

Reflecting the Avatar's Purpose in a Dystopian World

A Case Study of *Inside*

Ellie Chraibi

This paper analyses the subversive potential of the player-avatar relationship through a case study of *Inside* (Playdead 2016), a cinematic platformer set in a dystopian world. With each of the three different spectra categorising this relationship (tool/character avatar, designed/desired performance, grievable/nongrievable death) is associated a hierarchised binary that is subverted in *Inside*. The blurring of anthropocentred categories pushes the player toward a meaningful posthuman experience. This experience relies on the embodied, double-situated, non-linear and cathartic properties of video games that the unsettling world, narrative and mechanics of *Inside* enhance.

Keywords: player-avatar relationship, posthuman

Paper DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48341/hs1s-mm79>

Introduction

Video games offer a practical, concrete experience of theories of fiction that transform metaphors of fictional spaces, possible worlds, and nonlinear time into playable miniatures. They allow for an embodied experience in a world where time and space can be designed and played with. As such, designers are the great watchmakers, and players are semi-gods who are not entirely aware of the rules governing the world and its inevitable outcomes. Players must descend from their actual world to the fictional world through an avatar, explore the game space, ask questions and progress with the distance of a god but the ignorance of a mortal. Players can only answer their questions when pushing the game to its end, the avatar to its final destination, to understand the purpose of their play. A game should be a separate space protected from reality (Caillois 1963). However, games are not completely disconnected from reality and have very real consequences, at least as much as any piece of fiction can have. If games are connected to reality in the same way reality is connected to the sacred, it is legitimate to question the legitimacy of players and designers to rule over a world that they made dystopian. In other words, *can games free themselves from their divinities?*

If there are no real or definitive answers to this question, it is at least possible to ask if *a game can make a player realise her situation as a demigod in a dystopian world*, i.e. her power, her distance, and her ignorance. This paper argues that *Inside* (Playdead 2016) gives convincing elements to answer this second, more realistic, question.

Presentation of *Inside*

Inside is set in a dystopian world led by an authoritarian power aiming at creating humanoid bodies that are remotely controlled and thus exploitable. The player controls a child chased by

the regime and can control the humanoid bodies with the ultimate purpose of destroying the mind-control system allowing this power.

In line with the cinematic platformer genre, as, for instance, *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund 1989), *Another World* (Chahi 1991), *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* (Oddworld Inhabitants 1997), *Heart of Darkness* (Amazing Studio 1998), or *Rainworld* (Videocult 2017), *Inside* immerses the player in a horrific and hostile world where her avatar's life is virtually constantly threatened. What makes these games unique is that their avatars, which, despite the hostility of the fictional worlds, are designed to be weak, hard to control, and possible to kill in a wide range of ways. The cinematic platformer genre is thus mainly defined by the avatar's fragile body and the existential threats of the world it inhabits. The following paragraphs briefly describe *Inside's* specificities in that genre, both from a game mechanics and narrative perspective.

In terms of mechanics, the game is played with directional keys and two buttons, one for grabbing and one for jumping, and all the nuances in the avatar's movement are contextual. For instance, the avatar walks cautiously when surrounded by guards but will run when pursued by dogs. The key mechanic that serves for puzzle-solving is the mind control machine—a power already present in *Abe's Oddysee*—with a *mise en abyme* that de-hierarchises the player and her avatar's power over the other entities of the game's world. The avatar can plug itself into an electronic device, taking the form of a helmet, which allows it to take control of harmless zombie-like creatures who can, in turn, plug themselves into another mind-control device in a *mise en abyme* of vicarious bodies.

Inside's world unfolds on a 2.5D plane, meaning that it continuously scrolls from left to right on the avatar's plane and has a 3D background from which other elements can come to the avatar's plane. Most of the information about the world is given as an embedded narrative, nearly nothing is told with words but the player understands easily the strong symbols of an authoritarian system: the soldiers shoot on sight, there are people deported in military trucks, farms and nature are abandoned to the profit of a gigantic scientific facility whose main projects are a mind control system and a biological abomination looking like a massive amalgam of human bodies.

The game presents two different endings; the first happens when the player controls the massive biological abomination, the Huddle, to break through the scientific facility, destroying everything on its way and ending up dying in a last breath on the beach, the end of the map on the far right side of the screen. The second happens when the player finds all hidden collectables and unlocks a secret room toward the beginning of the game, under the abandoned farm, where she can unplug the central mind control machine and see her avatar fall on the ground. This ending reveals that it was part of this system and was controlled as much as it controlled the zombie-like creatures. This latter ending is opposed to the first one, for it is outside of the linear time and space of the game; the player can load a saved state at any point of the map already explored to find the different collectables, which are permanently saved in the game's memory as collected.

