

Dreaming of the Amerimaidan: Infinite Fall's *Night In The Woods* (2017) and the Revolution of Indie Studio Production

Independent or “indie” videogame studios have long exemplified the paradox Bourdieu identified in the field of literary studies, namely the structural tension between the habitus of competing producers and the larger field of commercial cultural production.¹ On the one hand, indie studios have always been the key drivers of innovation in the videogame industry, pursuing risky narrative and technological invention precisely where more established producers focus on profitable reiteration.² On the other hand, the vast majority of indie studios are the structural dependencies of the corporate oligopolies which have dominated the hardware platforms and circuits of software distribution of the videogame industry since the 1980s.³ The sole exceptions to oligopoly rule were the handful of studios fortunate enough to become medium-scale cultural producers in their own right.⁴

What makes Infinite Fall's adventure videogame *Night in the Woods* (2017)⁵ a true watershed is that it outmaneuvered these oligopolies by mobilizing the institutions of the digital commons, in order to tell a story which had never been told by a US-based videogame studio before. This story is how the youth of America are beginning to fight back against four decades of plutocratic immiseration.⁶ We will provisionally term this ongoing fight-back the “Amerimaidan” due to its conspicuous parallels to the Euromaidan, the digitally-savvy and youth-led protest movement of Ukraine's 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity.⁷

One of the main reasons no other American indie studio had created such a videogame before is the fact that the plutocratic assault on the living standards of most US citizens was buffered by a series of exponentially-increasing debt bubbles, the largest of which was the 2002-2007 Wall Street securitization bubble.⁸ These debt bubbles created enough short-term prosperity

for a large enough fraction of Americans to quell most expressions of overt political dissent, until the worldwide financial collapse of 2008.

The end of these bubbles has triggered the rise of mass political dissent, everywhere from the open revanchism of the 2010 Tea Party and the authoritarian kleptocracy which took power in the 2016 Presidential election, to the progressive social movements of the 2011 Occupy movement, the post-2015 Black Lives Matter and the 2016 Bernie Sanders primary campaign. Just as these progressive movements remixed elements of the mass union drives of the New Deal, the civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, and the post-1973 progressive identity-politics of race, gender and sexuality into a new kind of transnational populism, so too did *Night in the Woods* remix the interactive genres of the 2D role-playing adventure game, the platformer, and the visual novel into an innovative aesthetic form we will call transnational realism.⁹

This transnational realism has two main features which radically differentiate it from the national realisms typical of the 18th and 19th century literary field, as well as from the international realisms of 20th century cinema and television. First, it is based on the pervasive democratization of the entire videogame production cycle, from pre-production and financing to internal tools development, publication and post-release support. Second, it did not just document the post-2008 collective experience of economic immiseration and political crisis in the United States, it also depicted the rise of new kind of anti-capitalist class consciousness among ordinary US citizens.

We will specify the nature and function of this consciousness somewhat later. For now, it is worth emphasizing the degree to which *Night in the Woods* was the beneficiary of a long process of piecemeal democratization in the field of videogame production. Prior to 2013, independent studios had always been dependent on corporate oligopolies for start-up funding,

production management, software development tools, and quality assurance. This began to change in the early 2000s, when modders began to produce downloadable game modifications of remarkably high quality for fans of PC games such as *Half Life*.¹⁰

The next step was the post-2008 democratization of distribution ushered in by the proliferation of open source sound, image, animation and game software platforms and tools, the availability of open distribution channels such as Google's Youtube for media and Valve's Steam for games.¹¹ After 2012, the democratization of audience reception deepened thanks to the emergence of high-quality, fan-supported videogame review and news sites such as Angry Joe, YongYea and Jim Sterling.¹² Something similar happened to the democratization of financing through crowd-funding sites such as Kickstarter. While Kickstarter was initially founded in 2009, it did not serve as a significant source of funding for videogame studios until 2012.¹³

Infinite Fall's decision to launch a Kickstarter campaign in 2013 was just the right venue at just the right time. The campaign did not just meet its goals, it raised far more funds than the studio had originally envisioned. With the extra financing came the necessity to expand the scale and scope of the project, and the studio began to work closely with Finji, an independent videogame publisher based in Austin, Texas.¹⁴ This collaboration between fellow indies resulted in a sophisticated outreach strategy, involving informal and non-commercial networks of fellow digital artists and developers as well as members of the general videogame audience.¹⁵

