

Emma Reay

## Secrets, Stealth, and Survival

### The Silent Child in the Video Games *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE*

*Abstract: This article combines critical theory from children's literature studies with research methods from games studies to explore the connection between silence and childhood in two digital texts. Little Nightmares (2017) and INSIDE (2016) are wordless video games that feature nameless, faceless children as their avatars. Weak and weaponless, the children must avoid detection and stay silent if they are to survive. By slinking and skulking, crouching and cowering, the children navigate their way through brutal environments in order to reach safety – or so the player thinks. Both games end in shocking, unexpected ways, prompting the realisation that silent children have secrets of their own. The games use scale, perspective, and sound to encourage close identification between player and avatar, and position the silent, blank-faced child as a cipher onto which the player can project their own feelings of fear and vulnerability. The child-character's quiet compliance with the player's commands also situates the player as an anxious parent, protecting a dependent child as it moves through a dangerous world. For both subject positions, the child-character's silence closes the distance between player and avatar. However, when it is revealed that the child-characters have hidden, unknowable, and potentially sinister motivations, the meaning of their silence is wholly transformed. Using aetnormative theory (Nikolajeva; Beauvais; Gubar) in conjunction with studies of ideologies surrounding childhood (Jenks; Kincaid; Meyer; Balanzategui; Stockton; Lury), this article examines the extent to which these digital texts affirm or subvert cultural constructions of "the Child." It employs a close reading approach proposed by games scholar Diane Carr to argue that the player-avatar relationships in these games shed new light on some of the fundamental contradictions that characterise adult normativity and child alterity, and concludes by suggesting ways in which video games might productively expand and disrupt conceptions of aetnormative power relations.*

**Keywords:** video games, digital texts, representation, new media, childhood studies

©2020 Emma Reay. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Barnboken – tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning / Journal of Children's Literature Research, Vol. 43, 2020 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v43i0.475>

The horrors of these child characters are not associated with a shallow interplay of evil and innocence, but with the complex and impalpable ways in which they seem at once familiar and alien, vulnerable and threatening, innocent and dangerously indecipherable.  
(Balanzategui, *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema* 12)

In this article, I will examine how the figure of “the child” is constructed in two wordless video games – *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017) and *INSIDE* (Playdead, 2016) – focussing specifically on the connection between the child’s “blankness” and its silence, and how these related qualities establish the child-characters as sites of semantic complexity and contradiction. Chris Jenks writes, it is “impossible to generate a well-defined sense of the adult, and indeed adult society, without first positing the child” (*Constituting Childhood* 3). The figure of “the child” functions as the adult’s inferior binary opposite – it is “a coordinate set of *have nots*, or negations” (14), as James Kincaid puts it, that edges and affirms the attributes that adults possess. “The child” evokes the adult’s past: it is a rip in the fabric of time through which nostalgic adults can glimpse a lost realm of purity and simplicity. Simultaneously, “the child” lives on inside the adult as both a font of playful, carefree creativity and as a site of buried trauma from which adult phobias and neuroses stem: the “inner-child” is a personification of the adult’s subconscious. “The child” is not only a backward projection of the adult, but is also an emblem of futurity, signifying collective, teleological, linear progress. It is used to tell stories of development that ratify personal and national timelines. In this way, “the child” concertinas history by operating as the past’s vehicle to the immanent future – it is both replica and prototype on humanity’s production line. “The child” is “the very index of civilization” (Jenks, *Constituting Childhood* 60), and the general condition of childhood in society is considered a reliable measure of national morality. Adults who abuse the child “strike at the remaining, embodied vestige of the social bond, and the consequent collective reaction is, understandably, both resounding and vituperative” (Jenks, *Constituting Childhood* 114). On the other hand, “the child” is the perfect victim, and child abuse narratives are pervasive in both fiction and journalism, revealing an undeniable appetite for accounts of innocence assaulted (Kincaid). “The child” elicits and warrants strong emotional reactions in adults. Karen Lury notes, “[t]ears and emotion erupt when the innocent – dumb animals, little children – are seen to suffer” (105), and so “the child” provides an opportunity for adults to expressively perform their own moral positions. As Anneke Meyer writes, “anyone speaking on behalf of children can

represent him or herself as a moral person" (85), and this performance of virtue is greatly enhanced when an abandoned, traumatised, or dead child is available as a prop. As a metonym for blameless suffering, the abused child legitimates a simplistic grasp of right and wrong, which overrides the moral complexity that may be inherent in any issue. Lee Edelman has shown that both the political Left and Right continually invoke "the child" to demonstrate the unimpeachable, irreproachable nature of their values. The figure of "the child" can be used as a human shield to defend any political position from attack, and it is effective at all points along the political spectrum. Meyer summarises: "[c]hildren and childhood function to explain and legitimize any practice or opinion as right while removing the necessity to provide reasons: children are the reason" (85).

