

SPECIAL THEMATIC BLOCK II

Affect, Immersion, and Games

Guest Editors: Norbert Krek and Zsófia O. Réti

A Quest for the “Missing People”: Posthuman Affect in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*

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*HJEAS***ABSTRACT**

The narrative-adventure game, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (2018) is “a bleak American folk tale about traveling, sharing stories, and surviving manifest destiny,” whose objective is to introduce the player to voices formerly overshadowed or muted by the mainstream myth of the American dream. Players are tasked to find “the greatest stories,” that is “the ones people will tell you about their own lives,” meeting marginalized characters, like the migrant Mexican worker or the Navajo woman, as well as well-known figures of resistance, like Beat author Neal Cassady.

Relying on Aubrey Anable’s definition of video games as affective systems, the article demonstrates that the player’s non-linear, rhizomic wandering results in a more accurate, affective cartography of the USA and provides the opportunity to tap into the experience of becoming posthuman via a marginalized avatar. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* thus aligns with the objectives of Rosi Braidotti’s critical posthumanism: it facilitates a different, more democratic future achieved by actualizing as political subjects of knowledge the “missing people,” who did not qualify as fully human according to the humanist idea of “man.” (IB)

KEYWORDS: critical posthumanism, video games, affective cartography, American dream, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, posthuman subject, utopian impulse



The narrative-adventure game *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (2018) is described by the creators as “a bleak American folk tale about traveling, sharing stories, and surviving manifest destiny,” (*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, 2015–2017) the objective of which is to introduce the player to voices and stories of twentieth-century USA, which were formerly overshadowed or outright muted by the mainstream myth of the American dream and the pursuit of success narrowly defined in material terms. What sets this game apart is its reliance on gathering narratives not only as the aim of the quest—the player is given the task to find “the greatest stories,” that is, “the true

ones; the ones people will tell you about their own lives” (*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*)¹—but also as a form of currency, since the game can only be completed if the player discovers, listens to, and then re-tells them to the right characters who will reveal their own life stories in exchange. As clarified by the initial instructions, *WWTW* is a deliberate critique of the American dream:

. . . this land is built on stories. It’s one big story, this county, woven of many small ones. Few of the small ones are strictly true, and the big one is mostly a lie. . . . The more true stories you can find and tell, the more truth you can weave into the big story. Tarnish it a bit, perhaps, but isn’t a dingy and battered truth better than a shining lie? . . . Hunger, weariness, thirst, and despair. They’re all part of stories—the part not often told.

(*WWTW*)

The player is free to wander mainland USA on foot, hitchhiking, or hopping a train until they meet all sixteen main characters, whose life stories are equally vital for finishing the quest. The fact that these characters are on the road themselves emphasizes their marginalized status, all the more apparent as they present different iterations of ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, disability, and beliefs, giving ample room for a wide variety of life stories covering a period from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1970s.

Based on the above, it is my contention that *WWTW* fosters the appreciation of locally embedded experience by relying on a set of marginalized characters and the player’s unstructured, non-linear wandering across the USA, which results in an affective remapping of the American dream, creating a cartography, defined by Rosi Braidotti as “a theoretically based and politically informed map of the present that aims at tracking the production of knowledge and subjectivity” (“A Theoretical Framework” 3). The exploration of subjectivities that propose alternatives to the humanist idea of man and of the affects involved in new possible configurations of the (post)human is the main aim of this paper, since video games are, by definition, affective systems which may express novel, emergent “ways of being in the world and ways of feeling in the present” (Anable xii). I also argue that medium-specific features of video games, especially the “narrativization of space through movement [that] stands in stark contrast to sequential forms of storytelling most prominently found in literature and film” (Meinel 5), construct an affective environment that draws attention to the embedded and embodied player’s imbrication in the nature-culture

continuum as a relational being, and also conceptualize affect “as a social, subjectivizing, but also collectivizing force” (Anable xviii). With this in mind, I propose a reading of *WWTW* through the lens of Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman critical theory, the objective of which is to strive for a more equitable future by means of actualizing as political subjects of knowledge the “missing people,”² that is, “real-life subjects whose knowledge never made it into any of the official cartographies” (“A Theoretical Framework” 21).

