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Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism in *Night in the Woods*

Abstract: The main aim of our analysis is to consider the use and function of focalization in *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) and the resulting magic(al) realism subjectivity of perception and fluidity of the gameworld in the framework of post-classical narratology. Our suggestion is that the specific ludonarrative features and functions of the game and its playable protagonist, Mae Borowski, pose questions pertaining to the ontological status of the gameworld, making it an in-between, undetermined magic(al) realism space. Taking into account the conventional formulas and themes utilized in the game, it has already been discussed as an American story following the tradition of the so-called Rust Belt Gothic. This approach, albeit highly accurate, fails to exhaust the possibility that the events presented in the game, specifically in the fourth act, are only subjectively perceived by the protagonist/focalizer, Mae Borowski. In our text, we discuss the potential markers of subjectivity present in the game, with a focus on the game music and soundscape.

Keywords: focalization, magical realism, subjectivity, ludonarrative coherence, Rust Belt Gothic, American Gothic, sound design, game music

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with *Night in the Woods* (NITW), often discussed as representative of numerous American tropes and conventions. We want to focus on an aspect that has not been thoroughly presented yet, namely the structure and function of focalization in the game as connected with the perceived subjectivity of the

protagonist's experience, and the resulting ambiguity of the storyworld's status. Our findings result from around twenty-six hours of individual and tandem gameplay (21 February 2017 edition via Steam, Windows 10 PC, Xbox One controller), supplemented with a selection of YouTube walkthrough videos.

Various aspects of *NITW* have already been comprehensively discussed by Elizabeth Caravella, Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps, Patrick Fiorilli (in his exhaustive Master's thesis written under the supervision of Ian Bogost), Stephanie Harkin, Juri Honkanen, Justin Keever, Andrew Phelps, Jocelyn Wagner and Andrew Moger, Kathrin Trattner, and Kevin Veale. We relate to their observations to cover such issues as the game's concept and production, game genre contexts, narrative premises and major themes, character and world creation, player's agency, and the game's connection with the Rust Belt Gothic and American Gothic. What our studies bring to the table is a discussion of specific narrative problems—the main character's (un)reliability and the uncertain and dubious nature of what she can see and what, as follows, the player can recognize as either hallucinatory, real, or magical. We suggest that due to its intrinsic use of focalization, achieved with the help of medium-specific techniques, such as, for example, the narrative-driven ludomusical harmony between the events unfolding and the soundtrack, *NITW* is able to instil in the player a feeling of uncertainty. It thus opens the possibility of multiple readings with regard to the ontological status of the storyworld, a perspective not to be found in previous works on this game.

Therefore, following the already existing publications, we start with a presentation of the crucial ludonarrative aspects of the game and then move into the topic of the Rust Belt Gothic features of its storyworld. After that, we suggest three categories of formulas as means to characterize the game's affinity with the above-mentioned tradition (“little lies”, “soul-searching”, and “staying dead”). We also propose that the game could be read as magic(al) realism—an observation that has not, apparently, been made clear in the existing literature yet, though as we are going to explain, situating *NITW* in this category matches the fairly straightforward and widely recognized notion of the game as politically charged.

As it has been stated before, though numerous features of the game have already been discussed fairly exhaustively, what seems to be omitted are the unreliability of the narrator and its narrative consequences. Having introduced the game and its crucial contexts, we therefore proceed to present our understanding of focalization in video games in general and in *NITW* specifically, and to provide our reading of the fourth act of the game as highly ambiguous when it comes to the ontological status of the events that the player is able to observe.

2. *Night in the Woods*: An American game

A more detailed presentation of the game can be found in the academic sources mentioned above; we also provide it in our case-study article discussing ludonarra-

tive coherence and ludomusical harmony in *NITW* (Mochacka and Walczak). That being said, in this section we will refer to a selection of ideas from these sources to ground the incoming considerations in their proper context.

NITW, released by Infinite Fall in 2017, is a “dialogue-heavy” (Trattner 131) ludonarrative game (Arjoranta 2; cf. Aarseth). It is a 2D side-scrolling game with elements of jumping and climbing and adventure/exploration, and a selection of assorted mini-games (Trattner 131). As a typical adventure game prioritizing “reading and story over active gameplay” (Caravella ch. 6), *NITW* “requires players to develop and reinforce habits in decision-making, exploration, and moral assessment—through hexis” (Caravella ch. 6). 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).

