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“This Is a Story about Regeneration”: Understanding *The Missing: J. J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*

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A young woman with long blonde hair slowly works her way through various settings you could find in many cities, such as a church with broken windows, a diner, a graveyard, a power station, and a clock tower. As she does so, she encounters various puzzles that must be solved to progress. Sometimes, she must get hit by a saw blade to remove an arm or a leg, then toss that lost limb into some gears to shut them down. Other times, she will find herself disoriented by large monkey toys playing cymbals and gravity will flip, breaking her neck and some limbs as her world is flipped literally upside down. She may have to reduce herself down to nothing but a head in order to navigate tight areas full of sawblades and spinning gears or set her entire body on fire to progress past vines. All of these methods of brutal self-harm lead to progression within the game, with the woman magically healing all her wounds once she makes it through the obstacles.

This woman is named J. J. Macfield, and her progression, pain, and healing are the center of this game. *The Missing: J. J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* (White Owls Inc. 2018), uses grotesque, unnerving, and absurd imagery and audio to encourage empathy and understanding for the main character, J. J. Macfield. This SWERY- and White Owls Inc.-developed game has the titular character dismember herself in order to progress through the story, even to the point that J. J. can become just a head rolling around.¹ Unlike the traditional mechanics in many video games, you purposefully *harm* your character to progress through the game. The brutality in this mechanic is integral to J. J.'s story and her journey through absurd scenarios such as encountering a strange character wearing a lab coat but possessing the head of a deer who utters medical phrases such as “administering shocks” and “major hemorrhage” in a distorted voice but offers no context of what or who he is or why he has appeared. The gameplay frames J. J.'s experiences in a way that is understandable even without her lived experience. I will argue using the framework of phenomenology and queer phenomenology specifically that *The Missing's* audio design and gameplay mechanics, including the dismemberment of the titular character and the use of delivering narrative through text messages through her phone, are integral to creating an empathetic playing experience for the player.

At the outset, the method of gameplay in *The Missing* and the absurdity seem counterintuitive and even disturbing, but in order to understand the developers' use of the self-harm mechanic and the reasons behind it, one must understand the overarching story of the game. Only then do the reasons for J. J.'s strange and grotesque journey become clear. It is a story of self-acceptance, of seeking the support of those closest to you, and by finishing game, J. J. is able to fight and conquer her self-loathing, represented by a monstrous being called the Hairshrieker carrying a massive boxcutter. J. J.'s physical pain and the body horror throughout the

game represent the struggles that she has with body dysmorphia and her pain dealing with intolerance from her mother and those around her. This gameplay mechanic frames J. J.'s experiences in a way that is understandable even when you have a different lived experience. Katherine Isbister (2016, p. xvii) states, "games can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences." *The Missing* is a great example of this.

Narrative and Storytelling

The Missing begins with a conversation between J. J. (Jackie Jameson) Macfield and her friend/love interest Emily. Emily asks J. J. as they are sitting in front of a campfire if she and J. J. will be together forever. While J. J. initially leans away from Emily, she eventually leans her head on Emily's shoulder. They then seem to share a kiss. Soon after, Emily goes missing, and J. J. explores Memoria Island to locate her, only to be struck by lightning early in her search. After J. J. decides that she cannot die because of the lightning strike, she is magically revived. Due to this experience, she can no longer die throughout the game. This gameplay mechanic is what digital media and games scholar Bonnie Ruberg refers to as "permalife," where the character lives indefinitely (2017, p. 160). Ruberg argues that the inability to die makes these types of games unique by utilizing permalife as a major thematic element or a central feature of the gameplay. *The Missing* utilizes the idea of permalife heavily. This mechanic is crucial to understanding the game and J. J. as a character. The mechanic of dismembering a character—especially a woman character—complete with grotesque sound effects, made for an extremely uncomfortable gameplay experience, even if it was censored to black and white. It is the gamification of self-harm. While this sounds like a negative concept, as you progress through the story, it makes absolute sense as to why White Owls Inc. utilizes this mechanic.

