

**The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague  
FILM AND TV SCHOOL**

Department of Game Design

**MASTER'S THESIS**

**Metaphor of economic growth in videogame design**

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Awarded academic title: MgA.

Prague, June 2025

**Akademie múzických umění v Praze  
FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA**

Katedra herního designu

**DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

**Metafora ekonomického růstu ve videoherním designu**

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Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA.

Praha, červen 2025

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my institution for providing the intellectual space and resources necessary for the development of this research project.

In particular, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Mgr. Helena Bendová, for her constructive criticism, excellent guidance and detailed feedback throughout this process.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement and support during the research and writing of this thesis. My gratitude is especially extended to my grandmother, Soňa Maxová, for her unwavering support.

## Abstract

This thesis examines how videogames can create metaphorical meaning through their mechanical systems, focusing specifically on how *Inside* (Playdead 2016) and *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios 2017) subvert traditional representations of growth and progress in videogames. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and contemporary game studies scholarship, the analysis demonstrates how these games' designs create embodied experiences that challenge conventional gaming metaphors of material accumulation and dominance. Through close analysis of environmental design, enemy progression, and mechanical systems, this research reveals how *Little Nightmares* and *Inside* can be interpreted as critiques of consumption-based growth through three interrelated elements: spatial relations, bodily transformation, and embodied cognition. Unlike traditional games that represent progress through mechanical systems of leveling up and resource acquisition, *Inside* and *Little Nightmares* maintain player vulnerability while using environmental design and enemy encounters to create a sophisticated critique of excessive growth. This study contributes to our understanding of how games can meaningfully engage with complex societal themes through their unique combination of narrative and interactive mechanics.

## Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá, jak mohou videohry vytvářet metafory prostřednictvím svých mechanických systémů, konkrétně na to, jak videohry *Inside* (Playdead 2016) a *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios 2017) převracejí tradiční reprezentace růstu a pokroku ve videohrách. Na základě teorie konceptuálních metafor a současných herních studií práce ukazuje, jak design těchto her vytváří ztělesněné zážitky, které zpochybňují konvenční herní metafory akumulace surovin a dominance. Prostřednictvím analýzy designu prostředí, vývoje nepřátel a mechanických systémů tato práce ukazuje, jak lze hry *Little Nightmares* a *Inside* interpretovat jako kritiku růstu založeného na spotřebě prostřednictvím tří vzájemně propojených prvků: prostorových vztahů, tělesné transformace a ztělesněného vnímání. Na rozdíl od tradičních her, které představují pokrok prostřednictvím mechanických systémů zvyšování úrovně a získávání zdrojů, hry *Inside* a *Little Nightmares* zachovávají zranitelnost hráče a zároveň využívají design prostředí a setkání s nepřáteli k vytvoření sofistikované kritiky nadměrného růstu. Tato studie přispívá k našemu chápání toho, jak se hry mohou smysluplně zabývat složitými společenskými tématy pomocí kombinace svého narativu a interaktivních mechanik.

## **Keywords**

Videogames, Game design, Metaphor, Growth, Ideology, Game Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory

## **AI Disclosure Statement**

In preparing this thesis, I have used artificial intelligence tools for language enhancement purposes only. Specifically, I employed Anthropic's Claude 3.5 Sonnet language model and DeepL Translator for translation assistance and stylistic refinement and to improve the flow and clarity of my writing.

All intellectual contributions, research methods, data analysis and conclusions presented in this work are entirely my own.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background and Significance

### 1.1.1. Intro

Videogames create metaphorical meaning through the dynamic relationship between player action and system response. This thesis argues that when players engage with these metaphorical systems, they experience them through embodied interaction, with their avatar serving as an extension of their presence within the digital environment. Through this embodied interaction, metaphors are not only understood but literally enacted through gameplay. (See Bogost 2007; 2011; Begy 2011; Fahlenbrach 2015; Nguyen 2020a)

This thesis examines how the procedural and embodied nature of videogames can create a distinct metaphorical value through an interpretation of *Inside* (Playdead 2016) and *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios 2017). This thesis focuses on how these games subvert traditional thinking about the metaphor of growth, and how this can be interpreted as a form of social critique. By examining how these games implement certain mechanics and rules, this research provides insights for game designers on how certain mechanics can be interpreted and can offer insight into how to work effectively with complex metaphorical themes within games. In addition, this analysis highlights how games can deal with challenging themes in non-traditional ways, offering new perspectives on how metaphors can be implemented and experienced through interactive systems.

### 1.1.2. Why metaphors?

Metaphor has long been recognized as a powerful tool in language, art and media, allowing complex ideas to be expressed through more familiar concepts. This thesis looks at metaphors through the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), developed primarily by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, which defines metaphor essentially as “...*understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.*” (Lakoff, Johnson 2008, p. 6) CMT<sup>1</sup> argues that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but describes them as fundamental to human cognition. The connection between videogames and CMT has been made previously by Bogost (2007; 2011), Möring (2016) and others and it was pointed out that games are able to make arguments through rules and mechanics thanks to metaphorical abstraction.

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<sup>1</sup> More description of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and how is it connected to videogames can be found further in the thesis in chapter 2.1. Metaphors in videogames

Videogame narratives and experiences present ideological frames that can influence players, shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours in subtle yet significant ways. (See Bogost 2007; Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter 2009; Kirkpatrick 2013; Bown 2018; Nguyen 2020a) These ideological frameworks reflect broader societal values and norms, and by engaging with them, players may internalize them as their own values. (Nguyen 2020b) This thesis focuses particularly on the metaphorical structures through which these ideologies manifest in game design, especially metaphors of growth and development. By examining how game designers encode cultural and ideological tensions into their design decisions—whether consciously or unconsciously—we can better understand both the medium's capacity for meaning-making and its reflection of contemporary social dynamics. Therefore, as games are powerful tools for both reinforcing and challenging existing ideologies, it is important not only to critically analyse the content of games but to be able to critically think about and work with the metaphors videogames employ, both as scholars and as developers of such games.

### **1.1.3. Why growth?**

Growth in videogames typically represents progress through mechanical systems of levelling up, skill acquisition, and resource management.<sup>2</sup> This approach often reflects and reinforces neoliberal concepts of wealth accumulation and expansion. (Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter 2009, pp. 158–170; Bown 2018; Woodcock 2019; Nguyen 2020b) While some of these critiques imply a kind of cultural hegemony in which these themes are included in games for ideological purposes, others justify it by cultural unconsciousness, explaining these concepts as often unintentional or a part of an established genre. Nevertheless, it is important to critically examine the concept of growth (and the metaphors that enforce it) as it can reinforce certain unsustainable attitudes, particularly towards the environment and societal values (Næss 2006; Woo 2017; Jackson 2021).

## **1.2. Objectives**

This thesis examines how videogames depict growth and its problematic connection to economic concepts, particularly regarding sustainability and environmental concerns. While most games treat growth as inherently positive through systems of power accumulation, this research focuses on a game design approach that subverts these traditional practices. The analysis centres on single-player experiences, where game worlds are specifically designed to provide individual narrative experiences and specifically focuses on games *Inside* (Playdead 2016) and *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> This refers primarily to mainstream AAA or AAAA videogames and conventional genres where competition is essential to gameplay. See chapter 2.3. Metaphor of growth for further discussion.

Both games feature vulnerable protagonists who don't become traditionally "stronger", they are not equipped with a weapon or a superpower and they are unable to defend themselves directly. The games also use environmental storytelling and atmosphere to convey development, and they are of a similar genre: 2.5D side-scroller<sup>3</sup> with an element of platforming, where the camera is controlled by the game, only by the player's movement within the game environment. Both of these games are mainly linear experiences. Chosen games were also made in a similar time period, both of them in Scandinavian countries that are often being highlighted for their levels of happiness and social welfare.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A 2.5D side-scroller is a video game that uses 3D graphics but typically restricts gameplay to two-dimensional movement, blending visual depth with classic side-scrolling mechanics.

