



# The MISSING: An Attempt at Complete Cohesion of Gameplay and Narrative

SWERY

Game Director & Writer / White Owls, Inc.

**GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE**

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# The MISSING: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories Introduction

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# The MISSING J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories

## Basic Info

- A puzzle platformer where you need to damage your own body in order to proceed
- The debut title for White Owls Inc.
- Winner of 2 NAVGTR Awards among other awards,  
nominated for many more

### 🏆AWARD-WINNING🏆



### 🏆NOMINATED🏆







- Sever your arm and throw it to knock down something that's high up
  - Cut your body in half to balance a seesaw
  - Light your body on fire and use it to navigate through the darkness
  - Slam yourself into a wrecking ball to break your bones and solve a gravity puzzle
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Its most unique feature is the game system, which creates a cycle of self-mutilation and regeneration through the puzzles.



# The MISSING

## J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories

### Story: First Half

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- The main character J.J. visits Memoria Island with her best friend, who goes missing during a storm. J.J. heads deep into the island in order to find her.
- A sudden strike of lightning gives J.J. the power of immortality, which allows her to survive through repeated suffering and regeneration all in order to find her friend.
- As J.J. journeys deeper into the island, text conversations she had with her friends and family in the past gradually reveal the mental anguish she's suffered.







- When she reaches her memory of the clock tower, J.J. remembers that Memoria Island is the afterlife, and that she tried to kill herself.
  - J.J. is on the brink of death, teetering on the thin line between life and death with her immortal body, and the world of the island represents the world inside her own mind.
  - After the ending, the player realizes that this painful adventure wasn't a search for J.J.'s best friend, but a story of regeneration, where J.J. found herself again in order to be reborn.
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## The MISSING J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories Story: Second Half

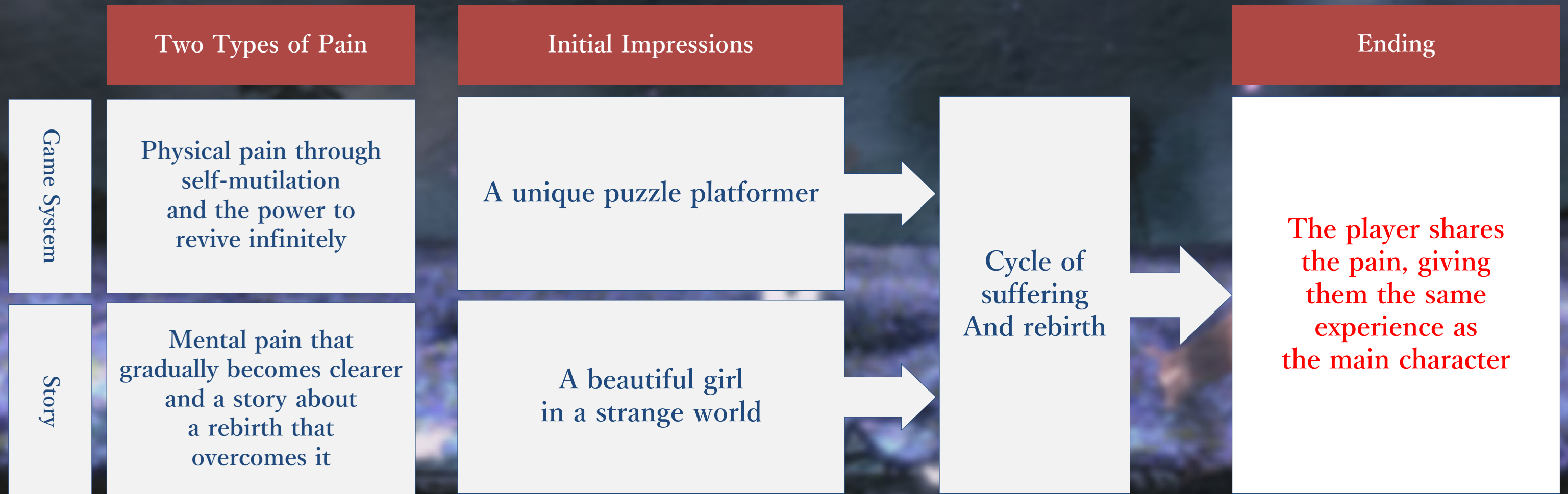


A surreal landscape scene. In the center, a person wearing a long white dress stands in a field of vibrant purple flowers. To the left, a deer lies down, and to the right, another deer stands. The background features several windmills under a dark, starry night sky. The entire scene is reflected in a dark, rippling body of water in the foreground. Two horizontal white bars are positioned above and below the central text.

