



OUR ARTIFICIAL HAPPINESS

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“But I was sad.... I was sad, wasn’t I? And ashamed, I can still feel it. I just don’t know why...” (Ollie Starkey, *We Happy Few*).

Substance abuse has affected society for a long time. Whether the cause is peer pressure, shame, guilt, depression, anxiety, or loneliness, it is often deeply rooted in sorrow and trauma. These emotions are an inescapable part of human life, but they lead many of us to desire an alleviation, leading to addictions to alcohol and drugs. The game *We Happy Few* (2018) explores the intersections of reality and fiction with surprising depth, describing how the pharmaceutical approach to trauma and sorrow creates only a temporary fix to a major problem, and how such an approach can lead to an unhealthy society that relies on substances at an unhealthy amount. With its narrative structure like that of many dystopian novels, including *Brave New World*, *We Happy Few* explores how a society’s reliance on artificial happiness outlines a very possible future for our world. We see many small ties to problems in our own society, which shows a stronger connection between reality and fiction. By studying how the society of *We Happy Few* unfolds and destroys itself, a parallel with society can be drawn, inferring the possible dystopian outcomes that the exploitation of artificial happiness gives us through the outlets of alcohol and drugs.

Since the worlds of video games are fictional, there is a lot of room to expand the imagination and alter the reality we are comfortable with, which some argue could also mean there can be nothing to learn from them. This idea seems particularly true in *We Happy Few*, since many of the character models and artwork of the game are highly stylized, as represented in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Character stylization in *We Happy Few* (Compulsion Games 2018).

However, the cartoon-like graphics can detract from the negatively perceived seriousness of the message presented which, when represented in realistic terms, might prevent audiences from playing the game in general. Through this method, these games can provide a less daunting medium to teach individuals of all ages important life lessons. In addition, we can still see the roots of reality in most of the games on the market, no matter how much it deviates from what is conventionally considered normal in society. Compulsion Games, the developers of *We Happy Few*, showcases the belief that their video game world can be very close to the future of our world. Wellington Wells, the fictional setting for *We Happy Few*, may not be an existing geographical setting, but the references to World War II and the consequential displacement of children are. This creates a subtle and solid reflection of our society, thus allowing a peek at the dark underbelly of our sorrows and resultant struggles with addiction.

Set after World War II, this game was partly modeled after events from the time period. Many German children were displaced to the United States over conflicts of parental custody between the male American soldiers returning home and the German mothers (Kleinau and Schmid 2019, 240). Studies, such as Kleinau and Schmid's, also explain that many of the women who remained in Germany would often use substances to repress the emotional trauma of knowing they will not see their children again. While the world of *We Happy Few* is based on a counterfactual German victory, it still shows the connection to real historical events. Even though most individuals in western society have not lived through a time of a war, we struggle through many issues of human trafficking and kidnappings that can leave many parents fighting for hope. On a more common level, this idea can represent the struggles of many parents

that work multiple jobs at once and having to make that decision to provide for the children over being able to spend time with them. For the characters of *We Happy Few*, they voluntarily give up their children for the chance at survival. The Player is given brief flashbacks about the children being transported in the beginning of the game, but we slowly uncover more of this information by following along with the three playable characters in the game, most importantly Ollie Starkey and Arthur Hasting. The overwhelming guilt and loneliness the people of Wellington Wells had to face at losing their children is unimaginable, especially for the parents who lost so much. That, on top of living with restricted resources from losing the war, results in the desperation for an escape from their own lives.

Compulsion Games does an exceptional job at outlining the lengths a society or person might go through to escape their feelings of guilt and loneliness. In the case of Wellington Wells, the best thing seems to be forgetting what happened, so a chemical substance called “Joy” quickly became an addiction to many. Since Joy is a mood-enhancing drug, leading to overwhelming happiness in the user, it also implicitly suppresses stress about the past or future. Just like the characters in the game, people are more likely to take more risks and develop a higher addiction rate to substances when under extreme stress (Goeders 2004, 34).