NITW was created by a relatively small team with the help of a crowdfunding campaign, which—together with its aesthetics and “themes of rural marginalization under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope” (Veale 2)—situates it in the elusive category of indie games. In recent years the reception of *NITW* has become influenced by a major controversy over accusations of sexual harassment and abuse levelled against Alec Holowka (lead designer and composer of the original soundtrack). The approach of scholars publishing on *NITW* to the allegations is reflected in the disclaimers provided in works analyzing the game (cf. Fiorilli; Consalvo and Phelps; Mochacka and Walczak). As we do not support any form of violence in the video game industry, we have extensively stated our opinion on this matter and condemned the alleged abuse perpetrated by Holowka in the introductory part of our article “Ludonarrative Coherence and Ludomusical Harmony: The Case of *Night in the Woods*”.

Characteristically, *NITW* has been discussed as “a very specifically American” (Veale 7) story. It also belongs to the so-called Rust Belt Gothic genre, or more generally, the (New) American Gothic. These univocal assumptions stem from conventional (American culture-specific) Gothic formulas and themes utilized in the game. The other widely recognized aspect is the Americanness of the storyworld, established and recognized in *NITW*, a video game that features anthropomorphic characters (cat-, alligator-, fox-like creatures) and allows them to jump on electric lines safely, while managing to render the atmosphere of a Rust Belt town. The existing criticism of the game, including numerous non-scholarly sources, positions the game as belonging to the Rust Belt Gothic tradition by virtue of game world and character design, narrative, and mechanics. From our point of view, classifying the game as following selected American Gothic conventions could result in interpretative consequences as to the ontological status of the storyworld. Thus,

we introduce some of the existing discussion on the game's Gothic, American, and American Gothic aspects here.

The Rust Belt Gothic is a sub-genre of narratives that transform older forms of Gothic fiction formulas: the forever antebellum, aristocratic, Southern Gothic South becomes the post-industrial, working-class North, and racial tensions turn into class struggles. Originally, the "Rust Belt" was a socio-geographical term, coined by the *Time* magazine to denote the Great Lakes region ridden with recession when "in the 1970s and 1980s, the 'heavy' auto, rubber, and steel industries that supported America's international preeminence in manufacturing suffered waves of factory shut-downs" (Palmer 1). However, "exceeding its localized meaning, the term now registers a social condition: 'rusting out,' for which abandoned buildings are the quintessential sign" (Palmer 2).

Possum Springs seems to be fairly close to the primary world, though at the same time the isolated town where the *NITW* events unfold does not exist in the actual world (Keever 1). As Consalvo and Phelps report, "many fans discussed and debated ... whether Possum Springs was representative of a specific town, or a sort of 'everytown' facing an economic downturn" (340). For numerous American players, the game showcases a synthetic Pennsylvanian town (Consalvo and Phelps 341). That being said, we would like to observe that the cartoonish 2D animation of the characters, who are creatures with human bodies and animal heads (and animal personality traits), adds to the game's "everytown" universality, triggering generification (Alber 49–50) and situating *NITW* in the ranks of animal fable or a similar allegorical narrative, with the animal features of the Possum Springs population treated as pseudo-fictional (Hogenbirk, van de Hoef, and Meyer 10). The anthropomorphic characters are contemporary Americans universalized, rather than representatives of some fantastic species. Whatever happens in Possum Springs, happens where the American Dream has gone awry, where "poverty and working, service-class jobs that are largely dead-end take center stage" (Consalvo and Phelps 349).¹

The gameplay of *NITW* starts at the bus station, which, as we see it, appears to be the hero's journey threshold, which she has to cross. The only person to come into town, Mae has to walk past the maintenance man blocking the entrance; placating the man with a can of soda pop is her first task in the game. Mae Borowski needs to reach "her hometown, ... which is situated to the left, signifying the past" (Honkanen 59). Contradicting the traditional left-to-right movement of side-scrolling games carries a symbolic meaning, as the game "sets out to deromanticise it [i.e., nostalgia] by emphasising its potentially destructive power" (Honkanen 59).