So, how is the gameplay  
fused with the game design?



# Two Axes of Suffering and Rebirth



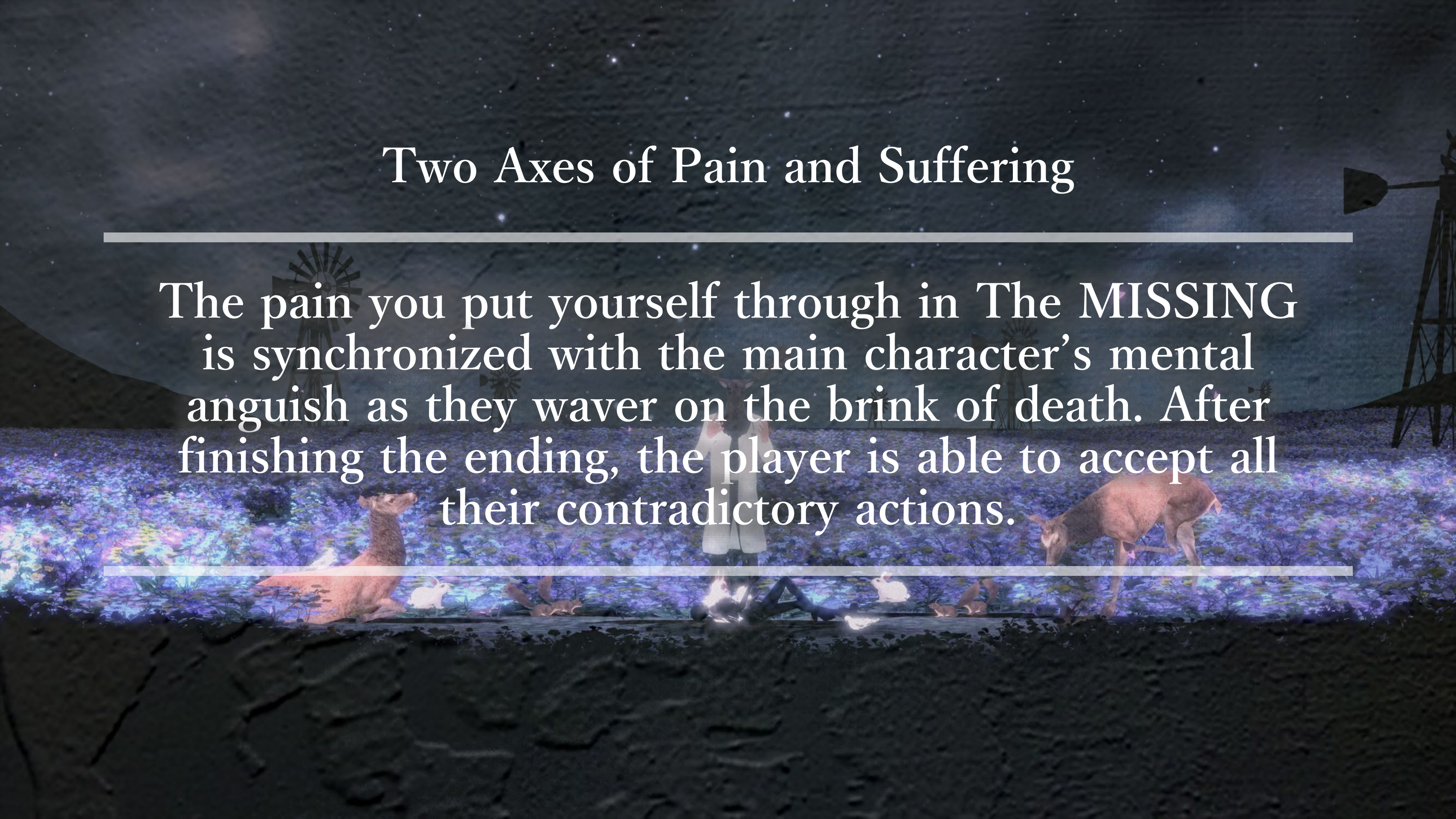


# Two Axes of Pain and Suffering

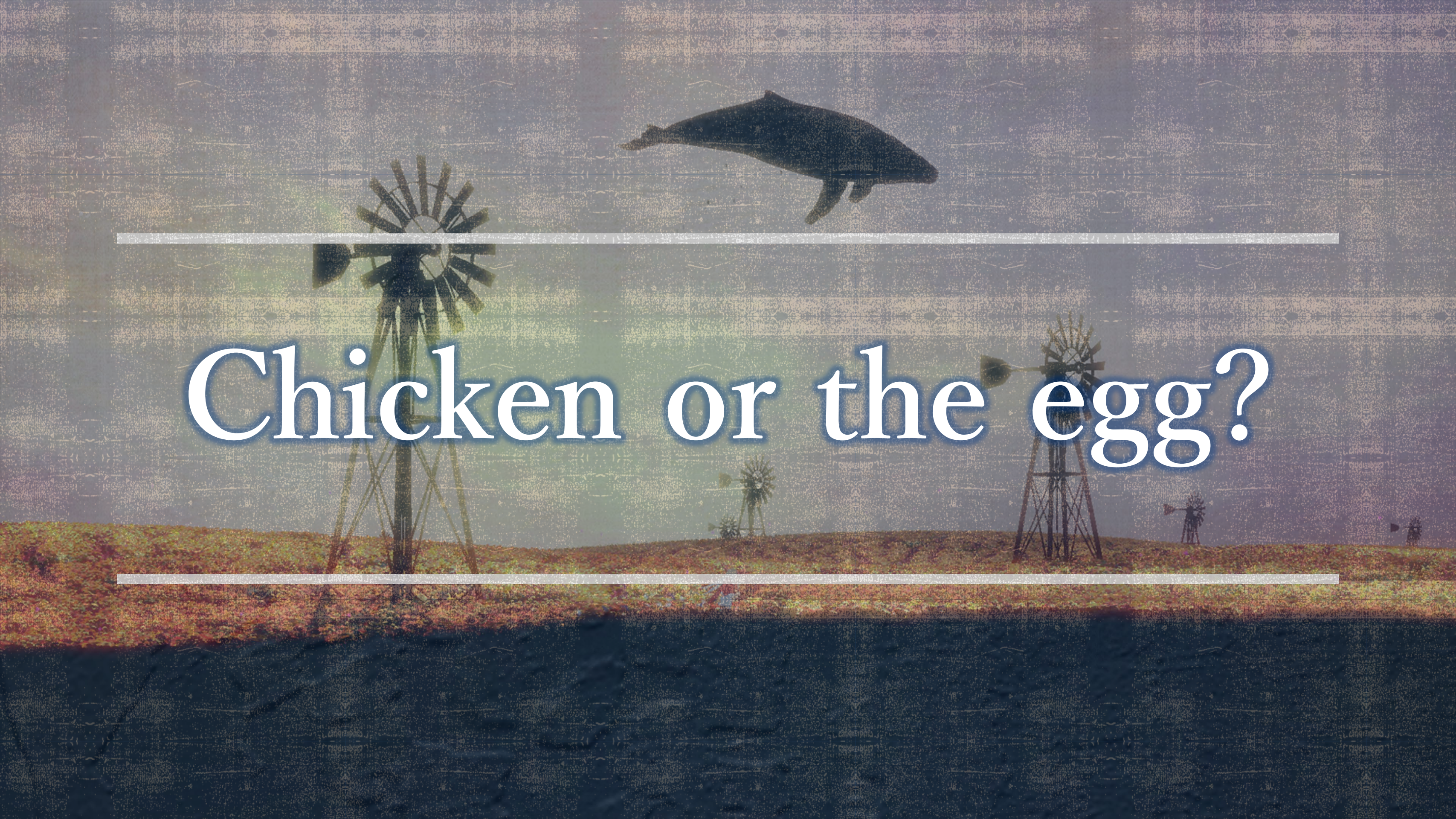
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The pain you put yourself through in The MISSING is synchronized with the main character's mental anguish as they waver on the brink of death. After finishing the ending, the player is able to accept all their contradictory actions.

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A surreal landscape featuring a blue sky with a dolphin jumping. Below the sky is a grassy hill with several windmills. The foreground is a dark, reflective surface. The text "Chicken or the egg?" is overlaid in the center.

Chicken or the egg?



A surreal landscape with a warm, hazy sky transitioning from yellow to purple. In the foreground, a field of golden-brown crops stretches across the horizon. Several tall, dark metal windmills are scattered across the landscape. In the upper center of the image, a large, dark whale is depicted flying through the air, leaving a faint trail of small white dots behind it.

Hypothesis:

The more a game's story is strongly fused with its gameplay, the more it will move its players.

This is also surely a method of story writing that can't be achieved by any other media.



I didn't focus on  
the actual scenario  
when deciding how  
the story would flow.

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- I adopted the method of making all story beats rely on the gameplay.
- I decided to keep the 'strange' and 'bizarre' hooks separate from all story beats. They only exist as parts of the performance within cutscenes.
- I decided on locations beforehand that would ensure that the story flowed together even though I hadn't started writing it yet.