"The child" is a conventional sign in Anglo-American culture, and there is a general level of consensus about its meaning. Despite being overdrawn, overdetermined, and "thick with complication" (Stockton 5), "the child," and childhood in general, are considered to be biological, intuitive, and obvious phenomena. Commonsense understandings of "the child" position it as a self-evident state determined by objective measures such as stages of cognitive and physiological development and a person's age in years. Since every person was once a child, the experience can seem natural and universal, rather than social and specific. Although Karín Lesnik-Oberstein points out that "the diverse meanings, understandings, ideals and rituals that surround [the anatomical markers of childhood] are not only arbitrary correlations within any cultural group, but also vary dramatically across both cultures and (pre) historical periods" (37), this knowledge cannot compete with a habitual, essentialised view of "the child" as pre-social, transhistorical, archetypal, and perpetual. What is more, the boundary work done by the discourses, institutions, professions, and specialisms that patrol the borders demarcating childhood is often rendered invisible, or is presented as responsive to childhood rather than generative of childhood. While there have been sociological and anthropological studies that challenge the supposed naturalness of the figure of "the child" – many of which are cited in this article – the social construction of "the child" is also frequently elided in academic thought. Jenks writes,

[T]he history of the social sciences has attested to a sequential critical address and debunking of the dominant ideologies of capitalism in relation to social class, colonialism in relation to race, and patriarchy in relation to gender; but as yet the ideology of development in relation to childhood has remained relatively intact. (Jenks, *Constituting Childhood* 4)

The idea of “the child” as a pre-social person – a primeval, uncultured, and literally “unadulterated” being – can be traced back through the blithe, unaffected Romantic conception of “the child” advanced by writers such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Rousseau through to Locke’s famous assertion that “the child” is a *tabula rasa*, a blank page awaiting inscription. “The child” begins as a series of negations that are sequentially inverted on its journey towards adulthood. Each childly quality – innocence, credulity, irrationality, malleability, simplicity, playfulness, blissfulness – presupposes its inevitable loss or, more specifically, the filling of that void with cumulative experience. The fact that “the child” is defined “in terms of its vacuity and lack of form” (Balanzategui 9) is arguably what makes it possible for it to maintain a sense of coherence as a rhetorical device in spite of the multiple, competing meanings that constitute it. Blankness can support a range of permutations, potentiality, and polysemy.

The lack of verbal communication in both video games discussed here generates interpretive blanks onto which players are encouraged to project meaning. This meaning is derived from cues in the game environments and from shared cultural understandings of the figure of “the child.” The games rely on players’ knowledge of ideological constructions of “the child” not only to convey narrative and cue specific aesthetic responses, but also to explain game mechanics and to define player-avatar relationships. At the conclusion of each game, however, it is revealed that the silent child-characters had latent desires and hidden agendas all along, and that players’ biases and expectations about “the child” impeded their critical, deductive abilities. Since vulnerability and innocence are frequently collocated and conflated in discourses surrounding “the child,” the player is duped into mistaking the former for the latter. The player is, therefore, unprepared for the innocent child-protagonists to be revealed as violent, driven, ruthless, duplicitous, sinister, and inscrutable. What is more, the child-characters are not subject to “conceptual eviction” and “removed from the category of ‘child’ altogether” (Jenks, *Childhood* 128); rather, they remain within the remit of “the child” by continuing to comply with the game rules that enforce their structural vulnerability, dependence, and powerlessness. They trouble the adult/child binary even whilst meeting the criteria that constitute childhood, verifying Kathryn Bond Stockton’s assertion that, “the very moves to free the child from density – to make it distant from adulthood – have only made it stranger, more fundamentally foreign, to adults” (5). As Jessica Balanzategui notes, “the shallow interplay of evil and innocence” is less disturbing than recognising

the “dangerous indecipherab[ility]” of something that usually feels intimate and familiar (12).

## Children’s Literature Studies and Games Studies

In drawing attention to, and then subverting, cultural constructions of “the child” these games challenge aetnormative hierarchies. Conversations about “the child” as a foil for “the adult” have been an integral part of children’s literature studies since the field’s inception (e.g. Inglis; Rose; Hunt), but it was Maria Nikolajeva who coined the term “aetnormativity” in 2009 to describe the tendency of adult authors to construct child-characters and implied child-readers as “Other.” This premise was further refined by scholars such as Clémentine Beauvais and Marah Gubar, who argued for the bi-directionality and interdependence of the power dynamics that scaffold relationships between adults and children. As with other heterological discourses, aetnormative readings identify and interrogate the unequal distribution of power between different social groups represented in texts. In this way, aetnormative frameworks have much in common with other critical approaches used in representation studies to examine depictions of gender, race, sexuality, social class, and ability; however, unlike these approaches, aetnormative theory is rarely applied as an interpretive lens for text-centric analysis in games studies research. As Björn Sjöblom summarises, “children in digital games have been studied a lot less than children in front of digital games. While the child-player is a frequent topic in academic discourse, the child avatar or NPC is all but invisible in games studies” (67). There are, perhaps, good reasons for games scholars’ reluctance to engage with the ideological figure of “the child,” not least because video game detractors have used “the child” as a means of barring the medium from the sophisticated, adult spaces of high art and serious academic enquiry. On the one hand, video games have been dismissed as kids’ toys and those who value video games have been accused of childishness; and, on the other hand, video games have been presented as a serious threat to children’s physical, emotional, and intellectual wellbeing. Contradictory calls from the same quarters to toss games in the toybox whilst also purging them from the playroom make the mapping of the relationship between children and gaming contentious territory for any games researcher (Reay, “Appraising the Poetic Power”). Even recent critical interest in the so-called “Daddening” of video games (e.g. Cash; Lawlor; Parker and Aldred) – which is explicitly concerned with a

