

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: INSIDE

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Genre: Adventure

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Developer/Publisher: Playdead

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Overview

The wind howls through wet branches; crashes of thunder herald the impending arrival of a storm. A boy crashes through the underbrush, breathing heavily, his faded red shirt in stark contrast to the dark canopy surrounding him. He sets his eyes on the path ahead. He knows that far away and deep below, a far more unnatural storm is brewing *inside*.

INSIDE is a 2.5D side scrolling puzzle-platformer adventure game that follows the journey of a faceless boy in a red shirt. However, to say that *INSIDE* tells the story of a boy seeking mysteries beneath the surface of a decaying world would be a disservice to its narrative construction. *INSIDE* does not *tell* at all: it *shows* in the most interactive sense of the word.

It is this distinction that sets the game apart from so many others. Compelling though its narrative *content* may be, its unique narrative *delivery*, making fluent use of the unique strengths of the medium, elevates *INSIDE* to excellence.

INSIDE is (it is not *about*) a haunting sojourn through a meticulously crafted post-apocalyptic industrial world. As the Boy, the player will sneak past masked guards and their vicious attack dogs, plunge into the sunken ruins of a fallen civilization, uncover mysterious and breathtaking experiments, and command eerie, sleepwalking drones with a mind control helmet, all to accomplish the game's titular goal: enter the hive mind, a fleshy mass of limbs that controls the drones, thereby finally going *INSIDE*.

Characters

Not a single human being (or humanlike entity) in *INSIDE* has a face. This is likely because faces, even when represented in the simplest of visual styles, communicate an immense volume of information about character and personality that the human mind naturally latches on to. Playdead's technique is to focus instead on the *body* and the far more honest and direct language it conveys. That being said, *INSIDE*'s creators are chiefly disinterested in differentiating individuals or delineating their traits because its characters are not the principal agents of its expression. Rather, they are a kind of environmental "dressing" whose apparent role is to contribute to the life-force of the game world. Playdead, it seems, would have players come to understand their characters not by studying their expressions, reading about them, or hearing the way they speak, but by observing their direct actions and reactions within the setting.

- **The Boy** – The player-controlled character that acts as the driving force of the narrative. All of the game’s events are experienced through the eyes of this boy. The Boy’s purpose is twofold: first, to serve as a direct agent on behalf of the player, acting as a vessel for the player’s desired actions within the game space, and second, to provide color and context to those actions and their consequences. That isn’t to say that the Boy is a lazy or shallow character, far from it. Playdead crafted the Boy as meticulously as they did their game world and with the same focus: reaction. The Boy is alive to the player, panting when tired, turning his head sharply to glance at his pursuers, gasping for breath as he nears the surface, etc. The Boy mirrors the player, providing an intense physical reflection of the player’s mental state. The Boy’s goals, too, align with the player’s: explore, overcome, and uncover.
- **The Mass** – An imposing amalgam of twitching drone-flesh implied to be the neural center of the many drones throughout the game world. This hive mind spends the majority of the game shackled, commanding its legions in accordance with the designs of its captors and creators. The Mass is the true end goal for the Boy, who becomes one with it at the game’s climax. It is at this point that the player assumes control of the Mass and the game’s goal changes from entering the enormous facility to escaping it.
- **The Drones** – Mindless humanlike creatures, some of whom may once have been human themselves. The bulk of the drones have been grown in specially created tanks and pods. The drones’ movements are sleepy and shambling. Transported from place to place in trucks, rail cars, and forced marches, these broken, tragic creatures evoke a comparison to the Jewish peoples subjugated by Nazi rule.
- **The Masked** – People on the surface who all wear plain white masks.
- **The Engineers** – Scientists and office workers underground at the heart of the facility. All of them wear business formal with ties, white collared shirts, and slacks.
- **The Water Children** –Pale, feminine children with long, flowing black hair that live in the water, but cannot leave it. These feral creatures are the product of prior experiments; all but one seek to drown the boy. The last one, however, bestows upon the Boy the ability to breathe underwater.