# Story Decision Process

Basic Game System Decision



Synopsis



Death Methods (Puzzle Types) Decisions



Location Details / Decisions in Order



Various Level Design Details



Main Story Writing Begins



# It's actually a little more complicated...







# Fusing the Game System with the Story and the Main Character





Question:  
Why is the main character a girl, rather than an  
undead creature or a “dark hero?”

What sort of story is it? What sort of main character would be best?  
You need to decide on what you want the player to experience before you decide on that.



# In a game with gun combat...



The 'play feel' is what will decide the 'bones of the story' and the 'main character's unique characteristics.'

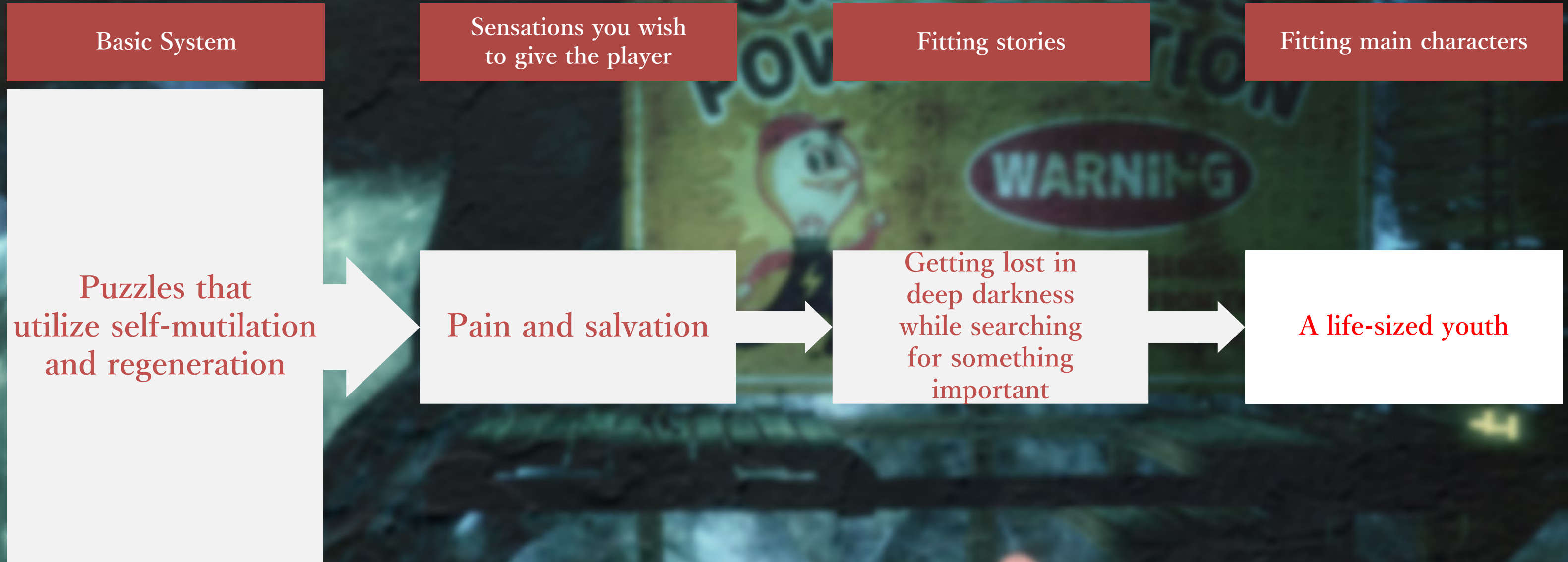


# In The MISSING's case...





# In The MISSING's case...



I wanted the player to experience pain and salvation.



# In The MISSING's case...



The main character you select to be the most fitting in the end will give you feedback on the game design.



# How to Create Empathy for the Story





# The initial hook should be as simple as possible.

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- At the start, it's a simple story about searching for a missing friend.
- There are some strange scenes, but nothing that requires any explanation.







- The horror and mystery of the “present events” happening on Memoria Island

- The events of the “past,” revealed in the messenger app

- The events of the “future,” which begin from the past and present events overlapping

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But it turns out that  
the story is actually deep,  
with three parallel story axes.