particular form of adult/child relationship – tends to use a feminist lens that centres the adult characters (the reformed male hero, or the absent/abject mother) and neglects the figure of “the child.” Feminist readings of these adult/child relationships are deeply important and illuminating – and aetnormative theory intersects with feminist theory at many junctures – but in applying aetnormative theory to contemporary video games, this article aims to complement and extend the critical frameworks that games scholars turn to when analysing representation. Equally, video games are rarely included in the corpora of text-oriented children’s literature scholarship. I have discussed elsewhere possible explanations for this omission (Reay, “Kideogames”), which vary from practical considerations such as the challenge of housing and archiving video games in conventional literary libraries, to the false dichotomy that polarises “reading books” and “playing games” as oppositional rather than contiguous activities, to concerns about the levels of ludic competence required to write with authority on video games. In any case, the absence of video games within children’s literature scholarship means that aetnormative theory has not yet been adequately tested against – or adapted to accommodate – player-avatar relationships that cross the child/adult binary. Player-avatar relationships are sufficiently distinct from author-reader or author-character relationships to warrant separate, sustained enquiry into how they might construct childhood alterity or, indeed, how they might foster intergenerational solidarity. This article is a step towards integrating video games into discussions of aetnormativity, and aims to convince children’s literature scholars of the value of exploring this particular pairing of medium and theory in greater depth.

Applying an existing literary theory to a new medium requires iterative testing and creative flexibility to adequately account for medium-specific affordances. More so than written texts, illustrations, photography, and films, video games lack permanence and stasis. Beyond practical issues of access that arise from technological obsolescence, critics must also account for the fact that video games are constellations of coded potentialities that form, dissolve, and reform with every new playthrough. When it is not in the process of being played, a video game is akin to a stack of sheet music – the information required to produce the melody is present and legible, but the silent pages of paper and ink are only a shadowy abstraction compared to the potential musical performance of the song inscribed upon them, and that performance depends in significant ways on the skill and personal style of the individual musician. To put it another

way, a video game playthrough is a spatio-temporal event, and the variability engendered by the non-unilinearity of interactive texts means that any single playthrough may be impossible to replicate. In order to read a video game through an aetonormative lens – or, indeed, to attempt any kind of close reading of a video game’s formal properties – it is necessary to artificially “fix” the text by rooting the analysis in a specific playthrough. Following the autoethnographic approach proposed by Diane Carr in “Methodology, Representation, and Games” (2019) – whose method builds upon the close reading approaches developed by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum – the analysis in this article is derived from my own playthroughs. Carr plays “the game through several times and then engag[es] in a closer consideration of particular moments within the game through forms of fragmentation (repeated play, taking and reviewing screenshots). These fragments [are] then fragmented in turn, their elements ‘unpacked’” (710). She uses her “experience of playing the game [as] the basis of a decision about the richest and most relevant or evocative levels or chapters for further analysis,” and rejects the concept of an “implied player” in favour of positioning herself as the “player-as-analyst” (Carr 711). I have found Carr’s method to be appropriate for addressing aetonormative concerns in two key ways: firstly, it is an effective means for identifying which of the texts’ formal properties coalesce to constitute the child-characters, and secondly, it facilitates an understanding of how these formal properties set the parameters for the possible relationships between players and child-characters.

## Defining Wordless Video Games

In *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE*, players take control of two faceless, nameless children. The girl in *Little Nightmares* is referred to as “Six” in the game’s paratexts, but the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* remains anonymous. Six’s face is hidden beneath the deep hood of her anorak, and the boy’s face is a blank space – smooth, gleaming, and featureless. Thin legs and tiny bare feet protrude from beneath Six’s vibrant, yellow raincoat, which is, in itself, an intertextual allusion to other vulnerable, uncanny children across different media (for example Andy Muschietti’s film versions of Stephen King’s *It* from 2017 and 2019 and Henry Selick’s film adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* from 2009). The boy’s red sweater differentiates him from his chiaroscuro world, but seems woefully insufficient for the miserable weather conditions he endures. The children are silent except for their soft footsteps and the sound of their breathing. When the

children die – which happens often – they occasionally whimper or gasp. Otherwise, they are, like the ideal Victorian child: seen and not heard. The worlds that they move through are vast, dark, and violent – the boy navigates a brutal, clinical, militaristic compound where awful experiments are being conducted on humanoid creatures, and Six ascends from the depths of an enormous ocean liner, working her way up from its leaky, mechanical guts to the luxurious suites belonging to grotesque cannibalistic guests. Six and the boy are weak and weaponless – if they are caught by the games’ antagonists, they are immediately killed, and so their silence and their inconspicuous size are key to their survival.

It is not just the child-protagonists who are mute: the games themselves are wordless and have hushed, minimalist soundscapes. In *INSIDE* the soft shuffling of corporate masses, the thin, plaintive whines of industrial machines, and the distant thunder of war machines edge the little boy’s silence, but for the most part an eerie, yawning quiet dominates the playing experience, evoking abandonment, death, sterility, and suppression. Similarly, the quietude in *Little Nightmares* consists primarily of creaking floorboards and the slap of waves against the hull, and is only ruptured during encounters with antagonists, who introduce disgusting squelches and abject moans to the soundscape. Emma Bosch defines wordless picturebooks as “books that tell a story through a series of illustrations without written text” (72). This definition is succinct, but it excludes certain wordless picturebooks in which non-visual signifiers such as non-verbal sounds, textures, and page-turns play a significant role in conveying the story. Nonetheless, this definition provides a starting point for defining wordless video games. Wordless video games convey narrative meaning, game rules, and ludic feedback through visual, audible, haptic, and mechanical signifiers without the use of written text or verbal speech, other than in the extradiegetic game menus and title screens. Additionally, wordless video games do not convey information via a “heads-up display” (HUD), which is an interface overlaid onto the gameworld that displays information such as the player’s score, the player’s remaining lives, or the time left to complete a task either numerically or graphically. *INSIDE* meets this definition exactly, while *Little Nightmares* should perhaps be described as “nearly wordless,” because if the player takes too long to discover the range of interactions available, written prompts appear at the bottom of the screen. Since the games are either entirely or nearly wordless, the rhetorical sign of “the child” bears a significant amount of the weight of communicating the games’ rules and me-

