"You Enter a Dark Room":

The Psychological Impact of Horror Games and the

Constraints Limited Information and Resources

Ashton McKenzie

Honors Bachelor of Game Design, Sheridan College Institute of Technology

GAME 43557:

Chris Crowell

December 12, 2024

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 investigates the psychological underpinnings of horror in video games, with a focus on how constraints in information and resources amplify psychological tension and player immersion. Drawing on Kristeva's Abject, Burke's Sublime, and Jung's Shadow, this study analyzes the integration of these theoretical frameworks into the design of Dead Space 2, Darkwood, and Mouthwashing. Dead Space 2 employs grotesque body horror and strategic dismemberment mechanics, transforming each combat encounter into a puzzle that forces players into deliberate, tension-filled decisions. Darkwood evokes the Sublime through the interplay of constrained visual perception and unreliable environmental cues, fostering an atmosphere of awe and dread. Mouthwashing embodies the Shadow, utilizing imagery, symbolism, and level design to explore themes of repression, guilt, and self-deception as players experience the protagonist's psychological decline. By examining these games, the research highlights the innovative use of narrative design, environmental storytelling, and player agency to transcend traditional jump scares, creating profound psychological horror experiences that engage players emotionally and cognitively, and showcasing the creativity and innovation in game design.

Introduction

Media like games are often completely overlooked when it comes to discussing their psychological impact and how various psychological theories apply. In this essay, I will explore the psychological underpinnings of horror in games through three distinct lenses: Kristeva's concept of the Abject as seen in *Dead Space (Both 2008, and the 2023 Remake)*, Burke's notion of the Sublime as portrayed in *Darkwood*, and Jung's idea of the Shadow as depicted in *Mouthwashing*. By dissecting each of these principles, I will analyze how they are woven into game systems and mechanics, effectively deepening the horror experience for players.

To illustrate this, each game will be analyzed in three ways: first, by examining the psychological principle it embodies and how it is used to evoke horror; second, by highlighting a unique gameplay mechanic that reinforces the narrative while connecting back to the psychological principle; and lastly, by applying a relevant psychological concept that explains the player's emotional response and ties all these elements together. Through this approach, I aim to show how game design can invoke profound psychological experiences transcending surface-level jumpscares.

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]

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.

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

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)

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;
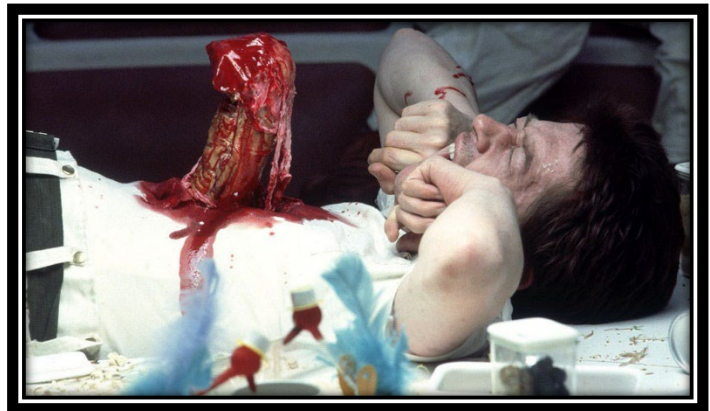

Figure 3: Original "Alien" Chestburster scene

similarly, in Ridley Scott's Alien, the 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

Figure 4: UI built into character model

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 Isaacs's voice lines, depending on his health or specific conditions he's been in, amplifies the tension he feels.
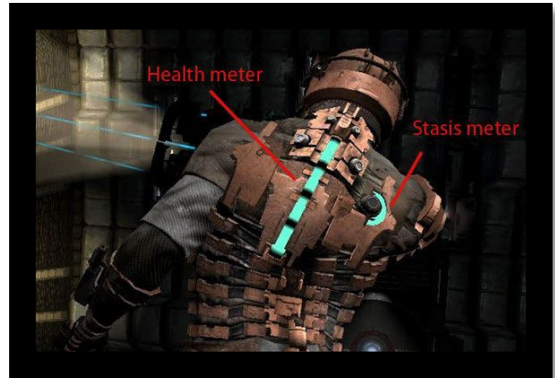
Through the use of strategic dismemberment, visceral enemy design, and an immersive environment, Visceral Games crafted a horror experience that forced players to confront their own fragility and discomfort, an abject feeling. The abject is not merely a visual element but a psychological experience that 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 a 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.

