

**“You Enter a Dark Room”:
The Psychological Impact of Horror Games and the
Constraints Limited Information and Resources**

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Glossary

Term:	Definition
The Abject:	That which is rejected by or disturbs the boundaries of the "self," evoking disgust or fear.
Diegesis:	The narrative world of a story, including all elements that exist within its fictional universe.
Environmental Storytelling:	Telling a story through the use of environmental elements allows players to discover the narrative by exploring a space.
Headshot:	In gaming, a shot is aimed at the target's head, often resulting in increased or instant damage.
Horror of Participation (HoP):	An active horror experience where fear is enhanced by the player's involvement and the consequences of their actions.
Horror of Transportation (HoT):	A passive horror experience where fear is derived from being transported to an unfamiliar or unsettling environment.
Immersion:	The deep engagement of a player in a fictional environment, creating a sense of presence within the game.
Jumpscare:	A sudden scare designed to startle the viewer, often accompanied by a loud noise or abrupt visual.
Liminal Space:	A transitional, often unsettling space that lies between two states, evoking a sense of ambiguity.
Ludonarrative:	The relationship between gameplay mechanics and narrative, either aligning to create harmony or creating dissonance when in conflict.
Metagame:	Strategies that go beyond in-game mechanics, based on broader player knowledge or the game's social aspects.
The "Other":	An external entity distinct from the self, helping define identity through contrast and interaction.
The "Self":	An individual's sense of identity, encompassing thoughts, emotions, and consciousness.
The Shadow:	The repressed, unconscious aspects of oneself, often depicted as dark or hidden.
The Sublime:	An experience combining awe and fear, often triggered by something overwhelmingly vast or powerful.

UI / UX: UI (User Interface) refers to visual elements for user interaction, while UX (User Experience) is the overall user satisfaction and effectiveness of the interaction.

Abstract

This essay delves into the psychological foundations of horror in video games, emphasizing how limitations in information and resources intensify tension and enhance player immersion. Drawing on Kristeva's *Abject*, Burke's *Sublime*, and Jung's *Shadow*, the analysis explores the incorporation of these theories in *Dead Space*, *Darkwood*, and *Mouthwashing*. *Dead Space* leverages grotesque body horror and strategic dismemberment mechanics, transforming combat encounters into puzzles that compel players to make deliberate, tension-fueled choices. *Darkwood* harnesses the *Sublime* through restricted visual perception and unreliable environmental cues, cultivating a pervasive sense of awe and dread. *Mouthwashing* embodies the *Shadow* by integrating imagery, symbolism, and level design to explore themes of repression, guilt, and self-deception as players navigate the protagonist's psychological unraveling. This study underscores the innovative use of narrative design, environmental storytelling, and player agency to craft psychological horror that transcends traditional jump scares. By examining these games, it highlights how creativity and innovation in game design evoke profound emotional and cognitive engagement.

Introduction

Video games are often overlooked as a medium capable of delivering deep psychological impact, yet they provide a unique canvas for exploring complex theories. This essay examines the psychological foundations of horror in games through three lenses: Kristeva's concept of the *Abject*, as exemplified by *Dead Space* (both the 2008 original and its 2023 remake); Burke's *Sublime*, as portrayed in *Darkwood*; and Jung's *Shadow*, as illustrated in *Mouthwashing*. By analyzing these principles, this essay reveals how they are embedded within game systems and mechanics to heighten the horror experience.

Each game is evaluated in three ways: first, by exploring the psychological principle it represents and its role in eliciting horror; second, by examining a specific gameplay mechanic that reinforces the narrative while tying back to the psychological principle; and finally, by applying a relevant psychological concept to explain the player's emotional response and the interplay of these elements. This analysis demonstrates how game design can elicit profound psychological experiences that transcend superficial jump scares, offering an in-depth look at the artistry behind creating truly immersive horror games.

Dead Space 2: The Abject

"These Necromorphs have no intelligence - how could they? Yet there's clear, if rudimentary purpose behind their actions, especially the gathering of corpses. They're clearly following some drive to kill living organisms and gather biomass. But where does this drive come from? How does it command them? Do all Necromorphs converted by a [Marker](#) share this... bond? Pack instinct? Or is the [Hive Mind](#) demonstrating a genuine telepathic communication - perhaps the first ever observed? How painful to admit that the Marker's horrors still hold a fascination for me."

—Dr. [Terrence Kyne](#)^[18]



Figure 1: Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection"

It's about that profound discomfort when we face something we should recognize, but it has been twisted, warped into something other.

