

# Everybody's Lying to Themselves in 'We Happy Few'

By Phil Hornshaw  
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The world of *We Happy Few* is a nice place to live—as long as you take your Joy.

For the people living in the British island town of Wellington Wells in the 1960s, Joy is essential. The drug pushes away bad thoughts and memories, and everyone is much happier in Wellington Wells when they don't have to remember.

*We Happy Few* just entered "early access," meaning fans can try it out before the game's fully complete. In the demo on-hand at E3 2016 in Los Angeles last month, things got hairy when protagonist Arthur decided not to take his Joy. Suddenly he became aware of the world as it really is, his escapism giving way to reality. His world became a dystopia.

It's a hell of a lot darker than developer Compulsion Games' last project, *Contrast*. That game was about a doll magically come to life, helping a little girl deal with her parents' fleeting relationship in turn-of-the-century Paris. In *Contrast*, there are jazz musical numbers played by shadows to break up jaunts across a brightly lit electric city.

In the first five minutes of *We Happy Few* Arthur watches his coworkers at the Ministry of Truth—a government entity charged with scrubbing bad events out of newspapers, like 1984—celebrate by smacking a pinata and eating the candy. Joy-less, Arthur sees them greedily licking up the blood of a rat they've just crushed with sticks, instead.

"Looking back on *Contrast*, it seemed what we could improve on was story and atmosphere," explained Guillaume Provost, Compulsion Games' director and founder. "I think with *Contrast*, we were a bit conservative. As a team, we'd like to go a bit darker, I think."

Darker in this case means a horrific world where the drug-addled populace aren't aware of how bad things really are. Wellington Wells is at best a disgusting mess. In the Ministry of Truth office, every workstation is a disaster, with paper and furniture scattered everywhere. No one cares because nobody at the office can see anything wrong. And the inhabitants of Wellington Wells fiercely protect their right to not worry and not care—to the point of banishing any "Downer" who chooses to go off their Joy.

## A UNIQUELY OPTIMISTIC DYSTOPIA



Provost and the team were attracted to the idea of a horrible society the player would want to escape. At the same time, though, Provost didn't want to chase the trend of the post-apocalypse, he said. That led to thinking about how to create a dystopia that was different from the ones found in other games. And that line of thinking led to the idea of an aggressively happy society.

Before long the idea took on its 1960s British feel through the art direction of Compulsion's Whitney Clayton. The team drew inspiration from stories like *Brave New World* and films like *Brazil* and, somewhat obviously, *A Clockwork Orange*. That setting gave *We Happy Few* to mirror actual history, albeit in some very twisted ways.

"The '60s was a magical kind of moment, especially in England," Provost explained. "There was this sort of wave of optimism. It was this reaction to history, wearing crazy mod clothes, all the partying. We're kind of paralleling those real historical elements, that kind of superficiality."

In *We Happy Few*, Wellington Wells' reliance on a happy drug is a response to the horrors of World War II. But it's not just about what England suffered during that war—the real horror is in how England responded. In this alternate 1960s setting, the thing people most want to do is forget their own guilt.

That story is mirrored in Arthur's tale. In the opening moments of the game, he's jarred by a news story he finds about his brother and him from years earlier. Memories flood back and Arthur foregoes his Joy rather than suppress them. Well, he does if you so choose. You can also choose to take the pill, and blissfully hang around the office, redacting news stories. There's nothing that says you can't stay in the peaceful, easy lie.

## THE RANDOM LAND OF THE DOWNERS



*We Happy Few*'s central focus is on telling the story of this unraveling dystopia, but how it does it is a gimmick unto itself. The game generates the city of Wellington Wells in pieces, "procedurally"—that is, the computer assembles levels according to rules, creating a shifting landscape that will be different from player to player. Once Arthur escapes the authorities in the Ministry of Truth who would arrest him for going off his Joy, he has to find a way off the island. In order to make that search compelling more than once, Compulsion Games is making sure you'll never see the island the same twice.

Procedural generation has an influence on the way the story is told, too, Provost said. Some certain beats must happen in a certain order, but much of *We Happy Few* is constructed of "microstories". When the computer builds Wellington Wells when you play the game, it assembles pre-constructed tiles together. Some of those tiles have trees, some mailboxes, some houses, some people. Some include quests. Just as you'll never see the same street layout between two runs through the game, you won't see exactly all the same people or stories, making Wellington Wells feel dynamic and alive.

It'll make navigating it all the more uncertain. In the demo Arthur quickly found himself outside of the city center, in a ruined, dirty section where Wellington Wells' sad-sack Downers are sent. Many of them scrounge to stay alive, it seems. Arthur's journey takes him through a number of sections of the city, and at each point, he has to play a role to the people around him. Everywhere he goes, he's an impostor, mimicking the local denizens in order to avoid detection as he tries to find his way to freedom.

What that means is finding a way to trick scanners that check for Joy in the brighter parts of town, and defending yourself with things like sharpened sticks in the scuzzier areas. You'll also spend time searching the landscape for useful objects and weapons—*We Happy Few* has a big emphasis on survival that's not immediately apparent, and you're responsible for taking care of Arthur's needs like food and water. One quest in the quick demo included talking to a man being hassled by Downers. There's more than one way to dispatch them: I chose jabbing them with a sharp stick in the face until they lay lifeless in the middle of a small park. Seemed fitting for the weird, sad, dirty world Compulsion is creating.

The grateful miscreant they'd been hassling was drinking something radioactive. He obligingly puked some up for me, which I scooped up and took to a nearby Joy scanner. The active ingredient in whatever he'd been ingesting was enough to trick the scanner into thinking I was doped up, and I was allowed to pass into the nicer part of town. Good thing, too, because had I failed the test, a nearby "Spanker"—basically a giant, scary looking Tesla coil-type thing—would have toasted me.

Provost said *We Happy Few* is due out soon—and in fact it'll be available by the end of the month—but that won't be the end of its development life. Already players who backed the game on Kickstarter have been highly involved with helping to shape the story. Compulsion is telling and how they're telling it. The game will continue to evolve past its Early Access release based on player feedback. And just like in *We Happy Few*, life in Wellington Wells will change, for better or worse, based on what the people want.

*Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.*

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