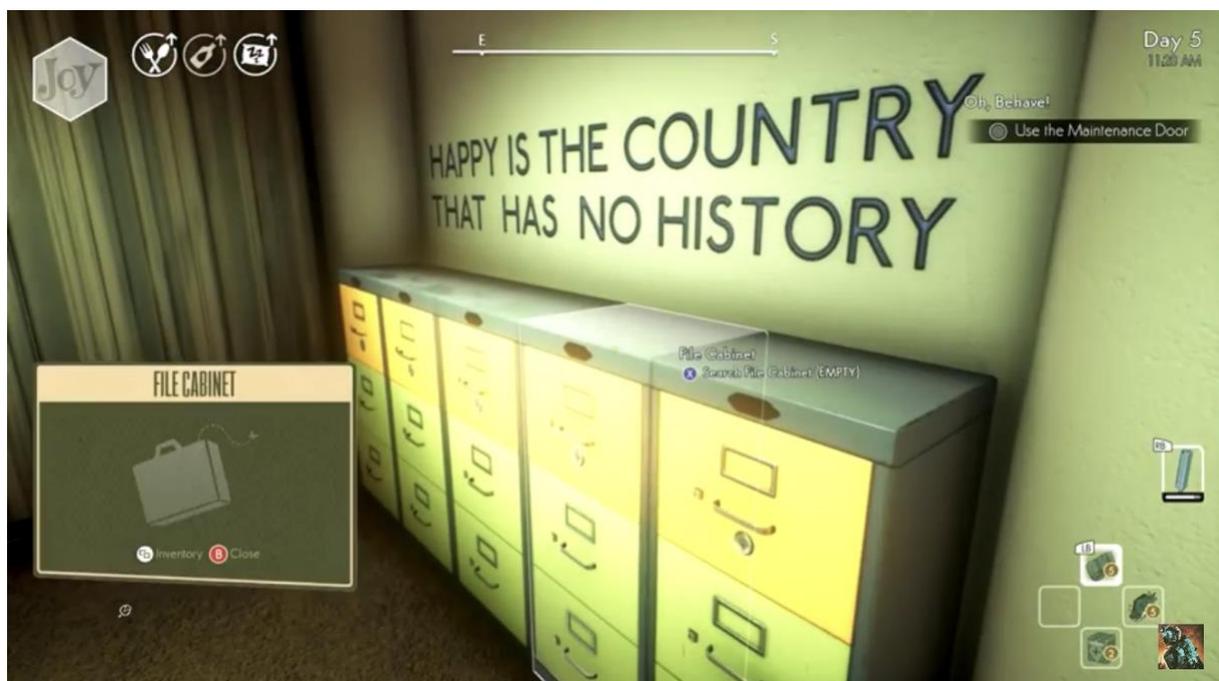


Figure 2 "Happy is the country that has no history" (Compulsion Games 2018).

The idea of the necessity of forgetting traumas in the game is reinforced by figure 2, a slogan of the rehabilitation center for getting Downers back on their Joy, which reads “Happy is the country that has no history” (Compulsion Games 2018). Being a Downer



in this game is the equivalent of being homeless within our society. They are completely cut off and considered a lost cause by most of Wellington Wells' fictional society. Many of the Downers here have rejected Joy because of an experience induced by a bad batch of the drug, rather than by choice; these bad batches also make all future Joy ingestion ineffective. In most cases, individuals who are homeless haven't consciously chosen to be in that position, but rather became a victim of unfortunate circumstances, which often reduces their chances to rebuild. In *We Happy Few*, Downers are more than figuratively cut off from society, as they are also driven to an isolated part of the game's world. This place is known as the Garden District, and it is plagued with many frantic people who are slowly going insane because of their memories. There are many spots in the game that outline this is what would happen to all of society without Joy.

The premises of the game's narrative lie in the fact that, right after losing the children to Germany, the government was able to predict the madness of those plagued by memories, so they developed Joy in hopes of keeping the peace. By using Joy as a coping mechanism, they slowly destroy their memories, rather than just forgetting fragments of them temporarily. Ollie Starkey, a playable character in the game, is off his Joy and still does not fully remember parts of his life during the war. Throughout the game, the Player sees small flashbacks of Ollie's actions before the time of the game. In the playable game, he consistently hallucinates a child he believes is his daughter Margaret. However, within one of the flashbacks, Ollie and the Player learn that it is a child he had gotten killed at the time of the transportations of the children. Margaret is a key example for showing us how Ollie's mind works to overcome his self-blame at the death of the child. Whenever he started to remember too much and his feelings became overwhelming, he would always go back to Joy. This narrative direction showcases the idea of pain avoidance reasoning in preference to relapses and drug use in our society (Newton et al. 2009, 297).

Ollie's backstory is one of many instances of self-blame and guilt, which made him the most susceptible to becoming an addict when Joy was first developed and given to citizens. Not only did he cause the death of a child, but later in the game it is revealed that the tanks used by the Germans to threaten a surrender from Wellington Wells are made of papier-mache, which Ollie had known about at the time of the surrender. In a way, the tanks being fake can be representative of how issues that can result in anxiety or depression may not always be as complex and intimidating as they first may seem. This idea also symbolizes how artificial substances, function utilized as a tool when dealing with traumas. On the outside, they might appear like they can fix any problems, and provide temporary results, but, they do not heal the unresolved pain caused by emotional trauma. While the story of *We Happy Few* can at first seem like a warning about anti-depressants and similar medications, Joy can instead closely be related to alcohol and illegal substances within our society. Anti-depressants are

often used to help reduce negative emotions just enough to make working through these problems in a healthy way easier for the user. Instead, Joy is used to completely get rid of negative emotions in a user by completely erasing memories, like it did for Ollie's guilt of the tanks.

