Little Nightmares II: Confronting and escaping from a rotting, dystopian world

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Tarsier Studios' *Little Nightmares II*, initially released for Microsoft Windows, Stadia, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on February 11, 2021, is a noteworthy contribution to the puzzle-platformer horror video game genre, focused on scaling and exploring the game's environments.

The primary entries in the genre, including the *Resident Evil*, *The Evil Within*, and *Outlast* franchises, are comparable to modern superhero movies or Hollywood horror films that favor grotesque imagery over gameplay and substance. *Little Nightmares II* is more restrained and atmospheric.

A good deal of the game's aesthetic appeal stems from its characters and their design, which mimic dolls and a dollhouse. The various characters speak only in grunts and other elemental sounds, with nearly every plot detail, character trait and motivation expressed through the game's detailed environments and character actions.

"Part of the fun," according to *Game Informer*, "if you'd call it that, is watching these oddly animated humanoids lurch around their environments, performing their work while you stay low and search for an escape." While some quite grisly character deaths do occur, they are not the game's focus and mostly occur out of sight.

Depicting events that occur prior to the first game, 2017's *Little Nightmares* (more on this below), *Little Nightmares II* follows the young, rebellious boy Mono, the main protagonist, on his journey through a foreboding world known as the "Pale City." On his quest, Mono will meet and team up with Six, the mysterious female protagonist from the first game. Six will serve as an assistant, providing hints and helping to solve puzzles in order to advance, while also adding uneasiness for those familiar with the grim conclusion to the first game.

Together, the pair make their way toward the ominous Signal Tower that looms overhead. The structure, a hulking skyscraper sitting at the heart of the Pale City, appears to be the source of the corruption, degrading all who come near it.

The characters whom Mono and Six encounter appear as imaginatively (and bizarrely) exaggerated manifestations of recognizable real-life figures. The game's first level, titled "The Wilderness," brings the two heroes face to face with The Hunter, a humanoid antagonist carrying a hunting rifle with a face horrifyingly obscured by a burlap sack (pierced by a single "eyehole" to see through).

Like most *Little Nightmares* enemies, The Hunter appears to be driven by mindless instinct, emphasized by the mounted human faces and corpses that appear as trophies throughout his mildew-ridden abode.

Other memorable characters and levels abound. The second stage, "The School," finds the protagonists inside a large, rundown schoolhouse, complete with creaking floorboards, peeling walls and hallways littered with trash. The main antagonist of this level (aptly named "The Teacher") is perhaps the most memorable and unsettling in the game.

Alongside these elements, the game's music and sound design are worth noting. Provided by Swedish electronic composer Tobias Lilja, the dreary but simple presence of bells, the sudden introduction of sharp strings at tense moments and the murky industrial synth sounds wafting up through the degraded environments effectively reinforce the game's atmosphere.

While the scenes and images of *Little Nightmares II* are certainly fantastical, the game's creators play upon a "sensation of being small and powerless in a dangerous world" (*Game Informer*) that draws upon recent experience.

The game appeared roughly one year after the full-blown eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed 15-20 million lives globally, a product of governments' efforts to subordinate public health to

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profits. It was released a little over one month after Donald Trump and his accomplices attempted to overturn the November 2020 US elections by mobilizing a fascist mob at the US Capitol building in Washington D.C.

While neither event is explicitly represented in the game nor perhaps even consciously grasped by its programmers, they form a real-world backdrop to the game's eerie sequences. Lucas Roussel, *Little Nightmares II*'s lead producer, explained to *Xbox.com* that the reason "why the situations encountered in-game are so creepy and bring this uneasy feeling" is because "they are all rooted in some sort of reality."

Elsewhere, in an interview with *Twinfinite.net*, Roussel elaborated on the game's themes and also unwittingly revealed some of its weaknesses. According to Roussel, "the core theme of our game" is "how people try to just evade their daily life because it's too hard to support.

"So we've got the strong connection with television in *Little Nightmares 2*," Roussel commented, "and that's probably a way of, you know, depicting our society. … Our society is probably getting too hard to face, so we'd rather look at it through our smartphone screen or TV screen, and we get absorbed by that."

This latter general notion materializes in a confused form in the final stages of *Little Nightmares II*, set in the heart of the Pale City. The environment, with its war-torn, "Japanesque" urban setting, is filled with zombified citizens who lash out violently whenever their faces aren't in front of a television screen. The influence of George Orwell's *1984* is apparent in the looming presence of the "Big Brother"-type Signal Tower and its human embodiment, the doggedly pursuing, 1950s-style Tall Man alongside the media-controlled citizens.

Little Nightmares II, however, removes socio-economic issues (including social inequality) as the driving force behind totalitarianism. The game registers a protest against an abstract concept of "propaganda." Instead of offering criticisms rooted in the everyday reality faced by people under capitalism, the game, with its moralizing outlook, implies that modern technology is the source of societal degeneration.

The consequence of *Little Nightmares II*'s lack of critical depth and social precision manifests itself in some of its main set pieces, leading to confusion or oversimplification. As a result, the Teacher and her class of puppet children could appear either as a criticism of classroom indoctrination or indicate a reactionary attitude toward knowledge as just another source of corruption. One can say the same about the Hospital level, occupied by The Doctor and his rotting, half-ceramic patients, for its uninteresting focus on obsessive cosmetic surgery.

The original *Little Nightmares* in 2017 also expresses unclarity. Set on a colossal industrial seafaring fortress called "The Maw," the game seemingly attempts to create a vague analogy for a capitalist, "consumerist" society. The industrial bowels of the vertically structured Maw harvest the flesh of imprisoned children, feeding the elegant restaurant-style upper layers. The boorish and obese "Guests" that arrive onboard provide an unclear allusion to a gluttonous upper class.

Yet, like its new prequel, the original game leaves room for far weaker interpretations, involving criticisms of the meat industry or misanthropic considerations of human activity in general.

"The first game was about hunger—overconsumption, of food … and butchery," Roussel also told *Twinfinite.net*. The game's creators seem to aim their criticism as much at the absurdly obese foes as they do the more deserving villains, such as "The Lady," a "faceless" bureaucrat and her deranged minions seemingly intended to personify the capitalist system as a whole.

Despite the difficulties and muddiness, the *Little Nightmares* series' focus on societal and psychological issues is a welcome part of a broader emerging critical trend in popular art forms, reflected in such works as Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game* (2021). The series reveals, in an initial manner, some of the socially progressive possibilities contained in this particular video game genre.

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