

Screen, Screen Features

Ludonarrative Discussion: INSIDE

Jacob Heayes praises Playdead's unsettling horror platformer and its commentary on control.

5 mins read

Written by & Jacob Heayes | Nov 23, 2019



A nameless, faceless boy tumbles down a rocky slope and collapses on the muddy forest surface, otherwise still, breathlessly awaiting player input. This is how Playdead's sophomore title *INSIDE* begins – barely a menu or title card in sight. Much like their equally haunting debut *Limbo*, Playdead revels in maintaining a tightly enigmatic atmosphere in both narrative and gameplay. There is no dialogue, no on-screen tutorial prompts, no prelude or exposition to establish the warped dystopia you'll be occupying for the subsequent three hours. In terms of ludonarrative, *INSIDE* is a breathtaking exercise in minimalism and of

environmental storytelling; one that encourages you to absorb every sickening background detail.

On paper, *INSIDE* is near-identical to *Limbo* in its mechanics and indeed appears deceptively simple. With only movement, jumping and grabbing, it's straightforward to grasp despite the lack of tutorials (and a heart-pounding introduction sequence). Yet it's how Playdead demolishes and reconfigure notions of control and platforming that is truly magical. In what is most efficiently described as Orwellian *Super Mario Bros.*, *INSIDE* rigorously inducts the player in a world founded on compliance. An eerie sequence challenges the player to disguise themselves amongst a patrol of enslaved citizens, marching to a mindless beat. One step out of line and the boy is ruthlessly knocked unconscious by the faceless authoritarian personnel. This isn't the only case in which *INSIDE* presents itself as a tormented distortion of the traditional 2D platformer, far from it. Whilst an early-game puzzle invokes the all-too-familiar routine of grabbing boxes to use as platforms, it isn't long until the player has to drag pig carcasses or evade ravenous hounds. The death sequences are similarly minimal, cold in their execution and frankly disturbing given the young playable character. Yet it's *INSIDE*'s unrestrained approach to its peculiar subject matter that has scorched it in my mind for years.

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Writing about *INSIDE* without divulging its mesmerising plot or thematic tones is incredibly difficult given that several of its greatest strengths lie in its masterful blend of gameplay and narrative. As stated earlier though, *INSIDE* is broadly a story about control and its abuse in the hands of fascist powers or grotesque surveillance. Whilst the world is never precisely defined, it's one seemingly barren of art or tradition, stripped to a power binary of scientists and experiments. The gorgeous art style confirms as much. Landscapes are rendered in morose, grim strokes. Everything is oppressive and overwhelming, nothing is familiar. *INSIDE* doesn't so much encourage exploration as other games of its type tend to indulge in (even with one particularly brilliant secret), but pushes the player forward through its hostile environment.

Puzzles can be fiendish later but they nonetheless rely on spatial language and once again controlling the environment and overcoming it. Whilst the game constantly throws the player into new and frightening environmental challenges, they are conquerable with the mastery of this language. Another striking sequence takes the boy underwater via submarine – not only is it visually stunning, but it

forces the player into a terrifying puzzle/pursuit setpiece that tests both maneuverability of the space as well as control over the opponent. This likely all sounds horribly vague, but as stated earlier, *INSIDE* is a work that is most effective with its secrets intact.

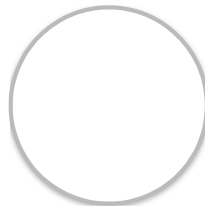
This naturally includes its horrific Cronenbergian ending sequence, which frankly might be my favourite isolated portion of any video-game this decade. Of course, the title is alluring and intriguing – what lies inside? Where even *is* this aforementioned ‘inside’? Suffice to say, the answers to these questions are both disturbing and ambiguous. *INSIDE*’s ultimate conclusion leaves you frantically craving more: more answers, more puzzles, more from this bizarro nightmare dimension. Much like the best art, it doesn’t give in to those temptations but leaves its audience to collectively absorb and deduce its ideas.

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