

Game Narrative Review

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Developer: Tarsier Studios
Publisher: BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: David Mervik

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Overview

Little Nightmares II is a puzzle-platformer horror adventure game that takes place in a 2.5D world, where players can move forwards and backwards from a sideways view, but their z-axis is limited. It was released as a prequel to 2017's *Little Nightmares*. The story follows a little boy Mono, who, working together with Six, must escape from the terrifying creatures of the Pale City. The players traverse the world through various platformer elements, where the environments determine everything they can do. Specifically, each level was designed to challenge them, so as they progress, they stumble upon obstacles and puzzles which correspond with the theme of the chapter. Frequently, players are rendered helpless in the environment, but on a few occasions, they are given tools that allow them to fight back.

The *Little Nightmares* franchise is also oftentimes associated with the game of hide and seek, where you must rely on stealth and the environment to hide from various enemies. The lore of the game is not straightforward as the game is dialogue-free, and players must use clues from the environment to assemble the overall story of the game.

In this review, I will discuss how the developers of *Little Nightmares II*, who mainly focused on the mental and psychological states of the players, were able to create such a terrifying game. To do so, I will examine the environments of each chapter and dive into the psychology of each character, identifying their phobias and disorders.

Characters

- **Mono** – the protagonist; a little boy who hides his face with a paper bag to help him forget about the scary world outside. Although he might seem shy and insecure, he is also incredibly kind, ambitious, and altruistic. Throughout the entire game, he goes out of his way to help Six, his companion, stay safe. Little Mono's motivation is to survive and escape the terrors of the world along with Six. It is important to mention that character names play a vital role in the game as well: Mono's name means "one, only, single", which foreshadows his fate. At one moment of the game, Six betrays Mono by allowing him to fall into a pit of gelatinous mass of flesh and eyes and flees on her own. After the betrayal, it is later revealed that Mono was and will become the Thin Man.
- **Thin Man** – the main antagonist of the game; a tall and slender being that resides inside the transmission. He is incredibly powerful as he has many abilities such as TV teleportation, time manipulation, and telekinesis. At the end of the game, we are shown how Mono aged and gradually took the form of the Thin Man, stranded completely alone in an isolated room. But even though he gets betrayed and is left abandoned in a time paradox, his motivation is not to get revenge on Six, but to break the miserable time loop and save his younger self from his worst nightmare - loneliness.
- **Six** – the deuteragonist; a small girl, often recognized by her yellow raincoat from *Little Nightmares*. She was found by Mono, kidnapped and locked in the basement by the Hunter, listening to a music box, the only object of hers that puts her at ease. Judging her personality through her actions, she is a two-faced, untrustful, and egoistic character. Pretending to be Mono's friend throughout their journey, Six makes questionable actions like killing one of the Bullies with her

bare hands and betraying Mono at the very end. The little girl's motivation is to escape on her own as she does not care about Mono.

- **Hunter** – the antagonist of “The Wilderness” chapter; an aggressive, homicidal lunatic who is suffering from taxidermy. By setting out fatal traps in the forest, he stalks and catches unfortunate animals and people to add to his trophy collection.
- **Teacher** – the main antagonist of “The School” chapter; an incredibly strict teacher who has the ability to extend her neck and catch victims. She cannot tolerate misbehavior and her motivation is to punish all troublemakers at school.
- **Doctor** – the main antagonist of “The Hospital” chapter; a perfectionist doctor that deeply “cares” for his deceased patients, more specifically for his experiments on them. He has the ability to crawl on the ceiling and lift obstacles. His motivation is to operate on his patients and keep them “alive” without any distractions.
- **Bullies** – the supporting antagonists of “The School” chapter; aggressive little dolls that behave only in the presence of the Teacher. At school they attack trespassers, set out traps, draw with chalk, and dissect frogs. They are even tempestuous against each other. Their only motivation is to misbehave and make trouble.
- **Viewers** – the supporting antagonists of “The Pale City” chapter; brainwashed citizens who are addicted to their televisions. If anyone distracts them, they will kill them by emitting a sonic frequency from their head.

