Complicity and Collapse in *MOUTHWASHING*

MOUTHWASHING is a narrative-driven indie game that follows a group of crewmembers stranded aboard a failing spaceship. As the story unfolds, the player witnesses the characters unraveling through addiction, manipulation, guilt, and the collapse of moral responsibility. Rather than offering clear choices or paths to redemption, the game fragments the narrative across timelines and character perspectives. The result is a disorienting, emotionally heavy experience that asks the player not to fix anything but endure it (*MOUTHWASHING*).

The game deliberately subverts player agency and narrative clarity to immerse players in feelings of helplessness and moral paralysis. Through spatial storytelling, fractured chronology, and environmental cues, the game turns interactivity into a source of discomfort rather than empowerment. Drawing on the theories of Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth, Henry Jenkins, and Abbe Don as a lens to interpret *MOUTHWASHING* shows the unique properties of digital media to tell a story not about taking action, but about surviving the consequences of actions already taken.

The opening sequence of *MOUTHWASHING* places the player in a small pilot room aboard the ship. The non-diegetic interface is sparse, offering little more than basic prompts and minimal feedback. A warning alert appears: the ship is on a collision course with an asteroid. The player is prompted to make a manual course correction and given a single option—steer right. After executing the maneuver, the system sounds an urgent warning: the current heading leads directly into the asteroid, but the autopilot is programmed to steer away. The player is then given the option to override this correction. Doing so requires locating a key, inserting it into a control panel, and confirming the override. There is no option to cancel and the only path forward is to take manual control and commit to the fatal course. Once activated, the room floods

with red light, alarms blare, and the monitors flash with system failures. It is the game's first interactive moment—and the outcome is already irreversible.

This sequence immediately subverts traditional expectations of agency in video games. As Janet Murray explains in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, digital narratives often promise new forms of engagement, inviting players to explore "narrative pleasures intrinsic to cyberspace itself" (Murray, 68). *MOUTHWASHING*, however, deliberately denies these pleasures. The crash is inevitable, and the only options the player is permitted to take are the one that causes it or no action at all. The game invites the player into a moment that appears interactive, even urgent, only to reveal that the outcome was predetermined. What seems like a choice becomes an act of complicity.

This denial of agency is a deliberate thematic choice. The opening mirrors the emotional arc of the game's characters, particularly Jimmy, who initiates the crash. Later revelations lead the player to discover that Jimmy assaulted Anya, another crewmember, leading to her pregnancy. Rather than face the consequences of his actions, he sabotages the ship in a desperate attempt to erase the future. Replaying the crash in this context reframes the player's participation: as a player you aren't just guiding a ship, or even avoiding a collision—you are acting as Jimmy burying his guilt. By aligning the player's input with Jimmy's selfish decision, the game begins its central project of entangling the player in cycles of moral failure.

The environmental design reinforces this emotional tone. As Henry Jenkins argues in his theory of narrative architecture, game spaces do more than provide a space to tell stories—they shape how stories are understood, felt, and enacted (Jenkins 4). Here, the sterile isolation of the pilot room, the flickering lights, the absence of any voice or feedback from the crew, all work to create a sense of confinement and foreboding. The pilot room becomes a sealed chamber of bad

decisions—a pattern the rest of the game will repeat. This sequence establishes *MOUTHWASHING*'s central tone: inevitability. There is no heroic save, no branching choice that could have altered what happened. You perform a disaster you didn't choose, and in doing so, the game asks you not to take control, but to share in the weight of it.

In one of *MOUTHWASHING*'s most disorienting sequences, the player, as Jimmy, begins in a room where Swansea is tied to a chair. A gun sits on the table in front of him. The game doesn't offer alternatives; the player must pick up the gun and shoot. But instead of killing Swansea immediately, the action transports the player into a tight and suffocating cemetery. The space is dense and enclosed, with gravestones and mausoleums crowding the cemetery. At the center is a mausoleum bearing a portrait of Daisuke–a former crewmate who died earlier in the story after Jimmy manipulated him into entering the ship's vents, leading to his death. Swansea runs around the area, lashing out if he gets too close. The player must shoot him three times. After the final shot, the game cuts to a stylized scene: Silhouettes of Jimmy and Swansea appear in front of a projected screen, with Swansea still tied to the chair. He delivers a monologue before the scene cuts again, now showing his body slumped forward, dead.

This sequence complicates the idea of player agency. Janet Murray describes digital environments as offering participatory storytelling, where players can shape outcomes (Murray 74). Here, the player performs a violent act, but the result is fragmented and symbolic. Shooting Swansea doesn't lead to a direct consequence. Instead, the game pulls the player into an abstract space where the meaning of the action is delayed, obscured, and expanded upon. The sense of control is minimal. The player is asked to follow through with the scene, but not given any real influence over it.

The setting plays a central narrative role. Henry Jenkins argues that game spaces often carry their own storytelling weight by drawing on players' existing associations and embedding narrative meaning into the environment (Jenkins 6).The cemetery is emotionally loaded: Daisuke's mausoleum recalls Jimmy's earlier actions of manipulating him into taking actions that result in his death, and the environment is built to feel closed-off and suffocating. It doesn't need exposition to tell the player that this is a space shaped by grief and consequence. The narrow paths and visual density make the sequence feel like a confrontation with repressed memory rather than with Swansea himself.

Swansea's monologue further shifts the focus from action to reflection. His words don't explain the plot or resolve tension. Instead, he speaks about disillusionment, honesty, and the crushing realization that redemption doesn't always feel like salvation. It's about a man who tried to change, and did change, but found no peace in it. He ends not as a hero or villain, but as someone who finally knows himself and dares to say it out loud, and points out Jimmy's inability to do the same. Abbe Don's idea of contextual storytelling is relevant here, where meaning emerges through interaction with a system or story over time (Don 387). Swansea's tone and meaning are only fully understood if the player has followed the game's emotional arc. His reflection builds on everything the player has already witnessed—Daisuke's death, Anya's withdrawal and suicide, Jimmy's breakdown.