Breakdown

Energized and sustained by meticulous attention to visual, aural, and mechanical resonance, the hauntingly melancholic world of *INSIDE* immerses both effortlessly and utterly. The fluidity of its narrative experience could never have been achieved without Playdead’s unwavering commitment to interactivity and its decided rejection of conventional narrative methodology. Through the eyes of a faceless child, the player experiences a kind of living history lesson, discovering the character of the world and their role within it step by step.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

INSIDE follows a loose five-act structure comprised of a brief opening act, three longer main acts, and a bizarre conclusion. Players who dig for the game’s myriad secrets are further rewarded with a powerful and pithy epilogue. These acts are not enumerated by Playdead themselves, but rather listed here for the reader’s convenience, ostensibly as Playdead felt that any meta-level narrative signposting would externalize the player. In fact, Playdead takes so fierce a stance against this that they interrupt play only when the player elects to pause. *INSIDE* loads dynamically, transitions seamlessly, and responds immediately.

OPENING ACT – SETTING THE STAGE

In its brief opening act, *INSIDE* establishes the rules and tone of its narrative. Act I follows the Boy’s forest escape from a band of masked hunters with attack dogs. From the moment the Boy slides on screen his natural movements inform the player of their goals and provide emotional context to the game state. As the player makes their way through the shrouded woods, the Boy hunches over to avoid being seen, making it clear

to the player that the people in the woods are no friends to them. The Boy's actions (looking over his shoulder as he runs from his pursuers, gasping for air, slipping through the underbrush, etc.) paint a clearer picture of the setting much more quickly and fluidly than a text box or a voice-over ever could. Once the Boy has escaped his deadly pursuers via a climactic leap (choreographed so as to be just in the nick of time, of course), the stage is set for Act II.

SECOND ACT – FORESHADOWING

INSIDE's second act accompanies the Boy as he slowly winds his way to the heart of the happenings, just as the player slowly begins to grasp the true nature of the setting. Climbing his way through repurposed barns, overgrown infrastructure, and fading concrete offices, the Boy and the player get their first taste of the bizarre: tiny cheeping chicks that follow the Boy's every move, a pig driven mad by a wormlike parasite, and finally a glowing, cabled helmet that allows the Boy to control the drones (who are introduced during this segment). Each element is delivered piece by piece (doubtlessly so as not to overwhelm the player), each building on the last until the player begins to comprehend the scope of the experiments they have discovered. The Boy, forced to think on his feet, marches into the third act amid a seemingly interminable procession of drones, stepping, jumping, and turning in sync in a terrifying demonstration for the Masked.

THIRD ACT - TRANSFORMATION

Forced out of his hiding place in the line, the Boy hurries underground as the third act begins. Commandeering a submersible from a waystation, the Boy plunges into the flooded depths, pursued by the mysterious Water Children. At the culmination of the act, the Boy is dragged down and "killed" by one, only for it to revive him with a glowing plug. This sequence is peculiar because if caught before this point, the Boy will simply die and the player reset to the last checkpoint. This is mere speculation, but it is quite possible that the last Water Child, whose trailing chords distinguish her from her predecessors, initially attempts to kill the Boy out of instinct or fear, but eventually grows to like him. This can be seen in the way that she drags the boy down. Rather than clawing at the him and strangling him as the other children would do, she grips him firmly in an affectionate bridal carry. The encounter feels gentle and calculated, where prior engagements were violent and frantic. This metaphorical "rebirth" results in the Boy being able to breathe underwater and taps into the sense of transformation that characterizes the act as a whole.

FOURTH ACT – THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Emerging from his watery transformation, the Boy makes his way through the well maintained passages, recently vacated offices, and idle laboratories of the central facility. The game's fourth act has begun. Drones perform manual labor as their masters abandon their stations to head further in. Phones left off of hooks and distant running silhouettes imply urgency and foreshadow climax. The Boy enters the observation deck where dozens of engineers gather around a large viewing window, but the player can't see inside. The Boy makes his way into the chamber, discovering, freeing, and ultimately being absorbed into the Mass as *INSIDE*'s bizarre concluding sequence begins.

