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“I Hope This Hurts.” — Rhetorics of Rape in *Mouthwashing* Digital Game

Abstract

This paper examines how *Mouthwashing* (2024), an indie horror game, constructs a space where horror aesthetics and agency-related mechanics converge, allowing players to engage with sensitive social issues such as sexual violence. By restricting player control and integrating classic horror elements — including an unreliable narrator and intentional narrative gaps — the game elicits feelings of helplessness and complicity, mirroring the mechanisms of sexual violence from the perspectives of both the aggressor and the enabler. Drawing on agency theory (Harrell, Zhu 2009; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009) and horror aesthetics, this study explores how *Mouthwashing* employs grotesque imagery, hallucinations, and constrained player choice to expose power dynamics and rape myths. The game illustrates the consequences of patriarchal violence within a confined group through its fragmented narrative. *Mouthwashing* exemplifies the capacity of indie horror games to employ subversive storytelling and innovative game mechanics to address taboo subjects, highlighting the potential of interactive media to provoke critical reflection on agency, complicity, and systemic abuse.

digital games; rape culture; unreliable narrator; agency; *Mouthwashing* (2024)



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Introduction

The horror genre has long been recognised for pushing the boundaries of the human psyche. It compels audiences to confront uncomfortable or repulsive topics within a safe context. It creates life-threatening situations that range from entrapment and monster attacks to psychological torture and mutilation. This imaginative immersion enables individuals to engage with powerful emotions in a secure environment, making horror a form of emotional simulation (Clasen, Christiansen, Johnson 2018: 5). Emotional response may encompass fear and reactions to sensitive real-world issues presented within the horror aesthetic. The genre frequently conveys political and social stances between the lines. This can also be observed in horror games, as they utilise their mediality, a form in which content is mediated (Günzel, Liebe, Mersch 2009: 33), to tackle more sensitive subjects such as sexual violence.

Games, much like the horror genre, elicit emotional responses. Horror games tend to evoke feelings of tension and fear. They draw upon the horror aesthetic — confining spaces, the fear of the unknown, monsters lurking in the background — while manipulating the player's sense of agency, increasing their anxiety. However, it is important to consider that a horror story is particularly compelling when it is left for the audience to fill in the blanks themselves. This may be evident in minimalistic game storytelling, which is often found in indie games — a type of games focused on subverting well-known themes and engaging the audience with real-world discourses (Styhre, Remne-land-Wikhamm 2021: 481). This suggests that indie horror games excel in delivering profound stories and critical socio-political perspectives in subtle ways.

Games have long been studied as a medium associated with the promotion of violence (Anderson et al. 2003; 2010; Ferguson, Kilburn 2010). The examination of sexual objectification, victimisation, and abuse within games is a relatively recent development, yet it contributes essential data to feminist analyses of the medium. Despite efforts to promote acceptable representations of femininity in games, sexual violence continues to feature prominently in gaming narratives (Hoffin, Lee-Treweek 2020: 169). Numerous studies indicate that games depicting sexual violence can influence players' real-life perceptions of such acts (see Dill, Brown, Collins 2008; Yao, Mahood, Linz 2010; Gordon 2022). Many of these findings emphasise the negative

impact on players, including tendencies to perceive women as intellectually inferior to men (Behm-Morawitz, Mastro 2009: 819) and significantly increased levels of objectification of women, which correlate with greater acceptance of sexual abuse (Fox et al. 2015: 26). However, more recent research suggests that games might also serve a role in reducing the acceptance of aggression (Potter et al. 2019). For instance, Beck and Rose's findings indicated a decline in the normalisation of aggression towards women following the observation of a gameplay scenario in which a player exhibited violent and abusive behaviour towards female characters (2018: 19). It seems that perceiving the extremity of others' violent choices may be necessary for inducing higher levels of empathy. Exposure to sexual abuse in games may thus help reduce rape myth acceptance, particularly when the abuse is witnessed as a part of the narrative.

As a game that addresses the themes of abuse, violence, and rape through the story of a close-knit group where a case of sexual assault was ignored — ultimately leading to the victim's suicide — *Mouthwashing* seems to be an interesting case to study in the light of the abovementioned scholarship. It appears to be a rare example of a game that provides insight into sexual violence from the perspective of the perpetrator. The narrative follows a protagonist who has sexually assaulted a coworker but does not take responsibility for his actions. In his efforts to evade accountability, he manipulates and exploits other characters, subjecting them to both psychological and physical abuse. However, the game constantly reminds the player of the crime and highlights the main protagonist's guilt, which subverts the common narrative trope of positioning female characters' suffering as secondary (Hoffin, Lee-Treweek 2020: 153). This unconventional approach may have a profound effect on players, influencing their attitudes as both involuntary witnesses and co-participants in the abuse.

The analysis conducted in this paper follows such an assumption, as the paper discusses how the game engages the audience in exploration of the themes of abuse using medium-specific means of expression and horror aesthetics. *Mouthwashing* may be called a game of "subtext", where many themes are conveyed symbolically and communicated through what is left unsaid. It uses uncanny elements to disturb and unsettle the player. The game manipulates player agency to impact their role in the depiction of rape. It seems that *Mouthwashing*, a horror indie game, uses its mediocrity to portray the motif of sexual assault through the eyes of the perpetrator. At the same time the horror elements of the narrative combined with ludic mechanics constructs a critique of rape culture. This paper examines the problem of player agency in the digital game *Mouthwashing*, focusing on how indie horror games manipulate said agency. It argues that by restricting agency through horror aesthetics of madness and the grotesque, the game evokes feelings of helplessness and complicity. As the player takes the role of both an aggressor and enabler, the game exposes the mechanics of rape culture from their perspectives.

