

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Little Nightmares
Platform: Windows, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, Stadia
Genre: Puzzle-Platform horror adventure
Release Date: 28 April 2017
Developer: Tarsier Studios
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Dave Mervik

Overview

Little Nightmares follows the story of a starving girl named Six, who must navigate through the vessel known as the Maw while evading the aggressive larger-than-life horrors that inhabit it. Throughout the ship, Six encounters Nomes: small skittish creatures that either avoid her or passively watch her journey. Six works her way through The Prison, The Lair, The Kitchen, and The Guest Area uncovering the secrets of the Maw and its prisoner children. Six's hunger increasingly becomes an issue as she devours larger and larger prey such as a live rat, a helpful Nome, and finally the Lady, the story's main antagonist. Six proceeds to exit the Maw through the Guest Area, where she uses the powers she gained from consuming the Lady to drain the Guests' lives.

Characters

- **Six** – The player character. Six is a young girl whose motif is a yellow raincoat covering her face, except her nose and mouth. She is much smaller than all adults, with a thin frame. Six is trapped in the dark depths of The Maw and knows she belongs elsewhere. Starving and alone, Six's journey is filled with danger. Six plays the role of the meek victim, but her habit of consuming everything and betraying others hints at her being a force to be reckoned with; everyone should watch their back.
- **The Lady** – The main antagonist. The Lady is the mute proprietress of the Maw, who cast the enchantment to keep it running. She is an abnormally tall and slender woman whose appearance is similar to a Japanese geisha. Her face is eternally covered by a white porcelain mask, where only her black eyes penetrate. In the Maw, The Lady is the one source of beauty amongst the grotesque monsters.

While her actions portray her as a highly narcissistic person, she cannot stand the sight of her face.

- **Nomes** – The Nomes are small, human-like creatures that don cone-shaped hats, who do not speak. They have pasty, paper-white skin with large hands and feet. They are collectibles; there are thirteen that Six can corner and hug. These thirteen will be present at the end of the game when Six exits the Maw. Through exploration, the player discovers that the Nomes used to be children and are now perpetually bound to the Maw, perhaps through The Lady's enchantment.
- **The Janitor** – The first antagonist. The Janitor is a human-like monster whose dimensions are extravagant compared to conventional humans. His head is enormous and ball-like, connected to his torso by a thin neck. His arms are twice the length of his torso, while his legs are incredibly short. The Janitor's most distinguishing feature is that the skin of the top half of his head is peeled down, sagged over his eyes, causing him to be blind. While non-talkative, his actions can infer that he is diligent and intelligent, hunting down children and Nomes by hearing alone. The Janitor is also seen as a hoarder with a room full of dolls and toys.
- **The Twin Chefs** – The second antagonists. The Twins Chefs are conjoined, overweight human-like monsters with preschool-like proportions, with stubby arms and legs. Their "flesh" folds over itself in an almost comical way, typically on their "face." If the player pays attention, they may notice their hands slip under their "faces," denoting that they may be wearing masks, their real faces unknown. Despite being chefs, they lack the needed skills, displaying poor hygiene and serving the guests raw meat.
- **The Guests** – The minor antagonists of The Guest Area. The Guests are seen as exceedingly obese human-like creatures with bloated faces that appear to be deflated; their eyes are sunken into the surrounding flesh. The males are bald, while the females have their hair in buns; some can be seen wearing *kabuki* masks. The guests are entirely carnivores, sometimes dropping their food instead of crawling after Six as she makes her way through the area.

Breakdown

Little Nightmares is generally accepted as an allegory for child abuse, and the larger-than-life way children can view adults. Its cast of non-talking characters and 2.5D worldview cause players to see the game from a dollhouse perspective, giving them an almost omnipresence to Six's story. The world is frightening; everything is enormous and misshapen. It seems like the monsters of the Maw are out to get her, but not to kill her. Contrary to how it may seem, you never truly die in the game; you wake up at a checkpoint as if you were waking up from a nightmare. *Little Nightmares* embodies the player in a small child with an unusually skewed view of the adult world that is both terrifyingly big and beset with danger.

The game's story is unspoken, seemingly left open for interpretation by players. My interpretation is that the game is a metaphorical story of a foster child: waking up with a suitcase in a place about which you know nothing. The nursery implies that it may be an orphanage or foster home. The "monsters" locking you away stand for the workers who catch you as you are trying to run away. The masks symbolize that all of the adults are strangers to you. There is a constant flow of "customers," symbolizing prospective parents; who might not be good parents. While hunger can indicate being alive, the guests are mindlessly overindulging in "lavish" feasts while the children are starving. Six is seen losing herself over time to her hunger, a devolution. The negative connotations behind "hunger," which was the original title of *Little Nightmares*, include overconsumption, obesity, excess, and the loss of oneself. The progressive hunger and devouring show that over time, you are becoming what you view an adult as; a monster.