Most of the characters' problems oscillate around not being able to leave Possum Springs. For example, "Bea ... feels anchored to her hometown due to the redistribution of her college funds toward her late mother's medical and post-mortem

¹ This fails to contradict the game's universality. We agree with Susan Buck-Morss that "the rust belts of the United States' Northeast cannot be [3] distinguished in a material sense from those that blot the landscape in Russia or Poland" (3).

bills” (Harkin 115). Mae was able to move out, but as the player slowly realizes (via environmental storytelling, dialogues, internal monologues, or written diary), she was forced to come back. She is very much entrapped in the gamespace and the place itself is isolated, as “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” (Consalvo and Phelps 350). As Consalvo and Phelps note, the game visuals are aesthetically indebted to such art projects as John Kane’s paintings or Pete Marovich’s photography, but contribute to the feeling of entrapment in the player trying to explore the gamespace in a much more powerful way (351), by utilizing embodied experientiality resulting from their engagement with an interactive environment.

There is a divide between the town space that Mae, Bea, Gregg, and the others inhabit, and the woods, taken over by sinister elders (Consalvo and Phelps 353). The elders hate “taxation and governmental regulation” (Keever 4), which they accuse of ruining the town. Their way of addressing the issue is “sacrificing fringe members of society ... to an unseen creature that lives in a hole in the abandoned mine” (Keever 4). Mae cannot cross the town’s limits and states that she does not actually want to leave. As we see it, the entrapment can be explained in terms of medium specificity (e.g., the need to construct a specific narrative architecture for the critical story path). However, we follow the consensus that it also carries a symbolic meaning, even more so as the game is characterized by a significant degree of ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony (cf. Mochocka and Walczak).

As we see it, one of the basic mechanics in the game, that is, jumping (on electric lines, from one rooftop to another, etc.), coincides with the “rooftopping” tradition of the so-called Urban Explorers (UrbEx) community: “their fascination with abandoned hotels, schools, churches, theaters, train stations, and amusement parks expands the taxonomy of ‘industrial ruin’” (Palmer 5). According to Asynith Helen Palmer, the UrbEx culture is predominantly male, and so we would like to point out that in *NITW* urban exploration is a female activity as well. Harkin notices how Mae’s (or Mae and Bea’s) escapades represent the two common tropes pertaining to the female inhabitation of the public space, namely “nonthreatening ‘sweet and fashionable’ friendship groups that comply to normative feminine behavior, and unfeminine ‘tough girls,’ who ‘take over’ public space ‘aiming to please themselves first and foremost, even if by ridiculing or aggravating others’” (126). However, it is always a feminist act for a woman to overtake public space; what is more, “the girls’ rebellious actions do not foreshadow their downfall ... but rather meaningfully strengthen their unions via their shared appropriation of these spaces” (Harkin 126).

Possum Springs is not what it used to be; “the visuals of the game rely on the kind of elements documented in these depictions of economic destruction: row houses, abandoned storefronts, steel bridges, and so on” (Consalvo and Phelps 351). As Keever puts it, the game’s “visual aesthetic ... is cartoonish, drawing on the art

of children's books like those of Richard Scarry" and showing the existents "reduced to geometric abstraction", as in the cases of the convenience store, Snack Falcon, or the interiors of Mae's home discussed by Keever (5). For Keever, this technique is reminiscent of Cubism and reflects both the decline of the town and Mae's mental state, as it "lays bare the constituent components of its [the game's] world" (5).

Such a depiction of the storyworld existents suggests a temporal dimension. The town used to be a flourishing hub of heavy-industry operations, with its distinguishable identity, represented, for example, by local restaurants, some of them now closed and replaced with fast-food chain joints. The dialogues inform the player that the historically strong trade unions are practically obsolete, yet, as we would like to stress, a significant amount of information comes from environmental storytelling via spatial objects—for example, the mural in the underground passage or the boarded-up windows of the shut-down businesses. Possum Springs is—metaphorically and literally—broken.

The temporal dimension is connected to the notably American theme of identity. There is a constant tension between Mae, living in "extended adolescence" (Fiorilli 38), and her friends, forced to enter the job market. *NITW* focuses on the "adolescent protagonists' complicated liminal status" (Harkin 116), placing the character in "a particularly troubled period of in-betweenness" (Harkin 120), also present in the form of the queer identities of several characters, which are "sometimes not obvious at first sight since the characters are often not visually gendered" (Trattner 134).