Mouthwashing functions as an artistic intervention that addresses the discourse on rape and abuse. It evokes discomfort and fear in the audience by employing uncanny representations of femininity, hallucinations, an unreliable narrator, and the manipulation of agency. Thanks to medium-unique interactivity, the game enables the player to perceive themselves as part of the problem while simultaneously subjecting them to consequences for their complicity. I propose that by incorporating narrative

unreliability alongside active player agency, the game seeks to elicit sensations of helplessness and injustice, while simultaneously revealing the internal dynamics of rape culture from the perspectives of both the perpetrator and the enabler.

Horror genre and the subversiveness of indie horror games

Before delving into the analysis, it seems important to outline the key theoretical framework to structure the study. This theory will be a central reference point throughout the analysis and guide the primary focus areas.

Horror has historically been used to expose taboos and subvert themes. The genre distorts reality through monsters, impossible events, and moral conflicts, often engaging with political and social issues while confronting oppression (Prohászková 2012: 141). Horror uncovers the unspeakable by presenting controversial themes in exaggerated and grotesque forms. This is particularly evident in psychological horror, which explores the instability of the human psyche. Through symbolism and unreliable narration, it addresses complex subjects in a subversive and unsettling manner.

Psychological horror, a subgenre of horror, has mastered conveying subliminal messages. It focuses on the protagonist's fears, guilt, and psychological instability (Prohászková, 2012: 133). Characterised by non-linear storytelling, unseen monsters, unreliable narration, and *the uncanny*, this subgenre evokes discomfort by distorting the familiar. For Freud, the prefix "un" in *uncanny* is a marker of repression — an imitation of the safety first experienced in the womb. However, rather than leading to it, the uncanny evokes danger, fear, and death (Freud 1919: 247). Uncanniness frequently references femininity, birth, and sexuality, which are prevalent in the horror genre. As a mechanism of gendered agency, the uncanny highlights political and social anxieties rooted in the real world. It seems essential to consider the capacity of games as a medium to apply unconventional storytelling techniques in a manner that both respects the subject and engages the audience.

Horror games, player's agency and indie games

Horror games create semi-familiar spaces ruled by forces outside of the player's control, compelling them to face disturbing events, which are crucial for the video-ludic experience of dread. Furthermore, functions such as haptic feedback or interactive elements further amplify the sense of fear. Those features help players feel closer to the avatar, allowing them to perceive themselves as the driving agent of the narrative's progression and outcome (Spittle 2011: 5). The avatar, serving as an extension of the player's body, is central to understanding the unique power of horror games — the manipulation of agency and its potential removal.

Agency refers to the necessity of active participation in achieving a goal. As scholars have approached agency from various perspectives (see Murray 1997; Aarseth 2007; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009; Calleja 2011; Perron 2012), this paper adopts the definition proposed by Wardrip-Fruin, Mateas, Dow and Sali (2009: 7) — a phenomenon where a player's actions align with those permitted by the computational model. The degree of control afforded to the player serves as a crucial mechanism for inducing anxiety and fear, allowing developers to shape the player's experience.

Bernard Perron's *Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (2009) highlights the significance of active ludic agency in fostering player identification with characters and game worlds, particularly within horror games, where such identification heightens emotional engagement. Tanya Krzywinska (2002: 207) further underscores the importance of oscillation between action and inaction, aligning with a recurrent theme in horror: the disruption of agency by forces beyond the player's control. These may be the narration, game mechanics or even the protagonists themselves. Agency in games may be restricted by multiple aspects, like physical or psychological capabilities of the player character, environmental obstructions, and limits of game coding (Boonen, Mieritz 2018: 5), for example, not incorporating jumping in the gameplay. As Harrell and Zhu (2009: 48) argue, agency functions as an expressive tool, and its reduction or removal can effectively evoke feelings of helplessness and confinement.

Using game mechanics to restrict agency may not be a widely adopted practice in digital game storytelling. Such unconventional methods are frequently found in experimental works, which indie game developers predominantly lead. Indie games are considered an opposition to large-scale game development and are described as an "avant-garde of video game development" (Styhre, Remneland-Wikhamm 2021: 481). In recent years, indie horror games have gained significant recognition, excelling in storytelling and evoking fear through minimalistic yet immersive design. These games convey multilayered narratives rich in symbolism by utilising simple mechanics, constrained decision spaces, and distinct visual styles. While their primary function is to provoke discomfort, many also incorporate deeper thematic layers, often addressing taboo subjects. Psychological indie horrors try to explore marginalised topics such as boundaries of morality or the progressive mental decline. Those themes may be conveyed through audio-visual effects and game mechanics, which, among other elements, contribute to the procedural nature of game progression. In this way, digital games possess a unique strength in their ability to represent processes. This concept aligns with Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric, which suggests that games, through their rules, shape player behaviour and influence gameplay progression. Games can guide players toward specific understandings of complex issues by mirroring real-world social, political, and cultural processes (Bogost 2008: 128). The procedural nature of games, when combined with restricted player agency, reinforces their rhetorical power, directing players towards specific interpretation, understanding and emotional response (Bednorz 2021: 86). Given that indie games often take experimental approaches to conventional themes and that horror frequently delves into repressed aspects of human experience, indie horror games may serve as a medium for subverting expectations. They may allow the players to engage with broader socio-cultural discourses, particularly those which are often silenced or evaded in public discussions, such as sexual violence. The indie horror games' rhetorical potential may be heightened by medium-specific tools such as proceduralism or agency. The fusion of horror and games may introduce interesting spaces to study sensitive topics in ways that move the audience. Topics such as sexuality and sexual violence may be brought into broader discussion within the medium of games, particularly in connection to the rape myth acceptance.