By relearning this information of the fake tanks, Ollie struggles through a major self-blame episode which almost leads to a relapse. In our real world, individuals often seek out substances to cope with those feelings of self-blame, which can span anywhere from alcohol, tobacco, or other, heavier substances (Boyraz and Waits 2018, 72). The major problem highlighted by the narrative of the game, about the exploitation of these coping mechanisms, is that instead of dealing with traumas in a healthy manner, we destroy our bodies and brains for temporary paradise. By not searching out for help in dealing with our trauma, we push it off, which leads to mental and physical deterioration (Boyraz and Waits 2018, 70). In situations like these, it is essential to reach out for counseling to prevent the reliance on substances for escaping these emotions since this response causes the emotions to fester, rather than cure them. In addition to this, it has been found that with proper psychological treatments, there is a higher chance to prevent addiction and relapse of alcohol and other substances (Boyraz and Waits 2018, 72). For the people of Wellington Wells, they could not move on in life without their children. So, the best way for them to move forward was by forgetting they even existed, with some parents finding their solace in suicide. At this point, the development of Joy became necessary for their survival. It is safe to argue that if the citizens of Wellington Wells had received the proper treatment, Joy probably would never have existed.

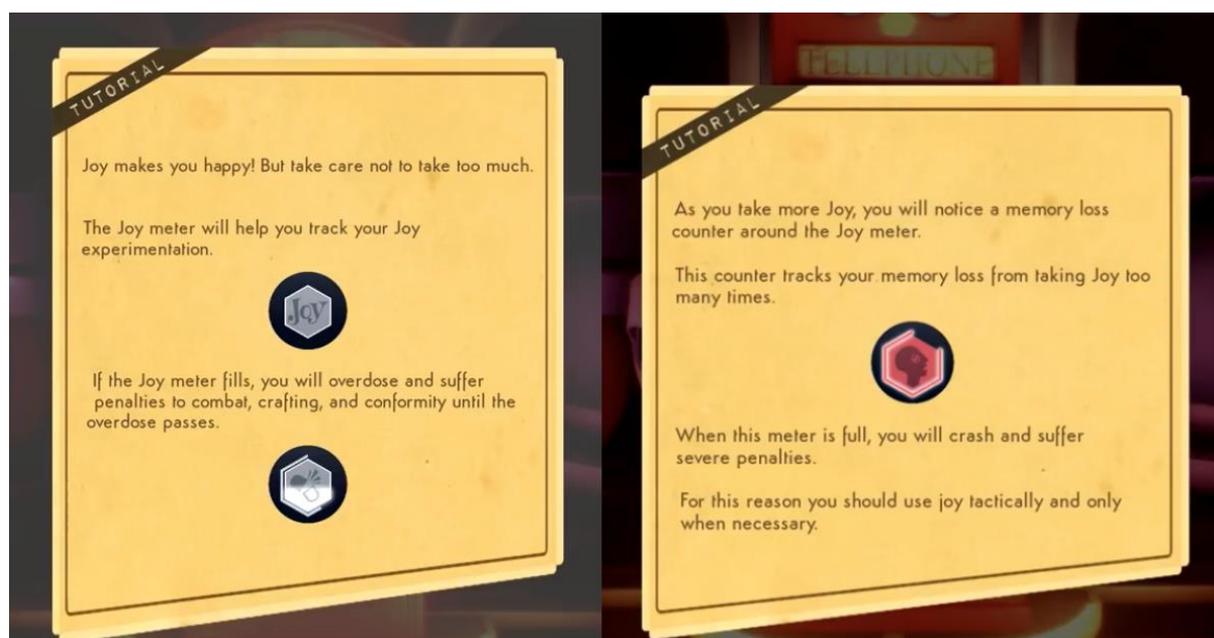


Figure 3 Joy tutorials (Compulsion Games 2018).



When the other playable character, Arthur, first takes Joy in the game, the mechanics are shown to the Player, as represented in figure 3. For Arthur Hastings, he must struggle with escaping the effects of Joy and finding his brother, one of the children taken before the game. He wakes up from his fogged state-of-mind, resulting from Joy, in his office where he censors historical newspapers. When he comes across a picture of him and his brother in an article, he starts to remember, and in result, he frantically searches for his bottle of Joy. The control is given to the Player in this moment, and they must choose: remember or forget? If the choice is to forget and be happy: Game Over. This abrupt ending sends the clear message that the easy route of using pharmaceuticals is not the correct choice in dealing with hardships. Likewise, those who choose to medicate away their sorrow in the real world may become addicted after taking a drug for the first time, which can be a metaphorical “Game Over” for that individual, especially when they do not have a proper support system.