Infinite Fall and Finji also worked closely with Australia-based software firm Secret Lab on a set of open source game design tools.¹⁶ One of the most important of these was Yarn Spinner, a spinoff of an open source dialogue management program called Yarn. Created primarily by Jon Manning at Secret Lab, Yarn Spinner enabled Infinite Fall's writers to create dialogue along with specialized fonts and gestural cues detailing the emotional states of the

characters.¹⁷ This dramatically compressed the development time required to integrate text dialogue with character animations, while endowing conversations with a degree of subtlety and nuance which would otherwise have required a roster of expensive voice actors. In keeping with Infinite Fall's ethos of egalitarian sharing as a studio, Yarn Spinner has been made available for use and additional modification by other game creators.¹⁸

This egalitarian ethos is also apparent in the division of labor inside Infinite Fall.¹⁹ The studio's three principal creators were digital musician and game developer Alec Holowka, who created the sound-track as well as much of the game code; animator and co-writer Scott Benson, who created the characters and most of the animation; and co-writer Bethany Hockenberry, who created the background history and lore of the game. All three worked closely with a team of programmers and fellow digital artists whose contributions are listed below:

Narrative Category	Contributors
Programming	Alec Holowka, Jon Manning and Paris Buttfeld-Addison (significant open source contribution by Australian-based Secret Lab)
Art and animation	Scott Benson worked on character design; Charles Huettner and Sven Ruthner created the playable Witchdagger adventure mini-game on Mae's computer
Writing	Scott Benson and Bethany Hockenberry
Sound	Alec Holowka created the main score; Gordon McGladdery, Em Halberstadt and Joey Van Alten created sound effects
Lore and world design	Scott Benson and Bethany Hockenberry
Quality assurance	Bekah Saltsman and Adam Saltsman coordinated production; Karen Teixeira worked on quality assurance; Luis Correia, Alex Leon Clatworthy, Peter Dimitrakopoulos, Tyler Coleman, Kai Clavier, MJ Johns, Lovely Rev, Eileen Mary Holowka, Nikki Lombardo and Tabby Rose worked as testers
Publicity	Chris Dwyer

Keeping this production history in mind, we are now in a position to address Infinite Fall's second major innovation, namely its invention of an anti-capitalist class consciousness. *Night in the Woods* is the first videogame from a North American indie studio which does justice to the single most widespread and pervasive social experience of 21st century America, an experience rigorously suppressed or marginalized by the plutocrat-owned mass media.²⁰ This experience is the disintegration of what had formerly been the single most powerful weapon in the arsenal of the US plutocracy -- namely, imperial consumerism.

Infinite Fall's narrative master-stroke was to critique this imperial consumerism not as an symbolic presence, but as an interactive absence.²¹ This absence co-determined the game's art style, character art, animation, sound track, mechanics and character development, in ways we will specify somewhat later. This absence does not signify the exceptional situation of a few poverty-stricken individuals or minority communities in the midst of an otherwise prosperous society. Rather, it transmits the bone-crushing despair of the vast majority of US citizens, who have suffered forty years of declining real wages,²² vanishing pensions,²³ and the skyrocketing cost of higher education.²⁴

This strategy is all the more remarkable considering that the US branch of the videogame industry has long been dominated by franchises glorifying plutocratic consumerism and the wars of US neocolonialism, an ideological tilt documented by Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter's *Games of Empire*.²⁵ What renders *Night in the Woods* immune to plutocratic ideology is that it does not focus on the traumatic shock of the loss of the imperial surplus but rather on the energy, tenacity and creativity of the communities abandoned by plutocratic capitalism: on the faint but unmistakable possibility of post-imperial solidarity.²⁶

One of the best examples of this is the game's depiction of space. *Night in the Woods* is

set in an animated version of Possum Springs, a lightly fictionalized town in the contemporary northeast of the United States. The initial art-style is bright and playful, with two or three layers of static backgrounds energized by the brightly-colored falling leaves of autumn, occasional squirrels racing along overhead electric wires, and the procedurally-generated shapes of passing cars. One of the most frequent sights early in the game is the distant silhouette of a glass factory in the background of the town.