chanics to the player. *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* are both stealth games. Stealth games, and the survival horror genre more broadly, typically pit underpowered avatars with limited access to resources and ineffectual weapons against overpowered enemies to elicit a specific playstyle, characterised by physical tension, hypervigilance, and strategic thinking. Using a child avatar is an efficient shorthand for expressing the power inequality between protagonists and antagonists, and for communicating that the correct way to progress through the game is to complete puzzles without alerting enemies. In this way, the child-characters in the games function as icons to explain the rules and mechanics of the games. Simultaneously, the rules and mechanics produce childhood by demarcating the abilities and prerogatives of the child-characters. This establishes a closed loop within which the game generates childhood through its rules, and then communicates its rules to the player through the descriptor of “the child.” To play these games is to play with readings of “the child.” In the following discussion, I will explore how the player’s decoding of the way “the child” is inscribed into ludic systems shapes player-avatar relationships.

Since the discussion that follows is based on my own playthrough, it necessarily represents an “adult” perspective, which entails certain limits and biases. However, I would argue that, irrespective of age, the players of these games are always invited to occupy subject positions that are undeniably “adult.” That is to say, if one accepts that the subject position of “child” is, to a significant degree, a social and cultural construction, then it is possible to conceive of this process in reverse, wherein a dialogic interaction between text and user constitutes a child-player as an “adult.” The dark, disturbing nature of these games presupposes an adult audience, and the age-ratings awarded each title reflect this: *INSIDE* received an age-rating of 18+ by Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and was rated “M” for Mature by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), while *Little Nightmares* was deemed suitable for players 16+ by PEGI and received a “T” for Teen rating from the ESRB. Nonetheless, I do not doubt that many children have played both of these games: the advent of digital downloads and home-streaming has made it almost impossible for marketplaces and censorship bodies to restrict children’s access to games. However, coded into these games are certain assumptions about players’ ludic competence (as well as players’ capacity to process mature themes) that constitute the player as an “adult” interlocutor. Furthermore, unlike the sword-swinging, gun-slinging avatars that players might encounter in other genres,

the avatars in these two games are small, fragile, dependent, and “at risk.” The pronounced asymmetry of the power balance between player and avatar in these games casts the player as the protective, controlling authority that defends the obedient, biddable avatar. In other words, even a player whose age matches the implied age of the avatar is unlikely to feel like the avatar’s peer: relative to the avatar, the player feels mature.

### Concealing Structural Vulnerability Through Silence

Meyer summarises the causal connection between children’s “innate vulnerability” and children’s “structural vulnerability” as a two-part process: she writes, “First, the discourse of innocence constructs the concept of innate vulnerability, which creates a particularly close fit between notions of innocence and vulnerability. Second, the discourse of innocence produces structural vulnerability, yet conceals it through silence” (102). Video games are rule-based systems, which means that they are particularly suited to exposing and enumerating the structures that produce social behaviours and identities. Digital children in games are the product of a deliberate set of parameters and criteria decided upon and implemented by adult designers and programmers. Discovering what is and is not possible when playing as a child-character reveals the active construction of the figure of “the child” as the consequence of a coded structure, whilst also simulating the experience of having to operate within these non-negotiable limits. The interactive nature of video games can prompt playful, strategic experimentation with the rules, wherein players challenge, subvert, or work around coded boundaries; however, as is the case when real children chafe against the strictures of “the child,” disobeying the game’s rules can result in punishment and narrative dissonance.

Outside of the coded, virtual environments of video games, it is more difficult to separate children’s innate vulnerability from their structural vulnerability, not least because the former is used to obfuscate the latter. Children’s “innate vulnerability” – the fact that children’s bodies are generally smaller and weaker than most adults’ bodies, and that children may lack certain mental competencies and social skills that most adults possess – is used to rationalise and naturalise their “structural vulnerability” – the culturally-constructed asymmetry of power relations between adults and children. Meyer notes a slippage between discourses of “vulnerability” and discourses of “innocence” when discussing children’s position in society,

which conflates the need to protect children's "innocence" with social practices that perpetuate their vulnerability – Stockton refers to these practices as processes designed for carefully "managed delay" (40). In this way, structural vulnerability can actually produce and exacerbate children's innate vulnerability, firstly because, as Meyer writes, "children are discouraged from being independent and gaining experiences, [so] their judgements of danger and acceptability may be impaired" (91), and secondly because they are not easily able to defy asymmetric power structures when adults abuse children, since obedience to adult rule is seen as a key aspect of adult-child relationships. In short, if children are seen as innately "at risk" – and if "innocence" and "incompetence" are used as synonyms – it legitimises a particular form of adult authoritarianism that demands children's compliance with adult wishes, rules, and practices. When children's structural vulnerability is conceived in terms of their innate innocence it naturalises their subordination within the family and other cultural and political institutions.