To be Abject is to have sunk to an existing low, showing hopelessness or severity in a bad situation made worse. Kristeva's concept of the Abject speaks to moments when the boundary between self and other collapses or when the familiar becomes grotesquely alien. To the average person, it's when a sense of revulsion creeps up inside you; for instance, Kristeva highlights food loathing as being the most elementary form of abjection; when sitting down, you spot soured milk with skin beginning to rise to the top of the carton. It's about that profound discomfort when we face something we should recognize, but it has been twisted, warped into something other.

But to the average person, what does it mean to be "Other"? Imagine, for instance, waking up as the character Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and discovering that your body has become something different, something monstrous. Your family no longer sees you as a part of the pack, and slowly but surely, that little bit of humanity left, begins to fade away. The horror is not just in the transformation but in the reaction of others, the isolation and the loss of self. Here, in a liminal space, the idea of not quite being human or monster, we're reminded of our own weaknesses. Mortality, disease, and decay are all elements of Kristeva's concept of the Abject. In video games, *Dead Space* taps into this sense of abjection through Isaac Clarke's journey aboard the USG Ishimura, where malformed creatures known as Necromorphs twist the human form into something foreign and disgusting. As a character, Isaac is constantly subjected to situations that would

mentally break the average person. Walking up to a glass window and being forced to watch someone writhe on the floor in agony, wheezing, as their lungs have been reversed and are on the outside of their body. The creature gasps and sputters as he looks in horror, and not long after, it explodes into a viscera on the walls.

The Necromorphs undoubtedly play one of the most important roles in the identity of *Dead Space*, and it was by no means a mistake. An interview from Games Radar with Ben Wanat found that “The Necromorphs were actually conceived relatively early in the game’s life; Wanat wanted the alien enemies to feel relatable. The production team deeply believed that aliens in games often felt too ‘other,’ away from humans and that encountering them, therefore, lost any sense of real threat or weight.”¹ In the intentional design of making them human, the user feels more connected to the experience, making the anxiety and fear that the player feels more real.



Figure 2: Dismemberment Tech Demo

The development team at Visceral Games (EA Redwood Shores) designed *Dead Space* with the specific intent of immersing players in a visceral horror experience that would distinguish it from other titles in the genre.¹ The dismemberment mechanic in *Dead Space* completely revolutionized how designers create systems for horror games. Unlike *Resident Evil* or traditional shooters, where a headshot means the end, players had to methodically sever the limbs

of Necromorphs to defeat them effectively. This approach, known as "strategic dismemberment," was a deliberate deviation from genre norms, compelling players to adopt a more tactical and unsettling combat style.²

The design choice of forcing players to dismember their enemies leans into the abject by not only physically killing the thing in front of them but also dismantling the very essence of its humanity. Here lies the abject in the situation; by forcing the players to confront the fragility of this human-matched creature, they not only feel disgusted by the death of the beast but by their own actions. Additionally, combat cannot be taken lightly in the game, as it has some of the most graphic and disturbing gameover screens, even to this day. Sometimes, enemy designs within the game are taken to a bordered extreme; actions that are otherwise ordinary or core to the essence of humanity are normally what the

¹ <https://www.gamesradar.com/how-dead-spaces-innovative-ideas-and-design-created-one-of-the-most-innovative-and-distinctive-horror-games-of-recent-time/>

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Space_\(2008_video_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Space_(2008_video_game))

developers focus on perverting in their design. Breathing, Strength, Life and death all become twisted motifs within the narrative.

The “Pregnant” Necromorphs in *Dead Space* exemplify this distortion, carrying writhing masses within their swollen bodies. This imagery is a twisted reflection of pregnancy, turning the promise of a new life into something revolting. It evokes the primal horror of the body's vulnerability, an idea often explored in feminist literature. In the case of *Dead Space*, the “self” in abjection is pregnancy, a nurturing life-giving process, with the “other” that emerges as something grotesque. This is not an uncommon theme in horror media. Ronald Cruz, author of the article “*Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror*,” states, “The horror of the uncertainty of the health—or inhumanity—of offspring is a real biological concern and has also been depicted in many films in the genre ... We are who and what we are because of our genes and that genetic makeup is beyond our control. Also beyond our control are mutations, which are random and unpredictable monstrous-feminine...” (Cruz, 2012).