3. Won't you take me to Spookytown?

To categorize the salient themes and motifs that dominate in *NITW* and, at the same time, represent American Gothic formulas we suggest three labels: "soul-searching", "little lies", and "staying dead". The first one, "soul-searching", means both the motif of ongoing introspection and self-analysis and the placing of the torment that the characters endure internally. The second, "little lies", applies to all the storyworld existents that relate to the dirty secrets and shameful memories that the community wants to keep quiet. The last one, "staying dead", conveys the idea that in Possum Springs characters are—metaphorically or literally—dead.

Let us discuss the category of "staying dead". Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove observe that Edgar Allan Poe's half-dead characters can be read metaphorically, representing the modern entanglement (75–76). It might be suggested that a similar mechanism is present in *NITW*; while some of its characters are actually dead, most of them are alive, but deprived of agency and/or the will to live. The game makes a discrete reference to William Faulkner's "Rose for Emily" when Mae and Bea visit an elderly lady on a house call to repair the furnace in her basement: the woman mentions living with her dead husband's body for a couple of

days, as if it were perfectly natural. This is one of numerous examples. Following the death of Bea's mother, her father is unable to run his business, spending his days in a nearly catatonic state. Another time, Mae and her friends come across a human hand, lying just like that in the street; the police officer present at the scene tells them mildly not to poke it with a stick. What is more, a person has gone missing and only Mae and her friends take interest. "A gnawing sentiment—this town is dead, really dead—is expressed outright by various characters, but all the more effectively through the motions of play itself" (Fiorilli 35). In other words, 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).

The second category, "little lies", concerns secrets and mysteries—awkward, disturbing, humiliating, connected with taboos, covered up with fake wholesomeness. Seemingly, the secret to uncover is related to the cultists and their victims, which sets the expectation that *NITW* is a typical adventure/exploration game. Yet, it should be noted, following Caravella, that:

as the game progresses, some of the townfolks' disdain for Mae magnifies, with certain members of the Possum Springs community even referring to her as "Killer" should the player interact with them, albeit without telling the player why, and so while Mae herself clearly already knows, the player does not until the middle of the game. (Caravella ch. 6)

The category of "soul-searching" has its explicit representation in the form of Mae's diary, in which she keeps track of her peregrinations around the town. Story-world-wise, keeping a diary is meant to help Mae maintain her mental health, as the local doctor prescribes. The game as a whole concerns introspection and thorough analysis of the mind, "what the game is really about: the in-depth characterization of its cast" (Trattner 133). And yet, another issue remains, namely how *NITW* approaches the mental states of the characters—this is going to be discussed in the following sections, devoted to focalization and its implications for the *NITW* narrative.

4. Focalization and magic(al) realism

Most of the issues listed thus far indicate a state of uncertainty, fluidity, and transition. The characters are not fully certain of who they are, and neither is the player. Inferences may be made, but the flickering of meaning remains, with some issues signalled to the player, yet never fully addressed. Are those events and bizarre occurrences real? The ontological status of what we can see is highly uncertain, to be discussed in this section, centred on the use and functions of focalization in the

game and the resulting magic(al) realism (cf. Bowers) subjectivity of perception and fluidity of the gameworld.

The “mystery plot” of *NITW* revolves around the secret organization of “killers in the woods” (Consalvo and Phelps 353). The cultists are revealed in “the video-game’s third act, which marks a shift away from the slow-paced realism and the introduction of a supernatural mystery story” (Consalvo and Phelps 353). *NITW* constructs a storyworld that can be read as endowed with some supernatural elements. However, if read in the tradition of American Gothic texts, such as Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, the events taking place are plausibly explained as resulting from (criminal) human intervention. This still leaves the space for them to be either entirely objective yet magical, with Possum Springs as a secondary world in which magic can happen, or entirely hallucinatory and subjective, with no magic, only severe (and badly maintained) mental health problems. Both options are possible, which yet again follows the strategies utilized by great writers still within the ranks of the American Gothic, such as, for example, the above-mentioned Oates or Toni Morrison, and their use of subtle magic(al) realism.