Children's need for adult protection is augmented by the fact that contemporary Anglo-American understandings of "adult protection" serve to eliminate children's bodily autonomy, block their access to knowledge, override their right to privacy, restrict their ability to enter certain spaces and move freely, undermine their credibility, and disrupt their routes to financial independence. What is more, children are not only seen as needing adult protection, they are seen as *deserving* of it, and if a child's innocence is "prematurely" replaced by experience, it is seen as a moral failing of adult society. There is, then, an implicit acknowledgement that adult intervention is necessary to preserve and prolong "natural" childly innocence. Joseph Zornado illuminates the connection between the protection of children and the subordination of children when he writes about parental love and parental control: he comments, "the adult's love for the child and the adult's need to exercise control over the child are usually synonymous unconscious impulses" (xvii). Children are seen as being inherently deserving of love – they are naturally loveable – and when control and love are interchangeable modes of behaviour, controlling children through discipline, punishment, and constraint is seen as equally natural, obvious, and laudable. What *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* do so successfully is to allow players to define themselves against the abusive, infanticidal adult antagonists in the gameworld by assuming the role of parental-protector, only for players to realise that they too are complicit in, and responsible for, the violence suffered by the child-characters. The players are po-

sitioned as the child-characters' keepers, but ultimately controlling, protecting, and loving the child-characters are shown to be incompatible, rather than interchangeable, behaviours.

There are several significant points of overlap between the experience of playing *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE*. Both games acclimatise players to being vulnerable and weak, and facilitate the learning of techniques to manage their weakness and turn their small size to their advantage. The "win" and "fail" conditions of both games convey that the player's role is to protect the child-character from harm as they progress through the gameworld, but the trial-and-error playstyle necessitated by the games' wordlessness results in frequent failure. Failure is communicated through short cutscenes showing the children's deaths, which work to emphasise both the fragility and debility of the children as well as the harsh brutality of the gameworlds. Finally, both games' feature absurd and shocking narrative twists that call into question the supposed innocence of the child-characters. These twists imply that the child-character's vulnerability was not an innate or inevitable facet of their childliness; rather, it was the result of the structural interplay between the cruel hostility of the diegetic adult world and the player's well-intentioned but ultimately disastrously harmful attempts to protect the child. In other words, the child-characters' seemingly obvious, natural, and innate vulnerabilities are revealed to be a direct consequence of structural power distribution between the player, the avatar, and the games' rules. As the child-characters' abilities increase, the player's agency decreases, suggesting a redistribution of power is taking place. The children become ludically invulnerable, and their only available response to the player's commands and direction is to move through the gamespace doling out death and destruction with every button-push. Equally, as the player becomes less secure in their understanding of the games' narrative events, the silent children suddenly seem imbued with authoritative knowledge. In many ways, the child-characters' final triumph in these games is to not only escape from their diegetic adult-oppressors, but also to free themselves from the control of the adult-players.

### Player-Avatar Relationships: A Silent Cipher or an Indecipherable Agent?

The unexpected narrative twists in these games dramatically shift player-avatar identification. In the typology proposed by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca a

distinction is made between “player-characters” and “avatars.” A player-character is a “character controlled by the player (except in cut-scenes); we can usually control his actions but his motivations and his missions are decided by the story,” whereas an avatar is “a non-intrusive representation of ourselves [...] Typically, an avatar has no name and cannot be seen, as the game view is first person, so that the player merges with the character” (212). An avatar is a cipher onto which players can project their own identities, but a player-character has a distinct identity that is separate from the player. Players might see themselves as heavily invested in and aligned with player-characters, but they nonetheless view these characters as independent agents. On the one hand, the children’s blankness, their facelessness, and their silence make them akin to avatars, as does the wordlessness of the texts and the lack of narrative exposition. The child-characters function as “[a] clean slate, with your own face on” (Plath 141) – they are smooth surfaces that invite self-projection. As Lury notes, “[t]he unreadable face of the child is ... often interpreted or anthropomorphised to fit the political and emotional agenda of the interested adult” (109). If the figure of “the child” is a void, then the childliness of these characters could be seen as key to facilitating player-avatar identification.

Although the perspective in both games is third-person, certain haptic and audio signs establish a closeness between player and child-character. The sparse soundscapes, for example, emphasise the sounds of the children’s breathing and their footsteps. In fact, the volume of these sounds is unnaturally loud compared to other environmental noise, which creates a sense of physical proximity to the children’s bodies. There are hardly any extradiegetic sounds in the games, and so the player’s auditory experience exactly matches what the character hears. In *INSIDE*, whenever the little boy plunges underwater the audio becomes muted and distorted, as if the player were hearing the environmental sounds from underwater too. *INSIDE*’s sound designer, Martin Stig Andersen, recorded the game’s diegetic sounds inside of a human skull salvaged from a genuine skeleton to layer them with soft, resonant, intimate bone vibrations, inflecting the soundscape with the jangle of teeth and the baseline echo of a jawbone (Andersen). The effect is a subtle but disorienting sense that the soundscape of *INSIDE* might actually originate inside the player’s head. In *Little Nightmares*, one of the only non-diegetic sounds is that of soft children’s voices singing a haunting nursery rhyme, which is heard whenever Six is in the throes of hunger pangs. This unnerving sound could be interpreted as an auditory halluci-

nation, meaning the gameworld is presented to the player through the lens of Six's troubled mind. Furthermore, when played with a controller, both games make use of the rumble effect – wherein the controller vibrates in response to events represented on screen – to create an embodied connection between player and child-character. In *Little Nightmares*, the controller vibrates to the rhythm of an accelerating heartbeat when one of the antagonists approaches the child-character. This instance of haptic feedback is not simply a description of the panic and fear felt by the child-character, but rather it is a stimulus that induces the symmetrical sensations in the player. That is to say, the player experiences feelings of panic and fear firsthand on a somatic level as well as vicariously through empathy, establishing a synchronicity between player and child-character.

