

Cosmic Horror and the Ruins of Capitalism in *Night in the Woods*

written by Guest Contributor | May 18, 2021



I maintained my sanity during the pandemic by spending time outdoors in abandoned places. Some of these places exist in the real world, but most were virtual. One of my favorite haunts has been Possum Springs, a depopulated town in western Pennsylvania that serves the setting of the 2017 story exploration game *Night in the Woods*.

In *Night in the Woods*, you play as Mae, an anthropomorphic cat who has dropped out of college and moved back to Possum Springs to live with her parents. With no job and nothing better to do, Mae decides to investigate the disappearance of several local children. It turns out that there is a monster living in the abandoned mine tunnels under Possum Springs, and a cult of town residents has been feeding young people to this creature in return for a promise that it will prevent the town's economic decline. Mae and her friends escape from this death cult and the monster before the mine tunnels collapse, trapping the remaining cult members underground. At the end of the game, Mae reflects on what she's taken away from this experience: the conviction that, if there is no benevolent higher power in a hostile universe, then she and her friends will have to help each other while doing the best they can for themselves and their community.

The elements of cosmic horror in *Night in the Woods* are genuinely creepy, especially during Mae's interactive nightmare sequences, but the cult and the creature it worships serve as a thematic juxtaposition to the true terror of Possum Springs, a large and impersonal set of interlocking systems that collectively exploit hardworking but vulnerable people—namely, capitalism.

Mae's parents are afraid of losing their house to the bank because of a usurious mortgage they took out to finance Mae's college tuition, and entire neighborhoods in Possum Springs are filled with repossessed, unsold, and subsequently abandoned buildings. The pastor of the local church wants to open a shelter for the newly homeless and the railroad drifters who camp out in the forest next to town, but she fails to obtain a permit from the city council due to concerns that lowering property values in the neighborhood will fatally disrupt an already struggling real estate market.

The horror of an absurd and uncaring universe in *Night in the Woods* has very

little to do with the unfathomable monster lurking in the mine tunnels, although the cult of older people who sacrifice members of younger generations for the vague promise of being able to sustain an imagined standard of living comes uncomfortably close to allegory in the wake of the 2016 American presidential election. Forces beyond our control and comprehension are indeed destroying individual lives and modestly thriving communities, but these forces are nothing as quaint or charming as a stygian tentacle beast that eats children.

[According to Scott Benson](#), the lead writer and artist of *Night in the Woods*, Possum Springs is located in Western Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh. This situates the town in the Rust Belt, an economically depressed region stretching around the Great Lakes from Buffalo to Detroit. The cities in the Rust Belt were centers of American manufacturing until the 1980s, when international free trade agreements incentivized companies in sectors like natural resource extraction and the automotive industry to outsource materials and labor. Formerly bustling mines and factories closed, resulting in a dramatic decline in population that in turn led to the bankruptcy of many smaller businesses.

In the current cultural moment, it's possible to accrue a sizeable following on social media by posting urban exploration photos: shuttered factories and other ghostly relics of infrastructure, such as empty schools, hospitals, movie theaters, and shopping malls. There's a certain poetic charm in high-contrast images of healthy green weeds stretching up through the cracks of ash-gray concrete and leafy vines twining around rusted iron support pillars, and these snapshots of the remains of modern civilization, devoid of human presence, provide fertile ground for the imagination to run wild.

Night in the Woods denies its players the solitary pleasures of urban exploration, however. As a dialog-driven game, its story won't progress unless the player participates in conversations with various people around Possum Springs. As you learn more about the town, you begin to understand the problems experienced by its inhabitants, from poverty to alcoholism to severe depression. At the same time, you come to appreciate the people who care about each other and want to do right by their community even despite the financial and emotional burdens they carry.

Night in the Woods is ultimately about accepting uncomfortable realities while moving forward and finding friendship and community in strange and difficult times. It is about coming to terms with circumstances that have no easy solutions. The game isn't just a protest against the lingering violence of the sort of global neoliberal capitalism that destroys local economies; it's a model of resistance on a small and personal scale, as well as an argument for the quiet beauty of allowing outdated structures to fall gently to ruin.

Although *Night in the Woods* is set in the days leading up to and following Halloween, its advocacy for regrowth and positive change is a welcome message as society gradually begins to recover from the effects of the pandemic. If nothing else, Possum Springs is a great place to find surreal and spooky chills, not to mention a decent trial run for remembering how to make

conversation with other people in real-world places that will be hopefully be not so abandoned in the future.



Kathryn Hemmann has published essays on video games in *Kill Screen* and *FemHype*, as well as academic articles on gaming culture in collections such as *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* and *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*. They teach at University of Pennsylvania, and they tweet [@kathrynthehuman](https://twitter.com/kathrynthehuman).