Rhetorics of Rape

In order to analyse how games can engage with rape myths, it seems crucial to first outline what rape myths are. Rape myths are pervasive attitudes and beliefs that downplay or normalise men's sexual aggression toward women, shifting responsibility onto the victim while minimising the perpetrator's accountability. This denial is reinforced by a patriarchal system that assumes women bear sole responsibility for the assault (Murray, Calderón, Bahamondes 2023: 1). These beliefs deliberately overlook all parties involved in the assault. However, it has long been emphasised that responsibility for such crimes extends to those who enable the behaviour, whether by concealing it or ignoring it, thus making them complicit. The role of the enabler is frequently disregarded. Reports on sexual violence predominantly focus on the victim, excluding third parties. This omission is closely associated with the broader tendency to emphasise violence against women in both factual and fictional media. The portrayal of such cruelty is a recurring motif in more subversive narratives, contributing to its normalisation and potentially desensitising audiences to its impact. Numerous studies suggest that visual representations of violence can influence real-world attitudes. With rape being a recurring theme in horror and thriller narratives, female characters are frequently reduced to symbols of male pleasure or experience of fright. This is especially evident in the horror genre, where female characters are subjected to extreme forms of fetishisation (Hankins 2020: 21). Moreover, it seems that horror games also contribute to that trend, but due to their interactive nature, they allow for a deeper exploration of the rhetoric surrounding rape. The procedural structure of games and how they manipulate narrative progression can shape specific understandings of the subject, such as playing from the perspective of a victim or perpetrator. Among other game mechanics, it seems that agency plays a crucial role in how players engage within the discourse, as lessening the player's power may evoke feelings of helplessness, exploitation, vindication or complicity, depending on the desired message of the story.

Combining the perspectives above, I posit that elements of rape culture and rape myths may manifest within cultural narratives addressing these issues. Moreover, such narratives have the potential to challenge and deconstruct those problems, which, as noted earlier, the horror genre is especially well-suited to do. In the context of horror games, this medium employs its unique means of expression to engage audiences in reflection on sexual violence, thereby facilitating an interactive and multifaceted discourse on the subject. In the following part of this paper, I will analyse *Mouthwashing* through the lens of harnessing player agency within indie horror games. I contend that through layers of unreliability and the subsequent engagement of player agency the game seeks to evoke feelings of helplessness and injustice while portraying the inner workings of rape culture from both the perspectives of the aggressor and enabler.

Mouthwashing as psychological horror

Mouthwashing (2024) is a first-person indie horror game developed by Wrong Organ and published by CRITICAL REFLEX. It follows the story of a crew boarding a space hauler, Tulpar, which crashes at the beginning of the story. The crew consists of a pilot, his co-pilot, a nurse, a mechanic and his intern. The freighter is said to be carrying precious cargo of the Pony Express company, under which our five characters are

employed. The narrative unfolds through the perspectives of two characters: co-pilot Jimmy, who provides a first-person account after the crash, and captain Curly, who recounts the events leading up to it, specifically seven days prior. The player's experience is shaped by the perspective of the co-pilot, who serves as the primary viewpoint.

Tulpar comprises of six rooms (lounge, utility room with cryogenic pods, cockpit, med bay, sleeping quarters, cargo hold) and a vent system. Tulpar is manually stranded from its path at the game's outset and crashes. As a result of the crash, Curly sustains severe injuries, including the loss of his eyelids, mouth, skin, and limbs, leaving him completely incapacitated and unable to speak or move. His agonizing condition is one of the first disturbing elements that players encounter and foregrounds the symbolical motif of body horror prevalent within the game.

Early in the gameplay, the player may recognise that the narrative is non-linear. The game's narrative is fragmented, with certain segments significantly altered or omitted, and players engage with these events in a non-chronological sequence. Each sequence ends suddenly and unpredictably with distortion, such as a blurred screen or a visual glitch, before moving to another moment in the past or future. Fragments of the story are interwoven with hallucinations and delusions related to a lurking monster in the form of a Polle—the company's horse mascot. The visuals are frequently distorted or blurred, forcing the player to change their path.

