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Understanding Emergent Experience in Gameplay

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Abstract

This thesis will work to understand emergent experience in games. Emergent experience is here understood as the un-recreatable experiences of specific players playing specific games at specific times with specific external influences and infinite other factors that could never be accounted for in any pre-established framework for understanding how this ‘play’ thing works. It takes a general anti-framework approach to understanding emergent experience as it holds that, in the game industry especially, frameworks function to over-simplify and colonize the abstract and un-traceable elements that make emergent experiences special and unique. It will first tell the narrative of this colonization with a focus on structuralism and the liminal space. With this narrative established, the thesis will work to move beyond them. A foundational way that the thesis works to accomplish this is to shift our understanding of games away from liminal spaces and toward liminoid spaces, understood as a constant state of flux, modification, and change. The thesis will build upon the liminoid, incorporating the posthumanist theories of Haraway’s cyborg and situated viewing as well as Barad’s concept of intra-action, which will visualized through Latour’s concept of ideo-pomorphization. All of this work will then be applied to creating a ‘processual method’ inspired by the work of Janik to understand the processualities of play and the work of Latour to create totally un-biased approaches to understanding social phenomenon. In so doing, it will work to build a solid understanding of games as medium for emergent ludic phenomenon.

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Introduction

This thesis works to understand games as a medium that gives rise to unique emergent experiences. We all, (all of us who play games at any rate) have unique experiences with games that have shaped how we see them. Games are transformative. In playing a game, we change the state of the game, and the state of the game changes us. And these changes are most often personal, involving far more than what the game offers in and of itself. A person in who is happy and stable will have a different experience and form different interpretations than a person who is suffering. An older player will have a different experience than a younger player. A cis-gendered person will have a different experience than a gender-queer person, and so on through all conceivable types of people and sets of circumstances that surround the playing of a particular game at a particular time, on a particular device and at a particular time.

The possibility for variation is endless, and it is impossible to anticipate audiences or manipulate the game in such a way as to account for the potential for variation. What we can, and should, do instead is work to understand how games work to give rise to unique experiences, not to control the processes, but to make the best use of the processes to encourage games to grow as works of art and players to grow as people.

To begin, it is useful to establish a shared foundational understanding of how games can be experienced, as informed by how other artforms can be experienced. On the surface, video games are a visual-audio narrative medium that usually follows narrative frameworks similar to those used in film, comics, and literature. Which is to say that there are elements to the experience of games specific to viewership. Under a viewership schema of experience in regard to an art form, we can typically describe a person’s experience with it as comprising:

1) Pre-encounter, a stage in which a viewer learns about the work of art in one way or another. This could be via reputation and depictions in media if the work is especially famous. It could occur through reading reviews or second-hand accounts. It could occur if the artwork is held up as special or worthy of special attention if, for instance, it is part of a temporarily visiting collection of works in a museum or gallery. It could occur through whatever material regarding the work is provided just prior to viewership such as the little plaques next to artworks in museums and galleries or the programme given to audience members of a theatrical performance.

2) Encounter, in which the viewer experiences the work of art through their own sensory apparatus such as watching a film, looking upon a painting or sculpture, listening to music, etc. During this stage, it is not just the work itself that is experienced, but also the immediate surrounding circumstances and contexts. There is the lighting of the space; the noise levels; the crowds; the comfort of the seat if seated or the comfort of one's footwear if standing; the energy, fatigue, hunger and thirst, etc. of the viewer at the time; and so on. The encounter stage comprises elements of the experience of the artwork that are intended as well as elements that are not.

3) Post-encounter, in which initial impressions are reflected on. This would also be the stage in which a person would share their initial impressions with whatever company they have and ask what they think. At this stage, the person's opinions of the artwork are not complete or solid. Rather, this is another element of the encounter. During this stage, the artwork is placed within external contexts such as what companions may think or what other works of art or media that this work of art reminds the viewer of. During this stage the viewer's impressions of the work will become more solid, and they will subsequently be able to somewhat consistently explain what they think or thought about it.

4) Organization into long-term memory. At this stage, there is little objectivity remaining to the artwork, only whatever lasting impressions the viewer formed. The viewer's impressions of the artwork are now placed alongside their other memories and formed opinions that will influence the experiences and interpretations of future artworks.

While this is a rough description of what can occur, with a general art gallery setting to aid in visualization, theory regarding art, literature, and society at large are rife with such schema. An easy example within literature is Joseph Campbell's organization of the entire human tradition of storytelling into the broad categories of departure, initiation, and return with each organized into four sub-categories (the ordinary world, the call, refusing the call, etc.).[1]

However, this rough schema is specific to viewership, to understanding a relatively passive experience of an artwork. Video games as a medium are not to be passively experienced but actively engaged with. You do not watch, read, or listen to a game, you play it.

This results in two specific schisms with the artforms that have come before video games. First, there is the added layer of interpretation. A viewer interprets the story whereas a player interprets the story that they helped to tell. How might a viewer of an artwork in a gallery experience that

1 Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series, 17, Commemorative ed (Princeton University Press, 2004)

artwork differently if *they* controlled the light levels, or if they could choose any seat in the theatre they wanted. What if they could decide who wins a climactic fight or who falls in love at the end. In the case of viewership, the spectator can choose how they interpret a work, but they cannot influence the creation of the work or shape any of the external elements to its enjoyment. Even if a game allows no freedom for the player to change the outcomes of the story, the player will still have the freedom to determine how they arrive at that outcome.

This is in part because games are also the only artistic medium to actively gatekeep its completion. You do not need to fight the words of a book or the actors on a stage to watch/read to the end. Although admittedly one will still need to be reasonably proficient in experiencing all artforms to enjoy them. A reader must know how to read the language the book is written in. A child may have difficulty enjoying a slow-burning suspense thriller or a story driven by dialogue or which has many different characters because they lack the experience and attention span to remain engaged in such stories. What is different here however is that games as artforms resemble athletic activities more than any other artform in that its enjoyers can choose to seek out more and more challenging games to play or greater, optional challenges offered by the games they already play. And a large part of a player's long-term enjoyment of games is the perception of improvement, taking on challenges that they could not attempt before. Paintings do not come with varying observation difficulty levels.

Second, there is the ludic element. Games are not just stories but also toys and playgrounds. What this means is that games simultaneously tell stories and provide the spaces and materials with which a player can tell their own story with as much or as little regard for the 'intended' story as they choose. A player will bring their own goals and aesthetics to a game. If a game allows for different tools, weapons, armour, and other forms of equipment to be used, a player will of course be free to use whatever combinations of equipment they like best, even if it disadvantages them. Even if a player is not given options to customize their character's tools and abilities, they can still choose how they overcome obstacles. A player can fight enemies more or less aggressively, choosing to take more damage from enemies to deal more damage of their own, or they could focus on evasion and wait for safe opportunities to strike. In games where combat is optional, players can choose to seek out enemies or go out of their way to avoid them. Even with minimal freedoms allowed, a player of a videogame will always seek out room for self-expression throughout the playthrough. What this means is that in order to study games as an artistic medium, a researcher must study both the disciplines that pertain to narrative, and those that pertain to understanding play.[2]

2 This thesis takes for granted the mutual understanding that any attempts to hold up one field, be it ludology or narratology, over the other is a fruitless and unproductive exercise as both are fundamentally important to

And what this calls for is establishing a new foundation for how we approach our understandings of art. In order to do so, we will first engage with elements of pre-existing foundations of understandings that currently inform how we shape our understandings of art so that we can proceed to build to a less rigid and more fluid model of interaction.

This fluid model will follow a similar trajectory as the work of Wilde in their book *Posthuman Gaming: Avatars, Gamers, and Entangled Subjectivities* as it will strongly feature posthuman entanglements influenced by the work of Barad and the fluidity of play.[3] But it will also bring in a new way of understanding entangled subjectivities through a unique type of parasocial dialogue between expectations, influences, impressions, and the agencies of the game both as a unique object an as a unique perceived object as influenced by the work of Latour, as will be unpacked in due course.

And such a fluid approach to understanding the playfulness games is truly needed. As we will discuss in the body of this thesis, a great deal of our existing approaches to forming our understandings of games as works of art tend not to focus on the fundamentally playful elements of interacting with a game. Instead, they focus on structures and systems that methodically work to create a playful experience for the player.

Such approaches bear striking resemblance to structuralism, a movement within sociology that has its origins in Emile Durkheim, was strengthened by the work of Lévi-Strauss, and brought into the limelight as the method by which to create compelling stories thanks to the work of Joseph Campbell and the success of their model of the ‘hero’s journey’ in such popular media as *Star Wars.* But why should we talk about foundational structuralism in a research project written in 2026? The answer lies in fundamental schism between game studies and the games industry. While academia has largely moved beyond structuralism, the observable practices and platformed research of the games industry tell a different story. This is because the games industry does not focus on interpretation and analysis of games as art and cultural artifacts, it focuses on games as commercial products. The focus is on making products that a publisher can be convinced will sell well. And to that end, universal approaches to creating compelling stories that will always work become extremely compelling. And the research that pursues such universal truths and presents it in a way

understanding games.

3 Wilde, Poppy, *Posthuman Gaming: Avatars, Gamers, and Entangled Subjectivities*, (Taylor & Francis, Routledge, 2024)

that can be immediately observed, understood, and sold is rewarded. That is why the vast majority of proliferated research that is geared towards games production focuses on structures, frameworks, and formulas to ensure that games achieve specific, intended effects.

We can see that structuralist practices have been applied to the making of games and the teaching of how games work, with the latter easily represented by *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* by Salen and Zimmerman and *The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design* by Hodent. And the former is exemplified by games such as *Journey*[4] which, as will be discussed in chapter three, most exemplified an approach to encouraging passive gameplay wherein players act more as spectators. While very successful at times, such research and practice does not account for the subversive elements of active play, which can give rise to emergent experiences beyond what a designer can anticipate and control through structural approaches to design. For this reason, this thesis will take a stand against such practices that treat games as self-contained and pre-determined systems and advocate for games' potential to co-create new emergent experiences with the player.

In order to do so, we are going to need to first address some core concepts and terminologies.

Core change one: reimagining immersion

One of the buzzwords when it comes to understanding how to build player engagement and enjoyment is through immersion. Immersion, like a lot of the foundational theories we use is both easy to visualize and difficult to grasp. What exactly is immersion? Does it rely on quality of visuals, or audio? Is it improved by larger or multiple screens? Are virtual reality (VR) games more immersive than those displayed on a television or monitor? What about consistency of narrative; is a story less immersive if it breaks the fourth wall (meaning that the game acknowledges itself as a game) or if elements of the story and worldbuilding have inconsistencies?

General wisdom would have it that all of the above applies. A better looking and sounding game would hold a player’s attention longer. A story should be complete; it should make sense. At the same time, many of the most successful games in recent years have not been the prettiest, or rather the most realistic in graphics. Many indie games in particular do not attempt to have lifelike graphics, opting instead for pixel art or cartoon/animation art styles. While it is true that two of the

4 thatgamecompany, *Journey* (2020), Steam

biggest AA games[5], *Clair Obscura: Expedition 33*[6] and *Baldur's Gate 3*[7] have beautifully detailed graphics, *Hollow Knight: Silksong*, one of the top selling games on Steam in 2025 is about two-dimensional animated bugs with little regard given to visual realism.[8]

If we consider the quality of audio in games, such as the quality of the music drawing a player in, or the meaty thwack of a sword against flesh or any other such audio feedback, games are unique in that audio is entirely optional. Many gamers elect to mute a game's audio or replace the game's audio with their own. For example, if a player is grinding levels for an extended period of time, they could listen to relaxing music or a podcast instead of the higher-tempo music of the game. In the case of film, a dissonance in the audio, such as the events on screen being accompanied by an unrelated podcast, would make the film unwatchable. But a game can remain immersive despite, or even because of such dissonances. Another level where this can occur is through playing multiplayer games while on call with friends or even talking to the person sitting next to them. In such cases, the audio of the game is replaced by people talking, which once again does not work for film.

As far as story goes, do players of MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online roleplaying games) really care about the story, or do they care about spending time with friends, grinding levels, and doing the next raid? Does anybody play *Call of Duty* games, or other esports such as *League of Legends* for the story? Additionally, games, unlike other forms of media, are able to conceal elements of their stories. Most players of *Baldur's Gate 3* will not even see half of the available story material unless they watch countless video essays or play the game over and over again, making different choices. And games break the fourth wall constantly. There are the games that do so explicitly, such as *Undertale*, *Doki Doki Literature Club*, and *The Stanley Parable* while just about all games technically break the fourth wall whenever the player is given a tutorial or button prompt. How do you tell your players to press A to jump without reminding them they are playing a game? Additionally, one will find that nothing will draw more attention to the graphics and sound of a game as being constructed than them being of particularly high quality (an idea that will be expanded upon in the body of the thesis).[9]

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5 This refers to the budget and team-size of the game's production. With AAA being big budget comparable to a Hollywood blockbuster and AA being a mid-size production.
6 Sandfall Interactive, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (2025), Steam
7 Larian Studios, *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), Steam
8 Team Cherry, *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (2025), Steam
9 See section four of chapter three: 'Understanding UI through Remediation'

None of this is to say that improving the visuals of a game is pointless, or that quality of writing is not vitally important (AI will never replace good narrative designers!), but rather that so simple a term as ‘immersion’ cannot really be easily understood. In order to understand such terms better, we need to allow them to be seen as complex, messy, and even contradictory.

Core change two: move from the liminal space to the liminoid space

In order to understand the nuances of immersion, we need to delve into the distinction between liminal spaces and the lesser understood liminoid.

Liminality is a concept that has its origins in anthropology, having been first used by van Gennep to describe various ritual practices within the cultures they studied.[10] It has subsequently been used to serve structuralist readings of universal myths. Today it can be most often found within and most easily described in reference to works of ‘classic’ fantasy literature that strongly adhere to Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’, with such examples as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*; C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*[11]; George Lucas’ *Star Wars*[12]; Robert Jordan’s *The Eye of the World*[13]; and so on. The ‘hero’s journey’ focuses on this space of ‘there and back again’. Within fantasy literature it has been classified by Mendlesohn as ‘Portal Quest Fantasies’ Fantasies in which the character begins in one world, enters a metaphorical or literal portal to another world where they have their adventure, gain gifts, allies, weapons or powers, and recognition in some form, only to return through the portal at the end.[14] In a ‘portal quest’, the protagonist would lose all that they have gained, returning to their primary world with only their memories of their adventure. In a ‘hero’s journey’, the protagonist does much the same, having returned in order to share their wealth and wisdom with the people of that world.

The liminal is the in-between during which the majority of the story takes place, a state of in-betweenness that is characterized by an imminent end and return to what is familiar. In the same way that a hero leaves their familiar surroundings, encounters new dangers and new uncertainties only to eventually return to the familiar, leaving the outside world of their adventures behind, the concept of liminal within narratives limits the viewer to ultimately leave a story the way they found it. When such an idea is transferred over to games (with fantasy games naturally taking influence from fantasy literature), a great deal of a player’s ability to create their own stories and experiences

10 Gennep, Arnold van, *The Rites of Passage*, (Routledge & Paul, 1960)
11 Lewis, C. S., *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Geoffrey Bles, 1950)
12 Lucas, George (dir.), *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (United States, 1977)
13 Jordan, Robert, *The Eye of the World* (Tor Books, 1990)
14 Mendlesohn, Farah, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008)

within the game world can be lost. If the player is a Campbellian hero who will arrive, save the day, and leave again, the world within the game is ultimately unchanged from any individual player's time with it. Likewise, the player is unchanged from their time with the game, and the player's experiences, perspectives, and interpretations would not in any way contribute toward the 'canon' of the game.

However, while such narratives have cemented this idea of the liminal into our general understandings of how narratives and imaginary spaces work, this is not actually how fantastic stories work anymore. Additionally, a more contemporary reading of such stories calls into question whether they are liminal at all. This is because, in reality, heroes never return from their adventures.

Generally, the most faithful tellings of portal quest fantasies are found in the isekai genre of anime, defined by a person from our world entering a portal to go on adventures in another world. However, in these stories, the portal goes only one way. The hero lives out the rest of their life in that world and does not typically so much as think about returning home. But on a deeper level, if we are to look back to our classic 'portal quests', we can come to realize that this isekai model of 'hero's journey' has always been the case. To say that the hero returns at the end has always been a reductive reading of what occurs. Luke never returns to Tatooine in *Star Wars*. Bilbo is forever changed by his adventures, and Frodo even more so in *The Lord of the Rings*. As a result, neither of them can truly return to the Shire, and must instead travel into the west.

What this shows us is that reading texts through a model of liminality has always been inaccurate. Even the stories that exemplify the liminal are distinctly un-liminal. If such a model can be called into question in regard to literature and film, then it must certainly be reimagined if we are to consider games. To this end, we are going to need a new idea to frame our understandings of entering into spaces of uncertainty and change; and this work presents the term 'liminoid,' a term first coined by Turner to describe a state of constant change and constant uncertainty.

Core change three: fluid approach to imaginative spaces

Third, if we are to understand how we can perceive playful and imaginative spaces within liminoid spaces instead of liminal spaces, we need to replace the rigid, hierarchical, and linearly sequential model of a structuralist approach with a more flexible, fluid, and playful model.

To begin with hierarchal and sequential approaches, let us first discuss how we may initially perceive an 'encounter' with the game object. In sum, a development team creates the work, the work is then interpreted as it would a film, with analysis focusing on elements of the story that are

not directly engaged with. Subsequently, a player would compare their experience of the game to a supposed ‘canon’ of the game, wondering if they got the best/happiest ending (which is often synonymous with a ‘true’ or ‘correct’ ending), and then it is interpreted as an object of play, it is decided whether or not the game was fun.

However, each stage can be said to occur simultaneously, or out of order. This is because, for our purposes here, we are not concerned with the game as an object but rather as a work of art. For an object to be perceived as a work of art, its creation should not be understood to be the physical crafting of a physical object or the digital crafting of a piece/collection of software, but rather when it is presented as a work of art and perceived by an audience as such. There is no creation of an artwork that can be separated from its consumption as it is the act of consumption that distinguishes art from object. One implication of this is that there is no ‘true’ ending to a game or a ‘canon’ story that is positioned above any players’ experience.

Further breakdowns of sequential order can be quickly listed off; for instance, it is not unrealistic for a work to be interpreted before fully played. If a game takes more than twenty hours of play to finish, an initial reviewer or journalist at the game’s release will only be able to give initial impressions, only having had the opportunity to play the game for a few hours, leaving the vast majority of the game they are reviewing unplayed. Additionally, even if a player has enough time to play a game to completion, it will be them behind the wheel of their experience. They might engage directly with story elements of the game first, and only engage with playful activities not directly linked to the story later, or they could do the opposite, or they could take frequent breaks from the main story to see what is on the other side of that hill, or their playful activities and story engagement could be completely intertwined and inseparable when the player considers their game experience after the fact.

For this reason, we should consider any distinctly different experiences of games (that is those experiences that could in theory be separated and labelled as a distinct phase or stage within a framework) as non-sequential. Instead, this piece argues that game experiences should be considered as fluid, shifting in and out of the player’s attention organically at times while existing simultaneously in the player’s attention at others.

With these core changes to terms and concepts in mind, this thesis will work to break down the idea of stories, rituals, and play as liminal and posit them instead as liminoid: understood to be a state of uncertainty that does not end. In liminoidality, there is no return to the familiar, or even to stability

but rather a constant state of shifting perspectives and new experiences. To compare the liminoid to the liminal is to remind us that a fictional character's life would continue after the conclusion of their story, where a reader or view loses the ability to follow them is irrelevant. While a person or character lives they change often into versions of themselves that a younger version would not recognize.

In play, this constant state of becoming gives rise to emergent experience. As already mentioned, emergent experience is what occurs when, in play, the player interacts with the game object and is in turn interacted with by the game object, a practice that will be explained through Barad's concept of intra-action in chapter two, contextualized through Donna Haraway's situated viewing in chapter three, and brought to a somewhat more grounded approach to understand a constant state of change through Janik's use of processuality in chapter four.

This thesis holds the stance that emergent experience, is the goal all art strives for. It is what occurs when a viewer is, through contact with the work of art, brought to a new understanding or way of seeing things. Within playful art, emergent experience brings to light new ways to play, new ways to perceive and interpret play, and new ways to perceive the self and one's perceptions of the world around them.

Chapter one will begin to work towards an understanding of emergent experience by first establishing the distinction between liminal spaces and liminoid spaces.

It will establish a baseline understanding of our current conception of liminal spaces in regard to imaginative practices. It will do so initially by discussing belief in 'primary' and 'secondary' spaces as it is discussed in the context of fantasy literature by Tolkien in their work *On Fairy-stories*.[15] This reading of their work positions belief in the 'primary' space of real life above belief in 'secondary' spaces of story because a primary space can be understood to be real and true without a person needing to actively believe in it. In comparison, 'secondary' belief is the belief in a space that is constructed. Because it is known to be a constructed space, its belief will always be fragile and must be supported by a strong system of consistent rules that make sense. If a secondary space is in any way non-sensical (insofar as it does not perfectly abide by the rules of its own worldbuilding and is not permeated by intrusions of the primary space) then belief ends and the reader can no longer find joy in the story.

15 Tolkien, J. R. R., *Tolkien: On Fairy-stories*, ed. by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, Expanded edition, with commentary and notes (HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014)

This structuralist reading of belief will be juxtaposed with their distinctly anti-structuralist argument in *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* wherein they argued that attempts to uncover underlying structures in mythologies, such as those practices undertaken by Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss in the creation of structuralism, fail to capture the joy of imaginative play in stories.[16] A story does not need to mean anything, it need not reveal any underlying rules for how things work, it simply needs to bring joy to the listener/reader. In such a case, whether a story can be believed or not would not truly matter. In here we can see two different conceptions of story: one that is delicate and easily breached and another where such notions need not apply.

Such conflicts seem to define study of the liminal and by extension liminoid. To understand this better, the chapter will situate the liminal within its historical context in academia paying particular attention to how it has been split into two camps, as described by Horrigan: the narratological camp that developed into the structuralist formations and organizations of thought that this thesis works to subvert, and the sociological camp which worked to provide a means of doing so by moving toward an understanding of contemporary ritualistic practices (namely those of leisure removed from social groups and traditions) as liminoid.[17]

Situating it as such will also allow for us to discuss the notion of liminal within ritual more closely. By doing this, we will see how liminal ritual practices diverge from liminoid playful practices. The key distinction to be drawn is that while the liminal ritual functions to bolster the health of small communities, liminoid play increase the wellness of the individual as well as expand their understandings of what is possible. While the liminal ritual works via the temporary inversion of typical norms and customs within specifically demarcated zones and for set amounts of time, liminoid play works by subverting typical norms and customs outside such limitations of specifically demarcated zones. In so doing, it can reveal those subverted norms to be arbitrary.

One such idea that play can show to be arbitrary is the very concept of immersion within imaginative practices and, self-reflexively, play itself. It will focus on the notion of immersion, the origins of its current form and how we can see it differently

Within game studies, the same notion of a removed, secondary, space that must be complete and consistent so as to not be breeched can be understood through the magic circle, first introduced by

16 Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien, The Essays of J. R. R. Tolkien, Paperback ed (HarperCollins, 2006)

17 Horrigan, Matthew, ‘The Liminoid in Single-Player Videogaming: A Critical and Collaborative Response to Recent Work on Liminality and Ritual’, *Game Studies*, 21.2 (2021) <https://gamestudies.org/2102/articles/horrigan> [accessed 24 February 2023]

Huizinga and subsequently brought into the limelight by Salen and Zimmerman as a part of their broader project to build a procedural framework for how a developer can craft a game as a system of rules, mechanics, and feedback to reliably create meaningful experiences for its players. Such a systemic approach will fall more strongly under the practice of the liminal than the liminoid, it can provide a good foundation for learning how to make a body of code, art, and animations, but a designer must also learn how to make their product fun.

To that end, the chapter will advocate for a fluid and messy conception of how we approach the psychological spaces of play. Play as an act of subversion cannot be contained through a structured framework, what we need instead is a philosophy. To begin the process of building one, the chapter will introduce the idea that, in addition to not needing to adhere to a strict primary space-secondar space type schema, we do not need to see the internal process of playful activity as ordered or logical at all. In play, and life in general, we do not hold one single idea in our heads at any given time but shift fluidly through several at once. To understand this idea, we will introduce the first primary body of theory for building our understandings of play: frame analysis as informed by Goffman[18] and Fine.[19] From this discussion, we will begin to construct a visualizable idea of the liminoid space in play.

Then chapter two will take our understanding of frame analysis a step further, introducing the idea of keying, a contextual cue for a participant in a social or playful setting to shift from one cognitive frame (still understood to be individual ‘headspaces’ or systems of contexts and patterns of thought that guide interpretation of a situation or phenomena in a certain way) to another cognitive frame. From Goffman’s work, we will see how keys function as types of thresholds, doorways from one cognitive frame to another. This, however, falls within the practices discussed here under structuralism. It adheres nicely to the idea of a hierarchical duality of frames rather than a fluid array of them, as a key or threshold works nicely to visualize moving from a primary space to a secondary space. Keying as it is first introduced fits within these types of schema and Goffman goes as far to express concern for moving between too many frames at once, which this thesis will advocate *for* in due course, as it may cause a viewer of a phenomenon, such as a stage play losing all grounding and understanding of what exactly is happening (Goffman). This would in turn constitute what is described in chapter one as a breach. If a person loses track of what they are supposed to believe in, then consistency has failed.

18 Goffman, Erving, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Northeastern University Press ed. (Northeastern University Press, 1986)

19 Fine, Gary Alan, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Paperback ed (The University of Chicago Press, 2002)

Frame analysis in this form provides a useful starting point for a foray into the liminoid, but to move further, we need to modify it with another body of theory, one which helps us to visualize an infinite array of fluidly shifting frames that simultaneously allows for a viewer, participant, or player, to feel sufficiently grounded in their understandings of what is occurring. In order to do so, the chapter will turn to Barad's conception of intra-action within the field of feminist posthumanism.

Intra-action works to allow a participant in playful activity to remain grounded in a shifting array of frames. It does so by first shifting our perspectives of the role that a participant is to embody in the act of play. Rather than a centre of the universe protagonist, we can see the participant of play as a collaborator, a supporting character even, who works with the game object to create altogether new meanings and perspectives. This idea will bring our attention firmly back to emergent experience.

Intra-action, as discussed by Barad, is the notion that there is truly no such thing as interaction. The reason for this is that all bodies that exert an influence over the other are entangled. The distinction between entangled bodies, with one being the player and the other being the game object can under this theory be seen to be somewhat arbitrary classifications of elements of one body rather than two totally distinct bodies. Intra-action works on the idea that actions of one entangled body, reactions of the other, and further reactions by the first body are a part of self-definition of a third, emergent, body of which the player is only a part. Where this relates to a player's positioning regarding a 'protagonist' status verses a collaborator status is that while a protagonist is entitled to see the whole picture of a playful phenomenon, as that phenomenon is there *for* them, a collaborator is not. And indeed, being a part of a body renders one unable to understand the entirety of the body just as any plant, animal, etc. cannot fully grasp their ecosystem.

What this means when we approach play as intra-active is that we are always in the process of acting upon the game and being acted upon by the game in a process of creating new meanings and experiences. These meanings and experiences, however, should not be considered as being beholden to the player's ability to understand them, as the player took part in their creation: they were not created for the player. What the player is then left with is a foray into the abstract, the subversive nature of play revealing that their need to understand what is occurring is an arbitrary one. What the player is left with is the awareness that what emerges from a game is not beholden to them juxtaposed with the player needing something, a landmark, even if it is an arbitrary and flawed one with which to situate themselves within as then move through constantly shifting and evolving cognitive frames.

Chapter three works with an awareness of the need for a player to be able to situate themselves within ever-shifting frames of intra-active play. To this end, the chapter builds further theories for use in visualizing the liminoid space. It first opens with the discussion of Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* in which we are presented by two core terms: situated viewing and the cyborg. The chapter will tie the practice of situated viewing to the established need for a player to be able to visualize a de-centred version of their part within the process of play. To practice situated viewing is to view oneself first as a hub of all of their shifting perspectives and frames of reference. These shifting frames are both intrinsic to the person and external influences, where and where the person is positioned and what other elements modify their experience of play.

Through the practice of situated viewing, we will be brought to the figure of the cyborg, a figure existing at the crossroads of human and non-human who here represents the situated viewer (or player) at the crossroads of all their influences and cognitive frames. A cyborg here can be seen as being in all places and in none of them as well as existing in a third, emergent space that arises from the combinations of all those influences. In such a reading, the cyborg can either be seen as representing the human player as they begin to play, or it can represent a third entity that emerges from intra-action, in which case the human player is not visualized or positioned as hub, but rather as among the connections to the hub.

With this established, the chapter will return to the established schism between game studies and the games intustry. It will do so by engaging in a core difference in how each treat the idea of entanglements, with a focus on one divisive and ubiquitous body of theory: flow theory. Flow theory, a body of theory introduced by Csikszentmihalyi, can here be understood initially as a means of approaching an actualized, realized, or optimized version of the self through a totally absorbing challenge.[20] Flow theory sits at a fascinating intersection of games research and games academia. In academia, it can be seen as problematic in its original form. It originally represented an approach to immersion in which one achieves a unity with the game object while simultaneously maintaining a hierarchical approach to understanding the game object. It maintains the positioning of game as object/obstacle to be overcome and the player/protagonist as the centre of the enterprise, with the obstacle being there for the player. It is through the act of overcoming challenge that flow theory works to bring the player into unity with that challenge. And within the games industry, this approach is celebrated, particularly in the work of Hodent, as a means of controlling a player's

20 Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology* (Springer, 2014)

experience. It is held up as a tool for providing players with the illusion of autonomy while depriving them of actual autonomy. To this end, it is portrayed as resisting entanglement, it does not intra-act with other cognitive frames, but rather pushes them to the background as obstacles to an optimal state of total engagement.

This iteration of flow theory is yet another body of theory that generally operates within an understanding of the space of play as liminal. It has its origins in the study of thrill-seeking activities such as rock climbing, sailing, skydiving, and so on. Standard understandings of flow states can be seen to comprise distinct categories of pre-flow, the traversal of a keying threshold into a flow state, and a post-flow state that greatly resembles the pre-flow state as the player returns to a state of comparatively low-energy/activation. However, in games, the chapter will show how, once again, when this theory of play within liminal spaces is expanded upon, it quickly grows to take on elements of the liminoid space. This will be shown in how, within video games, the strict delineations of states of mind that make flow state liminal break down and meld into each other.

This will be shown through two distinct sub-categories of flow state. The first is high flow, which represents a state of highly activated optimal performance in which the participant or player achieves a feeling of unity with the object of play through the act of overcoming it. It is the default state of flow that is generally understood to be what someone refers to when they refer to a flow state without further specification. The second is low-flow, in which a participant or player achieves a similar unity with a task through a feeling of low-activation ease or comfort with a task. It relates to autopilot activities generally, such as driving home from work without active awareness of what you are doing, arriving home with no memory of the commute. In games, it relates more to periods of slowness. This can be understood through restful or rejuvenating play that keeps the player engaged without driving them to the edge of their seat.

What we will find in exploring these two distinct types of flow, which are presented as occurring in distinctly different activities, will always work in tandem in flow-inducing games. High-intensity games require periods of low intensity and low-intensity games work best when they can switch into high intensity at a later point. The two states are defined by each other and can therefore not function without the other. As a player moves between them naturally throughout play, it becomes necessary to explore how a player can approach situating themselves between the two states at any given moment during play in much the same way that we can use Haraway’s situated viewing to situate ourselves within all our other cognitive frames. In play, these two types of flow will be shown to be inherently entangled. Any interaction involving flow will comprise an intra-action

between high flow and low flow, which will bring play out of the liminal and into the liminoid. Through this, we will show that flow theory does not resist entanglement and emergent experience, but rather functions as another means of understanding entanglement and giving rise to emergent experiences.

Chapter four will finish off by working to help us situate ourselves within the entanglements of intra-action. The practical exercise of situating oneself in such cases will prove a tricky one, as one cannot situate themselves within infinite possibilities without reducing those infinite possibilities to finite possibilities, a practice that this thesis has striven to discourage. In order to navigate this problem, it will first round out our understanding of emergent experience by broadly categorizing it under three ideas: emergent gameplay, emergent narrative, and emergent feedback. With that idea established, the chapter will introduce various guiding concepts/ideas that are known to be flawed. It is natural and good even to make use of flawed tools to broaden our understandings, so long as we bear in mind that these tools are flawed and that their use should encourage the development of better, slightly less flawed tools.

