

Game Narrative Review

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December 2018

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Game Title: The Missing: J.J. MacField and the Island of Memories
Platform: PC – PS4 – XBOX ONE - SWITCH
Genre: 2.5D Puzzle Platformer
Release Date: October 12th, 2018
Developer: White Owls Inc.
Publisher: Arc System Works
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hidetaka Suehiro (SWERY)

Overview

How much suffering can one person endure to become the person they've always been?

The Missing: J.J. MacField and the Island of Memories is a 2.5D puzzle-platformer developed by White Owls Inc and written/directed by the eccentric Japanese game director Hidetaka Suehiro (SWERY 65). It follows J.J. Macfield and her journey across Memoria Island in pursuit of her lost love interest Emily. The core mechanic is self-mutilation and recovery; the game's puzzles requiring J.J. to be dismembered, beheaded, electrocuted, and burned alive in order to progress. It is a story of identity and struggle that ties its main mechanic directly into its message. J.J. is broken down time and time again but always manages to get back up and continue living.

The game takes place in J.J.'s own mind after a public suicide attempt. In a dissociative state between life and death all of her fears and anxieties are made real, represented by the characters and events that compose the bulk of the game. The island of Memoria is J.J.'s purgatory – a place for her to come to terms with her own truth and identity.

Characters

J.J. MACFIELD – Jackie Jameson MacField is a soft spoken honours student coming to terms with her true identity. She studies product design with a focus on prosthetics and works for her professor as a teaching assistant. J.J. is a trans-woman using university as a fresh start for her identity. J.J. wears a long white wig, button down shirt and skirt. She attends as a woman and is recognized as such until a social

media account pretending to be her posts shaming images of her without wig and make-up. With her new life and true identity threatened J.J. is driven to a public suicide attempt, cutting her wrists in a full lecture hall: this sets the events of the game into motion. While she maintains a professional rapport with her school acquaintances she's only able to confide in Emily, her best friend since childhood, and F.K., her stuffed animal. Her relationship to her conservative religious mother is strained. J.J. is the player character. She loves donuts.

EMILY – Emily is J.J.'s best friend, confidant, and romantic interest. She is the ultimate representation of what J.J. wants to be: self-assured and feminine. Emily is wholly accepting of J.J.'s identity from the moment J.J. shares it with her. J.J. spends the majority of the game chasing after Emily in an effort to save her from the horrors of the island.

F.K. – F.K. is a stuffed animal and J.J.'s first best friend. He's an amalgamation of parts from J.J.'s previous stuffed animals after they were chewed up by her grandfather's dog – his head has one rabbit ear and one antler – one cat leg and one human woman leg – a tail made of a rabbit, squirrel and cat's tail. He communicates with J.J. throughout the game via text, guiding and chiding her – he's the only character to message J.J. back. While never fully understanding J.J.'s situation, he functions as a pillow to scream into, much like a real stuffed animal. He plays dumb and unwittingly eggs J.J. on but remains a constant font of love and support.

MOM – J.J.'s mom is a single parent and a conservative Christian that does not accept J.J. as a woman. She burdens J.J. with her expectations and acts as the primary emotional antagonist throughout the game. Mom expects J.J. to deliver grandchildren and a “normal family,” to continue the MacField line and bring some semblance of normalcy back to the family. After finding women's clothing in J.J.'s closet she demands J.J. seek religious and psychological counseling in an effort to “cure” J.J. of her true nature. As isolating as she is to J.J. she too is isolated by J.J. – the only member of her family left after her husband passed – and can't understand why J.J. doesn't see things from her point of view. She wants the best for her daughter, but only if she'll be her son.

THE HAIR SHRIEKER– A gnawing mass of white hair with thrashing limbs wielding a giant box cutter; the Hair Shrieker is the primary physical antagonist of the game. J.J. first encounters the beast chasing after Emily near the start of the game, establishing it as a threat to everything J.J. holds dear. The box cutter it wields is the same weapon J.J. used in her suicide attempt. The blade represents true death, being one of the only objects in the game that can actually kill J.J. In her palliative dream world the blade is something to be afraid of implying she's not ready to face death and yet the thought is always there. The Shrieker's long white hair bears a striking resemblance to the profile picture on the fake social media accounts used to shame J.J.