The childliness of the protagonists sets up what seems to be a clear moral divide between good and evil: only truly evil agents would kill a defenceless child, and so players intuitively and unquestioningly take the side of the child. This “good child”/“evil adult” opposition is reinforced by the fact that the only helpful or benign non-player characters (NPCs) in the games are coded as children. In *INSIDE* an aquatic, foetal little girl with a cloud of black hair and a trailing metal umbilical cord repeatedly pursues the unnamed boy. At first, every time she catches the boy, she drowns him, making her one of the game's most frightening enemies; however, the player eventually realises that the girl is trying to perform a procedure on the boy that gives him the ability to breath underwater, making him comparatively safe when traversing the game's many underground lakes. In *Little Nightmares*, Six is handed a loaf of bread by a small boy who is trapped in a cage, temporarily relieving her of her crippling hunger. The game also features tiny gnome-like creatures with mushroomy heads who initially skitter and hide when Six approaches them, but over time become more friendly, warming their small hands by the lanterns that Six lights and even showing her routes she can take through the environment. The “child versus adult” framing strongly inclines the player to identify with the child-protagonist, who is clearly set up to be the brave underdog that defies cruel tyrants.

On the other hand, the alterity of “the child” impedes player-avatar identification. Irrespective of their age, players are positioned as adults in relation to the child-character because they are tasked with protecting and guiding this vulnerable, dependent figure. This makes the child-protagonists into player-characters that the player thinks of in the third-person, rather than avatars to which the player would ascribe the first-person. The children's vulnerability is produced

through a combination of game mechanics, perspective, and visual scale. On a mechanical level, neither Six nor the unnamed boy have any “attack” or “defence” abilities, so this precludes the possibility of engaging directly with the adult antagonists. The children crouch, cower, and flinch when antagonists are nearby, expressing through gesture and body language the urgent need to remain hidden. The controls for the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* are limited to run, swim, creep, jump, push, pull, and climb. Six’s interactive possibilities are slightly more extensive: she can do all that the boy can, and additionally she can crouch, throw, and flick a cigarette lighter off and on. The games’ input controls define childhood in terms of a lack of choice and power, and the ludic challenge of being a child in the gameworld rests in the careful management of meagre resources and the strategic implementation of restricted movement. Child alterity and adult hegemony is also expressed through visual scale. In both games, the camera through which players view the gameworld frequently rolls backwards during location transitions to reveal just how small the child is in relation to its surroundings.

The gameworld in *Little Nightmares* seems to be designed in a way that is particularly hostile towards, and perilous for, children. The scale is such that furnishings and infrastructure seem extruded, elongated, and nightmarishly disproportional. Six is closer in size to the rats that roam the lower levels of the ship than she is to any of the adult antagonists. Similarly, the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* dies many more times as a result of his hazardous environment than he does at the hands of the non-player characters. He falls from high ledges, is sliced to pieces by industrial fans, and drowns trying to cross bodies of water. The keen sense that the gameworld is designed to punish and persecute the child-characters reinforces the “otherness” of childhood. The child-character’s deaths are visceral but not melodramatic – in fact, the quietness of the children’s deaths makes them all the more distressing. Their compliant, uncomplaining submission to death after death elicits feelings of guilt in the player. Unlike emotions such as panic, feelings of guilt do not map on to the child’s experiences and belong solely to the player. The children’s deaths even work to rupture the embodied closeness that is established on other semiotic planes. For example, when the boy drowns it is often because the player has kept him underwater for too long: the player’s misjudgement here is a result of a lack of embodied connection between player and protagonist that prevents the player from knowing when the boy has run out of oxygen.

The player is trained by the game to view spaces and objects in the environment in terms of the amount of cover and protection they

offer the child-character. Staying in the shadows and keeping to dark corners becomes associated with safety, inverting the usual connotations of light and dark. The threat of surveillance looms over both games, and each game contains puzzles in which the child-character must avoid a moving spotlight. In *Little Nightmares* huge, Orwellian stone eyes feature as an architectural motif in the game environment, and the icon indicating the player's progress is being saved is an unblinking eye. The perspective in the games positions the players as if they were part of the surveillance apparatus. Both games are rendered in 2.5D, meaning movement is mostly restricted to the X-axis (the player-character can only move along a single, flat, two dimensional plane) – although Six has some limited movement along the Z-axis, so she can move a few paces “deeper” into the gameworld away from the player, and the background animations in *INSIDE* create the illusion of movement along the Z-axis. The aesthetic effect of this cross-section perspective in *Little Nightmares* recalls a doll's house, within which a fatal game of hide-and-seek is taking place. In *INSIDE* this viewpoint creates the sense of a relentless lateral push – there is no explanation given for why the little boy is destined to get “inside,” other than the incontrovertible propulsion from left to right engendered by the game's format. Adult supervision of the child-character by the player parallels the adult surveillance of the child-character by the games' murderous antagonists in an uncomfortable way, and this is underscored by the fact that while the child-protagonists are generally seen in profile and have no eyes with which to return the player's gaze, the wide, staring spotlights of supernatural and robotic surveillance systems in the games are often positioned directly across from the player, allowing them to make direct eye-contact with the player.