Magic(al) realism, as we understand it following Maggie Ann Bowers, has been labelled “specifically Latin American” (16) due to the immense popularity of the appropriate literature from this region, but fails to be limited to Latin America only. Perception of magic is culture-dependent and usually influenced by the dominant religious system, be it Christianity or indigenous beliefs (Bowers 4), and definitions of magic may vary from culture to culture, as “magic can mean anything that defies empiricism, including religious beliefs, superstitions, myths, legends, voodoo, or simply what Todorov terms the ‘uncanny’ and ‘marvellous’ fantastic” (Ouyang 14). Bowers observes that in Latin America magical realism is both rooted in mythologies and the mythopoeic, whereas in Europe it “is chosen for the purposes of literary experimentation” (61). Since the 1980s magical realism has been used to denote a narrative mode that helps postcolonial and peripheral authors “to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy” (Bowers 1), with the aim of “questioning the epistemological premises of European post-Enlightenment realism” (Ouyang 14). Consequently, magical realism has helped the disenfranchised to be vocal about “issues pertinent to cultural and identity politics termed as postcolonialism and postmodernism” (Ouyang 14) and to confront totalitarian regimes with the criticism of systems of values and modes of thinking that support them (Bowers 4). The postcolonial impulse of magical realism can also be understood in terms of environmental activism, with texts putting human and animal identities and relations under scrutiny unavailable under the post-Enlightenment ontology and epistemology (Holgate 3). The evolution of the mode continues, resulting in new forms and formulas (Bowers 61). While magical realism cannot be contained in specific locations, there are spaces—geographical territories, cultures—suggestive of the mode (Bowers 31). They would be postcolonial countries

and “rural areas away from influence over, or influence from, the political power centres” (Bowers 31). The way we see it, the game’s agenda matches the above-mentioned impulse to give the disenfranchised back their voice. Although Possum Springs is not a town in what we would typically define as a postcolonial country, it is a peripheral place populated by a demographic that falls victim to exploitation by centralized laissez-faire capitalism and has no say as to its present, or its future.

As has already been mentioned above, Mae and all the other characters are anthropomorphic. Nevertheless, “while Mae is clearly not human, she behaves as such” and “engages the player in the human-like physicality of depression” (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127). She is able to perform actions that—at least seemingly—contribute to the progress of the narrative. The player can see Mae act/interact, has some access to her thoughts and feelings via monologues or the diary, sees the changes in her perception of the gameworld, as well as changes in her stamina, etc. However, as has been pointed out, the control that the player has over Mae is illusory (cf. Mochocka and Walczak) and her function as the focalizer brings up questions of her reliability and objectiveness.

Game narratives are interactive, which means that there are always fixed elements (prescribed narrative) and emergent elements (player-generated content), and focalization is consequently determined by the interaction of both (Ip 237). As Jonne Arjoranta puts it, presenting selected definitions of in-game focalization, “no strong narrating voice may be present in a game, but the perspective can still be clear and distinct” (4). According to Barry Ip, “in interactive games, narrative is depicted through a mixture of zero and internal focalization” (237). Zero focalization takes place when “a panoramic view of information is presented such as details about the game world, the nature of a hero’s quest, and other prescriptive elements that cannot otherwise be known” (Ip 237). In internal focalization only the information that a particular character can access is provided (Ip 237). The specificity of the video-game medium creates an environment where,

In most cases, narrative is told through the eyes of the protagonist in terms of the forces acting on him or her, but it is also “performed” by a human player, who determines how specific challenges in the form of levels, guardians, puzzles, and so on, are overcome during play, thus drawing attention to the role of the player as narrator. (Ip 237)

The immediate and limited interactivity of video games combined with their narrative architecture allows the player to be the one who tells and/or reconstructs the story, even though some of the characters might act as focalizers.

Unlike in literature, in the interactive, playable medium of video games “the character-internal perspective” (Arjoranta 6) allows for some access to the mental faculties of the character; still, Arjoranta makes a point that “this perspective is embodied in the physical perspective of the character being played, but does not allow access to their mental landscape in the manner of internal focalization” (6). In consequence, it is possible that the player can be purposely deceived (Arjoranta 6), but when the character is a so-called reflector-character, that is, a character that

experiences the narrative, but does not tell the tale, they “can be confused or misled or they may refuse to accept the truth, but they do not deceive the reader intentionally” (Arjoranta 9).