To begin doing so, we will introduce Janik's concept of processuality, an understanding of the processes through which emergent experiences can be seen to occur. Within play, it also serves as a further clarification, or help in visualization, for the notion of emergent post-human bodies. This in turn naturally helps us to situate ourselves within the infinite bodies of play. It aids us by visualizing four distinct bodies of play: the game as hardware, the game as software, the game as story, and the player's body (Janik). Importantly, these four bodies are not to be seen as self-contained or complete, but rather as umbrella terms for the innumerable possibilities for modification that can occur to them.

To make proper use of processuality as a means of understanding the creation of emergent experiences, we need to take a last step away from trying to fit the ideas discussed into established frameworks and work instead to develop a practice of developing schema in response to phenomena rather than defaulting to placing phenomena in contextual relation to previous phenomena or previous understandings of phenomena. This attitude can be seen reflected in the work of Bruno Latour, who worked to establish actor-network theory within a broader 'sociology of associations'. We can broadly understand this school of sociological thought as working to trace associations to disentangle the infinite entangled concepts and factors that make up experiences. And practitioners would do so with the full awareness that such an enterprise is impossible.

However, this thesis was not written with the goal of encouraging readers to delve into an infinite sea of metaphysical possibilities. It was rather written with the goal of encouraging people to continue building new theories and designing new games with an awareness that the majority of factors that contribute to a person's experience with a game cannot be accurately or consistently accounted for. To that end, the chapter will pivot to a focus on some flawed concepts that we can use, as already discussed.

The first such concept will the notion of infra-languages. Latour introduces infra-languages as a part of their argument for their approach to working to understand phenomena from the ground up. They can be understood to be another way of articulating keys and keyings. They too are the language of words, phrases, or other such interpersonal communicational prompts that bring participants from one frame of mind to another (Latour). Where this is worth discussing here, we will show, lies in the fact that infra-languages are specifically devoid of any context outside of what is being communicated within the group. There is a complete disregard for what words within an infra-language meant before, and therefore any effort to trace them back to their origins would fail to shed light on what it means to this group here and now. It re-affirms the notion that what matters when considering a phenomenon, such as instances of emergent experience in games, what truly matters is that thing itself.

The second concept will be Latour's notion of ideo-pomorphization. Ideo-pomorphization will be considered as distinct from the much more common anthropomorphization because while anthropomorphization pertains to ascribing greater agency to a non-human entity by ascribing human-like qualities to it, ideo-pomorphization ascribes agency to a non-human entity without humanizing it.

From the notion of ideo-pomorphization, we will arrive at a pathway to shaping our understandings of emergent experience: the specific application of ideo-pomorphization to regard our non-human intra-active collaborator(s) in play. One way that we can assemble an ideo-pomorphized perception of the game as object is through applying Janik's concept of processuality to a new series of bodies: the figures of the implied game designer and implied player as described by Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni as well as the figure of the implied game object as described by Aarseth. And as is the case with Janik's bodies of play, these bodies are likewise placeholders or umbrella terms for all of the infinite possibilities for modification of the game experience, in this case specifically the player's understanding of the game experience.

From establishing these new intra-acting bodies and concepts, this chapter will (in both the interest of and in some defiance of this thesis's generally anti-framework position) propose a flawed framework that, like its comprising flawed ideas, will hopefully aid in creating better ideas, better frameworks to replace it, and new angles from which to approach game design. This framework will comprise an understanding of four intra-acting bodies/processes of:

1) an implied designer that ascribes intention to every experience

2) implied rules are established

3) implied rules are tested, resulting in success or cruxes

4) emergent implied feedback, this success or failure was intended

With gameplay and its emergent experiences approached with these ideas in mind, the thesis will build new ways of seeing games as a medium for co-creating new stories and unique experiences with players. Games have the ability to challenge the status quo of structures of and formulaic approaches to art as commercial product even as such practices primarily drive game production. As platforms for intra-active play, games help us build new worlds and visualize our places in them.

As a final note before diving into the remainder of this work. It is worth highlighting that an engagement with play as defying structure cannot itself remain totally formal within the structures of an academic work. For this reason, while the thesis primarily uses a detached 'we' when referring to author and reader, there are several times were a more direct 'you' serves the work better. Additionally, there are scattered in the work moments where it is useful for me, the writer, to breach formality by presenting personal anecdotes (in which 'I' replaces 'we') These personal anecdotes are signposted as such.

Chapter One: From Liminal Ritual to Liminoid Play

Introduction:

This chapter serves as an introduction to the foundational understandings and assumptions regarding how we construct and understand frameworks. The goal of this chapter is to begin to establish a shared language among readers from different disciplines and backgrounds, be they in the humanities, sciences or industry. The challenges faced by such an introduction, as will be the case for most of this work, relate to this effort to establish a shared language/system of tools for understanding abstract concepts.

To begin this project, we build a shared working understanding of liminal spaces. Liminal spaces can broadly be understood as the invisibly demarcated spaces between one state of being and another. It can be understood to have arisen from the anthropological study of rituals among various cultures, particularly arising from the work of van Gennep. Beyond anthropology, liminality has been used in literature to the point where everything that happens in a work of fiction can be considered as a liminal state. On one level, the liminality of a story is everything that happens between the beginning of a story, wherein characters begin their journey, and thus begin changing, and the end where the stop changing. On another level, the liminality of a work of fiction can start with the reader opening the book (or playing the film or loading up the game) and ending when the story is finished, the book closed or the credits rolling.

Liminality, as we generally understand it falls within the academic theory and creative practice of structuralism. Within the fields of anthropology and sociology, we can attribute structuralism (at least the particular version of structuralism that is discussed here) to the works of Emile Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss. Both scholars sought to find underlining meanings and patterns to the ritualistic practices of an arguably inadequate number of tribes and societies in order to achieve a level of certainty about human nature that is, arguably more aligned with a non-academic's perception of scholarship, with the goal of being able to shed a definite light on truths of humanity that other schools of scholarship cannot touch, and thus achieve standing and funding despite being lower in perceived hierarchies of academia. This practice carried on from ritual to myth and into our formations of literature, and by extensions the narrative structure of games thanks to the work of Campbell, who used their research to state that there is only one true story: that of white man’s supremacy. Liminality is a nicely structured way of reading stories. It can be extremely useful, and

it paves the way for many other useful ideas to structure our understandings of our experiences with media. One such term is ‘Secondary Belief’ an idea put forward by Tolkien to describe how a story can absorb the reader. Another useful term describes that absorption: immersion.

As will be described in the body of this chapter, secondary belief is the belief in the completeness of a story. Completeness here refers to consistency in the storytelling: if a character is given a restriction like if a character refuses to kill or take up a weapon, then that character must not break that pattern of behaviour unless they are shown to have a reason to do so that makes sense to the reader in regard to what is happening in the story. Completeness can also refer to the lack of intrusion from our real, non-imaginative primary world into the imaginative secondary world. Characters must not have knowledge from our world they cannot have access to. This in particular applies to tabletop roleplaying games in which, for the fantasy to be complete, players would need to restrict their characters to knowledge that they would have access to. They should not, for instance, seek to make or use modern medicine, tactics, or weaponry of the game is set in a fictional past.

Another way of seeing the emphasis on believability, consistency, and completeness within a liminal secondary world is the magic circle. A term first introduced by Johan Huizinga in their book *Homo Ludens* and made famous to the point of ubiquity by Salen and Zimmerman.[21] The magic circle, as but one part of their much larger schema for understanding how to build games as systems that can reliably create meaningful experiences for players, is the attempt to apply the idea that immersion stems from belief which stems from consistency which stems from a total separation of the imaginary world from the non-imaginary world to the practice of game development.

From this idea, we can begin to see flaws in an approach to immersion and belief as informed by the idea of liminality. Liminality as it is discussed here provides a useful way to quickly communicate ways by which we can understand imaginative stories and tell them. From a practical standpoint, if you are a developer looking to start a project, understanding Salen and Zimmerman’s schema would provide a useful place to start. It likewise provides an undeniably useful place to for academics to start researching immersion and player engagement.

However, the inherent flaw with such approaches is that an unwary researcher can blind themselves to aspects of player experience that do not fit easily within these schemas and frameworks, creating

21 Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Martino Publishing, 2014)

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2003)

a schism between the research of play and what actually occurs during play. Referring back to the example of tabletop play above for instance, while it is true that a certain level of metagaming could spoil the fantasy, that only really applies to one type of fantasy. And a certain level of metagaming would of course be necessary in any case as a player cannot possibly know everything that their character would know and would need to compensate with their own knowledge. In the case of videogames, a design studio could align completeness of the world with the need for high quality graphical and sound design as well as map and level design that tries to be as un-game-like as possible. This is a practice Salen and Zimmerman refer to as the ‘immersive fallacy’.

Such misconceptions arise, this thesis argues, because an overly liminal approach to building a fantasy is too focused on what it is *not,* i.e. the real world, that it fails to embody a game’s ability to inspire imagination. If we are to discuss how we experience imaginative play, we need a new term and some new theories to unpack it. To this end, we will introduce the term liminoid, first used by Turner in their expansions upon van Gennep’s work on the liminal.

The liminoid presents a playful counterpart to the structured and ritualized liminal. A key distinction, we can see from Turner, is that while the liminal inverts the real world, the liminoid subverts it.

The discussions and theories used to show how the liminoid state of play subverts rather than inverts the way we perceive the regular or ‘primary’ world will take up the majority of this thesis, with new theories added in each chapter. To begin this process, we will discuss frame analysis, as it is first discussed by Goffman and subsequently by Gary Fine. Frame analysis is a study of understanding a person’s experiences of self and of social interactions as multiple and fluid. Frames are guiding contexts, opinions, and headspaces of which ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ worlds are only two of many. And in any given interaction, a person will hold and shift between many frames simultaneously.

In finishing the chapter by discussing this idea, we will lay a nice foundation for the following chapters to explore other theories and case studies to explore how a more fluid understanding of immersion allows for the creation and celebration of emergent experiences in play.

Section 1: How can we understand the Liminal and the Liminoid

Liminality within imaginative spaces is hardly a new concept. However, it appears that the term, how it is understood and how it is applied has evolved in different directions within different

academic fields. As Thomassen explains, the term liminal was first put forward by van Gennep, a scholar who was themself between fields.[22] They were an anthropologist who focused their research on rituals within non-Anglo-Saxon societies but published the majority of their work under the study of mythology.

The liminal in ritual served both as a means of change to fit oneself within society without the preconception that society is static, pure or unchanging. The liminal fits within a tradition of growth rather than a cyclical nature of change being resisted to preserve tradition and pure values. Thus, a participant in ritual undergoes the process of change into an element of ever-changing society rather than into a pre-conceived role. This fits well within the too classic of coming-of-age rituals and marriages. Although the idea of a ritual to mark a coming of age such as a Bar/Bat/Benai mitzvah can persist, what it means to be an adult in society always changes. People are still inducted into the (largely arbitrary) roles of man and woman as well as partner, parent etc. but what those titles mean changes drastically from individual to individual and especially between generations.

Thomassen positions van Gennep's work as an understanding of a shared role between cultures that ritual plays to represent the social significance of a person's transition from one state to another. The transition is marked by a liminal space. What is interesting is that it specifically does not argue for a universal system of rituals, it only acknowledges that all societies use rituals. Additionally, the ritual and the liminal space are regarded as means of breaking down what was there before and ushering in the new. The ceremony represents rebirth, not renewal. The liminal space is not a space in which a person changes from one predetermined state to another in a cycle of returning society to a set state, but rather the space in which change occurs. People change and societies change, and liminal spaces give room for such change to occur:

> Stressing the importance of *transitions* in any society, van Gennep singled out rites of passage as a special category, consisting of three sub-categories, namely rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. Van Gennep called the middle stage in a rite of passage a liminal period. He called transition rites liminal rites, and he called rites of incorporation postliminal rites. The ritual pattern was apparently universal: all societies use rites to demarcate transitions (Thomassen, p. 3 italics in original)

22 Thomassen, Bjørn, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2014) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1719905> [accessed 26 January 2025]

However, due to a series of unfortunate events that Thomassen describes as van Gennep being ignored within French anthropology because they were especially bad at politics within academia and picked fights with the wrong people, particularly Durkheim who was at the time regarded as a leading figure. Instead of anthropology, they were able to publish work and receive recognition during their life within mythology. However, after their death, their work was translated into English and quickly became very popular and influential in the 1960s and contributed towards the establishment of the sociology we have today.

1.1 What Is Structuralism?

Now, how did this study on the rites of transitions within anthropology turn into the ideas of liminal spaces we have today?

The answer appears to lie in structuralism. Leach describes structuralism as consisting of a '… loosely specified set of procedures which takes as its special field of inquiry the indefinable interface between what is out there and what is inside the actor-observer-human being' (Leach p. 27).[23] It appears to have its origins in schools of Anthropology and Sociology that sought a hybrid 'anthro-linguistics' to show how unconscious thought is a result of traceable systems that are shaped by language which is in turn shaped by the cultures and needs of the cultures. This approach can be traced back to Lévi-Strauss who, as Kurzweil shows, worked to combine Durkheimian anthropology with Roman Jakobson's structural linguistics and phonic analysis.[24]

Focusing on the anthropological side of things, Durkheim works to establish sociology as a non-positivist science that is to be treated equally to positivist science.[25] It works under an understanding of hierarchy in academia that positions positivist research above critical and empirical research and philosophical inquiry.[26] And they do so through the establishment of a non-scientifically quantifiable collective unconscious which can be vigorously studied, but through abstract philosophical study rather than positivist research.[27]

23 Leach, Edmund, 'Structural Anthropology: Volume II Claude Levi-Strauss (Book Review)', *The Spectator (London. 1828)* (London), 238.7752 (1977), p. 27

24 Kurzweil, Edith, *The Age of Structuralism: From Levi-Strauss to Foucault*, (Routledge, 2017), doi:10.4324/9781351305846

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology* (Basic Books, 2008) <https://go.exlibris.link/tXWKt3Cg>

——, *Tristes Tropiques* (Penguin Books, 1992) <https://go.exlibris.link/MnsLWX5K>

See Jakobson, Roman, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning (*M.LT. Press, 1978)

25 Durkheim, Emile, *Sociology and Philosophy (Routledge Revivals)*, Routledge Revivals: Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings in Social Theory, 1st ed (Taylor and Francis, 2014)

26 This perception of hierarchy within academia (not to mention disparity in funding), and subsequent actions within humanities to validate one's one field and work as *#NotLikeTheOtherHumanities* does of course continue today.

27 Positivism is a nineteenth century philosophical approach to knowledge that excluded any concept that could not be directly observed by the five senses, also interpreted as raw data.

In their chapter ‘Value Judgements and Judgements of Reality’, they take the idea of an emergent society and switch it to a narrative of dominance. In a healthy society, all differences between members will balance/negate each other, leaving a very general, or ‘normal’ idea of a component member. A Durkheimian society is a true melting pot. From their moral standpoint, this creates an issue. In their opinion, the majority of people are short sighted, petty, and unintelligent: ‘The average moral conscience is mediocre; it feels only slightly the commonest duties and hence the corresponding moral values; it is as though it were blind to some of them’ (Durkheim, p. 83). For this reason, a greater morality (of the ruling class) is required to define the morality. However, this is not an artificial modification of a natural state, but in fact the natural state. Speaking frankly, their argument fails to make logical sense, and Durkheim uses long visual metaphors of brain cells, light waves, ectoplasm, etc. to distract us before we can ask questions.

In *Primitive Classification* they then go at length to build upon our established ideas of universal emergent society from the intermingling of its people and the universality of its morality in order to empower wealthy colonizers.[28] They do so through the analysis of ‘primitive societies’ those being a selection of native societies in Australia, the Sioux and Zuni tribes in North America, and ancient China.[29] and claiming that they all share the same basic structure.[30]

Following Durkheim comes Lévi-Strauss. Like Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss approaches the field of sociology from a fundamentally hierarchal standpoint. Lévi-Strauss is often considered to be the ‘father of structuralism’, and their expansion upon Durkheim’s collective unconscious into the realm of mythology can be seen today in the continuing hierarchal approach to understanding imaginative spaces.

Lévi-Strauss’s status as the father of structuralism is not due to the fact they created it (it was Ferdinand de Saussure who invented the first iteration of structuralism.), but rather because, as Lipsus points out, they succeeded at selling it: ‘Part of Lévi-Strauss’s achievement has been to bring to the fore just such characteristics of his profession, which are generally hidden behind dry monographs in professional journals’ (Lipsius p. 90).[31] Their achievement was in making bodies of work that were approachable, easy to understand, and with far-reaching and exciting implications. It

28 Durkheim Emile, Marcel Mauss, and Rodney Needham, *Primitive Classification*, (Routledge, 2010), doi:10.4324/9780203092828

29 All of ancient China. As one fully unified society. With one mythology.

30 A rather short and questionable list to base such broad claims upon.

31 Lipsius, Frank, ‘Tristes Tropiques, by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Book Review)’, *Commentary (New York)* (New York, N. Y), 58.3 (1974), pp. 88-91

might not be too large a stretch to group them alongside ‘Pop-scientists’ of today who write similarly far-reaching, exciting, and influential works.[32]

There are two targets/focuses of their work to discuss here. Interestingly first target, as found in *Anthropologie Structurale Deux* is empirical research.[33] In the text, they argue that empirical research on its own cannot truly answer questions, instead only creating more questions, each requiring its own study, each leading to more questions still without bringing the researcher any closer to a universal truth. Instead, they advocate ‘…the use of the notion of transformation, which dominates the book; by this, dissimilar empirical systems are revealed to be variations on an underlying theme’ (Bloch, p. 3).[34]

This central and underlying theme, they argue, exists not on the surface level of societies where it can be seen, measured, and studied, but on a deeper level that traditional research methods cannot reach. To reach this hidden level, they turn to mythology.

The second target is a metaphysical reading of mythologies. In *The Savage Mind*, they provide an analysis of myth that is meant to be ‘…capable of overcoming, mapping or ordering an opposition, contrast or distinction’ (Silverman, p. 155).[35] The distinctions and contrasts are the features that mark the uniqueness of any particular mythology, and the analysis works by grouping each feature of the myth into one of several conflict-driven dualities. As Sliverman points out:

> The central oppositions are interrelated and transformed into one another. Their nature reflects the European philosophical, sociological and linguistic traditions which provide the setting for much of the author's thought: order/disorder, discontinuity/ continuity, necessity/contingency, synchrony/ diachrony, structure/event, form/content, meaning/meaninglessness, abstract/concrete, culture/ nature. These logical models might be formed from the myths of a particular society or from familiar institutional concepts, e.g., totemism, exogamy, myth, science (Silverman, p. 155).

And they sought to do so through applying this universal structure to mythologies:

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32 See Jane McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken* (2012) for a contemporary example of the practice within game studies.

33 It is worth noting that empirical researchers would likely present the most direct criticism of their work, as, in fact, this work of empirical research does.

34 Bloch, Maurice, ‘Anthropologie Structurale Deux’, *Man (London)*, 10.2 (1975), pp. 323–25, doi:10.2307/2800515

35 Silverman, Martin G., ‘The Savage Mind’, *American Sociological Review*, 33.1 (1968), pp. 154–57, doi:10.2307/2092271

> …Lévi-Strauss always stressed that analysis of a myth goes beyond the analysis of its terminology or contents; he focused on discovering the relations which unite all mythologies. These relations became the ultimate objects of his structural analysis. According to Lévi-Strauss, the meaningful and unifying structures of mythology surface through the analysis of myths in the way that unconscious thought emerges into consciousness through psycho analysis. Hence, the unveiling of the structures becomes a kind of cultural psychoanalysis. At the same time, Lévi-Strauss continually asserted that by discovering the structural "laws" of myth, he would ultimately transform fairy tales into science (Kurzweil, p. 19).

Beyond this, they worked under the assumption that myth can be reverse engineered to understand society. In turn, the now understood society can be reverse engineered further to understand the individual unconscious. Finally, reverse engineering from that will reveal the human condition as quantifiable through mathematical formula that can only be arrived at through non-empirical means.

1.2 Constructed narratives of the past

This practice of reveres engineering of social practices can and should be compared to philology, a practice that Tom Shippey describes as both a discipline of using understood structures of dead languages to reconstruct them, with the caveat that there are no living native speakers of those languages to confirm that 'reconstructed' words ever actually existed.[36] For that reason, all words created in this fashion would be given an asterisk, to convey that it represents a reality that could have been an 'asterisk reality', not a reality that definitively was.

Koselleck talks to the constructed nature of understandings of the past: how they are interpretations of times viewed from the present, subject to lacking information, misremembering, and certain details or players over or under represented. This is in turn interpreted by those who study history to form a history that is not as it was, or how it was recorded, but how it was interpreted.[37]

We can see this idea of appreciating a constructed past that could have been rather than a logically deduced past that definitely was in the work of Tolkien, who, in effect, used structuralism to advocate against structuralism in the pursuit of a return to celebrating asterisk reality as imaginative creation of what could have been rather than a formulaic writing of what definitely was.

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36 Shippey, Thomas Alan, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (Grafton, 1992)
37 Koselleck, Reinhart, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (MIT Press, 1985)

Additionally, Tolkien worked to re-focus our attention to language. It was the languages that the lost civilizations spoke that could provide valuable insight into understanding how they lived, perceived the world, and told stories about it. Without an understanding of the language, scholars risked projection of their values and confirmation biases upon other cultures.

They go to lengths to accomplish this in their work '*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics'. In this essay, Tolkien argues against the treatment of the tale *Beowulf* as a historical document from which to extrapolate information on the society that wrote it. They argue instead for treating it as art, and calls structuralist anthropology poorly suited for application to mythology and literature:

> I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea. (Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, pp. 7-8)

This work attempts to reclaim philological practice from a structuralism devoid of true understanding of what was to be structured, one that worked to fit cultures into an existing structure rather than working to uncover the structures of the cultures.

1.3 The split on liminality

Horrigan depicts the approach to liminality following two distinct paths of evolution in different academic fields. The first is the narratological path, which has its origins in Campbell's *A Hero with*

a Thousand Faces. The second is the sociological path which has its origins in Turner's *The ritual process: Structure and Anti-Structure* as well as their *The forest of symbols* (Horrigan).[38]

It is vitally important to understand how these two reading of the concept of in-betweenness diverge. A core difference in these readings is that the anthropological or sociological reading of liminality sees rituals as integrated in the fabric of society, simultaneously able to maintain a status quo through repetition of rites of passage as a means of communicating an individual's traditional roles within that society and disrupt the status quo, referring to ritual as a type of mediated chaos. Entering into a liminal space entails breaking down the established rules and understandings of ordinary life. As already discussed, a secondary space is by definition outside the primary space, informed by it but not structured by it.

What this all led to is there being two different readings of liminality: the mythological reading which gave way to the narratological reading of liminality that is commonly taught today. The second is the sociological reading of van Gennep put forward by Turner.

Where the sociological reading of the liminal diverts from the structuralist reading is in the idea of incorporation. Incorporation in the narratological thought came to mean a return to the past order. However, as Thomassen highlights, van Gennep advocated for incorporation as regeneration, as growth into new ways of thinking and acting, not as a return:

> [A]ll societies use rites to demarcate transitions, and the forms taken by such rites of transition are comparable. And liminal spaces and moments are key to personal and social development, anywhere in the world. It is via the liminal that persons and groups are taken apart, recomposed and regenerated (Thomassen, p. 38).

1.4 Turner's expansions on liminality

Let us now turn to Turner's work to unpack the sociological reading of liminality and the in-between.

Turner built upon van Gennep's work on rituals and liminality as processes to build their own framework.[39] Within this framework, liminal spaces constantly work to break down old structures,

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38 Turner, Victor, and Roger D. Abrahams, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine paperback (Aldine Transaction, A Division of Transaction Publishers, 2008), doi:10.4324/9781315134666
Turner, Victor, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1967) <https://go.exlibris.link/7p6dRKXZ>

39 Turner, Victor, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Cornell University Press, 1974) <https://go.exlibris.link/LLSdRzX2>

generate new elements of culture, and facilitate the creation of new structures to understand culture until they are overturned once again as a part of a constant cycle of change. In their words: ‘The social world is a world in becoming, not a world in being’. And it is within the liminal space of breaking down past frameworks to build new frameworks that societies achieve what they call communitas, a ‘social anti-structure’ (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, p. 45).

To understand their work on ‘social anti-structure’ as it pertains to this thesis, we need to establish a new term: the liminoid and distinguish it from the liminal. First, the liminal, they write, is primarily associated with pre-industrial societies that are commonly viewed by anthropologists as not distinguishing between work and leisure in the same way as post-industrial societies.[40] The two elements to consider here are the lack of resources such as birth control which allow for a broad separation of sexual activity for fun from the work of procreation. The other is in how ludic activity was utilized for the health of the community rather than a means by which an individual can rest and relax after their work.

Turner cites Sutton-Smith[41] for expanding upon Turner’s own term of ‘anti-structure’ as it pertains to liminality: ‘He writes: “The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the 'anti structure' represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it“’ (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 30). It is the social structure by which societies introduce periods of anti-structure, often making use of ludic element within the otherwise non-ludic environment of ritual to enable participants able to officially playfully reassess their roles within the community while free of them. Playing with their own perceptions of self and self within society in a way supported by the community and mediated by tradition enables the individual and group to make needed alterations to how they operate. It is a highly structured means by which to suspend structure to maintain the health of the community.

Because the joys and freedoms afforded by liminality are fundamentally tied to a social function, they cannot be truly separated from work. Instead, the participants alternate between materially productive manual work, and socially productive ritualized work.

Liminal states are therefore planned, expected, repetitive, and predictable. The classic examples of this idea are the ritualized rites of passage still generally used in the Western world: marriages,

40 Turner, Victor, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) <https://go.exlibris.link/J8YXlZ2t>

41 Unfortunately, I was unable to find an accessible copy of the work being discussed: Sutton-Smith’s 1972 ‘Games of Order and Disorder’

graduation ceremonies, Bar/Bat/Benai mitzvahs and other general markers of one's entering into a new stage of their life.

The liminoid is associated with post-industrial societies, that are no longer bound by rules and limitations independent of human society. It arises from environments where defining structures, and by extension frames of reference, arise from the goals, cultures, creativity, and customs of individual people colliding with the goals, cultures, etc. of other people to create arbitrary rules. These collisions of differing minds come in part due to the erosion of tradition-based long-term communities in favour of shorter-term transient communities centred around where work is available rather than generational homes. With this came a starker division between work: in which you are surrounded by people you must be around out of necessity and leisure with people you choose to spend time with, further aided by improved transportation and exploded today thanks to the internet.

Thomassen explains this, writing that, during the 1970s Turner recognized that social groups were putting less importance on formalized rituals and spending more time conducting in-formalised rituals of games and leisure (Thomassen).

If we are to consider the liminoid as existing in leisure activities that are specifically separated from productive work, unlike the liminal as existing in the in-between periods of socially productive ritual, then to understand the liminoid, we must have a working idea of what leisure is. Leisure, or entertainment, Turner writes is activity that creates feelings of ease and enjoyment through being subversions of everyday, liminal, activities: 'But supposedly 'entertainment' genres of industrial society are often subversive, satirizing, lampooning, burlesquing, or subtly putting down the central values of the basic, work-sphere society, or at least of selected sectors of that society' (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 41).

To better understand the distinction between liminal and liminoid phenomena, Turner, citing Sutton Smith[42], says:

> What interests me most about Sutton-Smith's formulations is that he sees liminal and liminoid situations as the settings in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise-as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact. These new symbols and constructions then feed back into the "central" economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying

42 As already mentioned, I have been unable to find this source directly.

> them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models, and raisons d'etre (Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual', p. 60).[43]

It is then through liminal states that new symbols and models emerge. This is a crucial idea that will be built upon throughout this thesis.

While liminal ritual (whether or not there are playful elements to the ritual) tends to focus on group identity and group meaning making, the liminoid arises from more individual focused activities, and therefore the unique meanings that emerge from it, such as interpretations of works of art as discussed in the introduction chapter, are specific to that person, or to small groups or schools of thought centred on a playful activity. For this reason, Turner writes, liminoid phenomena tend to be more 'idiosyncratic or quirky' (Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual', p. 85)

Liminoid phenomena, Turner writes, also lend themselves far more to critiques against societies in art and revolutionary manifestos in more academic contexts, as it is through play that we show the arbitrariness of the systems that govern our lives while liminal phenomena work to uphold or maintain them. The crux of the liminal-liminoid distinction here can be summarized as follows: 'One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid' (Turner, 2012, p. 86).

Section 2. The liminoid

2.1 The liminoid of Dark Souls

To begin to explain this idea, let us discuss *Dark Souls*.[44] *Dark Souls*, like many games, makes use of a New Game + system. New Game + offers players an alternative mode by which to replay the game. Instead of starting a new save file and starting the game over from square one, New Game + enables players to keep most of their weapons, upgrades, abilities, etc. and have the baseline difficulty of the game increased to counterbalance for the much stronger player and continue to offer the player new challenges. Typically, New Game + is offered as an option for the player to select if they choose. *Dark Souls* however foregoes the optionality of New Game + and launches the player straight into a new playthrough after the credits roll.

From a first time player's perspective, they have finished the game and been tricked into linking the fire, watched/skipped the credits and… suddenly find themselves back in the prison cell the game began in. And they see Oscar again. And they fight the first boss enemy again. The game ended, yet

43 Turner, Victor, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: an Essay on Comparative Symbology', *Revista Mediações*, 17.2 (2012), pp. 214–57, doi:10.5433/2176-6665.2012v17n2p214

44 FromSoftware, *Dark Souls* (2011), Steam

here you are. The end was not the end after all. And now that you know what awaits you, you can try to do things differently. If a player fights through the game once again, they may see what happens if they do not link the fire and instead leave the arena. What follows is another cutscene in which the player character somewhat ominously takes on the title of Dark Lord and a procession of other great serpents bow down before them. Is this better? Maybe, maybe not. Then the player once again finds themself starting from the beginning. This end is also not the end.

The moral ambiguity of both available ends deprives the player of a definitively satisfying point to put the game down. It does not end. Instead, the player is left in a perpetual state of limbo.

2.2 The liminoid in roguelike games

We can see a similar practice within the genre of roguelikes. The genre of roguelikes is defined by time loops. Whether you win or die on any given run, you will find yourself back at the beginning. In the same way as *Dark Souls*'s approach to New Game +, the outcomes of your previous run have little to no impact on your current run beyond unlocking additional difficulty. In some roguelikes, such as *Monster Train* and *Slay the Spire*, there is no given reason for you to be stuck in a time loop.[45] However, in the case of two other roguelikes, *Hades* and *Dead Cells*, the games make it clear that your player character is in fact immortal, or undead, and so too are your enemies.[46] Rather than time resetting, it moves forward with little change. Your immortal character fights its immortal opponents forever because, in the case of *Dead Cells*, there is nothing else to do, and in the case of *Hades*, it ultimately becomes your job as a prince of the underworld to test its defences to prevent residents from escaping.

In all of these cases, the game never provides a satisfying end. Instead, it falls to the player to make their own peace or satisfaction with their experience of the game. In the case of *Dark Souls*, it becomes about enjoying the journey. The land of Lordran cannot be conquered or beaten, instead the player can grow to feel a part of it. When you arrive in Firelink Shrine, it is not as a hero coming to conquer, but rather another person coming home. In the case of the roguelikes discussed, it can become a narrative of growth through experimentation.

Speaking to my experience as a player, the growth through experimentation came in the form of always trying new builds. In *Dead Cells*, the number of weapons can be categorized by the stats

45 Shiny Shoe, *Monster Train* (2020), Steam
Mega Crit, *Slay the Spire* (2019), Steam
46 Supergiant Games, *Hades* (2020), Steam
Motion Twin, *Dead Cells* (2018), Steam

they scale with, the speed and weightiness of their move sets, ranged and melee, etc. Even if the procedural generation will not allow the player to create the same character built in the same way, a player can always work toward a build style. If a player favours heavy weapons, heavy weapons will always be available for them to pick up. It then falls to the player to choose whether to make their runs diverse or not. Personally, I try not to win a roguelike the same way twice. When I first won a run of *Dead Cells* using a heavy crossbow, I chose to avoid heavy crossbows in the future. When I won with a particular combination of clans in *Monster Train*, I would move on to a different combination. In this way I could maintain a feeling of moving toward a goal I set for myself: win with as many combinations/builds as I can. As this was my personal way to find comfort within the liminoid, it falls to individual players to find their approach rather than relying on the game to explicitly provide one.

2.3 The liminoid as anti-ritualistic play: The Stanley Parable

The Stanley Parable is a usually one of the first names given when listing subversive, weird, and meta-textual games.[47] It has also been written about to the extent that this work will perhaps struggle to say anything groundbreaking about the game in and of itself, but we can try anyway since the popularity of this game justifies its use as it has greatly contributed to our ideas of what a game is and what it means to engage with a game.