Video games and critical posthumanism

The growing importance of video games as a medium is undeniable both in economic and cultural terms, as pointed out by Alenda Y. Chang, who considers academic engagement with video games necessary because they “have undergone a cultural transformation, from being a largely private and youthful subculture to being a ubiquitous phenomenon that now spans domestic and public space and all demographic categories” (5). Her volume, *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, sheds light on the potential of games to encapsulate covert ecological lessons that help cope with the Anthropocene’s prevailing environmental affects. By offering less moralizing and didactic engagement with environmental problems in a medium that provides agency, video games can invite players to combat both apathy caused by denial and paralysis due to eco-anxiety (15), thus raising awareness of the human subject’s enmeshment with non-human others.

The benefits of studying this emerging field are also underscored by the volume *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies* (2022), edited by Dietmar Meinel, who invites American Studies to “expand its notions of space as a practice or a form of doing” based on how Video Game Studies “understand the production of space also as an act of playing” (3). *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* expects the player to populate the map of the US through exploration, during which they relate to places, the local stories they find, and the objective of the quest based on the real-life cognitive pattern to semanticize spaces: “As we experience spaces, . . . we read them for their meaning and the stories they contain, and as we perform these spaces through movement and interaction, we inscribe our own narrative into them” (Domsch 104). This is the premise of the player’s task, built on two contrasting perspectives: one is the well-known “big story” to be challenged—“all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (“The Declaration of Independence”) coupled with manifest destiny, which translates power relations into spatial terms,

specifying the master narrative relating to American soil. The game's title, however, hints at the other side of the coin, being a line from an American folk song, first recorded in the 1920s ("Lonesome Road Blues"), and it has been around with variations since then under the titles "Lonesome Road Blues" and "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad." The song belongs to a musical genre that focuses on the lives of marginalized groups, according to Woody Guthrie, one of the most significant figures of American folk music,³ who identifies lonesomeness as the genre's main theme:

the blues . . . is about lonesomeness. It may be lonesomeness for a lover, but alternatively lonesomeness for a job, for spending money, for good times, for estranged children, for getting out of jail. . . the most searing blues [is] traced back to the runaway slave, violently deprived of home and heritage, torn loose from family, fleeing for a freedom of vast uncertainty and insecurity. (Guthrie qtd. in Clapp 27)

The search for the place where the water tastes like wine is not compatible at all with the lofty ideals formulated by manifest destiny, as demonstrated by the sixteen main characters' specific life stories that chronicle different forms of alienation and the sense of unbelonging that Guthrie posits as a defining element of lonesomeness.

Being "uniquely structured as an anthology of short stories" instead of relying on a single central narrative, the creators of *WWTW* made a specific effort to bring to life a wide variety of characters by working with sixteen different writers, who crafted the unique background, personality, and tale of each Campfire Companion to the player ("Exciting Announcements"). Four to five meetings and story-telling sessions are required to gain the trust of each character, who slowly reveal their innermost concerns, feelings, memories, and hopes, giving an account of the embedded and embodied experience of living in the USA. Since the main characters also wander around the map, the player needs to look for them while criss-crossing the country, collecting local stories and engaging in their exchange to make them grow with the telling (for example, meeting a man who planted an orchard turns into the story of Johnny Appleseed after several retellings) and have a set of new stories to entertain the Campfire Companions. The game contains 237 stories altogether and is praised by reviewer Allison Meier for delving into the origins of American folklore and for the connections forged by storytelling. However, she fails to note the socio-historical relevance of the life stories as situated knowledges of marginalized people, though going back

to the 1870s via the elderly Navajo woman's account of the forceful displacement of her youth and the pain of losing the tribe's sacred lands is hard to miss as a counter-narrative. The American Indian woman's experience, like the fate of the rest of the characters—for instance, the black sharecropper, the Dust Bowl refugee, the Mexican migrant worker or the trade unionist miner on the run—has been disregarded, suppressed, and discarded as stories of failure, at odds with American optimism and success stories of self-reliance. By devoting the whole game to voices that could hardly be called staple characters of video games and that have a long history of misrepresentation in mainstream culture, *WWTW* accomplishes what Braidotti defines as the aim of an adequate cartography: “to bring forth alternative figurations . . . for the kind of knowing subjects currently constructed” (“A Theoretical Framework” 4). Furthermore, the game also manages to fulfill the double task of cartography that Braidotti sees in providing a critique of actual conditions, while being “creative in terms of new figurations or navigational tools that aim at *actualizing* the virtual”; also formulated as “acting as the record of what we are ceasing to be and the seed of what we are in the process of becoming” (“Posthuman Critical Theory” 11, emphasis in the original).