Breakdown

There are many factors as to why *Little Nightmares 2* is a particularly scary horror game: the world is set in a very dark environment with a mysterious atmosphere, the antagonist characters have disturbing designs and behaviors, and the game does a great job of keeping player tension throughout the entirety of the gameplay. But I think the main reason why *Little Nightmares 2* is especially frightening is because it has a deeper meaning behind it. It is different from other horror games, it does not just want to jump-scare its players, it explores real-life fears a person may have had as a kid or even still has as an adult.

In my opinion, *Little Nightmares II* is an allegory of fears and psychological disorders in the real world. The developers have said before that they wanted to create a scary experience by tapping into childhood fears: “One of the main pillars of *Little Nightmares* is how does a kid see the world?” claimed David Mervik, the narrative director of the game, in an interview with Robert Purchase (Purchase). However, I think they did more than just that.

By using the theme of escapism, the creators of the game unfolded the real nature of each character, plunging into the psychology of different personalities. While playing, it is always unsettling to observe the actions and even the movement and sounds that the monstrous enemies make. It is also disturbing to watch what our little duo, Mono and Six, have to go through, taking in mind that they are just scared kids, who have to witness so much violence and absurdity on their journey. The environments and settings of each section of the game also serve big roles in this topic. Just looking at the creepy props such as deadly traps, cages, disgusting spoiled food, disturbing human remains, organs, dissected frogs, etc. can send chills down one’s spine.

To begin, it is obvious both of the little characters have anxiety - a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. However, both of them have said fears unique to each of them. Mono has monophobia - the fear of being alone (“What Is Monophobia?”). In the first chapter, Mono encounters a strange little girl playing a music box, and even after going through a terrifying, trap-filled forest, he does not leave her stranded. Instead, Mono saves her, and though she runs away from him, he still continues to try to gain her trust at any cost, empathizing with her. He is afraid of going through this world of death and hiding without companionship, he simply cannot do it alone.

Six, on the other hand, is the opposite of Mono. She does not want to depend on anyone, nor does she want to have anyone depending on her. I believe she has anthropophobia - the fear of people. Right from the start of the game we see her being concentrated on the music box, her only source of comfort. People with anthropophobia who experienced traumatic events, which, in Six’s situation, is being kidnapped by the Hunter, tend to treat themselves with relaxation training to put themselves in a more comfortable state. Then, she runs away from Mono: always wanting to run away is a common symptom of this fear (“Anthropophobia (Fear of People)”). Finally, she betrayed him by wrenching her hand away from his and letting him fall into the abyss of the mass of meat, believing she does not need him anymore because the biggest threat, the Thin Man, has already been defeated. Throughout their entire journey, Six always had trust issues and never completely trusted Mono. Finding out Mono was similar to the Thin Man only worsened the situation. Abused and neglected, she pushed Mono away, while the boy was just desperate for acceptance.

After being betrayed by Six, Mono grew up and transitioned into the Thin Man, a totally different character from our little Mono. He went from being an innocent child to a cold adult, a monster he was afraid to become. The players watched a scene where the character they played as, someone they grew very close to, grew up completely alone in an isolated room, living inside his worst nightmare - monophobia. Six’s backstabbing decision was the catalyst for grown-up Mono’s terrible deeds: starting from manipulating the transmission, he began to manipulate the citizens of the Pale City for power. Traumatized, he tries to do anything to break the time paradox to keep his younger self from living inside his worst phobia.

Moving on to the enemies of the game, just by examining their behaviors, it is clear they all have a primitive mindset to do their job. They are all intelligent creatures who still have passions for the work they do and used to do. However, just like Six and Mono have differences, the monsters too have immensely different personalities. They are all unique in their own way, be it their interests, behaviors, or abilities.

The Hunter, from the view of the little characters, portrays the fear of murderers or being murdered - foniasophobia (Cook); and obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is characterized by unreasonable thoughts and fears that lead to compulsive behaviors (“Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)”). While traversing through the Hunter’s territory, the player encounters multiple victims which include not only animals but also people. It is clear that this enemy is a murderer as shown by the Hunter’s skinning scene in the game and his decorations on his property. More than that, at the very end of “The Wilderness” chapter, Mono and Six retrieve a shotgun from a small shack they got cornered in and shoot him dead. This unsettling moment in the game represents OCD.

Homicidal thoughts are a common symptom of OCD, where a person fixates on thoughts of harming someone else, but continuously reassures themselves (Keara).