As you progress, the game unlocks past text messages from Emily and J. J.'s mother, and J. J. must collect donuts to see more conversations from other characters. These text messages—including some from J. J.'s stuffed animal, FK—at first glance seem to be part of this bizarre landscape, but over time, it becomes clear that J. J.'s story lies within these messages. Her character is explored and elaborated upon through these messages, which include conversations with her professor, a hypermasculine and crass video streamer, a girl with a clear crush on J. J. who claims to have started a fan club dedicated to her, and a rebellious musician. Through these conversations, we gain insight to who J. J. is and how she interacts with the various people in her life.

Though the above are interesting and add richness to the story, the text messages with Emily, J. J.'s mom, and the stuffed animal FK are the driving forces behind the narrative of *The Missing*. As you progress through the island, more of these messages unlock from a phone archive. At the beginning, many of them are normal, but eventually, you start getting messages from J. J.'s mom that make you question her intentions and make the player worry for J. J. and how she's feeling. Her mother says things such as, "I'm so glad you grew up to be a normal person", while stating that people these days get into "abnormal relationships". She mentions that she "heard that these days, young people like to say, 'I'm genderless'. They're even

pushing to make all public restrooms coed now. I just don't agree with any of it.” When J. J. challenges her mother on what normal is, her mother simply replies, “Normal is normal. The way you were when God made you.” Eventually, J. J.'s mother even argues that J. J. must take care of her body because she is the only heir to the Macfield name.

Meanwhile, the texts with Emily remain mostly casual. They discuss going camping together at some point in the future and talk about how J. J.'s mother is prejudiced and nosy. However, J. J. eventually texts Emily and says, “Emily...I don't know what to do. I think they found out about me at school,” and soon after, J. J. begins getting distorted and bizarre phone calls from Emily. The audio tracks of these calls sound odd. The reason for this is that the actors would say the lines in reverse, then that audio was reversed. This allows us to understand what is being said, but there is an eerie quality to it. SWERY confirms they utilized the same technique that David Lynch used in *Twin Peaks* (1990) to create the distorted phone calls (Andriessen 2018). It is unsettling to listen to, since you understand what is being said but something feels “off” and unnatural. One says, “Is this a dream about little birdies dying?” and another says, “You promised me we'd be together forever.”

As soon as Emily hangs up, J. J.'s texts with her mother continue. Her mom states that despite J. J. asking her not to, she went inside her room to clean. She found women's clothing in J. J.'s room, and J. J. brushes it off by saying they are Emily's. Eventually, the distorted phone calls from Emily continue. She says:

It didn't go over well. I guess I should just go die or something. Heh. But if I go on living, I'll just keep causing trouble for people. It might be kind of nice to die young, you know? I have red wings now. I feel a lot lighter. Red wings. Blood red wings...

Emily says, “I was so happy that you kept being friends with me...even after I told you,” and J. J. responds, “you're still you, Emily.”

After these calls and text messages, which are clearly about a situation of wanting acceptance, Emily and J. J. once again have a text conversation. J. J. says, “Maybe there really is something wrong with me...” and Emily responds, “No there isn't! You aren't sick! In any way! Trust me!” J. J. replies, “Mom said that if I'm not, then God must have just made a mistake...” In a similar response to J. J.'s from the earlier distorted phone call, Emily says, “J. J.... You're you. No matter what anyone says. I know who the real J. J. is. And I love you, from the bottom of my heart.” As more calls and texts come in from Emily, it is clear that her words may not be Emily's at all.

After several messages from Emily about J. J.'s mother, more texts from her mother come in. Her mother announces that she has scheduled an appointment with a counselor who would “be able to figure out what's caused the abnormalities in your mind”. When J. J. explains she is not sick, her mother replies:

Yes, honey, you are...I know I shouldn't have done this, but I took those clothes out of your room and tried to give them to Emily's mother on my way home from church. She said Emily didn't own any clothes like that. Something about how she wouldn't buy clothes like that, and how they were too big...I read your diary. I found out about your secret. Please go to the counselor with me, Jackie. I'm sure

that your mind is just a little unstable. We'll get you back to normal in no time. Back to the smart, well-balanced Jackie we all know. Please...Please do as I say just this once.