It is the aspect of actualizing the virtual that provides a crucial link between posthuman critical theory and video games as a medium, on more than one level. On the one hand, utopian visions, that is, “political anticipatory projections of more equitable, pleasurable and sustainable futures” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* 221) are integral part of the process of becoming posthuman, as they can give ample room to think outside of the box of humanism. Michał Kłosiński demonstrates very convincingly that “video games offer all three elements . . . crucial in thinking about utopia: a critique of social reality as such—utopian archeology; almost infinite potential for designing alternative social, political and economic order—utopian architecture; and a re-definition of being human, ethics and morality—utopian ontology” (12). The tendency to embrace posthuman affirmative ethics is already obvious from the main objective of this specific game, which is devoted to the creation of a world that includes the missing people, uncovered by the player in a process of reterritorialization, as the blank map of the US is slowly filled with a plethora of stories instead of the dominant myth of the American dream. On the other hand, as “laboratories which allow us to simulate consequences of different social, political and economic policies in real time” (Kłosiński 12), video games not only provide insight into how different social and political systems work, but also foster player

involvement as “a feeling and active subject” (Anable xiv). Unlike consumers of traditional media, video game players assume a dual role of both protagonist and audience in these participatory narratives (Owen 27). Here the narrative stalls without the player performing actions to move it forward (47), consequently experiencing a feeling of agency in the diegetic world. Although *WWTW* does not follow the pattern of classic dystopian games that offer the player the possibility of attaining a better future and the choice whether to become an agent of change (Farca 27), it definitely raises the player’s awareness of negative trends within empirical reality, cementing links to the real world by using historical events and personages, such as the Coal Wars,⁴ the famous WWI Black regiment nicknamed Harlem Hellfighters, or the life of beat poet Neal Cassady as starting points for the Campfire Companions’ stories.

Gerald Farca’s extensively researched volume, *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player’s Aesthetic Response*, proclaims the video game dystopia as “a new strategic enterprise of the utopian philosophy” due to the fact that it offers emancipatory routes that may bring improvements to the game world, and emphasizes its role “as a subversive example and inducement to effect social change and transformation in the empirical world” (16). *WWTW* instead has the Campfire Companions reflect on real life grievances and injustices, like the racism experienced by the Black Pullman porter in Jim Crow South or the desperation of WWI veterans that culminated in the Bonus Army’s March on Washington on 1932, in the form of personal accounts, reminiscent of oral histories. Since the player’s role is confined to exchanging stories with these characters and has no means to improve their status, discovering and listening to the American dream’s counter-narratives becomes in itself a subversive act. At the same time, the only place left for the player to effect change is in the real world, fulfilling the utopian impulse along the affirmative ethics outlined by Braidotti. More specifically, the game also complies with many of Braidotti’s methodological guidelines for critical posthumanities: “cartographic accuracy, with the corollary of ethical accountability, and the combination of critique with creativity, . . . non-linearity, [reliance on] the powers of memory and the imagination and the strategy of de-familiarization” (“A Theoretical Framework” 16). The rhizomic wandering across the map and the local stories are part of the process of de-familiarization, which results in a more accurate affective cartography of the United States, while the life stories of the Campfire Companions concurrently harness the powers of memory and imagination to envision a world where the happiness promised by the

American dream is not defined along individualistic principles and is not reserved for those who most approximate the ideal Man of humanism. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* encourages the player to look beyond the myth of the self-reliant subject as an independent agent based on the life stories and to recognize the characters as “relational beings, defined by the capacity to affect and be affected” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 45) as embodied and embedded posthuman subjects.

It is the analysis of the connection between player and avatar in video games that leads Kelly I. Aliano to the conclusion that the virtual experiences that allow for performative interaction “have expanded our posthuman positionality,” which entails that “we have become a version of ourselves that is both real and digital, and both human and posthuman simultaneously” (423). This relationship receives ample treatment in *Parables of the Posthuman: Digital Realities, Gaming, and the Player Experience*, where Jonathan Boulter elaborates on video games as sites of cultural imagination capable of providing “new ways of conceiving the self” that result in a unique experience for the player due to the technologically mediated complex network of “player-console/computer, player-avatar, player-narrative” (2). His analysis of video games thematizing the entry into the posthuman condition concludes that by mirroring “the player’s own entry into the posthuman condition as s/he plays: the games move thus from merely thematizing the posthuman to instantiating that condition” (15). Boulter’s enquiry based on positing the player-avatar hybrid as a cyborg highlights that the modus operandi of these games brings about “a practical demonstration of the extended, posthuman self” (5), that is, in Braidotti’s terms, they create an alternative figuration to the current notion of knowing subjects, “a conceptual persona” (“A Theoretical Framework” 4), resulting from a critical cartography conducted in an environment posited as technologically mediated nature-culture continuum.