<sup>4</sup> Inside developed in Denmark in 2016, Little Nightmares developed in Sweden in 2017. Both countries are often measured to be the happiest countries worldwide according to The World Happiness Report and the Human Development Index (HDI). (See Martela, Greve, Rothstein, Saari 2020)

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Metaphors in videogames

The medium of videogames has evolved to become a channel for the exploration of complex topics, social critique, and the representation of issues in a way that is similar to other forms of media. Central to this development is the use of metaphor in games, which serves as an important mechanism for conveying complex themes and abstract concepts. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed primarily by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson metaphors are not merely figures of speech, but are fundamental to human thought, allowing individuals to understand one domain of experience (target domain - typically abstract) in terms of another (source domain - typically concrete) by mapping the conceptual structure of one onto the other. (Lakoff, Johnson 2008) This cognitive mapping process is central to how we construct meaning and understand abstract concepts in everyday life. The theory suggests that our understanding of abstract concepts is largely shaped by metaphorical frameworks derived from more concrete, physical experiences. These conceptual metaphors operate at a deep cognitive level, influencing not only how we talk about concepts, but also how we think about and interact with them. For instance, consider the metaphor “*argument is war*”. This metaphor shapes how we perceive and conduct arguments: we “*attack*” points, “*defend*” our positions, and “*win*” or “*lose*” arguments, make our claims “*indefensible*” and so on. (Lakoff, Johnson 2008, p. 5). So, as we understand arguments in terms of war, we don't just randomly pick war-related terms; instead, we systematically map the entire conceptual structure of warfare onto argumentation. This includes concepts like strategic positioning (defending a position), territory (gaining/losing ground in an argument), victory/defeat (winning/losing an argument), combat (shooting down arguments), alliance/opposition (taking sides in an argument).

A key example relevant to game design is the metaphor “*good is up*” “*bad is down*” where we can map the target domain to a physical vertical orientation: when talking about emotions (feeling down, high spirits), or about achievements (top performance, hitting the rock bottom). This shows how our embodied physical experiences (standing upright vs. falling down) become the source domain and shape the abstract understanding. Unlike purely linguistic metaphors, embodied metaphors emerge directly from our sensorimotor experiences and bodily interactions with the environment. In the context of videogames, this metaphorical mapping is connected to the interactivity of the medium, which allows players not only to interpret these metaphorical structures, but also to embody them as the bodily interactions are experienced within the virtual environment. That is why video games are uniquely positioned to utilize embodied metaphors because they combine physical interaction with symbolic

meaning. When a game like *Journey* (TGC 2012) uses physical ascent to represent spiritual growth, or *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games 2018) uses challenging platforming to represent overcoming fear, they're not just creating clever metaphors - they're tapping into fundamental patterns of human understanding rooted in bodily experience. Therefore, this added dimension of interactivity is offering a significant space for analysis in terms of embodied cognition, which argues that even our most abstract thought processes are grounded in physical, bodily experience. Our cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped by the way our bodies can move, how we perceive our environment, our physical interactions with the world, or our sensory-motor experiences. This understanding of cognition becomes especially interesting when looking at videogame avatars as they are an extension of a player body schema into the virtual space, through which we are able to perceive metaphorical meanings. *"Serving both as an embodied manifestation of the player's interaction with the game system and as a fictional character in the represented storyworld, the avatar is thus of great significance with respect to how players are addressed on cognitive, emotional, and affective bodily levels."* (Fahlenbrach 2015, p. 330)

Fahlenbrach (2015) further points out, that metaphors in videogames exist in two forms: making abstract ludic properties of games tangible and structuring their fictional representation to make them readable to players to create a cognitive experience. In videogames Fahlenbrach (2015) distinguishes two main types of metaphors:

1. System metaphors, that use abstract entities or systems as target domains. *"Those are especially relevant for designing motifs in the representation of the fictional world, for example, a dystopian urban space, making its inhabitants part of a huge machine ('society is a machine')."* (Fahlenbrach 2015, p. 334) Generally, these would be connected to the games environment and setting within which player can interact with the game.

2. Event structure metaphors which conceptualize processes and events as target domains. These metaphors are represented by the interactive parts of the game, while also holding multiple metaphoric functions. *"Referring to these metaphors, the different kinds of movements, physically performed by the player and fictionally represented by the actions of the player-controlled character, generate both narrative and ergodic (or 'procedural') meaning."* (Fahlenbrach 2015, p. 335) Therefore the interactive part of a game presents two distinguishable metaphorical functions. *"... (1) making tangible the abstract and 'invisible' ludic properties of games (like rules, goals, game mechanics) and (2) structuring their fictional representation along primary metaphoric mappings that provide users with multisensory and cognitive experiences of their actions"* (Fahlenbrach 2015, p. 335).

In a conceptual sense, event structure metaphors link together how we process things physically, how we feel about them and how we understand them mentally. This integration happens at the level of symbolic representation, where visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues are processed locally at each moment of play and combined with the narrative meaning produced both locally and globally throughout the game. For instance, we can see that a health bar represents a character's life force, and a character level shows how experienced a character is within a game world. Or, on the global scale, when child characters appear, they act may be understood as metaphors, embodying themes of vulnerability and innocence. This reading of metaphor not only significantly structures our understanding of the virtual world of the game, but also how we as players approach rules and challenges in the act of playing. The vulnerability of child characters can influence how players respond to them within the rules and goals of the game. Through these mechanics, procedural rhetoric (See Bogost 2007) allows the player to engage directly with the metaphor. In this example, vulnerability is not only conveyed through dialogue or cutscenes. Instead, they are felt through the gameplay itself, as players adjust their strategies and priorities in response to these embodied symbolic representations. This capacity of games invites us to look at how we play not only through the lens of literal game mechanics, but also through the perspective of how meaning is represented procedurally.

## 2.2. Interpretation of metaphors in games

### 2.2.1. Beyond Art Games

Interpretation of metaphors in videogames is complicated and as in any media there is no one work, objectively perceived by all people in the world in the same form. The work is always actualized in the mind of each individual recipient, and the recipient fundamentally shapes and co-creates the work. But since there are games that are being presented as metaphorical<sup>5</sup>, we can talk about how specific these games are in terms of working with metaphors.

Möring (2016) provides a critique of perception of metaphors in art games, highlighting how such metaphors are often more readily recognized and analysed than in other games. His main point being, that when speaking about a metaphorical game, the conversation is often about very reduced, condensed, and therefore unrealistic simulations which are labelled as art games. *“Particularly games which feature abstract semiotics and imagery (e.g., squares, circles, or very pixelated humans), such as The Marriage (Humble 2007) and Passage (Rohrer*

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<sup>5</sup> Examples range from mainstream titles like *Journey* (TGC 2012), *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017) or games labeled as art games like *Passage* (Rohrer 2007), *Getting over it* (Foddy 2017), *The Marriage* (Humble 2007), *Dysphoria* (Anthropy 2014) etc.

2007), *tend to be labelled metaphoric because it is allegedly more difficult to understand their meaning.*"(Möring 2016, p. 4) Möring (2016) further mentions that Bogost (2011) creates a paradox by distinguishing art games from simulations based on their use of metaphor versus realism. When defining proceduralism Bogost (2011, pp. 9–17) argues that proceduralist games use metaphor to convey meaning, while simulations focus on realistic experiences. Möring (2016) on the other hand points out that this distinction is problematic because it sets up a metaphor-simulation paradox, suggesting that art games (proceduralist games) and simulations are mutually exclusive when, in reality, they can overlap and share characteristics. (Möring 2016)

This issue mainly concerns the way in which the video game is presented to the player and the nature of the player's relationship with it. When the game is an art game, the player is encouraged to engage with the game in a more interpretive way, whereas when games are not explicitly labelled as art games, their metaphorical content may be overlooked or dismissed. A good example would be the game *Factorio* (Wube Software 2016) with the description "*You will be mining resources, researching technologies, building infrastructure, automating production, and fighting enemies. Use your imagination to design your factory, combine simple elements into ingenious structures, apply management skills to keep it working, and protect it from the creatures who don't really like you.*" (Wube Software 2016). While the game is being presented as a very conventional terraforming game, it's awareness about the interrelation between industrial growth and environmental destruction offers rich procedurally emergent metaphorical meaning (De Beke, Raessens, Werning, Farca 2024, pp. 286–290). This metaphorical meaning however might be easily overlooked, and the narrative can easily shift into a representation colonialist ideologies.