DEER MAN – Deer Man is man in a doctor’s coat with the head of a dear. His movement is erratic and twitchy and he runs on all human fours. When found in game he loops distorted dialog like “major hemorrhage,” and “shock administered.” He’s present when J.J. first regenerates herself, implying he’s part of the reason J.J. is able to keep going. In the real world Dr. Moose is an EMT in the process of resuscitating J.J. after her suicide attempt.

PROF. GOODMAN – Professor Goodman is J.J.’s mentor, boss, and leading male figure in her life. Goodman is the only “good man” in the game. He supports J.J. academically and professionally and accepts her identity without question. He likes to tease her about her lack of pop-culture knowledge – specifically around the industrial design of Star Wars props. He often compares J.J. to his own daughter which validates J.J.’s identity and establishes Goodman as a pseudo father figure in lieu of J.J.’s own. His phone contact icon is an empty chair.

ABBY – Cool, tough, takes no shit. Abby is J.J.’s friend and classmate. She’s constantly getting into scuffs and arguments and is a self-professed tomboy. Abby is masculinity in a woman’s body a counterpoint to J.J. but the two share an understanding in their opposite but similar natures. Her phone contact icon is a photo of her red electric guitar.

LILY – Lily is a quiet and overbearing class friend to J.J. She has a not so secret crush on J.J. She texts her in the guise of study help but slips in personal questions and cute but suggestive stickers. Her phone contact image is a close-up picture of her cat Sebastian.

PHILLIP – Phillip is toxic masculinity personified and a representation of everything J.J. does not want to be. He dreams of becoming a “Jake Paul” style YouTube star, shocking his audience by smashing phones his dad bought him. J.J. is forced to keep Phillip on a school performance plan by Prof. Goodman, opening the gates to unsolicited texts asking J.J. to check out his most recent video. His phone contact icon is a scary clown a la Sweet Tooth from Twisted Metal.

Breakdown

Context & Representation

“This game was made with the belief that nobody is wrong for being what they are.” – 1st message in The Missing

The Missing is by no means a subtle game. It is heavy handed in its metaphors and crystal clear in its imagery, and ultimately effective in its execution. It is a story about a trans-woman coming into her true identity in between death and recovery and uses death and recovery as its core mechanic. The game doesn’t fully reveal the truth of the world until the final act, but it slowly trickles hints and narrative through texts from

J.J.'s past. The bulk of the narrative is communicated through non-interactive sequences, embedded symbolism in the environment, and said text messages. The game's primary verb is "suffer" and it doesn't shy away from making J.J.'s self-inflicted deaths truly stomach churning. You see her beaten, immolated, and cut into pieces in cartoonish detail. When recovering from broken bones J.J. snaps her neck back into place with a dramatic crack and camera shake. When she's down to only one leg she falls to the ground after every few hops, forcing the player to slow down and pick her back up. Early game this comes across as a gratuitous conceit for a mildly interesting puzzle mechanic, almost self-indulgent, up until the whole of J.J.'s story is delivered. The whole of *The Missing*'s story narratively justifies the use of the self-harm mechanic, but that doesn't excuse it from falling into tropes and stereotypes so common in LGBTQ media, or make it a fully effective thematic tool.

It is significant that game developers are willing to attempt to tell an earnest story starring a transgender character. It is even more significant that an independent Japanese developer lead by a non-trans creative lead would attempt to tell this story. Transgender individuals are not recognized as Japanese citizens unless they follow strict bureaucratic guidelines for gender reassignment – part of this process includes forced sterilization. Japanese citizens are not allowed to marry transgender citizens until they meet these requirements.¹ It is important to fight the toxic notion that trans people are not people through art, media, and discourse; and White Owls have given their take. Trans stories don't sell like straight cisgender stories do, and attempting to tell the story of a marginalized group while not being a part of it justly opens you up to criticism. White Owls took a risk with *The Missing* and they should be lauded for adding to the conversation, but they are not pardoned from the game's questionable portrayal of the LGBTQ experience.