When Arthur chooses to remember, he stumbles his way over to where his acquaintances are holding a party. He hits a rat - in the altered reality Joy produces looks like a piñata - and gets sick at the sight of his coworkers eating it raw. His reaction leads a coworker to notice that he has not taken his Joy and she offers some of her own, but when he steps back from her, she immediately turns on him and calls him a “Downer” (Compulsion Games 2018), and then calls for the police which chase him out of town and into the Garden District. This turn of events sets Arthur back on the quest to find his brother, and in order to escape the town, he must go back through the area he was just chased from, which also requires him to take Joy again to fit in. Players can also find a connection with similar situations regarding social media usage, on which users are led to always have on a “happy face.” Constantly confronted with the stigma of needing to be happy can influence others to feel that they too need to follow along with that example, which can further increase feelings of depression and anxiety (Aalbers et al. 2019, 1455). Social media feeds are often constantly filled with happier events, and when someone posts something negative, it is can be met with criticism. In this way, the people posting negative subjects, thoughts, or opinions are singled out from society, just like the Downers are in *We Happy Few*.

In the Garden District, the Downers’ disconnect from friends and family can lead to heightened feelings of loneliness than those experienced from being on Joy, which can evolve into a desire to take Joy once again to conform with the rest of society, even if it might not work. Since Arthur chooses to not take his Joy rather than taking from a faulty batch like most of the other Downers, he had a very likely possibility of being able to go back into society, which he knew. By wanting to see his brother again, and not wanting to be in a place that was slowly starving to death in the infertile Garden District, he takes Joy again to be with people he is more comfortable around. Whereas taking Joy at the beginning of the game was an immediate Game Over, here it is introduced as a crucial element of survival. This type of response can be observed often

within our own society because, “loneliness was concurrently and positively associated with drinking problems and medication use” (Segrin et al. 2018, 516). Based on how individuals conceive conventional behavior for their age group, individuals may use substances to, on a basic level, fit in with others.

The decision is left to the Player on whether or not to take Joy, but the game heavily emphasizes the idea that one must take Joy to fit in. However, the ending of the game and some game mechanics do not change based on how much Joy you take. So, how much the Player wants to feel safe in the town influences how often they take the medication. This idea is often reinforced in the game through “Downer Detectors” (Compulsion Games 2018), represented with the gates shown in figure 4, which notify townsfolk when Joy is not detected in the individual passing through. If the Player has not made Arthur take Joy recently, it will go off, and the citizens and police will chase down the Player and try to kill them. While it is possible to run away and hide, it is easier to just take Joy and pass through. This game mechanic adds to how Joy can be used as a quick solution to avoid conflict.



Figure 4 Downer detection system (Compulsion Games 2018).

Beyond the use of these gates representing the social pressures of drug use, forcing the Player to cross these gates might further represent the struggles people suffering from mental illness might undergo when working towards reintegration into society. A study by Baillargeon et al., follows the reinstatement of inmates with mental illnesses has found that it is twice as difficult for those with mental illnesses to obtain a job or housing (2010). While this study focuses on previous inmates, it shows that it is twice



as hard to return to a normal way of life when dealing with mental illness. Through this struggle, many of these individuals rely on substances to help, since it is often difficult to get proper treatment (Baillargeon et al. 2010).

Through incorporating Joy into the narrative of *We Happy Few*, the developers included into their game a major issue intrinsic to our own modern society: the reliance of substances as coping mechanisms. Many studies, including a methamphetamine trial focused on relapse factors for mood enhancing drugs, show that pain avoidance is a common reason for the start and continued use of drugs (Newton et al. 2009, 297). This response could stem from guilt, loneliness, and even stress. By studying *We Happy Few* and the narrative decisions that Compulsion Games implemented within the story, there are many connections that can be found to our own society. In *We Happy Few*, it is heavily emphasized that the Player should not take large amounts of Joy and alcohol. In teaching this, the game can influence its Players to believe that consuming substances is not always the best course of action and force them to consider other paths of survival. Anti-depressants and other medications have saved lives and has made it easier for many to understand and work through trauma. However, alcohol and illegal substances closely model the effects of Joy, and only temporarily relieve traumas by putting them towards the back of our minds. Western society is closer to the addiction and substance abuse problem represented in *We Happy Few* than many of us realize. By understanding the root social causes of addiction and offering easier access to therapy and other types of interventions, we can begin to eradicate the excessive use of substances that can destroy us physically and mentally. If we uncover the types of “Joy” we rely on to create artificial happiness and take necessary steps to properly treat the damage left behind from traumas, we can move towards a happier and healthier society.

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