However, Monika Fludernik observes that we attribute certain feelings and emotions to characters even in cases when the narrative fails to provide us with the “magical ability of narrative discourse to grant us insight into characters’ inner worlds” (78). Similarly, even though there is no narrating voice in the game that would explicitly comment on the mental landscape of the characters, the player is not only able to attribute the perspective to specific characters, but also gleans a considerable amount of information pertaining to this landscape.

Highlighting the spatial experientiality afforded by games, Yotam Shibolet points out that by combining the notions of focalization and environmental storytelling a category of “focalization through movement” could be reached (52), and discusses how it “urges us to consider the way in which whatever is brought to the fore of conscious perceptual experience at a given moment, is implicitly and explicitly interpreted by this intertwined framework” (59). In Allison Fraser’s words, “video games in which a player directly controls a character have opportunities to convey the character’s subjective experience and ways of thinking to the player” regardless of the convention of the audiovisual design (13).

One of the specific tools used “to illustrate a character’s private experience, often in response to changes in the environment” is music, “considered an element of internal focalization when it communicates or emphasizes a character’s emotional state” (Fraser 11). As we are interested in the game’s protagonist/focalizer ability to perceive reality, we are going to present some instances of how music is utilized in *NITW* to reflect Mae’s mental states. Peaceful, soothing music can signal safety and comfort. In *NITW* it is apparently Mae who perceives that safety when, for example, before she opens her eyes in the morning, the music is soft and relaxing. Mae sleeps deeply, with no dreams; then she wakes up, stretching and yawning, and there is silence. The music is also peaceful when Mae stays at home and in the town, and in the opening of the game in Sawmill Park.

There is no music when Mae is getting ready for a party in front of the mirror in her room, talking to herself. The verbal utterances highlight her anxiety and lack of confidence, and so is the lingering, heavy silence. Instead of music, there is the pulsating rhythm of the tick in her ear, as Mae’s ear twitches uncontrollably *circa* every six seconds. During the party in the woods the fireplace is also pulsating, the flames moving in a captivating rhythm. The background music fades out to silence when Mae gets drunk and loses control, threatening people in a hectic monologue. Then, Mae’s first dream shows her destroying a gigantic monument and the surrounding space with a baseball bat. The ambient/rave music in this scene is appropriately dark and aggressive, as Mae wants to crush everything, and methodically smashes whatever she can reach with her bat. Metaphorically, the scene reflects memories haunting Mae, as she wants to get rid of them.

In the “Crimes” part of the second act of the game, before the characters enter the building of the abandoned Food Donkey market, the sound design gives the impression of something sinister and threatening: other than the howling wind, there is silence, creating suspense. However, when Mae and Gregg go inside, the suspense is broken by the lively, albeit slightly mysterious, music, to return with silence a moment before they enter the underground. Then, there is a minigame consisting in carrying a heavy load up the stairs, with music as a ludonarrative device (cf. Mochocka and Walczak). In the “House Call” sequence, Mae and Bea walk across a meadow and when they talk, there is no music; crickets can be heard, creating suspense similar to the one presented above, yet with a much more mild, delicate feel. Then the widow’s house is filled with bouncy and somehow suspicious music, and when the furnace is fixed, suspense is suggested with silence again. When Mae realizes that the widow has locked them in the basement and reaches for a baseball bat to make noise, her memories are triggered, and the music suggests that by becoming upbeat and set in heavy-metal aesthetic. After the two friends manage to leave the house, they spend some time close to the meadow, and the music is soft and soothing again, as when Mae feels at ease (the music is also calm when she watches the constellations with her old teacher, but disappears when she is tense, as when she is dressing up for the Harfest celebrations).