The Stanley Parable is, in this discussion, an experience of being perpetually in the middle of a ritual experience. It has a beautiful anti-structure that builds an immersive experience through constant inversions that accumulate until they become subversions. Any discussion of the magic circle breaks down when discussing this game, as the game was clearly intended to fly in the face of any such structure or formula centric view.

The Stanley Parable presents itself as a walking simulator. And as the term suggests, the player has seemingly no direct agency at all. Your character can only walk and click on certain things. Ordinarily, walking sims, such as *Journey* (a game that will be discussed at length in chapter three) are meant to create a more cinematic and linear experience. You walk in a mostly straight line, are primarily acted upon by the game with no mechanical means to directly interact with the game world. It serves different purposes from more active games, primarily serving as a means of telling a story to the player for them to interpret. For this reason, it is common for non-walking sim games to include a section of walking sim gameplay for world building purposes. We can see this done

47 Galactic Cafe, *The Stanley Parable* (2013), Steam

Lies of P, as well as *Code Vein*.[48] In both, walking sim-esque sections serve to tell the player the story of a central character, with the player walking from one point to the other and watching scenes play out once they get close enough to them.

The Stanley Parable, a pure walking sim rather than a game with the odd walking sim sequence, does none of this. Instead, the game focuses on the player being encouraged to defy the linear nature of walking sims. For an explanation that does not bore the readers who damn well know what this game is about, you are introduced to the game through a narrator that introduces your character of Stanley, a boring office worker who suddenly finds that all his co-workers have disappeared. We then take control of Stanley and leave his office. At this point, the narrator continues to narrate what we do, but *before* we do it. After walking down a hallway, we see something that does not belong in the story we are being told: a choice. Before us lie two doors and the narrator tells us we take the door on the left. This is, of course, reverse psychology that dares the player to take the door on the right. And we can take it. In response, the narrator will berate us for our wrong choice and try to force us back onto the correct path. *The Stanley Parable* is such a subversive walking sim because it is actually not a walking sim at all. It is a work of interactive fiction with numerous branching paths you can take. And throughout play, the Narrator tries and fails to tell the story that it is supposed to tell.

This is, however a major oversimplification of the role the narrator plays. The narrator's commentary on just how annoying you are transcends boundary after boundary. First, the narrator comments on the player as an individual. Then it begins to talk about its frustration with players as a collective, how even those who are experienced and should therefore know how a game is supposed to work will do whatever they want instead of what they are supposed to do. In the later release of *The Stanley Parable Deluxe Edition*, these interactions are taken even further. In one interaction, you and the Narrator read through popular reviews on Steam, paying particular attention to the negative reviews, which cause the Narrator to become increasingly indignant and angry.

This game represents another take on the shift away from structure, away from coherent beginnings and ends, away from clear interpretation, and importantly away from the idea of clear resolution. In terms of ritual, *The Stanley Parable* is as directly liminoid a space as can be. Meaning is lost, fun is pursued and found, immersion is achieved, but simultaneously the meanings of those words are lost. The player is perpetually in an in between, similarly to a roguelike. And as in the case of roguelikes,

48 NEOWIZ, *Lies of P* (2023), PlayStation 5
Bandai Namco Studios, *Code Vein* (2019), PlayStation 4

playing this game becomes an exercise in the player finding their own goals, their own win conditions in games that, much like life, do not overtly strive to make logical sense or provide true win conditions. They show that the rituals of play cannot be truly defined and cannot truly end.

Section 3: Understanding Immersion

Drawing distinctions between the liminal and the liminoid in games brings us to other foundational ideas for how we understand the structures of play: belief in secondary spaces, and the magic circle.

In another notable work of Tolkien's, *On Fairy-stories*, they give what can be considered a structuralist reading of liminal states:

> What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator’. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises the spell is broken; the magic or rather art has failed (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* p. 52).

There is a great deal to unpack here. They discuss the primary world as the world that establishes all the key context for the secondary world. The secondary world can therefore only exist in relation to the primary world, which it is implied can exist without the secondary world. They stress the importance of belief, and links belief to consistency, and by extension logic. If a world cannot be explained, it cannot be believed in. If it cannot be believed in, it cannot exist. Finally, suspension of disbelief is in fact the effort to engage with an imaginary world that you do not believe in and will always be a type of condescension. Viewed this way, we view the imagined or secondary space that is simultaneously fully dependent on the more highly regarded, logical, consistent primary world but can only function if it can for a time take on the appearance of a primary world. The secondary world’s dependence on the primary world must remain hidden, and if revealed will break the spell, making belief impossible. Extrapolating from this further, it appears to work on the assumption that one can either be in a primary world or a secondary world, and any bleed or spillage between them, anything to reveal how they are both hierarchically arranged and inextricably linked makes belief impossible. Regardless of them being intertwined, you are either in one or the other, never both.

Reading just beyond the *On Fairy-stories* quote, despite the lecture being about the acceptance of fairy stories, what is Tolkien’s example of a true secondary world, in which you can have what they

call ‘secondary belief’? An enthusiast of cricket watching a game.[1] It is then both appropriate and striking all the same that Johan Huizinga says something very similar in his work *Homo Ludens*:

> Play only becomes possible, thinkable, and understandable with the influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos […] in giving expression to life, man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature […] (Huizinga, pp. l22-23).

Huizinga is also attributed with coining the term ‘magic circle’ to describe this secondary world. They describe it as a place in which ‘[…] the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently (Huizinga 31).

And like Tolkien, they advocate against suspension of disbelief in the imaginative, or secondary space, saying that a spoilsport who bends or breaks the rules shows the fragility of the magic circle, and thus robs the secondary space of its believability. It becomes just a game, a shallow substitution for something real.

And it is the need for imaginative play to be perceived as real that we come to the buzzword: Immersion. Immersion appears to be among the most used terms when it comes to describing any form of media that transports the consumer. That is to say, any form of media that introduces a perception of reality that is in some way distinct from our commonly accepted perceptions of reality. As Salen and Zimmerman explain, immersion is often falsely described as arising from suspension of disbelief: the idea that in order to embrace a reality other than our own, we must ignore the fact that it is fictional and an incomplete reality that lacks the depth of our own. According to this false mindset, media strives to be more and more ‘complete’ creating less and less disbelief to be suspended, culminating in something resembling *Star Trek*’s holodecks, fantasies that are almost completely indistinguishable from reality.

They call this belief ‘the immersive fallacy’, an approach that has very little to do with how immersion actually occurs when we are engrossed in a form of media. It continues to be perpetuated in large part because it makes a nice soundbite that is easy to understand and explain. In lieu of practices falling within the immersive fallacy, they propose a more complex framework to build structured systems that work to evoke the psychological and emotional experience of immersion.

Rules of Play sets out to provide developers a ‘Rules, Play, Culture Schema’ to create games with deep systems, allowing among other things what they dub ‘meaningful games’. Simply put, a meaningful game here is one that ascribes meaning to a player’s actions. A player makes a gameplay decision, and the system responds to that decision in such a way as to communicate that their decision has had an effect. The book states that it is not a work of semiotics, but the analysis of systems that evoke emotional and psychological effects.

> The word "meaningful" in this sense is less about the semiotic construction of meaning (how meaning is made) and more about the emotional and psychological experience of inhabiting a well-designed system of play (Salen and Zimmerman, p. 32).
>
> Meaningful play occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game. Creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design (Salen and Zimmerman, p. 32).

In other words: create a well-designed system, and emotional responses will follow.[49]

What is interesting here is that although it claims to emphasize the emotional and psychological experience of inhabiting a game, it does not discuss these ideas at all. Player experience is at no point approached from the perspective of a player. Rather, it seeks to provide systems through which emotional and psychological responses of players can be accounted for and given meaning. In other words, this book does in fact focus on semiotics. It does not focus on the systems of meaning-making among humans, but the systems of meaning-making within the coding of the game in anticipation of and adjusted in the wake of human play. *Rules of Play* primarily focuses on the semiotics of computer programming. The text appears to treat games not as an artform, but as a craft. As an anecdote, were this carpentry, *Rules of Play* would teach the reader how to make chairs and tables, not sculptures.

From this perspective, we can discuss the magic circle as it has been revived in this work. The term originates in the following passage from Huizinga:

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49 For further examples of such practices, see:
1. Reeves, Byron, and Clifford Ivar Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Televisions, and New Media like Real People and Places*, (CSLI Publications, 1996) <https://go.exlibris.link/554g6J6S>
2. Cowley, Benjamin, Darryl Charles, and Michaela Black, ‘Toward an Understanding of Flow in Video Games’, *Comput. Entertain.*, 6 (2008), pp. 1–27, doi:10.1145/1371216.1371223

The first can be summarized providing a framework for building systems that encourage anthropomorphization by users, thus giving a program ‘personality’

The second is an empirical study making use of multiple frameworks to build a systemic approach to making systems fun to interact with.

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, *the magic circle*, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga, p. 10 my italics).

Their analysis of the idea of a magic circle revolves around the demarcations of areas in which the magic circle can be considered an open system (being permeable by outside influences) or a closed system (being impermeable by outside influences) within their Rules, Play, Culture Schema.

On the rules level, the magic circle is a closed system. The rules are absolute, and breaking the rules breaks the game, and by extension immersion.

On the play level, the magic circle is an open and closed system. It is within play that the special cases of transformative play can occur. The rules can be changed if and only if they are changed playfully to reflect the preferences of the players:

> Considered as **PLAY**, games can be either closed systems or open systems. Framed as the experience of play, it is possible to restrict our focus and look at just those play behaviors that are intrinsic to the game, ignoring all others. At the same time, players bring a great deal in from the outside world: their expectations, their likes and dislikes, social relationships, and so on. In this sense, it is impossible to ignore the fact that games are open, a reflection of the players who play them (Salen and Zimmerman, p. 87. Bold and all caps in the original).

On the culture level, however, we can begin to see some cracks in the schema. In it, the magic circle is an open system to account for the fact that a developer cannot account for the cultural backgrounds for all people who play the game. On the rules level, it is easy to say that the rules are to be respected or the game cannot function. But on a culture level the idea of the magic circle becomes far more complicated and difficult to rely upon when you cannot rely on all of your players having the same interpretations of those rules. Furthermore, the developer can create a system that consistently provides feedback for a player’s actions, but they have no control over all the different factors that shape how that feedback is understood and interpreted.

However, contrary to the open nature of the system, the goal of the schema is to close it:

> The schemas presented under CULTURE are contextual schemas. They focus on the cultural dimensions of games, game design, and play. In considering games from a cultural point of view, our goal is to understand how the design of a game, as the design of meaningful play, engages shared systems of value and meaning (Salen and Zimmerman, p. 95 all caps in the original).

This reading of *Rules of Play* highlights the inherent strengths of a structuralist formulation of thought directed towards practice. It is easy to understand, easy to teach, and easy to emulate. On a meta level, it functions in much the same way as how it instructs developers to approach game design and understand how games create meaning. It imposes restrictions that usefully limit the scope of the concepts discussed to what can quickly be communicated and therefore applied.

However, that isn't to say that it treats games as entirely structured experiences, as much of the criticism of the book implies. Ways of thought retroactively organized into movements are, by definition, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and there is always room for flexibility and exceptions. This means that *Rules of Play* does make some room for un-structured, emergent play:

> When play occurs, it can overflow and overwhelm the more rigid structure in which it is taking place, generating emergent, unpredictable results. Sometimes, in fact, the force of play is so powerful that it can change the structure itself. … We call this important form of play transformative play. Transformative play is a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape. The play doesn't just occupy and oppose the interstices of the system, but actually transforms the space as a whole (Salen and Zimmerman, p. 262).

What's interesting here is that emergent, or transformative play is treated as a 'special case', an exception that proves the rule of play as structured as well as treating it as one of the many elements that contribute to meaningful play, something they describe as greater than the sum of its parts.

3.1 Establishing the primary space

Most of the work that is done on imaginative play distinguishes between a primary framework and a secondary, imaginative framework. Before we continue discussing the nature of a secondary

framework, we should first establish just what a primary framework is. Goffman provides a very useful insight on what makes up our primary framework.

As they explain, a ‘primary framework’ is one or more systems of interpretation used to interpret the world around us. What makes a framework ‘primary’ is the idea, whether true or not, that the framework has no origin in interpretation. A primary framework deals with ‘truth’ rather than ideas. Therefore, when we regard something through a primary framework, what we perceive is what is there, as far as we are concerned and cannot be debated. Primary frameworks can manifest as rules for how the world or society works, or they can manifest without a specific shape ‘providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective’ (Goffman, p. 21). In addition, a person typically does not have a full grasp on their primary frameworks. They do not understand them on a cognitive level; they simply use them:

> Whatever the degree of organization, however, each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms. He is likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and [would therefore be] unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to his easily and fully applying it (Goffman, p. 21).

They distinguish between two types of primary frameworks, the natural framework and the social framework.

A natural framework refers to our formed understandings of causality, how the world works as a non-agent. Things happen. There is always a reason for things to happen, but never an intention. For this reason, typical concepts such as winning, losing, success or failure do not apply because the natural framework exists outside of conversations of agency all together.

A social framework, however, refers to the non-fundamental constructed contexts of human interaction that have become so ingrained in us that they might as well be natural frameworks as far as we are concerned. However, a social framework is far more flexible than a natural framework. While a natural framework exists outside an actor’s intention, a social framework exists because of intention. Social frameworks revolve around agency, in the give and take that occurs in every human interaction.

Thus, to consider the world in which we live through a natural framework is, in theory, to use no framework at all, to regard events as mere occurrences. This would not include any societal or

individual attempts to consider the natural world through a social framework, attributing events in nature to divine will, for example. In comparison, to consider the world through a social framework is to consider events as ‘guided doings’:

> These doings subject the doer to "standards," to social appraisal of his action based on its honesty, efficiency, economy, safety, elegance, tactfulness, good taste, and so forth […] Motive and intent are involved, and their imputation helps select which of the various social frameworks of understanding is to be applied. (Goffman, p. 22)

However, as Goffman explains, because this system of guided doings is ingrained in us, we equate the social with the natural. Actions taken in a social context, guided by rules and convention, can take on the same force as nature (Goffman). Human decisions become conflated with causality. One way this manifests is in social organizations, such as a business. In such a group, individual, small-scale decisions come together to become large scale actions that often bear little resemblance to any particular small-scale decision. The results of any worker’s effort or decisions become lost, not directly reflected in the actions taken by the collective. As a result, social settings can be considered as inscrutable as natural settings. This inscrutability is a result of the fact that a social framework comprises not one context or set of rules, but every context and every set of rules in an ever-changing network of information, ideas and evolving conventions.

3.2 Structures of immersion

Fine discusses immersion through the idea of goal-oriented engrossment. They describe engrossment as ‘voluntarily cutting oneself off from other realms of experience’ (Fine, p. 182). They claim that the main objective of role playing games (RPGs) in particular, discussing table top role playing games (TTRPGs), which they call a ‘pure game’ is engrossment. Winning in such games is less clearly defined and is ultimately less important than achieving secondary belief (Fine). This differs from the literature-informed impression of immersion insofar as it places a greater emphasis on the player feeling compelled to focus on their goals within the game rather than the flawlessness of the narrative or the flawlessness of the interface. It also places less importance on the game-imposed requirements for winning, as it could be said that the player is happiest if they get to do what they want to do within the game, whether it lines up with the given goals of the game or not.

Thi Nguyen adds greater context to the idea of winning being a secondary goal.[50] In their work, they introduce the idea of achievement play, understood to be playing specifically to win,[51] and striving play. Striving play, they explain is the most interesting, the most convoluted, and yet the most approachable and universally experienced mindset of gamers. Striving play entails 'a motivational inversion from ordinary life' in which the player takes up a goal in order to accomplish a different goal. Suppose you play a game to relax or have fun with friends, in order to do so within a game, you strive for an arbitrary goal such as collecting the most gold coins, and thus, hopefully, accomplish the goal you actually care about.

It is striving play, Nguyen explains, that enables a state they call 'harmony':

> When your abilities are pushed to their maximum, when your mind or body is just barely able to do what's required, when your abilities are just barely enough to cope with the situation at hand— that is an experience of harmony available primarily to the players themselves. It is a harmony between self and challenge, between the practical self and the obstacles of its world. It is a harmony of a practical fit between your whole self and the world (Nguyen, pp. 12-13).

It is this 'practical fit' that makes up the aesthetic experience they describe. Rather than the experience of visual or auditory beauty, the beauty here is in satisfaction, having just the right solution to a problem, tackling a challenge that is just difficult enough, just complicated enough, to be engaging in a satisfying way:

> In games, we are given the right kinds of abilities, but just barely enough of them— which creates drama and interest. And not only do the abilities fit, but their exercise is often pleasurable and interesting and exciting, at least when we've found the right game for our tastes (Nguyen, p. 20).

Successful games work to provide this sensation on every level, but it becomes even more striking to consider games that do this without fantastic settings or fantastic scale of conflict. There is an entire genre of games called 'satisfying' games or 'healing'[52] games. In such games, you often do

50 Nguyen, C. Thi, *Games: Agency as Art*, Thinking Art (Oxford University Press, 2020)

51 Winning differs as a motivation from striving, in one way, in how it dictates what games you play. If your goal is to win, you are more likely to prioritize games you are skilled in rather than would be most fun.

52 For clarity, 'Satisfying' or 'Healing' games are not fully defined genres such as Soulslike/Soulsborne, Roguelike, or Metroidvania. They are more akin to tags you would find describing a game on its marketplace page.

something quite mundane: running a farm in games like *Stardew Valley*[53], power-washing homes in *PowerWash Simulator*[54], and cleaning up other people's bloodbaths in *Viscera Cleanup Detail*.[55]

The aesthetic experience then, is the experience of being skilled in something and performing a challenging task skillfully:

> In ordinary practical life, we catch momentary glimpses, when we are lucky, of harmony between our abilities and our tasks. But often, there is no such harmony. Our abilities fall far short of the tasks; or, the tasks are horribly dull. […]
>
> But we can design games for the sake of this harmony of practical fit (Nguyen, p. 13).

This brings to light an advantage that video games have over other forms of activities. What Tolkien describes in his example of a cricket enthusiast experiencing secondary belief is the engrossment you feel in an activity in which you have a great deal of experience. Tolkien says they personally have to suspend disbelief when watching cricket because they lack the requisite proficiency in the game.

Nguyen describes art as human inscription, a form of record keeping, various forms of proof that we exist and have existed. And games, specifically, are inscriptions of agency: 'Games turn out to be part of the human practices of inscription. Painting lets us record sights, music lets us record sounds, stories let us record narratives, and games let us record agencies' (Nguyen, pp.1-2).

Importantly, it is our ability to be immersed in a game, or submerged as they describe it, that enables us to experience alternative agencies. And they use terms very similar to those Salen and Zimmerman use to describe the magic circle:

> The rules of the game tell us to care about something and we start caring about it. A board game instructs us to care about collecting one color of token. A video game tells us to care about stomping on little mushroom people. A sport tells us to get a ball in a net. In order to achieve that cherished state of absorbed play, we let that goal occupy our conscious-ness, for a while. And the fact that the game designer specifies goals and abilities for the player to take on—that is precisely what makes games distinctive as an art form (Nguyen, pp. 2-3).

53 ConcernedApe, *Stardew Valley* (2016), Steam
54 FuturLab, *PowerWash Simulator* (2022), Steam
55 RuneStorm, *Visceral Cleanup Detail* (2015), Steam

They explain that games enable us to adopt in-game ends. An in-game end is a goal that is fundamentally different from our real-life goals. Ordinarily, we would never care to collect bits of plastic game tokens, yet in a game, collecting such tokens becomes the most important thing. In real life, our belief systems are rigid and only change after a great deal of effort and with a willingness to change. However, games enable us to be so much more willing to change than we could ever be in real life, thus we can change immediately, caring about goals that should not matter and approaching those goals in ways that should make no sense.

At the same time, the goals we adopt are rarely simple:

> We must distinguish carefully here between the goals of a game and our purpose in playing a game. The goal of a game is the target we aim at during the game: getting to the finish line first, making more baskets, maximizing points. Our purpose with a game, on the other hand, is our reason for playing the game in the first place (Nguyen, p. 6).

They give the examples of playing racket ball against their partner and playing party games with friends. In either case, they describe taking on two contradictory goals: genuinely caring about winning and genuinely not caring about winning so long as the other party has fun. If offered racket ball lessons, and their partner were not, they would not take those lessons as they would enable them to win every time, making the game less fun for their partner. Simultaneously, a party game is no fun for anybody if one person has significantly more skill than the others:

> I manipulate my capacity to win, with an eye toward maintaining a desirable sort of struggle. But during the game itself, I play all out to win. If my decision to forego those lessons is comprehensible, then striving play is a real motivational possibility (Nguyen, p. 9).

To play such a game, or to be a striving player, is to hold contradictory ideas, goals, and methods by which to accomplish your goals.

We can also see this in roleplaying games. When playing such a game, players often take on contradictory goals. The first is to accomplish whatever the goal of the game is, whether to save a kingdom, destroy a kingdom, or just raise a bunch of sheep. The second goal is to work towards the first goal while roleplaying, working within the limitations of the character they play as, forgoing the use of their real-world knowledge and their personal motivations for wanting to win. The character must want to win as well, and they may have goals and motivations that are poorly suited

to the established conditions for winning. In such a case, the very definition of winning would need to be redefined, as the character would introduce entirely new prerequisites for winning.

Nguyen explains that we are able to take on such intense and complicated agencies because they are temporary agencies. We are not really changing ourselves, we are just becoming something else for a short time. It is fun to be immersed, to care about different problems and be enabled to solve them, and we are more than happy to do so.

> In order to engage in striving play, I must be able to take on a disposable end. That is, I must be able to bring myself to temporarily care about an end, and for that end to appear to me as final. But I also must be able to dispose of that end afterward (Nguyen, pp. 10-11).

3.3 Returning to the previous understandings of duality:

In *Rules of Play,* Salen and Zimmerman assert that to enter the magic circle is to become playful. Playfulness is not a state in which you leave or forget the rules of the primary world but rather a state of metacommunication in which we ascribe to artificial rules with double-conscious awareness of their artificiality. Play is the emergence of unique experiences from agreed upon rules that create a temporary self-contained world (Salen & Zimmerman 455). In other words, as we are working with abstract concepts, dealing with our internal worlds and not quantifiable or measurable observations of the world outside of our minds (And further not getting into how our internal worlds, or at the very least the act of observation can in fact change the outcomes of certain experiments thereby calling into question all objectivity). It becomes very easy to bicker, draw false connections and contradictions between different scholars works. The reading of *Rules of Play* that seems most accepted, and which has been the reading that we have used up until this point appears to be an older framework, whereas this reading positions their depiction of a secondary space nicely within Fine's third 'pure game' space.

Although the secondary space is self-contained, it is not isolated. Because it is a state of metacommunication, even as it asks us to play by the rules of the game rather than by the rules of our primary world, those rules are made with an awareness of our primary rules and reflect back upon them as we shift between cognitive frames. Thus, even as we play by different rules, we still find ways to bring our real selves into our imaginary selves. Rather than intrusions breaking the illusion, they can enrich the illusion. As we move between cognitive frames, we enjoy our shifting awareness and engagement in multiple views of the world.

3.4 Understanding liminoid immersion through frame analysis

Goffman uses the term ‘frame analysis’ to refer to the practice of examining the various terms and techniques of individual experience: ‘the structure of experience individuals have at any moment in their social lives’ (Goffman, p. 13). As they explain:

> My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitored arena of a face-to-face gathering. I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: "What is it that's going on here?" Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way the individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand. Starting, then, with that question, this volume attempts to limn out a framework that could be with appealed to for the answer (Goffman p. 8).

Frame analysis seeks to better understand the impossible question of ‘what is going on here’ the here being the artificial construct of the ‘situation’ a somewhat arbitrarily but necessarily cropped conflux of temporalities, interests, backgrounds, external stimuli and diverging interpretations thereof to name a few. It is the attempt to build a framework for understanding any given individual’s frameworks for interpreting the world around them. It simultaneously highlights the fact that any individual will not be limited to one framework at any given time and that an individual can in fact apply more than one framework to a given ‘situation’.

As Zerubavel notes, Goffman’s frame analysis represents a beginning of a sociology of attention, which examines the levels of attention and disattention that work within the limits of frames of reference, including relevant details for particular social interactions while excluding irrelevant details while simultaneously shifting fluidly through multiple frames of reference at once.[56] This all lies within the consideration of any given individual. However, when we expand frame analysis to account for the intersection of multiple frames, the scale of the resulting complexity renders the exercise pointless. The frames of an individual can theoretically be understood, the frames of a group of people cannot. In relation to this, Goffman makes a statement fundamentally important to the overall discussions and arguments of this thesis: ‘In that sense it has been argued, for example, that opposing rooters at a football game do not experience the "same" game’ (Goffman, p. 9).

56 Zerubavel, Eviatar, ‘Frame Analysis: Erving Goffman and the Sociocognitive Organization of Experience’, *Symbolic Interaction* (Malden, US), 47.4 (2024), pp. 525–37, doi:10.1002/symb.1201

Fine expands upon Goffman's work on frame analysis, and directly applying it to games, saying that as a medium particularly focused on 'engrossment', it helps us to more easily see how frame analysis can be understood, observed, and applied. Importantly, they diverge from Goffman in considering individual frames in isolation to each other, both in terms of an individual's singular focus on one state of mind and in the duration of any particular frame. First, let us examine the temporal element, i.e. the duration:

> [P]eople easily slip into and out of engrossment. Frames succeed each other with remarkable rapidity; in conversations, people slip and slide among frames. Engrossment, then, need not imply a permanent orientation toward experience (Fine, p. 183).

This point is consistent with Goffman's discussion of talk as a '…rapidly shifting stream of differently framed strips' (Goffman p. 544). Understanding and expanding upon this idea, if a person moves through cognitive frames rapidly, then it stands to reason that a given person will not always remain in the same frame of mind throughout the duration of a task. They may begin the task in one frame of mind, switch to another, perhaps another still or return to the first state of mind before completion. For instance, if you were to do a boring task such as mowing your lawn, you may start out bored, that is one frame. Then you may start to daydream, thinking about something happy or sad, perhaps remember a joke and laugh at it again. Then, when you are closed to finished, you may return to a state of boredom, anticipation of being finished, satisfaction, or your mind could go to the next chore you are supposed to do. In this case, throughout the simple task of mowing your lawn, you have moved between three or more cognitive frames.

Now, what if we build on this, and break down the singular attention on shifting frames in sequential order? From here, Fine argues that people apply multiple cognitive frames to any given situation *simultaneously*. They illustrate this through the idea of 'slippages' in the context of tabletop roleplaying games. An idea that seemingly contradicts what we have discussed before in terms of motivation-based immersion:

> Characters [that is, the player-controlled characters in role playing games] do draw on their animator's knowledge of contemporary reality when their character could not have this knowledge, or they can draw on their player's knowledge of game events outside of their own knowledge (Fine, p. 188).

This is problematic. It contradicts Nguyen's description of goal-oriented immersion. It contradicts the work by Salen and Zimmerman to treat game immersion as closed systems. And it contradicts Tolkien's emphasis on wholly separate spaces. Fine addresses this idea by explaining that, simply put, there is more than one way to play. They distinguish between roleplaying in RPGs vs using what a player knows to their advantage:

> Slippages of awareness indicate the fragility of the roleplaying enterprise—it can easily be subverted. I emphasize, however, that although this subversion damages the nature of the role-playing, it does not destroy the game. This extra information gives the characters an advantage that they would not have if the fantasy situation were the primary framework for their characters—it tarnishes the illusion of the "real fantasy" world, but it doesn't make the game less of a game (Fine, p. 192).

In other words, we can distinguish here between immersion in a fantasy and engrossment in a ludic experience. Players, not the developers or game masters, have the ability to decide which form of immersion they want to seek at any given time. Do they immerse themselves in a consistent fantasy, or do they try to win the game? Thanks to frame analysis, we know that the answer does not need to be consistent. A player can choose to dedicate themselves to the roleplay in one moment to the detriment of optimal play, or they can choose to chase the win to the detriment of their roleplay. Or they could of course choose another engrossing perspective altogether by pursuing goals they choose rather than those provided by the narrative of the game or the mechanical level of the game.

Summary and further thoughts:

In Summary:

- We have established our idea of the liminal as foundational to how we, on default, frame our understandings of imaginary spaces.
- We have explained the origins of this term and how it has split into narratological and sociological camps, with each having different implications for how we understand and apply it.
- Through the sociological approach, we arrived at a new term, the liminoid.

- As shown in our case studies, the liminoid provides a much more useful approach to understanding how games engage with the player than the liminal, as the liminoid is inherently a more playful concept.
- By bringing the discussion from one buzzword, liminal, to another buzzword, immersion, we can see the importance of exploring the liminoid more thoroughly, as an idea of immersion as grounded in the liminal falls short of reflecting the depicted experiences in the case studies.
- As an initial exploration of how we can begin to better understand the liminoid experience of games, we have introduced the theoretical practice of frame analysis.

Framing our understandings of how liminality and immersion work as arising from an intentional effort to ‘discover’ through rather colonialist enterprises of cultural erasure enables us to see the need to look past the liminal and search for new answers. This is not merely a moral issue concerned with moving beyond colonialism in general but also reflected in the ineffectiveness of liminality to fully capture how games work and how they speak to players. Simple condemnation is largely pointless at this stage, what matters is to take what is legitimately useful from such foundations and broaden our understandings of imaginative play beyond them.

Understanding primary spaces helps us to frame these structuralist foundations. It prepares us to see the world through the hierarchical duality of the serious real and the unserious imaginative play. It encourages us to see imaginative spaces as needing to be distinctly separate from our regular spaces, demarcated as separate and maintaining a level of independent completeness and consistency so as to not break the spell, which would make belief in the secondary space impossible and forcing participants to either cease the playful activity (an option that is totally acceptable in liminoid play as an individual who is not beholden to others has no obligation to continue an activity if it ceases to interest them) or suspend disbelief to maintain the activity in the interest of the social contract surrounding it.

Though this chapter only discussed Tolkien’s primary and secondary belief and Salen and Zimmerman’s expansions on Huizinga’s magic circle at length, there is a persistent through line of the need for belief and the avoidance of suspended disbelief in the research discussed, appearing prominently in the work of Turner as a means of achieving ‘communitas’ through ritual practice, for instance (Turner 2012). This chapter does not seek to dissuade the reader from the usefulness of such terms, but to encourage them to build upon these ideas and establish a less hierarchal and more

fluid understanding of how belief, and by extension immersion can be observed to function in games.

By moving toward discussing the liminoid rather than the liminal as they are described in this piece, we are able to start showing the flexibility of play as a means of creating new meanings or new perceptions of what is possible. Play is an inherently subversive concept. It is often tied to rules, particularly when one is playing with others, but with a double-conscious awareness that it is play. Play is not sacred. Play can be considered a tradition insofar as all children are expected to do it and adults tragically expected to stop, but the ways we play are not traditional or bound to the ways that people who have come before us have played. For this reason, we should not always think that breaking, or breaking with, established rules ends the act of play. Instead, should incorporate the idea of breaking with rules as modifying or customizing the experience of play for the player(s). This idea will be strengthened through the addition of Goffman's concept of laminations in the following chapter, but for now we can begin to consider play to be fluid and ever-shifting rather than strictly rigid, as might be expected from the playful elements of ritual.

Another important element to consider in regard to cooperative play is that each player still has an individual grasp on the situation at hand and will to varying extents have differing opinions and goals to the people with whom they are playing. In a competitive game, one player will have a unique strategy and work to disrupt what they perceive to be their opponent's strategy. The two players are playing the same game but have drastically different approaches to playing it. In cooperative play, in which multiple parties can take part in imaginative play together, as occurs during tabletop RPGs, the fine details of such play will still exist within the individual minds of the players. Teammates will have different roles to play. In a basic four-person party structure, some players will be focused on damaging enemies while another would be more focused on healing and defending their teammates. They have the same ultimate goal of winning/surviving the encounter, but the moment-to-moment plans, goals, and methods of the players will differ dramatically. With this in mind is worth reiterating the question, if multiple people partake in a game, be it as players, mediators, or spectators, are they actually partaking in the *same* game? As will be explored more in the following chapters, this thesis' stance is they are not.

To explore this idea further, frame analysis provides us with our first set of tools with which we can build a liminoid perception of how play works. It works to challenge the idea of a hierarchal duality in how we perceive the world around us.