The final image of Swansea, dead, bloodied, and slumped in his chair, doesn't resolve anything. The sequence offers no branching outcome, no emotional payoff, and no escape from what came before. It leaves the player in a familiar position within *MOUTHWASHING*: watching something irreversible, having participated in it, but unable to change it.

In one of the final scenes of *MOUTHWASHING*, the player takes control of Curly, who is confined inside a cryopod. From behind fogged glass, Curly watches as Jimmy enters the room, tells him, "[he]... fixed it," and then walks out of view. A gunshot follows, accompanied by a flash of light. The player cannot move. There are no branching options, no way to intervene or respond. Interaction is limited to small actions, like adjusting the camera slightly. The scene plays out slowly, carrying a sense of quiet inevitability. This moment speaks directly to Janet Murray's concept of immersion and agency (Murray 74). While Murray argues that digital media often promises participatory storytelling—offering players the chance to enact meaningful change—*MOUTHWASHING* strips that away entirely. The game uses that denial thematically. You are immersed in the world, but unable to act upon it. As a player, you interact with the game's systems but these actions only advanced a predetermined future. You are not empowered to change the outcome but instead made complicit in it. The game invites your participation while denying you agency, implicating you in Jimmy's spiral through your performance. The interface becomes a kind of anti-agency, aligning the player's helplessness with Curly's own moral paralysis. You don't just watch Jimmy die—you endure the knowledge that you could do nothing to stop it. The tragedy isn't that he dies but that he dies believing he made things right. He never acknowledges his wrongdoings or faces consequences for his actions. As a player, you're left with the unsettling weight of his self-deception and your role in sustaining it.

This scene also exemplifies Henry Jenkins' idea of narrative architecture, where game environments are not just backdrops, but storytelling devices (Jenkins 4). The cryopod, once a space associated with safety or stasis, becomes a tomb—both literal and emotional. Curly is entombed with his memories, and the player is sealed in with the consequences of everything that has unfolded. This transformation is solidified by the game's final image: you alone in the

pod. It is not a place of rest or redemption, but a vessel of guilt, failure, and experiences that cannot be undone. The confined visual perspective reinforces this: you view the world through layers of distortion, from behind glass, immobilized. The spatial design here doesn't support exploration, it communicates emotional suffocation.

The emotional impact of this moment, however, depends entirely on the interpretation of the game, making it a clear example of Abbe Don's contextual storytelling (Don 384). The meaning of Jimmy's suicide is not given—it is constructed through everything the player has experienced leading up to this point. As the player, you have witnessed his manipulation, his unraveling, and the damage he's inflicted on others and himself. In that sense, the scene doesn't deliver narrative closure; it delivers emotional accumulation. As the developers noted in a Washington Post interview, the phrase "I hope this hurts" appears multiple times throughout the game (Park). And by the time you reach this point, it does.

This sequence functions as a kind of ending, but without catharsis. There is no resolution, no redemption, just memory and the unshakable feeling that you were made to witness something you didn't want to see. The player's lack of control is the emotional heart of the scene. In the end, MOUTHWASHING doesn't ask you to act, but asks you to live with what cannot be undone.

Where literature or film might depict guilt, helplessness, or moral failure from a distance, *MOUTHWASHING* places the player directly inside those feelings. It does not simply show these emotions, but it forces the player perform them. The game's interactivity does not grant agency or choice; it creates entanglement. The player is implicated in actions they cannot prevent and outcomes they cannot change. This design aligns with Janet Murray's and Espen Aarseth's theories, though it applies them in unconventional ways. Murray discusses how digital

environments allow for participatory storytelling and immersive engagement (Murray 74). Aarseth focuses on the nontrivial effort required to navigate ergodic texts and the emotional resonance of paths not taken (Aarseth, 1, 4). *MOUTHWASHING* builds on both ideas, but turns them toward discomfort rather than empowerment. The game uses interactivity to restrict the player's control and foreground their emotional proximity to failure. In doing so, it demonstrates how digital media can convey meaning, but rather than through freedom, it does so through limitation.

Compared to other narrative forms, the experience *MOUTHWASHING* offers is uniquely visceral. The player's complicity—pressing the button, pulling the trigger, watching helplessly—is essential to the game's emotional power. It is not the choices the player makes that define the story, but the weight of knowing they could never have chosen differently.

MOUTHWASHING turns traditional video game storytelling on its head. It withholds agency, fragments truth, and redefines interactivity as a source of emotional weight rather than narrative control. The player is not a protagonist shaping events, but a witness bound to the consequences of others' decisions. Each scene from piloting the ship into failure, pulling the trigger in a symbolic graveyard, to watching helplessly from behind glass reinforces the game's commitment to discomfort and narrative paralysis.

Through the frameworks of Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth, Henry Jenkins, and Abbe Don, *MOUTHWASHING* reveals the unique capabilities of digital media to explore themes of guilt, powerlessness, and memory. Murray's immersive environments become spaces of paralysis. Aarseth's unread paths become emotional burdens. Jenkins' storytelling spaces become haunted architecture. Don's contextual storytelling becomes a means of layering meaning through perspective, silence, and spatial design.

In the end, *MOUTHWASHING* offers the illusion of control, but undermines it at every turn. Its power lies in how it entangles the player in its events and forces them to endure it. It offers a vision of interactive storytelling that is more than a fantasy of choice; rather an experience of shared suffering.

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