Its seemingly benign shape suddenly acquires a very different meaning, however, when the player learns that the glass factory shut down years ago. One of the laid-off workers just happens to be the father of Mae Borowski, the young college dropout who is the main protagonist of *Night in the Woods*. This is just the first of a host of references to signs of economic crisis. Everywhere the player travels in Possum Springs, malls are only semi-full, small restaurants are closing down, abandoned buildings are tumbling into ruin, and homeless drifters gather near decrepit railyards.

Despite its troubles, the town remains intensely alive. Its neighborhoods teem with quirky and interesting townsfolk, who chat with Mae about everything from the dismal condition of their favorite sports teams to their personal dreams of becoming film directors. These interactions provide a panoramic view of post-2008 American society, with citizens who range in age from young teens to elderly retirees, and in profession from schoolteachers to penniless artists. While these interactions are the structural equivalent of side-quests in role-playing videogames, in the sense that players are not required to complete them to progress further in Mae's personal storyline, they are an essential part of the overall interactive experience. Each character is depicted with respect and dignity, and over time they turn from random passersby into acquaintances, and finally into members of Mae's larger community.

What makes these interactions especially effective is the subtle whimsy of Benson's animated character models. These latter are anthropomorphic versions of animals with enlarged and highly expressive eyes (a borrowing from Japanese manga and anime).²⁷ They are endowed with a variety of realistic human behaviors, and animated using textures reminiscent of handcrafted paper models. The effect is immensely endearing, and heightened by Alec Holowka's superb ambient sound-track, which brings each location to life with a combination of soulful melodies, luminous harmonic samples and catchy hooks.²⁸

If *Night in the Woods* had done nothing more than to combine credible characters, crackerjack dialogues, an appealing art-style and a superb sound-track into a realistic portrait of an average American community in the post-2008 era, it would succeed as a interactive experience. Yet what raises a solid videogame to the level of something truly extraordinary is Infinite Fall's seamless blending of this society-wide or external crisis with the personal drama of Mae's internal or psychological crisis. The community's struggle for collective survival does not take precedence over Mae's personal struggle for psychological survival, nor does the latter have priority over the latter: *both are the same crisis*.

Whereas the story of the community is told primarily through Mae's interactions with the townsfolk, Mae's story is told primarily through path-based interactions based on her three closest friends, namely Angus, Bea and Gregg. Each is a credible and well-rounded character in their own right, and players are given the choice of which character they wish to spend the most time with in order to unlock the path associated with each (some of the paths are exclusive, partly to give players a sense of choice in the storyline, and partly to encourage players to replay the game). These paths are organized as a series of events which take place over the twelve in-game days of the entire storyline.

Infinite Fall made two ingenious design decisions when they formulated the precise chain of events of these twelve days. The first was to studiously avoid the cardinal error committed by all too many role-playing videogames, namely to flatten the objective and subjective levels of story-telling into a single narrative layer.²⁹ At every step, *Night in the Woods* ensures that the external or objective crisis of Possum Springs mediates -- and is mediated by -- Mae's sense of internal or subjective doom: the geopolitical informs the micropolitical, while the micropolitical suffuses the geopolitical.

The power of this equilibrium is most evident in the game's demolition of one of the most toxic tropes of plutocratic ideology, namely crime. If the player chooses to spend time with Bea during day four of the game, they will visit the Fort Lucenne Mall, a once-thriving outpost of imperial consumerism which is now close to extinction. At one point, Mae convinces Bea to join her in a harebrained scheme to shoplift clothes from a half-defunct retail clothing store named, with exquisite irony, Urevolution. While the theft is laughably easy to accomplish, Bea's budding radical conscience convinces Mae to eventually return the stolen goods -- which the latter does, along with a suitably revolutionary message about the need of the workers of the world to unite.³⁰ What gives the sequence its satirical sting is the fact that the plutocratic despoliation of the United States was accompanied by an unprecedented carceral boom, as millions of poor Americans were arrested and jailed due to punitive drug and property laws.³¹

There is a similar logic at work in game's nuanced depiction of sexuality. *Night in the Woods* is to be commended for its forthright depiction of Angus and Gregg's same-sex relationship, one of the best romances ever written for a videogame. While there are hints of both opposite sex as well as same-sex desire in Mae's behavior, her orientation is left undefined, most likely because any additional exploration of this theme would have undercut the central motif of

Mae's ever-increasing sense of subjective anomie and despair.

