

# “If anyone's going to ruin your night, it should be you”: Responsibility and Affective-Materiality in *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods*

**Kevin Veale**

Massey University

School of English and Media Studies

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Wellington 6140

[K.R.Veale@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.R.Veale@massey.ac.nz)

## **ABSTRACT**

Responsibility is key to the medium-specific storytelling associated with videogames, and both *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods* make use of it in distinctive ways to shape their experiences of storytelling.

## **Keywords**

Affect, modes of engagement, materiality, responsibility, metamedia storytelling, transmodal engagement

## **INTRODUCTION**

Storytelling experiences have always been shaped by the labour required of the people engaging with a story, in terms of the physical and mental processes required of them as they negotiate the text that frames the story – and textual structures shape that labour (Veale 2017).

N. Katherine Hayle's 'media-specific analysis' considers the ways that different textual structures require different modes of engagement to negotiate, and argues that meaning is an emergent property which grows from the interaction. Hayles argues that the 'materiality' of a text is an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between [the work's] physical characteristics and signifying strategies (Hayles 2005, 3, 103–4). The significance of materiality as a concept is in recognising that the meaning of a work emerges from a complex interplay between the work's underlying structure, how the user engages with that structure, and the user's 'interpretive strategies' (Hayles 2002, 33). As a result, the meaning of a text cannot be entirely predicted before the user engages with it, as a result of the interplay that produces materiality.

Part of the meaning generated as people negotiate with texts is affective, rather than aesthetic or associated with semiotic signification. Misha Kavka frames affect as "...potential emotions – emotions that have not yet been perceived as such and thus constitute a 'primordial soup' of feeling" (Kavka 2008, x). Since there are affective dimensions to negotiating a given textual structure, different modes of textual engagement are affectively distinctive. As a result, authors and creators can shape different textual structures to manipulate the affective dimensions of the experience. The

**Proceedings of DiGRA 2019 Conference: What's Next?**

© 2015 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

materiality that Hayles identifies is already affective, because there is an inextricable affective dimension to the meaning that we generate from engaging with texts and their underlying structure.

*Undertale* (Fox 2015) and *Night in the Woods* (Benson, Holowka, and Hockenberry 2017) are both videogames that use storytelling specific to the ‘affective materiality’ of their medium to produce a sense of responsibility for the player, reinforcing their affective investment in the storyworld.

However, they do so in different ways for very different purposes: *Undertale* subverts what players typically expect of games, and turn standard patterns of play such as loading a game to explore multiple potential outcomes into part of a singular storyworld, underlining that the player cannot escape the responsibility for their own actions. It uses this emphatic responsibility to tell a story that simultaneously explores the impact of kindness and interpersonal connection, and savagely critiques the gameplay and narrative assumptions common to videogames at large.

*Night in the Woods* does not subvert the fundamental mechanics of gameplay, instead presenting a more limiting and seemingly-mundane contextualising framework for its narrative: a young woman returns to her small home town after dropping out of university in the hopes of relaxing into her normal life, only to find that her friends and family have moved on in the intervening time. The game uses the very specific narrative context of the protagonist to ask how the player would respond in the same situation, and to tell a story that uses their perception of responsibility to explore themes of rural marginalisation under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope.

Responsibility is key to the medium-specific storytelling associated with videogames, and both *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods* make use of it in distinctive ways to shape their experiences of storytelling.

## BIO

Kevin Veale is a Lecturer in Media Studies for the School of English and Media Studies at the Wellington campus of Massey University in New Zealand. He is interested in storytelling across media forms, and exploring the ways that different forms of mediation shape the affective experiences of the stories they mediate. Available at: <https://wheretofind.me/@krveale>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benson, Scott, Alec Holowka, and Bethany Hockenberry. 2017. *Night in the Woods*. Infinite Fall. <https://finji.itch.io/night-in-the-woods>.
- Fox, Toby. 2015. *Undertale*. tobyfox. [undertale.com](http://undertale.com).
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2002. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . 2005. *My Mother Was A Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kavka, Misha. 2008. *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy*. Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Veale, Kevin. 2017. “‘friendship Isn’t an Emotion Fucknuts’ - Manipulating Affective Materiality to Shape the Experience of Homestuck’s Story”. *Convergence*, June, 1-17 1354856517714954. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517714954>.