Beyond him, Authors like Margaret Atwood and Mary Shelley or even the Original “Alien” have depicted the act of pregnancy as invasive and transformative. This theme of pregnancy-as-horror taps into the innate fear of losing control over one's body. The *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood portrays forced pregnancy as a means of control and dehumanization; similarly, in Ridley Scott's *Alien*, the

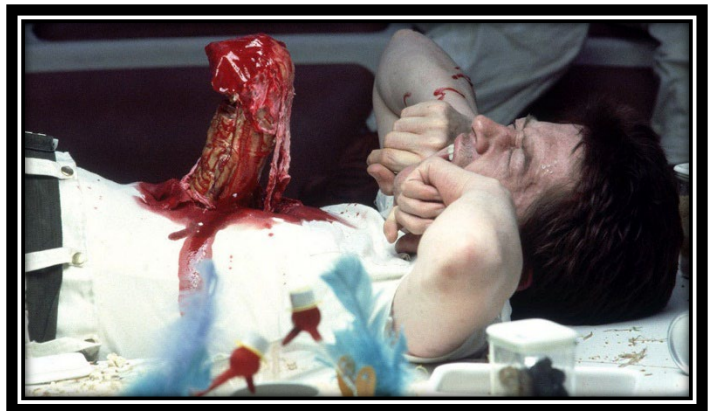


Figure 3: Original “Alien” Chestburster scene

infamous "chest-burster" scene depicts pregnancy in a parasitic way. Imagine an unwanted creature growing inside you, draining your life force. There's a different fear in other cases where the baby is desired. the fear of growing a monster that would eventually consume you and commit violent acts. This fear highlights the loss of agency, a feeling most men wouldn't be able to fully empathize with. In each of these examples, pregnancy is transformed into a vehicle for exploring anxieties around bodily autonomy and vulnerability. Despite the use of these tropes, the horror of *Dead Space* surpasses its repugnant imagery, embedding itself in the game's very mechanics and environments.

Beyond its central themes in character design and some of the team's design decisions, *Dead Space* excels in its game design choices. The setting of the USG Ishimura is a labyrinthine, decaying vessel, but beyond that, a character. It breathes, it creaks, and it feels almost alive, a decaying structure that seems to conspire against Isaac at every turn.

The development team honed in on environmental storytelling, using the ship's decayed and claustrophobic corridors to create a haunting atmosphere. Sound design also played a pivotal role, with ambient noises and eerie silences amplifying tension and keeping players on edge.³ It is as if the ship itself is abject—something once functional, now a decaying, malignant presence.

The tension in this completely immerses the player within the setting by using diegetic sound and UI; diegesis in horror is no easy task, but *Dead Space* delivered a design masterclass. Isaac's health and stamina were seamlessly integrated into his suit, while ammunition counts were displayed directly above the gun reticle, allowing the player to remain fully immersed in the experience.⁴ Resource management plays a critical role in enhancing the sense of vulnerability: ammunition and health were scarce, making every shot count and amplifying the anxiety of each encounter. This scarcity ensured that every decision carried weight, each engagement became a tense struggle, and players had to think strategically about when to engage enemies and how to conserve supplies. The player was not just battling Necromorphs—they were also contending with dwindling resources and the fear of running out. Recording multiple instances of Isaac's voice lines, depending on his health or specific conditions he's been in, amplifies the tension he feels.

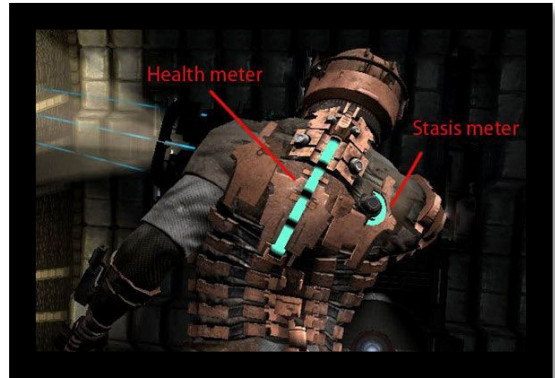


Figure 4: UI built into character model

Through the use of strategic dismemberment, visceral enemy design, and an immersive environment, Visceral Games crafted a horror experience that forced players to confront their own fragility and discomfort, an abject feeling. The abject is not merely a visual element but a psychological experience that taps into our primal fears of bodily transformation, loss of autonomy, and the thin boundary between the human and the monstrous. *Dead Space* achieves its chilling atmosphere through graphic horror and by complicating players in the grotesque acts required to survive, challenging them to examine their actions and emotional responses. Much like Isaac's, the player's journey becomes one of wrestling with abjection where the "self" blurs with the other and where survival demands a reckoning with the dark, twisted, and uncanny.