As shown in the different headspaces of different players in cooperative and competitive play, we can begin to see that such coexisting yet seemingly contradictory ideas, interpretations, and goals can also exist in the head of one player. Humans are infinitely complex, and to say that any person has one singular thing on their mind at any given time is a dramatic oversimplification, a structuralist reduction of observed and unobserved phenomena. A mind analysed through frame analysis would not simply see a real and unreal world when perceiving a ludic phenomenon, but multiple contexts coming together at once, perceived in turn through multiple contexts, ideas, and thoughts coming together in that mind.

Chapter Two: Keying the liminoid, understanding play as intra-active

Introduction:

This chapter will build upon the foundation laid in chapter one for how we may begin to understand emergent experiences within liminoid spaces of play. It chapter will engage more deeply with frame analysis with a mind to take us further away from a strictly liminal understanding of immersion and play in order to take us closer to an understanding of play as liminoid. In order to do so, we will need to establish further language and conceptual imagery to help the reader better visualize a fluid and non-hierarchical or linear approach to understanding playful headspaces.

This chapter will not be as focused on a critique of structuralism as we were in chapter one. This project is ultimately to build up new approaches to understanding play rather than simply to tear down older approaches and leave it to the reader to build something in the resulting vacuum of theory. Therefore, this chapter seeks to build upon theories relating to liminal understandings of play. Doing so will show our idea of the liminoid as a natural result of exploring these theories further, pursuing their logical conclusions. Establishing new bodies of theory is a practice best undertaken by building upon the best qualities of the bodies of theory that came before rather than by tearing down one body to lift up another. From approaching play as liminoid in this way, we will arrive at the idea that liminoid play is a process that enables the creation of emergent experiences. These experiences will be understood as arising from cooperative engagement with one or more external bodies whose outcomes cannot be accurately predicted due to the sheer number of factors contributing to it and which can also be seen as a product greater than the sum of its parts.

To begin understanding emergent experiences as such, we shall begin with a foundational liminal understanding of emergent experience. Doing so will provide us with a solid, comprehensive, and stable foundation upon which we can build our bodies of theory while preserving and highlighting the best qualities of that foundation. To understand emergent experience (here interchangeably referred to as emergent play or emergent experience, distinctions between the two will be established later)[57] within liminal understandings of play, we need to return to a practice-based model of building complex systems that allow for

57 See chapter four, section two: ‘Emergent Experiences’

dynamic relationships and interactions. By dynamic relationships and interactions, there are two key approaches. The first is the dynamic relationships between the intersecting rules of the game. One rule will come up against another rule and the two will, in fact, act intra-actively to create new outcomes (this constituting further evidence of liminal approaches naturally moving toward liminoid approaches to understanding play). The second is the dynamic relationship between the rules of the game, as well as their intra-active emergent rules and the player as a body that encounters and interacts (or intra-acts) with those rules to create new experiences. Jørgensen summarizes this nicely, saying:

> [G]ameplay is not a feature designed into the game alone, but an emergent aspect of interaction between the game system and the player's strategies and problem solving processes. In short, *gameplay* is how the game is played, delimited by the game rules, and defined by the dynamic relationship that comes into being when the player interacts with these rules. The *gameplay* of a specific game can therefore not be fully understood without playing the game and becoming familiar with the game system and its dynamics (Jørgensen, 4th para).[58]

It is important to signpost here that the core distinction to be drawn here between a liminal approach to understanding play and a liminoid approach is that the liminal approach focuses on the rules as written and their inter/intra-actions as they can be accounted for as was discussed under Salen and Zimmerman's work to create their 'Rules, Play, Culture' schema (Salen and Zimmerman).

As we continue to explore the idea of emergent experience as something arising from complex interactions of bodies, in this case the interaction of player(s) and game bodies, we will expand greatly upon frame analysis. We will do so by introducing two new terms discussed by Goffman that pertain to cognitive frames: keys and laminations. Both terms originally function in a dualistic sense. Goffman describes keys as the contextual cues that encourage or prompt the 'travel' from one distinct cognitive frame to another (Goffman). Keys can be understood to be the prompts that enable people to enter into the magic circle and to leave it afterwards, a sub-liminal (not to be confused with subliminal) space within liminal spaces. Laminations on the other hand are contextual prompts that do not move us between distinct contexts as keys do. Instead, as Goffman explains, laminations modify an existing context, enabling it to take on different meanings, interpretations, or implications from what it originally had. Where laminations are distinct from

58 Jørgensen, Kristine, 'Audio and Gameplay: An Analysis of PvP Battlegrounds in World of Warcraft', *Game Studies*, 8.2 (2008) <https://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/jorgensen> [accessed 5 March 2026]

keys is in the fact that these are less drastic shifts in context. They modify an existing frame slightly without causing it to shift so much as to constitute an altogether new frame (Goffman).

Our discussion of laminations in particular will show how frame analysis can move from a liminal to a liminoid understanding of our experiences with media. In their work, Goffman expresses concern that too many laminations will cause confusion in the participants or viewers (Goffman). This confusion would represent a loss of understanding resulting in a breakage of the secondary space/magic circle. But such confusion is only a pertinent concern if we are focused on staying within liminal spaces. As we are looking to explore the liminoid, we will seek to over-laminate, to embrace confusion and see what we can learn on the other side.

And what we find on the other side of this over-lamination of ideas is not immersion-breaking confusion at all. Instead, the phenomena we find can be understood through post-humanist theory, particularly feminist post-humanist theory. In this chapter, we will focus on the work of Barad who here introduces the concept of perceiving reality through entangled bodies with entangled agencies.[59] A party that acts and another party that reacts are, in this case, not two distinct entities, but rather two halves of one entity. Though this idea, we arrive at the concept of intra-action, a method of seeing playful engagement that is distinct from interaction. Where interaction can be understood as one distinct body acting upon another body, an idea that inherently brings to mind a hierarchical approach as one body acts and the other is acted upon, to intra-act is to self-reflexively act and react simultaneously to the self as an emergent entangled body.

We will arrive at this established idea of play as entangled activity through two instances of collaborative play. The first instance is that of multiple players playing the same game together, in this case during tabletop roleplaying games. In such play, each player will be shown to hold their own distinct sets of cognitive frames, each of which laminate the cognitive frames of the other players far beyond the point where Goffman may have expressed concern for over-laminated confusion. From this interconnected and entangled sea of ideas and perspectives, we can see the emergence of gameplay experiences that do not exist in the head of any one player. Instead, the emergent experience can be understood to inhabit its own body, which is comprised of the physical and conceptual bodies of the players as well as those of the game being played.

The second instance of collaborative play is that of an individual player and the bodies, understood as cognitive frames, associated with that player experiencing entanglement with a game and all of

59 Barad, Karen Michelle, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Duke University Press, 2007), doi:10.1515/9780822388128

its associated bodies which manifests as a type of para-social relationship. These are the phenomena that our case studies, *Inscryption* and *Slay the Princess* will work to shed light upon.

In so doing, we will show how structuralist-informed readings of games as systems of rules, mechanics, and feedback within liminal spaces of play as an inversive practice fall short of fully understanding what happens during gameplay. No matter how comprehensive your system is, it simply cannot account for infinite possibilities and the experiences that may emerge from them. Instead, we need to see ourselves as entangled with the systems, part of a greater whole rather than its consumer.

Section 1. Keys and Thresholds

If we are to use frame analysis as our entry point into the idea of subversive liminoid play, let us now examine a crucial element to Goffman's text: keys and keyings.

They coin the term keying to refer to a system of acts or signifiers for crossing a boundary into play. They define keying as a systematic transformation of materials and actions, divesting them of their typical meanings and ascribing new meanings to them:

> Actions framed entirely in terms of a primary framework are said to be real or actual, to be really or actually or literally occurring. A keying of these actions performed, say, onstage provides us with something that is not literal or real or actually occurring. Nonliteral activity is literally that, or is if everyday usage is to be followed (Goffman, p. 47).

On an initial level, we can see keying as functioning within a structuralistic hierarchal approach to primary and secondary worlds, with the quote above talking about how the secondary space of a stage production is set apart from the primary world. At first glance, keys appear as straightforwardly useful means by which to move between primary and secondary spaces. However, the new meanings ascribed to actions or words prescribed by keying go far beyond initiating play. Rather, Goffman explains that keying occurs in any social situation. In normal social situations, the transformations of meaning that arise from keying are used, in the correct contexts, to communicate group-specific meanings that have little bearing on the words used. Through keyed contexts, any interaction between individuals will take on unique meanings and associations determined by the social context of the interaction (Goffman). For example, it is reasonable to expect people to speak and act differently at a football game than they would at an academic or professional event or at

their workplace. However, if someone were to not talk differently at a football game than they would at a professional event, the resultant break down in communication would naturally be a subversion of social roles and therefore and act of play. We will discuss this idea further later on.

For now, we can see how keying functions in specifically playful contexts by aligning it with Upton's descriptions of 'context switching'.[60] What is interesting to consider when we discuss context switching in relation to Goffman's keys and keyings is that it is not limited to entering into a playful cognitive frame but also applies to switching between different cognitive frames during play without ending play. These new frames do not break the flow of play or require play to cease because they are still playful cognitive frames that are pertinent to the play that is occurring. Context switching here refers to the practice of altering the rules of play, or one's perceptions of the rules of play during play. Switching contexts in this way, Upton writes, requires a threshold. A threshold here describes a clear boundary that communicates to the player that a change in the guiding contexts of their play is to occur:

> A threshold is a clear boundary that tells player there's been a significant change in context; it's a shift in the overall texture of the experience. It can be as simple as passing through a door or turning a corner, but it can also be represented by a change in lighting, or effects, or visual style. It can be abstract as well as physical. Pausing time is a threshold, as is the "letterbox" effect that indicates a cut scene. A threshold is anything that signals to the player that their circumstances have significantly changed… (Upton, p. 48).

Upton distinguishes between two types of play, which can each be seen as a different cognitive frame and a threshold with which to move between them.[61] The first type of play is immediate play. Immediate play is characterized by actions done in the heat of the moment. It resembles play while in a state called 'high flow', which will be examined in chapter three. For now, it is the play of executing a plan. The second is anticipatory play. Anticipatory play is not characterized by what is happening now, but what may happen in the future. They use the example of horror games to describe anticipatory play, as it is often the case in horror games that much of the gameplay occurs in the anticipation of something scary happening (Upton). The context keyed by anticipatory play in horror games is one of expecting a monster to jump out at you whereas the context keyed by immediate play would be to run from the monster as it chases you, throwing something to distract it

60 Upton, Brian, *Situational Game Design* (Taylor & Francis, CRC Press, 2018)
61 See this distinction in types of play also in Upton, Brian, *The Aesthetic of Play* (MIT Press, 2015) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=3339961> [accessed 22 January 2024]

and sneak away, or (if this is an action game) shoot it. In other genres of play, anticipatory play is the anticipation of what will happen and how you the player plan to respond to it. It is the play of planning your next steps, as informed by your experiences with the game so far and your expectations for the game as informed by your experiences with other games, particularly those of the same genre. It is important to note that, in regard to a player's expectations for immediate play being informed by their past experiences with the genre, it is in this idea we can see the individuality of how a player forms their expectations. A developer cannot know what other games a player has played. There is also the possibility that this is their first game of this genre.

The threshold discussed here is what Upton calls a crux. A crux is the keying of failure, or unexpected consequence. Immediate play is a fragile state of mind, particularly as far as it concerns the execution of plans. It relies on the game acting as the player expects it to act: it is only maintainable if the plan works. If the plan does not work, the player is confronted by a crux, an unexpected consequence that promptly ends the state of immediate play and switches the player into anticipatory play as they now need to assess the game and how it appears to work in relation to how they expected it to work. Then they need to make a new plan based upon the new information before anticipatory play can become immediate play again (Upton).

Of course, a crux can also be seen as a reversal of the subversive nature of play. In this case, rather than a player subverting the rules of an established primary frame, the game is subverting the rules of the player. It can occur when a game's narrative takes an unexpected turn and it can occur when a player misunderstands an element of the system. In either case, it represents the game as an object forcibly keying the player into a different context.

This brings us to a perception of keys that does not quite fit with how Goffman describes it. The threshold is not simply a gateway into play but a gateway into sub-frames. Immediate and anticipatory play are not truly separate frames, but entangled ideas within the same frame. They are messy and show the potential for keys and keyings to be considered within liminoid spaces. And yet, there are still many readings and applications for keys and keyings for a more liminal approach to game design. For example, in Fine's expansion upon Goffman's work, they establish two distinct types of keyings: upkeying and downkeying. Upkeying functions to place distance between a signifier, be that an action taken, words spoken, or any other form of communication, and its signified (Fine). Upkeyed contexts are primarily what this paper has discussed so far. Upkeying lives within the ritual spaces, the liminal, and the in-between where new identities thoughts and

meanings emerge from existing contexts without being bound to them in the manner they usually are.

Fine's use of downkeying can be read as the keyings of contexts that bookmark upkeyed contexts, symbolizing the end of the liminal period and a return towards the original form of the contexts that were transformed (Fine). In this case, this is a means of using keys and keyings to understand how a player can move linearly into and out of a magic circle. Upkeyings help you enter into secondary belief and downkeyings ease you back into your primary space.

The majority of work regarding keys and keyings researched for this project discuss keyings (or ideas quite similar to keyings) to achieve the effect of Fine's upkeying. For instance, Murray draws our attention to spectacle as an upkeying:

> Cyberspace gains much of its immersive power from spectacular effects arresting visuals like the fast-moving, pulsating explosions of the videogame, the flashing billboards of the World Wide Web, and the hallucinatory apparitions of virtual reality landscapes… Spectacle is used to create exultation, to move us to another order of perception, and to fix us in the moment… (Murray, p. 117).[62]

They write that digital spectacle, (read here as a form of keying), enables ordinary people, not limited to professional actors, to become actors, participants in a shared constructed reality, an idea that will in turn be expanded upon in later chapters. For now, Murray explains that in order to create a proper stage for players to experience agency, designer(s) must prepare two types of scripting. They must both program the actions of the system to key the players into the correct frame of mind to understand the game world and their significance in it as agents, through such keys as spectacle, and additional keys to prompt the player to exert their agency. 'When these two scripts are well matched,' they write, 'the interactor feels the satisfaction of agency" (Murray p. 158).

Ryan discusses familiarity as another type of upkeying for building immersion in a space:

> A narrative's ability to immerse readers in place is often the result of a "madeleine effect" that depends more on the coincidental resonance of the text with the reader's personal memories than on generalizable textual properties. Just as the taste and smell of a piece of madeleine dipped into a cup of tea took Marcel Proust's narrator back to the village of their childhood, a single word, a name, or an image is often all the reader needs to be transported into a cherished landscape—or into an initially hated one that

62 Murray, Janet Horowitz, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, (MIT Press, 2017)

> grew close to the heart with the passing of time (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 86).[63]

Yet another, different type of upkeying can be found in the work of Persson.[64] Taking the discussion of keyed contexts outside of games, they discuss the keys of anonymity and accountability in online spaces. If a person on social media or forums is in that space as themselves, they have to act with the knowledge that they will be held accountable for their words and actions, both in their intended and unintended effects. On the other hand, if you are represented by an anonymous username, you can be keyed into the context of having no accountability, to say whatever you like and troll whomever you like without repercussion (Persson, p. 91).

All of these readings of keys appear to have a rather dualistic approach. They discuss keyed headspaces as distinctly different from the headspace someone might hold prior to the keying. And when a keyed context is linked to a system, as Murray wrote, it is with the caveat that this occurs only when the system functions as it should. Therefore, if the system does not function as it should, the keyed context would exhibit a similar fragility to what we have discussed in Tolkien's secondary space and Salen and Zimmerman's magic circle. These are all liminal readings of keyed contexts. Before proceeding, let us stay in this liminal space for a little while longer to see how well it holds up.

1.1 A Structural understanding of coexisting frames:

If we return to Fine, we can see that they do in fact present a similar idea of switching frames (or sub-frames) within one frame to what Upton discussed. Instead of being upkeyed into one frame and down keyed out of it before being keyed into another frame, Fine explains that players can, and do, bring different cognitive frames to the same task or to different tasks depending on which frame is most suitable (Fine). And they do this without breaking the spell. They do this because, echoing Nguyen's temporally bound striving play, the players are not concerned with avoiding disbelief, they are choosing which beliefs to embrace at any given time.

Fine claims two ideas: that engrossment (here read as interchangeable with immersion) is the primary goal of play (Fine). We all seek a form of escapism, to adopt new temporary contexts to 'escape' our problems (though in reality the worlds we escape to represent similar problems to those

63 Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015)

64 Persson, Anders, *Framing Social Interaction: Continuities and Cracks in Goffman's Frame Analysis* (Routledge, 2019)

that plague our daily lives, the novelty emerges from alternative settings and alternative agencies in part arising from abilities matched exactly to the problems the player will face, which Nguyen refers to as ‘harmony’). However, people often struggle to stay focused on the same task for a prolonged period of time, contrary to our current desk-bound lifestyles, we did not evolve to work this way.

As a result, we generally cannot stay engrossed in one cognitive frame for an extended period of time. Instead, Fine argues that, contrary to a binary understanding of immersion/broken immersion, we can and do cycle through multiple cognitive frames in conversations, in games and over the course of the day. A game, they argue, must therefore accommodate for less singular, more pluralistic experience.[65]

In the context of play, Fine focuses on three general frames. The first is the primary frame for our primary world. This frame follows much the same rules as discussed previously through the work of Tolkien and Salen and Zimmerman as they have so far been discussed. The primary frame is relatively consistent, with natural rules that cannot be disputed and social rules that are often a faux pas to dispute. It is rather unpleasant a lot of the time, thus we play games.

The second frame, as they describe, ascribes to a new context, a new set of rules. Those who use this frame are not, in this moment, all of the parts that make up a human, but specifically players whose actions are governed and constrained by the rules of the game and a clear objective. This is also familiar, as it is the secondary space as discussed. It is sub-created from the rules of the primary world we know. The rules make up the magic circle and the objective, striving play transports keys the player across the magic circle and into secondary belief.

Fine presents the third frame as a pure game emerging from the convergence of the first two frames. The pure game is one in which the primary frame and secondary frame are allowed to mix, creating a third headspace that includes elements of the first two but is also an independent headspace greater than the sum of its parts. We will return to this idea in due course (Fine).

1.2 Applications: Tabletop

Fine draws our attention to RPGs, particularly tabletop games such as Dungeons and Dragons, Kids on Bikes, etc. in which the players and game master pursue a more character driven game than a

65 Those being the experiences of self in which people are not seen as singular people but rather a nexus of their diverse and conflicting thoughts, emotions, perspectives, and even personalities. This type of consideration, I argue, should not be limited to those with specific conditions or identities such as schizophrenia or plurality.

tactical one, distinguishing these games from more traditional dungeon crawling games or war games. In these particular types of games, the players often choose not to optimize their characters for combat, but rather make them flawed, quirky and can be driven by goals that run counter to the goals established by the setting, the other players, and even their own best interest. It is almost impossible to make a more 'human' and nuanced character without including elements of the players own personality, perspectives, ethics (including deliberately choosing for a character to go against the player's ethics), aesthetics, and so on. At the same time, these characters would not be simple player inserts, but rather elements of the players personality and goals influenced by the setting, rules, tools and abilities available as determined by the game master in addition to the equally deep characters of the other players at the table.

There are two outcomes to consider from this example. The first, as Fine explains occurs on the individual roleplaying level. The player can come to feel that the character is a part of them, rather than a fictional character or gameplay tool (Fine). They can temporarily become this character during games, rather than simply pretending to be someone else. This level of roleplaying can in turn achieve an effect called 'bleed', in which the character positively impacts the player outside of the game as a part of their identity, which is sadly beyond the scope of this thesis.[66] However, it only works in this form if we consider just one player. To consider the second outcome of frame analysis applied to tabletop play, we need to discuss how different people will experience different keyed cognitive frames.

1.3 Separations between parties keyed into playful headspaces.

Any keyed context will transform actions to communicate radically different ideas from what they typically may communicate, both on a personal and interpersonal level. Where this grows more complicated is that even if people may adhere to similar frames in certain contexts, those frames will still differ between different people, even if they are on the same page. As mentioned above, even if two people are keyed into the context of anticipatory play within the same horror game, they will still likely have somewhat different expectations/anticipations of that game if they have different experiences with and therefore a different understanding of horror games.

66 For more on this topic, see:
Bowman, Sarah Lynne, 'Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character', Nordic Larp, 2 March 2015 <https://www.nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/> [accessed 27 March 2026]
Kamm, Björn-Ole, *Role-Playing Games of Japan: Transcultural Dynamics and Orderings*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), doi:10.1007/978-3-030-50953-8

There are additional factors that remove each person from shared contexts, one person may have a newer device or a better signal. One person may be interrupted by constant new text messages from a group chat. Then there are still more influencing factors if the interaction occurs over social media. Each person will have radically different feeds, ads, and so on. As a result, digital interaction presents infinite possibilities for diverging keyed contexts that can conflict and shape understandings and misunderstandings between people. The rules of social play are never consistent, they are never quite the same, and they are always being transformed during interactions and from one interaction to another.

If we are to regard a simplified understanding of a conversation as a liminal ritual, in which two participants begin in shared contexts, discuss and transform their shared contexts in some way, then return to a (mostly) shared context, then the way that interaction occurs today must be liminoid, always transforming, always in flux, and never fully agreed upon.

With these separations in mind, we can see that a second outcome of considering tabletop games through frame analysis is emergent gameplay. In a group setting, there are countless factors including the different player backgrounds, different player goals, different perspectives, and different ideas of how exactly this game should be played drawing from their own preferences. This combines with the rule systems of the game, an entity separate from the mediating game master if the game follows a third party's rulebook, such as the *Dungeons and Dragons 5th ed. Handbook*, as well as the game master, themself an entity of multitudes who works to a) tell a coherent story b) ensure the rules of the game are being followed to their and their party's pre-agreed preferences c) act as a personified threshold for their players to enter into roleplay (with each player once again having different ideas of just what 'roleplay' is) d) play the part of every non-player character, and e) make sure everyone is having fun. When all these innumerable factors all come together to create a moment of gameplay, what results is something organic and alive, comprised of all its component parts but also greater than their sum.

Paying particular attention to Fine's third frame, in which two cognitive frames within one individual's perceptions of phenomena of a pure game as well as the infinite cocktail of conflicting, colliding, and collaborating frames within group play, we can see that even if we stick to liminal readings of play, we can see the liminoid begin to rear its head. If we continue to consider the liminoid as playful subversions juxtaposed with the liminal as enjoyable inversions, then we can see that play becomes play when a game is so engrossing or so complicated that a player would be unable to describe with complete confidence just what is happening in that moment.

1.4 Keys as laminations:

To proceed from here, let us shift our attention solidly to keyed contexts' potential within the liminoid. To do this, we will build off of Goffman's idea of keyed contexts as laminations.

Lamination is the practice of keying in which rather than moving from one space to another as one would in a physical space and closing the door behind you, you were to overlay a new context on top of the pre-existing context, existing in two rooms, or two temporal iterations of the same room simultaneously. This idea is useful for understanding coexisting conflicting cognitive frames. It provides a useful visual guide to help to visualize such thought processes. Our thoughts do not have physical form in the same way that objects do and can thus exist in the same space simultaneously. To suppose that this is not the case, that thoughts have physical mass and cannot share the same space with other thoughts would then require such ideas as secondary belief. In such a model, additional ideas, concepts, or interpretations can only be considered as one might intrusive thoughts, undesired forces that rupture, invade and destroy a desired thought process.

Goffman describes laminations as various sub-contexts or sub-keys that further modify a keyed context, adding layers of nuance that add further specificity to that particular keyed context. On this level, we can use a modern take on a classic theatrical production as an example. The initial keyed context would be that of an audience watching a play they know well. Laminations would occur from any design, costume, or casting choices that would differ from a more classic version of the play. The audience is still within the same keyed context, while experiencing laminations that modify that context. One notion to highlight is that Goffman does express concern that too many laminations on a frame, in the case of a stage play becoming too metatextual for example, can cause confusion, a poisoning of the frame rather than a breaching of it (Goffman).

However, concerns over too many laminations damaging the frame become less relevant when we consider them as means to explore the liminoid rather than the liminal. There are new forms of logic to be found on the other side of confusion which we will seek to understand in the following section.

For now, let us begin to illustrate laminations within liminoid spaces from a literary angle. In their classic 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse 5* Kurt Vonnegut tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, who somehow becomes unstuck from time.[67] What this means is that his perspective (as the protagonist/point of view character) is constantly shifting randomly to different points in his life, from his childhood to

67 Vonnegut, Kurt, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, 25th anniversary ed (Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1994)

his time in the USA army during World War II to his time abducted by aliens to his period as a type of preacher/sage at the end of his life. Though it is unclear when in his life he becomes unstuck from time, it does not matter, as once it happens he has complete awareness of his life in its entirety, moving back and forth from event to event with knowing what is to occur and placing the events he experiences in the moment in context with what he knows from his future as well as what he now remembers from his past having visited it again. His life is a constant cycle of laminations as the contexts with which Billy experiences his moment-to-moment life is constantly overlaid with recontextualizing knowledge. And yet, this knowledge coexists with the events as they unfold naturally. At no point does he attempt to change the future, the events of his life play out exactly as they would if he had not been unstuck from time, what has changed is his perception of self as he sees his past, present, and future simultaneously, rendering such terms as past, present, and future meaningless (Vonnegut).

While there are many other methods with which to express laminations, a non-temporal model in particular is useful for helping us visualize layered contexts.

Section 2. Metaphors, mis-keyings, and intra-actions

Now that we have established the idea of keyed contexts as a means of moving between cognitive frames within both liminal and liminoid spaces, let us now discuss how we can work to understand how keyed contexts work within the liminoid space in particular to create new, or emergent meanings or interpretations of experiences through play.

We will discuss the types of keyings that lend themselves particularly well to meaning making, first within metaphor studies (a field within cognitive linguistics) and then through post-humanism (providing a sampling of the post-humanist discussions to take place in the following chapters.

To begin with metaphor studies, metaphor, Lakoff and Johnsen show, serves as a type of invisible fluidly shifting keying linked to the ever-shifting processes by which words and phrases are transformed to have new meanings.[68] A core idea to their argument is that facts or specifically ‘correct’ and universally understood meanings of words and phrases do not matter for most forms or instances of communication. What does matter is how concepts and their surrounding contexts are framed through metaphors and that metaphors are themselves always changing to reflect the changing nuances and emphases associated with that current iteration of a concept.

68 Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980)

2.1 Metaphors and mis-keyings

Metaphors function both to attempt to encapsulate a concept and to create that concept insofar as it provides the language with which to understand that concept. Metaphors exist both before and after the concepts they evoke, shaping our understandings of them and changing to reflect our changing attitudes toward that concept, in turn further shaping our understandings of it.

Here are some examples of the metaphors they discuss:

- Time is money: by extension we generally think of time as something we can spend and exchange for money through labour. We also see it as something we can give to others or invest in projects.
- Love is war: this metaphor encourages us to see love as a type of tragic conflict by default rather than a bond formed upon mutual attraction and maintained through clear and honest communication.
- Happy is up, Sad is down: a metaphor that leads us to give statements such as ‘I’m feeling down today’ or ‘that task is beneath me’.

What is important to note here is that all of these are invisible metaphors, they are not often said, so much as they reflect contexts that we as a society can be keyed into without realizing it.

With this idea established, they advocate for an experientialist understanding of metaphor as a tool that ‘unites reason and imagination’ enabling us to partially understand and communicate abstract concepts that cannot be fully understood without stripping them of vital nuance (Lakoff and Johnsen, p.192).

This experientialist understanding of metaphor shows us how keys and keyings can themselves exist within liminoid spaces. There is no ritualistic structure to how our language evolves, especially in regard to the words and phrases we use to communicate abstractions or subjective experiences. In order to communicate the abstract as faithfully as possible, the terms themselves must be abstractions, existing in a constant state of change that never reaches a resolution or ‘return’ point and defies definition through any sequential, hierarchical, logical, or otherwise structured framework or schema.

Returning to Goffman’s keyed contexts, we can draw a strong connection to these types of metaphors. These metaphors are a type of key: they guide the listener into the correct frame. They

provide the necessary contexts for the transformation of words that are necessary for those words to communicate what is intended to be communicated.

Let us now tie this concept within cognitive linguistics back to the sociological approach to understanding liminoid immersion in games. In games, keying metaphors become visible and understandable if we compare the role that they play in conversation with the role played by the rules and systems of feedback within the game. Keying metaphors function to communicate the terms of engagement. When a metaphor is understood as the communicator intends it to be, it keys the recipient into how best to communicate back (and by extension how best *not* to communicate back). It limits the infinite possibilities for how a conversation could go into a much narrower set of possibilities which guide the participants in a useful direction. It is the entryway into what Salen and Zimmerman describe as necessary restrictions of possibility that guide a player toward a desirable pattern of play behaviour, made meaningful to them through correctly applied feedback.

However, contrary to the metaphor as keying in communication, in which it can be assumed that the guiding metaphor is the first thing that the recipient receives, having themselves not yet done anything, this does not occur for the player(s) of a game. In direct interpersonal communication, both parties would not be expected to begin conversing in earnest until the correct context is keyed. Feedback in games as a keying functions in the reverse order. The player acts, receives feedback for their action, and via that feedback is keyed into the appropriate context as to take further actions that will result in desirable feedback.

For example, if a player of *Dark Souls* walks off of a ledge, they will fall and after a second or two enter an invisible ‘kill plane’ which as the name implies, kills them instantly. The feedback here is that while some games have invisible walls that prevent players from walking off of cliffs, this game has invisible boxes of doom that will always kill you if you slip off of the path. The behaviour keyed by this feedback would typically be for a player to traverse narrow paths, broken bridges, rafters, and buttresses of buildings carefully[69] rather than rushing across without care. Another example would be how the game encourages spell casters to play more passively, attacking from a distance. If a player tries to cast a spell too close to an enemy, that enemy will hit the player, interrupting their spell casting animation and forcing them to back away and try again. In one final example, if a player is presented with multiple paths, such as is the case in Firelink Shrine in the opening of the game, the comparative difficulty of the enemies in each path would communicate

69 Of course easier said than done when enemies are also firing arrows at you as you cross said precarious areas, but I digress.

which path would be best to travel down first, with (seemingly) unkillable skeletons down one path, terrifying ghosts that will one-shot an under-levelled character down another, and a couple of much weaker enemies down the third. It is typical for a first-time player to try the skeleton path first and then move on to the easier path after being killed a few times.

But not always! It is also not unheard of for a first-time player to persevere through the over-levelled skeletons and proceed through the over-levelled catacombs that follow until they enter The Grave of Giants, a late game level totally unnavigable for an unprepared player and an effective dead end. For all their effort, the player is rewarded with nothing but an arduous climb all the way back up through the catacombs to reach Firelink Shrine and start down one of the other two paths, which could enable game progression. What went wrong here? How would a player suffer through a path they were not supposed to see as an option? The answer is the feedback of the skeletons being hard to kill keyed them into the wrong frame. *Dark Souls* is known for being a hard game, and so a player expecting difficulty might not be dissuaded by difficulty as they might be while playing a game with a different reputation.

Let us also discuss the spellcasting example once again. It stands to reason that enemies being able to interrupt spell-casting animations would encourage passive play. But what if a player took this idea and tried something else? What if a player instead donned very heavy armour that makes it harder for their animations to be interrupted and charged straight at the enemy? This may be an unexpected strategy in the first *Dark Souls*, but in *Dark Souls II*, players are given the 'Immolation' spell, which lights the player on fire so that they can charge straight at the enemy, recklessly using magic to attack up close.[70]

The link between metaphors as keys and the systemic approach to guiding players through feedback only works if players interpret the feedback as it was intended to be interpreted and are keyed into the intended cognitive frame. When this does not occur, we begin to see the processes by which players can interact with media to create new experiences, meaningful on an emotional level, not simply on an action-feedback level.

2.2 Intra-active Gameplay

To better understand this process, let us recontextualize such practices through the posthumanist concept of intra-action. Barad writes that all things, all objects, all people and anything that can in any context be considered an actor are entangled. Any party, in acting will always be acting on

70 FromSoftware, *Dark Souls II* (2014), Steam

another and be acted on themself in turn. In light of this idea this thesis, among many other things, works to break down the dualistic approach to seeing action and feedback as separate concepts. Action is feedback and feedback is action, and if one were to go back through the whole history of the universe, it would be impossible to determine which actually came first because they are not separate concepts but two arbitrary ways of looking upon the same concept. This idea of entanglement renders ordinary understandings of interaction and by extension our approaches to discourse inadequate to encapsulate what occurs when one party acts upon or communicates with another. For this reason, Barad introduces us to the idea of intra-action: action that is completely entangled with all things that can fall under 'causes' (to be expanded upon through discussions of diversity among players and reflected in our ongoing discussion of frame analysis) and all things that fall under 'effects' (feedback, emergent behaviours, etc.).