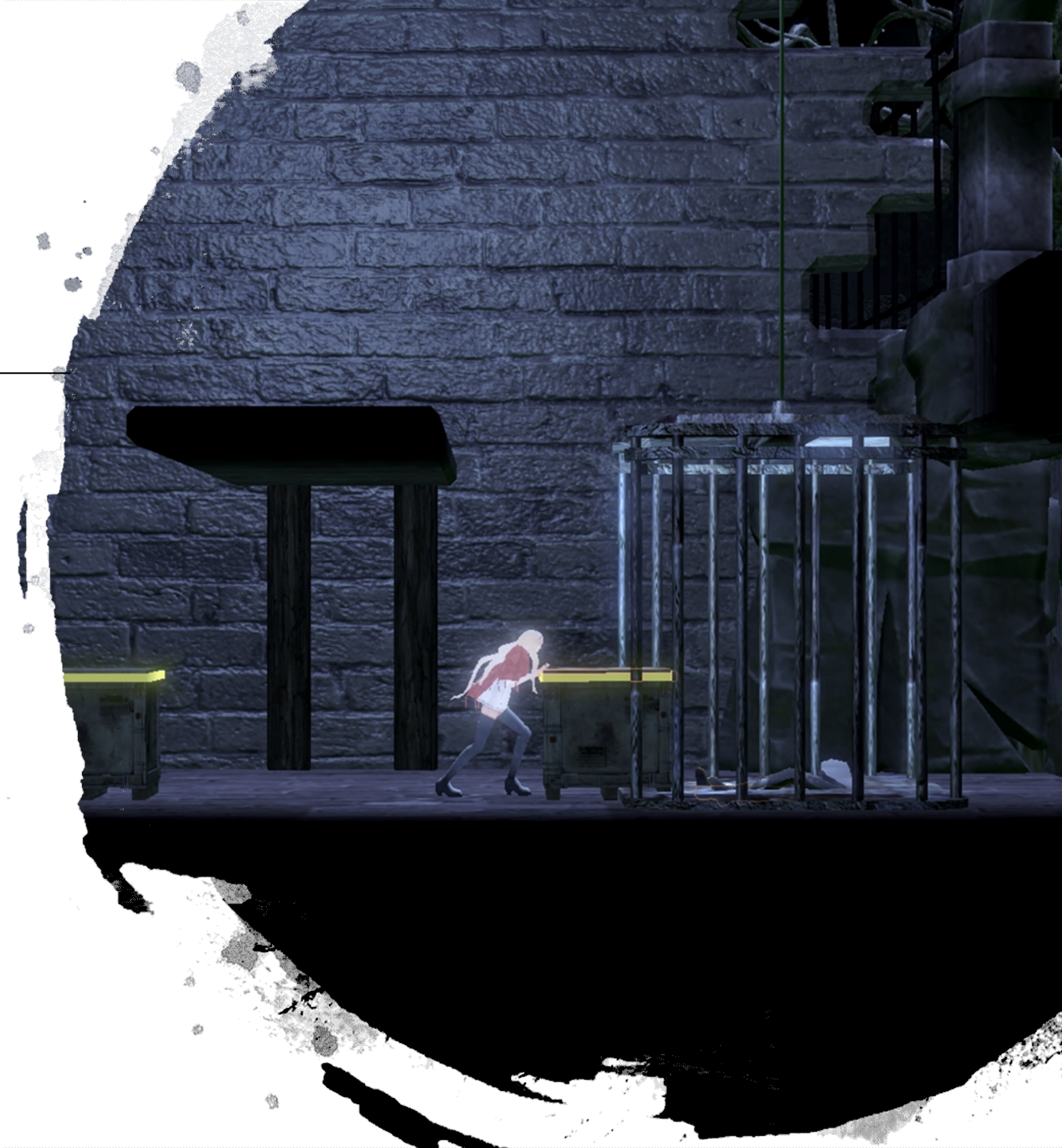
Is it YOUR dream?



# Platformer on purpose

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- The game itself is simple in that you're always heading to the right
- Merits from simplifying orders in order to make players more active







- The events aren't happening "now," they're all centered around a single question: "Why?"
- Depicting J.J.'s relationships with the people around her in order to show who J.J. really is
- The players are free to read or not read the messages as they wish
- The messages can still be read after completing the game

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## Inventing the smartphone conversations



# What I did in order to grab the hearts of young people

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- Made the main character's problem something life-sized and personal
- No need for any story about saving the world
- Thorough healing  
(self-actualization and desire for recognition)
- Hired a graduate student as a secondary writer
- Used text messages on a smartphone (a common, everyday tool)