Infinite Fall's second decision was to reappropriate one of the most reactionary cultural genres of the late 1970s and early 1980s, namely the slasher film, in a radical turn. These films featured young people being hunted by monstrous figures which symbolized the economic hardships and social disintegration endemic to the first decades of plutocratic rule. *Night in the Woods* rewrites the horror story of the monstrous annihilation of solidarity among the youth of the 1970s and 1980s³² into a resistance story of the reinvention of solidarity among the young people of the 2010s.

This resistance story begins on day seven of the game, halfway through its full twelve day cycle. Mae attends a town festival called Harfest, essentially a variation of Halloween, and ends up participating in a community theater production which may or may not be homage to a comparable sequence in *The Witcher 3*.³³ That evening, Mae glimpses a masked figure skulking in the twilight. At first she thinks she has seen a ghost, and begins to track down anything in Possum Springs connected to ghosts or haunting, much to her friends' bemusement.

It is at this moment that *Night in the Woods*' overall tone of nostalgic exploration shifts towards explicit history-telling, as Mae's vague consciousness of class begins to crystallize into an overt class consciousness. Interestingly, there were strong hints of this shift in the lucid dreams Mae experiences after falling asleep, which begin the evening of day three and recur at the end of days four, five and six.³⁴ These dreams are playable sequences wherein Mae traverses a nightmarish version of Possum Springs at night. In the majority of these dreams, the goal of the player is to trigger the appearance of a quartet of ghostly musicians. These musicians play a fiddle, a saxophone, an accordion and a tuba -- instruments reminiscent of a swing-era jazz band, a nod towards the radical US working-class movements of the 1930s and 1940s.

Over the next five days, this history-telling expands to include the history of the various labor struggles in the town's region, as well as the personal histories of Mae's friends. For example, on day eight, Mae visits the local library with Bea and uncovers a plethora of articles on an old microfiche machine detailing the violent labor struggles of Possum Springs.³⁵ Far from being a rural idyll, the town has been the site of epic battles between workers and plutocrats since the late 19th century. Similarly, if the player chooses Gregg's path on day nine, they will break into the local Historical Society building and learn the grisly details of the Possum Massacre, the bloody state repression of a major miner's strike.

That said, some of the most significant history-telling of days eight through twelve is relayed by the personal stories of Mae's friends (e.g. Angus' personal story of surviving an abusive childhood during day nine, or Bea's story of her frustrated educational aspirations after the college party during day ten).³⁶ The effect is to ground the urgency of personal struggles in the larger geopolitical urgency of the new mass struggles against plutocracy. Put more concretely, *Night in the Woods* shows how the struggles of young Americans for their own economic and psychological survival converge with the collective struggles for public education (the need to defend libraries, schools and universities), for democratic participation and ownership of the digital media (the need for poets, writers, musicians, videogame fans and videogame artists to create their own specialized commons), and for service-sector workers (the need for retail workers, food service workers, and logistics workers to create new types of unions and other forms of solidarity).

This history-telling reaches its culmination on day twelve, when Mae and her friends discover that there is indeed a powerful force haunting the town. This force is not ghostly in nature, but entirely human. It consists of a group of anonymous citizens who have decided to

take action against the downward spiral of their community, by abducting and tossing young teenagers down the shaft of a long-abandoned coal mine. This is a ritual sacrifice to appease the plutocracy, whose rule is symbolized by an eerie absence called “the Hole at the Centre of Everything”.³⁷ This hole is both physical -- the void of the mine shaft -- but it is also the terrifying psychic void which has been haunting Mae during her increasingly distraught dreams. The economic violence the plutocracy inflicts on young Americans -- high rates of arrest and police violence, epidemic unemployment, and skyrocketing college tuition -- merges seamlessly with the psychological violence of a heartless, ruthless society run by predators.

This final twist demolishes two of the most powerful ideologies of the plutocracy at once. The first is the fiction that plutocrats like Jeff Bezos create all wealth, whereas Amazon's 566,000 workers create nothing at all.³⁸ The second are the cultural revanchisms and political fascisms of the post-2011 period, which scapegoat the poorest and the most vulnerable for the thievery of the plutocrats. By the end of *Night in the Woods*, Mae and her friends openly reject the rule of the plutocracy, and escape from the clutches of the revanchists.