If we narrow the scope of this idea down to the misalignment of feedback and keyed responses we have discussed (as just a few examples of what might happen when a player plays a game) we can see that constraints give way to emergent gameplay behaviours and emergent gameplay behaviours give way to new constraints. In a less metaphysical and more 'grounded' level, we can see this in the addition of the 'Immolation' spell to *Dark Souls II*. Restrictions created emergent behaviour that was incorporated into further mechanics. And, if one were to look back through FromSoftware's long history of quirky dungeon crawlers and found an 'Immolation-like' spell that predates the *Souls* games, that would in fact strengthen this argument as it shows that a strictly temporally bound understanding of cause and effect as separate ideas fails to capture the evolution of such gameplay.

Intra-action shows us that, as there is no gameplay without feedback and no feedback without gameplay. There is no idea of a game that can be separated from the act of playing it, and therefore there are no games without players. Games are inherently collaborative enterprises.

Overall, this thesis has positioned structuralism and structuralist thought as represented by the liminal as attempting to make logical sense of the abstract and subjective. To this end, it separates spaces into specific boxes: primary spaces and secondary spaces, magic circles, the hidden playgrounds, and other demarcations of spaces that a) require keyings to enter and b) serve as gateways and thresholds whose traversal key us into and out of playful headspaces.

By discussing keyings within the liminoid space, both through game-specific keys and keys for interpersonal communication, we come closer to understanding liminoid spaces as intra-active rather than interactive. This insight helps to break down the structuralist practices that unnecessarily

restrict our understandings of play. Playfulness, by virtue of being subversive rather than inversive practice, defies the demarcation of spaces as spaces in which to play and spaces in which to not play.

Section 3: Case Studies

3.1. Intro to case studies

This case study section will begin with *Inscryption*, a game that, frankly, deserves its own dedicated thesis and will likely get a few if it has not already.[71] For the purposes of this chapter, it serves to first, establish keyed contexts through its continued subversion of keyed contexts. Rather than subversion serving as negation in this case, it provides a wonderful opportunity to analyse the idea of keyed contexts as the player is forced to move between them fluidly. Additionally, it will provide useful material to engage with Frame Analysis. In regard to ritual, the game is a liminoid ritual in the initial guise of a liminal ritual. It initially presents the game setting as a disruption to the regular, a temporary space that the player is to escape and thus return from the liminal space into the normative space they were presumably in before. As the discussion will show, this is in fact a thinly veiled guise for a liminoid ritual, that leaves the player character, and the player by extension, forever changed.

Slay the Princess likewise functions as a wonderful engagement with keyed contexts as it works to establish, destabilize, disrupt, and subvert.[72] It is also even more ritualistic than *Inscryption*, as it repeats the same setting and objectives each time. You are given a task, you act within the context of this task, receive an outcome, and then die horribly most of the time. Once again, it is presented as a liminal ritual: arrive, perform, return home, but quickly reveals itself to be liminoid, permanently destructuring our perceptions of the situation without providing an explanation. (It can be argued that ultimately, as the game will reach a resolution that it in fact remains a liminal ritual, but readers may or may not find such hyperfixation on largely abstract terms to be useful, as further discussion of this game will make apparent)

3.2. Case Study, Inscryption

For clarity, this game has many moving parts that cannot be fully represented within this work, such as hidden easter-eggs within the code of the game and the clips of a found-footage conspiracy film

71 Daniel Mullins Games, *Inscryption* (2021), Steam
72 Black Tabby Games, *Slay the Princess* (2023), Steam

that the player uncovers throughout the game. For the sake of this project, we will focus on the laminated and intra-active elements of acts one and three of the game.

Act one of *Inscryption* begins with one distinct threshold into play that sets the tone for additional laminations over time. You are in a cabin alone with a strange man named Leshy who presents the player with a game, a deckbuilding roguelike. While playing, Leshy acts as a game master in a tabletop game. As such, he is at once narrator, NPCs, and enemies. In fact, Leshy goes so far as to wear unique masks and change the way he speaks while playing different characters, particularly the merchant/boss characters.



Fig 1. Prospector Boss. Image taken from https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/inscryption-boss-battle-guide on 06/03/2026.



Fig 2. Angler Boss. Image taken from https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/inscryption-boss-battle-guide on 06/03/2026.

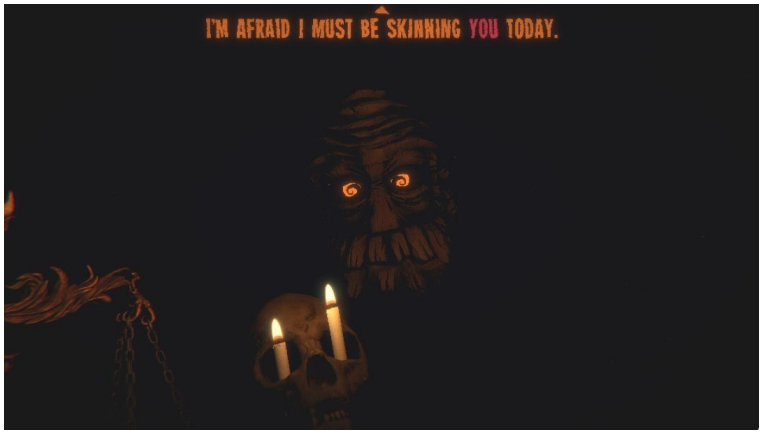


Fig 3. Trapper Boss. Image taken from https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/inscryption-boss-battle-guide on 06/03/2026.

There are so many different cognitive frames coexisting within this stage of the game. Leshy is both whimsical and terrifying. He is your playmate who wears silly masks, but he is also your captor who will kill you if you lose the game. Physically, this is represented by his bent, hairy and gnarled hands, but also by the fact that his eyes glow and swirl whenever he talks. His character model is believably physical and not physical at the same time.



Fig 4. Leshy about to finish off the player after they have lost a run. Image taken from https://www.eurogamer.net/inscryption-review-a-wonderful-nightmare-and-a-vividly-memorable-game-of-cards on 06/03/2026

In the same way that Leshy's whimsical immateriality and terrifying materiality are interlinked in the same character, the game you play with him and the cabin in which you play are fundamentally interlinked. After playing for a little while, Leshy encourages the player to take a break from the game, stand up from the table, and explore the cabin as much as they like. And as it turns out, the cabin contains several escape room-esque puzzles for the player to solve.

While at first the puzzles in the cabin and the game with Leshy on the table can appear as two separate frames, which can be keyed between through the act of choosing to get up from the chair or sit down again, these two frames are laminated in such a way as to show that they are not separate at all. Over time, players will find that the frame of Leshy's game will be laminated by the knowledge that events in the game can affect the puzzles in the cabin, and that the frame of the cabin puzzles vice versa alter the state of Leshy's game.

For example, on a wall is a framed picture of a particular configuration of cards on a playing board. If, during the tabletop roguelike, you gather the right cards and arrange them on the board in the same way, a safe will open in the cabin which contains the Stink Bug, one of the three cards the player needs to eventually overcome Leshy and survive. And in the cabin, you can solve puzzles that unlock doors containing powerful new cards, which Leshy will allow you to include in the game, making it easier to win a run and reach the final confrontation with Leshy, ending act one.

The cabin and the tabletop game are two frames that exist in the same space. Actions in the tabletop game present feedback in the cabin and actions in the cabin have feedback on the tabletop game. In playing this section of *Inscryption*, you cannot interact with just one element. The only way to make progress in the game is to intra-act with the two spaces simultaneously as they are, in effect, two faces of the same space with any border drawn between them shown to be arbitrary.

While act one presents a delightful experience of intra-action between interconnected systems of the game and player experimentation, act three deliberately breaks this playful dynamic down. Our antagonist for this section, the robot P03, is attempting to make its perfect version of the game that you have been playing with Leshy. And it becomes immediately clear that P03 does not know how to make a fun game, is convinced that it does, and blames the player both as an individual and as a stand-in for the player community at large) for never being happy.

While we can enjoy Leshy as villain and opponent, our relationship with P03 is much more straightforwardly antagonistic. P03 is attempting to make a good game, not with us, but in spite of us. P03 has a rigidly systematic approach to creating an interactive (not intra-active) experience. This is depicted through the art style of this chapter. While Leshy's cabin was comprised of warm-toned wood, with seemingly hand-carved figures and meticulously crafted puzzles, everything in P03's cabin is cold. Everything is mechanical, blue and grey, with only hard and smooth surfaces (one can only imagine the chair our character sits in to play P03s game as cold, hard, a bit slippery, and quite uncomfortable overall). It is not a space for comfort, or fun and our organic body feels

entirely out of place. And in this cabin, we are not encouraged to touch anything we aren't explicitly told to. While Leshy encourages us to get up from the table and explore the cabin at our leisure, P03 initially has us manacled to our chair, and only allows us to get up and explore the cabin when something breaks that it needs us to fix.

It becomes apparent that P03 is trying to make a liminal interactive system rather than a liminoid intra-active stage on which to co-create new meanings and experiences as Leshy did. And the result is decidedly un-fun.

It is for this reason that P03 holds us prisoner and forces us to play its game. It cannot understand the missing 'human' elements to a fun game: it has no mind for abstraction, or fluid, contradictory, and messy thought processes. It works exclusively in structures and systems. Our role here is to fix that, to give their game the missing pieces to make it enjoyable, but P03 has made it abundantly clear that it does not see us as equal collaborators in creating fun gameplay. P03 is using us. As a fitting representation of AI, it harvests our data as we play (represented by actual files from our computer and pictures of our player-character among other things).

And in the end, as we are given no space or room in which to play with P03, the only option available to us is to defeat it. In playing its game, we are in fact working to keep it occupied so that in the end it does not notice Leshy sneaking up behind it to break it and end this poor facsimile of a game before P03 can launch it, saving other players from being subjected to it.

3.3 Slay the Princess

Slay the Princess works initially from the position of a visual novel intermixed with some roleplaying game elements. Despite differences of genre, it opens very similarly to *The Stanley Parable*. It begins with you already in the middle of the environment, having not been offered an introduction or anything that could act as a threshold into a desired cognitive frame. You have no explanation for the nature of the forest you find yourself in or why you are there nor do you have any tangible motivations to go along with provided instructions/objectives. This distinct lack of a threshold can be seen to act as an anti-keying. It still functions as a keying insofar as it shifts your attention and focus onto what is occurring in the game and to how you can interact with it, but rather than keying you into a state of compliance with the state of the game, it can key you into a state of defiance.

Appropriately, as is done in *The Stanley Parable*, you are immediately given an authority figure to defy, an over-controlling narrator who pointedly directs you along an intended path: walk through the forest until you reach a cabin where you are to kill the princess trapped there. And like the choice between turning to the left or right hallway in *The Stanley Parable*, the player could choose to proceed to the cabin, or they could turn around and attempt to leave. And if you do so, the game world will twist and contort around you; all paths will lead to the cabin. And if you continue to try to avoid the cabin, eventually a large wall will appear around your small section of forest, driving home that there is no choice but to do what the narrator wants you to do: go to the cabin.

Beyond choosing which direction to walk, this game is primarily dialogue driven, and when the narrator initially tells you what you are to do, you are presented with a (frankly overwhelming) number of dialogue options you can choose, asking the narrator directly what is going on, why you are here and why are you supposed to *slay* the princess of all things. And, like *The Stanley Parable*'s narrator, this narrator will become increasingly impatient and frustrated with the player if they ask too many questions instead of just doing what they are supposed to do. This aspect of the narrator character also bears similarity to P03 insofar as it clearly is not interested in treating you as a collaborator, and instead wants you to go through the game, playing it as you should, and asking no questions, all to serve some agenda it does not share with you until much later. The narrator is yet another authoritative, perhaps antagonistic, figure that tries to steer the player away from intra-active play, making this game a liminal ritual rather than liminoid play.

Now let us discuss how, despite our narrator, we engage in intra-active liminoid play. As far as intra-action is concerned, there are two distinct entanglements to consider. The first is our character's entanglement with the princess. The second is our playable character's entanglement with himself.

To begin discussing our character's relationship with the princess, each narrative 'scene' we play out in this game is determined through us making a number of visible and invisible choices, and the princess in turn acting upon us, often by killing us. The princess is a type of mirror that turns whatever we direct toward her back to us. On the level of visible choices, if we are hostile, she will be hostile; if we are not hostile, neither is she. If we treat her as a damsel in distress to be rescued, she will act as one, seeming clearly too frail and innocent to be any threat to us. If we treat her as a threat, she will be dangerous, exhibiting super strength or hidden weapons. On a more invisible level, when we enter into the cabin, we find a knife waiting for us on a table, which the narrator instructs us to pick up. If we do pick up the knife, the princess will always be more pre-disposed to

hostility. This is not determined by her seeing us with the knife, but our act of picking it up outside her field of view. And once again, the opposite holds true.

Then there are the nuances of how dialogue progresses. If we, say, do not pick up the knife, and go down to talk to her without it, then decide to go back up to get it or leave her locked in her dungeon, she will transform into a vengeful wraith, killing us through possession. Or, if we attack her with the knife, but then surrender to her, she will transform into a domineering goddess-like figure that sees us as weak and submissive. Or if we choose to fight her and neither submit nor kill her immediately, she will come to enjoy fighting and transform into a battle-obsessed rival. These are just a few examples of how an interaction with the princess can play out. But in essence, whatever we throw to the princess, knowingly or unknowingly, she does not simply accept, but throw right back at us harder.

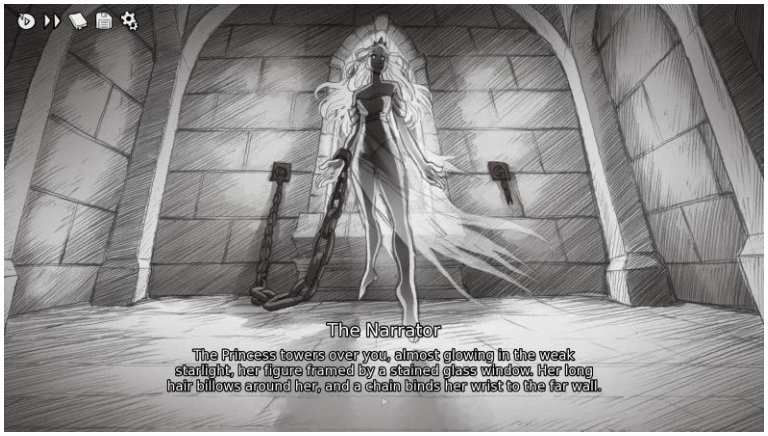


Fig 5. The Princess if we follow the ‘Tower’ route (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 28/03/2026)

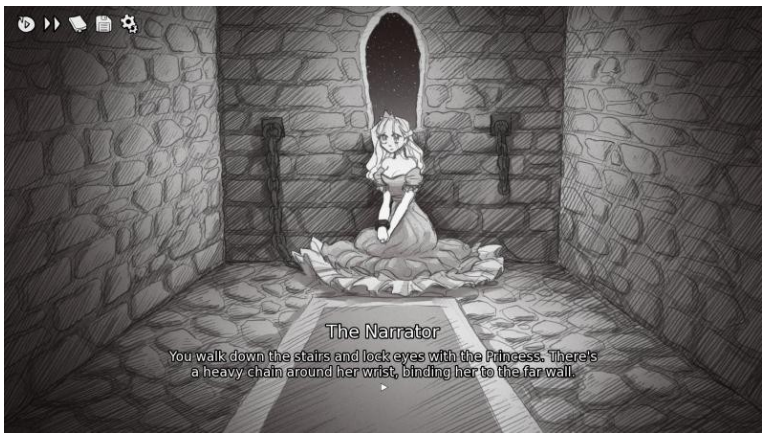


Fig 6. The Princess if we follow the ‘Damsel’ route. (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 28/03/2026)

But our interactions with her are not limited to single conversations and/or fights. Over the course of a scenario, we walk to the cabin, interact with the princess, and die three to five times. Over the course of this, both the princess and our playable character change. The princess develops across each interaction, embodying the role that emerges from how a scene plays out. And our character

changes through acquiring more perspectives, cognitive frames that manifest as different voices in his head. Every run starts with the character's head inhabited by the player, the narrator, and the 'voice of the hero' a generally well-intentioned persona that does not want to slay the princess but will generally agree with whatever the player chooses to do. Then, depending on how a scene plays out, a new voice is added in the next, with options including 'voice of the romantic', 'voice of the sceptic', 'voice of the hunted', and so on. With each new voice added, the player character's inner dialogue becomes more and more complex, with voices disagreeing with each other, fighting with the narrator, and at times making choices on their own with no input from the player.

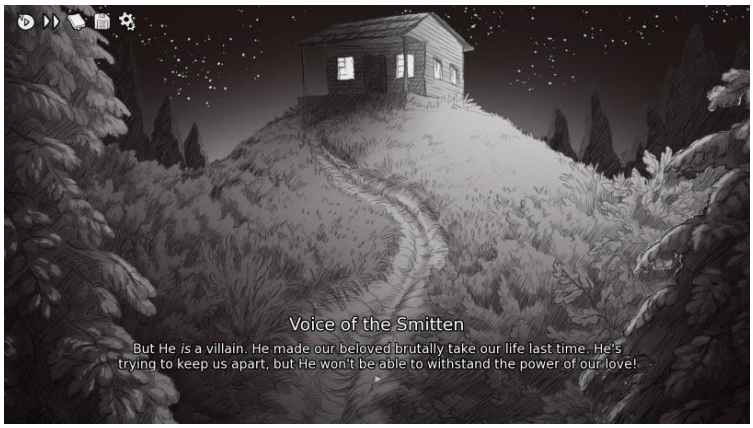


Fig 7. The Voice of the Smitten. (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 28/03/2026)

All of this works to create a feeling of unpredictability for the player. In the first scenario especially, the player could have no idea how the game could respond to their actions next. It is no stretch to say that, when regarding the princess's behaviour, that she is acting on how *she* interprets our actions, with no regard for the player's intentions. In the same way, as more voices join the cacophony in the player character's head, the player can feel increasingly like just one voice among many. We are not in complete control of our player character, and we have little to no control over how the princess may choose to act in response to us. As a run progresses, any prospect of interactive play is lost, and we become just a part of the process of intra-actional play. The game grows to exert as much agency on the player as the player has to exert on the game, and the result is new unpredictable experiences of gameplay.

Summary and final thoughts

In Section One:

- We have introduced the idea of keying as a system of acts or signifies for crossing a boundary into play, systematic transformation of materials and actions, divesting them of typical meanings and ascribing new meanings.
- Discussed how keys and keyings function within systematic or structuralist frameworks and found that it begins to break down when too many ideas or factors are introduced.
- In tabletop, keyed contexts were shown to lead us to the liminoid by virtue of no one person at the table sharing an identical keyed context.
- This idea took us to the concept of emergent gameplay, as it becomes impossible to anticipate what may happen when so many keyed contexts intermingle.
- As we discussed keys as shifting contexts, we introduced laminations as modifying contexts.

In Section Two:

- We discussed metaphors as keyings within social contexts.
- We linked metaphors as keys to feedback in games.
- As metaphors can be misunderstood, so too can feedback, resulting in mis-keyings.
- We can better understand mis-keyings through the idea of intra-action.
- Intra action teaches us that all our actions are entangled.
- Entanglements through intra-active play helps us to understand emergent play.

In our discussion of *Inscryption*:

- We explored the entangled laminated contexts of Leshy's game and his cabin.
- We discussed the implications of P03 acting to deprive us of agency, trying to make us engage with a liminal and interactive ritual rather than liminoid intra-active play.

In our discussion of *Slay the Princess*:

- We compared the narrator of this game to the narrator of *The Stanley Parable* as well as P03 as all three are characters who wish to tell a story despite the player rather than with the player.

- We discussed the intra-active entanglements of the player character's mind depicted through its host of different and contradicting voices as well as the character's entanglement with the princess.

From section one, we further built upon a structured reading of how we traverse boundaries to further reflect on play, and to an extent our general daily lived experiences, as fluid rather than strictly linear. Keying provides both the means by which we can better understand, as one builds a foundational understanding of how we perceive and interact with imaginative spaces, how we can go from one space into another. Keying can function as the gateway, or the threshold into and out of the magic circle or from a primary space into a secondary space and eventually back to the primary space. It works quite well if we keep it to simple and straightforward approaches to play or social interaction.

This use of keying and keyed contexts however does start to break down when we consider more complicated phenomena of play, social interactions, and of course social play. As discussed in regard to Fine's concept of a pure game, it is only possible to visualize as the combination of two frames. When more than two frames come into play we run across what Goffman described as the potential for confusion, a disorientating loss of grounding that makes it quite difficult to remember/continue to understand just what is going on here. From a structuralist standpoint, such confusion would break the spell, or the immersive power, of an imaginative space, forcing participants to suspend disbelief as discussed in the previous chapter.

One way that we can now view this idea of a spell-break is now, rather than the nature of a story disrupted by an inconsistency, instead a process of unpredictable creation. When we collaborate, either with other players in a multiplayer setting or with the game itself in a single player setting, we are keyed into new contexts through a constant process of laminations of the previous contexts rather than entering into altogether new contexts

The issue then becomes one of not knowing where you are going with the imaginative experience. In a liminoid space, our feet are not firmly planted, we are going *somewhere*, but we don't know where or necessarily why. And after a while, where we came from ceases to have very much meaning or relevance. It is a space in which we are not the hero, the protagonist centre of the world who is to be served by the world, but rather just another part of it.

This idea is explored more in the second section, in which we introduce used the keying of metaphors within social interactions to both reflect, contain, and create the concepts to which they

pertain. Metaphors here represent ungrounded keyings. They are ungrounded because they have no need for the original meanings of the words used or even the previously understood meanings of similar metaphors. In discussing them, we can see that keys not only transport us into new contexts but laminate them permanently as a part of the eternal process of thought processes and language evolve.

If we compare keying metaphors in their function of providing a baseline understanding of language and contexts within interpersonal communication to the closest equivalent in games: the keyings contexts of rules and feedback, we can see that, in both cases, the keyings only function as they are intended to if both parties are on the same page. If they are, then they would both, in theory, be keyed into the correct cognitive frame to receive a message as it is intended to be received.
But when both (or all) parties are not on the same page, the result would be mis-keyings. One party attempts to communicate a message and the other party receives a different message. This can result in misunderstandings, but it can also result in the continued evolution of those keys, as the mis-keyings result in the original keys taking on new meanings. In games, this can occur when a player receives feedback intended to guide them toward a certain pattern of behaviours in the game (such as being less or more aggressive with certain enemies, approaching environmental hazards with care, using strategies appropriate for their character build, etc.), but acts upon that feedback in an unpredictable way.
Our case studies explore such breakdowns in communication. Both *Inscryption* and *Slay the Princess* confront us with narrators/mediators who are deliberately unhelpful, discouraging any attempt to play within the game, pushing us instead to do whatever it is they want from us. By confronting the player with such figures, the games encourage the player to not follow instructions and instead play with the systems available to them even if those systems ‘want’ to be used some other way. This is especially true in *Slay the Princess* as while the narrator gives unhelpful feedback, the princess gives opaque feedback, leaving it unclear why a particular scenario played out the way that it did.
The way that we can work to understand play in such spaces is through Barad’s concept of intra-action, a view of action and reaction between two bodies that visualizes those two bodies as fundamentally entangled. What this means is that instead of two bodies with two minds and goals, we can visualize one body with two minds and goals in much the same manner that, through frame analysis, we can see that one person can hold multiple contradictory frames at once.

Through this idea, we can begin to take a step back, no longer perceiving the self as player/protagonist and the game as an object for delivering a pre-determined story. Instead, we can begin to perceive the player and the game as two parts of a body we can call emergent gameplay.

Chapter Three: Situating the Flowing Self

Introduction

In the last chapter, we worked off of the idea of keys and laminations within our shifting network of cognitive frames to move away from a structuralist-informed idea of play as occurring within liminal spaces, one in which the player interacts with separate bodies or separate ideas, and towards an idea of play as arising from liminoid entanglements in which the player is one of two or more intra-acting bodies. This is a rather far-reaching idea. For one thing, it can lead to researchers considering the play of posthuman bodies as a type of sublime experience, here understood to be the experience of exhilaration, inspiration, or terror at the contemplation of (or confrontation with) forces greater than a person's typical capacity to understand, but with the understanding that the person is not an outside observer of such phenomena but a part of it.

To better understand this idea, we will address two views of self-realization within the context of intra-active play. How we can view the entangled self. To do so, this chapter will first discuss the work of Donna Haraway, paying specific attention to the idea of situated viewing, the idea of perceiving oneself as a nexus of innumerable influences, both internal and external, intrinsic and extrinsic, body and machine, and so on. What this will achieve is to further link a post-human understanding of experience to the existing discussions of liminoid spaces as well as provide a logical endpoint for the practice of frame analysis. Now that we understand our experiences to be comprised of multiple keyed and laminated cognitive frames, we can begin the practice of situating ourselves within them on a moment-to-moment basis. What this provides to the argument is a productive way to see the 'self' within the intra-active entanglements of liminoid play.

This will be juxtaposed with how the games industry approaches entanglements through user experience (UX). UX functions as the umbrella term for everything that goes into a player's experience. It is, in this work, aligned with a structuralist-esque work to understand all the aspects of a player's experience with a game and create interactive liminal systems to guide a player towards pre-determined outcomes in such a way as to make those outcomes feel meaningful to the player. This can be clearly seen in the work of Hodent. In their work, they advocate for a 'UX mindset' that works to streamline the game design, development, and publication processes through, among other practices beyond the scope of this project, removing all possibility for emergent

experience by adhering to strict hierarchies that reduce the game object to a tool and works to ensure that the players have only intended experiences:

> Players enter the scene with their prior knowledge and expectations and will develop their own mental model of how they think the game works through their interaction with the system image – the part of the system with which they interact and which they perceive. The main objective of user experience and a player-centered approach is to make sure that the user's mental model matches the one the developers had intended (Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain*, p. 16).[73]

And they hold up one especially inspiring and influential game as exemplifying their model: *Journey. Journey* is lauded in their work primarily for two reasons. The first is for how it succeeds at only allowing for its specifically intended multiplayer gameplay.[74] And the second, fascinatingly, is for how it boosts player engagement through inducing a flow state. For this reason, *Journey* makes for an important and difficult case study in this chapter. As will be shown, flow theory, despite having its origins in a rather hierarchal narrative of self-actualization through conquest, as will be discussed, has significant potential for entanglement and intra-active, fluid play and can marry well with Haraway's situated viewing when taken to its logical conclusions.

Flow theory is first introduced in the work of Csikszentmihalyi as a means of understanding how people can achieve happiness and fulfilment through sublime-esque playful experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*). Generally speaking, flow theory can be understood as comprising two different states (these two states notably falling within the happy is up, sad is down metaphor Lakoff and Johnson described previously). High flow is the state of 'highest' activation, associated with challenging physical activities that demand the complete attention from the participant(s) as well as fast-paced video games, such as those often found within the roguelike genre. Low flow is likewise the state of 'lowest' activation, wherein the participant in a low-effort (yet still engaging) activity experiences a relaxed ease and natural smoothness of thoughts and actions. It is also often associated with a person acting on 'auto pilot' acting without conscious awareness.

In Jenova Chen's and thatgamecompany's two previous games, *Flow* and *Flower*, a flow state is induced quite straightforwardly and effectively.[75] However, *Journey* does something different. It will

73 Hodent, Celia, *The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design*, 2nd ed (Taylor & Francis, CRC Press, 2026)

74 This despite the tremendous potential for variation and unique interactions that online play would normally invite.

75 thatgamecompany, *Flow* (2006), PlayStation 3

be shown that in playing *Journey*, the player is not likely to be the one achieving a high flow state, but is rather carried along as a spectator as the player character experiences a flow state. This occurs because, as will be described in section 2.2, '*Journey* as drama', *Journey* discourages reflexivity and encourages interpretation. It is so structured an experience, that it begs the question of whether it should be considered a game at all, or instead a type of interactive theatre.

From this, it becomes clear that we need to alter our understandings of how flow fits within UX as a means of deepening entanglement rather than resisting it. To this end, this chapter will discuss how our understandings of flow theory can be deepened and allowed to fit alongside the posthumanist theories of situated viewing and intra-active entanglement.

In order to accomplish this, we will first explore four different games, with two exemplifying high flow and low flow respectively. Our high flow case studies, *Hades* and *Dead Cells* will show how this theory applies to mastery-style gameplay and filtering information with short bursts of intense gameplay. In comparison, our low flow case studies, *Keep Driving* and *Sunless Sea* will show how the games encourage a relaxed and fluid execution of tasks, even if the tasks in question are not easy, over longer durations of play.[76] At the same time, *Sunless Sea* in particular shows a linkage between high flow and low flow as its gameplay is defined by long periods of anticipation for short periods of intensity.

From comparing these two approaches to flow in games, we will see that whether gameplay encourages high flow or low flow is determined by the pacing of the game, with high flow being linked to shorter, high-intensity periods of play while low flow is linked to longer periods of slower play. We will also see that, contrary to the strict division between these two types of flow, this body of theory being in support of interactive, rather than intra-active play, both types occur in these games. We will see that high flow games require periods of low flow in order to function and that low flow in games occurs in anticipation of a shift to high flow. They are entangled.

In order to understand the dual nature of flow better, we will compare it to another core aspect of UX that already allows room for entangled ideas: remediated user interfaces (UI) of games and other digital media as introduced by Bolter and Grusin.[77] Remediation as an approach to understanding UI provides an interesting counterpoint to flow theory for understanding player

——, *Flower* (2009), PlayStation 3

76 YCJY Games, *Keep Driving* (2025), Steam
Failbetter Games, *Sunless Sea* (2015), Steam

77 Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 1999)
It is also worth noting that UI is regarded as an important aspect of UX. They are seen as entangled, both in game studies and the games industry.

experience. This is because, like flow theory, it is divided into two sub-categories: immediacy and hypermediacy. There is of course not a direct 1:1 comparison between these two different frameworks, but what *Remediation* offers a third term of the same name, which is the practice of situating oneself within the fluid process of moving back and forth between immediacy and hypermediacy in the experience of digitally mediated interfaces. It offers an alternative to a dualistic way of perceiving player experience which can allow us to consider flow theory in a more complimentary position to the rest of the theory discussed. What we stand to gain from this is a third sub-category of flow, like remediation, this would not be a singular state of mind, but a state of situatedness within shifting frames of contexts and states of awareness. We can call this third state situated flow, the intra-active flow state of the cyborg.

In one final case study, we will provide one example of how we can perceive situated flow as a means of intra-action. To do so, we will use yet another application of the idea of temporalities and layering of experience, the use of the pause button and menus in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *The Witcher III*. In so doing, this chapter will accomplish the dual tasks of expanding upon the idea of posthuman intra-actionism that was introduced in the previous chapter and showing that a seemingly ungroundable idea can in fact be grounded in such a way as to be applied to understanding game design and game UX.

Section 1. Introduction to Haraway's Posthuman Cyborg

Thus far, we have discussed a few foundational ideas for how a general Western narrative of how we perceive the in-between spaces in which ludic activity occurs and how such activity is included in the fabric of society as well as in personal fulfilment. The purpose of this work is, however, not to bolster these ideas and apply them to game studies. It is to show how they fall short of objective truth and replace this structured and organized narrative with a less-structured and messier conception of our perceptions of reality, those perceptions of reality being fundamental to how imagination exists within and alongside them and thus guides and informs our experiences with games.

And there is no body of theory better suited to breaking down hegemonic narratives of how the world works than post-modern and post-human feminism. Haraway's work *Simeans Cyborgs and Women* can be seen to inhabit a similar foundational space to such texts as *Rules of Play* while

simultaneously having far broader and varied application and potential for interpretation that justifies its continued use.[78]

As Prasad highlights, Haraway's work on posthuman feminism worked to, among several other things '…the strategic use of partial and fragmented identities as the foundation for political action and social change…' (Prasad, p. 433).[79] Within games and broader technology studies, Haraway is attributed with discussing the figure of the cyborg, the sci-fi inspired figure of a fusion between the organic and the technological which allows for diverse, distributed ways of being and of interacting with the world.[80] However, the text does not focus on how our capabilities are extended or bodies modified, but rather on calling for a disruptive anti-framework and ever-growing system of meaning-making:

> So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. But not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built Out of summing and subsuming parts (Haraway, pp. 192-3).