Affect and the relational subject in video games

“Posthuman subjectivity starts with the acknowledgement that what defines us as an autonomous capacity is not rationality, nor our cerebral faculty alone, but rather the autonomy of affect as a virtual force that gets actualized through relational bonds,” not to be conflated with individualized emotions, Braidotti cautions, while arguing for the need to de-psychologize and de-link affect from individualism “in order to match the complexity of our human and nonhuman relational universe” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 45). To gain insight into how the affects linking individuals and their relational

universe are theorized regarding this specific medium, I will rely on recent research by Aubrey Anable and David Owen, whose starting point for approaching video games is to interpret them as “structures of feeling” (see Anable’s “Introduction”), and to explore the affects specific to the medium by applying performance studies to the player’s experience, respectively. These angles will serve well the investigation of the process of becoming posthuman as played out in video games in general, modeling both the “material net in which everything is actually connected and potentially interacting” and the “entangled, symbiotic, hybrid” existence, which defy fixed notions of being (Ferrando 168, 170) that posthumanism posits.

Anable’s volume *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (2018) operates, in her view, with the most basic definition of affect underlying most approaches,⁵ formulated succinctly as “forces that inform our emotional states” (xvii), and, as its starting point, it deploys a critique of Deleuzian versions of affect theory. These strands, Anable argues, proclaim that “the body in movement and the virtual capacity of affect model a new politics and a new ethics. Yet this potential, this becoming, is never actually here,” since by entering the realm of signification and representation once formulated and comprehensible as “feeling” the radical potential of affect is lost (xviii). Anable sets out to demonstrate that video games have the potential to surpass the unique space-time of individual bodies (human or otherwise) and are able to describe the new type of relationality (xix), as they “engage and entangle us in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh” (xii). She finds the theory of becoming as conceptualized in Deleuzian affect theories unable to grasp the virtual potential of affect either as “a way of talking about the myriad ways everyday experience is felt but is not articulated or is inarticulable,” or as “the embodied capacity to feel—that which simultaneously opens us up to the world as relational beings and reminds us that our own sense of individuation and connection is always partial and extremely limited” (xviii). Anable justifies turning to Silvan Tomkins’s work instead by pointing out that the birth of both video games and his affect theory can be traced back to the mid-twentieth-century “cybernetic fold,” a term coined by Sedgwick and Frank to denote the period roughly between 1940 and 1960 (Anable 17). This era is characterized by the tendency of all fields of research, even art, to experiment with the use of cybernetics and systems theory to make sense of phenomena as diverse as world politics, animal communication, or the human mind (17). Tomkins’s insistence on affects and cognition being mutually interdependent systems that are

influenced by specific social and biological contexts is now regarded as the foundation for conceiving the sensing body as a historical, biological, technological, and social assemblage, underscores Anable (23), who deploys his notion of the self “as constantly formed and re-formed through daily, ordinary interpersonal and intrapersonal transmissions of feeling and sensation” (25) to investigate a pressing question of the present: the role of video games in the constant shaping of the contemporary sensorium.

It is not difficult to note the affinity between the role of affect as seen by Tomkins and the process of actualization of the embodied and embedded posthuman subject, which occurs through “networks of natural, social, political and physiological relations,” and results in “a sense of engagement in a web of ever-shifting relations and perpetual becoming,” as asserted by Braidotti (*Posthuman Knowledge*, 53). Although Anable does not elaborate on situating her research in the specific context of critical posthumanism, she concludes that video games as structures of feeling provide insight into the “collective desires, fears, and rhythms of everyday life in our precarious, networked, and procedurally generated world” (132), shedding light on the relationality of technologically mediated posthuman subjects, while not losing focus on the body, enmeshed in other webs of connections within the techno-natural-cultural continuum. Anable, who analyzes video games as media objects and cultural practices as well, justifies her inclusion of the embodied subject in the affective assemblage by citing Tomkins’s emphasis on the surfaces that transmit affect, which, in this case, is the material surface of contact: the video game screen. She, therefore, postulates the screen “as a space of representation, and . . . a site of everyday intimacy and entanglement” (59), denouncing game analysis and affect theory that would diminish the importance of questions of subjectivity and representation (57).