As the narrative progresses, one may observe Jimmy's mental decline, as hallucinations become increasingly frequent, ultimately evolving into fully immersive psychedelic episodes toward the game's conclusion. Those distortions do not appear during Curly's sequences, which gives the impression that they resemble Jimmy's state of mind and not the in-game reality. This suggests that Jimmy, the main point of view, experiences hallucinations and disruptions in time, making him possibly unreliable. Jimmy may be considered an *unreliable narrator* — a device often employed by psychological horror texts. According to Nünning (1999: 60), when the recipient encounters some semantic inconsistencies, such as self-contradictions or illogical events, they may try to understand them by attributing unreliability to the narrator. The player must reconstruct the proper sequence of events by disentangling the fragmented and hallucinatory episodes, filling in the gaps that Jimmy's perspective has obscured or erased. Adopting Hansen's taxonomy, we may assume that Jimmy's case can be classified as an example of *intranarrational unreliability*, a case where the narrator self-contradicts themselves (2007: 241). Jimmy's behavioural patterns exhibit characteristics of madness. His delusional episodes serve as reflections of his mind, while he perceives his actions as entirely rational. Distorted elements introduced through the main character's perspective instil fear of the unknown — the truth concealed beneath the deformation of reality. Furthermore, in the context of horror games, unreliability can affect the player's agency. The questionable perception of the narrator may obscure interactive elements or distort the choices available, compelling the player to make decisions they might otherwise avoid under different circumstances. In Jimmy's case, his unreliability impacts the linearity of the narrative, shifting responsibility for his crimes onto other crewmates. His conviction distorts the choices the player must make, as progression necessitates repeated violence towards other crew members. Jimmy's character may represent the unapologetic state of oppressors, who strip away the agency of their victims while justifying their actions.

In the following part of this paper, I will analyse *Mouthwashing* through the lens of harnessing player agency within indie horror games. I assume that through layers of unreliability and the subsequent engagement of player agency; the game tries to evoke feelings of helplessness and injustice while portraying the inner working of the rape culture from the perspective of the aggressor and their enabler. I will address these issues in more detail regarding all parties involved in the sexual assault — nurse Anya, Curly and Jimmy.

***Mouthwashing* as a critique of rape culture**

Anya's story

Anya experienced sexual violence, which was revealed through interaction with her. She never reported being sexually assaulted by Jimmy to the captain; instead, she talked around the subject and only disclosed the pregnancy. Her silence regarding the assault may relate to the fact that trauma is often 'unsayable' (Coupland, Coupland 1999: 117), and victims frequently opt for metaphorical language when recounting the events (Gayraud, Auxemery 2022: 201). The first indication that something may be amiss occurs during one of the earliest scenes in chronological order — the psychological evaluation of the crew. These evaluations are scheduled regularly, and Anya, as the ship's nurse, is responsible for conducting them. This scene, one of the few portrayed from Curly's perspective, occurs seven days before the crash. Jimmy, with whom Anya appears to feel uncomfortable, is the only remaining crew member to be evaluated. She confesses that he consistently fails to take her seriously and makes inappropriate jokes, such as the comment, "I have found myself sexually excited at the sight of cartoon horses" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). When Curly offers to do the evaluation in her place, she seems relieved. In the context of this conversation, it is worth noting that Anya is aware of the close friendship between Jimmy and Curly. As the only woman on the spaceship, she is subordinated to the closed, patriarchal space where men hold higher positions. This conversation emphasises her cautiousness in what she says and does to avoid being blamed for sexual assault, a common issue in patriarchal societies, especially with an established hierarchical order (Murray, Calderón, Bahamondes 2023: 2). Casually mentioning Jimmy's sexual joke may imply that she wants to draw attention to this aspect of his behaviour while remaining calm.

Another scene that portrays Anya's careful approach to reporting the assault is when she talks with Curly about a dead pixel. Curly finds the nurse seated on the sofa in the lounge, watching an imitation of the moon on a big screen. She remarks that she likes the view and occasionally comes to look at it. This information seems vital as the crew has only allotted 5 hours of sleep. However, Anya still chooses to forgo some of this time to observe the night sky. She then asks him "Why [...] Pony Express put a lock on the medical room door but not in the sleeping quarters?" to which Curly responds, "Safety" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). This exchange triggers a visual glitch, filling the screen with distorted texts displaying the word "SAFETY." The glitch and discussion both suggest that safety on the ship is illusory. The absence of locks in the sleeping quarters results in Anya feeling unsafe at night, opting to spend the night in a public space where she remains visible to others. She later draws attention to the dead pixel in the corner of the screen and that it is "always in the back of my mind" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). The

pixel symbolises her sense of isolation following the assault, reflecting her detachment from the rest of the crew. Furthermore, this scene foreshadows disputes among the crew as a single dead pixel often leads to further screen damage. Curly, however, cannot see the pixel as he focuses on the broader picture. This dialogue reinforces Curly's avoidant nature, as he consistently evades confrontation and prioritises diffusing tensions, even at the expense of others' well-being. The game then glitches. In the following sequence featuring Curly, he finds Anya hiding after stealing a gun. She reveals that she took the weapon for self-protection and discloses that she is pregnant. When asked, "Who?" she responds only with "Captain. I told you" (*Mouthwashing* 2024), which Curly immediately connects to Jimmy. This conversation implies that Curly was aware of the distressing situation between Anya and his co-pilot, yet he chose not to intervene. Instead, he confiscates the gun, disregarding her pleas for protection, and assures her that he will speak with Jimmy. Curly opts to protect the perpetrator rather than the victim — a pattern often observed in cases of violence against women.