In the next chapter, “The School”, Mono and Six meet with the Teacher and Bullies. This entire chapter is a representation of the extreme fear of school, scolionophobia, and the residents of it help demonstrate this point. Many children are afraid of schools because of the teachers (“Scolionophobia (Fear of School)”). They seem to imagine that all of the teachers have an authoritarian teaching style. These types of educators are perceived to be cold and punishing. This is exactly what the Teacher from *Little Nightmares II* is like: craving control, she gains joy from the humiliation and suffering of her students. She menaces her Bullies by threatening them with her ruler, smacking their desks, and tying them up. Even the official description of the terrifying character implies her sadistic personality: “if one [child] should be heard, they will never be seen again”. Speaking of troublemakers, children might also be scared of schools because of bullying. Bullying is defined as chronic actions directed at a student, characterized by a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim (Ahmed et al.). In the game, the Bullies are aggressive not only toward our duo but also towards each other. They set out traps, dissect frogs, and at one point in the game, they even tied Six up to the ceiling. Looking into their psychology, it is evident they have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as shown in many scenes where all of them are hyperactive, inattentive, and impulsive.

The third chapter, “The Hospital”, depicts nosocomephobia, an extreme fear of hospitals (“Nosocomephobia (Fear of Hospitals)”). Although the name of the chapter speaks for itself, we can delve deeper into this topic. The hospital itself has many disturbing factors such as the electric chair, the life support that we must turn off at some part in the game, and the morgue. It is also filled with many enemies: living hands, patients, and the Doctor. Firstly, the living hands portray alien hand syndrome. In *Little Nightmares II*, these hands crawl around like spiders, hissing and pouncing on intruders. Just like with the alien hand syndrome, these hands act as if they had minds of their own. Secondly, the patients depict traumatic shock. It is known, the Doctor has made many experiments on his patients. With the help of a surgical light as seen in one of the rooms in the chapter, he operated on them to keep them “alive” so they could move even though they are dead. When Mono flicks a bright flashlight, similar to the surgical light, on the patients, they freeze, and during traumatic shock, the body’s defense mechanism is to freeze or dissociate. Finally, the Doctor represents iatrophobia, an extreme fear of doctors (“Iatrophobia (Fear of Doctors)”). His creepy loose face and baggy body alone could scare anyone. But more importantly, his motivations are very unsettling. This monster did harsh experimental surgeries on the poor deceased patients, “fixing” them by implanting artificial mannequin parts inside their bodies. As mentioned above, the Doctor’s patients even have traumatic shock because of the cruel operations he did on them.

In the fourth chapter, “The Pale City”, Mono and Six encounter enthralling personas, the Viewers. They are addicted and lost within the televisions’ perfect false world, and, as said on the official website, “cannot imagine a world without it [screen]”, killing anything that distracts them. Using the transmission, the Thin Man brainwashes these poor creatures for his own benefit, for the sake of power. Due to this, everyone is lonely, but the citizens’ loneliness is collective, serving the illusion of unity. It is common knowledge that nowadays, in the real world, technology is highly addictive, causing

many people to have technology addiction. And the Viewers portray this horrible condition, based on the symptoms they show. Unable to manage their time, the inhabitants of the Pale City are practically hallucinated by the TVs. They neglect their social life and have dramatic mood changes when diverted from seeing the flickering lights of the TV screens.

Narrative Structure

In the game's universe, time isn't linear because the game ends right where it begins, considering the time paradox Mono and the Thin Man are stuck in. However, without taking into account the collectibles and secret easter eggs, the narrative structure of *Little Nightmares II* is undoubtedly linear, which makes sense for a game that is primarily narrative-heavy. Chris Stone's informative article about narrative design in modern games nicely explains what linear storytelling means in video games. "They [players] are not given choices that affect the story, and cannot alter it through gameplay, therefore being unable to dictate how the story plays out. The game can only be completed one way: the way that was written by the game designers."

Little Nightmares II uses the three-act structure where the second act has the strongest stretch of the game as most of the interactive gameplay happens there. Evidently, each act has a set of highs and lows for the player, which could be thought of as chapters or levels. And in each act, there are smaller highs and lows – challenges, puzzles, and goals within a level. The story structure gradually progresses, continuously keeping the player engaged, but at the same time, it is compact. Having different chapters for each environment helps create a comfortable experience for the players. And containing a sudden plot twist that is not entirely explained at the very end of the game, aids the player experience, providing for a better emotional impact.