While *Infinite Fall* wisely left the post-escape future of the four friends open, the writers bequeathed one final gift to the radical digital artists of the future. This is the supplemental narrative called *Lost Constellation*, available as a free supplemental download for purchasers of *Night in the Woods*.³⁹ This supplemental is a Slavic folk tale told by Mae's grandfather when she was a young child (he has passed away by the time of *Night in the Woods*), narrating the adventure of a young woman who journeys into the forest during the dead of winter in order to speak to a deceased relative. Along the way, she encounters magical creatures reminiscent of Baba Yaga and other mythic beings. Where the 20th century novelists created the neo-slave narrative, *Lost Constellation* can be described as one of the first neo-serf narratives of the 21st

centuries, a genre already undergoing significant development by the digital artists of Eastern Europe and Eurasia (most notably, in CD Projekt's *The Witcher 3*).

1. “The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions (i.e. their position-takings), strategies which depend for their force and form on the position each agent occupies in the power relations (rappports de force).

Every position-taking is defined in relation to the space of possibles which is objectively realized as a problematic in the form of the actual or potential position-taking corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it. It follows from this, for example, that a prise de position changes, even when it remains identical. whenever there is change in the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from. The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader.” Pierre Bourdieu (1983). “The Field of Cultural Production: or, The Economic World Reversed”. *Poetics* 12 (313-313).

2. For a useful overview of the literature on independent games, see: Felan Parker (2014). “Indie Game Studies Year Eleven.” DiGRA '13 - Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies 7. For an illuminating account of the “doujin” subculture of independent videogame developers of Japan, see: Nobushige Hichibe and Ema Tanaka. “Chapter 3: Content Production Fields and Doujin Game Developers in Japan: Non-economic Rewards as Drivers of Variety in Games.” In: *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Play*. Alexis Pulos and S. Austin Lee, editors. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016 (43-80). For a useful study of the motivations and contradictions of the skilled digital media workers employed by the animation, advertising and related media industries of China, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, see: Anthony Fung. “Chapter 15: Redefining Creative Labor: East Asian Comparisons.” In: *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*. Edited by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. For a useful account of the informal and non-commercial digital media culture of late 1990s and early 2000s Finland, see: Heikki Tyni and Olli Sotamaa (2014). “Assembling a game development scene? Uncovering Finland’s largest demo party.” *Game 03*. http://www.gamejournal.it/3_tyni_sotamaa/.

3. The plight of many indie videogame studios has significant parallels to that of Youtube media artists, caught in the crossfire between Google's advertising-based monetization model and the non-commercial ethos of digital fan communities. See: Hector Postigo (2016). “The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money.” *New Media & Society* 18:2 (332–349).

4. The most significant examples include Square, a Japanese indie studio founded in 1986, releasing Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy* in 1987; id Software, founded in 1991, which invented internet distribution via the shareware release of the opening level of *Doom* in 1993; Valve Software, founded in 1996, which released the ground-breaking digital distribution service, Steam, in 2002; CD Projekt Red, founded in 2002, which published *The Witcher* in 2007; and Mojang, founded in 2009 by Markus Persson, which released the beta version of

Minecraft in 2010.

5. *Night in the Woods* was released by Infinite Fall in 2017 and 2018 on Linux, macOS, Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, with additional releases planned for Android and iOS devices in the second half of 2018.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_in_the_Woods.

6. Since the mid-1970s, the transnational ownership class of capital has been grabbing an ever larger share of the planet's income and wealth in almost every major economy and country on the planet. Emmanuel Saez (2016). "Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States."

<https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2015.pdf>. Thomas Piketty et. al. (2018). *World Inequality Report 2018*. <https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf>.

7. The name "Euromaidan" referred to Kiev's central city square, the location of the biggest protests against Yanukovich's corrupt and traitorous authoritarian kleptocracy. While the Euromaidan borrowed many of its tools, tactics and strategies from the 2011 Arab Spring and Occupy protest movements, it invented a wide range of unique digital strategies. Svitlana Krasynska and Eric Martin provide this lucid description of how the protesters organized the use of digital tools: "Recruitment for and coordination of the [Euromaidan's] social technology program was channeled through an all-Ukrainian 'Hackathon' launched by the IT Tent in December. As part of the Hackathon, a call was made both for project ideas from IT professionals and for project needs from the general public. Subsequently, dozens of social projects were conceived and implemented during the events of EuroMaidan, coordinated by the IT Tent. Projects ranged from creating and maintaining a database for the missing persons (addressing a salient need during abductions and detention of activists) to creating an electronic chemistry textbook (a project requested by a chemistry teacher and selected for implementation by an IT student).