After the crash, Anya assumes the responsibility for keeping Curly alive. This task proves emotionally and physically taxing for her, as he remains on the brink of death due to the severity of his injuries. The treatment includes forcefully administering medication, a violent and repulsive act that causes her significant discomfort. This reaction suggests that the sexual assault was similarly violent, possibly involving physical force akin to the rough handling Curly is enduring. When Jimmy assumes the role of captain, he questions Anya's medical training before reluctantly administering medication to Curly. However, his doubts should be questioned, as Anya successfully keeps a severely injured patient alive using only medication and bandages, highlighting her competence as a medical practitioner. This, however, fails to convince Jimmy, who perceives Anya as an annoyance. Throughout the game, Anya is consistently belittled by Jimmy, and she refuses to make eye contact with him, preferring to agree with everything that he is saying, even complimenting him, to avoid his aggression.

Five months after the crash, Anya locks herself in the medical room and takes her own life, stating, "It's the best decision I'll ever make" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). This suggests that she had long felt a sense of powerlessness and viewed this act as a way to reclaim the agency that she had been denied within the patriarchal structure aboard the ship. She resorted to the only means available to escape the forced proximity to her abuser. Anya's lack of agency may symbolise the disempowerment often felt by victims in the aftermath of assault, as her experience was disregarded to preserve the *status quo* of the ship — an issue also prevalent in real-world societies, which often legitimises the dominant's group superiority and reasons for violence, particularly in the context of male-female power dynamics (Martini, De Piccoli 2020: 2). Viewed as inferior by Jimmy, Anya is deprived of any autonomy, compelled to submit to his demands, much like the other crew members. Jimmy seems to be the only person who holds agency on the ship, and he does that through manipulation and force.

Aggressor Jimmy

Jimmy's narrative is shaped by coercion from the very beginning, starting just before he decides to crash the ship. This decision follows a key moment shown from Curly's perspective. In that sequence, Curly informs Jimmy that the entire crew has been laid off

and that Anya is pregnant. Jimmy reacts with anger and aggression, claiming that his life will be ruined once they land and blaming Curly for all the failures aboard the ship. This admission reinforces the assumption that the pregnancy was not accidental and serves as evidence of an act punishable by law. His accusation triggers another screen glitch displaying the words “TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.” This moment serves as an example of broader behaviour pattern associated with rape culture — shifting the blame. Within rape culture, we find victim blaming as a technique to at least partially blame the victim for the assault to excuse the violence (Gravelin, Biernat, Bucher 2018: 9). Curly is not the victim in this case. Still, Jimmy justifies his actions by shifting the responsibility to Curly’s negligence in keeping the crew in check.

The player assumes control of Jimmy in the cockpit, where an alert indicates that an asteroid is passing by on the right. The player can move around and interact with various materials within this space. The game provides brief explanations of objects such as the generator and rope; however, any attempt to leave the room proves futile, as the interaction triggers the message, “I can’t let anyone in” (*Mouthwashing* 2024). This mechanic reflects a recurring theme in the game — while the player appears to be free to explore the physical environment, this autonomy is ultimately illusory, as progression requires completing specific actions in a predetermined sequence. Upon interacting with the control panel, the player is presented with a choice menu containing only two options: “Steer right” (into the asteroid) or “Leave.” Selecting the first option results in a visual glitch accompanied by a WARNING sign, after which the control panel confirms that the ship is now on a collision course with the asteroid. Every decision within the control panel is an illusion, offering only the ability to make a ‘wrong’ choice or remain trapped in this space. As this is the game’s opening scene, this sequence establishes a sense of helplessness. The player, lacking prior knowledge of the situation, is restricted by limited agency and effectively coerced into dooming the ship. This illusion of choice fosters a feeling of complicity, as the player must cause the crash to advance the narrative. A horror-like sequence follows this scene. After redirecting the ship and leaving the cockpit, Jimmy finds himself in an unnaturally elongated corridor. Moments later, it becomes apparent that the corridor has looped, sometimes ending in the closed door, forcing the player to go back and forth and ultimately being trapped. As players walk, they repeatedly encounter Polle, with each appearance in a more deformed state. The endless corridor may foreshadow the player’s overall lack of agency throughout the game. Furthermore, during the corridor sequence, the player can hear the baby crying, reinforcing Polle’s symbolic significance. She becomes a representation of Jimmy’s deteriorating psychological state and the responsibility he is trying to evade, which later manifests as the baby-monster lurking in the shadows. The motif of the monstrous infant closely aligns with the concept of the uncanny, serving as a signifier of guilt and a lost sense of safety as the child leaves the protection of the womb. Crying audio signals Jimmy’s emotional turmoil and his fear of consequences, as well as his fall into paranoia.

Jimmy’s progressing madness influences the players’ agency during the game. It is evident every time Jimmy is asked to administer medication to Curly. During this task, the player may ignore it and go around the ship trying to progress with the main story. However, trying to avoid this is futile, as other characters will prevent you from doing

that by reminding you of unfulfilled duty. This is another event of illusive choice—the player may walk around and interact with the environment. Still, they cannot progress in the game until they have fulfilled all the objectives in a specific order. The task of administering medication is significant in this context, as the player must manually take the medication, approach the patient, open his mouth, and only then administer the painkillers. Each time it results in a blacked-out screen and distressing audio of choking and gasping as the medication is forcibly given, one time even accompanied by sounds of Jimmy beating Curly. By removing their options, the game compels the player to hurt Curly's body and endure the unsettling audio physically. This sequence may evoke feelings of guilt and discomfort as the player is forced to inflict pain while violating the patient's bodily autonomy. Those sounds of struggling and suffocation may make Anya unable to perform the task. They seem to evoke Anya's trauma, specifically concerning the use of force during the assault. She even expresses her unease by stating, "It just hurts him so much. I can't stand the noise" (*Mouthwashing* 2024), before retreating to another room, where she curls on herself in distress. This statement suggests that Curly's current condition serves as a reflection of Anya's own experience — one of being stripped of agency and subjected to physical mistreatment. Both Curly and Anya are deprived of their autonomy through harsh treatment or assault. This way, Jimmy reinforces his sense of control, as his victims are rendered powerless to resist or challenge his authority.