The crux of J.J.'s character is that she is transgender and suffers for it. The only issues she deals with are trans issues: body dysphoria, mental illness, and self-harm. While the focus of the game is to communicate J.J.'s experience coming to terms with who she is as a trans woman this narrow portrayal reads as a shallow interpretation of the fears and anxieties specific to the trans experience. A survey conducted by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in 2014 found 41% of transgender Americans have attempted suicide at least once.² Violence and self-harm are so closely tied to the trans experience that the mechanic of mutilating a transgender body feels exploitative, especially when the thematic weight of the suicide mechanic becomes just a mechanic. After 2+ hours of play the player is murdering J.J. just to get through the game, not to feel the weight of her suffering.

Dead Lesbian Syndrome is a recognized trope where straight creators build LGBTQ characters up to have them die tragically in service of plot and character development for the main straight cast. Liron Cohen describes its origin: "Homophobic writers used to do it in the name of restoring social order, or as punishment for a sinful

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/forced-surgery-sterilization-japan-s-trans-community-faces-uphill-battle-n870411>

² <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf>

lifestyle. Then they did it to teach a homophobic society a lesson, to show them how miserable gay lives are and make them feel bad about it.”³ While J.J.’s story does have a happy ending, the majority of the game requires her constant murder and mutilation and after only an hour of play the game may be written off for having “killing a lesbian” as its main mechanic. *The Missing* overcomes this trope is in its portrayal of J.J. and the supporting cast of characters – J.J. isn’t dying in service of anyone else, but to overcome, grow, and heal. This is a story about regeneration. It has a happy ending, which is rare in LGBTQ media.

Characterization

“so what exactly do we need to do for the essay” – Abby

The characters of *The Missing* are most often read and not heard. J.J. has a cellphone that the player can access to read text messages that are both given and earned. As J.J. reaches certain points in the game new messages from Emily and Mom will be unlocked, giving the player a direct and un-missable window into J.J.’s true identity and the broader narrative and plot. The player can unlock supplemental texts from F.K., Prof. Goodman, Abby, Lily, and Phillip by collecting donuts scattered across the levels, typically requiring an extra level of puzzle solving to collect. These supplemental texts give the player a more domestic insight into who J.J. is and what she is to different people and personalities.

The strength of these texts is in the believability of the writing; the characters text like real people. Their use of grammar is reflective of their personality and their relationship to J.J. Prof. Goodman speaks directly, professionally and in long form paragraphs. Lily texts with cute emoticons [☺•••?] and cat stickers. Conversations range from benign discussions on upcoming projects to real heart to hearts about struggle, identity, and society’s expectations of them. They’re believable. Not every conversation humans have is meant to move their plots forward – sometimes it’s just a check in or rant or make a dumb joke. The quality of the dialog cannot be understated. Writing believable young adults is capital h Hard and if the texts were even a micro-percent less believable these stories would ring hollow. Here’s an example conversation between J.J. and Abby:

Abby: I dyed my Hair

J.J.: Again?

J.J.: What color?

Abby: purple

Abby: and

³ <https://ladypartstv.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/lesbian-lives-matter/>

Abby: green

J.J.: [sweet emoji]

Abby: and

Abby: a little white

J.J.: Very colorful.

Abby: I got sick of my old colors.

From this small exchange much can be interpreted about both characters. J.J. is direct and to the point. Her grammar is proper, she's interested in Abby's slight hair change, and doesn't mind using emojis or stickers to give her text personality. Abby is quick, impulsive, sending thoughts as soon as they pop into her head. It's clear that J.J. and Abby are different personalities, and the interplay between the two is revealing of both characters, particularly J.J. who for most of the gameplay sequences is reduced to cries of anguish and calling out for Emily. The player develops an image of J.J. in their head based on the image J.J. presents to others – not the way she's represented in gameplay.