In *Player and Avatar: The Affective Potential of Videogames* (2017), Owen explores in detail the affective response of video game players based on performance theory, emphasizing the doubleness inherent in being both protagonist of the game and the audience enjoying and evaluating the performance. The medium provides a new form of suspension of disbelief compared to the traditional theatrical or cinematic model, in which the player chooses to join the fiction, extends the borders of their physical body or their perceived location and imagines the fiction affects them personally (3).⁶ Thus, video games move “from witnessing the other to being the other” (Causey qtd. in Owen 2), a feat accomplished via an extension of the self, the avatar, which functions as the player’s placeholder in the game world. Owen’s analysis is underpinned by the avatar’s definition as “an affective conduit

between the player and the game world” (4), which fulfills the role of the surface that transmits affects in Tomkins’s theory. The in-depth look at the affective potential of video games from a dramaturgical approach, defined by Owen as “the study of structure and interaction of representations in the performance of a story” (209), also complements Anable’s insistence on the growing importance of computational forms of representation and video games as “a particularly popular form of representation through which we can trace and analyze how affect moves across bodies and objects in the present” (132).

Owen’s work takes up the general observations Anable formulates in the Conclusion about video games’ significance as contemporary sites that enable the investigation of the mediation of bodies, the impact of such mediation on the notion of what the *body* is, and which bodies matter (Owen 132), all central questions in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*. Owen cites the fact that video game situations provide a feeling of agency to the player as well as an empathetic connection to one’s avatar (and even non-player characters) as evidence for the feeling of telepresence within the game world and the affective power of the medium in general (23). The relationship between player and avatar goes beyond identification, since the player experiences extended, both physical and mental, presence in a virtual space, as the result of their projection within the game world (26), creating a new, hitherto unavailable relationality. “The phenomenological relationship between the body and affect, virtual or otherwise, is a powerful means to not only expose players to novel experiences but through them, create change in the player,” contends Owen (27), who concludes that the short-term affective reactions of the player can lead to behavioral and ideological changes. This is explained by the fact that immersion occurs not only due to the presence of compelling narratives well known from traditional storytelling mediums, but also because the player can discover them through their actions, choices, and exploration (46). In addition, the performativity inherent in video games also aligns with becoming posthuman, bringing this process to the attention of the player more efficiently than non-participatory narratives.

The growing role of video games in facilitating empathy, education, and transformation is documented by Mary Flanagan’s research, which demonstrates that games with embedded design relying on specific narrative mechanics in a subtle manner have the potential to shift beliefs and biases (280). Games that employ scenarios that allow for psychological distance by operating with places, ideas, and people not present in the player’s direct, daily experience of reality are more likely to engage the imagination and to

provoke less judgmental reactions (286). In a similar spirit, in order to ensure a more favorable affective disposition to questions of marginalization in the USA, *WWTW* combines distance in time with social distance by offering as entry point into the game a skeletal avatar with a hat and a bundle on a stick, recalling the poverty-stricken wanderers of the Great Depression, but also reminiscent of the Everyman of medieval morality plays. The mechanism of identification with the avatar is also different from the pattern observed in traditional narrative mediums, as explained by Owen: “*because* the character lacks depth in a traditionally theatrical sense, the player is allowed to impose or interpret her own psychological complexities onto the game character she is playing” (3, emphasis in original). *WWTW* literally offers the bare bones of a character to the player, who is addressed as “you” by the other characters and the narrator of the game, to facilitate identification. Contrary to the practice of using direct address to break the fourth wall in theater and cinema, thus breaking the suspension of disbelief, the use of the second person perspective in video games signals inclusion into the game world and enhances immersion. While gathering stories, the player is referred to as *you* by the narrator, who describes the choices they may make and what they see, hear, and feel, in a game environment reminiscent of early text-based games from the 1970s and 1980s, which were modeled after choose-your-adventure-books. Owen points out that this perspective already identified the reader as “an entity that is both essential but separate from the story itself, and . . . necessary to move the narrative forward” (52). This technique, however, fulfills a vital role from an affective perspective when interacting with the Campfire Companions, who tell their life stories to “you,” the player/avatar sitting at the campfire they graciously share with another person down on their luck. What is more, they finish each storytelling session with a question or comment directed at the player, prompting them to reflect on and form an opinion about the topics and problems they have just described, and to compare how these issues are manifested in the non-diegetic world: in the player’s personal experience in the twenty-first century. For instance, after describing how veterans’ service bonuses were withheld by the government for years after WWI, the ex-soldier asks: “What about you—is there something somebody owes you?” (*WWTW*), leaving the player ample space for contemplation.