This duality affects not only players, but also the creators of games that are not intended to be metaphorical in any way. Developers working on games that don't fit the typical art game category may be unconsciously incorporating rich metaphorical content, but these elements may go unexamined simply because the game is not aiming to be metaphorical or an art game. And while this thesis does not attempt to judge the intentions of game designers, since it is impossible to fully control what narratives the game may evoke, it does attempt to demonstrate the importance of thinking about the context of game mechanics, which may contain hidden sets of values. Therefore, the question of whether a game is considered or labelled as artistic or metaphorical is in a way irrelevant; what matters is whether the game creates a precondition that resembles our embodied experiences that have metaphorical values.

### **2.2.2. Literalization and demetaphorization**

The above mentioned division between "metaphorical" and "simulation" can be also looked at through a concept of literalization (Bogost 2007, p. 106) or demetaphorization (Möring 2016, pp. 11–12). These terms refer to a process where instead of experiencing the metaphorical meaning (the target domain), the player directly experiences the physical/spatial mechanics that form the basis of that metaphor (the source domain). For example the game *Marriage* (Humble 2007) being about love (target domain), but what the player actually does in the game is just move squares around in space (source domain) The only thing that links this spatial movement to "love" is the title of the game (Möring 2013, pp. 217–220).

The literalization (or demetaphorisation) serves two functions. First, when placed in the context of a game that the player understands to be metaphorical, it serves as a source domain for the deeper metaphor. Second, it serves as an explicit ludic representation of what the player is doing in the game. The literalization of a metaphor can be nicely illustrated by the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017) which utilizes the metaphor of "fighting inner demons" as a literal gameplay mechanic. In this context, the player fights creatures that symbolize specific fears or anxieties, while the protagonist's journey represents a way of coping with mental health issues. In this example however, the game's narrative encourages the player to look for hidden meanings behind their actions, even though the visualizations of the monsters are very concrete and, at first sight, do not visually encourage the player to look for further meanings as much as abstract games labelled as art games. What Möring (2016) points out is, that the ludic function can hide the metaphorical meaning behind it. For instance, in action games, enemies might be literally understood as obstacles to overcome rather than metaphorical representations of broader concepts. This literalization can influence both how players engage with the game but also how developers approach game design, by limiting the recognition of metaphorical content in games not explicitly framed as artistic or metaphorical works.

### **2.2.3. Metaphors and societal context**

The previous chapters argued that depiction of metaphors is not exclusive to the games labelled as art games and that metaphors are also a part of games that are not trying to label themselves as metaphorical. The metaphorical representations present in games do not exist in isolation; rather, they are deeply connected to the cultural conceptualizations of success, progress and human development. When examining how games portray the human condition through their protagonists, we should consider how do these portrayals reinforce or challenge the dominant societal metaphors.

When games engage with existential themes through play, they inevitably reflect and comment on societal values through their metaphorical frameworks. In further chapters this thesis will look at how game design can be not only self-aware, but also aware of the societal context within which it is being created.

The representation of growth, struggle and development in games often mirrors the way these concepts are viewed in society. In games where growth is represented through environmental mastery rather than individual power accumulation, we can see a critique of traditional societal metaphors of development. These games might suggest alternative values - emphasizing adaptation, understanding, and coexistence rather than dominance and control. This connection between existential themes and societal values becomes particularly evident when examining how different games metaphorically represent fundamental human experiences like vulnerability, growth, and agency.

## 2.3. Metaphor of growth

### 2.3.1. Personal growth

Videogames typically present existence as a process of gradual development, with characters evolving through struggle and player interaction. This evolution from struggle to success often mirrors western society's understanding of growth and progress, particularly in its adoption of competitive Darwinian metaphors. As Jackson (2021, p. 127) notes, this framework “...evokes seemingly trustworthy visions of life as the domain of scarcity, irreconcilable conflict, endless competition and the inevitable dichotomy of victory or defeat.”

This perspective manifests in conventional videogames - from RPGs<sup>6</sup> to racing games to FPS<sup>7</sup> titles - through mechanics that equate growth with dominance and competition. This to a certain level mirrors the metaphor “*survival of the fittest*”, which characterizes both economic systems and nature as harsh competitive environments where only the strongest survive, has contributed to the development of social Darwinism, eugenics, xenophobia, and racism, which continue to affect society in ways that are still problematic today. (Jackson 2021) By uncritically adopting similar metaphors, videogames risk reinforcing problematic worldviews that reduce human worth to measures of competitive success.<sup>8</sup> These mechanics, whether through

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<sup>6</sup> RPG, or Role-Playing Game, is a genre where players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting, engaging in narrative-driven gameplay with elements of exploration, combat, and character development

<sup>7</sup> FPS, or First-Person Shooter, is a genre where players experience the game from the perspective of the protagonist, primarily engaging in combat using a variety of firearms and other weapons

<sup>8</sup> For broader analysis of how games reflect capitalist principles (See Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter 2009; Bogost 2007; Kirkpatrick 2013; Bown 2018; Woodcock 2019; Nguyen 2020a)

defeating enemies, acquiring equipment, or conquering territories, create systems where growth is inseparable from domination.

### 2.3.2. Designed dominance

Most common use of the growth metaphor in videogames is commonly seen through mechanics such as defeating enemies, resource gathering, upgrading and buying new equipment, levelling up and unlocking abilities. This player growth and development usually leads to the player becoming the dominant force within the game world, which carries over an underlying metaphorical structure that presents a simplified meritocratic narrative, where success is achieved through 'hard work' - though notably within a system specifically designed to be conquered.

Although the relationship between games and player behaviour is neither direct nor uniform across all individuals however as game designers we create these systems with predetermined paths to victory, often through mechanics that reinforce specific power dynamics that are focused on the player. *“In games, we are permitted to temporarily inhabit a motivational state where only one thing is valuable. Crucially, this means that we don’t need to treat others’ interests as valuable.”* (Nguyen 2020b, p. 192)

When looking into how players are influenced while playing games we can look at Juul's (2005) concept of games being half-real: existing simultaneously in fictional and real domains.<sup>9</sup> While the violent actions may be fictional, the underlying messages about power and superiority operate on a real, psychological level. Nguyen (2020b) illustrates this through online shooters. Even though most players understand the violence as fictional while engaging with very real competitive dynamic, the act of defeating another player exists on two levels: fictionally through the representation of violence, and non-fictionally through the very real experience of outperforming another person. As he explains, *“Fictionally, I have shot you and killed you. But nonfictionally, I have really scored points against you. It is not fictional at all that I outwitted you, that I was faster than you, that I was better than you at this game. My victory in the game is real.”* (Nguyen 2020b, p. 192)

While Nguyen demonstrated this dual nature through multiplayer competitive games, the same principle can be applied to singleplayer experiences, though in a more carefully constructed

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<sup>9</sup> Juul presents differentiation between the real and fictional domains of games. Some examples of the real ones are the rules, the player interaction with rules, outcomes and achievements, developed skills, the social interactions. The fictional examples are game world, player avatar or narrative events. Juul further explains how players engage with real rules through fictional scenarios and how social dynamics play out through fictional competition. (See Juul 2005)

way. In singleplayer games, the competition is purposefully designed and staged, rather than being emergent as in online games. The game system itself becomes the judge of success, presenting designed challenges that simulate competitive dynamics. Although players know that the system is designed to be defeated, the sense of superiority and progress remains psychologically real. When a player defeats a boss character or overcomes a difficult challenge, the victory is fictional in its presentation, but real in its psychological impact - the player has genuinely improved, learned and demonstrated mastery of the game.