Other initiatives included an 'SOS button,' a smart phone app that, when pressed, sent text-messages to relatives and/or friends of the sender, notifying them of emergency and providing the sender's exact coordinates through the Global Positioning System (GPS); a bar-coded database for donated medicine for field hospital units on Maidan; and an 'electronic enemy map' documenting locations of pro-government Special Forces, among many others. Approximately, twenty different teams of IT professionals were active during the Hackathon. The other key program, the IT communication platform, was created for IT professionals who wanted to contribute technical expertise to EuroMaidan and support community-building among IT professionals. The platform was created, 'so that any IT'er could come from any country and stay there, starting with getting warm, to having a conversation, to a meeting place. So, [it was] a sort of an association,' as conveyed by the chief coordinator. The platform served as a central point of communication between the IT industry on EuroMaidan and the 'outside' world. Positions on various issues were discussed by the participants on Facebook, and were then conveyed publically to the press and in different Maidan councils by the chief coordinator." Svitlana Krasynska and Eric Martin (2016). "The Formality of Informal Civil Society: Ukraine's EuroMaidan." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. DOI 10.1007/s11266-016-9819-8 (20).

8. The US Federal Reserve's Z1 Financial Accounts (formerly known as the Flow-of-funds accounts) show US non-corporate financial debt rose from less than 15% of GDP in 1973 to 109% in 2009, enabling US consumers with falling real wages to maintain the illusion of prosperity. Yanis Varoufakis has argued that this tidal wave of debt helped to power the world economy from 1973 until 2008. The US ran enormous current account and trade deficits, effectively importing the export surpluses of Europe (primarily Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands and Switzerland) and East Asia (originally Japan, but later South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and China). Part of this influx of funds ended up financing Wall Street financial speculations, the main institutional form of which was what Paul McCulley famously termed in 2007 the “shadow banking system”, a.k.a. unregulated financial firms with the power to create debt like banks. This shadow banking system is the labyrinth of Varoufakis' Minotaur, but instead of devouring human beings for the hegemony of King Minos, this minotaur devoured other countries' trade and current account surpluses to safeguard US hegemony. Yanis Varoufakis. *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*. London: Zed Books, 2011. Also see: Zoltan Pozsar, Tobias Adrian, Adam Ashcraft, and Hayley Boesky (December 1, 2013). "Shadow Banking". FRBNY Economic Policy Review. Federal Reserve Bank of New York. For the Federal Reserve statistics on US debt, see:

9. The first overt political expression of this transnational realism was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' July 2018 primary campaign in New York City. For a useful description of how the campaign succeeded, the digital tools it utilized, and the role of the digital commons, see: Naureen Akhter (blog). July 4, 2018. “Notes from a Winning Campaign.” <http://kitchen3n.com/?p=2735>.

10. Hector Postigo has provided an illuminating account of non-commercial, independent production in modding (downloadable fan-created content designed to run on existing commercial videogames): Hector Postigo (2007). “Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-Based Digital Game Modifications.” *Games and Culture* 2.

11. For additional background on recent changes in indie studio production, see: Jennifer Whitson (2018). “Rethinking Cultural Production: Entrepreneurship, Relational Labour and Sustainability in Indie Game Development.” Forthcoming in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Draft copy is available here: <https://jenniferwhitson.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/ecs-revision-submissionfinal.pdf>.

12. The Angry Joe Show (Youtube channel). <https://www.youtube.com/user/AngryJoeShow>. YongYea (Youtube channel). <https://www.youtube.com/user/YongYea>. Jim Sterling (Youtube channel). <https://www.youtube.com/user/JimSterling>.

13. Videogame studios raised only \$1 million on Kickstarter in 2011, but \$39 million in 2012. <http://icopartners.com/2018/02/kickstarter-2017-depth-look-games-category/>.