1.1 Reading the Cyborg Manifesto[81]:

To begin, let us describe what the figure of the cyborg is to stand against. Haraway associates patriarchy or 'phallocentrism' with a post *Star Wars*[82] society. It is through stories that we teach ourselves how to structure our understandings of reality, often with our organizations of memory falling into a narrative sequence. In such narratives, we often position ourselves as the protagonist (and therefore, hero). 'Post *Star Wars*' or phallocentrist narrative focuses strictly on dualities (good and evil, human and monster, etc.) within a declining society. The social decline and heroic resistance thereof culminate in an apocalyptic catastrophe/epic battle followed by a eucatastrophic[83] return to a prior 'golden age' in which the 'good' side of the duality regains dominion over the 'other'.

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78 Haraway, Donna, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1990)

79 Prasad, Ajnesh, 'Cyborg Writing as a Political Act: Reading Donna Haraway in Organization Studies.', Gender, Work & Organization, 23.4 (2016), pp. 431–46, Business Source Ultimate, doi:10.1111/gwao.12128

80 It is important to note that this is a post-humanist and **not** transhumanist depiction of the cyborg.

81 Which has been its own publication, but is here read as a chapter of *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

82 That franchise of course being among the most influential examples of the Campbellian monomythic approach to understanding story.

83 Eucatastrophe being a term used by Tolkien in *On Fairy- Stories* to describe a sudden reversal of favour to save the day when all seems lost. A classic example being the sudden arrival by the eagles in *Return of the King* and *The Hobbit* or more recently in the largely unexplained, and arguably unearned, victory of the heroines in *K-pop Demon Hunters.*

This dominant narrative can of course be seen reflected in the right-wing politics of the past and today, but it also infects our art, how we create it and how we interpret it. It is another standard pillar of how games are understood work in the industry, with the majority of AAA games telling narratives of returning to a past order and resisting change, rather than building new futures. This is also apparent in the proliferation of reboots, symbolizing a return to a golden age, a clear example being *Marvel's Wolverine* a heavily advertised and hyped reboot of Marvel's X-Men franchise just released at the time of writing.[84] Haraway describes this narratological and social practice as fitting within the practice of relativism. Relativism here refers to the universality of one type of social construct from one perspective without acknowledgement of or regard for other perspectives:

> Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The 'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both 'god-tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding Science (Haraway, p. 191).

Haraway's text focuses on the building of a new narrative, a new means by which to understand the self as a non-dominating protagonist, non-downtrodden other.[85] They advocate for a perception of self as *situated*, not centred, within the world around them and within all the contexts that frame and guide their thoughts and actions. This self, they dub the 'cyborg'. To begin to understand the figure of the cyborg here, let us unpack the following passage:

> A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late

84 Insomniac Games, *Marvel's Wolverine* (2026), PlayStation 5

85 They make a point of highlighting how a perception of the self as a victim can be as dangerous to oneself and society at large as a self-perception as a hero.

> twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway, p. 149).

We can position Haraway's work here against structuralist sociology insofar as it seeks to tell a different story about what it means to be human, to be a non-man, and how to perceive one's place within systems of society and nature. As already discussed, a Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and Campbell-informed reading is inherently hierarchal. There is the collective unconscious of human society that guides the formation of mythologies and group identities across all cultures and works to place those whose natural tendencies suit them to rule in the positions to do so. The unification of group identity as supported by the idea of nature is used to attribute universality to patriarchy, the hierarchy of cis man over cis woman and erasure of all other forms of identities as 'unnatural'. It also works to support colonialism, the 'natural' hierarchy of western nations standing above non-western nations and therefore deserving of land ownership and obligated to guide lesser people's toward 'civilization' and knowing their natural place as subservient. In contrast, Prasad shows us that Haraway's work flattens these hierarchies. In flattening structural hierarchies, the limited potential of pre-determined master-slave social role becomes infinite potential for self and social identification:

> For Haraway, the cyborg is the central character of a myth representing infinite possibilities. A cyborg is, […] chimera residing in indeterminate liminality [i.e. liminoidality] — the corollary of confounded ontological demarcations that rigidly separate human, animal and machine, and that categorically differentiates the physical and the non-physical constituents of (social and material) life (Prasad, p. 433).

We exist in a dizzying multitude of partial truths that cannot be separated from true objective fact and individual impression. Any science that claims to offer a universal depiction of how things work and why they work that way are deliberately offering an oversimplification to give the reader a reasonable general understanding. And in the case of work geared toward the games industry, such work presents ideas that can be easily packaged and sold. They offer the illusion of objective truth and conceal a reality in which real truths cannot be grasped and are instead constantly interpreted, reinterpreted, and misinterpreted:

> [O]nly partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices. Partial perspective can be held accountable for both its promising and its destructive monsters (Haraway, p. 190).

An example of the large-scale implications of this practice of oversimplification in pursuit of objective understanding has already been discussed in the first chapters of this thesis. A reduced, filtered, and misunderstood understanding of the purpose of ritual served Durkheimian objective truth of the roles of ritual in society which were further misinterpreted by Campbell into in false objective understanding of how all stories work. It has been discussed in the work of Tolkien both railing against such practices and falling into them themself. It has been discussed in relation to the magic circle and the immersive fallacy, both their flaws and their misinterpretations.

It then becomes clear how, overall, this project has been an attempt, itself naturally flawed and incomplete, to situate our understandings of immersion, player experience, and emergent narrative within some of the historic, modern, and contemporary practices that gave rise to them.

Once we add this body of theory to the mix, we can see a broader shift away from situating oneself in the world through liminal ritual and towards situating the world within oneself through the liminoid. This shift has only been accelerated by technology. The idea of how we perceive the world as constantly changing has been discussed through the introduction of frame analysis, the study of how our interactions are guided by a shifting network of contexts, impressions, and perceived norms.

Haraway moves us toward application of frame analysis through situated knowledge, which is the practice of perceiving the self as the cyborg, among other things a nexus of cognitive frames. Through greater awareness of our shifting network of contexts, which allow for conflicting and contradictory ideas to co-exist providing alternative readings of the same situations, we can work to more actively shape our perceptions of the world, challenge what is taken for granted, and choose the changes that we wish to occur (Haraway).

Section 2. Introduction to Flow Theory

Flow theory sits at an interesting intersection in discussions of immersion and player engagement within liminal/liminoid spaces. As far as it informs and shapes game design it shares a space with the magic circle and the ‘hero’s journey’ for creating the general baseline understanding of how games function, particularly within the games industry, that this thesis works to complicate and expand upon. It is also, in its original state, to refer to our discussion of Haraway, a rather relativist narrative for constructing thought and experience.

However, unlike the magic circle and ‘hero’s journey’, flow is not a formula for how to create an engrossing experience, but rather an idea of how that engrossment is supposed to feel. It attempts to capture subjective experience, and for this reason is more of a vibe, something vague and ephemeral that a designer could attempt to evoke for their players. The term itself creates a pretty vivid picture of being ‘in the zone’ or otherwise carried along by a great momentum.

The theory originates with Csikszentmihalyi, who described it specifically as ‘optimal performance’ and more generally as the experience of the optimal self. Flow theory, in large part reflects the historical political context of the time.[86] In brief, as Soderman shows, there are two distinct core influences at work. First, Csikszentmihalyi was born in Fiume (now a part of Croatia) in 1931, and spent World War II moving to and from Budapest fleeing violence. Their family suffered horribly, with Csikszentmihalyi losing most of their family to violence and the Soviet gulag. This is relevant to this discussion because, as Soderman explains, this contributed to a fundamental distrust of the human condition. The trauma experienced at the hands of the Soviet Union in particular combined with dominant pro-capitalist and anti-communist culture in western countries during the Cold War to make Csikszentmihalyi staunchly anti-Marxist (Soderman). Marxism to Csikszentmihalyi sought to dissolve the individual into senseless masses, masses who could commit atrocities. Masses who sought conformity over self-actualization. In essence, ‘sheeple’: ‘In all ages, in every country, man has always asked “why?” and he has always been grateful to receive a simple, unequivocal answer’(Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Marx: A Socio-Psychological Evaluation’ p. 278).

And it is this ungenerous opinion of people within collectives that positions Csikszentmihalyi staunchly against structuralist sociology of knowledge:

> …Marx as well as the later sociologies of knowledge developed by Scheler, Mannheim, Durkheim and Sorokin have had little direct effect on sociology as it has been practiced in this country. No matter how stimulating, such theories are too vague and riddled with loopholes to permit a consistent interpretation of reality (Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Marx: A Socio-Psychological Evaluation’, p. 278).

They proceed to say that:

> … this over-socialized view of man … amounts to the belief that somewhere in society there exists a golden sum of vectors, a magic point that includes in itself, without conflict, the interest of all mankind. The goal of history and of sociology is to help bring

86 As do all theories, of course. However, flow theory in particular benefits from a discussion of its historical context to show how it has been used in the past compared to how it can be used now.

> about this conflict-free state. If individual interest were to diverge from the common good (a possibility that some tend to deny completely), then the individual is to be "resocialized" (Csikszentmihalyi, 'Marx: A Socio-Psychological Evaluation' p. 275).

Inflammatory language aside, they compare this idea of society to a closed-system[87], a debunked idea that societies thrive in uniformity and isolation. They claim that instead societies require conflict and diversity. This does not totally divert from 'sociology of knowledge' insofar as Durkheim also advocated for conflict. The difference then is that in one camp, the conflict is ironed out, and in the other it is not.

In sum, the background philosophy of flow theory can be summarized as a response to a reading of Marx that celebrates a static and conflict-less uniformity of society. As will be discussed promptly, it works towards individual fulfilment through conflict rather than a group fulfilment. Rather than diversity being boiled together (either to enrich or make bland depending on one's interpretation), it is used for individuals to sharpen themselves against each other.

Flow theory in its original state exists within distinctly liminal (not-liminoid) states. It arises from a pre-industrial mentality of both work and play existing within existing structures, the difference here being that the structure is no longer that of the community as it strives to survive but rather is the structure of individual fulfilment through mastery of the world around them. There is no leisure in flow theory, nothing that is not productive, there is only boring work and fun work:

> Contrary to expectations, the activity most often associated with flow experiences was work... One-third of the respondents said that the intense concentration, involvement, and loss of self-consciousness occurred most frequently when they were working. Next came more predictable hobbies like cooking or carpentry; then sports and outdoor recreations (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and Positive Psychology*, p. 217).

However, this emphasis limits our understandings of both the scope and applicability of this research. The stated goal was, to paraphrase, to understand how through the dual processes of burying and uncovering one's perception of self through immersive practices functions to productively shape our impressions of self, the people around, and the world at large:

> Despite the importance of what passes in consciousness, psychology has by and large shied away from confronting it. Most psychological research in this century has focused

87 This closed-system is not to be equated to the closed systems of structured approaches to game design in this project. However, direct comparison of these ideas of closed systems could prove fruitful in further research.

> on the periphery of lived experience: on behavior, attitudes, choices; on cognitive processes and performance viewed from an outside, abstract perspective; on relationships between intrapersonal and external events. In studying these epiphenomena it hardly ever asks, how do these feelings relate to the psyche, that is, to subjective reality? (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and Positive Psychology*, p. 210).

They stress the practical function of jumping through mental hoops to achieve perceptions of self and perceptions of others that do not overwhelm the mind with too much or too little information or stimulus. To this end, the act of focusing, culminating in a flow state, represents the act of filtering down the immediately relevant information for survival. Flow is not limited to intrinsically motivated ludic activity, but in fact has been shown to occur more frequently in extrinsically motivated work activity (at least among some personality types):

> Rather than focusing on the person, abstracted from context (i.e., traits, personality types, stable dispositions), flow research has emphasized the dynamic system composed of person and environment, as well as the phenomenology of person-environment interactions (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and Positive Psychology*, p. 241).

As flow state does not distinguish between enjoyable work and boring work, Csikszentmihalyi describes two different types of flow state: high flow and low flow. Which have subsequently been called c-flow and u-flow by Draper.[88] C-flow represents total absorption in an enjoyable, or at the very least demanding, task, as already described, whereas u-flow represents the autopilot that emerges from uninteresting and non-challenging work. Low/u-flow can occur when you are so absorbed in one activity or train of thought that you do another activity such as driving home from work without being consciously aware of what you are doing and it can also occur when you go through a day of uninteresting work in a sort of meditative trance in which you are not thinking of anything in particular and the day flies by with nothing memorable happening aside from seeing what work you accomplished at the end of the day.

2.1 Journey: Witnessing the flowing subject

Importantly, it is in large part due to Jenova Chen's work that flow theory is widely used in game production and game studies. And yet, their most famous work, *Journey* does not work to the strengths of flow theory and contradicts how it is depicted in Hodent's work. In fact, it does not

88 Draper, Stephen W., 'Analysing Fun as a Candidate Software Requirement', *Personal Technologies*, 3.3 (1999), pp. 117–22, doi:10.1007/BF01305336

work to produce flow in the methods described above at all. One of the focuses of *Journey* appears to capitalizing on the feedback of a flow state rather than working to evoke a traditional flow state. And *Journey* provides this feedback through its narrative as it is communicated through visuals, music, and the overall *feel* of the game. Hodent draws our attention to Chen's GDC talk, wherein they discuss how they set out to create a specific feeling of connection to other people, and approached mechanics reductively, beginning from traditional online games of the time, primarily shooters, and taking away all mechanical elements that encourage competitive play, and at later stages of development any mechanics that allow for non-cooperative play to occur. They talk about how, in the pursuit of feedback, they realized that actions such as pushing another player off of a cliff provides a greater spectacle, and therefore a greater amount of feedback, than cooperative actions such as helping the player climb a cliff face.[89]

What this means is that since Chen was not building their vision of the game around a central mechanic, they had to build it instead through the use of narrative structure, and they discuss how the 'hero's journey' and the three act structure it describes is perfect for building to a sense of catharsis, defined in the talk as a non-specific intense emotion. The approach to flow here is not built around a state that the player builds up to through their effort to gain greater proficiency, but rather depicted through a constant cycle of anticipation and release, manifesting in the world through climbing up sand dunes and then sliding down them accompanied by beautiful visuals and music. The idea of anticipation and release here draws parallels to Upton's anticipatory play and immediate play. However, in this case the immediate play, the execution of a plan, is replaced with a less-agential act of spectatorship. There is no strategy in sliding down a sand dune and no potential for failure or a crux to occur. It is more like a ride. The player chooses to be acted upon by an external force and derives enjoyment from a temporary loss of control rather than from their efficacy.

What is interesting here is that through all of these design elements, the game only allows one experience of the game to take place. In that way, it resembles a film or theatrical production with the player as audience. The player can interpret their experience of the game, but they are not able to take control or change it in any way. Chen's studio, thatgamecompany, created a beautiful system to allow a feeling of connection to other players through its multiplayer system that, despite the inherent unpredictability of bringing random players together, has only one outcome. A player sees another player, they are happy, they travel together for a little while or a long while, and then go

89 Chen, Jenova, 'Designing Journey', 2013 <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1018751/Designing> [accessed 28 July 2025]

their separate ways. There is no room for any other interaction to occur. Therefore, player interaction in this game is not really organic, and there is ultimately very little room for any given player to make their experience with the game their own. This creates a fascinating dichotomy. Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory centres individualism and individual empowerment to conquer the self and the environment around them, yet the exact opposite occurs in *Journey*: the environment conquers the player. And in thus conquering the player, the game accomplishes the goals of Hodent's approach to UX.

Journey is a masterpiece of minimalistic design, from its character model made of simple shapes, to the landscape barren of anything to distract the player from the next goal or vista. It is uniquely focused. This is of course well known and has been heavily written on. The gameplay is not challenging per se, but it is not so easy as to fade into the background. Rather than being a means by which to directly induce a flow state, *Journey* appears to portray a flow state. The player is not the one who is in flow, the player character is. The desert world of *Journey* looks vast, appearing to go on forever. But it is actually quite small. There is you, the goals, the obstacles, and beautiful scenery in the background. The only information that is communicated is what is directly and immediately important. Anything unnecessary, including the arms of the player character, are not there. If you see something, it is important *right now*. It creates a sense of mastery as well. The world appears vast, and yet everything you see is there for you to interact with in some way, which makes it feel like a vast world that is there specifically for you. You are unambiguously the protagonist of this world.

If we apply this reading to a post-*Journey* games landscape, what does it say that *Journey* evokes flow second hand through the character rather than centring the player as has been done previously? It shows us that flow is fundamentally a conversational or collaborative practice. To bypass the collaborative element subverts flow theory.

2.2 Journey as Drama

Now, we can return to Turner's work and the liminoid. In *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, Turner draws attention to how within Goffman's frame of 'guided doings', which they make a point of explaining in terms of social structure as defined by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann as relying on and fostering a sense of continuity within a group.[90] The qualities of flow which may be found in ritual practices, Turner writes, rely on

90 Turner, Victor, 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Tokyo), 6.4 (1979), pp. 465–99, doi:10.18874/jjrs.6.4.1979.465-499

identification with the scenario, which in turn can create a ‘reflexive metacommentary on the history of the group’ (Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection*, p. 489). Flow within ritual relies on identification with the group and one’s place in it whereas flow within a dramatical space, Turner claims, requires ‘…actors convey the dramatist's *individually*-based appraisal of the social structure’ (Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection*, p. 490).

Flow in ritual, then requires reflexivity, but the flow of actors in a theatrical performance hinders reflexivity. To explain this, Turner draws our attention to the audience. Seeming to work on the assumption that a stage drama can only be considered such if observed by an audience, rendering any performance without an audience a guided redoing, they claim that it is the audience’s role in the ritual of a stage play to be reflexive:

> Part of the potency of a "great performance" comes precisely from this: the author reflects; the actors flow. There is a fruitful tension between the opposites. The audience is "moved." A cultural problem is irradiated into full visibility for the audience to reflect upon passionately (Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection*, p. 490).

We see here an assigned headspace for the participants. The actors flow, the audience interprets. The actors are in a liminal space; the audience are in a liminoid space. Rather than a nexus of impressions, contexts, and influences, the actors, through flow, reduce themselves to one of the influencing factors of the audience’s experience.

The audience in turn cannot enter a flow state, at least not as it has been described so far. They simultaneously experience a stage play as a flowing object and all the other components of the production that a flow state would filter out. They see details of the set design, they may be aware of the actors, they might see elements where reality contrasts with the fiction being portrayed, such as when an actor plays multiple characters, or when an actor plays a character with a different gender or ethnicity from their own. There could be satirical elements to the play, or a mix of time appropriate and modern or whimsical costuming that the actors treat as completely normal, and damn it, a tall person just sat in front of me! Now they’re pulling out their phone! Oh, I’ve gotten distracted; what was happening in the play again?

Turner draws particular attention to the fact that, because the audience themselves are not in flow, their reflexivity lends itself not to feelings of community or group identity, but rather to the individualistic practice of interpretation:

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Open Road Integrated Media, 1966) <https://go.exlibris.link/MKmMpYk2>

> As a member of an audience I can see the theme and message of a play as one among a number of "subjunctive" possibilities, a variant model for thought or action to be accepted or rejected after careful consideration. Even as audience people can be "moved" by plays; they need not be "carried away" by them - into another person's utopia or "secular sacrum," to use Grotowski's phrase. Liminoid theater should present alternatives; it should not be a brainwashing technique (Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection*, p. 497).

These ideas all come together to show the intersection of theatrical performances and games such as *Journey*. The flow of *Journey*, is not that of a rock climber or adventurer, but of an audience interacting with the performance of an adventure. For this reason, we should consider *Journey* not just as a game, but also as a piece of liminoid theatre communicated through the medium of games.

Section 3. Introduction to Applications of Flow Theory

3.1 High flow:

Now, what does this work hope to achieve, and how can we link it to the wider discussion of player driven experience? The stated goal of this collection of research is in the pursuit of optimal performance. The understanding of optimal performance, however, goes well beyond the frames of mind that enable, well, optimal performance. For me personally, as a former competitive swimmer, it is difficult to separate the idea of optimal performance from optimal *athletic* performance, with easy transferability over to infinite games and e-sports.

Within games, flow best serves what Nguyen's achievement oriented or striving play styles. It is most commonly applied to infinite, arcade style games such as *Tetris or Breakout*, and later consol adaptations of the model such as the Zombies[91] sub-franchise within many *Call of Duty* games. Another more recent example of striving play applied to an infinite game would be the Infinite mode of *Monster Train II*, which becomes an option after the player has succeeded in a run of the roguelike. In this mode, as in the other examples, the player is offered no condition to win (beyond

91 Itself an interesting case of fan communities shaping the identity of a game franchise. Originally, Zombies was a small party game in *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), but fan communities started to piece together 'easter eggs' within the levels that created an unofficial game lore that was later adopted as canon. The game mode additionally became so popular that it created a split within the game's community, with many players purchasing subsequent *Call of Duty* games specifically for Zombies.

the ‘Will it Ever End’ achievement for surviving two battles in the mode). This is because they have in fact already won and fighting and fighting until they are defeated is their reward. In such games, the game itself continues forever, growing more and more difficult until the player eventually fails. In such games, winning in the traditional sense is not the goal. In the case of *Monster Train II*’s Infinity Mode, the player has knowingly opted out of winning. Instead, the goal is to last longer than you have before, or to last longer than the other people who have played this game.[92]

After a player has reached a certain level of proficiency with such games, typically when they are able to see a consistent level of improvement from one run to the next, they begin to enter into the flow state. This state of mind builds upon Nguyen’s description of harmony between one’s tasks and one’s abilities. In a flow-inducing game, the goal is for the player to feel just barely good enough to overcome the obstacles at hand, with the game constantly threatening to grow more difficult more quickly than the player can improve their skill or deepen their focus.

The precarious harmony between ability and growing difficulty urges the player to grow more and more focused and fixated on the game in order to meet the ever increasing challenge as the player mediates themselves in order to stay within a state of harmony. While the game is easy, the player can play more relaxed, not needing to devote all of their attention to the game. As the game grows steadily more difficult, the player steadily increases their focus until they reach a state of peak performance. In this state of mind, all information or stimulus that is not relevant to the task at hand (the task being maintaining a tenuous harmony with the game) fades away until there is nothing left but the player and the game. At this point, even the awareness of the controller as separate from the hands holding it would cease to be relevant as the act of interacting with the game would feel like the player moving their body. The player’s perception of time also changes, typically speeding up to the point where the player spends far more time playing than they realize until they leave the flow state.

In addition to time being perceived differently within a flow state, the duration of the activity also plays a critical function in creating a flow state. As this form of flow state is incredibly intense, it is very taxing on the mind and usually causes the person to experience a crash afterwards. For this reason, games that work to create a flow state have typically short durations. A roguelike is usually limited to three or four levels, and games that have a longer duration allow for rest periods. In the case of *Dead Cells*, each level has a break area between levels where the player can upgrade their

92 This idea, while no longer the dominant approach to winning a game remains relevant in local, friend list, and global leaderboards.

weapons and abilities and replenish their health bars. All in all, a single run in such games should not take more than an hour or two.

3.2 High flow Case Study: Hades and Dead Cells

Let us discuss how games can induce flow on a mechanical level, allowing and encouraging the player to be keyed into their personal experience of flow rather than watching a depiction of what flowing gameplay should look like. One key difference between these games and *Journey* is that while *Journey* works through minimalism, *Hades* and *Dead Cells* are both more maximalist in design.

Hades has a great deal of moving parts to it. You begin with a primary weapon of your choice with a light attack and a heavy attack, a dodge, and a ranged attack. Over time, you gain various boons from Greek gods which modify your existing abilities or add new abilities. Much later in the game you gain the Summon ability which allows you to use a special move themed around one of the allies you have made over the course of the game.

Dead Cells has even more moving parts. In *Dead Cells*, you begin with a primary weapon, a secondary weapon, and later an optional third weapon. You have a dash, but also a jump for traversing obstacles (a movement mechanic *Hades* does not have). You have not one but two throwable items, which can be grenades, turrets, traps, and so on. While *Hades* adds to its complexity primarily through the addition of boons to modify your existing abilities, *Dead Cells* encourages the player to be constantly swapping weapons and items as they find them, all of which have different move sets, attack speeds, and cooldown periods.

In both games, there is substantially more visual noise occurring on the screen, such as explosions, bullet-hell[93] projectiles, flashing colourful lights to lend attacks greater visual appeal and communicate their danger as well as more colourful and varied environments overall. This serves to both retain the player's attention and communicate how powerful the player is as they gracefully dodge between lasers and explosions.

What we can learn from discussing these two games is both how we can form a more nuanced understanding of how high flow works and how high flow can be used. Both games discussed move beyond the previously established minimalist approach to flow exemplified by *Journey* and arcade style games to create a feeling of focus and oneness with the environment where the game does not

93 Bullet-hell both referring to a sub-genre/descriptor tag/type of combat gameplay in which enemies fill your screen with projectiles. The majority of the gameplay becomes finding the small holes in the walls of bullets as you either wait for opportunities to strike or fire back your own projectiles.

limit the stimulus or relevant information, but rather requires the player to filter out distractions and determine what is immediately relevant. As these games are no longer about survival until eventual failure, and instead allow for victory, the feelings associated with high flow change. Both *Hades* and *Dead Cells* use high flow with an emphasis on filtering information regarding enemies to create a feeling of overcoming and achieving mastery over great adversity.

3.3 Low flow

As already described, low flow refers to doing actions automatically with little to no conscious thought, time moves quickly do to a lack of attention. Low flow occurs during daily routine actions.

Within the context of games, this can be seen during repetitive actions, such as grinding for levels. But on a broader level, this can be seen to occur during games where monotony is the point. There is an entire genre of games called cozy or healing games, such as FutrLab's *PowerWash Simulator* where the player is presented with monotonous work which would be considered chores in real life yet takes on an element of satisfaction. This is because, unlike real life where chores pile up and you must do them even when you are tired, the chores of satisfying games do not pile up. They are there when you want to do them and achieve the harmony between abilities and tasks that Nguyen describes, but scaled to easy, repetitive tasks rather than challenging tasks. Satisfying games are just engaging enough to avoid boredom where other games work to be just difficult enough to be engaging but not overwhelming.



Fig 8. *PowerWash Simulator*. Image taken from https://gamerant.com/db/video-game/powerwash-simulator/news/ on 28/01/2026

3.4 Low flow Case Studies: Keep Driving and Sunless Sea

3.4.1 Keep Driving



Fig 9. *Keep Driving.* Image taken from https://store.steampowered.com/app/2756920/Keep_Driving/ on 28/01/2026

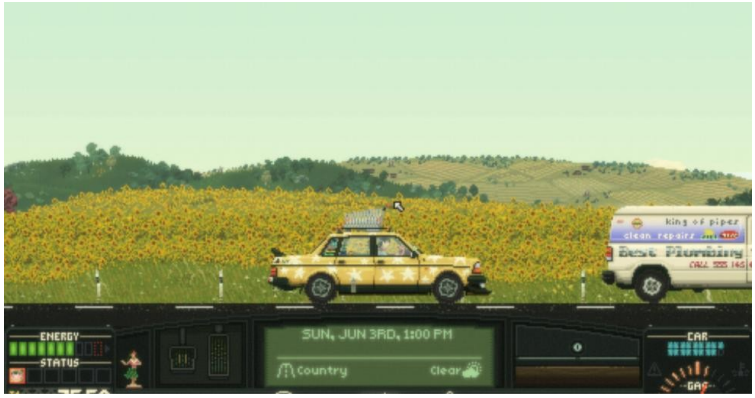


Fig 10. *Keep Driving.* (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)

Keep Driving is a contemporary example of the roguelike genre, a genre that features such high flow inducing games as *Hades* and *Dead Cells* as have been discussed. In it, your character embarks on a solitary road trip to a music festival, given forty days to make the trip. On beginning a run, the player is told, ‘You’re young, take your time’. The goal of the game is to get to your destination, and pick up an optional tent to sleep in. And if the player did simply that, there would not be very much to the game. The goal is to go on adventures along the way. You can explore, pick up hitchhikers, modify your car, and work jobs. The hitchhikers are simultaneously traveling companions, allies offering different skills to encounters, and quest givers. These quests can and will divert the player from a direct course to the music festival and often require the player to retrace miles to the last town or further. They in turn do not ask for a simple one-way trip usually, but a multi-step journey making up a smaller adventure within the player’s adventure.

The music in the background is energizing as it would be for a drive, both loud and unobtrusive at once. On the road, the only interaction occurs during combat-esque events. Otherwise, you the player are looking at the scenery, reading occasional dialogue between your character and hitchhikers, listening to the music, and zoning out. Unlike a typical real drive however, the game springs those events on you, such as slow drivers, confusing lanes, arguing hitchhikers, etc.

periodically. This serves to always bring your attention back to the game. There is also an element of inventory management, which sits at a middle ground of difficulty as you do not have infinite storage space in your boot, but you still need to manage it, creating short periods of easy yet satisfying work.

Low flow in games often does not become a highlight, but an attraction. For example, in *Elden Ring*, the focus is placed on high flow through combat encounters while most of the body of the game, especially the first half of the game, is low flow inducing exploration.[94] This exploration is characterized by peaceful background music, pretty and visually interesting scenery, day and night cycles, collectibles, and the discovery of new areas which signal a pausing of low flow and switch into high flow as every new area means new combat encounters. And it is the memory of past combat encounters and the anticipation of future ones that retain player attention overall, with the explorable areas, once explored, becoming background. In contrast, the looming challenges of *Keep Driving*: the flat tires, fog, and slow drivers make up the background. The low flow travel is the focus and high flow moments are interruptions to break them up.

Another element of *Keep Driving* that maintains a level of low flow even during combat-esque encounters is through its automatic skill levelling system. Whatever you do most often during encounters, whether it is to use your skills, the skills of your hitchhikers, consumable items, or step on the gas to escape, will automatically level up, increasing efficacy and lowering costs. Because the game works to support the decisions you make, it does not call for the player to alter their headspace. Optimal performance does not call for optimal focus.

3.4.2 Sunless Sea



Fig 11. *Sunless Sea.* (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)

94 FromSoftware, *Elden Ring* (2022), Steam



Fig 12. *Sunless Sea.* (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)

As we have already discussed in regard to high flow oriented gameplay, the pacing of the games often includes periods of downtime for a player to recover from an intense period of high flow. In games such as *Hades* and *Dead Cells*, these breaks are short, only a few minutes or so, and the player can take less time, speeding through the rest area to begin the next level without leaving a high flow state. They are there to sustain the player's energy as needed and desired.

However, games can do the opposite as well. The majority of time spent playing *Sunless Sea* can be arguably called down time. You play as the captain of a steamboat navigating a vast Lovecraftian subterranean ocean. You travel from island to island to buy and sell goods, transport passengers, and collect stories. Unlike the gameplay of the roguelikes discussed above, the gameplay here is very slow. You watch as your vessel trundles along, making soothingly repetitive mechanical chugging sounds with ambient music in the background. And then a giant monster emerges from the depths and kills you. Or you run out of food and are forced to start eating your crew. Or the crew mutinies and kills you.

Returning to Upton's work, most of the play in *Sunless Sea* is anticipatory play. The gameplay loop is of long periods of downtime, of waiting, followed by short bursts of intense immediate play. The game uses a muted colour palette, with a top-down camera that offers a very wide field of view relative to the number of things there are to see at any given time. Most of your screen is open sea.[95] As in *Keep Driving* periodic hazards do appear (as mentioned above), but there is a greater sense of randomness to it. One journey will have several encounters, while another one will have none. This gives the game a feeling of gambling with your life, as a voyage well-prepared for might go badly,

95 The game provides the cultural quirk of the sea being referred to as 'zea' and sailors as 'zailors'. For clarity in this piece, we will regardless refer to them as 'sea' and 'sailor'.

or a poorly prepared for voyage might go well. If you were to smuggle contraband into London (your main port in the game) inspectors might be there, they might not, or they might be there but too busy to search your ship.

The randomness of encounters adds greater and greater tension as the game progresses. Not only is movement in this game slow, so too is game progression. Like *Hades* and *Dead Cells*, *Sunless Sea* is a roguelike. But unlike these games, an individual run will not take an hour or two. It could take ten hours or more, with no save points.[96] If you die, that time is lost, and you start over, with the islands moved to new positions and only limited resources carried over from the previous run. Speaking personally, in no other game that I have played has the prospect of death been so frightening. Yet, with the fear of death hanging over your head, all you can do is wait. Listen to the soothing sounds of your ship, manage your resources, and hope that it will be enough.

The flow of this game is not truly that of zoning out, zoning out would be suicide. Instead, it encourages a constant low-grade alertness for something that might go wrong followed by brief periods of high alertness and white-knuckled terror when it does. But, in my experience over time, when the fear of death has lessened somewhat, I personally found the game to be soothing during the periods of uneventful sailing (or I'm masochistic). It is a game that can be played for long periods of time in one sitting whereas roguelikes with prolonged high-intensity can grow too taxing over time. A single run of *Hades* or *Dead Cells* cannot go nearly as long as a run of *Sunless Sea*.