Despite the vivid dialogue scenes when the player’s perspective is that of someone facing a storyteller and interacting over the crackling fire, the psychological distance is maintained by the game’s frame story, based on “Direwolf,” a song by the Grateful Dead. The game starts by showing the

player lose at cards against a mysterious stranger who turns out to be a direwolf, tasking them to collect the true stories overshadowed by the myth of the American dream to pay off their debt. The lyrics of the song, “I said my prayers and went to bed / That’s the last they saw of me” (Grateful Dead), suggest that the game of cards has deadly consequences, and indeed, while traveling back in time, the player is transferred to a different plane of existence: in the form of the skeletal avatar, they are not encumbered by physical needs, nor can they die until the debt is paid off.

Flanagan also establishes that addressing a real-world problem in a fantasy setting can allow players to feel more open to the message (286), which in *WWTW* is supported by embedded design. For the player to settle the debt and save themselves from a fate of restless wandering and unhappiness, all sixteen Campfire Companions’ life stories must be heard out. The gameplay thus fosters relationality, requiring the player to open up to the flow of affects in the form of empathetic listening and to attempt to tell stories that suit the character’s interest and taste to gain their trust. By ensuring that there is no hierarchy of importance among the Campfire Companions and making the expansion of the American dream with their embedded and embodied knowledges, a prerequisite for the player to save themselves, the game manages to activate “subjects to enter into new affective transversal assemblages, to co-create alternative ethical forces and political codes—in other words, to compose a missing people” (Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework” 19).

The cartography of happiness

“Only by knowing our history, our stories—and why they were allowed to happen—can we strive forward to a better tomorrow,” proclaims a minor character in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, formulating the utopian impulse and the aim of posthuman cartography at the same time. Often thought to be synonymous with the pursuit of happiness, the American dream in various iterations has been a powerful driving force since the Mayflower set sail. “Desire as positivity and relationality is experienced as affect,” declares Braidotti in her latest work, *Posthuman Feminism* (205), which intends to express its affirmative force and make things happen, but is always social and contextualized (206). This role of affect has already been pinpointed by Tomkins, who saw affect as “the prime ‘interest’ motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily drives” (Gregg and Seigworth 6),⁷ and was also formulated by Sara Ahmed as intentionality and orientation, in this particular case towards happiness. “Happiness functions as a promise that

directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social goods” (Ahmed 29) that can obviously be physical or material objects but may be “anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, and styles, as well as aspirations” (41). The fulfillment of the American dream has been historically associated with various material and immaterial “happy objects,” as put by Ahmed, with the myth conferring value upon them, as, presumably, happiness would follow their possession. Their dependence on ideas of American exceptionalism is reflected upon by the Direwolf as follows: “trapped by this country, perhaps. . . . Seduced into believing it has all they need and that none will ever be better” (*WWTW*).

The common denominator of the Campfire Companions’ life stories is the exact opposite of the fulfillment of the dream: they feel excluded, which can be collectively formulated as “the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects” (Ahmed 50). What they see as happy objects varies widely: it is the restoration of sacred lands for Dehaaya, the Navajo woman, the comradeship and the freedom of roaming the seas for August, the ex-Merchant Marine injured in WWII, the harmonious family life of loving siblings lost due to the Great War for Mason, the veteran, decent pay for backbreaking labor for Rocio, the Mexican migrant worker, a life well lived in the service of the community for Fidelina, the Native curandera (healer), or equality as imagined by Little Ben, the trade unionist miner: “Nobody left wantin’, nobody eaten up by the gears of industry. Nobody’s money settin’ them up above you” (*WWTW*). Besides stories and scenes that include looking for odd jobs, panhandling, sleeping in abandoned buildings and occasionally being beaten for hopping trains, the game’s soundtrack serves as a constant reminder for the player of the sense of unbelonging experienced by the characters. The “Vagrant Song,” written specifically for the game by Ryan Ike, dominates the map: it accompanies the player in the Deep South, the Midwest, the Northwest, Appalachia, and the Southwest, recorded with Spanish lyrics for the latter, and in five variants by male and female singers in the typical folk music style of each region, to enhance identification and immersion. The game ensures that the avatar is in the same situation as the characters, summarized by Shaw, the black sharecropper as “Realizin [*sic*] that you have nothing and belong nowhere feels both like death and freedom at the same time” (*WWTW*). From this liminal position the player is encouraged to talk to the Campfire Companions as equals and use the roadside camp’s freedom from social constraints to explore affects and relationality with less bias than in real-life social contexts.