The following spreadsheet shows the narrative structure of Little Nightmares II in action:

Chapter	Beats	Description
The Wilderness	ACT I	
	Exposition	
	1	Mysterious transmission hallway hooks the player, and we are introduced to Mono.
	2	In the cottage, we are introduced to Six, and the Hunter.
	Inciting Incident	
	3	The Hunter chases the little characters
	4	The duo must make three escapes: in the forest, the house, and the pond.
	5	The solution to deal with the Hunter is to pick up a shotgun and shoot him dead. This leaves the players shocked and emotional.

	Break	
	6	Mono and Six swim to the Pale City. Players can relax and enjoy the moment.
The School	ACT IIa	
	Rising Action	
	7	<p>The school is full of traps and annoying bullies. The characters must be very vigilant; they can even kill the dolls to defend themselves.</p> <p>The main resident of this area is the Teacher. The players must be quick and sneaky in order to break free.</p> <p>Six gets captured by the bullies, however, working alone, Mono finds her upside down, tied to a rope, and saves her.</p> <p>At the end of the chapter, the duo escape by traversing through a narrow ventilation as the Teacher extends her neck to catch them.</p>
The Hospital	8	<p>The hospital is filled with many enemies: living hands, patients, and the Doctor. The players must find two fuses.</p> <p>To get the first fuse, Mono has to dodge moving hands, that want to pounce on him. For the second fuse, Mono must use a flashlight to control the patients' movements by stopping them.</p> <p>Six and Mono encounter the Doctor. After a long chase scene, they trick him to go inside a furnace and get rid of him.</p>
The Pale City	9	The Pale City is inhabited by Viewers. Mono and Six venture through the city until they encounter another activating television.
	Midpoint Turn	
	10	Mono tunes up the Transmission, but this time he is able to open the door at the end of the hall and meet his next opponent, the Thin Man. The Thin Man takes Six away, Mono tries to save her but fails.
	11	Mono traverses through the city on his own, encountering many puzzles with the Viewers and televisions. On the rooftop, they jump off from buildings, staring at the Black Tower. Nearby the store, Mono makes a frantic run from the crowd of the Viewers chasing him down. By going inside a random TV, Mono ends up safe in a random room.
	ACT IIb	
	Fall	

	12	Mono sees Six on the TV, but to his misfortune, the Thin Man breaks out of it.
	13	The enemy chases Mono down on the trains until Mono disconnects a part of his train, escaping. Glitching Remains will lead you to the exit of the subway.
	Death	
	14	Mono gets to the subway and fights the Thin Man, defeating him. Though the opponent is conquered, Six is still nowhere to be found and Mono is completely alone. He sees a pink light that guides him to go inside the Signal Tower.
The Signal Tower	15	Inside the tower, Mono solves door puzzles by listening to the sound clues. He finds Six in a distorted form, concentrated on playing her music box. For her own good, Mono destroys the music box, turning her back to normal.
	ACT III	
	Pre-Climax	
	16	The Signal Tower starts to collapse as the Flesh Walls emerge out and chase the duo.
	Climax	
	17	Mono and Six get separated by the abyss, and the girl reaches out to help Mono. Six allows Mono to fall into a pit of a gelatinous mass and flees on her own.
	Resolution	
	18	Mono ages and gradually takes the form of the Thin Man.

Strongest Element

It is a well-known fact that music plays a huge role in video games, especially those that fall in the horror genre. *Little Nightmares II* features a thrilling soundtrack, which is, in my opinion, the strongest element of the game. The audio team did a great job helping the game maintain the perspective of a child by finding “simple melodic motifs inspired by nursery rhymes and also instruments that had the aura of childhood nostalgia.” (Tobia Lilka) Throughout the entire journey, music helped drive the storyline by creating distinct atmospheres in each location of the game. “For example, the first level takes place in the woods, so here we could explore a more earthy and organic feel with key elements like wood and flies,” said Tobia Lilka, Audio Director, in an interview with Brian Crecente. Music also plays a vital role in many of the puzzles, for example, the doors quest in the last chapter of the game requires you to follow the sounds of Six’s music box in order to find her. It is fascinating how well the music completes the overall feel of *Little Nightmares II*.