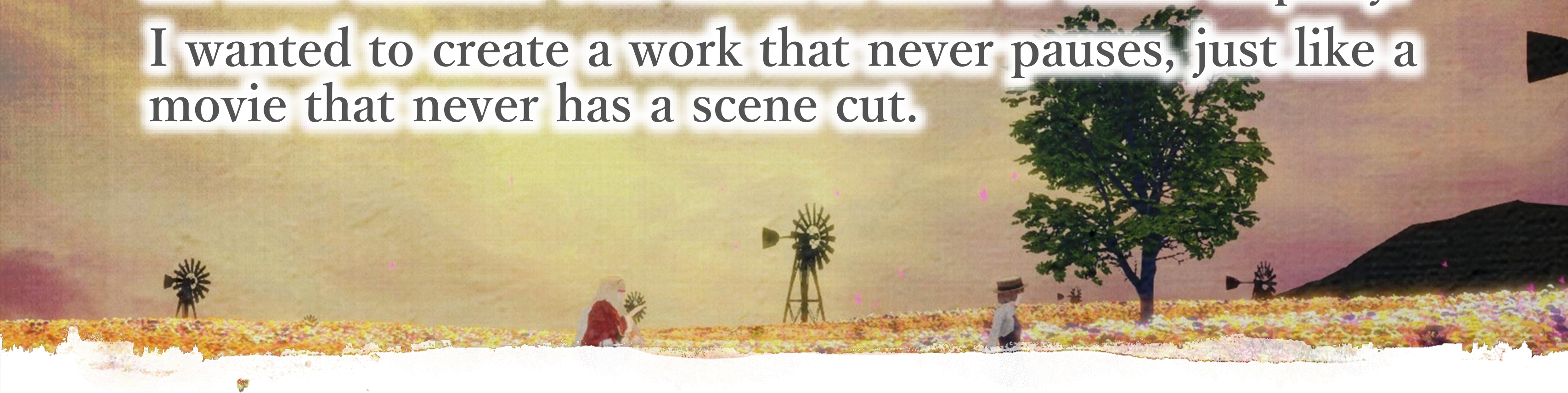


- No scene cuts
  - No orders, such as “Do this!”
  - Don’t show anything with the camera that the main character (=player) can’t see
  - Don’t write about or look up on a wiki anything that I’m not interested in
- 

## The MISSING Scenario Creation Rules



All these elements were added in order to create empathy.  
I wanted to create a work that never pauses, just like a  
movie that never has a scene cut.



Excessive depictions create an “invisible, flat screen” wall  
between the player and the main character.





# Main Character J.J. Macfield

I'll never leave you again.



# Creating J.J.'s Personality

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- Everything began from searching for a kind of main character who I'd never seen before
- I began with a hypothesis that in order to get people to love her character, I'd need two elements: admiration and sympathy. I built her out from there.
- The biggest challenge was how to depict the “you that other people see” and the “you that exists within yourself.”







- I decided to depict a struggle through prejudice so that everyone could sympathize with the main character.
- All people are both minorities and majorities in different ways.
- I wanted players to realize the “truth” on their own after finishing the ending.

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## Gender as a Symbol for Sympathy