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

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

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, ground 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
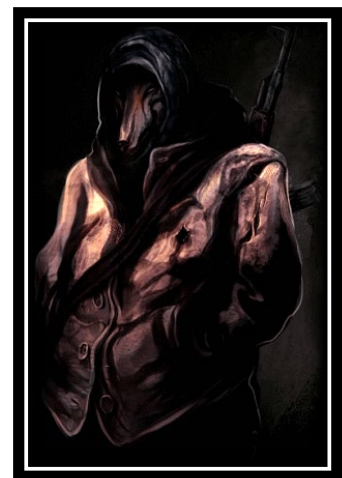
As designers, we often strive to engage players through meaningful interaction, and horror games achieve that by placing players in direct control of their survival. Decisions such as what upgrades for them to take, when to venture away from home or how to manage limited resources directly affect the outcome, creating a strong sense of active participation[6] 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. <u>Safety</u>.

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 even within interactive media like video games. Mouthwashing is a game that leans less on a unique gameplay hook but feeds more into ludonarrative and games as a storytelling medium. It masterfully intertwines Jung's ideas about the Shadow with a unique narrative and ludonarrative 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 side" 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.

Figure 9: Anya and Curly talk about dead pixel

Mouthwashing is a prime example of how this struggle manifests in game design, critiquing repression and projection among its characters. The metagame in Mouthwashing leans away from traditional gameplay hooks and instead relies on an unreliable narrator, social dynamics, and symbolism to create a dynamic centered on deduction, narrative interpretation, and moral judgment. This approach allows players to piece together the truth about who the villain really is, 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. 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.

By focusing on these narrative elements rather than a unique gameplay hook, the game leverages social dynamics and symbolic storytelling to create a psychological experience that demands player interpretation and moral engagement. 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

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

repeated, referring both to mouthwash and the game's constant references to the ship's crash. This repetition creates a sense of unease, underscoring the futility of trying to sanitize the darkness beneath the surface. The game brilliantly uses the idea of form over function—leaning into its artistic, exploratory aspects rather than relying heavily on gameplay mechanics—to invite players to dive into these dark themes.

Character relationships in Mouthwashing showcase the psychological dynamics central to the game's theme of repression and the Shadow. The protagonist, 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 resentment and turning himself into a "pushover." This dynamic, seen through gameplay and dialogue, leads to the eventual psychological breakdown near the game's climax Curly, who remains mostly silent through 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, a character that looms as the unseen threat, 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 villain.

His attempts at "mouthwashing" using mouthwash 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 of repression and projection are explored through environmental symbolism. 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 psychological journey of the characters. From a bright, seemingly peaceful sky to a dark red, these changes mark the descent into chaos and the culmination of suppressed fears and guilt. The mouthwash, dismissed by Anya as "worthless because of the sugar content," symbolizes the emptiness of half-hearted attempts at reconciliation, reflecting both Jimmy's shallow efforts at redemption and Curly's failure to take meaningful action.

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

The narrative design of Mouthwashing is strengthened by the use of speech colors that delineate the characters' emotional states and relationships. The colour-coded speech reflects dynamics—Jimmy's lines are often tinted with aggression and manipulation, while Curly's are subdued, denoting his submissive personality. This use of colour helps to create an emotional and psychological contrast that enhances the narrative. Moreover, the interplay between the characters mirrors the tale of The Scorpion and the Frog – Jimmy's inherent cruelty ultimately destroys those around him despite his claims of friendship and loyalty. Mouthwashing does not shy away from 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 defenceless, 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.

Figure 12: Jimmy puts Curly in cryogenic sleep

The game's ending is powerful in its depiction of the consequences of failing to confront the Shadow. Curly's silence breaks into hysteria when his constrained emotions can no longer be contained, triggered by Anya's suicide and Jimmy's attempt to execute Swansea. Jimmy has finally become undeniable as the Shadow figure, and the repression that held the crew together unravels completely. The motif of eyes throughout the game, Daisuke losing both, Curly losing one but being forced to keep the other open, and Anya retaining both, serves as a metaphor for perception and acknowledgment. Daisuke's blindness is symbolic of lost innocence, while Curly's forced vigilance reflects his struggle to face reality. In the game's final moments, a hallucination of Curly appears, telling Jimmy that he is taking responsibility for the crash and urging Jimmy to finish what he started. Curly insists that he will keep playing the villain so that Jimmy can be the better man in the end. This powerful scene encapsulates both the relationship between the two and the irony of the situation. Jimmy fantasizes about Curly's ultimate sacrifice; he chooses to "shoulder the blame" and "project himself as the antagonist", allowing Jimmy the chance to "redeem himself". This moment underscores the depth of Curly's repression and inability to confront his own Shadow. He opts for self-destruction rather than true integration, sacrificing his identity to maintain Jimmy's facade of righteousness.