However, it is crucial to recognise that in games these challenges are deliberately designed to be conquered by the player. A clear example of this common game design practice is the populating of game worlds with enemies that are inherently weaker than the player character. This quantified hierarchy of power, where success is measured by dominating less skilled entities, can be interpreted as reflecting meritocratic ideologies. However, this meritocratic framework is fundamentally distorted, as virtual entities are mostly programmatically prevented from reaching the same level of skill or ability as the player and are specifically designed to be defeated. To a significant degree, competitive singleplayer games invariably create an artificial ceiling that ensures player supremacy, rather than fostering genuine competition or growth. This design choice not only simplifies our goals but also narrows the value system by which we measure success in games. As Nguyen (2020b, p. 191) observes, *“In game life, our temporary agency’s values are usually extremely clear. That clarity is encoded into a game’s specification of its goals. The values we take on in games are clearer, easier to apply, and easier to evaluate than our enduring values. The second danger, then, is that the experience of motivational clarity that we have inside games might influence our expectations outside games.”*

Furthermore, the reward systems that directly link victory to material gain (e.g. enemies dropping coins, experience points or equipment after being defeated) entrench this dynamic by creating a closed, self-reinforcing loop. In this system, growth through power accumulation and domination of others becomes both the means and the end, mirroring problematic aspects of capitalist structures where success breeds success through accumulated advantage. This design choice alone not only plays with power dynamics, but also potentially normalises a worldview in which hierarchical dominance and material acquisition are presented as natural and justified outcomes, even though the system is inherently rigged in favour of the player protagonist.

Just as the meritocratic metaphor can obscure the complexity of social systems by reducing them to a simplistic 'survival of the fittest' narrative, it is worth examining how the depiction of the growth metaphor in video games can reflect broader societal values regarding growth and

success. Video games that emphasize individual achievement and power accumulation parallel certain aspects of real-world economic systems where the pursuit of growth as a primary goal has led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and the prioritization of individual success over collective well-being. However, it's important to recognise that the relationship between game metaphors and player values is not deterministic, but rather part of a broader cultural dialogue in which players actively interpret and negotiate meanings. While these systems can be analysed for their ideological implications, the actual impact on players remains complex and difficult to measure empirically. Like other media, games exist within a complex web of cultural influences, making it difficult, if not impossible, to isolate their specific effects on individuals.

The following interpretation will examine two games – *Inside* and *Little Nightmares*, that offer unique approaches to the growth metaphor. These games subvert traditional power progression systems, presenting alternative ways of understanding development and success in virtual environments. Through their distinctive mechanics, narratives, and environmental design, they challenge conventional gaming metaphors of growth and suggest different ways of conceptualizing progress and player development.

## 3. Interpretation of games

### 3.1. Inside

#### 3.1.1. Vulnerability

*Inside* opens in a forest where we learn the basic mechanics of the game. We find out that we are able to move our character from left to right, we can jump and grab objects. We quickly accept the limitation of being able to move from side to side as the only sensible way for our character within the environment is to move to the right. The game employs a sophisticated, non-verbal tutorial system that relies on subtle environmental cues. That is through tiny hints like specific camera movements, the child character looking at something or breathing heavily<sup>10</sup>, but mainly by trial and error. Crucially, the game communicates through experience rather than explicit instruction, allowing players to learn primarily through trial and error. This approach transforms our interaction into a nuanced exploration of vulnerability and awareness. We begin to navigate the world with increasing caution, developing an acute sensitivity to environmental dynamics and our character's precarious position within it. We are compelled to understand the world not through confrontation, but through careful observation and adaptive strategy.

The control scheme is limited to movement and basic interaction and lacks any combat capabilities. This mechanical limitation becomes rhetorically significant early on when we encounter first hostile adults in the environment, as the game provides no means of self-defence or aggression. Then the lack of combat mechanics works on two levels: procedural and metaphorical. As the character encounters adult figures who respond with immediate hostility, pursuing, shooting our character with tranquilizing darts or setting dogs on the child protagonist, we feel an internal need to escape. On the metaphorical level it can be seen as that we are running away from danger since it is close to our fundamental survival instincts but on the procedural level, we also have no way of defending ourselves – there is no button we can press to fight back. This powerlessness comes back to the trial and error technique; even if we want to try to fight back, we are met with a fail state that is supposed to teach us about that we can't.

The design of fail state scenes further deliberately intensifies this sense of powerlessness. Unlike traditional game design that quickly resets after failure, *Inside* lingers on scenes of violence against the child. Whether the protagonist falls from a hill, is shot with tranquilizers,

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<sup>10</sup> Detailed talk on how the animations and game design in *Inside* are connected was explained during a talk at Konsoll 2017 by Martin Fæsterholdt (Konsoll 2017)

mauled by dogs, or roughly arrested, players are compelled to witness the brutal consequences of their failure in excruciating detail. (*Screenshot 1*) Screenshot 1. First, we empathize on a physical level through our embodied instinct to protect a smaller, weaker being from physical harm where the response is triggered by the size difference and the brutal depiction of violence against a clearly vulnerable body. Second, we connect on a moral/ethical level, responding to the apparent injustice of the situation where the disproportionate and seemingly unprovoked violence directed at a child creates a sense of solidarity.



*Screenshot 1 Inside, Playdead 2016, Tranquillizer shot*

From the perspective of procedural rhetoric, the game communicates vulnerability not just through narrative or visual means, but through its core mechanics. The mechanical limitation of player actions - being able only to run, jump, and interact - becomes an argument about powerlessness itself. When confronted with armed adults or aggressive dogs, the child literally can't perform violent actions. The game's mechanics force us to experience vulnerability by providing only two procedural options: hide or flee. This mechanical restriction does more than just limit gameplay - it creates an embodied argument about power dynamics.

In conclusion, we can try to connect this analysis of vulnerability to the framework proposed by Fahlenbrach (2015). Ludically the player has no way of defending themselves and they are forced to a certain playstyle. On emotional and narrative level, the player engages with their instinct to protect children from the injustice and violence. So finally on the embodied level *Inside* is making players to experience the consequences of powerlessness and vulnerability

through the perspective of a child through the player representation within the game world and the lack of strength on the procedural level.

### **3.1.2. Growth through control**

The game design is based on the player working with the environment to move forward. We must solve environmental puzzles by finding a way of how the environment can be useful for us by repurposing it. That leads into an interesting shift in power dynamics as we suddenly find a way to coexist within the environment and find specific ways of how to survive. We experience growth, but not in the material sense, but rather by understanding connections between each element of the game environment and repurposes them for our progress. This form of growth maintains physical vulnerability while developing cognitive power.

The first hint of power shift is when we must use tiny chickens to advance in the level. Although the little birds are not being harmed, they're being a part of violently looking act of being sucked into a large industrial machine and being projectiled onto a box that our protagonist can later use to climb onto. It represents the first moral threshold where we must use another living being as a tool. Suddenly it doesn't feel like our protagonist would be the most innocent entity within the game as they become complicit in the game's industrial violence. This first hint of power shift is quickly followed by a discovery of a technology that is present in the world, through which one can control other beings (*Screenshot 2*). When we encounter this mind-control technology, we, through the child character, gain the ability to manipulate the bodies of adults. This change raises questions of embodiment: how does the player's experience of control evolve?



*Screenshot 2 Inside, Playdead 2016, Mind control*

Controlling others changes our sense of power. This transition represents a metaphorical growth beyond the child's physical limitations. The child's limited physicality highlights its need for understanding and cooperation, making cognitive growth a necessity. When we "become" adults, we can do more. We can pull heavier objects, move huge structures and do things we couldn't do as a child. We're in control of an adult body, and we've grown as players.