The game groups the stories the player finds under sixteen topical headings, which can be sorted according to the affective value the majority ascribes to them. Some, as also reflected in the American dream, are typical “happy objects”: family, nature/country/home, freedom, love, faith/trust, heaven/desires fulfilled/wishes come true, future, and joy. The affective value of others, like choice/morality, authority, travel, the past/memories, and fortune/fate/luck is not as unanimously thought to be positive, while sadness, bondage/traps/imprisonment, death/change/endings/moving on cause most people to move away instead of orienting themselves towards them. The Campfire Companions’ personal stories open up a far more sophisticated relationship with happy objects than postulated by the American Dream. Liberty is no more than a fancy word when “some chains ain’t ever come off you, don’t matter what sorta [*sic*] proclamation a white man in a suit makes” (*WWTW*) as noted by Jimmy, the Black preacher who just buried a young lynching victim, while the perpetrators walked away. The myth of the Wild West is also questioned, quite ironically by a cowboy who ended up in the desert as the last place that still afforded some semblance of the cherished American freedom, but “every time I close my eyes another piece gets snatched up by those fellers [*sic*] in D.C. Happiness is hard for me to find these days. Everywhere you look now—roads, fences, power lines . . . garbage” (*WWTW*). Refusing to give up his old way of life although he would be able to make a living somewhere else, Ray ended up on the run to Mexico for trespassing and tearing down fences, because no other lifestyle would bring him happiness. This example draws attention to the significance of “melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good” (Ahmed 50), as a form of resistance, demonstrating a different way of being human, which can also be interpreted as a posthuman becoming.

Other stories also tell about alienation from the main affective community regarding widely valued happy objects, like the family. While some characters remember their parents and siblings fondly, others feel remorse for mistreating loved ones. Rose, for instance, is very critical of the conservative middle-class values of her parents, who gave up on her when she joined a hippie commune. Quinn’s story, however, is a child’s shocking tale of neglectful and cruel parenting, with a huge gap between the affective value of the object and the affects generated by the actual experience. These situations, according to Ahmed, can involve a range of affects depending on the explanations why a happy object has proved to be disappointing. “Such explanations can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt . . . or a narrative

of rage” either directed toward the object itself, and rightly so in Quinn’s case, or “toward those that promised us happiness through the elevation of this or that object as being good” (37). The latter is very prominent in the tale of both men injured in WWI and II, who were enticed to do their duty but received no support when left disabled. This bitterness is summed up by August: “What’s [*sic*] it say about a country if it breaks its people, then throws ‘em away?” (*WWTW*), and is echoed by Mason, who can hardly believe that the country he served and suffered for ordered the army to disperse the veterans demanding compensation.

Where the Water Tastes Like Wine treats these melancholic subjects as embedded and embodied, but does not stop at enumerating the social injustices and personal backgrounds that contributed to their becoming affect aliens, and elaborates on how this experience changes their views. Ahmed stresses the role of unhappiness in providing alternatives to imagine “what might count as a good or better life,” since unhappiness is not the endpoint (50). This stance is exemplified by elderly Dehaaya, a survivor of the harrowing 1864 Long Walk of the Navajo, followed by years of displacement which had a very rare happy ending in the history of American Indian tribes.⁸ She promotes a cautious but hopeful stance regarding the future: “As Diné we must not forget the evil ways of this invasive country, but we must also fight this sickness before it infects our future” (*WWTW*). Exclusion from accessing the happy objects postulated by the American dream also motivates Little Ben, the Appalachian coal miner to subscribe to a different dream, the one provided by the trade union. Bertha, the Dust Bowl refugee abandoned by her husband and daughters, finds hope in joining the agricultural workers’ union in California, and Rocio, the Mexican migrant worker sorely missing her family and community, starts to feel she belongs somewhere once involved in the California Grape Boycott of 1965. All these characters who, at the beginning of the game were virtually powerless as individuals due to their ethnicity, gender, class, and/or disability, found some level of agency by going against American individualism and self-reliance, just like Rose, who continues to live a far less consumerist but community-centered life in a commune despite the hard work and the financial difficulties even after the hippie movement stopped being fashionable.