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:

The examination of horror in games such as Dead Space 2, Darkwood, and Mouthwashing reveals a sophisticated approach that transcends traditional jump scares, immersing players in a psychological terrain of fear and uncertainty. Utilizing concepts like Kristeva's Abject, Burke's Sublime, and Jung's Shadow, these titles craft rich, atmospheric experiences that resonate profoundly with players. Both Dead Space 2 and Darkwood employ a metagame centered around limited resources and information, effectively generating a sense of tension for the player. Darkwood grants players more access to information while simultaneously introducing unreliability to the player map, cultivating a sense of disorientation and loss. Conversely, Dead Space takes a more combat-focused approach, using resource constraints to amplify the visceral horror and evoke feelings of disgust as players confront nightmarish creatures. Mouthwashing, however, diverges from this resource-based tension, instead leaning into the intricacies of an unreliable narrator, social dynamics, and symbolism. This game fosters a metagame centered on deduction, narrative interpretation, and moral judgment, challenging players to discern the true villain within the story. Ultimately, these games illustrate the potential of horror as a genre that entertains and stimulates profound psychological responses. By blurring the lines between fear, agency, and the unknown, Dead Space, Darkwood, and Mouthwashing offer critical insights into human vulnerability and the confrontation with our darker selves. Their innovative use of psychological concepts within game mechanics, narrative structures, and environmental design enriches the gaming landscape, inviting players to engage cognitively and emotionally with the narratives they unfold. In doing so, they affirm the enduring power of horror to explore and illuminate the complexities of the human condition.

Acknowledgements

If I hadn't had the opportunity to listen to a wonderful Jacob Geller video essay, I don't think I ever would have initially found interest in the complexity and inner workings of the horror genre or even the robust indie scene that is filled with a plethora of absolutely wonderful games by many talented creators. Perfect Vermin, in particular, was one of my first experiences to see the stories a game could tell beneath surface-level scares; for that, I draw inspiration and am truly grateful. I want to thank all of my wonderful friends within this program who have always pushed me to improve my character and grow as a person. Layla, who's shown me that even those who start off rivals can become the best of friends. Brandon, Joey and Sebastian, who've always helped me struggle through my worst, I cannot thank you all enough for helping me grow into who I've become as a professional, and to the many more I don't have space to name. I would also like to thank my Professor Chris Crowell for reigniting not only my love for game development but public speech as a whole and, finally, my beautiful girlfriend who has always ensured that I remain well fed and rested on my countless nights of hard work. I wish nothing but the best of luck to all of you that move forward in your lives and the industry.

Works Cited

Alien's Chestburster Sequence: The Inside Story Behind One of Cinema's Most Shocking
Scenes. (2023, June 26). *Empire Online*.
https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/alien-chestburster-sequence-oral-history/. Accessed
December 3, 2024.

Blackburn. (2017, August 20). *Darkwood Night* [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdfxjpWz8Rs. Accessed December 4, 2024.

Christopher, D., & Leuszler, A. (2023). Horror video games and the 'active-passive'
debate. *Games and Culture, 18*(2), 209–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221088115.

Connolly, A. (2003). Psychoanalytic theory in times of terror. *The Journal of Analytical
Psychology, 48*(4), 407–431. https://doi.org/10.1111/1465-5922.00405.

Cruz, R. A. L. (2012). Mutations and metamorphoses: Body horror is biological horror.
Journal of Popular Film and Television, 40(4), 160–168.
https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2012.654521.

Cthulhu Girl. (2019, April 16). *Darkwood game review*. Cthulhu's Critiques.
https://cthulhuscritiques.com/2019/04/16/darkwood-game-review/. Accessed December 4, 2024.

Dead Space Remake - Dismemberment & Body Destruction Tech Demo. (n.d.). [Video].
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIwY_qCdkVc. Accessed April 15, 2024.

EA, Red Wood. (n.d.). *Dead Space - Diegetic UI elements - Health bar*. Freelance For You.
https://freelanceforyou.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/8/8/15884220/787261097.jpg. Accessed December
3, 2024.

Julia Kristeva's powers of horror: An essay on abjection. (n.d.). [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rpoqr6TZR3o&ab_channel=SpenserSmith.

Roux-Girard, G. (2011). Listening to fear: A study of sound in horror computer games. In
Sound and music in videogames (pp. 192–212). https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61692-828-5.CH010.

Wizard, Acid. (n.d.). *Wolfman*. Darkwood Wiki.
https://darkwood.fandom.com/wiki/Wolfman. Accessed December 3, 2024.