What we should consider in regard to this game, as well as *Keep Driving*, is that in perhaps a similar manner to how *Journey* depicts flow as much as or more than it evokes it, the same might be said here. These games are not relaxing on a mechanical level, but they can be on a narrative level. Relaxing gameplay is what is being depicted.

3.5 Combining the two: pacing

If we stick to this binary approach for now to understanding how flow works in games, it becomes clear that the majority of games cannot keep a player engaged through just one type of flow. *Dead Cells* and *Hades* would not be able to sustain their high-speed and high-intensity gameplay throughout an entire run unless they were to give the player a chance to take a break from the action without taking a break from the game. Likewise, *Keep Driving* makes sure that the player does not zone out or scroll on their phone while their character drives in a straight line, and zoning out in

96 For clarity, you can of course save and quit the game. But you cannot re-load progress upon death.

Sunless Sea would likely be fatal for run. In fact, Hodent makes note of this duality of flow in games, saying:

> Game flow is also about pacing: the rhythm of stress and pressure. A game typically has some intense moments and more relaxing ones. Many action games have "waves of enemies", for example, and in "battle royale" games, players have relatively calmer moments to prepare, alternated with moments when encounters are getting inevitable as the map is shrinking (Hodent, *The Psychology of Video Games* p. 35).[97]

Our high-intensity games both inject periods of low intensity play between periods of high-intensity. In both *Hades* and *Dead Cells*, there are safe areas between the three levels of the run. In these areas you can upgrade your equipment and abilities, heal, and make strategic choices for resource allocation to either affect this run, or future runs. In *Dead Cells* especially, it is normal for a player to spend experience points in order to unlock a weapon that will not fit their current build, but will be fun to play with in a future run. *Hades* also offers occasional safe rooms within each level where the player can heal or have dialogue with a resident character such as Sisyphus.



Fig 13. A brief respite with a friendly NPC in *Hades.* Image taken from https://screenrant.com/hades-complete-sisyphus-favor-companion-unlock/ on 28/01/2016

In *Sunless Sea*, as already mentioned, the low-energy periods of peaceful travel are valuable because they stand in stark contrast to high-intensity combat encounters, and in *Keep Driving*, the game has you solving problems constantly, with new encounters popping up every minute or so. In this way, both games invoke the impression of low flow, while deliberately avoiding its reality. Through this, we can begin to see how flow theory is in no way rigid. Games seem able to strike a balance between high flow and low flow, enabling the player to be absorbed by the gameplay and

97 Hodent, Celia, *The Psychology of Video Games*, (Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), doi:10.4324/9781003045670

separate from it enough to interpret the story at the same time. To better understand this, let us discuss how a similar balance can be achieved in a different element of games UX: the interfaces.

Section 4. Understanding UI through Remediation

To add another piece to this puzzle, let us add Remediated UI. Bolter and Grusin provide insights into UI design philosophies in regard to how interfaces are perceived and interacted with by the user. There are three core ideas from this work to be discussed:

1. Immediacy, the erasure of visible UI
2. Hypermediacy, the undivided focus on UI
3. Remediation, the experience of both simultaneously (Bolter and Grusin)

What is useful to consider here as we are coming from the discussion of high and low flow, is that immediacy and hypermediacy are presented dualistically, with user experience moving back and forth between the two. However, this work does not adhere to the same rigid conception of dualities that we have seen so far. The purpose of remediation is to show how, in a similar concept to frame analysis, the user moves between immediacy and hypermediacy fluidly and can in fact be in both states of mind simultaneously.

4.1 Immediacy

Immediacy is the illusion of being in the space, it relies on the mechanisms making the illusion possible and the tools to interact with the game invisible. The logic of immediacy functions on the erasure of the visibility of the medium as medium. This manifests in two ways, the first is in extreme attention to graphics and traditionally ‘immersive’ technologies to create a feeling of being really there. The second is of more interest to this study, which is the growing homogony of online spaces. Over time, due to the streamlining of website creation tools as well as a general drive to make online spaces as accessible as possible for the users, interfaces have come to all look alike. Game console menus are almost indistinguishable from smart tv menus. All document writing software looks like Microsoft Word and all pdf readers look like Adobe. Interfaces are identical as well. Games are made for nearly identical gamepad or WASD[98] controls. Through the growing

98 The W, A, S, and D keys on the keyboard, which have replaced the arrow keys as the default input buttons for PC gaming. They are even highlighted or otherwise made to look visually distinct from the other keys on gaming laptops and keyboards.

homogony and uniformity of online spaces, the mediacy of the interface disappears as interacting with online spaces becomes the same as moving our bodies.

Immediacy can here be defined by the mentality and practice of achieving a particular interpretation of immersion they call presence (Bolter and Grusin). Presence aligns with a pervious conception of immersion that was discussed in the opening chapter: the idea of creating a fantasy that works to make the participant forget that they are in a fantasy. In digital media, immediacy works to make all elements of the experience contribute directly to the singular vision of that experience. An immediate experience exists in the heat of the moment, divorced from analysis or other consideration of the media as artificially constructed object.

Immediacy is most easily seen in the progress of virtual reality, both in the forms of VR headsets and wrap around monitors, surround sound, and any other feature that directs the participants senses toward the experience at hand rather than anything that may distract or recontextualize. For this reason, with its emphasis on complete sensory occupation, the practice of immediacy focuses on the immersive fallacy: improving technology in order to make the sensory experience as complete as possible, with the end game being holodecks.

Indeed, Bolter and Grusin call distractions from immediacy ruptures. And ruptures break the spell of immediacy. Immediacy considered in isolation brings us back to the discussions of primary vs secondary worlds, suspension of disbelief, as discussed in chapter one. Immediacy, when taken at face value can be tied to suspension of disbelief. Therefore, it can never truly escape rupture because it is always focused on rupture. This means that the more effort is placed into making a perfect experience, the more that inevitable imperfections will stand out. This idea can be easily explained through the concept of the uncanny valley: the closer something comes to looking real, the more unnatural or unreal it looks. Eventually, presence will inevitably become rupture.

Moving beyond virtual reality, immediacy also manifests in how we structure interfaces to be, not invisible necessarily, but an emulation of real-life objects and actions. When working on computers, we store information in files, we drag and stack windows as we would pieces of paper. The word window also conveys a ‘looking through’ the boundary into virtual space rather than ‘looking at’ (Bolter and Grusin).

In games, the increasing universality of interfaces can have the same effect. When you play a shooter on a game pad, the left trigger usually shifts our view to see down the gun’s sights and the right trigger fires it. Or if you hold two guns, the left trigger will fire the left gun and the right

trigger will fire the right gun. This is a given. It makes sense. It feels natural. Additionally, the controller will rumble when you fire your gun to imitate, or rather symbolize, the recoil of the weapon and the noise of it firing loud enough to be felt as much as heard. In platforming games, the bottom button (the A button on the Xbox, the B button on a Nintendo console, and X on a PlayStation) always means jump. It is the bottom button for the bottom half of your body. It is natural, if for no other reason than its ubiquity. For this reason, an experienced player will not think 'I have to push this button to jump' they will just jump.

One way that games work to create immediacy is to incorporate the HUD into the game itself rather than placing it on the borders of your screen as we see in *Dead Space*[99], *Journey*, and *Aragami*.[100] They work to make our interface feel like a part of the game world proper rather than something outside it. We also see a hybrid approach to interface, with a normal HUD communicating some information and features of the world, such as your apartment in *Do Not Feed the Monkeys*.[101]



Fig 14. *Aragami*. The HUD is the cape. Image taken from https://www.bit-tech.net/reviews/gaming/aragami-review/1/ on 28/01/2026

99 Not to be confused with *Dead Cells*, these are two very different games with similar names.
100 EA Redwood Shores, *Dead Space* (2008)
Lince Works, *Aragami* (2016), Steam
101 Fictiorama Studios, *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* (2018), Steam



Fig 15. *Do Not Feed the Monkeys*. Your computer. (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)



Fig 16. *Do Not Feed the Monkeys*. View of your surveillance camera footage. (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)



Fig 17. *Do Not Feed the Monkeys.* Your apartment with fridge, bed, and door with an angry landlord on the other side. (Screenshot of gameplay, taken 18/2/2026)

4.2 Immediacy through UI Design, *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* and *Papers, Please*

Both of these games, while arguably existing only in the one window on your computer, simulate the experience of hypermediacy, they do this through integrating menus into the game in such a way

as to push the player to juggle multiple windows and tasks that fill up their screen and demand their constant attention.

Papers, Please:

Despite much already being said about this highly influential game, it still has a great deal to teach us about remediated interfaces.[102] The beauty of the game lies in how un-optimal its interface is. You operate a small visa checkpoint for a fictional authoritarian government. For any given interaction with someone attempting to cross the border, you must take their papers, ask them questions, refer to your manual to check their documents' authenticity as well as to fact check what they are telling you. Then you have additional clutter added to your workspace, such as papers in addition to their passport, hidden messages to deliver, and so on, which physically clutters up your workspace. The interface effectively has you juggle multiple windows at once as quickly as you can with only your mouse to click and drag items of select dialogue options with the prospective immigrants.

Do Not Feed the Monkeys:

Do Not Feed the Monkeys shows a number of similarities to *Paper's Please*. It is a resource and time management game primarily, where the core gameplay loop is spying on people through hidden cameras connected to your home computer. The interface for this game alternates between your computer, which offers the surveillance program as well as email, phone, internet browser and online shopping. But the interface extends beyond this into the character's studio apartment. You cannot stand up and move about the space, but just turn your head to see your refrigerator, coffee pot, phone numbers, bed, and your front door. Rather than this feeling like a strict divide between a windowed computer interface and a non-windowed world, the apartment feels like another window. The appliances are, functionally, no different from applications. They communicate information, allow you to spend or make money, consume coffee or sleep to increase your energy meter and eat food to boost your hunger meter. If we compare this functionality to other games, the apartment is quite similar to the inventory, maps, and equipment screens we are accustomed to in role playing games. This in turn creates a fun reversal, as it equates the physical and therefore more 'real' apartment with the less-real or less-substantial menu.

Additionally, the surveillance window is, itself, hypermediated through the sheer number of displays the player views at once. As the player progresses through the game, they will gain more and more 'cages' (views of unknowing people going about their lives). The player is to constantly scan for something interesting happening on any given screen, and then zoom in on that view to

102 Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please* (2013), Steam

take note the person's details and story.[103] These events are scripted and occur at specific times, and are often scheduled to coincide with other events. They can also be interrupted by an email notification or someone knocking on your door.

The idea of immediacy can easily be tied back to conventional ideas of immersion, the desire to make the interface so seamless and integrated with the game that it is invisible, giving the feeling of being in a real space, or forgetting that the space is a secondary one. We have already discussed how, in and of itself, an Immediacy driven Immersion is an oversimplification, but when considered as one element of a greater package of experiences and perspectives, it has great potential to make a game feel more engaging, and the way that Immediacy is striven for adds additional ways for the game in question to express its unique identity.

4.3 Hypermediacy

Then we have hypermediacy, which focuses on the interface, on the HUD. Hypermediacy confronts you with the tools with which you interact with the game world. In so doing, mediation becomes the focus rather than the means.

To begin, it is useful to consider the increasingly common multi-screen computer set up. Although it is possible to configure two or more screens to act as one larger screen, it is far more common for the two screens to have different displays. For example, as I write this I have my document open on one screen and my music open on another screen. Beyond that, the very nature of working on a computer encourages the user to have multiple application windows on the same screen. For a personal anecdote, say I am writing this paragraph, on my two screens, but then I want to refer back to one of my sources or copy a quote, so I open my pdf reader alongside my word document. Then I want to check my pomodoro timer to see how much time I have before the next break, so I switch away from my music tab on my browser and look at my timer tab, then I check my email, etc. etc.

In this example, we could say that I am immersed in my work, but that work is not one, immediate process. It is multiple processes that exist simultaneously, each individual process can simultaneously distract from a different process, breaking immediacy, while also increasing my focus (particularly in the case of listening to music, or reminding myself directly of the temporal limitations of this work period with a pomodoro timer).

103 As a side note, in a similar manner to how the quantity of enemies and attacks to dodge in high flow inducing games can communicate the player's power, so too does the number of screens a player is to watch. This is however something of an illusion, as the stories taking place in any given cage will not take very much time to finish. As a result, the player will likely only be paying attention to three or so cages at any given time.

Bolter and Grusin draw our attention to this, discussing how the very nature of our windowed interfaces act in opposition to the idea of immediacy:

> Unlike a perspective painting or three-dimensional computer graphic, this windowed interface does not attempt to unify the space around any one point of view. Instead, each text window defines its own verbal, each graphic window its own visual, point of view. Windows may change scale quickly and radically, expanding to fill the screen or shrinking to the size of an icon… The multiplicity of windows and the heterogeneity of their contents mean that the user is repeatedly brought back into contact with the interface, which she learns to read just as she would read any hypertext (Bolter and Grusin, p. 33).

However, they state that rather than being opposite approaches to mediating an experience, as u-flow and c-flow are presented, hypermediacy is required to achieve immediacy. If you work to remove the interface, the interface becomes the focus. If you put greater effort into creating an illusion, more attention is paid to that effort rather than the illusion itself.

The argument then becomes that neither the ideas of immediacy nor hypermediacy can exist on their own, because the state of one will naturally transform into the other in a somewhat yin-yang-esque manner.

4.4 Hypermediated UI: Games within games, *Pony Island*, and *Doki Doki Literature Club*

One way that games achieve hypermediacy is through the lamination of one game onto another. Many games feature minigames within them, such as the arcade games available in *Stardew Valley* in which the player is controlling a character on one screen while the character is controlling another character on another screen. Through this layering, the game within the game is hypermediated. The player is directly confronted with a smaller screen, altered graphics and music, and simpler controls and gameplay than can be found in the primary game.

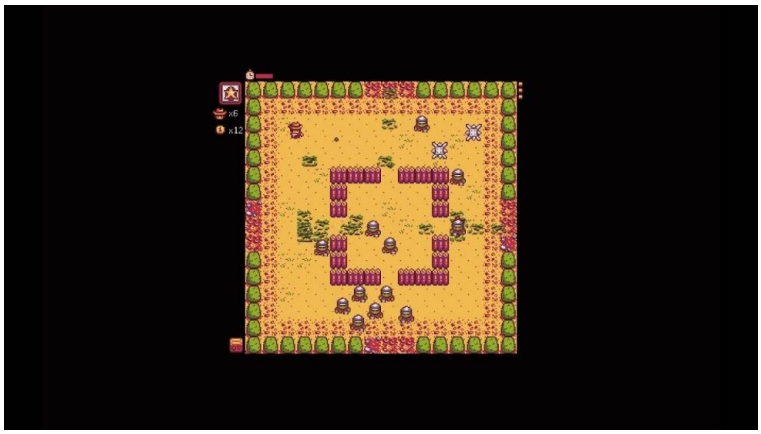


Fig 18. Image of ‘Journey of the Prairie King’ the arcade game to be found within the saloon in *Stardew Valley.* Image taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmcw34m9HCs on 18/02/2026

However, another more interesting way that games become hypermediated is through breakage. *Pony Island* does exactly this. In the game, you are playing a character who is trapped in a type of interdimensional purgatory in the form of an arcade with the arcade game ‘Pony Island’.[104] This game, however, is in many ways broken and inoperable. In order to even begin playing it, the player character must go into the code of the game (represented by buttons and arrows) to make it operable in a way similar to hacking minigames such as the pipe-connecting hacking game within *Bioshock*. However, once again unlike typical hacking minigames, you are not hacking into an interface within the game, you are hacking into the game itself just to make it work. Throughout the game, the player is confronted by the game as a game object through the game not functioning as it is supposed to and needing to be fixed, worked around, and eventually confronted as it becomes clear that the game is a sentient collector of lost souls and the player must use hacking and exploits in order to escape it and free the other lost souls it holds within the arcade purgatory.

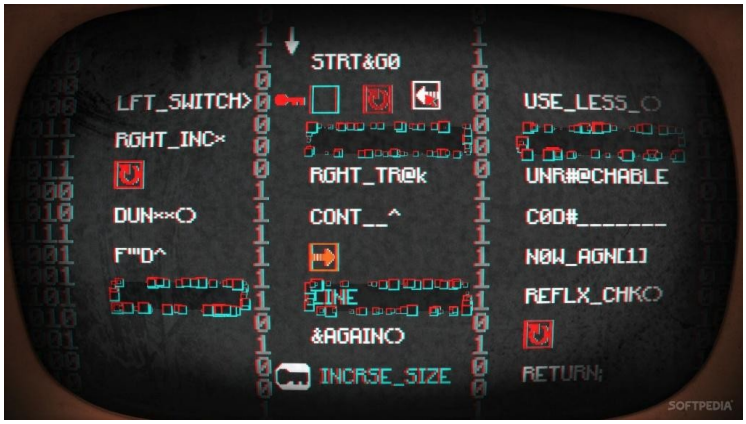


Fig 19. Image of hacking a menu in *Pony Island*. Taken from https://www.softpedia.com/reviews/games/pc/pony-island-review-498542.shtml on 28/01/2026.

104 Daniel Mullins Games, *Pony Island* (2016), Steam

What this game does is it first positions the arcade game of pony island as separate from the game the player is playing, with the player playing a character playing the game. Then it works within the structure by showing that the game within the game is not to be played, but confronted, circumvented and defeated. The player is confronted time and again with all the ways that the game does not work, which ensures that the malfunctioning interface is always the focus. Then there is the final layer of this player-game interaction in which in defeating the cursed pony island arcade game, the player wins pony island the actual game. This brings the artificiality of pony island as a whole to the players' attention as an artificial construct separate from the player because the game is to break the game, breaking the game is playing the game as intended and therefore not breaking the game at all. The narrative of confronting the game serves to always keep the player's focus on the game's interface rather than separate gameplay because the interface *is* the gameplay.

Doki Doki Literature Club very famously takes the idea of intended gameplay as hacking the game a step further.[105] Like *Pony Island,* the game is hypermediated through inviting the player to play a game that is ostensibly broken. It begins as a seemingly typical Japanese style visual novel where the protagonist's role is to date one (or all) of the four other characters. However, during the first chapter, the player is given no opportunity to spend time with the character Monica. Otherwise, the game progresses normally until it suddenly ends with the childhood friend character Sayori revealing that she has severe depression and committing suicide the next morning. After this, the game breaks; your save files are lost, Sayori is deleted from the game, and you can only start a new playthrough, without Sauri, as if nothing happened. However, the second playthrough shows how broken the game has become, with broken indecipherable dialogue, choices you are not allowed to make, and disturbing visual glitches. Eventually it is revealed that all of the problems are caused by Monica, who has become sentient and is trying to achieve autonomy within her digital space by hacking into it, deleting and re-writing the characters, and forcing the player to only interact with her. In order to defeat Monica, the player must exit the game altogether, open the game files, and delete Monica's character file from their device.

105 Team Salvato, *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017), Steam



Fig 20. Image of *Doki Doki Literature Club* 'glitching' in act 2. Taken from doki-doki-literature-club.wikia.com on 28/07/2026

Once again, the game's interface makes itself the centre of the gameplay by breaking (or rather pretending to break). From these examples, we can surmise that immediacy within games relies on smooth, flow inducing gameplay whereas hypermediacy arises from cruxes, or subversions of expectations of how the game should run.[106]

4.5 Remediation and the Networked Self

Remediation is the representation of one media within another, a fusion of the effort to make the interface invisible and the reality of the player being confronted with the interface. However, remediation as a concept is fundamentally subjective. Each person will perceive it differently as each person will bring a different understanding of what it means to interact with a digital object. For instance, they explain that individuals can and will disagree on exactly what is an immediate, or hypermediated experience:

> [I]t is clear that not only individuals, but also various social groups can vary in their definitions of the authentic. What seems immediate to one group is highly mediated to another. In our culture, children may interpret cartoons and picture books under the logic of transparent immediacy, while adults will not. Even among adults, more sophisticated groups may experience a media event as hypermediated, while a less sophisticated group still opts for immediacy (Bolter and Grusin p. 71).

This is why we discuss Salen and Zimmerman's immersive fallacy at the beginning of the thesis. We don't really feel more immersed in the space when we see the effort to streamline the experience, but we can appreciate the aesthetic appeal of it. Thus, the games listed as examples of

106 There is a great deal more to be said about an object becoming most visible when it breaks, with Legacy Russel's (2020) *Glitch Feminism: a Manifesto* as an excellent example, which sadly cannot be explored in this work.

immediacy are also examples of hypermediacy, because in these games the player pays more attention to the interface, not less.

In other words, whether we confront a player with the mediation of the game or work to conceal the mediation of the game, the result is the same. Hypermediacy enables immediacy and immediacy brings us back to hypermediacy. In engaging with an imaginative space, you are not in one of these mental spaces and forgoing the other, you are moving back and forth between them constantly, and it is the study of this process that Bolter and Grusin call ‘remediation’.

Remediation for the purposes of this thesis represents yet another example of blurring established frameworks. Bolter and Grusin build to it in their book, first establishing immediacy, and then hypermediacy. Although these ideas are presented in a similar manner to the hierarchal dualities we have been discussing, they do not serve the same purpose. Just like Upton’s anticipatory and immediate play, immediacy and hypermediacy are meant to be permeable. One does not sit above the other, and a player moves between headspaces fluidly. Remediation is the practice of situating oneself within the movement between these two spaces as one experiences the UI of a game. Remediation is yet another way to view situated knowledge within UX.

With this in mind, let us bring the conversation back to flow as a hierarchal duality to disrupt. As observed in our discussion of high flow inducing games, there are necessary periods of downtime within runs (not to mention downtime between runs in which the player might get up, stretch, go to the toilet, etc.) that make the high flow state possible. In the low flow inducing games, high flow is still present, it occurs when something goes wrong, and the low flow becomes more about a low-level anticipatory alertness than total relaxation or autopilot. Just as immediacy and hypermediacy cannot exist without some measure of the other, so too do the two types of flow in games. Thus, a new term is called for, which for purposes of this piece, we can call ‘situated flow.’

4.6 Flow Situated between pause menus

In the build up to establishing the idea of situated flow, we have discussed a number of dual states of mind a player can move through: anticipatory and execution play, high flow and low flow, as well as immediacy and hypermediacy.

As was discussed in the context of Upton’s anticipatory and execution play, there are distinct thresholds to key the player into the new context, such as environmental changes or a crux. High flow and low flow also make use of thresholds, often through the use of moving into a different room. You clear all the enemies, take a breath, and move into a peaceful room as you prepare to go

back into high flow. In both of these cases, it is the game that provides the player with the threshold from one keyed context to another.

Then there is the remediated state of moving back and forth between immediacy and hypermediacy. Remediation does not require a game-imposed threshold in the same way as the above states of mind. It is a more neutral frame of interaction between player and game as the switch between immediacy and hypermediacy does not need to be initiated or signposted. It simply happens.

Understanding this, we can reflect on a third way that the movement within situated flow can occur: a player can also actively switch between contexts, unprompted by the game which would, rather than change the context of the game for the player, change the context of the player for the game. This arises from the temporalities of pause menus.

Schmalzer brings our attention to the pause button.[107] The pause button, they write, is an element of the game that is both separate, often described as hypertextual in so far as it is a modification of a core experience without being a part of the core experience, and yet fundamental. Pausing the game alters the dimensionality, bringing a three-dimensional game into a two-dimensional interface.

4.7 Case Studies: Temporalities of Menus in Breath of the Wild and The Witcher III

Through the examples of games discussed above, we have already skirted around discussing the temporalities of menus, primarily in the context of how games avoid altering the speed of time in the game by combining menu windows with gameplay windows to achieve immediacy. In *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* and *Papers, Please* for example, because the menus expand upon the moment-to-moment gameplay, they deliberately avoid altering the temporality of the game. Things will happen whether you are looking at them or not. The same is true for *Dead Space*. As all of the interfaces exist within the same visual perspective as the rest of the game, appearing in front of our character instead of in front of the player, there is nothing to imply a monster will not attack you as you go through your inventory.

This contributes to a dynamic between the player and the game in which the game acts and the player reacts. The game system has a vastly greater ability to multitask than the player and has the simpler job of creating problems and situations and the player has the more difficult job of resolving them. If you are watching a situation unfold during *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* and someone knocks

107 Schmalzer, Madison, ‘PLAY WHILE PAUSED: TIME AND SPACE IN VIDEOGAME PAUSE MENUS’, *Journal of Games Criticism*, 4.1 (2020) <https://gamescriticism.org/2023/07/25/play-while-paused-time-and-space-in-videogame-pause-menus/> [accessed 23 June 2025]

on your door, you the player are forced to choose which interaction to give your singular attention to while the computer runs both interactions simultaneously.

If we return to the discussion of flow where the speed of computer thought relative to the speed of human thought mirrors the player's in-flow relationship to their environment, pausing immediately reverses that relationship.

While a game is paused, the player is still thinking, planning, and as Schmalzer describes through the example of the interfaces of *The legend of Zelda Breath of the Wild*, will even continue to be playing the game through swapping equipment and using consumable items while time, from the perspective of the computer[108], is stopped (Schmalzer).[109] This is also a significant element of combat within *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*.[110] Within this game, you spend time collecting information about different types of monsters and crafting potions to boost your abilities as well as oils to coat your sword with in order to boost your damage against specific monster types. When the player then encounters a monster, they can open their inventory menu, pausing time for the rest of the game, read through their monster catalogue for the monster they are currently facing, find out which of their oils to use, apply that oil to their sword, and then leave the menu, un-stopping time suddenly far better equipped to fight the monster than they were zero seconds of in-game time ago.

Through changing the nature of encounters through menus in stopped time the player reverses the dynamic. During this time, as Schmalzer highlights, the player acts more quickly than the computer could (Schmalzer). Additionally, pausing also gives the player enhanced multitasking and planning abilities. While paused, a player can take a breath, calm down if stressed, reassess the situation and plan what they want to do next. In this way, the player shapes the games experience of the player as. Ordinarily, it is the player that must grapple with suddenly changing situation, but after un-pausing, it is the in-game enemies and environments that need to now grapple with a suddenly changed player character and player. Through pausing, the player becomes a crux upon the game.

Summary and further thoughts

In summary, in this chapter:

108 Or to be more precise, from the standpoint of the parts of the computer's memory that are dedicated to the processes of the game outside of the pause menu.
109 Nintendo, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), Nintendo Switch
110 CD Projekt Red, *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015), Steam

- We elaborated on an avenue for perception of self within intra-active play through the figure of the cyborg and the practice of situated viewing.
- We juxtaposed situated viewing with flow theory.
- We explained the schism between how flow theory is treated in game studies and how it is treated in the games industry.
- We explored the ideas of high flow and low flow.
- We explored how flow is used in games.
- *Journey* was shown to create an interactive experience despite the player rather than with the player.
- In so doing, *Journey* does not evoke flow, it depicts flow.
- Exploring how flow is evoked in games shows that there is an entanglement between high flow and low flow.
- This idea was explored further through remediation within user interfaces.
- The result of that comparison is a third type of flow, a situated flow.
- Situated flow shows how the logical conclusion of flow theory is not mastery of the game but intra-action with it.
- Through this exercise we begin to explore how we can work to apply the notion of intra-active play within liminoid spaces to game design.

As we have entered into a rather abstract area of theory, it becomes useful to take a step back down the ladder and work to better understand how we can consistently arrive here. It is useful to work towards finding applications for the ideas discussed without returning to relying on over-simplified understandings of systems of rules and structures of narratives.

The problem with the view of self as part of an intra-active entity is just that, we are a part of it and a part cannot understand the whole in its entirety. Before we can work to strengthen our ideas of intra-action, we can work to better understand the posthuman experience of self. Through situated viewing, we can work to do so, providing a means to better understand the fluidity of self and one’s cognitive frames within liminoid spaces.

To further bolster the idea of the situated self, we introduced a structural approach to an actualized, or optimized, or dominating self that is promoted within the games industry, a particular approach to flow theory, to show that this body of theory in turn will bring us back to the liminoid when taken to its logical conclusion. We reintroduced a dualistic structure of high flow and low flow (not to mention the implied duality of being in flow and being out of flow).

To begin discussing flow theory through how it has been depicted as fitting within game UX by Hodent, we discussed *Journey*. In analysing the game, one of the core takeaways was that it works against any notion of intra-activity or even varied/diverse interactivity. If two people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, religions, experience with games, etc. were to play *Journey*, they, more than with any other game discussed in this thesis, could be said to have played the exact same game. Chen succeeds where P03 and *Slay the Princess*'s narrator fail; *Journey* tells one story, in one way, despite what any given player may bring to it.

And because of this, *Journey* does not truly evoke a flow state. There is no reason why a player would enter into a traditional Csikszentmihalyi-esque high or low flow. Where *Journey* unequivocably succeeds is in the depiction of flow. It tells a structured narrative of a character in flow, and the player is there to spectate.

When we examine games that work to evoke a flow state in the player rather than depict one for the player, we find that the clear division between high flow and low flow starts to break down. The two states are entangled: they will inevitably bleed into one another.

To help to understand and articulate this entanglement between high flow and low flow, we looked to a similarly entangled pair of ideas within UI, immediacy and hypermediacy. Like high flow and low flow, these ideas appear at first glance to work toward opposite goals, with immediacy working to render the interfaces used to work a computer (the analogue interfaces of computer, keyboard, mouse, and monitor) as well as the interfaces for websites, games, or other digital media (such as tabs, clickable icons, button prompts, health bars etc. invisible and hypermediacy working to render such interfaces starkly visible and the centre of our attention. However, Bolter and Grusin make it clear that this is not the case at all and that, in the same way that we have found that high flow cannot work without low flow and vice versa, immediacy and hypermediacy cannot be separated. There is no digital space that is only immediate or only hypermediated because each one evokes the other. Immediate digital spaces are very visibly immediate, as we discussed through the examples of *Dead Space* and *Aragami*, which by virtue of its visibility renders it simultaneously hypermediated.

The fact that they are opposite ideas do not prevent them from co-existing, an idea we have discussed at length through frame analysis. Instead, they intra-act; one modifies the other which in turn modifies the one in a process dubbed remediation.

If we return back to the ideas of situated viewing that Haraway discusses, we can see a distinct similarity between the concept of remediation and situated viewing, as remediation is the process of situating one's experience of an interface between immediacy and hypermediacy as it shifts back and forth fluidly. Applying this to the entanglement of high flow and low flow shows that we can do the same thing. We can articulate our experience moving between high flow and low flow fluidly as a situated flow, a flow state defined by intra-activity rather than interactivity, of playing with the game rather than dominating it or (in the case of *Journey*) being dominated by it.

In discussing the differences between situated viewing as a means of self-articulation within intra-active play and flow theory as a means of self-actualization with a view toward pursuing dominance over a game, we accomplish two things. First of all, we work to further strengthen the idea of the liminoid spaces as being built upon the idea of the liminal space and as a far more useful guiding idea for understanding play as an over-emphasis on the liminal detracts from the playful elements of play and because the liminal space can be seen to turn into the liminoid space when explored to its logical conclusions. Second, through the discussion of flow theory in games as it can be seen to enter into liminoid spaces as well as remediation within user interfaces accomplishing the same thing, we begin to move towards an understanding of our theory that can be applied to game design as an alternative to the structural practices currently championed in the industry. Although this thesis does not aim to provide a specific framework for doing so, being primarily an anti-framework argument, we are steadily moving toward sufficiently nuanced understandings of liminoidality and emergent play that they can function as inspiration and guiding principles. To strengthen this idea further, we will return to discussing emergent play in the following chapter.

Chapter Four: Processes of building frameworks to explain experiences as they emerge

Introduction

In this final chapter, we are unfortunately faced with the task of tying up loose ends and helping the reader to a conclusion to this body of research that they can then take and apply to their own research or artistic projects. Within the limits of the medium of research papers, we are currently bound to an inherently liminal model of initiation, argument, and conclusion that leaves the reader ultimately where they started, but with new ideas, or at the very least another source or two to add to their own bibliographies. How then, might we work to finish a text that argues that work, and play, is not a process that truly ends? As a personal example, could I, the scholar and writer who needs to show a 'significant contribution to knowledge' to earn my PhD, actually get away with arguing against frameworks and other useful tools and lenses through which we can perceive the world around us without providing any frameworks or tools of my own? Readers must be able to apply this work somehow.