Beyond physical force, Jimmy also exerts dominance through manipulation and coercion. This is particularly evident in his interactions with other crew members, especially following Anya's decision to lock herself in the medical room. The only means of reaching her is through the vents, which the ship's mechanic, Swansea, guards. To achieve this, Jimmy manipulates a reluctant young intern, Daisuke, into assisting him. Jimmy decides to drug Swansea to gain entry. Even though it is an in-game character decision, the player must actively participate by preparing the cocktail intended to render Swansea unconscious. Progression in the game is impossible unless the player goes to the lounge, locates the cocktail recipe, and meticulously follows each step to create it. This sequence undermines players' agency to make them complicit in Jimmy's actions, which functions as an expressive tool. As a result, the player may experience guilt about drugging a crewmate and feel like an accomplice to Jimmy's growing madness. This guilt stems from self-attribution of consequences, as players tend to take responsibility for character's actions based on their morality — the more immoral a character is, the more guilt the player will feel (Ahn, Grizzard, Lee 2021: 4). Jimmy's avoidant nature and transgressions heighten this effect, reinforcing the player's discomfort as they navigate his decisions.

The feeling of guilt may be more prominent when the player discovers that Swansea guarded the vents because of the severe risks they posed. In one of the flashbacks, it is revealed that even before the crash, they were: "Fully fuckin' collapsed inside!" and trying to fix them carried a risk of being "impaled, electrocuted and cooked" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). The entire crew was aware of their condition; however, it didn't deter Jimmy, who coerced Daisuke to enter the vents to save Anya. Daisuke initially refuses, recognising the danger, but Jimmy assures him that it would make Swansea proud and emphasises how the whole team depends on him. Ultimately, Daisuke gives in and

enters the vents. While he successfully opens the door to the medical room, he sustains grave injuries, leading to a “mercy killing” by axe, which the player is forced to witness. While Daisuke’s mutilated body is fully visible, Anya’s blurred-out corpse in the medical room visually reinforces Jimmy’s indifference toward her and his refusal to acknowledge his actions. This distorted perception underlines Jimmy’s unreliability and avoidant behaviour as the perpetrator. Following Daisuke’s injury, the ship’s lighting shifts to red, accentuating its uncanny atmosphere — blood covers the floors, empty mouthwash bottles block pathways, the lounge screen is shattered, and protective foam seals the ship from outer space. The ship mirrors the crew’s deterioration. Its gradual destruction symbolises the internal decay driven by violence and death, beginning with the broken pixel representing the assault and culminating in the crew’s demise. The game shifts into hallucination sequences after seeing Daisuke bleed out in the lounge. The player must now retrieve mouthwash from the bloodstained cargo hold, guarded by “A BLIND BEAST, AIMLESS AND RESTLESS.” This creature is a deformed Polle, symbolising the guilt and avoidance that follows the player. Then, the player enters a hallucinatory journey through the vent system, with the screen intermittently glitching to display the red text “TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.” As they progress, the vents become increasingly distorted and stretch endlessly, revealing glitching faces of dead crewmates, their bloodied belongings and eyes emerging from the walls, following the player as they proceed. Upon exiting, the player finds Swansea tied up in an otherwise empty room, with only a gun present. After Jimmy decides that he will shoot Swansea, but it is again the player who must retrieve the gun, access the inventory and use it on him. The player may walk around the room and interact with all available items, but they cannot leave until they shoot the mechanic. This sequence reinforces the illusion of agency by creating a false sense of choice, while only a single path allows progression. This enforced participation is amplified by an unnaturally dark room and scenes of calm scenic views scrolling behind Swansea on a screen that is not even there when the room is again explored after his death. Upon leaving, the screen glitches violently, transforming the scene into a room with an enormous pulsing ovary. The player must use a hand-held ultrasound to perform an examination, which reveals several monster foetuses hidden in the ovary. The scene’s audio is filled with the sounds of a heartbeat and a child’s moaning. Upon finding all monsters, the ovary bursts open, and a horse-monster swallows the character. This sequence is deeply connected to Freud’s (1966: 247) concept of the uncanny, as it manifests Jimmy’s repressed guilt. This sequence represents his denial of all the violence he had caused. While foetuses are typically associated with life, in this context, they symbolise Jimmy’s conscience, reflecting the deaths he had caused. Babies’ deformed forms, combined with the rapid pulsations of the ovary, create a sense of urgency, compelling Jimmy to confront his actions or be consumed by them. The ovary’s rupture represents a ‘violent birth,’ a symbol of male anxiety toward death (Creed 1993: 56), while the monstrous entity emerges from it, embodying guilt, and engulfs the protagonist. After being consumed, the player is met with a jingle declaring them “clean,” as the mouthwash “gets rid of that bad taste in your mouth” (*Mouthwashing* 2024). This is immediately followed by a glitched screen displaying the text “I HOPE THIS HURTS.” Now Jimmy is again in the same vent, being pursued by the same monster, a representation of repressed guilt. The only way

to overcome this encounter is to confront the beast directly, symbolising Jimmy's readiness to reckon with his actions.