The Three Avatar Spectra

After building a strong relationship with the avatar through the resolution of difficult challenges in a morbid world and a five-hour adventure with a cathartic resolution, *Inside's* second ending subverts the entire meaning the player made of the game. This bonding-with-the-avatar

experience followed by the unsettling second ending makes the player ask multiple questions about her relationship with the avatar: does it have a personality, or is it just a tool? Am I controlling it, or am I just following a script? And finally, when did my avatar die, if it did at all? Through these three questions, this paper will explore the different taxonomical spectra through which an avatar can be understood and how they can subvert the player's preconceived power binaries.

The first is the tool/character spectrum, defined by Schalleger (2017) with three main archetypes of avatar. Toward the tool side of the spectrum is the *shell avatar*, where the avatar is reduced to its function as an interface between the player and the virtual world. In its minimal form, the shell avatar is a mouse cursor. In the middle of the spectrum, the *role avatar* is the medium through which the player can play a role, as found in RPGs like *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010), for example. Lastly, the *personality avatar* has a determined role that the player has to identify with, much like traditional linear media characters. The second spectrum I propose, desired/designed, concerns the attitude when analysing the player's performance, defining the repartition of agency between designers and players in the play experience. On the desired side, the focus is on the player's make-believe game, i.e. her capacity to meaningfully be caught in the story. On the designed side, the avatar is a scripted character that the player must perform as the game developers intended. In between these two situations, the player negotiates with her avatar in a guided improvisation throughout the game. While the first spectrum considers the concrete technical and narrative possibilities offered by an avatar, the second takes into account the player's interpretation of the avatar and the resulting kind of performance. The last spectrum categorises the narrative relevance of the avatar's death. It goes from meaningless, i.e. a temporary failure of the player to execute the intended performance that is taken out of the game's narrative, to meaningful, i.e. the cathartic point of the avatar's tragic story. In the middle, there is the definitive death of the avatar, cutting the story short, also called *permadeath*, as found in rogue-like games or 'hardcore' difficulty levels as in *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) or *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2000).

Three Subversions

Each of these three taxonomical spectra implies an underlying posthuman variant of an anthropocentered binary that *Inside* subverts.

Object-Subject

The first, implied by the tool-character spectrum, is the object-subject dichotomy, making the avatar either an object submitted to the player's will or a subject of experience in its world. In other words, it asks the question of whether the avatar is the player herself being-in-the-world or is the avatar a non-human—both as a fictional digital character from the actual world's perspective and as a monster in the fictional world—being-in-the-world. For this section, I ask the reader to be able to temporarily pretend that the avatar has an independent existence in the world, a Pontian embodied perception. In this phenomenological approach, the avatar is meaningless outside of its virtual world and can only be understood by analysing its perception. Willumsen (2018) distinguishes two different kinds of avatar action that are independent of the player's will: the *automated avatar action* and the *character autonomy*. The former concerns the extent of the avatar's actions that are implicitly asked by the player, based on and forming avatar control conventions. For instance, a point-and-click adventure game like *The Curse of Monkey Island* (LucasArts 1997) lets the player click somewhere on the screen and automates the avatar's movements and interactions, while it would be absurd to do so in a platformer

game. In the opposite situation, it would be as absurd to give Mario the same configuration of control as in a game like *QWOP* (Foddy 2008), where the player controls separately the thighs and the calves of a runner. The *character autonomy* also relies on the avatar's independent actions, but only the ones that are unexpected by the player and constructs the avatar's personality. This phenomenon happens when the avatar shows its emotion through facial or body expressions to the point that it interferes with the player's control or even becomes part of the game's mechanics. This categorisation reflects the double function of the avatar again, as a tool and as a character. What is noteworthy in *Inside* is that the two of them are indistinguishable; its automated actions are necessary for the player's progression but also a strong part of its characterisation and what makes it very human. Without a face, the avatar's body language expresses fear, cautiousness, tiredness, curiosity, and even a sense of cleverness and mockery when imitating the movement of the zombies to hide in plain sight. Although such a design choice—i.e. to make a character not as agile and powerful as a *Super Mario* or a *Nathan Drake* (Naughty Dog 2007) but closer to an average real human being—might look frustrating at first, Pugliese, Förger and Takala (2015) confirm that uncommon virtual bodies reinforce immersion when narratively justified. As in many cinematic platformers, *Inside*'s avatar's powerlessness is intensified by a threatening world. By limiting the number of commands the player can make the avatar execute and increasing the number of situations, the avatar's meaningful existence is preserved; its body is not a toy for the player, but a vessel through which the world can be made sense of. Through the mind control *mise en abyme*, the avatar is given the same power as the player: to progress in the world through a vicarious temporary body. As such, the player is put in the recursive chain of vicarious bodies, possibly asking herself the question of her own object/subject dichotomy (see Barnabé and Delbouille 2018).