### The Final Puzzle: Interpreting the Child's Silence

I will conclude this discussion by analysing the effects of the narrative twists in each game. *INSIDE* and *Little Nightmares* use the figure of “the child” in similar ways – indeed, these games are representative of a slew of games with functionally-comparable child-avatars such as *The Flame in the Flood* (2017), *LIMBO* (2010), *Among the Sleep* (2014), *Fran Bow* (2015), *Little Misfortune* (2019), and *The Binding of Isaac* (2011) – however, the voltas in these two games differ in tone. While both conclusions meld childliness and monstrosity and leave the players with more questions than answers, *INSIDE* ends with a resigned, melancholic reflection on the impossibility of freedom

in the face of homogenising, self-replicating systems of conformity, whereas *Little Nightmares* ends with a dark but triumphant re-inscription of violence-based power hierarchies.

Having overcome countless lethal obstacles, the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* arrives in the central atrium of a grim, scientific facility. Here he finds an abominable experiment: a huge, gelatinous lump of human flesh and fats and skins and limbs floating in an aquatic chamber. The wobbling mass seems to be sentient and in pain, as it groans and struggles against the wires and chains that bind it. The little boy breaks into the aquatic chamber and swims towards the mass, removing his clothing as he goes. He detaches its restraints, and when it is free, the blob subsumes the boy entirely, and the player takes control of the blob. Under the player's direction, the blob begins a murderous rampage around the facility, crushing scientists and office workers, and destroying the building. The blob is utterly abject, revolting, and pitiful, but it is also, somehow, strangely comic. At certain points its waving limbs look like people cheering and crowd surfing at a concert, and its soft, sloppy, resilient, rolling squishiness has a pleasing tactility in contrast to the hard, cold, sharp, clinical environment of robotic precision and brutalist, functional architecture of the final levels of the gameworld. After slamming into the laboratory's director, pushing him through a glass window and crushing him to death, the blood-streaked blob breaks out of the building, tumbles down a mountainside, and rolls along the coast, coming to rest in a golden pool of sunlight by the edge of the ocean. Here it takes a few deep, collective breaths, and the soundscape is simply the rush of wind through meadow grass. With the same quiet, dream-like reticence that characterises the rest of the game, the camera retreats, the credits roll without fanfare, and the game ends. Players are left baffled. Becoming one with a disgusting, heaving huddle of connected human bodies is not the victory or the happy ending they envisaged for this little boy, who, after all, represented a brighter future that would outlive and outlast this dystopian scenario. Players wonder if they have made a terrible mistake and directed the boy to his doom – to a very messy, sticky end. They question whether they were tricked into doing the blob's bidding all along, inadvertently betraying the boy by using him as a tool to orchestrate the blob's liberation. In short, players are left unsure whether they have been the boy's protector or his persecutor, and this is the game's final puzzle. Themes of mind-control, lobotomy, and conformity prompt players to reappraise any automatic, "unthinking" decisions they may have made when engaging with the game, drawing specific attention to

the fact that greater critical, independent consideration is required to understand the habitual roles taken on by “adults” and “children” in relation to one another. Questions of whether or not the child consented to the (adult) player’s intervention suddenly arise, making the boy’s enduring silence newly conspicuous – his silence becomes present in the same way that a missing jigsaw piece gains a shape once the surrounding tiles have been correctly placed. If the little boy is an instrument deliberately selected and exploited by the blob to engineer its escape, then the player is the object upon which this instrument was used. Equally, if the boy is not a naïve victim of the blob, but knowing participant in its escape plan, then his silence is a symptom of his purposeful deception of the player who he betrays by withholding a definitive “win” condition at the end of the game.

At the end of *Little Nightmares*, Six makes it past a hoard of obscenely obese child-eating guests to confront a beautiful but menacing masked Geisha who is the proprietor of the ship. This terrifying, uncanny mother-figure is defeated when Six uses the only mirror in the Geisha’s quarters that isn’t smashed to pieces to reflect the woman’s Medusa-like stare back at her. In weaponising a mirror in her struggle against this mother-figure, Six demands that the Geisha “sees herself” in Six. Six defies the alterity of childhood by triggering adult self-reflection and intergenerational recognition, and in doing so she triggers a power shift that allows her to usurp the Geisha’s magical abilities. The elegant antagonist collapses, her long, dark hair falling over her face. She tries to raise herself to a seated position but her arms tremble and give way. Six approaches her and, without warning, proceeds to eat the woman’s face, biting off great chunks of her flesh. This ritualistic murder magically transfers the Geisha’s fatal glare to Six, who then walks calmly and slowly through the ship’s galley, effortlessly killing every single one of the guests. They die in grotesque ways – their bones cracking, their eyes popping, and their necks twisting. Six is no longer constrained by the X-axis of the platform game format, but rather she walks confidently away from the player along the Z-axis, as if she were a bride walking ceremonially down the aisle. Finally, she walks so far from the player, that she disappears from view. The player remains trapped on the ship, while Six escapes alone. When the credits roll, the player sees Six standing on a far-off island, surrounded by the sea. This ending could be read as a bleak take on Beauvais’ conception of the “mighty child” (3) who resides out of reach, in a tomorrow that the adult cannot access. The cannibalistic power hierarchy of the ship, which is appropriately called “The Maw” in the game’s paratexts, uses hunger as a currency

and operates on an “eat or be eaten” policy. Six’s small size belies a mighty appetite but prefigures her potential growth to reach the top of the food chain.