At the game's conclusion, Jimmy 'takes responsibility' and descends into a manic episode — the final instance in which agency is manipulated to control the player. Upon exiting the vents, the player is transported to a scene where Jimmy is already holding Curly. With no assigned task and all other paths blocked, the player has no choice but to proceed to the lounge and place Curly on the table, among the 'partying' corpses of the crew members. The player cannot interact with any other items except for the table. Once seated, the player cannot move their character. He is forced to take the only interactable object, which is a knife, and manually cut Curly's stump. Then, the player must solve a grotesque puzzle, rearranging Curly's internal organs while enduring his pained moans. When the scene returns to the party, the room is shrouded in darkness, lights illuminating the only possible way out. It compels the player to carry Curly toward the visible exit. This surreal corridor leads to a room containing a single, illuminated cryopod, directing the player's focus toward it. By maintaining the illusion of free will, the game ensures that the player enacts Jimmy's decisions, reinforcing their complicity in his crimes.

Jimmy seems to employ similar manipulation techniques to those used by perpetrators of sexual violence. He instils a sense of powerlessness by asserting dominance, violating boundaries and coercing others to serve their interests (Burt 1980: 218). Similarly, Jimmy exploits Curly's inability to respond after the crash, mistreating him. He incapacitates Swansea by drugging him, thereby stripping him of the ability to refuse. He emotionally manipulates Daisuke to the point of breakdown, rendering him unable to say 'no'. Jimmy forces his authority over the crew, depriving them of agency. He rationalises it as being 'responsible for them' and trying to be better than Curly. As it all happens with the use of agency-related tools, the game involves the player in their execution, making them both a witness and a participant in the events.

Enabler Curly

Jimmy's focus on responsibility comes from his jealousy of Curly's position as a captain responsible for his crew. However, Curly did not see problems with Jimmy's behaviour. His personal attachments often clouded his judgment. It is visible during his conversations with Anya, as he is the first person she confides in about her situation. However, he prioritises his own emotional comfort over Anya's well-being; he avoids direct confrontation with Jimmy, preferring to reason with him instead. He even gets upset when Anya tells Jimmy about the pregnancy without his knowledge. Curly becomes upset, stating, "You should have waited for me" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). Then he asks, "Did he seem angry?" (*Mouthwashing* 2024). His immediate concern is for Jimmy rather than Anya. His response suggests empathy toward the perpetrator while downplaying Jimmy's accountability, a typical behaviour among third-party observers, who often function as enablers of violence.

Curly embodies the role of an enabler — someone who is aware of sexual abuse or violence but chooses to protect the perpetrator, minimise the victim's suffering, or ignore the situation. Enablers often possess the power to protect the victim but refrain from acting (Guiora 2021: 4). This is evident in Curly's behaviour, as he is fully

aware of Anya's discomfort around Jimmy and his inappropriate actions, yet he never confronts his friend. In one hallucinatory sequence from Curly's perspective, players encounter large red warning signs blocking his path as he attempts to reach Jimmy. This symbolic moment indicates that Curly was aware of Anya's suffering. However, he decided to overlook it to maintain a harmonious atmosphere and preserve his friendship with Jimmy.

This friendship made him trust Jimmy and follow him to the cockpit, the place of the impact. Curly did not manage to leave on time, and his body suffered severe injuries that left him immobile — all limbs were torn off, and his skin was extensively burned along with the eyelids of his remaining eye, rendering him incapable of closing it. His blue eye is a recurring motif in Jimmy's hallucinations, symbolising a constant sense of observation and judgment. Curly being forced to observe Jimmy's action adds to the torture he feels physically. He is once again the passive observer of the abuse, but this time he is also a victim of violence. His medication must be administered to him, and Jimmy chooses to forcefully shove the painkillers down Curly's throat, as he cannot swallow on his own. Each time the player administers the medication, the screen blacks out, accompanied by harrowing choking sounds, suggesting Jimmy's lack of care or gentleness. In one instance, Curly, unable to articulate words, can only groan and yowl loudly enough to wake Jimmy, who responds by giving him painkillers while audibly beating him. The sequences of administering medication are shown from Jimmy's perspective. The blacked-out screen allows the player to fill in the gaps about how the medication is being administered, giving minimal details that befit the horror genre. The contrast between the violent audio and Jimmy's lack of reaction suggests that the brutality of the act does not affect him, highlighting his indifference. Based on the assumption that Curly's incapacitated body may be a metaphor for Anya's violation, this scene underscores the normalisation of violence, particularly against women in media.

In the final scene at the end of the game, Curly is placed on the table, surrounded by the corpses of his friends wearing birthday hats. Jimmy mutilates him, and the audio plays a high and distorted sound of the knife scraping against the bone. Jimmy then force-feeds Curly his own severed stump, compelling him to consume it even after vomiting. This act of self-cannibalization symbolises Curly's erasure, potentially serving as a metaphor of how a rape victim's suffering is often erased in patriarchal narratives. Alternatively, it may represent how Curly, as an enabler, seeks to erase his own involvement in the crime to avoid confronting it.