The supplemental texts are unlocked in chunks: collect 36/255 donuts and receive one new text chain from each side character. The donuts are collected through extra puzzle challenges and hidden secrets. This is meaningful as the narrative is the “carrot on a stick” being used to get players to engage with the game on another level. This speaks to White Owl's care for the narrative and the strength of these text exchanges – players will want to seek these optional narratives because they're interested in J.J., her friends, and the world being presented. This can be a frustrating system for players who enjoy the narrative more than the death puzzles. These extra challenges are not easy and not always obvious. The fact that a player could go through the game and miss most of these terrific conversations weakens the game and hinders the overall narrative. The gameplay and narrative are not so closely tied that people who like rolling J.J.'s dismembered head through tough platforming challenges will be the same people that care about the colour of Abby's hair or vice versa.

The mandatory text messages from Mom and Emily are used to fill in the more personal details of J.J.'s life and how she ended up on her path to suicide – the ultimate plot of the game. The messages start off mundane: Emily and J.J. planning a weekend trip to Maine, Mom checking in on her progress in school (and elaborating on a strict career plan she has set out for J.J.). As the game progresses secrets the player isn't privy to begin to be mentioned. An uneasy mood is set. Mom starts to get more serious, her conservative views leak out. J.J. confides her feelings with Emily giving the player a direct perspective into J.J.'s state of mind as key events unfold. Mom eventually finds women's clothes in J.J.'s closet too big for any of her female friends to fit in. Her secret is out and J.J. is offered spiritual and psychological counseling to fix her “deviancies.”

J.J. tells Emily she's considering it just to appease her mother but Emily reassures her, tells her there's nothing wrong with her, she's just J.J. These texts come in at scripted moments that sync up with the trials J.J. is undergoing in her dream state. This allows the game to introduce one of the strongest of the aspects of the narrative:

Metaphor

“sunset colors n the bell at train crossings.” – F.K.

The island of Memoria exists in an uninterrupted dissociative dream state AKA Hidetaka Suehiro's wild metaphor amusement park. Every environment and character is directly representative of J.J.'s fears and anxieties surrounding her identity, how she is perceived, and what is expected of her. These metaphors, particularly the environmental ones, are successful in creating a game space that is relevant to the character and works to communicate her struggle and mindset to the player without just telling it to them through dialog or exposition. They contribute to the “feeling” as much as they do the narrative. The saw mill sequence requires J.J. to destroy herself on the open blades in order to rebuild again somewhere safer. The saw and blade directly correlate to her body dysphoria. A saw is a tool to cut off the part that is the root of her suffering – her male genitalia. A blade is what J.J. eventually used to try and end her life. The phallic imagery of the logs cut open peppered throughout the area further clarify that this area is a place for rebuilding and deconstruction of the male form – a place J.J. visits in her mind constantly.

There are characters that serve as walking metaphors that are worth examining. The most striking is Deer Man – a doctor in a lab coat with the massive head of a deer. J.J. encounters him when she first gains her regeneration powers at her first in-game death and pops up from time to time in hidden areas. He speaks in backwards talk – a voice over effect where an actor recites a line backwards and the recording gets reversed, creating a slightly off, uncanny valley version of the normal line. *The Missing's* backwards talk is a reference to the backwards talking dwarf from *Twin Peaks*, a show that's a recognized source of inspiration in Swery's games. In *Twin Peaks* backwards talking occurs in the dreams of the main character Dale Cooper – this indicates a metatextual relationship between the two works and allows an aware player to clue in to Memoria being a world derived from J.J.'s subconscious before it is fully revealed. Emily also speaks in backwards talk, further signifying the dream world. Deer Man in reality is the EMT attempting to resuscitate J.J. after her suicide attempt. In the classroom where the attempt took place it is revealed in the ending sequence the EMT is in front of a large stuffed deer head, and so in J.J.'s dissociated state she combines the two key images she sees into one amalgamated form that leaks into her Memoria. The presence of Deer Man is the presence of help and recovery – he's an anchor into reality and shows that the people haven't given up on J.J. She still has a place in this world.