What these endings have in common is the sudden empowerment of the child character. Rather than this new-found power transforming the child into a vanquishing hero who re-establishes moral order, it makes the child an ambiguous, ambivalent force. In fact, their new invulnerability makes the children seem almost monstrous. The children destroy a production line, a functional industry, and a military complex – the oppressive systems and structures that enforced their status as “child” – but this brings about their unchilding, which also strips them of the symbolism of moral good and the rhetorical associations of “a better future.” The victory condition for the child-characters in these games entails the retreat of the child from the player and the relinquishment of the player’s power over the child. At the close of both games, the adult stops controlling the child and the child becomes unlovable – it is left ambiguous which of these events is cause and which is symptom. In trying to understand and assign value to these endings – to answer the question, “did I win?” – players are forced to reconsider all of the assumptions they made about “the child.” They might notice their ready conflation of vulnerability and innocence, or recall the fact that small, subtle animations did hint at the child-characters’ independent wills. The boy, for example, will turn his head unprompted in the direction of an unknown sound, and Six will use her hand to steady her as she runs through the ship’s ventilation system. These undirected, autonomous idiosyncrasies could have alerted players to the fact that they were dealing with player-characters rather than avatars. Ultimately, these games offer the players one final puzzle: they ask players to decipher “the empty inscrutability of childhood ‘innocence’” (Balanzategui 286).

*Biographical information: Emma Reay is a PhD researcher based in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, and an associate lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University, where she teaches undergraduate programmes in Children’s Literature Studies and in Critical Approaches to Video Games. She also runs the K.i.D.D.N.G. project, an ever-growing database that documents how children are represented in digital, narrative games.*

## Works Cited

- Andersen, Martin Stig. "Audio Design Deep Dive: Using a Human Skull to Create the Sounds of *INSIDE*." *Gamasutra*, 6 October 2016, [https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/282595/Audio\\_Design\\_Deep\\_Dive\\_Using\\_a\\_human\\_skull\\_to\\_create\\_the\\_sounds\\_of\\_Inside.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/282595/Audio_Design_Deep_Dive_Using_a_human_skull_to_create_the_sounds_of_Inside.php). Accessed 8 May 2020.
- Balanzategui, Jessica. *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
- Beauvais, Clémentine. *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015.
- Bizzocchi, Jim, and Joshua Tanenbaum. "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences." *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, edited by Drew Davidson, Pittsburgh, ETC Press, 2011, pp. 262–290.
- Bosch, Emma. "Texts and Peritexts in Wordless and Almost Wordless Picturebooks." *Picturebooks: Representation and Narration*, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 71–90.
- Carr, Diane. "Methodology, Representation, and Games." *Games and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 7–8, 2019, pp. 707–723, [doi.org/10.1177/1555412017728641](https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017728641).
- Cash, Jason. "'We Must Be Better': Hegemonic Masculinity and Dadification in *God of War* (2018)." *First Person Scholar*, 10 July 2019, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/we-must-be-better/>. Accessed 1 February 2020.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, et al. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, Routledge, 2020.
- Gubar, Marah. "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 291–310.
- Hunt, Peter. "Narrative Theory and Children's Literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1984, pp. 191–194, [doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.0415](https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.0415).

- Inglis, Fred. *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- INSIDE. Playdead, 2016.
- Jenks, Chris. *Childhood*. London, Sage, 1996.
- . *Constituting Childhood*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Routledge, 2005.
- Kincaid, James R. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. London, Duke University Press, 1998.
- Lawlor, Shannon. "'Your Daughter Is in Another Castle': Essential Paternal Masculinity in Video Games." *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 81, 2018, pp. 29–42, [doi.org/10.7560/VLT8104](https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8104).
- Lesnik-Oberstein, Karin, editor. *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Little Nightmares*. Tarsier Studios, 2017.
- Lury, Karen. *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairy Tales*. London, I.B. Tauris & Co, 2010.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Theory, Post-Theory, and Aetonormative Theory." *Neohelicon*, vol. 36, 2009, pp. 13–24.
- Meyer, Anneke. "The Moral Rhetoric of Childhood." *Childhood*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 85–104, [doi.org/10.1177/0907568207072532](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568207072532).
- Parker, Felan, and Jessica Aldred, editors. *Beyond the Sea: Navigating Bioshock*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.
- Plath, Sylvia. "You're." *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1981, pp. 141.
- Reay, Emma. "Appraising the Poetic Power of Children's Video Games." *International Research in Children's Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 17–32, [doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2018.0251](https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2018.0251).
- . "Kideogames: Reimagining the Fringe of Literary Studies as the Forefront." *Games and Culture*, 2019, [doi.org/10.1177/1555412019841476](https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019841476).
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.
- Sjöblom, Björn. "Killing Digital Children: Design, Discourse, and Player Agency." *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen et al., New York, Routledge, 2015, pp. 67–81.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2009.

Zornado, Joseph. *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood*. New York, Taylor and Francis, 2006.