Curly may serve as a metaphor for Anya's experience. Following the accident, Jimmy treated his body in the same way as Anya's — manhandled, tormented, and objectified. These characters represent a standard structure within rape culture: Anya as the victim, disregarded by Curly, who could have helped her but chose not to, and Jimmy, who feels empowered by escaping consequences and further exploiting others as an oppressor. This empowerment grants him a sense of control. He even turns on his friend, using his body for emotional gratification, violating and tormenting him. Curly's body horror becomes a rhetorical device symbolising the trauma of rape. His repeated abuse at the hands of the oppressor illustrates how turning a blind eye to sexual assault can make the perpetrator feel invincible. Curly's grotesque injuries, his inability to close his eyes, and the agonising moans he produces — uncannily resembling those of sexual

pleasure —highlight the cruelty of rape and the powerlessness experienced by its victims. If Curly's body is a rhetorical tool, his forced self-cannibalisation may represent the victim's disgust with their own body after the assault. His mutilation creates a discourse about the lasting effects of assault on both body and mind, showing how his agency and sense of self were stripped away, leaving him subject to repeated violations. The motif of denied agency is further emphasised by the fact that only the perpetrator possesses any agency, which extends to compelling the player to carry out his bidding. As an unreliable narrator, Jimmy sways the player's actions, and through his distorted perceptions, attempts to evoke feelings of complicity and guilt within the player — emotions that the character himself does not experience. Jimmy thus becomes the source of horror in the game, with his rejection of responsibility shaping the perceived reality and truth within it.

Conclusions

Mouthwashing is a game that resists simple interpretation, requiring the player to read between the lines to understand the underlying issues that drive the characters' behaviour. This task is further complicated by the game's non-linearity, harsh glitch-like transitions, and hallucinatory sequences. As a horror game, it subversively engages with the social issue of rape culture, presenting the problem of assault without consequences and exploring the role of enablers, who contribute to the perpetuation of the harm. The damage caused by enablers can sometimes rival that inflicted by the abusers themselves, with many survivors feeling greater anger and resentment toward enablers than the abusers (Guiora 2021: 2). In Anya's case, she was forced to live with her aggressor for six months, enduring constant belittlement and mistreatment.

Mouthwashing exemplifies the power of video games as a medium for conveying these experiences. It incorporates classic horror elements — such as an unreliable narrator, distorted perspective, lurking monsters, non-linearity, intentional narrative gaps, body horror, forced self-cannibalism, extreme violence, and madness — while adapting them to the interactive nature of the medium through the procedurality and the manipulation of agency. While horror games draw from traditional horror conventions, they simultaneously expand the range of expressive tools, allowing for the communication of subversive themes within horror aesthetics.

Mouthwashing portrays guilt as an all-consuming force, reflecting Jimmy's descent into madness as he refuses to acknowledge his actions. Jimmy, as the aggressor, denies the pregnancy, repressing it through grotesque images of monsters and horse-like creatures. In his madness, he shifts the responsibility to Curly and concludes that both must die for their actions.

The game effectively uses the illusion of choice and manipulation of player agency as a tool to evoke feelings of helplessness and complicity in the crimes committed by Jimmy. The first-person perspective immerses the player in Jimmy's viewpoint, but as an unreliable narrator, this perspective fosters discomfort as players may attribute the consequences of Jimmy's actions to themselves. By manipulating player agency and introducing an uncanny element to the narrative, the game highlights the issue of concealed sexual assault. *Mouthwashing* presents a previously unexplored perspective — that of the aggressor — revealing the internal mechanisms of rape culture from

a rarely examined angle. As a game, it differs from other titles addressing similar themes through its approach to the player as an involuntary accomplice of the oppressor. This perspective aligns with the assumption that witnessing suffering within game medium can decrease the acceptance of rape myths (Beck, Rose 2018: 19). *Mouthwashing* exposes the dangerous role of the enabler. It subverts the player's expectations by positioning them as the aggressor, allowing them to see how one may try to rationalise their behaviour. The player becomes integral to Tulpar's tragic end, serving as the executioner behind Jimmy's decisions.

Mouthwashing, through its horror narrative, positions itself as an artistic intervention addressing the social issue of rape. It creates discomfort and fear in the audience, using uncanny depictions of femininity, hallucinations, an unreliable narrator and the manipulation of agency as a tool to make the player feel complicit in the crime. Playing as Jimmy offers a new perspective on the hidden ideologies behind sexual assault, such as feelings of superiority and the refusal to admit guilt. The characters of Curly and Anya emphasise the loss of self and agency. Curly's treatment after the crash, accompanied by horrific hallucinations, symbolises the pain and suffering of victims. *Mouthwashing* engages with the discourse of rape culture through its horror elements and distorted storytelling. It highlights the consequences of concealing an assault. It illustrates how ignorance or inaction can cause long-term harm to the victim, enabling the aggressor to continue their violence with impunity. This interactive experience is unique to this medium, allowing the player to feel as if they are part of the problem while simultaneously punishing them for their complicity, much like it does with all the characters. The ending credits, playing while Curly is put into the last cryopod and slowly frozen, encourages the player to reflect on the state of violence within humanity.

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