it will hurt, and feeling that pain will mean that it was all worth something.

She chooses to hold onto, above all else, her friends and family, because no matter what else happens, they will always be there for her.

And that is the beauty of *Night in the Woods*. Its decision to focus on its core narrative over all else, including gameplay, let it create a tightly crafted story that also allows the player to expand their experience with optional content if they so choose. Whether the player decides to explore the town fully every day and experience the rich stories of all the side characters, or if the player moves directly from their house to hanging out with Bea or Gregg, they will still see every moment of Mae’s journey from college dropout yearning for her childhood to young adult, ready and willing to make the changes necessary to improve herself.

## **Strongest Element**

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The restriction on player choice, forcing the player’s core narrative along a tightly controlled central path, provides a strong and impactful gameplay experience. No matter what choices the player makes, Mae will encounter the same core events, each of which play a key role on starting her on the path towards realizing she needs to choose hope and progress, even if it comes with pain, over stagnation and dreams of a bygone youth. While the player can choose to interact with most citizens of Possum Springs and learn that most are going through the same process that Mae is, doing so only serves to enhance an already complete and fully fleshed out narrative arc.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The inclusion of the Black Goat, and the implication that he is completely real and impacting the area around Possum Springs, feels out of place and unnecessary within the overall narrative of the game. The first 7 days of the game’s narrative focuses almost exclusively on Mae and her friends, exploring their characters in depth. The player is exposed to their personal lives, their issues with mental health, and how each deals with



those issues in different ways. Besides the dream sequences, there are no implications of any supernatural elements within the town until the kidnapping on night 7, during Harfest. Even following this, all the actions perceived by Mae as being supernatural are the actions of a single Cult member stalking the group. The actions of the Cult could have been tied into the older generation's refusal to let Possum Springs die, and potentially their own struggles with mental health and a lack of proper health services, medication, or healthy coping mechanisms.

## Highlight

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Despite my view that the Black Goat and the supernatural elements were the weakest portions of *Night in the Wood's* narrative, it did lead to the strongest scene in the game. Throughout the optional side narratives, it is implied that gods, in the mythology of the world, represent a lack of control. The gods are what people turn to when they have nothing else to hold onto, when all is lost and they are beyond hope. When Mae returns to Possum Springs, that is the state she is in: lost, confused, grasping wildly for a hint of normalcy in a very uncertain future. When she loses control at a party and becomes blackout drunk, despite not enjoying alcohol, her nightmares begin. Nightmares that are implied to be caused by the singing of the Black Goat, reaching out to a newly lost soul. Mae, however, grows as she reconnects with her friends, realizing that how she is being extremely self-destructive, and that she has to start dealing with her mental health issues.

So when the Black Goat reaches out to Mae one final time as she works to escape from the collapsed mines, Mae finds that she can no longer understand its song. She decides then and there that she will grasp onto hope, both for herself and the future, because even if that hope fails, she will feel something, and that will have made it worth it. She chooses control over her own life, and over her ability to continue growing. She will continue confronting her own problems and working through them, with the help of her friends and family.

## Critical Reception

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**Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw – *The Escapist*** – Croshaw praises *Night in the Woods* strong writing and overall storyline, and he respects the developers for “drawing a line” design wise and focusing on its strongest aspects, despite it coming at the cost of a slow pacing and a lack of distinct gameplay. **Review Score:** Worth checking out. [1]

**Kat Brewster – *The Guardian*** – Brewster views the game as a narrative-driven experience, one that relies heavily on strong characterization and excellent dialogue. She finds that the game rewards “the patient and the curious”, providing players that take the opportunity to explore the crumbling town of Possum Springs with understated and clever dialogue, placed perfectly to evoke the best emotions for the scene, whether that is melancholic yearning for years gone by, or uncomfortable silence caused by Mae's temperamental outbursts. **Review Score:** 5/5 [2]

**Kallie Plagge – Gamespot** – Plagge complements Night in the Woods’ ability to tell a story that is at once both intensely personal and widely relatable, especially to anybody that has suffered severe bouts of depression, or who have grown up during the current age of economic uncertainty. While the gameplay occasionally distracts from the strong narrative through line, she finds that the witting writing and character development keep the existential themes of the game grounded, and provide for an extremely evocative gameplay experience. **Review Score:** 9/10 [3]

## Lessons

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- **Stick to your strengths...** - Night in the Woods knows that its key strength is in its excellent narrative and fully fleshed out characters. By focusing on those key factors, the game remains focused and enjoyable despite the lack of an iconic gameplay mechanic. If your goal is to create a strong narrative experience, focus on that, and let the gameplay mechanics, whatever they are, simply support the story.
- **... but don’t be afraid to experiment** - The game, despite knowing its focus and building the game towards that, isn’t afraid to experiment with short mini-games outside of the core experience. Whether it is playing through a rogue-lite dungeon crawler that Angus installed on your computer, stealing pretzels to feed baby rats, or having a knife fight with Angus, it is okay to shake up your gameplay mechanics on occasion, as long as it doesn’t detract from your core gameplay and narrative experience.
- **Make it relatable** – Not everybody is a princess with magical powers, or an international super spy. But no matter whom the player is they should be able to connect and empathize with your characters in some manner. Whether that is understanding the struggles that come with depression or anxiety, seeing both good and bad family relationships, or just the joy that comes with visiting a favorite restaurant, the more that we can have the player empathize with our characters, the more strongly the character’s story arc will impact them.
- **Reward the player for exploration** – No matter how much you expect a player to do something, they will find a way to surprise you. If you have an empty space in your game, and you give a player a way to get there, they will check that location every chance they get to see if something appears. Reward them for that loyalty. Whether that is having a group of weird teens show up on a usually empty cliff edge to foretell the player’s encounters with several pentagrams, or simply having a cat at the top of a hard to climb building that the player can interact with, if you give the player small rewards for exploring your world outside of the main storyline, they will appreciate the efforts you went to.

## Summation

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Night in the Woods is a game that knows what its strength is, and doesn’t let go of that strength for anything. While it has missteps in how it handles its pacing and some of its

gameplay mechanics, its ability to provide a strong core narrative that is only improved through exploration of the town and its residents gives players a short, extremely enjoyable experience that lingers in the minds and hearts, leaving questions for the player to think on. At the end of everything, just what is it that *we* hold onto?

## Works Cited

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- [1] <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/zero-punctuation/117021-Tom-Clancy-Ghost-Recon-Wildlands-Review> (4:25 - 4:58)
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/14/night-in-the-woods-review-platformer-90s>
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