³ <https://www.relyonhorror.com/in-depth/exclusive-dead-space-remake-developer-interview/>

⁴ <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/video-designing-i-dead-space-i-s-immersive-user-interface>

Darkwood: The Sublime

I see hatred and fear in their eyes. As if I was responsible for the spreading disease. As if I were responsible for the misery plaguing this land. I have nowhere to hide from them, nowhere to run. The woods have closed us off from the outside world. We are all doomed.

—*The Doctor, Darkwood Intro*

To be sublime is something that inspires awe, usually because of elevated quality. When one thinks of beauty in an object, they may often look for small characteristics. Elegance can usually be described as something that brings a sense of peace, frequently perceived as delicate or graceful. Beauty, however, would be defined in a way that brings charm or delight to an object: the tiny, fragile porcelain dancer sitting atop a shelf, a historical artifact within a museum, or perhaps someone you glance at from across the way. Both words are characteristics that are required of the sublime. Something can't just be beautiful, elegant or wonderful. It must go beyond those expectations to create something that can't quite be described with just pleasant words. Edmund Burke's concept of the "Sublime" challenges the traditional sense of emotions we feel when we think about what it means to experience heightened senses or the feeling of something sublime. When we see something more than what could be just described. Burke thinks that the "sublime" centers on experiences that evoke reverence, terror, and a sense of overwhelming vastness or power. While heavy rainfall could be perceived as something peaceful, a major storm's raw destructive force is much greater than ours. According to Burke, the Sublime is tied to the feelings of fear and astonishment, often triggered by nature's grandeur or the unknown. It describes an aesthetic experience that overwhelms the senses, blending pleasure with dread and is frequently rooted in the perception of danger or pain.⁵ When isolated from real events, this experience feels overpowering and insurmountable. But how can it be captured when the context of games comes to mind? Nature is a common setting in horror games, *The Forest* (Endnight Games, 2014), *Alan Wake* (Remedy, 2010) and *Slender: the Eight Pages* (Hadley, 2012) immediately come to mind. The feeling of being stuck alone in a space that, while not inherently threatening, fills you with dread. One step further could

⁵ "It is this paradoxical quality of terror, its capacity to produce both pain and delight, that makes it, for Burke, the 'ruling principle of the Sublime.' The aesthetics of the Sublime is the aesthetics of indeterminacy and uncertainty."

leave you lost in its ever-growing, almost omnipresent space. The strongest elements of the sublime are best characterized by the game *Darkwood*. *Darkwood* by Acid Wizard is a top-down survival horror game that plunges players into an eerie, semi-procedurally generated forest filled with strange creatures, limited resources, and an anxiety-inducing atmosphere. When examining *Darkwood* by Acid Wizard Studio, it becomes clear that the game utilizes similar principles, particularly in how it evokes the Sublime. At its core, is a survival horror game that excels at creating an atmosphere of dread through both its narrative and the use of restricting player information. Instead of relying on traditional horror game mechanics, the game uniquely builds tension by restricting the vision of the character to a small radial circle and controlled cone while also leaning into a non-diegetic “sixth sense” of the player's surroundings, in which a monochrome colour palette represents the player's view, but the characters’ view is in colour. This choice always gives the player access to what the general area beyond their sight looks like, which in turn also creates some very interesting gameplay moments where places look one way to the player but completely different for the character.

This dual perspective—how the player perceives the game world versus the character’s perception—introduces two key concepts of horror: the Horror of Participation (HoP) and the Horror of Transportation (HoT). The Horror of Participation refers to the fear that is amplified through the player’s active involvement and the direct consequences of their actions. Meanwhile, the Horror of Transportation involves psychological immersion, where the player feels emotionally manipulated and drawn into the game's eerie narrative. In *Darkwood*, both types of horror are used to craft an unsettling experience that keeps the player on edge.

Another tactic it uses to amplify this is creating deliberate lulls in the player's engagement. This can also be recontextualized as the Horror of Participation. These lulls occur during moments where the player’s active control feels limited, such as the silence during a mundane walk to collect gas for the next night or the subtle suggestion that something immense and dangerous lurks just out of sight. By restricting the player's control over their environment, the game fosters an ever-present

Figure 5: Player View (Grey) Character View (Color)



sense of vulnerability, effectively both leaning into the concept of the sublime and generating HoP by emphasizing the player's anxiety about what could happen next.

At the same time, *Darkwood* employs elements of the Horror of Transportation through its atmosphere and environmental storytelling. The dark, oppressive visuals, combined with haunting soundscapes, psychologically transport the player into the forest. The player becomes immersed in a world that feels alien and threatening, fostering an emotional connection that is akin to being lost in an actual nightmare. By blurring the lines between what the character experiences and how the player perceives those experiences, the game creates an effective blend of HoP and HoT, making the horror feel both immediate and deeply psychological.