FIFTH ACT – REVERSAL

Chaos defines *INSIDE*'s terse and surreal finale. The player, whose control has just switched from a charming boy in a red shirt to a massive chorus of writhing flesh, is mostly likely quite stunned. This is the largest turning point in the game, flipping absolutely everything on its head. Where previously the player's modus operandi was to hide and run away, solving puzzles with delicate strategy, as the Mass they careen mercilessly through walls and trample through terrified engineers, solving larger-scale puzzles with mighty force. At the closure of this final segment, the Mass bursts out into the open air, rolls down a forested hill, and rests by the shore in a beam of light, finally at peace. Or at least, that's what it *looks* like happens...

EPILOGUE – REVELATION

In actuality, Playdead hints that the tranquil last scene is actually fabricated, part of a deliberately constructed test of the Mass's abilities. Earlier in the game an observant player may notice a diorama of the ending scene: a perfect replica, beam of sunlight and all. The game's epilogue, which requires that the player hunt down and deactivate fourteen generators hidden throughout the game world and record their musical tones, reveals that the Boy was a drone the entire time, shutting him down in the process. The implications of this are a matter of speculation among the game's community at this point, but the three prevailing theories, summarized in a Eurogamer article by Jeffrey Matulef, hold that the Boy was controlled by either: a) the mass; b) one of the engineers, who possibly was absorbed into the mass as punishment for defiance, or; c) some external force representing the player themselves¹. The Boy's explicit goal, it is widely believed, is to free the Mass and help it to escape. Whomever controls the Boy ultimately decides that the only winning move is not to play, and lets go.

Strongest Element

In an ironic twist, *INSIDE*'s strongest element may actually be the shadow of what it does not employ, i.e. the absence of traditional narrative channels. Playdead's constraint of having neither text nor dialog nor description forces all other facets of the game's construction, from its physics systems to its sound design, to convey its story instead. Where many narrative games hide inferior tech, audio, art, or gameplay behind conventional narrative methods and thereafter suffer for it, *INSIDE*'s core limitation makes for a stronger overall experience. The beauty of *INSIDE* is its lean and prudent narrative architecture: its focus on story as a gestalt.

Unsuccessful Element

INSIDE's unconventional methods leave clarity by the wayside. Because Playdead evidently decided not to be explicit, by abstaining from any form of linguistic description, they denied themselves the opportunity to ensure players understand the narrative once they have finished with it. Playdead leaves its story up to interpretation, a narrative trait far more common to literature than to video games, and while this has many positive effects (e.g., inspiring players to deliberate and build their own canon as a community) it can turn public attention away from meaning and message to summary and clarification. There are certainly valuable discussions to be had about humanity, ethics, etc. in *INSIDE*, but such analysis requires a level of comprehension that Playdead's constraints make uncommonly difficult to acquire. As is, *INSIDE*'s players must spend a lot of energy simply to digest the content of the narrative. A more traditional narrative approach would have made the story more accessible and likely shifted player discourse away from explanation and towards examination. It is likely that Playdead was aware of this and viewed it as a necessary sacrifice to empower its players during gameplay. Nevertheless, one must wonder if some compromise could not have been reached, with text or dialogue layered on top for clarity once *INSIDE*'s aforementioned strong foundation had already been cemented.

Highlight

INSIDE is riddled with powerful moments (plunging into the depths for the first time, being drowned and reborn, joining with the Mass, etc.); its hypnotic pacing guides the player from one to the next with such fluid grace that it becomes difficult to isolate them. Selecting any one of these moments as definitively *superior* is impossible, but the moment perhaps the worthiest of *discussion* is the very last one in the game's narrative:

¹ Source: Matulef, Jeffrey. *What's going on at the end of Inside?*. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-07-08-whats-going-on-at-the-end-of-inside>. Eurogamer. 2016.