J. J.'s mom continues speaking to her about conversion therapy, and she is pleased that the doctor says that J. J. can be cured, returned to "normal," and would grow to be an excellent heir to the Macfield name.

Eventually, J. J.'s secret is exposed, and her classmates begin bullying her. J. J. lashes out at Emily, who is trying to comfort her and says it will go away. J. J. refers to herself as a "freak," "sad," and "pathetic." Based on other messages from characters such as Professor Goodman and Lily, the secret is out—and rather than it being a secret that Emily was hiding like we were told early on in the story, it is J. J.'s secret.

Despite this, J. J. chases a distorted Emily into a clocktower, and Emily's dialogue is telling: "I told her my secret. She seemed really confused...Mind and body...What does it mean to be human?...I'm Jackie. I'm Jackie Jameson. So, who does that make you?"

As the player navigates J. J. to the top of the clocktower, J. J. picks up a suicide note. The note reads:

No one will understand what I'm going through...Some are nice and try to act like they're on my side, but that doesn't mean they'll ever understand. I realize now that it's impossible. I never thought it would feel this painful to be so different from everyone else...But I can't take it anymore. If only 19 years is this bad, then there's no way I'll ever be able to take a couple more decades. Today I'm going to put on my red wings. Blood red wings that will let me fly far, far away. Sorry mom. Sorry Emily.

At this point in the game, it's quite clear that this story is about J. J. and her struggles, rather than Emily's. When they arrive at the top of the clocktower, J. J. sees Emily's body hanged. After she cries out in grief, she has a text exchange with FK, her stuffed animal. In it, J. J. says, "You think I'm not scared? I wish you could see the shit I just went through. You have any idea what it took to make it this far? Can you even comprehend all the pain I'm going through?" These words have a double meaning. J. J. is referring both to the journey on the island, where she has had to put herself through significant amounts of bodily harm and pain to progress, but also the pain she has experienced in her fight for acceptance with who she is. As J. J. chooses to commit suicide alongside Emily, she says, "I'll never leave you again, Emily..." and finally, "What does it mean to live? Were we just born to have sex? When is something really real? Inside and outside...I'm Jackie Jameson. That was my mother's anger."

However, with the permalife mechanic still in effect, J. J. cannot die. According to the game, she hangs for one hundred years, then her body falls into a lecture classroom and heals as it has throughout the game. As she walks, we see ghostly figures behind her bullying J. J. by throwing objects at her while she weeps. Emily eventually comes to help, and we see a quick shot of a ghostly Emily crying over someone's body. Emily runs off, and J. J. once again follows her. After traveling through the

school and making it to the roof, J. J. morphs into a giant monster, reminiscent of a creature that chased her twice on her journey. Armed with a shotgun, Emily yells for her to wake up, screaming that she hates J. J. for breaking her promise that they would be together forever. J. J., in monster form, says that it hurts. Once the monstrous version of J. J. eats Emily, we see J. J. under a spotlight texting with FK once again, and she says she remembers everything. J. J. tells FK that she is dead, and that everything beyond that was a dream she was experiencing. FK informs J. J. that there is still something she must do. She must save Emily since she has not given up and is still beside J. J.

FK then states a line that is crucial to the game and narrative: “This is a story about regeneration. Jackie Jameson’s regeneration!!...Now stand up! J. J.! Beat urself [*sic*]! Accept urself! [*sic*]” J. J.’s response is to ask if she should go on living and if it was good that she was born, and FK replies, “sum1[*sic*] needed u[*sic*] from the moment u[*sic*] were born.” J. J. decides she is ready to fight back and accept herself, and we are treated with real life videos of things such as snow melting and green plants growing underneath, as well as people holding hands. The giant monster that was J. J. is defeated, and she says, “I won’t lose again. I’m ready to accept myself now.”

J. J. is once again chased by the Hairshrieker. However, anytime she is injured either by the environment or the Hairshrieker, she instantly heals herself rather than taking a few seconds for her body to regenerate. She says, “accept the pain” as she runs, forming a silent plan to defeat the monster. As she is battling the monster, she explains that her mind created the demon, she is not afraid of it anymore, and most importantly, “I need to beat myself!!”