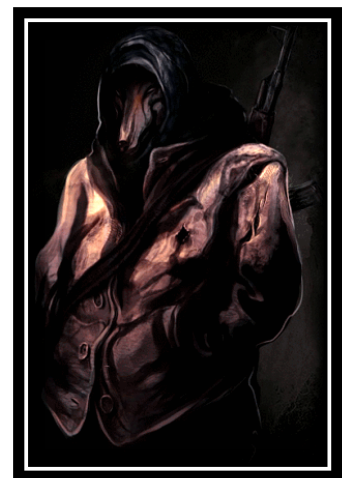
Figure 6: *Darkwood* at night



The game also skillfully employs both diegetic and non-diegetic sound to immerse players in the intensity of the atmosphere. Foley, such as the subtle creaking of floorboards or the distant growl of an unseen creature, grounds players in the environment, making them acutely aware of their surroundings. These sounds create a sense of place, reminding players that they are not alone in the woods and that the environment

poses a constant threat. In contrast, the often dreamlike, low rumble of the score creates a strong sense of almost primal anxiety during the night; the use of natural sounds like the wind returns the player to a place of fear that they can't quite put their finger on. But when dawn finally arrives, the sudden crescendo that shifts to a softer and warmer score allows the player to have a breath of fresh air and comes as a welcome relief.

Figure 7: "The Wofman" *Darkwood*



As designers, we often strive to engage players through meaningful interaction, and horror games achieve that by placing players in direct control of their survival. Decisions such as what upgrades for them to take, when to venture away from home or how to manage limited resources directly affect the outcome, creating a strong sense of active participation⁶ Players feel both empowered by their agency and overwhelmed by the vast,

⁶ "Horror of Participation"—where fear is amplified through direct player interaction—and the "Horror of Transportation"—where immersion stems from psychological manipulation

unpredictable dangers surrounding them. By making them constantly aware of their actions, emergent experiences can easily occur. Whether barricading themselves in for the night or confronting one of the many eldritch horrors within the setting, all actions have direct consequences. This level of interaction heightens tension and fear, reinforcing the sense of being both in control and vulnerable within the game's often unforgiving world.

Darkwood, because of this, stands as a prime example of how a horror game can leverage both psychological and participatory elements to evoke fear, awe, and the Sublime. By blending Burke's concept of the Sublime with both the horrors of participation and transportation along with employing sophisticated sound design, *Darkwood* creates an atmosphere that is both deeply immersive and profoundly unsettling. It captures the delicate balance between agency and vulnerability, inviting players to confront their fears while challenging their perception of control. This combination of thematic depth, atmosphere, and player-driven experiences makes *Darkwood* a powerful and unique entry in the horror genre.

Mouthwashing: The Shadow

Curly: You doing okay?

Anya: Yeah. Can't Sleep.

Curly: I know how that is, I just toss and turn. Or stare at the ceiling all night.

Anya: I actually kinda like the nighttime window screen if you believe it. So, I just come look at it sometimes. If you look really really close, you can see there is a dead pixel in the upper right corner.

Curly: Is that so? Hmm. Nope, don't see it.

Anya: In the back of my mind it's always there.

Curly: Now I'll go bonkers just looking for it. ... I don't think it ruins the illusion though, it's peaceful. But maybe I am just used to looking at the bigger picture.

Anya: ... Why do you think that Pony Express put a lock on the medical room door, but not the sleeping quarters?

Curly: Hmm. I suppose for the same reason they put on the cockpit. Safety.

Figure 8: Extra Analysis for Mouthwashing



Carl Jung's concept of the Shadow delves into the dark, unknown side of the human psyche. It is the repository for aspects of ourselves we deny, reject, or fail to integrate. As Jung puts it, this Shadow is "...the sinister and frightful brother, our own flesh-and-blood counterpart." The Shadow concept is explored through literature, psychology, and interactive media like video games. *Mouthwashing (2024)* by the Studio Wrong Organ is a psychological horror game that leans less on a unique gameplay hook but feeds more into Ludenarrative and games as a storytelling medium. It masterfully intertwines Jung's ideas about the Shadow with a distinctive narrative and Ludenarrative design, creating an experience centered on repression, projection, and the darkness lurking beneath human nature. In Jung's work, the Shadow often represents the embodiment of a person's unwanted qualities, those parts they cannot acknowledge and seek to repress. It's described as "...the psychic shadow" present within every individual. Connolly (2003) expands on this by emphasizing the difficulty of accepting the "other" within oneself. When we deny the validity of others, we deny the Shadow's right to exist, both within ourselves and in our environment. This denial of our internal darkness stifles our capacity for empathy and authentic interaction.