14. Noclip (Youtube channel). “Bug Testing Night in the Woods (Bekah & Adam Saltsman) -- Noclip Sessions.” February 23, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu2zOVeA5JQ>. Also see Adam Saltsman's blog post on the state of contemporary indie publishing:

https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/AdamSaltsman/20180329/315941/GDC_Wrapup_Part_1_Notes_on_Indie_Publishing_Spring_2018.php.

15. Many of the strategies Infinite Fall and Finji pursued were co-managed by Chris Dwyer, the indie publicist for *Night in the Woods*. See: Chris Dwyer (GDC presentation). “(Opportunity) Cost Effective Marketing & PR for Indies.” July 25, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsFgXXjoLi8>.

16. The total funds raised by videogame projects on Kickstarter rose from \$1.1 million 2011 to a peak of \$48.4 million in 2013, before dropping to \$16.6 million in 2017. <http://icopartners.com/2018/02/kickstarter-2017-depth-look-games-category/>.

17. Secret Lab. <https://www.secretlab.com.au/blog/2017/11/14/how-night-in-the-woods-uses-yarn-spinner>.

18. Jon Manning delivered a talk at GDC 2017 describing the creation and utility of Yarn Spinner. Jon Manning (Youtube). “Making Night in the Woods Better with Open Source”. April 14, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsiu-zzDYww>.

19. A cultural of workplace internal egalitarianism and participatory decision-making is one of the most striking and consistent features of the most successful videogame studios in the world. Variations of this egalitarianism are core features of studios as diverse as Arkane, Bethesda Softworks, Blizzard, CD Projekt Red, Insomniac, Rockstar, Sony Naughty Dog, Sony Santa Monica, Spike Chunsoft and Valve.

20. It is true that Toby Fox's satire of the choice-and-consequences role-playing adventure, *Undertale* (2015), and Supergiant's sports-themed *Pyre* (2016), with its subtext of an impending democratic revolution against a repressive social order, both came close to this achievement. While both are top-notch videogames in their own right, they lack the vocabulary of transnational realism which makes *Night in the Woods* such a powerful work of art.

21. Infinite Fall's strategy has limited parallels to the alternate future scenario depicted by Bethesda's *Fallout* franchise, which critiques this imperial consumerism in the form of period-specific satire of the US empire at the zenith of its mid-20th century hegemony. Where *Night in the Woods* surpasses the four main iterations of the *Fallout* franchise, however, is the former's explicit critique of imperial white masculinity.

22. Drew Desilver (2014). “For most workers, real wages have barely budged for decades.” Pew Foundation. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/09/for-most-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>. Also see: Pew Research (2016). “America’s Shrinking Middle Class: A Close Look at Changes Within Metropolitan Areas.” <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/05/Middle-Class-Metro-Areas-FINAL.pdf>.

23. Defined benefit pensions once covered 35% of private sector workers in the early 1990s, but only 18% by 2013. <https://www.epi.org/blog/private-sector-pension-coverage-decline/>.

24. Data from the US Federal Reserve shows that educational loan debt in the US exploded from almost nothing in the late 1970s to \$1.48 trillion in May 2018.

<https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/current/default.htm>.

25. Nicholas Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

26. This is a favorite strategy of numerous occult thriller, horror, and post-apocalyptic videogame franchises, which depict the sudden ruination of once-thriving communities by inexplicable forces. What is problematic about shock narratives is their fundamental ideological ambivalence about the prospect of social change. Simply, the loss of imperial privileges can trigger catastrophic revanchisms as well as progressive anti-imperial mobilizations.

27. This whimsical aesthetic is also apparent in the animal names of the town's main businesses, e.g. there is a bankrupt supermarket outlet called the Food Donkey, driven under by a competitor called the Ham Panther. There is also a local donut chain called Donut Wolf, whose main symbol is a giant neon wolf -- a broad hint of how commodities threaten to consume their erstwhile consumers.

28. Holowka's sound-track is a remarkable achievement and deserves a full-scale musicology in its own right. Its musical strategy has parallels to Inon Zur's sublime ambient sound-track for *Fallout 4*, only where Zur refunctions the primary musical documents of the US empire at its progressive peak (the span from the atonal classics of Charles Ives to Bebe and Louis Barron's masterful score sound for *Forbidden Planet*) into a critique of the US empire at its zenith, Holowka refunctions the thematic materials of 1980s and 1990s alternative pop and grunge into a critique of the US empire as it fades into the history-books.