The bodies that we first control appear lifeless, either crouched or lying down as if drained of life. They only begin to move when we take control, suggesting that the lifeless bodies sole purpose is to serve our objectives. It almost feels as if the player is bringing them back to life, creating a sense of positive purpose. In our eyes, these bodies begin to feel like possessions, tools to be used rather than autonomous beings. The game's procedural rhetoric further reinforces this emotional distance through the controlled bodies' jerky, uncoordinated movements. These figures are presented as mere "puppets" - machines to be manipulated rather than sentient individuals. This is also supported by the way the game presents mind control on a parasite-like worm controlling a pig, creating a parallel between us as parasites and the pig and the controlled humans as industrialized life forms. Crucially, this embodied perspective shields us from the consequences of our actions. When something happens to the controlled bodies, the child protagonist remains unharmed.

This transformation from innocent child isn't necessarily towards evil - rather, it represents learning how to repurpose tools of control for the child's own survival. Beyond breaking the fourth wall by suggesting that the child character is similarly just an entity controlled by us (the

player), this ability to control others gives the main character more power within the game world. They are suddenly not the weakest innocent entity that we know to exist. This creates a transformation where growth is measured not by physical strength, but by the ability to control others and grow through their efforts.

As the game progresses, we learn that these humans are being exploited by the mean adults we encountered earlier and that the world is separated into two groups when one controls and uses the other. This creates a tension - while our growth and progress are initially based on exploitation as we move forward, leaving mindless bodies behind, this dynamic gradually shifts into something more complex. The use of these bodies begins to show signs of collective effort within the oppressive environment, with several characters able to work together and achieve collective success.



*Screenshot 3 Inside, Playdead 2016, Collective support of the child*

Eventually the mindless bodies start following the protagonist and we can work together to “free” more of these humans for us to go further. We suddenly feel like our influence within the world is growing, and our character has a seeming support of other entities. We are no longer controlling them with direct movements, but they are following us anyway. (Screenshot 3) Instead of being possessed, machine-like puppets, they are now human beings with an apparent purpose and motivation. This agency gives these entities a form of independence. The growth metaphor shifts from individual empowerment to agency supported by others. In other words, the game portrays growth not as individual development, but as social power expanding through the support of others. This collective effort enables us to achieve more and

validates our agency. We can now use the crowd to jump higher (by being thrown), to push even larger objects, or to weigh down a scale that allows us to open a large gate. Although these efforts are apparently collective, the transition from exploitation to cooperation is not absolute, because the crowd remains tied to the child's journey and goals. We are put in the position of a leader, however the crowd of people with uncoordinated movements still feels not so different from the beginning of the game, when a flock of chickens started to follow us. It touches on a moral layer of our growing influence and responsibility for these people, but the game makes a clear point that our child protagonist has his own goals, regardless of others as the player is presenting just another form of manipulation.<sup>11</sup>

These mechanics again procedurally represent the growth of becoming stronger as we become more significant in the world. However, the humanization of others adds a moral and emotional layer to this growth metaphor, highlighting yet another loss of childlike innocence. While the physical representation of our human avatar remains unchanged, our moral perspective continues to shift, reflecting our evolving position in the world.

### **3.1.3. Blob**

The game's ending represents a disturbing culmination of its growth metaphors. So far, the game has presented us growth through using our scale to be able to hide, growing knowledge of the world mechanics and our growing influence over the exploited class within the game world. The ending extends the following of the mindless humans. Some of our new followers start to carry some signs of body horror; some do not have heads, not all of them have limbs, but all of these are following and helping our child protagonist. What this all leads to however is a surprising transformation. Our child character merges with a giant lump of flesh made up of countless human bodies (*Screenshot 4*), similar to the ones that were following us. Then we start controlling the merged mass of human bodies.

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<sup>11</sup> Narratively in the game this support is based on the mind control technology, but the humans do not need to be directly told what to do.



*Screenshot 4 Inside, Playdead 2016, Ball of flesh*

Our understanding of the world was fundamentally shaped by experiencing it through a child's vulnerable body, making the radical transformation into the blob form a profound shift in embodied experience. The blob's physicality maintains a connection to human capability—it can run, jump, and manipulate objects, preserving these familiar actions from our earlier gameplay. However, the scale and force of these movements are dramatically amplified, distorting our embodied understanding. We can now burst through glass and concrete walls, fall from great heights without harm, and evoke fear in the vicious dogs that once threatened us. The human form that initially allowed us to relate to the protagonist's vulnerability dissolves, replaced by something that transcends our previous limitations and fears.

Although the narrative does not present this transformation as literal physical growth, it manifests as an expansion of our player agency and capabilities. This metamorphosis into an amorphous mass of flesh fundamentally alters our relationship with the game world—we no longer need to be cautious. The resulting numbness of our actions serves as a powerful rhetorical statement about the nature of growth itself. Our physical dominance enables emotional detachment from the environment, while simultaneously offering cathartic pleasure in its destruction. The previous imperative to hide inverts completely—now others must hide from us, as we embody the very danger we once fled. The almost compulsive urge to destroy structures and traverse rooms with overwhelming force now that we lost our human body establishes a critical connection between growth and destruction, suggesting that to attain such power, we must sacrifice aspects of our humanity.

However, this transformation reveals its own limitations. Despite our newfound destructive capability, our movements become less precise—the blob responds to our commands with approximate rather than exact actions, creating a disconnect between intention and execution. Not every obstacle yields to brute force, requiring us to navigate the environment with unexpected care and we have to solve puzzles in a similar way like we had to when we were in the child's body. This limitation undermines the initial satisfaction of our transformation, revealing the costs of our evolution: we have sacrificed precise control, environmental sensitivity, and our fundamental human embodied experience. The amorphous form represents more than just physical change—it symbolizes the dissolution of human form and identity, challenging our basic understanding of self within the environment. While our cognitive experience remains rooted in human embodiment, the blob exists outside these parameters, transforming what began as collective empowerment into a profound loss of individual bodily autonomy.

This transformation ultimately becomes a reflection of our journey—what we previously witnessed within the environment, we now see manifested in our character. The lack of precise control, the destructive nature, the loss of form and purpose mirror the cycle of dehumanization and utility in industrial practices. This final sequence creates an ironic sense of freedom at a profound physical cost, representing the ultimate perversion of the game's earlier themes of growth through cooperation. In becoming powerful we are completing a cycle that puts us into a position of questioning whether our growth was positive.

### **3.1.4. Final Thoughts**

Through this analysis, *Inside* reveals how its minimalist design and deliberate limitations on player agency create vulnerability that resonates both physically and emotionally. While the game begins with a sense of powerlessness, it evolves into a nuanced exploration of growth through the gradual acquisition of control mechanics. However, *Inside* subverts traditional gaming conventions by presenting growth as cognitive development rather than mere physical empowerment. The game creates a contrast between the traditional progression of power - typically celebrated in games - and the preservation of vulnerability and humanity. Through this lens, *Inside*'s central argument can be seen as: simplistic philosophies of empowerment and growth are flawed, as the pursuit of power often leads to the sacrifice of our essential human qualities.

## 3.2. Little Nightmares

### 3.2.1. The World

*Little Nightmares* presents a different perspective when interpreting growth and its metaphors than *Inside*. *Little Nightmares* works with growth and scale as fundamental conditions of existence. The game constructs its horror not just through monsters or enemies, but through the embodied experience of childhood vulnerability in an oversized, hostile, consumerist world.

*Little Nightmares* shares some mechanical similarities with *Inside* in its initial player learning curve. Both games employ trial and error learning, teaching players basic movements, object interaction, and environmental navigation. However, *Little Nightmares* expands beyond *Inside*'s linear movement design by introducing depth - allowing movement not just left to right but also front to back. This three-dimensional space creates a paradoxical relationship with player agency: while it offers more freedom of movement and problem-solving possibilities, it simultaneously heightens our awareness of spatial limitations. This spatial awareness becomes central to how we perceive the metaphorical power of the game. With less constrained movement, we are not limited by what the game allows us to "do", but by where the game allows us to "go". In other words, we are much more aware of the limitations of space because of the freedom of 3D movement - we realize even more that even though the rules of the game's interactions allow us to go somewhere, the environment of the game does not. As we explore each corner of a room, climb different structures and interact with scattered objects, our movement patterns reflect a child's natural curiosity and playfulness, but it is precisely this freedom to explore that makes the limitations of our small size more tangible.