Set on the Tulpar, a cargo freighter in a dystopian future, The story Mouthwashing begins with an unknown individual whom we later find out is Jimmy, sabotaging the autopilot, so the ship drifts into an asteroid's path. Curly, the captain of the ship stops the vessel from complete destruction at the expense of being brutally disfigured and disabled. The story alternates between two time periods with two different characters. One uses flashbacks to show Curly's earlier attempts to maintain morale, including his discovery that Pony Express will soon replace the entire human crew with automation. The other focuses on the aftermath of the crash, when Jimmy becomes the acting leader, while Anya, Swansea, and Daisuke struggle to survive.

Before the crash, Curly appears restrained but well-meaning as he manages tensions caused by exploitative corporate policies and personal anxieties. Meanwhile, Jimmy resents Curly's leadership despite having gained his position thanks to Curly's recommendation. Anya confides in her pregnancy, Swansea bickers with the naive Daisuke, and everyone dreads losing their jobs after this voyage. When Curly announces the layoffs during what should have been a celebratory speech, bitterness and hostility intensify, especially in Jimmy, whose envy and insecurities drive the story within the game.

Mouthwashing is a prime example of the “show, don’t tell” principle within game design, tackling and critiquing, many themes. Corporate Capitalism, failed ambition, and sexual abuse are only a few to name. When analyzing the metagame in Mouthwashing, it chooses to lean away from traditional gameplay hooks and instead hones in on its character study with an unreliable narrator, social dynamics, and

strong use of symbolism to create a dynamic for the player, centered on deduction, narrative interpretation, and morality. This approach allows players to piece together the truth about why the crew is in such a bad state, deepening their engagement with the story. The quote at the beginning of the section highlights a conversation between Curly and Anya, where they discuss the nighttime view from the ship and a dead pixel on the window screen; it is a seemingly mundane conversation that reflects the core themes of Mouthwashing, the unnoticed flaws that remain hidden in plain sight. Anya mentions, "If you look really close, you can see a dead pixel in the upper right corner." This dead pixel becomes a symbol of the imperfections no one wants to acknowledge but cannot ignore. From the Jungian perspective, it stands for the Shadow itself, an unacknowledged flaw that subtly affects the entire picture. Curly’s response, focusing on the “bigger picture,” represents a coping mechanism that seeks to avoid confronting imperfections that may threaten the sense of normalcy. Through this, the narrative of repression and projection is masterfully explored within the Ludeonarrative, intersecting both the game’s narrative and mechanics.

The game uses repetition as a motif, with phrases like “I hope this hurts” and “Take Responsibility” serving as echoes of the unresolved emotions that the characters suppress. The idea of “Kills 99.9%” is center stage, referring both to mouthwash and the game’s constant references to the ship’s crash, implying no amount of “sanitizing” can erase lingering guilt or remove the .01% of worst offenders.

Character relationships in Mouthwashing showcase the psychological dynamics central to the game’s theme of



Figure 9: Anya and Curly talk about dead pixel



Figure 10: Swansea is forced to murder Daisuke severing his eyes

repression. The deuteragonist, Curly, represents a subdued figure, constantly belittled by Jimmy. While Jimmy projects his insecurities onto Curly and manipulates him, Curly attempts to remain loyal, repressing his potential resentment, or blind hopefulness in Jimmy's character and turns himself into a complete "pushover." This dynamic, seen through gameplay and dialogue, leads to the eventual psychological breakdown near the game's climax. Curly, who remains mostly silent throughout the story, finally breaks down into hysterics after Anya's suicide. In true Jungian fashion, the act of not confronting his Shadow, of not admitting his true feelings towards Jimmy, causes an eruption of uncontrollable emotions. Jimmy is the embodiment of the game's Shadow, looming over everyone within the ship, manipulating and abusing others in ways that become obvious only after recontextualization.