In reality, going to an orphanage is a disheartening situation. A child with innocence dwindling can too soon transform into the monster that once consumed them. The portrayal of hunger in *Little Nightmares* becomes more prominent as the game progresses. It becomes destructive; Six starts with bread, then a live rat, and a Nome who wants to help her. Six's innocence spirals, unable to recover. Six betrays everyone who gets close to her throughout the comics, DLC, and eventual sequel.

In *Little Nightmares*, the Nomes are a portrayal of children who were never able to escape, who were never adopted; failed by the system. While children like Six can be found in the Janitor's cages, the Nomes are trapped in the open, unable to leave if they wanted to, trapped by the Lady's spell. They often run from Six, representing a fear that older children might have of younger children, who sadly tend to be looked at first. When Six devours the Nome that tries to help her, she destroys their hopes and dreams. The children arrive like Six, but they turn into Nomes if they cannot escape or be taken away.

"One thing that we wanted to do, is not be too specific," says narrative designer Dave Mervik. "My nightmares will be different from yours. What we've done is try to go as far back as you can and find the root of this stuff. A fear of being alone, or not trusting that things are as they seem. They're the things that more specific fears or phobias spring from." Tarsier Studios wanted to tap into primal childhood fears, and what is scarier than being a small child and suddenly gaining the sense that you are in a vast world? *Little Nightmares* accomplishes this by coupling its warped environment with its unique take on a dollhouse-like perspective using a 2.5D camera placement.

The camera's tilting is an aspect of the game that makes excellent use of the player's perspective. As Six climbs her way throughout the Maw, the camera bobs up and down, tilts left and right, as if it mirrors the viewpoint of Six herself. This tilting delineates a style of movement for players that allows for Six to become a representation of themselves. This delineation permits a sense of projection for the player's psyche. In contrast, the player might unconsciously tilt their head along with the camera to match their view with the camera's perspective or to translate the stress that Six may feel when climbing objects. According to C. Solarski in *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art*, a

canted angle may be used to "communicate the playable character's distress or discomfort" (2017, p.67). By having the camera move in various directions, the designers were able to create environments that were slightly larger than the camera, allowing you to see the monstrosities that may be coming or a more peaceful refuge to hide.

The difference in the size of the environment and the camera's size creates an opportunity for more dynamic interactions between the two. In the game, the player is unaware of their location in the world view until they reach a specific point where they have a glimpse of the outside world. While this moment might cause the cogs in some players' heads to start turning, those who are more prone to analyzing the scenery and ambiance will find their biggest hint in the swing of the camera. The camera is meant to sway from time to time, depending on the room that Six is currently in; this is meant to reflect that the Maw is on the ocean, more specifically underneath it. The environmental allusions, paired with a slight delay of the camera, can produce a sense of anxiety, not knowing what is on the other side of a door, but then unexpectedly realizing something is coming *through* the door when the camera finally moves to show the contents of the next room.

The dollhouse-like view allowed the developers to hide clues throughout the game that sparked fans to interpret the game's meaning for themselves. In a 2016 interview with Tarsier's Andreas Johnson and Dave Mervik, it is stated that developers purposely left out dialog from the game and included the story in the world so that players can interpret it for themselves (Gamereactor, 2016). Little Nightmares encourages deductive reasoning by hiding the most critical components to the story in the game's environment; the player has to look for clues actively. By alluding to crucial story elements, the player-audience tends to "engage in deductive reasoning more frequently" (C.Solarski, 2017, p.114). Everything in the Maw is there for a reason; because of this, the player must have a point of view that allows them to explore every inch of the game in order to piece together the complete story

The world of Little Nightmares is grotesque, with warped objects stretching far more than they usually should, seemingly much more massive. With the player's view of the world being in 2.5D, the game gives off the impression of looking into a horrific dollhouse. As Six can move left and right and travel along the z-axis, there is a sense of depth in the game's atmosphere that is not seen in your typical side scroller. This depth is key to solving the various puzzles that the Maw is riddled with and a source of frustration for players. Since the game is not 3D, only simulating 3D-like graphics, players' sense of depth perception can be thrown off. This illusion leads to many accidental falls from great heights, which causes Six to blackout and regain consciousness at a previous checkpoint. Falling repeatedly in a specific area or crucial moment can infuriate less level-headed players.

The player can interpret Six's view of the world because of the dimensions of the game and the lack of a backstory. The world is frightening; everything is enormous and misshapen. The monsters in the game are portrayals of adults, they are deformed and

terrible, and through the 2.5D view, you can see that they are all wearing masks. This seems to be a child's view of aspects of the grownup world: dreary, dictated, and sinister. According to C. Solariski, "A general rule is that players experience a more intimate connection with their playable character when the camera is positioned up-close" (2017, p.61). *Little Nightmares* breaks this rule with its outside-in view of Six's world; the player is instinctually drawn to Six because they feel the fear and anxiety that she feels in real-time; they begin to feel empathetic for her. Because of this dollhouse view, the player's connection with Six is heightened further whenever she is caught the first few times. The player feels helpless when Six is caught, like a bystander banging on an indestructible glass window screaming for the culprit to let her go.