There are a few key sequences in the game that tie narrative and environment together in a natural and intelligent way. One of them is the train sequence where J.J.

must pass through a train stuck inside of a tunnel about halfway through the game. This is around the time Mom reinforces her career plan for J.J. through an unlocked text conversation. J.J. navigates to the other side of the stuck train and proceeds through the tunnel. The train then suddenly becomes loose and goes careening straight towards J.J. She is smashed by the train and must dodge the rest of the cars by rolling under and through them with just her dismembered head. The train tunnel is representative of the plan Mom has set out for J.J., the path J.J. has been “railroaded” onto. The train itself represents Mom’s crushing expectations of J.J. and how they run right through her as a woman. The train of expectations smashes J.J.’s womanly body leaving her as just a head that must carefully navigate the following train cars. Her true body must be obscured if she is to traverse this situation only to regenerate later behind the back of her mother. This isn’t just an action/puzzle sequence for the sake of needing an action/puzzle sequence – it is a direct metaphor for one of J.J.’s biggest anxieties and is part of what led her to her eventual suicide attempt.

The most significant metaphor in the game is Emily – J.J.’s love and emotional confidant whom the player spends the entirety of the game chasing after: the “missing” in question. On the island of Memoria Emily is not actually Emily: she is a representation of the acceptance and femininity that J.J. is chasing after. To J.J., Emily is the only person in her life that accepts her as a woman but knew her as a man. This is revealed through Emily’s constant messages of support and love received through the mandatory text messages. The Emily of Memoria is J.J.’s Jungian shadow that J.J. has yet to accept. She is aware of this presence and is so desperate for it – she spends the game murdering herself time and time again just to get closer to it, but in the end, her true self is just out of reach. J.J. finally confronts Emily at Memoria’s representation of the clock tower, the place where J.J. first told Emily that she is a woman. The clock tower is where her life truly began. J.J. chases Emily up the tower while being assaulted with backwards talk thoughts from the deepest part of J.J.’s shadow. “Do we exist just to have sex?” This line stabs at J.J.’s fear of reproduction and the expectations her mother has, that J.J. deliver another MacField into this world. It questions whether her identity is valid if she cannot reproduce. These emotional assaults come to a head once J.J. reaches the top of the tower. There she finds Emily hanging from a noose. The love and acceptance J.J. has for herself has died. The idealized version of herself that she came so close to realizing before being revealed as transgender has died. With it ended J.J.’s will to live is gone, and she steps towards the noose beside Emily and hangs herself. But J.J. cannot die.

The only thing that can kill J.J. is her suicide, represented in game through the primary antagonist: The Hair Shrieker; the antithesis of Emily. It represents J.J.’s self-hate and lack of acceptance. It wields a massive boxcutter, the same implement J.J. used at the peak of her self-loathing. It takes on the mocking form of the social media page used to shame her. While J.J. is chasing Emily (her acceptance and true nature), the Hair Shrieker chases J.J., her darkest thoughts and doubts; the kind that end in suicide. J.J. operates between these two forces throughout the game until the final confrontation, and the highlight of the game.

Strongest Element

“I’m in a hurry, you know. You’d better not get in my way.” – J.J.

MacField

The Missing is the most successful in its pacing and delivery of the narrative. It starts out normal enough: J.J. and Emily escape to a mysterious island for a weekend getaway but Emily goes missing. J.J. follows the white rabbit until she is struck by lightning and burns to death. Then Deer Man shows up and everything gets wild. J.J. gains the ability to resurrect and check her phone and the messages start coming in. The pace in which the mandatory texts are delivered is well tuned. They typically come in after an intense puzzle sequence or high-stress action sequence. They offer moments of respite and story development that the player can explore at their own pace. Combined with the optional messages the player can seek out through extra challenges the narrative is delivered in natural arcs that never leave the player too long without context or story to chew through. This narrative loop allows for the J.J.’s dramatic arc to be deliberately paced out and tied to gameplay sequences (like the runaway train). It feels natural, and when the game starts disrupting the loop through intense exchanges between J.J. and Emily and J.J.’s Mother the moments resonate. Respite is replaced with drama leading up to the final act, adding a sense of urgency to the moment to moment play.