The player initially perceives Jimmy as a well-meaning, if flawed, character. But as the story unfolds, the game recontextualizes events, revealing him as the true monster. His attempts at "mouthwashing" as a symbolic gesture to "cleanse" himself of guilt, illustrate the emptiness of his gestures. He seeks to wash away his crimes by controlling and ultimately killing the crew in a murder-suicide plot. His projection and inability to integrate his darker side harm everyone aboard the ship. The themes are explored through environmental symbolism. For instance, the ship's window screen changes over the course of the game: it starts with a blue sky, shifts to a sunset after the crash, then night with the dead pixel and finally settles on a vibrant, harsh red glow. This transition visually reflects the journey of the characters and state of the ship. From a bright, seemingly peaceful sky to a deep, blinding red. These changes mark the descent into chaos and the culmination of suppressed fears and guilt. There is a moment of dramatic irony, 2 months after the crash where the crew, hungry, break into the storage bay to avoid starvation, and once finally cracking it open, they discover an infinite bound of mouthwash. The mouthwash, was dismissed by Anya as "worthless because of the sugar content," not only foreshadowing Jimmy's torture of Daisuke before his final moments but also alluding to the fact that they will die for a purposeless cause. At least it will be safe enough for them to drink...

Figure 11: The crew discovers nothing but mouthwash, looking for food



Sometime after the crash, the story shifts to Jimmy in a much darker version of the Tulpar. Parts of the ship are cut off by insulation foam, resources are scarce and Anya struggles to care for Curly, who is mute and immobile, while Swansea self-medicates by drinking mouthwash. Daisuke's hope and eagerness to prove himself make him susceptible to manipulation by Jimmy. In this claustrophobic post-crash setting, each character's suppressed feelings slowly but catastrophically begin to emerge as the game moves into climax. Jimmy, initially seen as flawed but not entirely malevolent, transforms into the hidden villain who secretly manipulates and threatens everyone. After Anya finally breaks and locks herself in the med bay, Daisuke gets manipulated by Jimmy into climbing into the service vent to rescue Anya, players should remember earlier in the game that this vent was incredibly dangerous, and Daisuke becomes mortally wounded, triggering Swansea to snap and execute Daisuke in an act of mercy, which could also be a metaphor for how Swans when stressed will kill their Young. Jimmy at this point becomes aware of Anya's suicide, grabbing the pistol in an attempt to "stop" Swansea's rampage, they both clash and at this point it's not definitive at what happened but Jimmy ends up coming out on top finishing off Swansea, This ends with Curly's repressed anger toward Jimmy breaking out into hysteria after the climax of these events.

Diving into the resolution of the game is payoff powerful in its depiction of the consequences of failing to confront the Shadow. Curly's hysteria is powerful because it's the first time he has to acknowledge the inevitable. Jimmy has finally become undeniable as his Shadow figure, and the repression that held the crew together unravels completely. In the final moments, it becomes clear that Jimmy's insecurities and incompetence have doomed the entire crew. He is found seated at the table with their lifeless bodies, every one of them a casualty of his desperate attempts to evade blame. Despite the carnage, Jimmy clings to a twisted notion of heroism by vowing to save them all, but even this promise is laced with self-importance rather than true remorse. When he carries Curly to the cryo chamber, declaring he will become the "villain" for Curly's sake, it is less an act of self-sacrifice than a final bid to control the narrative: by choosing how he appears—hero or villain—he sidesteps the deeper truth of his own failings. Ultimately, Jimmy's inability to accept any real responsibility exposes the unintentional yet very real architect of the tragedy. As he walks off-screen and the echoing bang punctuates the aftermath, the full weight of his actions settles over the scene. The saddest fact of the matter being that the crew was doomed to die, the second Jimmy steered the ship off course, and Curly would never be found.

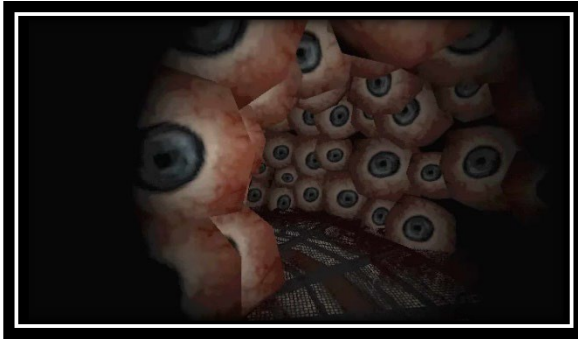


Figure 12: Eyes as a symbol within the game

The narrative design of Mouthwashing is strengthened by the use of speech that delineates the characters' emotional states and relationships. The colour-coded speech reflects dynamics, for instance, the colour green is often associated with feelings of disgust and envy, two core themes of Jimmy's character. An even lesser-known use of this color is the boardgame with 4 pieces that move in accordance with the current plot of the story, the 5th piece is intentionally left off the board to signify Curly's lack of presence within the ship. This use of colour helps to create an emotional and psychological contrast that enhances the narrative. Beyond the motif of color, it's clear the team at Wrong Organ had strong inspiration on it's themes from media outside of games, as the relationship between Jimmy and Curly mirrors the Aesop Fable of The Scorpion and the Frog – Jimmy's inherent cruelty ultimately destroys those around him despite his claims of friendship and loyalty.