After the fight, we find J. J. once again at the campsite looking for Emily. She runs to the field where she was originally hit by lightning to find Emily waiting for her. Emily says, “Did you find what you were looking for? You better not lose it again.” As J. J. sobs, the deer-headed man then runs into the field of flowers saying, “Weeoo Weeoo. Please, wake up. Can you hear me? Administering shocks. BEEEEEEEEEP.” While this is happening, the character J. J. gets struck by lightning once again, but as this is happening, the scene changes. We see a flash of two paramedics standing over someone bleeding profusely with defibrillator electrodes attached to their chest. The scenery of the field fades, and we are back in the lecture hall again.

The character with the defibrillator pads sits up on the lecture room floor next to the paramedics. One of the paramedics asks, “What do you see?” and this person replies, “a deer.” It becomes clear then that the deer-head behind the paramedic is what created the deer-headed man on Memoria Island. The paramedic then shows this character FK and explains that he was “the little guy who saved you. He’s the one who stopped your bleeding.” The character receives a phone call from their mother, and we hear them ask her to stop crying, reply “huh?” and eventually say, “I love you too, mom.” Emily runs next to the character, throwing her arms around them in an embrace. The character says they had a strange dream with Emily in it that helped them find what they were looking for. They then thank Emily for always supporting them. The character says, “I finally understand who I am now. I’ll never leave you again.” Emily hugs the character once again and says, “J. J....me neither.”

The character we see in this scene is shirtless, wearing pants, and male presenting with short brown hair and a deep voice. The story's incorporation of bullying, self-harm, as well as multiple suicides led to this reveal that *The Missing* is about a trans woman who has been in a dream-like state while being revived after a real-world suicide attempt. Ultimately, this is a story of self-acceptance and of seeking the support of those closest to you. By finishing the game, J. J. is able to conquer her self-loathing, represented by the Hairshrieker who carries a boxcutter, who had chased her at various points throughout her journey.² The physical pain and body horror that J. J. experiences throughout the game represent the struggles that she has with body dysmorphia and her pain dealing with the intolerance from her mother and those around her, such as those who created a fake social media page with her pictures labeled "Princess Packing Extra". J. J. up until this point has felt pain because of who she is and intolerance of that identity.

Setting and Character Constellations

Two important settings in the game reflect the conflicts J. J. had in her mind. One is the Franklin Rose Church. The church itself is dilapidated, with fallen shelves and crumbling walls, and the building is inhabited by owls who break through stained glass windows with designs of the deer-headed man praying. This church is also the first time the Hairshrieker chases after J. J. All of this speaks to J. J.'s complicated feelings due to her mom's religious nature, which caused her to reject J. J. as herself and force conversion therapy on her. The other setting is soon after the church in the graveyard. In a basement area of the graveyard, there is a depiction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, but his head is replaced by the deer-man's head. The statue says similar dialogue as it has in the rest of the game ("Danger", "Hello. Can you hear me?", "How many am I holding up?", "Cardiac arrest", and "We need a transfusion now."). The *Vitruvian Man* is intended to represent ideal male body proportions. It does not seem accidental that a game where a character who was assigned-male-at-birth explores her internal struggles with her gender identity has an area depicting the representation of the ideal male body combined with the deer-headed man who is actively keeping her alive in real life.

There is also an enemy in the graveyard and the bowling alley worth mentioning. The creature is a baby doll/spider hybrid with limbs made out of items typically found in a Swiss army knife, which could also be coded traditionally masculine. Baby dolls are a traditionally feminine-coded toy, and to have this toy make up the main body of this enemy that traps J. J. and dismembers her down to a head demonstrates the conflicted feelings that she has regarding gender identity. Further, this enemy is accompanied by a lullaby-like song entitled 'Mommy'—given J. J.'s complicated relationship with her mother and J. J.'s identity, it makes sense this enemy that is associated with the feminine, the masculine, and the mother would cause great bodily harm and pain to J. J. as she progresses.