Role-Identity

The second, implied by the desired-designed performance spectrum, sets the dichotomy between a role and an identity. Is the avatar a role for the player to perform in the game, or is it an identity that uses players to exist? The easiest way to approach this question is to focus on the avatar as a second-person narration operator. The avatar is the 'You' of a textual adventure game. It is what makes the first posthuman step possible, the identification of the machine's 'you' appearing on the screen by the player (see Hayles 1999, xiv). It is possible to oppose two ways of considering the transport of the audience in the fictional world:

Caught up in the story, Walton's spectator projects a fictional ego that takes part in the imaginary happenings; symmetrically, Ryan's author impersonates a fictional speaker or writer who fully belongs to the imaginary world and in this capacity introduces the fictional beings and states of affairs to the fictional ego of the reader. (Pavel 1986, 88)

The reader can be considered as playing a make-believe game, pretending to be a fictional character who is the audience and making the experience of fiction possible (Walton 1980). The reader can also be considered as caught by the fiction in a metaleptic manner (Ryan 2004), especially when using second-person narration (Fludernik 1994)¹, meaning that there is an ontological contamination of the text into the reader's world. The combination of make-believe and metaleptic theories is necessary to explore the ontological ambiguity entailed by the experience of fiction while preserving the double role of players as actors and spectators. They are both the *cyborg at the machine* and the *cyborg in the machine* (Dovey and Kennedy 2006). An eloquent term to describe this ontological ambiguity is the *double situatedness* of the player

¹ Fludernik does not directly refer to metalepsis but her analysis of the second-person narration uncovers its metaleptic mechanisms; the 'you' creates an uncertainty on the ontological levels of the protagonist and addressee.

(Ensslin 2010). Both make-believe and metaleptic theories solve this ambiguity in different manners. The former is built on what I will regroup under the concept of *distance* as defined by Henriot (1978): on the one hand, if the player is aware she is playing, then the distance between her and the game increases at the risk of disengaging with the game, on the other, if the player is not aware she is playing, then the distance between her and the game tends to disappear at the risk of not distinguishing the fictional world from the actual world. The player must be in between, or both, in complete immersion, leading to the experience of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), and in a space that keeps the separation between reality and fiction which allows distanced, almost fictive, affective reactions to a piece of fiction (Walton 1980). As for them, the metaleptic theories explain the double situatedness by an *ontological flickering* (Bell 2019). In this conception, the player is constantly travelling through the feedback loop between the computer and herself (see Salen and Zimmerman 2003). In both cases, games are understood as space, and it seems more suitable to analyse *Inside* as what Merleau-Ponty (1945) calls a *mythical space*. The absolute acceptations of real or fictional, and true or false, are irrelevant in mythical spaces because they are not meant to be believed but to be learned, to make sense of the world. Games like *Inside* push the player to let go of the usual clear ontological boundaries between imaginary and reality and accept the spiritual experience of the imaginal space (see Mazis 2016).

The Avatar's Grievability

The third, implied by the narrative relevance of the avatar's death, is the grievable-nongrievable binary, and in the form of the question: does the death of the avatar matter? The term 'grievable' was coined by Judith Butler but reemployed by multiple scholars to suggest a way of strengthening posthuman empathy (Boller and Voigts 2019; Ostrovskaya 2021)—an extension of the original meaning more appropriate to the present paper. There are three kinds of death in *Inside*. The first is a video game topos; it is the death as failure and makes it nongrievable. For this one, *Inside* follows what other cinematic platformers did before, i.e. making the deaths very graphic, numerous and diverse. Although they are not meaningful in themselves, they become relevant for the narrative because of the relation they create with the two other kinds of death. The second kind is the fake death happening around the second third of the game, where the avatar is drowned in a way that looks like a failure-type death but is then cryptically revived by the same creature that killed it. This diegetic death and resurrection, without respawn, sets an ambiguous relation toward the grievability of the avatar. The last kind of death is the tragic ending; there are two of them, and they meaningfully close the purpose of the game. In an audience response study (Şengün et al. 2025), this latter category has been compared to TV show deaths, showing that the audience reaction is stronger in the case of video games.