The player, after relentlessly hunting down the game's many secrets and entering the musical password to the hidden chamber, finally uncovers the game's most shocking truth: in pulling the plug, the Boy himself becomes inert. His newly fetal posture reveals him to have been a drone all along. This revelation not only empowers the player by making them part of the narrative, but also serves as the final piece of the puzzle and the true conclusion to the experience: awareness. The alternate ending may be likened to waking up, rising above, etc. and it puts the player in an excellent state of mind to begin thinking about the story more critically.

Critical Reception

Critical reception of Playdead's *INSIDE* has been overwhelmingly positive, with reviewers from multiple institutions commending its elegant wordless storytelling. IGN's Ryan McCaffrey praised it as a "visually stunning, thought-provoking, and mysterious masterpiece"² in his review that awarded the game a full 10 out of 10 points. McCaffrey concluded his piece by stating, "I am still thinking about Inside – what it means and what it says about humanity – and I am enjoying the debate with myself and my co-workers." In Alex Newhouse's GameSpot review, in which he conferred upon *INSIDE* a score of 8 out of 10, he asserts that "the real achievement of this game [...] is the way that it crafts its narrative: detailed environments convey the bizarre world that you travel through; introspective moments are filled with minimalist sound design and just the barest touches of music; and the things you must do to complete your journey force you to confront the realities of humanity, freedom, and existence."³ Nick Robinson, writing for Polygon, gave the game a score of 9.5 out of 10⁴. Robinson focuses his analysis on Playdead's methods, applauding the strength of its unconventionally delivered narrative. "Inside drips atmosphere and effortless world-building," he writes. "You'll find no audio logs or graffiti written on walls in blood here, as Inside trades in subtler, more ambiguous hints at its true nature."

Lessons

- **Don't tell your audience a story: give them the tools to build it for themselves.**
 - Games are fundamentally an interactive medium and by now game makers know how to make interactive experiences. However, developers are still experimenting with games as a *narrative* medium. In film it is often said to *show* and not *tell*. In games it has likewise been said (although much less often) to *do* and not *show*. *INSIDE* is one of the first games to embrace this principle completely with respect to its narrative and its success demonstrates the power of this principle.
- **Don't hide your game behind your narrative: let your game *foster* your narrative.**
 - Tech, art, audio, and gameplay are critical in *all* games, even (and perhaps especially) narrative-driven ones. Too great an emphasis on story as an isolated element can lead to the degradation of the pillars that support it. The developers played to the strength of the medium when they chose to execute its narrative as a gestalt, allowing *INSIDE*'s traditional game elements to convey story through their elegant harmony. In practical terms this suggests that to craft a better game narrative, the correct approach, while counterintuitive, may be to focus on sound design or add additional environmental animations rather than to hire more writers or include more dialog choices.

² McCaffrey, Ryan. *INSIDE* Review. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2016/06/28/inside-review>. IGN. 2016.

³ Newhouse, Alex. *The Boy in the High Castle*. <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/inside-review/1900-6416458/>. GameSpot. 2016.

⁴ Robinson, Nick. *INSIDE* REVIEW. <http://www.polygon.com/2016/6/28/12049410/inside-review>. Polygon. 2016.

Summation

INSIDE is a master class in narrative elegance. It weaves its story with a highly detailed mixture of animation, sound design, and carefully timed and choreographed gameplay without ever resorting to text or speech. There is something fundamentally more primal and powerful about delivering narrative without text or dialog. Playdead turns the player into a genuine agent within the narrative, choosing to let the player live out the story rather than telling it to them. This interaction forms the beating heart of *INSIDE*'s gripping narrative. It is *alive* in a way few games ever accomplish because of its commitment to interactivity as well as its attention to detail. *INSIDE* portends an exciting turning point both for those who love game narratives and for those who work to create them. It represents a significant milestone in the execution of game storytelling: that is, not to *tell* those stories at all.