29. The single most common symptom of this excessive flattening is the stereotypical villain narrative or "diabulus ex machina" (demon from the machine), wherein the protagonist or main characters are threatened by an inexplicable force for completely gratuitous reasons (the wrath of ancient gods, the disturbance of occult artifacts, monsters from other dimensions, etc.).

30. The scene plays out as follows:

Clerk at cashier. Offscreen conversation between Bea and Mae.

Bea: "...because it's not 'sticking it to the man'. 'The man' isn't going to lose anything here. But she [the clerk] will get in a lot of trouble."

Mae: *dubious*: "She's just a cog in a much bigger machine, huh?"

Bea: "Sure. Whatever. Return the shit."

Mae: "OK. OK. I'm going."

Enter Mae.

Mae: "Hi." *Offscreen Bea says 'hello'.*

Clerk: "You're back."

Mae: "Yeah. We stole some shit. Here is that shit. We don't want you to get in trouble with your boss. It's not your fault the world is like it is."

Clerk: "What? You stole this?"

Mae: *clearly inspired*: “You're just a cog in a much bigger machine. To blame you would be like blaming a thing inside a whole thing.”

Brief pause.

Clerk: *baffled*: “So you're returning stolen merchandise?”

Mae: “One day folks like you are going to overthrow the whole thing.”

Clerk: “What whole thing?”

Mae: “The. Whole. Thing.” *Offscreen, Bea says, 'we're leaving'.*

Mae: “Stay strong you beautiful dreamer. You have nothing to lose but your chains.”

Clerk: “What?”

Messofanego (Youtube channel). “Night In The Woods - shoplifting.” February 28, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juV7-tEe2iU>

31. While the average rates of drug abuse are the same among all ethnic groups in the US population, the individuals arrested and jailed for drug-related crimes in the United States are overwhelmingly poor or persons of color. Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

32. In the single most common version of this story, a group of young people is killed off by a monster which can be defeated only by single (usually female) survivor. For a useful analysis of how the slasher films oscillated between the poles of revanchist misogyny on the one hand and the neoliberal commodification of youth culture on the other, see: Pat Gill (2002). “The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family.” *Journal of Film and Video* 54:4 (16-30). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688391>. For an analysis of the role economic austerity played in some of the major franchises spawned by the slasher as a form, see: Kara M. Kvaran (2016). “‘You’re All Doomed!’ A Socioeconomic Analysis of Slasher Films.” *Journal of American Studies* 50.

33. Mae is dragooned at the last second into the role of an actress, very much as Geralt of Rivia is called upon to display his thespian skills in the *Witcher 3* quest called “The Play's The Thing”.

34. The dreams recur twice more after the revelation of day seven, namely during the evenings of days eight and nine.

35. To underline the point, Holowka's ambient sound track for the microfiche sequence contains an electronic sample resembling the high-speed whirl of microfilm being spun through the projector. This is both a nod to an important analog technology of preservation which has become almost extinct in the digital age, and a broad hint of the indispensable role of public libraries.

36. *Night in the Woods'* interweaving of radical US labor history with the life-struggles of contemporary citizens beginning to mobilize against the plutocracy has an intriguing Ukrainian literary parallel, namely Oksana Zabuzhko's novel *Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2009), the single most prescient literary anticipation of the Revolution of Dignity. Zabuzhko's text explores the bitter legacies of the successive genocides perpetrated by Soviet neocolonialism and Nazi colonialism on the people of Ukraine during the 1930s and the 1940s, and the struggles of contemporary Ukrainians to come to terms with this legacy.

37. This void is ingeniously foreshadowed by the tag line on the game's website, which displays the phrase, “At the end of everything, hold on to something.” <http://www.nightinthewoods.com/>. The “everything” in question is nothing less than the 1945-2008 US hegemony, while the “something” is not a commodity, but a handhold which might help to orient ourselves to a post-imperial future.

38. This number is Amazon's own figure for total employees at the end of 2017. <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/amazon-profits-soar-1-9b-key-holiday-quarter-eclipsing-wall-streets-expectations/>.

39. The download was released free of charge here: <https://finji.itch.io/lost-constellation>.