Unsuccessful Element

“Can you even comprehend all the pain I’m going through?” – J.J.

MacField

The ultimate failure of *The Missing* comes at the very end of the game after the credits roll. The player is brought back into the main menu with a new text from Deer Man: a stats screen. These stats list important thematic details like: “Broken Bones: 37” “Burns: 11” “Amputations: 216” “Blood Lost: 67.74L” “Distance Traveled as a Head: 1.22km” and so on. The inclusion of this screen trivializes every ounce of credibility its story had earned. J.J.’s suffering becomes quantified as something a player might want to collect. It treats self-harm as points. Not only does it trivialize its own story but the story of every trans person that has been murdered or committed suicide. The intent may have been to get the player to empathize even more with J.J.’s horrible journey but the result was the total opposite. Suffering can’t be enumerated – especially when describing the real suffering of a real group of people – a group this game is trying to represent. It comes off as clumsy and unaware and ends the game on a sour note. This doesn’t minimize the quality of the narrative that came before it – the game is still good, the story still impactful. It just drops the ball at the end.

Highlight

“Emily...I had a strange dream.” – J.J. MacField

The final act. J.J. swings from the noose beside Emily. She’s given up on accepting herself. The camera pulls out to an ultra-wide shot of the sickening scene. “100 years later” prompts the on-screen text. J.J. falls from her rope through time and space into a grayscale shadowy lecture hall, split into pieces from the fall. She regenerates. Barely formed J.J. walks across the room – a spectral projection of J.J.’s suicide plays out in-game. A ghostly Emily runs to J.J.’s aid while her classmates throw binders and pencils at her. J.J. continues walking out into the hall as a crowd of spectral students stare at her and grin. She climbs to the roof of the school to be greeted by Emily pointing a shotgun at her. “Wake up!” she cries. “You broke your promise!” She shoots. “You said we’d be together forever!” She shoots. “I hate you J.J.!” She shoots and J.J. deteriorates into the ground. She regenerates, but this time as a mass of dismembered limbs covering a sucking void. The player controls this hulking J.J. and attempts to suck Emily into the dark hole that makes up her core. After a brief struggle Emily is devoured. From within the unending blackness of J.J. a phone can be heard vibrating. The “you have a text” icon appears. The screen fades to black.

J.J. stands alone in a patch of grass illuminated by a heavenly spotlight – the rest of the world is black. She checks her phone – it’s a text from F.K. “u ok?” “I just remembered everything. I’m dead, right? My wrists are covered in blood. And everything after that point was a dream.” The music comes in – piano – sad but uplifting. J.J. talks like it’s over. She’s dead, Emily’s dead, there’s nothing anyone can do. But that’s not true. “who wants that? ffs.” The music swells.

FK: this is

FK: a story about regeneration

FK: jackie jameson’s regeneration!!

The final few scenes of the game play out, but this moment with F.K., this simple, dumb conversation is the moment that drives this story home. **This is a story about regeneration. Jackie Jameson’s regeneration!!**

Emerging from the endless dark J.J. has a final encounter with The Hair Shrieker. The player runs J.J. through an action puzzle sequence across the school roof, but this time on the attack. Now filled with the glowing light of love and self-acceptance J.J. runs through hazards that would have previously slaughtered her unscathed. She lures the Shrieker to a lightning rod atop the school. The two struggle for control of the rod in a quick time button mashing sequence. “I must beat myself. I’m not afraid of you!” J.J. wrests control from her doubts for the first time and impales the Shrieker, striking it dead. J.J. is teleported back to Memoria’s campground with a flash of lightning.

The game comes to a close. J.J. wakes up in the lecture hall greeted by an EMT AKA Deer Man. Emily rushes in to the room and they embrace. J.J. has accepted herself for who she is. She is no longer dependent on Emily's approval. They can be together as they are. Jackie Jameson MacField has found what's missing. Dolly out. Fade to black.