The conversations between J. J., her mother, Emily, and FK, as well as other characters in the game, allow the player to learn more about J. J. as they continue through the game, and as the player, we discover her interactions the further we progress through the narrative and utilize the brutal mechanics to obtain more donuts. Social interactions with nonplayable characters (NPCs), Isbister (2016, p. 23)

argues, can produce feelings in the players who interact with the NPCs as the playable character. For example, further pain is inflicted in J. J.’s life by two side characters who have archived texts with J. J. Both Philip and Lily’s interactions come across as a little strange at first. Philip is a self-centered hypermasculine streamer who talks about women, cars, and money, while J. J. responds in a mostly disinterested manner. Lily jokes about having a fan club for J. J., says that J. J.’s hands are very pretty, and generally shows an attraction toward J. J. Given the ending twist of the game, we realize that these texts have a different meaning. For example, Philip feels safe in talking the way he does to J. J. because he sees J. J. as a “guy” like him, due to end-game J. J.’s appearance as male-presenting. Lily, on the other hand, has a crush on male presenting J. J., and even goes as far as to question her when she sees J. J. with library books about transgender topics. Lily eventually took it upon herself to tell people that J. J. was “struggling with a condition”, and when J. J. asks why she would do that, Lily replies that she is worried about J. J. but then continues, “I want you to be yourself! That’s not you. It’s weird!!” Lily in one text message contradicts herself in stating that she wants J. J. to be herself, but then denies J. J.’s true self. Lily’s feelings for J. J. only apply for male presenting J. J. rather than who J. J. is, and she ultimately does more harm than good by outing J. J. against her will, which led to her classmates bullying her.

However, we do see other characters who are supportive of J. J. in the texts, even if unintentionally. The rocker friend, Abby, texts a story to J. J. explaining how people bullied a girl in her class for being a lesbian. Abby states that Sherrie is not a lesbian, “and so what if she was?”. Another character is J. J.’s professor, Professor Goodman. Late in the game, he has a conversation with J. J. in which he shows sympathy for her after he asks if the rumor at school about her was true, which J. J. confirms. He then explains that there is a school counselor available and that he would do his best to “deal with the other students”. These two characters show acceptance and tolerance in contrast to Philip and Lily. All of these NPCs give the player a chance to understand J. J. more through reading their text message exchanges and how they interact with her.

Gameplay Mechanics and Experience

Every aspect of the gameplay mechanics and audio are designed to create a level of discomfort to reflect J. J.’s own pain and discomfort, and players often associate themselves with the playable character in video games. Warren Robinett, the developer of *Adventure* (1980) for the Atari 2600, once said:

[P]layers identify themselves with the shape they move around on the video screen. When they say, ‘I ran into a wall,’ they mean the shape they moved ran into a wall; they *are* that shape. (Robinett 2006, p. 697)

It is not only the story and dialogue that drives this feeling of empathy for J. J. as a character—it is the sum of the story, audio, and the gameplay mechanics as a whole, as well as the player’s identification with the playable character’s pain, discomfort, struggles, but also her happiness and triumph. One does not work without the others to create this totality of understanding the struggle and pain that J. J. experiences in the narrative.

Throughout the game, the dismemberment of J. J. is accompanied by grotesque and horrific audio. Whenever J. J. loses an arm, she screams in pain with accompanying gushing sounds. If she loses a leg or her lower half so that she is forced to crawl, you hear a squelching sound as she moves. When J. J. breaks her neck, there is an impact sound accompanied by similar sounds as when she loses an arm. If J. J. is set on fire, she screams several times. If J. J. is reduced to a head, there are continuous sloshing sounds as you navigate through the level by rolling around as her head. When all of this damage is healed, there is an uncomfortable wet sound as J. J. is put back together. All of this audio is designed to make the player uncomfortable while navigating as the mutilated J. J. The players are not feeling the same levels of pain as J. J., but they experience discomfort that builds a feeling of empathy for J. J. and what she is facing every time they are forced to harm her to progress.