The game's opening sequence immediately establishes this theme. Whereas *Inside* began in an open landscape, *Little Nightmares* begins in a confined interior space. The first thing we notice is that we're in a suitcase, which makes it clear that the scene and setting are stylized, feels detached from realistic proportions, but most importantly gives us an immediate sense of the scale of our character. At first, we are not confronted with literal enemies but rather by the environment of the game. As we move through, we come to understand, that the environment was clearly not designed for us and we feel much more like we're visiting the environment or rather that we do not belong there. Most of our basic interactions with the environment become challenging because of our size. We cannot open doors because we cannot reach the door handles, we have to climb onto the furniture like when we're climbing a mountain and even dragging a bucket presents a major physical struggle. (*Screenshot 5*) These forms of obstacles build up upon our feeling of weakness, rather than being overpowered by an enemy, we are simply not grown enough for our environment. The metaphor behind growth works immediately against our agency – we are being limited by not being "big" enough.



*Screenshot 5 Little Nightmares, Tarsier Studios 2017, Door handle jump*

This design choice resonates beyond literal childhood experiences of what it might be like to be a child in the adult world. These obstacles can be read as metaphors for how institutional spaces can physically exclude and challenge those who don't fit their intended scale and the game's consumerist setting reinforces this metaphorical meaning. The vast dining rooms, industrial kitchens and guest quarters we traverse aren't just physically overwhelming; they represent spaces of adult excess and consumption where children (and, by extension, the powerless) exist only as unwanted intruders or, more disturbingly, as potential commodities themselves. The game doesn't merely tell us about power imbalances - it makes us feel them through every climb onto structures and desperate scramble for safety. In other words, we experience this systemic hostility not through abstract understanding, but through our (the protagonist's) body's direct confrontation with a world that constantly reminds us of our inadequacy. The child protagonist's perspective is crucial here – we don't comprehend why the world is built this way or why are we excluded from its proper functions. Instead, we experience it as a series of physical challenges and emotional responses: the frustration behind the struggle of doing something essential (like picking up a key from a table), the anxiety of being exposed in open spaces (running around in a kitchen while trying not to be noticed by a chef) designed for much larger beings, the physical strain of manipulating objects not meant for our small hands. This bodily experience of exclusion mirrors how marginalized groups often first encounter systemic barriers - not as theoretical constructs, but as immediate, physical limitations and obstacles.

While our small size is initially seen as a disadvantage, *Little Nightmares* subverts this limitation by showing the extent to which powerlessness can be transformed into a unique form of agency. The very spaces that exclude us become our means of survival; the gaps under furniture, narrow vents and high shelves show us that our physical limitations paradoxically become our strengths. The game's environmental design reveals how power structures can have blind spots. The adult world, with its imposing furniture and overwhelming scale, creates unintended spaces of resistance. We can slip under floorboards where larger beings can't reach or turn bookshelves into vertical escape routes. These 'child-sized' spaces represent a kind of counter-geography within the oppressive environment - a network of safe passages and hidden pathways that exist precisely because the powerful don't consider them important enough to monitor.

### **3.2.2. Enemies**

The enemies in *Little Nightmares* represent different ways in which distorted growth affects the body, and how consumption and power literally reshape bodies. The game doesn't use traditional monster designs to create a sense of horror. Instead, it uses exaggerated human proportions that make the player feel uncomfortable.

The long-armed janitor is the first example of how natural growth is distorted. This distortion of human anatomy taps into some of our most basic fears about body horror, but it can also be seen as a metaphor for institutional power and childhood vulnerability. His arms are unnaturally elongated, which immediately creates a visceral response – they simply shouldn't stretch that far. (*Screenshot 6*) But to us and our character, they're not just long arms, but appendages that can traverse entire rooms to snatch us. The way these arms violate our perspective on natural proportions is disturbing, but it's when they interact with our small scale that they become truly terrifying. When the janitor's fingers reach out through the darkness to grab us, they're big enough to encircle our entire body, threatening not just to grab us but to swallow us whole, making us feel like a defenceless toy. Usually growth represents power and ability, but in this case the grotesquely elongated arms of the janitor represent a distorted, menacing form of growth.



*Screenshot 6 Little Nightmares, Tarsier Studios 2017, Janitor*

The janitor's blindness adds another layer to our embodied connection to the main character. Even though he cannot see us, he can hear us and smell us. The game doesn't just represent vulnerability visually but makes us feel it through multiple sensory modalities. We learn to walk on carpets to muffle our footsteps, to navigate carefully across shelves to avoid disturbing objects that might betray our presence with their clatter, and not to get close to the janitor so he can smell us. The game heightens our sense of body position and movement through mechanics that force us to think carefully about every step our protagonist takes. The game makes us constantly aware of our body's position in space. We're not just controlling a character; we're learning to inhabit a small, vulnerable body in a space where the slightest sound or movement can lead to our capture. From the perspective of our agency, it inverts traditional metaphors of growth, where becoming more powerful means becoming more present and influential. Instead, survival requires mastering some version of negative growth when we are learning to minimise our physical presence in the world.

The twin chefs embody a different kind of distorted growth through their grotesquely bloated and misshapen bodies, serving as physical manifestations of consumption's transformative effects. While the long-armed janitor represented the horror of being caught, the chefs extend this threat to include being caught and cooked, their doubled presence multiplying our sense of danger. Yet through them, we experience a profound paradox of power, as their bodies occupy a middle ground between authority and servitude.

Similarly like with the janitor we must physically diminish ourselves in their presence, move carefully and hide under the tables. However, their bodies simultaneously tell a story of subordination. Their flesh appears physically transformed by their proximity to consumption, bulging and distorting as if the very act of preparing endless meals has been absorbed into their forms, ultimately limiting them. The game communicates their condition through multiple sensory channels that trigger our embodied understanding of physical limitation. We hear their laboured breathing, which connects to our own bodily experience of exhaustion and strain. We observe their slow, lumbering movements, which we understand through our experiential knowledge of how weight affects mobility. We understand their condition not through abstract concepts but through our own physical knowledge of how bodies work and feel.

This representation subverts the traditional bigger is better metaphor in several ways. First, their increased size manifests not as enhanced power but as a form of embodied constraint where their growth has made them more physically impressive but less physically capable. Second, their proximity to food and consumption, typically associated with growth and strength, has instead led to a kind of degenerative growth that weakens rather than empowers.

The guests in the final stage of the game represent the terminal stage of growth through consumption, where bodies have become so grotesquely distorted that they have lost almost all functional purpose beyond the act of consumption itself. These beings embody the ultimate paradox of growth through excess: their massive size has rendered them almost helpless against our small, agile form. From our childlike perspective, these guests appear as mountains of undulating flesh, their human features distorted beyond recognition – faces merging into necks, limbs becoming indistinguishable masses. Their movement through space tells the story of their transformation through embodied metaphor: they don't so much walk as drag themselves across floors and furniture, their bodies too massive to support their own weight. (*Screenshot 7*) This restricted mobility creates a profound reversal of the game's initial power dynamic – their growth, meant to signify power, has become their prison. The spatial relationship between our character and these creatures perfectly encapsulates the game's critique of excessive growth. Whereas earlier enemies such as the janitor and the cooks had some control over their surroundings, the guests have outgrown the spaces designed to contain them. They can barely fit into chairs and struggle to reach across tables. The only movement they can make through their environment is to destroy it. Their attempts to grasp us become desperate lurches, demonstrating how their own mass works against them – we can simply step aside or slip under furniture as they struggle to redirect their mass.