Critical Reception

Review: *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*

Destructoid (Chris Moyse)

[7/10]

Moyse comes away from *The Missing* with an overall positive opinion. He found the puzzle design to utilize a “clever exploitation of a gruesome gimmick,” and applauds its creative use of the self-harm mechanic. His statement “Brave, subtle, and at times cruel, I for one “enjoyed” my time with the game,” I find to particularly ring true. *The Missing* is not a classically enjoyable experience – its puzzles are engaging and the story is motivating, but the act of killing J.J. does not *feel* good. This mechanic was affecting for Moyse and he didn't mention growing numb to it. He also mentions its relation to him personally: “...I found some of it uncomfortably relevant to chapters of my own life. Then again, maybe that's *why* it appealed to me.” It's significant that this J.J.'s story can hit close to home with non-trans players. There's a universality to self-harm and self-doubt – the themes have a wide reach even if the specifics of the story aren't 1:1 with J.J. and the player.⁴

The Missing Review – Lost and Found

Gamespot (David Wildgoose)

[8/10]

A welcome opinion from Wildgoose, he critiques the game's choice to make J.J.'s gender reveal “the big twist.” “It doesn't feel cynical--there are no bad intentions detected here--but its execution comes off as clumsy and its impact is diminished.” Clumsy is a fair description of White Owl's handling of the broader context of representing a trans character. It doesn't come off as malicious, just uninformed. And for a story like this one would hope for more informed developers. But Wildgoose can put the clumsiness aside to appreciate the greater whole and comment on the auteur feel of the game: “*The Missing* is smaller and more mechanically conventional than *Deadly Premonition* or *D4*, but its components remain focused on distinctly a Swery game: a dark, idiosyncratic experience that tells a deeply personal story that's as confronting as it is sincere.”

The Missing is aggressively Swery. F.K. shares the name of the main antagonist from his earlier work *Deadly Premonition*. Its themes are dark, its imagery bizarre, and it's rife with little Swery-isms found in all his work: bad voice acting, clapping monkeys, and character references. A player familiar with Swery's work knows what to expect coming in and measures their expectations so. His stories are deeply unique but the gameplay and technical elements are typically rough. Wildgoose signs off appropriately:

⁴ <https://www.destructoid.com/review-the-missing-j-j-macfield-and-the-island-of-memories-525686.phtml>

“It is absolutely not for everyone, but as the game reminds us, there is nothing wrong with that.”⁵

***The Missing* Gets Queer Love Stories Right**

Kotaku (Heather Alexandra)

[no score]

While not a review of the game I think it’s critical to get the opinion of a transgender critic on the success and/or failure of *The Missing* from someone closer to the depicted experience. Based on the title of the article one can guess that *The Missing* delivered. Alexandra speaks honestly about her experiences and seeing them reflected in game: “Those too large clothes that J.J.’s mother found were, in retrospect, clothes that J.J.’s bought for crossdressing and experimenting with gender expression. When I was young, my mother found mine.” She continues in her personal connections to the story: “*The Missing*’s story, in showing both the sweetness and anguish of J.J.’s situation, helped me recall the trials and victories that made me the person I am. That’s a remarkable achievement for a four-hour long horror-themed puzzle game.” I can think of no higher praise to raise for *The Missing* than to have it recognized as a meaningful and reflective piece that speaks true to at least one trans experience. When handled with care, respect, and research a cisgender creator can tell an effective story starring and featuring trans characters. The ultimate takeaway: put more trans characters in your games!