The final theme I will tackle in the game is, the motif of eyes. Eyes are a prevalent symbol throughout the story, either representing Jimmy feeling like he's always being watched or judged by others potentially signifying his greater insecurity or his inability to accept responsibility for his actions. Each character within the story has different eyes either losing or keeping them, Daisuke loses both in his execution, Curly maintains only his right eye constantly forced to keep it open, Swansea only has his left, and Anya retains both. The choice of eyes is entirely intentional as a form of visual symbolism, Daisuke's blindness is symbolic of his innocence and inability to see Jimmy for the manipulator he is, while Curly's forced vigilance reflects his struggle to face reality as he is forced to slowly watch the chaos Jimmy has caused unfold, he must accept that Jimmy is a monster. Swansea's opposite loss of curly is left more up to interpretation, potentially denoting that he was always suspicious of Jimmy and didn't trust him, but at the same time, did nothing to prevent him from enacting his plan. Anya is left with both eyes because she is the only one on the ship that is entirely aware of the situation and sees Jimmy as the cruel and selfish animal that he truly is.

Outside of the themes of the game, the subgenre Mouthwashing does not shy away from is psychosexual horror, embodied in Anya's experience aboard the ship. Anya's portrayal is a critique of both the male gaze and her manipulative tactics for survival. While she appears defenseless, acting in ways that seem incompetent to appease Jimmy's insecurities, she is, in fact, the most capable crew member. She keeps Curly alive, but her manipulation is her means of coping, a response to the fear instilled by Jimmy. The restraint of her true talents and the adoption of a weaker persona is part of her survival strategy theme echoed in Jung's exploration of how individuals bury their true selves in response to external pressures. Ultimately, this careful self-effacement allows Anya to continue operating under Jimmy's radar, but it is only a temporary solution. As tensions within the story mount and resources dwindle, her hidden strengths can no longer shield her from the escalating conflict. The same protective facade that grants her a degree of safety also isolates her emotionally, leaving her with few outlets for the anxiety and despair she feels. In the end, the weight of her suppressed capabilities, her silent fears regarding her pregnancy, and Jimmy's ever-growing volatility resulted in not only her tragic suicide, but Jimmy managing to grab the gun that will result in Swansea's execution and Jimmy's eventual suicide as well .



Figure 13: Anya's Suicide, Jimmy grabs the gun



Figure 14: Jimmy puts Curly in cryogenic sleep

Ultimately, Mouthwashing excels at telling a story of repression, projection, and the failure to integrate the Shadow. The Ludeonarrative, the intricate weaving of gameplay, environmental storytelling, and character dynamics, creates a psychological portrait of characters who cannot confront their true nature. The journey from denial to horror reflects what happens when we fail to acknowledge

and integrate our darker selves, offering a chilling reminder of Jung's warning: that the more we attempt to mute our Shadow, the more it grows beyond our control.

Conclusion:

Horror in games like *Dead Space*, *Darkwood*, and *Mouthwashing* takes a sophisticated turn that moves beyond standard jump scares, leading players into a realm of psychological fear and uncertainty. Drawing on concepts such as Kristeva's Abject, Burke's Sublime, and Jung's Shadow, these games create powerful, atmospheric experiences that resonate deeply with their audiences. Both *Dead Space* and *Darkwood* revolve around a metagame rooted in limited resources and information, effectively building a high level of tension. *Darkwood* grants players more data but compromises its reliability through a deliberately flawed map, evoking disorientation and a sense of loss. By contrast, *Dead Space* doubles down on combat and scarcity, amplifying the visceral horror and provoking disgust as players battle nightmarish creatures.

Meanwhile, *Mouthwashing* diverges from these resource-driven strategies, instead centering on the complexities of its unreliable narrator, social dynamics, and symbolism. Here, the metagame is defined by deduction, narrative interpretation, and moral deliberation, pushing players to uncover the true villain. Ultimately, these games demonstrate horror's potential not only to entertain but also to elicit profound psychological responses. Their seamless blend of fear, agency, and the unknown offers meaningful insights into human vulnerability and our encounters with our darker selves. By creatively weaving psychological principles into game mechanics, storytelling, and environmental design, *Dead Space*, *Darkwood*, and *Mouthwashing* encourage players to engage both cognitively and emotionally reaffirming horror's ability to delve into, and illuminate, the complexities of the human condition.

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