Screenshot 7 *Little Nightmares*, Tarsier Studios 2017, *Guests*

The embodied horror of these encounters comes not only from the fear of being caught, but also from witnessing and evading bodies that have surrendered their functionality to endless appetite. Each guest becomes a physical manifestation of consumption taken to its logical extreme - growth without purpose, size without strength, mass without meaning. Through the small, nimble form of our character, we experience how excessive growth ultimately consumes itself, leaving behind bodies that can only consume, but no longer effectively act or control.

The progression of enemies in *Little Nightmares* creates an inverse relationship between growth and power, which we experience through our unchanging small form. As the enemies are increasingly consumed by their own excess, our constant size paradoxically becomes a source of our increasing power as our agency is not limited unlike the agency of others. While our physical abilities remain unchanged throughout the game - we can still only run, jump and climb as well as we could at the start - our relative power grows precisely because our enemies have grown into their own ineffectiveness. Against the janitor, our diminutive size forced us to hide from his outstretched arms. Against the chefs, their bloated forms still posed a threat, but their limited mobility created more opportunities for evasion. By the time we reached the guests, their extreme growth had rendered them almost helpless against our agile form. Their massive bodies, warped by endless consumption, can barely coordinate their movements to catch something as small and fast as us. We experience a growing sense of empowerment, not because we've become stronger, but because the world around us has grown into being weak. The game design inverts traditional fantasies of power, where the player becomes

stronger through growth or acquisition. Instead, we become more powerful by remaining small and agile, while our opponents collapse under their own excessive growth.

The final lady's boss fight represents the culmination of *Little Nightmares'* procedural rhetoric about power and growth. Throughout the game, the rules have taught us that survival depends on avoiding being seen. Now, the game's rules make visibility itself into a weapon. The procedural argument here is subtle but profound - whereas previous encounters have taught us that excessive growth creates physical vulnerability, this final confrontation demonstrates how power can be reversed through self-awareness. The mirror mechanism changes our relationship to size and space. Instead of running or hiding, we must actively manipulate light and reflection, transforming our small size from a means of evasion to a tool of tactical positioning. Our diminutive form becomes essential to literally and figuratively reflecting power back upon itself. The mechanism of reflection connects to our fundamental embodied understanding of self-knowledge and visibility while the woman's vulnerability to her own reflection taps into deeply embodied experiences of self-awareness and identity. This mechanical shift can be read as an argument that defeating entrenched power requires more than just physical resistance - it requires the ability to force systems to confront their own distorted nature. The Lady, whose power derives from carefully maintained illusions of consumption and growth, can only be defeated by being forced to see her true reflection. The game's mechanics themselves can be understood as an argument that the most sophisticated forms of power contain their own weaknesses, not in physical vulnerability, but in their inability to face their own nature.

### **3.2.3. Hunger**

In *Little Nightmares*, hunger operates on multiple levels: as a visceral, embodied experience, as a mechanical system, and as a metaphorical commentary on growth and consumption. The game creates a relationship between these elements by surrounding us with environments of food preparation and consumption, while also allowing us to experience hunger directly through our protagonist.

The game's environments constantly remind us of the central role of consumption - we navigate through industrial kitchens, dining rooms and food storage areas. But this isn't just scenic; it creates an environment, where the scale of food preparation itself becomes threatening. Everything is oversized, emphasising both the smallness of our character and the excessive nature of the consumption that takes place. The massive cooking utensils, huge portions and industrial scale preparation areas create an embodied understanding of systemic consumption through spatial relationships. While this correlates to what was discussed in

chapter 3.2.1. *The World*, the game further connects our embodied knowledge of physical need through our protagonist. When hunger strikes, our movements become noticeably heavier - we run slower, our jumps become more difficult, and our posture changes as we clutch our stomachs. This physical manifestation of hunger taps into the player's own embodied understanding of how hunger affects movement and energy levels. The slight distortion of the screen and darkening of peripheral vision reflects how intense hunger can affect perception and concentration. Finally, the protagonist's amplified sounds of his stomach create a multi-sensory experience that resonates with our own memories of hunger. The game presents hunger as an overwhelming, temporary condition that demands immediate gratification, rather than as a resource management system. Thus, rather than employing traditional survival mechanics, hunger primarily serves narrative and metaphorical functions within the game. As the protagonist's hunger evolves, the game creates increasingly unsettling experiences that challenge the player's comfort, with the character craving increasingly disturbing forms of sustenance.

A crucial shift in the representation of hunger occurs when the hungry protagonist encounters a gnome (a friendly, harmless creature) holding a sausage. When the player attempts to interact with the gnome, the character consumes the gnome itself rather than the sausage it is holding.

The act of consuming the gnome is shown in close-up animation, forcing the player to confront the physical reality of predation. The game's camera work and animation are deliberately intimate and unflinching - we cannot look away as our small protagonist, previously positioned as vulnerable, becomes the predator. This creates a moral dissonance in which our bodies react with instinctive revulsion to the act of consuming a helpless creature, just as we have previously reacted to threats to our own character. This scene parallels *Inside*'s depiction of violence against its child protagonist, but in *Inside* we reacted physically to the violence because it violated our embodied understanding of how children should be protected - we empathised with the victim through our natural instinct to protect the vulnerable. In *Little Nightmares*, however, this embodied moral understanding is undermined because our character becomes the aggressor. We experience a double violation: not only do we witness violence against a helpless being, but we also perpetrate it through a character we've come to associate with vulnerability.

On the mechanical level, rather than conveying this transformation through narrative or cutscenes, the game makes its argument through its rules and mechanics. This mechanical constraint creates a possibility space<sup>12</sup> that deliberately excludes player choice to make its

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<sup>12</sup> Possibility space is a term used by Bogost to describe what player is allowed to do (See Bogost 2007)

point. It creates a moment in which we become aware of the gap between our expected agency within the system and the actual constraints of that system. This mechanical argument goes beyond the mere representation of hunger as it can be understood as comment on how systems of consumption can override individual agency, and how participation in these systems can lead to actions that we might not consciously choose.

The protagonist's hunger can be further understood as a metaphor for how systems of excess create cycles of consumption. The more the character consumes, the greater his hunger becomes, paralleling the grotesque physical growth of the guests. While the protagonist's diminutive size initially positions us in opposition to the game's antagonists, our growing hunger suggests a more complex relationship with power and consumption. The game's procedural rhetoric can be read as suggesting that even resistance to systems of excess may require participation in those very systems. Ultimately, the game presents a mechanical argument that growth through consumption follows an inevitable progression - what begins as necessary survival evolves into something that overrides both choice and morality.

### **3.2.4 The Lady**

*Little Nightmares* carefully builds toward a final confrontation with a boss of the whole establishment through an evolving relationship with visibility and exposure. In early encounters, being seen means immediate danger, forcing complete concealment. However, as we progress through the game, our relationship with our presence becomes more nuanced. We learn that we can exist in the same spaces as the janitor (we can be heard and smelled), with the chefs we can be seen but we then have to hide and with the guests we can be seen but they are unable to reach us because of their physical size. This isn't just about survival through hiding anymore; it's about claiming space despite our size. The game's procedural rhetoric shifts from teaching pure avoidance to teaching a kind of defiant existence. By the time we reach The Lady, this progression reaches its apex. Rather than stumbling into her domain as prey, we enter as a deliberate challenger. The mirror mechanism becomes not just a tool but a manifestation of our newfound agency. The procedural argument here is subtle but profound - whereas previous encounters taught us about the vulnerability of excessive growth, this final confrontation demonstrates how our small but increasingly confident presence can become a weapon in itself.

Our diminutive form becomes essential to literally and figuratively reflect power back upon itself. The mechanics of the mirror tap into our embodied understanding of presence and visibility - we don't just avoid being seen; we actively use our presence to force confrontation. The lady, whose power derives from carefully maintained illusions of consumption and growth, can only be defeated by being forced to see her true reflection. This mechanical shift can be

read as an argument that defeating entrenched power requires more than survival or evasion - it requires the confidence to stand visibly before it and force it to confront its own nature. Finally, our physical relationship to space has evolved from desperate hiding to confident positioning. This can be read as a powerful physical argument about growth that doesn't rely on physical size, but on the strength of presence itself. The mechanics of the game itself argue that true power lies not in excessive growth or consumption, but in the ability to exist authentically even in spaces designed to exclude us.