Since players are already used to their characters dying over and over throughout the gameplay, a persistent narrative death seems like a harder condition for them to accept. It is common practice for players to see a character die in a game story and to go online to research if there is a way in the game to keep them alive (e.g., through game choices or becoming more powerful). Additionally, we find a further negative correlation between a character being playable and the acceptance of their deaths, where not only it is hard to accept the death of a video game narrative character but also it gets harder to accept their deaths if the character was playable. (Şengün et al. 2025, 111)

The first tragic ending is the destructive mass, which goes from the forest and dies once outside of the facility, in front of the ocean, a trajectory evoking cyclical conceptions of natural life in linear narratives. This ending seems to follow the linear tragic destiny of the hero, foreshadowed by a diorama showing the Huddle, the monstrous amalgam of bodies, on the

beach. It is the form of meaningful death that we can find in traditional linear media; the tragic hero is the vegetation god (Mendel 1961, 15). In this ending, the avatar is the protagonist, the Huddle, that the player made go through the game's world, acting like the scientist, a god controlling the avatar's destiny. The second ending offers a tragic ending more proper to video games and fits what Murray (2017, 216) defines as the *electronic closure*. It is through the exhaustion of all possible paths in the game that players can find a sense of closure, the passage from *hypertext aporia* to *hypertext epiphany* (Aarseth 1997, 90-91). This time, it is not as a spectator that we see the avatar dying, but as an actor, identifying the player to the protagonist of *Inside*, making the avatar only a tool for her to completely kill the mind-controlled entities. This creates a peculiar sense of *complicity*, the "unpleasant feeling of responsibility" (Juul 2013, 112). The player is made responsible for the death of what she believed was the main character, the subject of the game.

For the player to be able to quit the dystopian world, she has to renounce any form of power over the actors of this world. At this moment, the player can realise that she is not grieving for the death of the avatar but for the death of the world she virtually inhabited. Even in the most dystopian world, lived through an avatar that already died and revived in every possible way, a sense of attachment can be built. She can also reinterpret her avatar as a role that she got used to playing to the point she forgot it was a role, she experienced a corruption of the mimicry form of playing: alienation (Cailliois 1958). Although my analysis accentuated the importance of the second ending, both are emotionally impacting and necessary to one another. It would be hardly conceivable that a player would want to solve the deepest mysteries of the game and find all the collectables without having been attached to the game's world first. In a more general manner, all deaths that happen during one's gameplay are necessary for the electronic closure. Except that not all deaths are aestheticised as endings, *Inside* is close to what Murray offers with her kaleidoscopic story in which "[e]ach separate viewing would provide its own experience of catharsis, but no single one would feel complete" (Murray 2017, 220). To make the virtual avatar grievable is a necessary step to make the virtual world meaningful and worth investigating. *Inside* subverts the notion of grievability by making the avatar both grievable and nongrievable when the player gets to the full electronic closure of the game.

Conclusion

Inside is a cleverly crafted game, conscious of the philosophical potential made possible by the tropes of the genres it is part of. Using the full range of the ambiguities proper to the video game avatar, *Inside* suggests a very peculiar and innovative approach to what the subversion of a dystopian system can be. It is possible to interpret *Inside* as an allegory for the difficulty of realising one's own situation. From an outside perspective, the avatar-in-the-world's life and purpose seem linear and inevitable; they are the logical progression from the forest to the sea, from birth to sufferance, death and rebirth. An inside perspective, the avatar as the player-in-the-world, requires the player to learn and deconstruct the world to understand her purpose. It requires her to experience the world not alienated by her avatar's role but to experience the game as it is in its whole: a posthuman experiment that she can only stop by quitting the game.

Acknowledgements

I thank Prof. Schniz and Prof. Schalleger for their tremendous support.

About the Author

Ellie Chraibi is a student in the Game Studies and Game Engineering master's program at Klagenfurt University. Her background lies in engineering mechanics and musicology at Sorbonne Université. Her main research interests are the theorisation of video games through phenomenological, poststructuralist and fiction theory approaches. She wrote her master's thesis on the opposition between the figure of the player and authoritarianism under the supervision of René Reinhold Schalleger.