Focusing on characters who fall short when measured against the humanist ideal, the game provides a cartography of the American dream, toppling the monomyth and highlighting the importance of affect as motivation to actualize the virtual and to promote a variety of happy objects. Due to their social status, the characters are weighed down by power as

entrapment (potestas), excluding them from the affective community created by the American dream, but some of them also experience its other facet as the affirmative mode of potentia,⁹ which provides the “means to cultivate degrees of empowerment and affirmation of one’s interconnections to others in their multiplicity” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 158) in the process of becoming posthuman. Instead of the pursuit of happiness channeled toward the happy objects as defined by the American dream, the player’s quest results in a cartography that fills in the gap between the myth and reality as experienced by the Campfire Companions and pointed out by the youngest one, in his early teens: “This country . . . I don’t rightly know what this thing called ‘Merica is. I know what I done been told [*sic*] in school, but the words don’t fit the picture” (*WWTW*). This is reiterated by the Direwolf during a subsequent meeting in the form of a question directed at the player: “Do you have Faith in the Dream still? Or for the first time? Is there another dream that we could build, a better one for everyone?” (*WWTW*), which explicitly invites them to participate in imagining a more equitable future, based on the collected stories. The exploration of the situated knowledges and affects of the Campfire Companions takes place on the road, in a liminal position that matches spatially the posthuman subject’s process of becoming, which should be “regulated by an ethics of joy and affirmation that functions through the transformation of negative into positive passions” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 158): from the unhappiness of exclusion toward the pursuit of different avenues that lead to happiness.

Once the player manages to collect all sixteen life stories and complete the quest, they meet the Direwolf, who reveals that the place where the water tastes like wine is non-existent. This idealized place cannot be found on the map, instead, the player is rewarded with a male-female duet of “Heavy Hands” during the end credits, which summarizes the affects the game investigates: the resistance of the lyrical I to power as entrapment (“a Heavy Hand / Laid across this land”) and the search for power as agency by means of preserving the tale of a land where the “Sky will shimmer and sun will shine / Where the water tastes like wine” (Ike, “Heavy Hands”). It is the personal version of the story that conserves the utopian impulse and it acts as a happy object to remember and strive for, even “[w]hen the words won’t flow . . . / And the song you carry / Goes dull and gray.” According to the lyrics, once reaching this place “the soul burns clean / And the verse it’s singin’ / Rings pure and true” (Ike, “Heavy Hands”), which reinforces the game’s purpose to bring muted stories to the attention of the player, because “[h]earing stories is important work. Everyone wants to be heard, and so few

are listening,” as put by the Direwolf (*WWTW*). By allowing the player to explore these stories while experiencing similar marginalization via their avatar, the game expands their relationality and during their search they inscribe the map of the USA with the missing people. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* pointedly focuses on enhancing relational affectivity, which, in Braidotti’s view, “produces a shared sense of belonging to, and knowledge of, the common world we are sharing” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 47). Placing the game into the context of Anable, Owen, and Flanagan’s research into video games as affective systems, it clearly invites the player to tap into the experience of becoming posthuman and, ultimately, to transfer the affects generated by meeting the Campfire Companions to the real world. This is also strengthened by the constant prompting to compare issues in the gameworld with the player’s own experience and by the fact that the quest for the place where the water tastes like wine cannot be completed in the diegetic world. Consequently, the subsequent lack of closure that denies the player the cathartic experience is more likely to help carry the utopian impulse over to the real world and to actualize the virtual experience of posthuman relationality through finding the missing people.

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Notes

1 Subsequently to be abbreviated as *WWTW*.

2 Braidotti sets the formation of a new alliance as the aim of posthumanism, which should lead to “a transversal composition of multiple assemblages of active minoritarian subjects,” including “non-human agents, technologically-mediated elements, earth-others (land, waters, plants, animals) and non-human inorganic agents (plastic, wires, information highways, algorithms, etc.)” (“A Theoretical Framework” 20–22).

3 Guthrie, whose career started in the 1930s, was one of the most significant figures of American folk music, dubbed a “poet of the people.” (see Clapp 27–30)

4 A series of strikes and armed labor conflict between coal miners’ unions and mining companies in Appalachia in the decades between 1890 and 1930. (see Boissoneault)

5 For an overview of the most significant affectual orientations see Gregg and Seigworth (4–10).

6 For a discussion of various interfaces and the processes occurring between the human subject and digital information see Stasienko's *Media Technologies and Posthuman Intimacy*.

7 See psychologist Silvan Tomkins's *Affect, Imagery, and Consciousness: The Positive Affects* (1962) and *Affect, Cognition, and Personality: Empirical Studies* (1966) with Carroll E. Hard.

8 In 1868 the Navajo were allowed to return to their tribal lands, part of which was turned into a reservation when signing the Treaty of Bosque Redondo. (see Ault)

9 Braidotti distinguishes between power as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia); both to be investigated in a cartography ("A Theoretical Framework" 3).

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