Unsuccessful Element

A weak element of *Little Nightmares II* that can be extracted and applied to future game development is not entirely connected to the narrative aspect of the game. Game mechanics play as big a role as narrative design in video games, but they can get in the way of player engagement as it happened in *Little Nightmares II*. Since the game takes place in a 2.5D world, it is challenging for players to estimate where exactly they need to move or jump in order to correctly reach the desired place. More than that, some of the combat encounters may frustrate players as well. It feels like you must die and learn from death at all times to move on, which immensely distracts the player from the narrative perspective of the game. It is important for game developers to keep in mind that this unsuccessful element drastically worsens players' experiences.

Highlight

From my perspective, the best moment of the game comes with the player's realization that Mono and the Thin Man are the same person. The same realization Six had when she decided to wrench her hand away from Mono's in disgust. Emma Majoros phrased their correlation perfectly in her article: "Not only is Mono a key story in the life of Six, but the other way around. Six is a catalyst for the creation of the Thin Man." That means Six was a trigger for the creation of this monster. It was shocking and sad to see our little character Mono age and gradually take the form of the Thin Man, stranded completely alone in an isolated room.

Critical Reception

Game Informer, 9.25/10, Jeff Cork – Overall, Jeff believes *Little Nightmares II* is a "masterfully executed sequel". The reviewer loves the game's structure, despite its terrifying residents. Being patient and observing the monsters oddly lurching around their environments while you search for an escape was part of the fun for him. The reviewer praises the fact that feeling small and helpless remains at the core of the game, and he continues to applaud the "horrific imagery and dread-inducing atmosphere" of the game. One of Jeff's favorite aspects of *Little Nightmares II* is that it is "ambiguous enough to allow for multiple interpretations", leaving him with an "abundance of questions" after its unexpected ending.

Destructoid, 8.5/10, Jordan Devore – Jordan had an "overwhelmingly great experience" playing *Little Nightmares II*. He considers this sequel "bigger, more elaborate, and better balanced". Although the reviewer struggled with the movement controls, he "fell in love" with the "messed-up world of horrors". He even felt that failure - getting caught - was engaging and enjoyable. The reviewer appreciated how natural the environmental puzzles felt within their surrounding. After finishing the game, Jordan still wanted to go back and "soak" it in even more.

Lessons

- ***Telling a story without words can create a more impactful gameplay experience***
 - Considering *Little Nightmares II* has no dialogue throughout the entire

gameplay, which is uncommon in horror adventure games, the developers did an amazing job setting conflict. However, not only did they set the main conflict, but they also hid many more subthemes using the environment and internal confrontations of the characters. Containing a sudden plot twist that is not entirely explained at the very end of the game, aids the player experience, providing for a better emotional impact. In an interview with Crit Hit, David Mervik expanded more on this topic, saying he thinks this method of storytelling is “much more powerful” because of the mystery. He finds it way more “disturbing” when you do not know *why* something has happened.

- ***Successful horror games impact the players emotionally*** – Story and characterization are crucial elements of good horror games. Not only should the players be led away by the story, but also they should sympathize with the character they are playing as. *Little Nightmares II* is especially horrifying because it has a deeper meaning behind it. It is different from other cliché horror games because it dives into meaningful psychological topics, exploring real-life fears that many people have. The players of the game cared for Mono and Six, wanting them to succeed, and were left heartbroken and shocked after the unexpected plot twist.
- ***Comfortable playability is essential for the best player experience*** – Gameplay mechanics are vital in any game, and in *Little Nightmares II* this element was the weakest. Movement and combat do not feel proper, causing player frustration, which immensely distracts the players from the narrative perspective of the game causing a bad experience.

Summation

Little Nightmares II is truly an astounding gaming experience. The developers’ attention to detail in every aspect of the game created unforgettable gaming memories for many players. It keeps its players hooked by exploring and delving into important topics such as escapism, betrayal, phobias, disorders, and technological advancement. It is clear, there was a lot of hard work put into the characterization of this game as well. Tarsier Studios even mentioned that it was a “long and painful process” where they worked hard to “find the personality of this world and everything in it”. With the help of incredible art, amazing sound and music design, and a thought-through story, the immersive world of *Little Nightmares II* leaves many players wanting to return.

Citation

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