# The fusion between admiration and sympathy that I aimed for with The MISSING

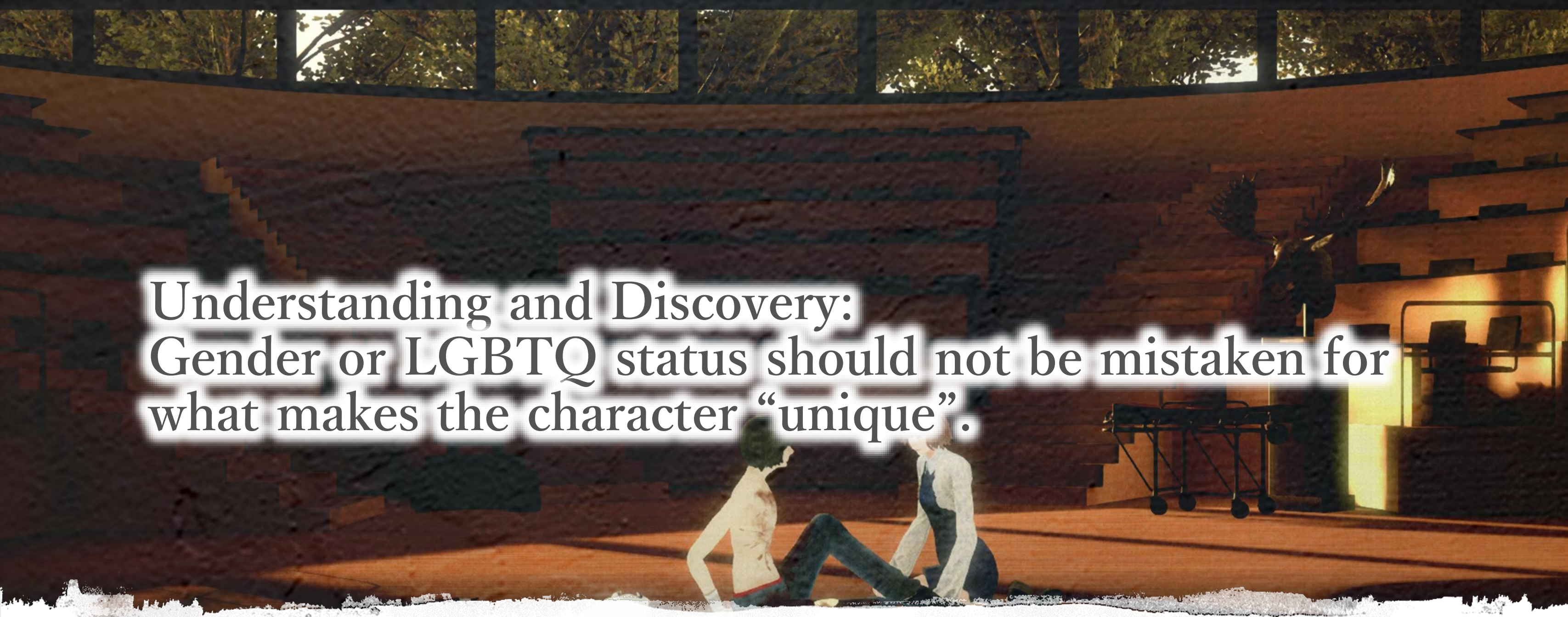
	Story	Gameplay	Player Emotion / Sentiments
Game Starts	You are the main character in the world of The MISSING, a majority (human side) in this world together with your best friend Emily.	Synchronization begins when you start controlling the character.	Completely innocent and neutral towards the story.
Beginning to Middle	It turns out that the monsters are the majority on Memoria Island, and you suffer a great deal as a minority.	How will you use your strange power? Players will have to put forth effort to get used to the game world.	As the adventure continues, players slowly start to feel like they are a ‘minority.’
First Stage of Empathy	Players start to feel like they are the minority on Memoria Island, along with a dependency on Emily, their only ally. Simultaneously, the players (and main character) start to feel irritated at being unable to catch up with Emily.		



# The fusion between admiration and sympathy that I aimed for with The MISSING

	Story	Gameplay	Player Emotion/ Sentiments
Second Half of the Game	You learn about the main character's past, where they cut themselves off from the real world due to being a minority.	The difficulty rises from the middle of the game to the second half, boosting your synchronization with the main character.	Pent-up suffering reaches its peak.
Ending	By accepting yourself, you realize that your most treasured people have always loved you.	Players master their powers and overcome their suffering, defeating the demon of self-denial.	"This is a story about me."
Completed Empathy	After learning about the truth all people feel sympathetic, whether or not they were in a similar situation to the main character, and acquire diversified knowledge.		