Strongest Element

The most vital element of *Little Nightmares* is the narrative decision to purposely leave out dialog from the game and include the story in the environment so players can make their interpretations. This leads the game to be engaging on a psychological level as players try to grasp the game's meaning. This mechanic allows the player to become more immersed as they connect with Six on an individual level. The developers made a masterful decision because the game would have had a completely different reception than it initially did. Five years after the game was released, and followed by comics, DLC, and a sequel, players and professionals are still dissecting the metaphorical meaning behind every aspect of the game.

Unsuccessful Element

An unsuccessful element of the game would be the requirement of a comprehensive worldview beyond the original game for Six's story and devolution to make sense. Without the addition of DLC, many iconic moments would be rendered useless. An example of this would be The Runaway Kid from the Secrets of the Maw prequel DLC. The Runaway Kid DLC reveals that the Nomes used to be children who are transformed by The Lady, while also revealing that the Nome who was consumed by Six after trying to help her was The Runaway Kid. These details are key plot points for the main game that could rework how players interpret the story; having them left out and then locked behind additional content seems counterproductive towards the type of story the developers were trying to create.

Highlight

The game's highlight would be the moment that Six devours the Nome that tried to help her. When Six ate the bread and even the live rat, the player can attribute it to hunger. However, when Six forgoes the food offered by the Nome to in turn consume said Nome is the moment that equally stuns and puzzles players during their first playthrough, causing them to ask themselves: why? If one pays attention to each time Six gets hunger pangs, they can see an alternate version of Six, a more sinister shadow version. This version is finally revealed by eating the Nome, the tipping point in her descent to madness. Her actions afterward become different, specifically when she consumes the

Lady. She proceeds to go on a killing spree, consuming any of the monsters that approach her. The Nome shines a light on the true Six and is her first (in original release) betrayal.

Critical Reception

IGN, 8.8/10, *Joe Skrebels* – Skrebels praises *Little Nightmares* as being quietly masterful in its use of environmental storytelling. "Every enemy, every room, every meat grinder you use to make a rope of sausages to swing from, contributes to the story of The Maw and Six's seeming breakout." He proceeds to applaud the game's use of a wordless style of narrative, especially when the game seems more straightforward than it is. He explains that it is like playing hide and seek in the world's worst doll's house, which attributes to the sense of exploration and storytelling.

GameInformer, 9/10, *Jeff Cork* – Cork commends the ambiguous nature of the game's narrative, stating that it made him want to play through again to pick up on details he may have missed. He enjoyed the specificity of many references that point to a more excellent mystery that some players may have missed if they took the game at face value. While he did state that players who like getting straightforward answers are most likely going to be let down, he proceeds to say that he was not disappointed that things were not spelled out in the end and that it was an excellent game for those who enjoy an imaginative horror game.

Lessons

- *Words are not needed to tell a story* – The entirety of the game's narrative was told in the environment, none of the characters uttered a word, and there was almost nothing to read. The characters' actions, the details of the environment, and the player's ingenuity tell the story. If not for the character bios on the game's website, players would have created their own story using the metaphorical clues scattered throughout the game. The bios gave just enough to lead players in the right direction without ruining the story.
- *Everything should tie into the plot* – Almost every part of the game's environment played a role in the plot of *Little Nightmares*. From the scurrying of the Nomes to the Tall Man swinging from the ceiling, the environment is what told the game's story. Since this was the case, developers ensured that everything in the scenes could be used to conclude the game's narrative; down to the sausage links swinging from the meat grinder or pictures hanging on one of the rooms off to the side.
- *Players need to be active to be immersed* – "There needs to be more mechanics to draw the players in." *Little Nightmares* uses one mechanic; do not get caught. The developers created plenty of places where players could stop and take a breather if needed. The more critical plot points in environmental storytelling are strategically placed in the environment in these scenes. Watching the guests arrive, exploring a room with the tilting camera, or viewing one of the antagonists off-camera; because of the simple yet challenging gameplay, players can focus on what matters about the game, the hidden narratives.

Summation

Little Nightmares is a game that is unique in its presentation and how it delivers its story. It is different because it relies on its players' interpretation of its metaphorical clues rather than a straightforward story. This allows the game's story to be relevant years after its release, as it is still being psychologically dissected. These clues allowed the developers to expand the *Little Nightmares* Universe into comics and DLC shortly after release. Each tiny detail that a player finds contributes to constantly evolving theories revolving around the big questions; just who is Six, and what does she want?