Thus, as we have presented, in *NITW* music and other intradiegetic and extradiegetic sounds serve as definite descriptors of the protagonist’s mental states and emotions and a marker of the shifts between narrative levels. Harfest is accompanied by solemn music, as Possum Springs inhabitants walk the streets in the night on this exceptional occasion. The tune becomes decisively spooky when Mae chases a mysterious figure who has kidnapped a teenager. Then comes the confusing scene in the forest—unlike other dreams Mae has, there is no blue light/colour-coding, but a red glow instead. Mae was meant to join her aunt, who is a police officer (the aunt refuses to believe that someone has really kidnapped a youngster, ridicules Mae for describing the figure as a ghost, and offers her a ride). Mae seems to stay in the woods instead, where she comes across a well or a shaft and the soundscape consists of the rustling of dry leaves as she walks; some strange and threatening sounds are coming from the shaft. This sequence is ambiguous, as the player might find it difficult to decide if the events are happening in the gameworld, or are yet another nightmarish dream that Mae has. The way this fragment is constructed would suggest a conventional case of contextual content markers of subjectivity (dream) in the language of film (cf. Thon).

5. The hole in the centre of everything

Towards the end of the third act, Mae and her friends catch the cultists in the midst of human sacrifice; the scene ends in Mae trying to outrun the cultists chasing her

and falling into a ravine. At this point Mae is separated from the others, and the fourth act, called “The End of Everything”, begins. “Hallucinatory sequences” are an instance of narrative subjectivity in video games mentioned by Fraser (13). Though “the mental health of Mae and her peers is largely left open to player interpretation” (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127), as has been stated before, there are numerous suggestions in the game as to what might obscure her perception. We are now going to discuss the relationship between the subjectivity of vision that may result from Mae’s mental health and the ontological status of the *NITW* gameworld.

Mae’s friends are at Gregg’s place, playing a video game, chatting, and worrying about Mae. Then Mae is shown in the forest, as if waking up from a lapse of consciousness. Characteristically, for a couple of seconds her figure appears and disappears again, as if glitching. This is something the player is not accustomed to. What is more, glitches are typically recognized as possessing “emersive” function (cf. Kubiński) and may drive the player’s attention to the fictionality of the gameworld. Mae stands up and walks to the right with unsteady, heavy steps. At times the image of the forest is blurry and out of focus, which apparently signifies Mae’s dysfunctional sight, again in accordance with the above-mentioned contextual content markers of subjectivity. Then the player can see her in church, laid on a bench, her friends and other people discussing what should be done next; after that, she seems to be shown in a hospital or ambulatory bed (the transition between these images differs significantly from the usual change of scenery in the game). Finally, Mae is reunited with her friends as she walks to Gregg’s place, still very weak and unstable, and after having a pizza and a chat with her friends, she falls asleep on the coach.

The presentation of Mae in this sequence via visual design and dialogues shows that she is in a bad state, bent with pain, disoriented, falling asleep fast. Previously in the game, falling asleep signalled entering the imaginary dreamworld (as opposed to the here-and-now reality of Possum Springs). Now, however, Mae leaves a sleeping friend behind and goes to the forest. And then, the subsequent events might be problematic in terms of their ontological status.

Mae is in a deep-blue forest; the colour-coding is reminiscent of the unreal dream sequences, though it is equally possible that at this time it is only signalling darkness. While Mae struggles to get to the cultists alone, her friends follow her and together they finally confront the cult; they almost escape to safety, but one cultist is determined to kill them. Following the accident in the mine (where it all happens), they find their way out to the surface. As they leave the forest, they discuss the moral implications of their encounter with the cultists (left in the mine for dead). Then, at her house, Mae messages her friends, sharing her thoughts and thanking them for saving her. One of her texts says: “All of you are what kept me from floating off tonight”. Finally, they carry on living in a surprisingly mundane way, getting ready for band practice.

We suggest that Mae could be read as an unreliable narrator in the sense of intranarrational and intertextual unreliability. The latter occurs when “based on

manifest character types” and “on behalf of their former existence” (Hansen 242), the narrator falls into a category of characters that are conventionally deemed untrustworthy. In turn,

Intranarrational unreliability designates the “classical” definition—that is unreliability established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers ... “verbal tics”—small interjections and comments that hint at an uncertainty in the narrator’s relating of the events—or unresolved self-contradictions, etc. (Hansen 241)

Similarly to, for example, the narrator of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”, who denies his altered state of perception, Mae tries to either conceal her mental health problems or exaggerate them so they seem to be absurd, “but does so with reference to situations and behavioral patterns that most definitely expose insanity” (Hansen 241). Given her actions and the reactions of the other characters, the player could perceive Mae as mentally unstable and thus unreliable in her account of reality. That she is not as reliable as it could initially seem is suggested in numerous sequences.