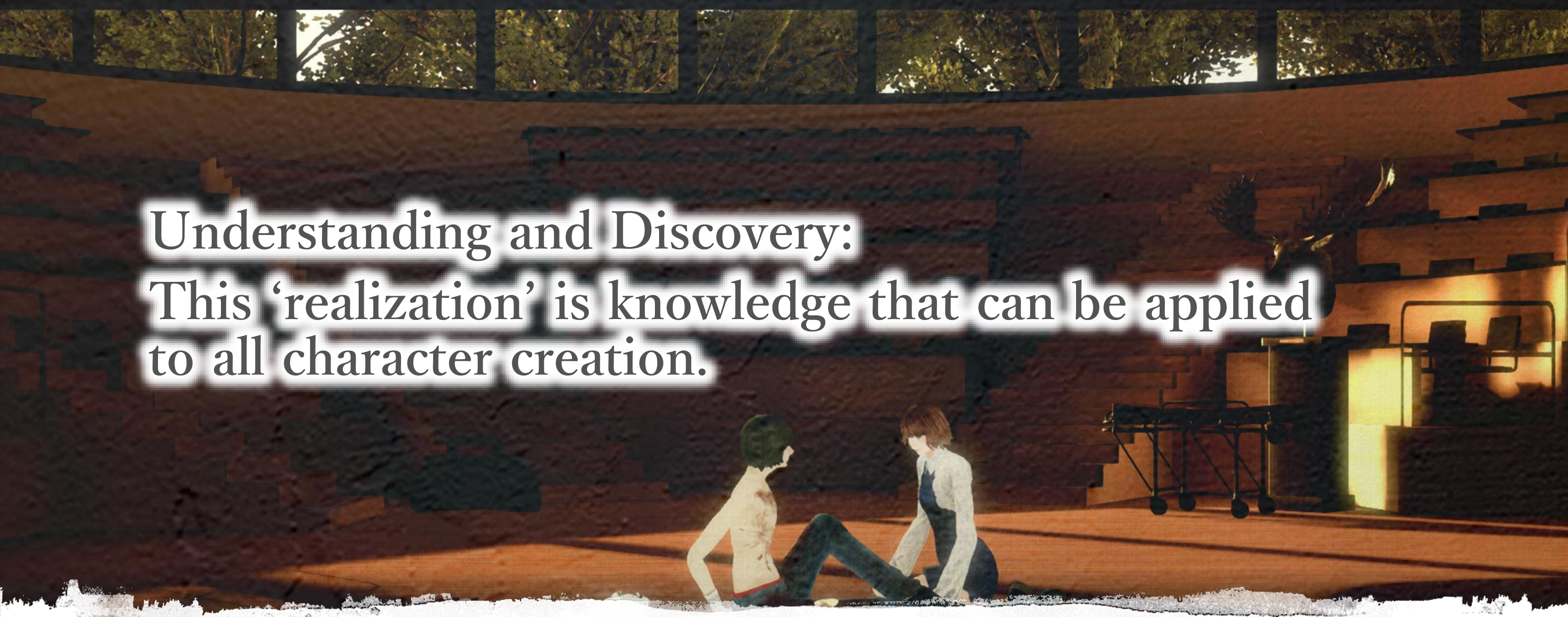




Understanding and Discovery:  
Gender or LGBTQ status should not be mistaken for  
what makes the character “unique”.

Just like a character being American or Japanese, being LGBTQ is just a trait. Instead,  
the character's unique self is what should be explored.





Understanding and Discovery:  
This 'realization' is knowledge that can be applied  
to all character creation.

It also serves as an antithesis to 'easy' female / male main character ideas, and made me realize that I need to rethink what it really means to make an 'easy' race selection for a character. The same goes for images that come from 'easy' profession selections...





# The Importance of the Characters who Surround the Main Character





1. Life up to this point
2. Likes/hobbies, skills
3. Proficiency as an object of interest
4. Parent, friend, family environment
5. Objective assessment from family
6. Surface level acquaintances and their objective assessment
7. Self-image

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## Elements that Define Personality

※These are all necessary elements to creating a personality in a story. There is no need to simulate actual personalities.





1. Life up to this point
  2.
    - **Teenage college student, lost father when young**Likes/hobbies, skills
  3.
    - **Interested in industrial design, loves donuts**Proficiency as an object of interest
  4.
    - **Design major, has good instincts, needs training**Parent, friend, family environment
    - Lives alone with mother, best friend is Emily**
  5. Objective assessment from family
    - **Good student, but pushes herself too hard**
  6. Surface level acquaintances' assessment
    - **Small group of peers and professors**
  7. Self-image
    - **A failure, since she can't become what she wants to be**
- 

## Elements that Define Personality

※These are all necessary elements to creating a personality in a story. There is no need to simulate actual personalities.



# What I was able to depict by cutting the main character off from the story beats

- Emily is the only side character who has a 3D model. How was I able to make the other characters memorable despite that?
- In this game, side characters don't fulfill defined "roles"
- All characters are completely free with their own personalities
- Therefore, they always act naturally and realistically, and the same goes for their speech.







- “Breaking the fourth wall” is something supernatural, just as the metaphor suggests.
- Characters who “break the fourth wall” need to always be able to freely travel between both sides.
- In this game, the wall breaker is F.K., a stuffed animal who can travel between the real world and Memoria Island.

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The most important characters are those who break the fourth wall.



Something was  
added at the very  
end of the dev cycle...







“This game was made with the belief that nobody is wrong for being what they are.”

This is the most important message in this game.

- But the truth is, this message wasn't originally planned to appear at the beginning of the game.





“This game was made with the belief that nobody is wrong for being what they are.”

After speaking with my advisor for this game,  
I decided that it was necessary to put this at the beginning.





Don't become a prisoner  
of your dev schedule.  
“Do what you need to do.”

Simple, but vital.



The GDC logo is displayed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. It is centered within a red diamond shape that points downwards. The background of the slide is a dark, blurred image of a campsite at night, featuring a tent and trees. Red geometric lines, including diamonds and thin lines, are overlaid on the background.

# GDC

# Thank You



Swery65



Hidetaka Swery Suehiro

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