Website: <https://chrabz.github.io>

References

- Aarseth, Espen J. 1997. *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Amazing Studio. 1998. *Heart of Darkness*. Paris: Infogrames Multimedia.
- Barnabé, Fanny, and Julie Delbouille. 2018. "Aux frontières de la fiction : l'avatar comme opérateur de réflexivité". *Sciences du jeu*, no. 9 (Mai). <https://doi.org/10.4000/sdj.958>.
- Bell, Alice. 2019. 'Digital Fictionality: Possible Worlds Theory, Ontology, and Hyperlinks'. In *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, edited by Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, 249–71. Frontiers of Narrative. Lincoln ; London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Blizzard North. 2000. *Diablo II*. Irvine: Blizzard Entertainment.
- Boller, Alessandra, and Eckart Voigts. 2019. "'What counts as a liveable life and grievable death?' – Critical Posthumanism and Cloning in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Caryl Churchill's *A Number*". In *Teaching the posthuman*, edited by Roman Bartosch and Julia Hoydis, 151–74. Anglistik und Englischunterricht, Band 89. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Broderbund. 1989. *Prince of Persia*. San Rafael: Broderbund.
- Caillois, Roger. 1958. *Les Jeux et les Hommes (Le masque et le vertige)*. Paris: Gallimard
- Caillois, Roger. (1963) 1988. *L'homme et le sacré*. Édition augmentée de trois appendices sur le sexe, le Jeu, la Guerre dans leurs rapports avec le sacré. Paris: Gallimard.
- Chahi, Eric. 1991. *Another World*. Paris: Delphine Software.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dovey, Jon, and Helen W. Kennedy. 2006. *Game cultures: computer games as new media*. Issues in cultural and media studies. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England ; New York: Open University Press.
- Ensslin, Astrid. 2010. "Respiratory Narrative: Multimodality and Cybernetic Corporeality in "Physio-Cybertext"". In *New perspectives on narrative and multimodality*, edited by Ruth E. Page, 155–65. Routledge studies in multimodality 1. New York: Routledge.
- Fludemik, Monika. 1996. *Towards a 'natural' Narratology*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Foddy. 2008. *QWOP*. Foddy.net
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 1999. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Henriot, Jacques. 1976. *Le Jeu*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Juul, Jesper. 2013. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Playful Thinking. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- LucasArts. 1997. *The Curse of Monkey Island*. San-Francisco: LucasArts
- Mazis, Glen A. 2016. *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Mandel, Oscar. 1961. *A Definition of Tragedy*. New York University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) 1976. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Collection Tel 4. Paris: Gallimard.
- Mojang Studios. 2011. *Minecraft*. Stockholm: Mojang Studios.
- Murray, Janet Horowitz. 2017. *Hamlet on the holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*. Updated edition. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

- Naughty Dog. 2007. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. San Mateo: Sony Computer Entertainment.
- Nintendo R&D4. 1985. *Super Mario Bros.*. Kyoto: Nintendo.
- Obsidian Entertainment. 2010. *Fallout: New Vegas*. Rockville: Maryland.
- Oddworld Inhabitants. 1997. *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*. New York City: GT Interactive.
- Ostrovskaya, Maria. 2021. « Reframing the Nonhuman: Grievability and the Value of Life in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* ». In *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*, edited by Yvonne Liebermann, Judith Rahn, and Bettina Burger. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG.
- Pavel, Thomas G. 1986. *Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Playdead. 2016. *Inside*. Copenhagen: Playdead.
- Pugliese, Roberto, Klaus Förger, and Tapio Takala. 2015. 'Game Experience When Controlling a Weak Avatar in Full-Body Enaction'. In *Intelligent Virtual Agents*, edited by Willem-Paul Brinkman, Joost Broekens, and Dirk Heylen, 9238:418–31. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21996-7_45.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2004. "Metaleptic machines". *Semiotica* 2004 (150). <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2004.055>.
- Salen, Katie, und Eric Zimmerman. 2003. *Rules of play: game design fundamentals*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Schallegger, René Reinhold. 2017. "WTH Are Games? – Towards a Triad of Triads". In *Digitale Spiele*, edited by Jörg Helbig, 14–49. Klagensfurter Beiträge zur visuellen Kultur 5. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.
- Şengün, Sercan, João M. Santos, Joni Salminen, Milica Milenkovic, and Bernard J. Jansen. 2025. « Is Death Only the Beginning? How People Mourn Artificial Characters in Social Media ». *Games and Culture* 20 (1): 77-124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231190195>.
- Videocult. 2017. *Rain World*. Atlanta: Adult Swim Games.
- Walton, Kendall L. 1980. « Appreciating fiction: Suspending disbelief or pretending belief? » *Dispositio* 5 (13/14): 1-18.
- Willumsen, Ea Christina. 2018. "Is My Avatar MY Avatar? Character Autonomy and Automated Avatar Actions in Digital Games." In *DiGRA 2018*. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DIGRA_2018_paper_32.pdf.