Not only is it fair in its representation, *The Missing* is also transgressive in giving J.J. the ending she got. Alexandra speaks to J.J.’s ultimate fate: “In a medium where queer characters are often victimized and then cast aside, it feels downright radical to simply let this game—with all of its blood, horror, and self-loathing—still manage a happy ending.”⁶

Lessons

- **If the main mechanic of your game is tied directly into your theme don’t overuse it.**
 - A thematic mechanic will always be boiled down into just a mechanic. It is unreasonable to expect a player to feel the full weight of your thematic gameplay element every time they do it, especially if they’re doing it constantly. If Mario’s jump represented the leaps taken to democratize Italy post Mussolini era fascism people would stop caring after level 1-2. At a certain point it gets in the way of actually playing the game. In *The Missing*’s case the player becomes numb to J.J.’s struggle when stuck on a frustrating puzzle. Her body becomes a tool, not a person, and J.J. is weaker character for it. Find new mechanics to inject your theme into! Play with the players expectations of the mechanic! If your theme is deep your attached mechanic should be too.

⁵ <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-missing-review-lost-and-found/1900-6417008/>

⁶ <https://kotaku.com/the-missing-gets-queer-love-stories-right-1829784922>

- **Authentic dialog can make a game.**
 - Most players don't like having giant blocks of texts communicate a game's full narrative. I certainly don't. Games aren't novels! And yet *The Missing*'s narrative was carried on the back of its dialog. The most powerful scene in the game was a text conversation between J.J. and her stuffed animal. Again, believable dialog is capital h Hard but it can become the heart and soul of a game. Look for writers that do dialog well, read their work, follow them on Twitter! Foster talent and put it to good use.
- **It's ok to be heavy handed.**
 - It's ok to verbalize the message of your game. You don't have to hide it in metaphor and symbolism. Use these tools to contribute to your message but don't expect your player to pick up on them. Sometimes the most powerful moments are the ones that are directly stated. F.K. saying "This is a story about regeneration" bashed my head with the message and it worked. I got it and it made me happy. Make your players happy! As fun as it is to watch 2 hour video essays on the meaning of your game, it's even more fun to leave the experience feeling like you understood it.
- **Put LGBTQ characters in your games!**
 - I think straight, cisgender developers have a fear of misrepresenting LGBTQ characters in their work. Or there's a fear of backlash from straight, cisgender gamers who scream "political correctness" when a trans character is included (see: *Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear* backlash for its inclusion of a minor trans character)⁷ and how that might affect sales. This fear is part of the problem. *The Missing* is the perfect case study on how a straight, cisgender creative lead can construct a game that breaks away from many LGBTQ tropes and resonate with all audiences. White Owls did their research – they "worked with transgender individuals, other minorities, psychology professors, and students" throughout the development process.⁸ All it takes is a little research and an interest in representing a wider range of people to have strong LGBTQ characters. The more wonderful, impactful LGBTQ characters the world gets the softer the stigma becomes and this "lesson" becomes the norm. Still worried you'll misrepresent? Hire LGBTQ writers!

Summation

"Was it a good thing I was born?" – J.J. MacField

Video games don't exist in a bubble. Just like any other art form they're representative of the world we live in. When a game boldly and successfully tackles a subject so contentious in the AAA "gamer community" (trans identity) it is worthy of

⁷ <https://www.polygon.com/2016/4/6/11380556/baldurs-gate-studio-responds-to-harassment-over-trans-character>

⁸ <https://www.relyonhorror.com/in-depth/interviews/interview-swery-on-the-missing-of-j-j-macfield-and-the-island-of-memories/>

analysis and recognition. I'm also under the bias that all of Swery's work deserves a closer inspection to truly digest it all. Swery takes risks and is unconventional in his narratives and is heavy on metaphor and symbolism. When you look deeply at his games you're typically rewarded for the extra effort. I think *The Missing* is an important game, particularly for its use of the self-harm mechanic. In many ways it is clumsy and overly gratuitous, but in many others it does a great job of making the player part of J.J.'s painful journey. There's a lot left for interpretation in *The Missing* – the side characters J.J. communicates with all speak to bigger stories of broken people that have room to be explored and analyzed. There's not a lot of media that express the LGBTQ experience as proficiently as *The Missing* does, and certainly not many video games. For that reason alone *The Missing* is important, but just as well for its authentic characters, narratively innovative mechanics, and a story that speaks to anyone who's struggled with feeling wrong for being what they are.