Along with the audio, the grotesque gameplay mechanic of body horror, self-harm, and dismemberment is also intended to make the player uncomfortable, and this discomfort is key to understanding J. J.'s struggle of self-acceptance and the pain she has endured to this point. This violent gameplay mechanic creates a story that allows people to relate to her struggles, but also to her ability to self-heal in the face of monstrous creatures that represent transphobia, homophobia, and self-loathing. The double meaning of J. J.'s text to FK regarding the pain she has been through demonstrates that this pain is representative of how J. J. has been feeling in her real life in addition to the physical pain of dismemberment through the gameplay. Surviving the environment and the obstacles is painful, but ultimately J. J. progresses through healing herself, accepting herself, and refusing to die. It is a regeneration metaphorically and literally through the gameplay.

Some of the narrative can be quite relatable to a variety of people, even if it is not their exact lived experience, and the discomfort experienced throughout the game is purposefully there. It is made in the effort to make the player feel. SWERY said, “[t]he point of *The Missing* is to have each player reflect on the story and combine it with their experiences to reach a conclusion of their own” (Hashimoto 2018). Further, when asked about the writing of the story and whether SWERY consulted with transgender people regarding the story and their experiences, SWERY replied:

We worked with transgender individuals, other minorities, psychology professors, and students on this title. Also, as a Buddhist priest myself, I thought deeply about the contents of this title and approached the creation with the utmost care and sensitivity. [...] *The Missing* is J. J.'s personal story, but at the same time, I wanted this game to be something that everyone could relate to on their own.

The structure of the game itself, including the gameplay, the audio, and the story allow for people to connect with the character of J. J. and relate with her personal story and struggles.

While there has been critique of ‘empathy games’ and especially the idea of using video games to teach cisgender straight gamers about the lived experiences of queer and trans people through ‘empathy tourism’, *The Missing* does not aim to make the player understand the lived experiences of queer lives. It aims to have an empathetic story that players can potentially relate to through the story and gameplay mechanics.³ Teddy Pozo (2018) explains that instead of games describing queer

experiences and lives for a cisgender straight audience, games can have “representation of queer characters and queer narratives, but through affective familiarity, representing experiences players may relate to, or fantasies players may share”. Much like SWERY’s hope that everyone could relate to the story on their own, Pozo argues that video games, specifically queer games, can serve as tools to learn about others and themselves through relating the narrative of the game to their own lived experiences. Isbister (2016, pp. 8-9) explains that with storytelling “allows us to experience alternate situations and ways of being human, which in turn informs our own experience of being human”, but the difference in video games, rather than film or books, is that the player actually is responsible for what occurs within the game.

As explained by the Verge’s Julie Muncy, media with transgender characters is frequently created solely for the cisgender lens, and it is often intensely violent with tragic endings (Muncy 2018b). In the case of *The Missing*, the pain J. J. experiences throughout the game eventually turns into a power for her, one that empowers her to fight back, win, and accept herself. This pain is not just for pain’s sake—it is incorporated in the gameplay in order to tell J. J.’s story. J. J. survives what could have been a tragic ending for her, which is a reversal of this trope.

Ruberg argued that permalife games often

directly address queer experiences and perspectives [...] permanent living represents a particularly potent trope for expressing hopes and concerns about contemporary queer life in the face of an uncertain future. (2017, pp. 160-161)

Further, Ruberg says:

[T]he mechanic of permalife could be seen as a powerful refusal of death—a symbolic performance of the will to live in the face of homophobic oppression and violence. (2017, p. 163)

Given that this story is J. J.’s dream after a suicide attempt and her eventual decision to fight against the pain and survive, this mechanic is J. J.’s refusal to die in her life even before she realizes it within the story.

The game opens with the message, “this game was made with the belief that nobody is wrong for being what they are,” and that message is key to understanding *The Missing: J. J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*. The gameplay and audio mechanics are integral to the story-telling process and narrative of the game, and through the discomfort of the brutal gameplay and audio, one can relate to J. J. and feel empathy for the specific character but also for anyone who wants to be accepted for who they are.

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Notes

- ¹ SWERY's real name is Hidetaka Suehiro. He is known as SWERY or SWERY65.
- ² It is likely intentional that the Hairshrieker uses a box cutter as a weapon against J. J. given that it represents her self-loathing, and J. J.'s attempted suicide involved cutting her wrists.

- ³ For critiques of the concept of 'empathy games' see Alexander 2015; D'Anastasio 2015; Dussault 2017; Muncy 2018a; Pozo 2018.