NITW oscillates between different versions of reality: one strictly magical, with the cult killing people as bloody offerings for the Black Goat who really demands sacrifices and rewards for them; the other(s), highly plausible one, with the murders and/or their supernatural explanation being the product of Mae’s mind. The second option is as plausible as the first one, if we accept Mae as the focalizer, an intermediary between the gameworld and the player as the co-creator of the story-world. The revelation of the final act of the game does not rule out either possibility. In a game, just as in a literary text, there are gaps to be filled. The reader may interpret *NITW* as realist fiction or may follow the magical realism path. In magical realism, the same narrative voice narrates what is real and what is not, all in the same manner; “they are given the same serious treatment” (Bowers 63–64). The mundane version of what happens is contrasted with the magical explanation of the same (Bowers 64). The transgressive quality of the mode can be also found, as Bowers has it, in the fact that magical realism dismantles the boundaries between the magical and the real, thus creating a third—in-between—space (64).

One of the tenets of magical realism enumerated by Wendy B. Faris is that the text is able to “instil doubts in the reader” (7), who then hesitates between the rational explanation of the events/existents and the acceptance of the irreducible magical element. This is exactly what happens in *NITW*. As Faris puts it, “before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts” (17). Faris goes on to say that “the contemporary Western reader’s primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character’s dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle” (17). Consequently, it is the “combination of acceptance and skepticism that characterizes the reader’s experience in magical realism” (Faris 20). Here lies the problem of how we should understand Mae’s unreliability in the light of one of the basic premises of magic(al) realism:

the magical things must be accepted as a part of material reality, whether seen or unseen. They cannot be simply the imaginings of one mind, whether under the influence of drugs, or for the purpose of exploring the workings of the mind, imagining our futures, or for making a moral point. (Bowers 29)

The implied reader of a magical realist text should not openly question the truth of the storyworld, “accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level” (Bowers 3). In such a case, could the unreliability, crucial in the discussion of *NITW*, exclude the game from magic(al) realism?

Addressing the issue of the narrator in *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, Bowers raises the question of whether a character depicted as “playfully deceptive”, staying in a mental asylum, can “provide the recognizable realistic elements of the narrative” (60). Bowers leaves that question open and goes on to discuss the narrator from *Das Parfum. Die Geschichte eines Mörders* by Patrick Süskind: although the narrator’s and the reader’s perceptions of reality are apparently different, the casual tone in which the horrific details of the story are narrated situates the novel in the genre of magical realism (Bowers 61). Faris considers texts in which “it is difficult to decide which events are irreducible elements and which are visions, either waking or sleeping” to be works of magical realism, singling them out as “a kind of hallucinatory magical realism” (100).

Situated in a small-town part of the United States, and presenting a selection of eccentric characters, Mae’s story seems to serve as a commentary on the “reality’s outrageousness”, as expressed by Faris in the context of the functions of magical realism discussed before. It could be said that it is exactly by means of magical realism that *NITW* is able to scrutinize the human condition and speak up on behalf of the marginalized, disenfranchised beings. Mae’s narrative serves the defamiliarization of the mundane and makes the reader doubt the ontic status of the events and existents presented.

The unreliable focalization achieved primarily with the help of visual and audio clues is used consistently and results in the oscillation between accepting the supernatural as a norm in the storyworld and rejecting it on the grounds of rational thinking. As a result, the player never knows for certain if Mae is really able to talk to god-like creatures, or if the cultists really kill the underdogs of Possum Springs, or if all this is just a disturbed millennial’s tale. In the light of the discussion presented here, we would suggest that *NITW* achieves the defocalization typical of magical realism and leaves the player in the in-between space, where their doubts can never be dispelled. It is not an either–or issue—the game is neither only about the subjective vision of the world conjured up by mentally disturbed Mae, nor about the secondary world in which townspeople can engage in human sacrifice fairly unbothered, if they feel like doing so. For a player willing to decode the markers of subjectivity it can become both.

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