On the other hand, the game's ending also suggests that our protagonist hasn't conquered or satiated his hunger but rather elevated it to a more terrifying form. As we are finishing the game with our new powers, still small but now deadly, the game completes its critique of growth through consumption. We've become powerful not through physical growth like the guests, but through a more insidious form of consumption that maintains the appearance of innocence while harbouring a devastating capacity for predation. This creates a powerful commentary on how systems of power reproduce themselves - in overcoming the system, we have become its new agent, perpetuating rather than breaking its patterns of consumption and control.

### **3.2.4. Final Thoughts**

*Little Nightmares* can be interpreted as a critique of growth through three interrelated elements: spatial relationships, bodily transformation and presence. The game's oversized environments initially establish the player's vulnerability through scale but gradually reveal how this apparent weakness becomes a source of power. The progression of enemies presents growth as a path to self-destruction, through which the game can be read as an argument that excessive growth leads to powerlessness. While the protagonist remains physically unchanged, their relative power increases as their opponents become trapped by their own excess. This culminates in the final confrontation, where the mirror mechanism forces power to confront its own nature, leading to its destruction. Finally, the protagonist's transformation from victim to predator suggests that resistance to systems of consumption may require participation in those very systems.

## 4. Analysis Summary

The analysis explored the relationship between metaphor and game design, examining how video games can be read as reinforcing or challenging conventional ideologies through their metaphorical representations of growth. Through a theoretical analysis of embodied cognition and procedural rhetoric in videogames, we identified how traditional game design often supports potentially unsustainable ideologies through common growth mechanics. The analysis of *Inside* and *Little Nightmares* then revealed alternative approaches to game design that subvert these conventional patterns and create distinct metaphorical meanings through their mechanics, environments, and player experiences.

The analysis revealed that both games address two distinct forms of physical/material growth and cognitive growth. This duality can be seen as a subversion of conventional game progression systems while offering alternative models of development and agency.

Physical growth in both games is first introduced through the protagonist's embodied experience of vulnerability in the face of larger entities. The games establish an immediate visceral understanding that "bigger isn't better" through environmental design and early encounters - whether its *Inside's* armed adults hunting the small protagonist, or *Little Nightmares'* existence in an oversized world. This initial bodily experience of being overwhelmed by larger entities creates an emotional and physical foundation for the games' broader critique of growth.

The analysis shows how this fundamental vulnerability evolves into a specific critique of growth through consumption, creating a limiting rather than empowering force that inverts traditional game metaphors where accumulation benefits the player. In *Little Nightmares*, this is manifested through a hierarchy of consumption, where each enemy represents a different stage of growth through excess. Through these enemies *Little Nightmares* makes a clear procedural argument that growth driven by consumption leads to limitation rather than empowerment. *Inside* presents this critique through its final transformation which can be read as the ultimate consequence of growth through consumption. The protagonist's fusion with the blob - itself a mass of consumed bodies - grants us enormous physical power, but at the cost of precise control and human identity.

In contrast, cognitive growth emerges as the primary means of progression in both games. This form of development isn't represented by material gains or physical enhancements, but by the player's increasing understanding of the game's environment and mechanics. In *Inside*, this is manifested through learning to repurpose environmental elements, demonstrating

growth through understanding rather than material accumulation. *Inside* points to cognitive growth also by repurposing control mechanics that serve the player to influence others. *Little Nightmares* implements cognitive growth through players' evolving understanding of how to navigate oversized spaces and exploit the limitations of physically imposing enemies. This type of growth is empowering precisely because it doesn't rely on material transformation or physical dominance.

This dual approach to growth is implemented through several specific design techniques:

**Environmental Design:** Both games use scale and spatial relationships to create embodied experiences that highlight the limits of physical growth while rewarding environmental understanding.

**Limited Mechanics:** The games maintain the protagonist's vulnerability throughout the whole game, forcing players to develop cognitive solutions rather than relying on increased physical capabilities.

**Enemy Design:** Both games present antagonists whose physical growth has compromised rather than enhanced their effectiveness, creating a clear procedural argument about the limits of material expansion.

**Progressive Understanding:** Rather than the acquisition of new skills or equipment, both games implement progression through the player's increasing mastery of existing mechanics and environmental relationships.

These findings demonstrate how games can create sophisticated metaphorical arguments through their core mechanical systems while maintaining player engagement. By contrasting physical and cognitive growth these games show how careful attention to environmental design, scale relationships, and constrained mechanics can create rich metaphorical meanings that emerge through play rather than being imposed by narrative. Also working together with literalization of mechanics or rather against it. Rather than becoming purely literal, the mechanical limitations in both games consistently reinforced their metaphorical significance.

Furthermore, this dual approach to growth metaphors is linked to broader societal debates about sustainable development and progress. The games' approach to physical/material growth reflects a growing awareness of the limits and costs of unrestrained expansion in real-world systems, while their emphasis on cognitive development suggests alternative models of progress and agency.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Further Research

The cultural context of these games offers lot of space for further research. Both *Inside* and *Little Nightmares* were developed in Scandinavian countries, raising questions about how regional perspectives on growth, consumption and social welfare might influence game design. This suggests a broader examination of how different cultural contexts shape the implementation and interpretation of growth metaphors in games. Such research could explore whether different cultural attitudes towards progress and development manifest themselves in different approaches to game mechanics and metaphorical representations.

The potential application of alternative growth metaphors across different game genres also merits investigation. While this thesis focused on two specific 2.5D platformers, future research could examine how similar representations of physical and material growth and emphasis on cognitive development might function in other genres, from RPGs to strategy games. This could reveal how different game structures and mechanics might support or challenge these alternative approaches to progression and development.

Finally, there is a crucial need to study player reception and interpretation of these alternative growth metaphors. How do players from different backgrounds understand and respond to games that subvert traditional power progression? Do they consciously recognize the critique of consumption-based growth, and how does this awareness affect their gaming experience? Such research could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of games as a medium for communicating complex ideas about growth and development through their mechanical systems.

### 5.2. Final Words

This thesis demonstrates how game mechanics inherently carry ideological frameworks, often in ways that may not be immediately apparent to developers or players. Through analysis of *Inside* and *Little Nightmares*, we have reviewed design decisions can be read as a meaningful critiques of conventional growth paradigms while suggesting alternative ways of understanding development and progress.

For developers, this analysis reveals the importance of examining their design choices not just for their mechanical function, but for their metaphorical implications. Simple design decisions - from how players progress through a game to how they interact with the environment - can

reinforce or challenge established ideological frameworks. When designing progression systems, developers might consider alternatives to traditional power accumulation mechanics. This could involve creating growth through understanding rather than acquisition, emphasizing cognitive mastery over material gains, or using environmental design to create meaningful challenges that don't require traditional power progression.

The analysis also highlights how embodied cognition principles can inform game design. By understanding how players can physically and emotionally respond to game mechanics, developers can create more meaningful experiences that resonate on multiple levels. This might involve using scale relationships to create specific emotional responses, designing limited mechanics that encourage cognitive problem-solving, or developing enemy encounters that subvert traditional power dynamics.

Furthermore, this work demonstrates how games can function as a medium for critical reflection on societal values and assumptions about growth, power, and progress. Through mechanical systems and environmental design, developers can create experiences that encourage players to question established paradigms while maintaining engaging gameplay. This suggests a path forward for game design that considers both the immediate player experience and the broader implications of its mechanical systems.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how games can meaningfully engage with complex themes through their fundamental design elements. By revealing the metaphorical significance of common game mechanics and demonstrating alternative approaches, it provides a framework for developers to create more thoughtful and intentional design choices that consider both their mechanical and metaphorical implications.

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# 7. Annex

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