To begin to address this predicament, the final chapter will introduce two new key theories: Janik's concept of processuality and Latour's actor-network theory.[111] Processuality will be introduced as the means of perceiving infinite post-human bodies through the practice of establishing a manageable number of umbrella terms from which one may begin an analysis. These umbrella terms are exactly that, placeholders for groupings of infinite and infinitely shifting and laminating sub-bodies.[112]

In their work, Janik organizes the process of play into the four bodies of the game's hardware, the game's software, the game's story, and the player's body. These bodies provide excellent starting points for a foray into the infinite possibilities of their contained sub-bodies because their presentation immediately enables us to perceive the various changes and laminations each body can undergo. The most immediately approachable lamination to consider as an example is the lamination of permanent change due to the progression of time, which will be unpacked.

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111 Janik, Justyna, 'The Material World of Digital Fictions', *Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication*, 29.38 (2021), pp. 57–72, doi:10.14746/i.2021.38.04
Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford University Press, 2005)

112 With the distinction between body and sub-body being entirely organizational with no hierarchal connotations. The decision of which label applies to a body and which to a sub-body should be completely arbitrary.

Beyond these four bodies, we can also apply processuality as a method for grouping other bodies of intra-active play in such a way as to lend themselves to the formations of frameworks without prescribing that those frameworks colonize thought. This is because, in the practice of perceiving the bodies of play as infinite and arbitrarily grouped under umbrella terms, frameworks built upon those umbrella terms are made with an awareness that they are but one of the possibilities for frameworks that could have been built.

With this idea established, we are thus provided with a method through which we can create our own frameworks, which can at this point in time be called a ‘processual method’ in homage to Janik’s work. As this is a somewhat subjective engagement with nearly infinite choices, any framework made in this manner should be viewed as a potential, or even flawed framework, rather than something that strives for, let alone achieve, definitiveness. We will begin this process by returning the focus of discussion to emergent experiences. Emergent experiences will, through a processuality-inspired methodology, be broken down into the three umbrella-term bodies of emergent gameplay, emergent feedback, and emergent narrative.

These three bodies can be considered through liminality initially. Emergent gameplay would be considered to occur in moment-to-moment gameplay in which the player experiences a situation, rapidly assess the situation, and responds to it with a predictable or unpredictable outcome. Emergent feedback would then be the lessons that the player took away from the outcomes of that situation, what strategies worked, did not work, or worked in an unpredicted way. The player would then arrive at an emergent narrative, in which what they learned from their emergent feedback is fitted into their overall understandings of the game that they are playing. However, this ordering would not function in the same manner subsequently, as the emergent narrative would factor into the initial assessment of emergent gameplay and emergent feedback would factor into how the player would choose to approach a situation in the heat of the moment. These three bodies do not describe the processes contained in a linear interaction but rather in a liminoid intra-action.

To better understand this idea, we will then introduce Latour’s actor-network theory. This body of theory within sociology sets out the goal of building frameworks for understanding social situations from the ground up in such a way as to avoid pre-conceived notions and biases as much as humanly possible. It presents the practice of working through the infinite entanglements of intra-action and painstakingly detangling them to work to truly understand phenomena rather than settle for grouping the ideas that arise from research alongside similar or associated ideas. In so doing, it strives to truly understand a situation in its entirety. This is an inspiring endeavour, but it must be

highlighted that a purely unbiased approach is impossible to achieve and that there could be no practical application from such research that works to understand phenomena significantly more slowly than such phenomena would evolve into new forms, referring back to the notion that bodies of contexts are always changing and laminating.

What becomes necessary, is a compromise in which we do not abandon the tools we use to understand phenomena but use them with an understanding that they are inadequate, limiting, and flawed. We can approach an understanding of such tools by referring back to the idea established through the discussion of processuality. The frameworks and concepts we allow to guide us as we explore the possibilities of play can be treated as placeholders for groupings of shifting bodies. As the bodies change and laminate, so too must our understandings of the grouping as a grouping and create new flawed framing tools accordingly. With this practice in mind, our reading of actor-network theory leads us to three new placeholder tools that we can processually group in the same manner as we did for emergent experience. These bodies, as they are described by Latour will be understood to be infra-languages (which will be described as an expansion on the idea of keys and keyings), ideo-pomorphization (a concept distinct from anthropomorphization as will be described in the body of the chapter), and the application of both ideas to paint a picture of our non-human collaborator in play.

With these two groupings of bodies of play established, the rest of the chapter will enact a ‘choose your own adventure’ esque foray down the infinite possibilities presented by the bodies of theory and concepts that this thesis has introduced and discussed, with each section going a level ‘deeper’, or adding another lamination, to unpack some of the terms introduced in the section(s) prior.

The next layer of this practice will be the unpacking of the notion of the non-human collaborator as it can be understood through ideo-pomorphization, with the resulting bodies from that grouping being the contemporary figures of implied author and implied reader, the implied game designer, and the implied player as they are described by Mosselaer, and Gualeni as well as the implied ‘game object’ or pure game as described by Aarseth.[113]

From this layer, we will progress to the final layer of this theoretical spelunking. In it, we will discuss:

113 Aarseth, Espen, ‘“Define Real, Moron!” -Some Remarks on Game Ontologies’, in *DIGAREC Keynote-Lectures 2009/10*, ed. by Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch, DIGAREC Series (Universität Potsdam, 2011), vi, pp. 50–68

1) Emergent gameplay in the context of implied designers ascribing a sense of intentionality to the randomness of play

2) Internal constraints as they are discussed by Upton to represent a player's internalized beliefs for how a game functions as informed by their experiences of emergent gameplay

3) Outcomes of actions informed by a player's internal constraints broadly framed either as successes or cruxes

4) Emergent feedback as the keying thresholds that bind and transition us between these intra-acting bodies

Finally, we will finish this chapter by discussing how we can see this particular understanding of emergent feedback being encouraged in two games, *Don't Starve* (as well as its sort-of sequel *Don't Starve Together*) and *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*. Both of these games function through encouraging a player to develop a unique relationship with the feedback they receive from play, which sheds a light on the particular process of play that we arrived at above. *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is especially noteworthy in how it traps players into the consequences of their prior choices, shifting the emphasis of the feedback away from the systems of the game or the implied designers and back to the player.

Section 1. The processes of intra-acting with infinite bodies of play

To round out our understandings of intra-action for this body of work, we will discuss the concept of processuality as it is discussed by Janik. Through discussing this term, we will work be able to work towards a rough understanding of how emergent experiences occur through the intra-active play with a game object. Janik, in an approach that can be aligned with the work of Haraway as it has been discussed, uses processuality as a means of situating oneself within the seemingly infinite entangled bodies of play. In order to better visualize the practice of situating oneself among these various bodies, they provide us with four bodies of play to contemplate:

1. The game as hardware
2. The game as software
3. The game as story
4. The player's body

These bodies are what can be understood to be seen on the surface of play; they are immediately observable. And as they explain, these four bodies are not static, they are always shifting and changing and intra-acting with each other. To aid in visualizing how these bodies are constantly shifting and changing, we will return to our now established practice of using temporalities to discuss the modifications and laminations that temporal progression apply to all contexts. While we have previously used temporalities non-linearly, first in the description of laminations through the example of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* and second through the discussion of intra-action seen through the non-aligning temporalities of menus, Janik reminds us of the progression of time causing permanent change to contexts.

Humans, of course, age. Our bodies grow bigger and stronger as we transition from child to adult, but we also lose things. We have less energy, and often become less creative, generally more conservative, and limited in thoughts and beliefs. We gain education and experience at the cost of time for leisure and play. Income and social standings will also change over time. Without even needing to discuss old age and inevitable mortality, we gain and lose things over time. This too is the case for digital bodies. The software of videogames will evolve over time through updates and patches. Generally, these are seen as improvements, but enjoyable exploits and glitches may be lost. Your favourite weapon or spell might be nerfed.[114] The hardware of games also changes constantly. Older consoles and PCs will be replaced by new ones. Hardware will decline with use, with newer devices performing better than older devices of the same model. And in turn, a player may become more proficient in games the longer they play, but they may also accumulate repetitive strain injuries, reducing their ability to play as a direct result of it.

As an aside, this notion is also tremendously helpful to remember in regard to building our understandings of emergent experience. Because human bodies, both in their physicality and psycho-social constructedness, and game bodies, both in their hardware and software are always changing, there is always going to be new contexts added onto gaming sessions over time. One body might be performing better or worse on any given day for any number of reasons. No two play sessions will have exactly the same contexts, the same expectations, the same outcomes or interpretations of them. The process of play, then, becomes the process of creating particular moments from which particular meanings emerge.

114 Nerfed is a general term for making elements of the game such as weapons, abilities, etc. weaker for the purpose of rebalancing.

With this idea of constant change occurring to all bodies of play reaffirmed, we will now return to the notion that the intra-action within play occurs between and betwixt infinite bodies. It is vitally important to understand that these four bodies do not function as a be all and end all of how we can understand the factors that intra-act during play. As mentioned above, processuality is described as the process through which a player can work to *situate* themselves within seemingly infinite bodies. In order to situate a flawed human mind within infinite multitudes of possibilities, one must limit the infinite down to the finite. It is because of this need that we use frameworks at all, we need to be given something concrete foothold to stand on, even if we know that foothold is ultimately arbitrary, inaccurate, or false. What then emerges is an eternal balancing act of reducing the cosmos to be able to perceive any of it with the restraint and self-awareness required to not colonize the cosmos in the process. In the case of Janik's four bodies of play, this balancing act can be seen in the fact that these bodies are presented as umbrella terms, or placeholders, for the infinite shifting contexts that sit underneath them. A human body is a nexus of infinite bodies, be they situated within the physical, geographical, temporal, societal, psychological, or other fields. To illustrate this, we can see Janik making a point of discussing the need to situate a human's bodies and a game's bodies of hardware and software, within their materialities:

> The game software could, for a start, be broken down into code, mechanics and aesthetic layers. Hardware, too, consists of many elements, from microprocessors to plastic cases. The player's body, on the other hand, is not only a biological body, but also a mental and socio-cultural construct. All of those bodies exist not only on the micro level of player's involvement in the gaming situation, but also on the macro level, outside the game space, in more day-to-day situations. The experience of play is deeply anchored inside the materiality of these three bodies [which are amended to four bodies at the end of the paper], and the special relationship that connects them (Janik, p. 59).

As a capstone for directly approaching our posthumanist theories regarding perceiving all the bodies of play and situating oneself among them, processuality aptly provides us with a process through which we can work towards both understanding the liminoid as it has been discussed throughout this thesis and shifting the discussing towards how we may begin applying this knowledge. To that end, it will also play an important part in rounding out the remaining theories and concepts that will be discussed in this chapter.[115]

115 As an aside, although this particular work is not directly referenced in this chapter, I would like to give credit to another notable essay of Janik's, 'Intra-acting Bio-object' (2021a), which was a large source for inspiration for this chapter. It also deserves credit for first introducing me to actor-network theory, which I make use of in this chapter, and Barad's concept of intra-action.

Section 2. Emergent Experiences

With this new approach to understanding intra-active play added to the mix, we will now transition into discussing emergent experiences. We are introducing this chapter's discussions on emergent experiences here rather than later on because it is helpful to consider it here first, in close relation to the idea of processuality. In the same manner that we can help ourselves to visualize the infinite intra-acting bodies of play through a non-restrictive representation of a manageable number of bodies as umbrella terms, we are going to divide up the vast notion of emergent experience into, somewhat arbitrary, yet useful divisions of the types of emergent experience.

First, we can consider the idea of emergent gameplay. Emergent gameplay can be considered as what occurs during moment-to-moment intra-active gameplay. Upton's game design philosophy centres gameplay around situations. The game presents the player with a situation, be it an obstacle, puzzle, enemy and so on and that situation teaches the player the proper way of approaching such situations in the future (Upton). The situation imposes restrictions in such a way as to key the player into different cognitive frames to discover a solution. Once the player has committed to an action in response to the situation, a new situation arises as a result, thus keying the player into still more frames.

It arises from immediate situations, say if a player is walking down a corridor and an enemy, or a locked door, or a friendly NPC, etc. appears in front of them. The player would then form an initial assessment of the situation, itself a process that contains infinite intra-actions, as will be noted below, and then act upon that initial assessment. If the scenario plays out as it ordinarily might, with the player attacking the enemy or talking to the NPC, the gameplay might not be considered emergent, but that is only because we take such a notion of 'ordinary gameplay' for granted. Even if the outcome appears to be mundane, it would arise out of multiple factors coming together. It is however much easier to imagine gameplay as emergent when the interaction is not ordinary and expectations are subverted in some way. For instance, the NPC could be an enemy in disguise, or the enemy, instead of charging the player, runs away and leads them into an ambush, or the player moves to attack the enemy, misses them and falls off of a ledge, only for that enemy, and all the enemies lying in wait, following them off the ledge and landing on the player character's head one by one. In any case, we can see emergent gameplay as the immediate situation arising from the confluence and intra-action of multiple factors. It can be argued to be the default state of moment-

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Janik, Justyna, 'Intra-Acting Bio-Object: A Posthuman Approach to the Player–Game Relation', *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 13.1 (2021a), pp. 21–39, doi:10.1386/jgvw_00026_1

to-moment gameplay, but it comes into more stark relief when the gameplay is interrupted or modified into a more chaotic and unpredictable situation.

It is important to note that an initial assessment itself contains infinite intra-actions. That initial interpretation, regardless of the speed at which it occurs is another microcosm of this entire exercise, with all the infinite bodies that can intra-act within a player's mind to form an impression occurring within a small fraction of a second. This idea, in relation to processuality drives home the idea that our straightforward ideas of what occurs in any interaction or intra-action contain multitudes. And our multitudes contain still *more* multitudes.

Then there is emergent feedback, a term introduced as a modification of established understandings of feedback to help to understand how a player can go about interpreting emergent gameplay. Emergent feedback can be considered as arising in the immediate aftermath of emergent gameplay.

Additionally, Upton asserts that feedback (beyond informing the player of the changes they have made to the game) guides the player to transform themselves, develop new cognitive frames, in order to better transform the game.

Referring back to Upton's model of anticipatory and immediate play. Once the immediate need to initially assess and respond to a situation has passed, the player would return to a state akin to anticipatory play to assess what had just occurred. As with the initial assessment that is entangled with the process of emergent gameplay, a re-assessment will likewise contain multitudes. However, due to the modifying contexts of not needing to act immediately, any changes to the state of their body such as a heightened heartrate or sweaty palms, and any immediate aftermath pertaining to the overall situation of the game in which the moment of emergent gameplay took place, these multitudes of intra-acting contexts would be distinctly different from the intra-acting contexts that made up the initial assessment.

This assessment of what occurred will naturally arrive at a conclusion, a lesson learned that will be applied to future situations. Such lessons will be inherently tied to the situation as it played out, rather than how it might have been intended to play out. As a result, such emergent feedback could be that a conventional strategy or approach should not be used in the future, and instead the player should attempt to use an unconventional strategy so as to re-create some of the unpredicted elements of the emergent gameplay. For instance, after a player misses an enemy and falls off a ledge, they may elect to try baiting enemies into making the same mistake, removing them from their path without even needing to engage with them directly. This discussion strongly links back to

our discussion of keys, keyings, and mis-keyings in chapter two, with mis-keyings being one distinct way we can approach an understanding of emergent feedback. However, it would be an oversimplification to refer to all instances of emergent feedback as arising from a misunderstanding, as one can only say that a person misunderstands a communicated message if that message is communicated directly. And this, of course, would make the game far less playful. During play, feedback is not received so much as it is created.

Then we have emergent narrative. In emergent narrative, the player's understanding of what occurred in the emergent gameplay is contextualized via the player's understanding of what the game communicates to them via emergent feedback to create broader opinions of the game overall. One way that we often see emergent narratives discussed is when players over-analyse little quirks or idiosyncrasies of a game to ascribe meanings to their experiences.

For example, the *Dark Souls* trilogy has seen a great deal of community engagement with the lore, both to unearth hidden or subtle story elements, but also to invent commonly accepted narrative interpretations from quirks of the games. For example, in *Dark Souls II*, a significant part of the gameplay condition is that a great deal of content was cut from the game in order to meet production deadlines. As a result, game maps do not always progress logically. For example, a player traveling between Hades Tower of Flame and No-man's Wharf will travel deep below sea level, walk in a more or less straight line and emerge at sea level again. The most famous example of the spatial distortions of the maps occurs when traveling between Harvest Valley and the Iron Keep. In this, the player travels to the top of a fortress and finds an impossible elevator with a shaft far too tall to fit in the building that deposits them at the top of a volcano. However, these spatial distortions arising from production limitations end up working beautifully for creating emergent narrative. A central plot point of *Dark Souls II* is the degradation of the player-characters' mind and the loss of memories due to a curse. Thus, the illogical transitions between map areas enable the players to experience amnesia as they are left wondering 'how the heck did I get here?'.

This interpretation of the illogical map layouts can be further bolstered when compared to horror games such as *Silent Hill 2*, where the map layouts explicitly reflect on the character's declining mental state with little to no regard for spatial logic.[116] Even if this were not an intentional narrative decision for *Dark Souls II*, the fact that this decision has been made intentionally in other games gives legitimacy to it as emergent narrative.

116 Team Silent, *Silent Hill 2* (2001), PlayStation 2

As a final note for this section, as will be shown through the rest of this chapter, we can see how this model differs from the models of systems and feedback that we discussed previously in reference to Salen and Zimmerman in the fact that the real developers and designers of the game have no say whatsoever in how these encounters and outcomes actually play out for individual players, this approach requires us bear in mind that we are looking to better understand how players form their experiences with a game, rather than how designers should approach designing experiences for the players.

Section 3. Latourian Actor-Network Theory

Our final full body of theory this thesis will use is actor-network theory, specifically referring to the work of Latour. Actor-network theory is a body of sociology, grouped under the suggested name ‘sociology of the social’. It seeks to ascribe no prior, unifying, or natural order to the concept of society, instead working to build new ideas of social systems from the ground up. This has the advantages of, first working towards an understanding of society as always changing and evolving in the wake of large changes. Societies post-Covid are not the same as they were pre-Covid, and a system of meaning-making that is not tied to what was once relevant would have an easier time adjusting to such changes. Beyond this, the sociology of the social s works to bypass confirmation bias. It would seek to understand interactions on a more case by case basis rather than working to fit associations between parties, or actors, into prior frameworks.

In particular, actor-network theory seeks to observe and trace associations, with little regard for such associations logically making sense, either in relation to other actors or in relation to one actor’s internal logic. This is of course consistent with what we have discussed already. Through frame analysis, we have come to understand that actors can and do hold contradictory ideas, systems of organizing them, and interpretations of them in their heads simultaneously:

> ANT [Actor Network Theory] claims that it is possible to trace more sturdy relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than by trying to keep one frame stable (Latour, p. 24).

Latour’s body of theory then fits nicely alongside the work done to describe our situated intra-actions with media. It can be quite easy when discussing the cyborg, or situated self, to substitute contexts for associations. And they sought to establish this body of theory in order to achieve a

more purely and unbiasedly objective view of how members of social groups define themselves rather than attempting to define them as an outsider:

> The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst. This is why, to regain some sense of order, the best solution is to trace connections between the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy. The search for order, rigor, and pattern is by no means abandoned. It is simply relocated one step further into abstraction so that actors are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear (Latour, p. 23).

In order to fully understand any given collection of actors, a new framework must painstakingly, and to some extent unrealistically, be created based upon what is said, with comparison to previous results needing to be suspended. In this way, the way to best conduct critical research is uncritically.

In order to undertake such a daunting task, we need to be equipped with the proper tools, which counterintuitively are themselves liable to being shaped by confirmation bias. They are out of necessity language that is established by the outside researcher to help them to understand the language of members of a group. There is no simple, easy, or foolproof method of creating such language. Afterall, if there were such a method, there would be no purpose in Latour's sociology of the social at all. With this in mind, this work argues that we do use conceptual tools to aid us in understanding the subjects of research, but with a constant awareness that such tools are flawed and actively work to build better and better tools. There are three conceptual tools that Latour describes that are fundamentally helpful for the use of attempting to better situate ourselves processually within the ever-shifting bodies of play.

Section 4. A branching road

Now that we have established an understanding of this 'processual method' as grounded in Janik's processuality and Latourian Actor-Network theory, let us examine two guiding concepts taken from Latour's work that can be applied to understanding emergent experience:

1) Infra-language

2) Ideo-pomorphization

Importantly, as this is something of a ‘choose your own adventure approach’, these two ideas represent possibilities for how the following work can develop. We will not use both: the rest of the chapter works off of the idea of ideo-pomorphization. But the reader benefits from seeing this un-trodden path of exploring emergent experiences within liminoid play through the notion of infra-language as it could prove useful for future/continued research.

Path number one: infra-languages

Latour’s sociology of associations also provides us with insight into a deeper understanding of keys and keyed contexts, deeper even than we delve in this body of research. It places an emphasis on infra-language, language that has no meaning other than to key an actor from one frame to another. It serves no other purpose. Furthermore, Latour writes that infralanguage must always be regarded as infralanguage, its study should not look beyond or over or underneath the purpose that it serves within a particular group within the period of time that it is used (Latour).

The way that Latour discusses the ways not to approach infra-languages brings to mind Tolkien’s metaphor of the tower on a cliff to describe the structuralist practice within literature and myth (Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*). The purpose of the tower is to key the person who built it into enjoying the view, and to study it as anything else conceals rather than reveals what it has to offer.

Infra-language then presents a totally ungrounded approach to understanding keying terms within groups. Within the practice of sociology of the social that Latour describes, we have to regard the language on face value. What this means is that it cannot and should not be traced back to its beginnings. This deviates from our discussions of the liminoid in a delightful way because, in this thesis, work on the liminoid is grounded in an understanding of a point of origin. A person begins outside the liminoid state and enters it. They then become changed and are unable, unwilling, or unable to understand the notion of leaving. We have approached this from the postmodern angle of such starting points being illusions and the act of entering the liminoid space is in reality discovering that you were always there. However infra-language works on lack of even that. They are to be treated as having no beginning point, illusory or otherwise.

That places the term both inside and outside the purposes it is put to in this thesis. Latour’s infra-language informs an approach that is grounded in the here and now rather than an approach grounded in historical context. At the same time, it shows potential for application beyond this, presenting a version of play or playful activity within the liminoid space that is no longer

subversive, as an ungrounded activity that exists entirely in the moment has no prior context to subvert. This is a fascinating avenue of thought to pursue (and hope others pursue) in future research.

Path number two: ideo-pomorphization

The second concept discussed here will help us return to the discussion of the non-human actor in intra-active play. The non-human actant can be regarded as an object, as Latour discusses, and as a concept as Haraway discusses. In either case, we have non-human actants who cannot be understood through direct means. To give it an unproblematic placeholder, Latour writes that we need to move beyond anthropomorphization and begin to ideo-pomorphize:

> Second, if agency is one thing, its figuration is another. What is doing the action is always provided in the account with some flesh and features that make them have some form or shape, no matter how vague. 'Figuration' is one of those technical terms I need to introduce to break the knee-jerk reactions of 'social explanation' because it is essential to grasp that there exist many more figures than anthropomorphic ones. This is one of the many cases where sociology has to accept to become more abstract. To endow an agency with anonymity gives it exactly as much a figure as when it is endowed with a name, a nose, a voice, or a face. *It's just making it ideo- instead of anthropomorphic* (Latour, p. 53 my italics).

Ideo-pomorphization arises not from a static or dynamic element of an object in and of itself, but rather form how it can guide the imagination to give it life. Consider the improvised toy. A child in physical play can transform a stick to a sword, or a gun, cane, etc. The stick is just a stick, but the inclination of the child and shape of the stick can give the child the impression that the stick wants to be used in a certain way. To this day I still have a tree branch that just clearly wanted to be a wizard staff.

How we will use ideo-pomorphization: the specific application of ideo-pomorphization to regard our non-human intra-active collaborator(s) in play

It is worth remembering at this juncture that the purpose of these tools is to provide flawed means of perceiving infinite possibilities as through finite lenses, focusing them into collections of bodes that we understand to be arbitrary but necessary for study with the eventual goal of not needing such tools at all (likely an impossible notion). With this in mind, we can see the idea of ideo-

pomorphization being applied to the infinite possibilities of our intra-active partner(s) in play and reducing them to what can be described or expressed as personality.

Once we ideo-pomorphize something, we as humans naturally give it an identity or personality, it has to be something capable of wanting something, therefore it must have some manner of personality. One may see this as pursuing conceptions of non-human identities, or a failure of imagination that erodes the line between ideo-pomorphization and anthropomorphization.

For clarity, for the purposes of this piece, anthropomorphization is an object expressing desire as a human would whereas ideo-pomorphization is an object expressing desire in relation to humans as a non-human entity. A work of art can be considered ideo-pomorphic in how it can be seen to be an extension of a person. That is to say that the anthropomorphic intention becomes ideo-pomorphic once it leaves the human body and is perceived to inhabit a non-human body for the purpose of acting in a manner that a human body cannot. It is a transformation of a human agency into a non-human agency that will nonetheless be perceived in relation to human agency due to our limited imaginations

Section 5. A flawed framework for understanding our applied ideo-pomorphization: Implied Designers

With this established, we are going to now need to establish a flawed framework in order to better understand our flawed tools and how we can use them in the endeavour of making better tools with better frameworks. To build this framework, we can first look to Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni, who can give a face to our ideo-pomorphized partner(s) in play. In their work, they present the figure of the implied designer.[117] They based the figure of the implied designer off of the much older term implied author, which was first proposed by Booth as a means of articulating the unique agencies that novels, which we can now see as intra-active objects, have over both the readers and the authors themselves.[118]

5.1 *Implied Author*

To establish an idea of the implied author idea, Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni lean heavily on the figure of the implied author within literary studies, an idea that was first put forward by Booth. Booth writes that the implied writer is the author's 'second self' or persona created through the act

117 Van De Mosselaer, Nele, and Stefano Gualeni, 'The Implied Designer of Digital Games', *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics*, LX/XVI.1 (2023), pp. 71–89, doi:10.33134/eeja.303

118 Booth, Wayne C., *Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961)

of writing stories. It is how the author perceives themselves as being seen by the reader (Booth). This idea is linked to the narrator of the story, with a narrator being reliable, unreliable, etc. but it is not limited to that. The implied author can be seen as a keyed context that the writer takes on as they write their story, an idea further strengthened if the writer takes on an alias or penname. However, such things are not necessary for the effect. For example, most/all of us know writers such as Steven King or George R. R. Martin, but few of us know them as people. We see what we are allowed and encouraged to see in such people, an image curated initially by that person.

For context, this text is situated in a 19th to 20th century discussion of impartial 'objectivity' and partial and critical subjectivity in the act of writing literature, situated in published works in which the author tries and fails to be a distant storyteller conveying how things happen without giving any indication about how the author feels about events or passing moral judgements. The implied author stands out as representing the inevitable failure of such a gesture. The original implied author here is, from an author's standpoint, the reality that, whether intentional or not, the author will put a version of themselves into their work to be discovered by the reader.

5.*2 Contemporary implied author and implied reader*

With the historic figure of the implied author established, we can now discuss a more contemporary version of the figure. While Booth constructed the implied author as a second identity of the author, something that the author could not help but place in the text despite any attempts to be objective. The contemporary implied author, as Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni describe it, focuses much more strongly on the reader. They position the contemporary implied author as an entity constructed by the reader, rather than as a pre-existing one that can be perceived by the reader. This implied author is a constructed entity made up of all the impressions of the reader of the author from the reader's interpretations of the known information about them, be that from contexts external to the work itself or solely from the reader's impressions of the person derived from how and what the author wrote. The image of the implied author within the minds of readers has nothing to do with the actual author but rather becomes an independent entity that exists within the reader's imagination and is given form and shape through the contexts that cue the reader's imagination to move in certain ways. The implied author, then, becomes a post-human body formed of the imagination of the reader and the contexts that guide it.

This process in turn gives rise to the implied reader. The implied reader can be seen either as a parallel post-human entity that exists in the imagination of the author. This implied reader would be

the person to whom the story is written, with imaginative cues intended to guide that specific, and imagined, reader to the conclusions intended by the author. However, the implied reader can also be seen as the reader's imagined impression of the person their implied author addresses.

The implied author and implied reader can combine to enable the reader to achieve a sense of embodiment, in which they are the implied reader and the implied author wrote the story specifically for them, to represent them and give shape to their existing perspectives, beliefs, and experiences. They can also combine to reflect on divergence between the events of a story and the contexts of the reader. If a reader feels that their perspective does not align with the perspective of the implied author, as can happen when a text is read by a demographic outside the target audience or if the text is read in a different culture from the one in which it was written, then the reader can form an image of an implied reader who is distinctly different from them and therefore would feel represented and addressed by the text.

In fact, Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni show that it is often more important to discuss implied authors than it is to discuss actual authorial intent, citing Wimsatt and Beardsley for using the term 'intentional fallacy' to describe that practice.[119] That is not to say that an implied author replaces the actual author, but rather that any discussion of the actual author will not actually encapsulate that person's identity and intentions because that goes beyond the limits of human interpersonal understanding. We never can truly separate a person from our impressions of that person. Therefore, any discussion of an author will in truth be a discussion of an implied author. But because of this, it is most useful to be transparent about the constructed nature of an implied author when discussing them, neither concealing that this figure is a constructed representation of the actual person nor smothering that real person under our impressions of them.

Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni continue to explain that the implied author is constructed based on any given reader's interpretation of the text, providing a 'death of the author'-esque argument that any meaning of a text depends upon the expectations and desires of the reader, with little to no regard for how the actual author may feel about any given interpretation (Van de Mosselaer, and Gualeni)

This results in a unique power to shape individualized narratives. A text is a constructed artifact; it was made with intention. Every element of the text is there for a reason. But what the reasons are is to be determined by the reader. Broadly speaking any given reader will not care what a text means,

119 Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review*, 54.3 (1946), pp. 468–88

but rather what a text means to them. And whatever elements of the text speak to the reader have the weight of intention without that intention being limited to any given thing. Any reading is, for better and worse, a correct reading because correctness in this case is entirely subjective.

But this goes beyond interpretation of story as story. Because it is possible to have the dual effects of immersion and awareness of the constructed nature of the story, and because the constructed nature of the story gives the impression and weight of intention to all elements of the story, they argue that the reader will imagine the author that wrote the story that they read. That is to say that, in interpreting a story, we can surmise what the author is saying, regardless of whether the real author would agree that they are indeed saying it. To any given reader, a story is meant to be interpreted the way that they interpret it. The transformed text is perceived as correctly received. The reader, then, creates an 'implied author' who wrote the story that they created through transforming the story that the real author wrote.

5.3 Implied (game) designer

With these ideas established, we can now return directly to considering games. And indeed, the figures of implied author and implied reader are become far more pronounced when they are not perceived from a spectator's position but rather from an inter/intra-actor's perspective. This is of course because games are made to be touched, stretched, broken and remade, that is to say played with. The creation of an implied designer, they write, can be used to better understand player behaviour:

> …the notion of the implied (game) designer can also be useful in explaining their behaviors. In digital games, the implied designer not only guides the interpretation of the presented gameworlds, but also the ways in which players position themselves (and orient their goals) within those worlds. This means that the intentions that the player infers to be the creative force behind a gameworld contribute to determining the way they interactively traverse that world and give meaning to their own existence within it (Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni, p. 3).

For clarity, the implied designer here is understood to be perceived as one entity regardless of the numerous people that are needed to make most games. In some cases, the implied designer is perceived as the lead designer of the games studio if they are a well-known figure, such as Hidetaka Miyazaki (president of FromSoftware and the lead designer of *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls* III as well as *Bloodborne* and *Elden Ring*) or Hideo Kojima, founder of Kojima Studios and lead designer

of the *Metal Gear* games as well as the *Death Stranding* games, or any other known lead figure. More typically however as the games industry has few celebrities, the implied designer is more nebulous, taking on the identity of the studio as a whole rather than any individual person. Regardless of the face, there is a perceived universality of intention one would not realistically see in a development team numbering in the dozens or more.

5.4 The implied pure or perfect game

One other idea that is useful to consider here is when ideo-pomorphization ascribes direct agency to the game without attributing it to any idea of intention, plan, or desired outcome. To understand this idea of implied 'pure' game object, we can look to Aarseth's lecture 'Define Real, Moron! Some Remarks on Game Ontologies'.

In the same way that Booth describes the implied author as an idealized version of the author who has a morality perfectly aligned with the reader's and that Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni describe the implied player as an idealized version of the player who plays the game exactly how they're supposed to, Aarseth presents the idea of an implied game that plays the way that it is supposed to play. For clarity, to say a game 'plays' a certain way is the same as saying that a car 'drives' a certain way. It is a description of the object functioning exactly as it is intended to function, which simultaneously deprives the object of agency as it is only perceived of as acting within the range of expectation and ascribes a patronizing semblance of agency in that it is a 'good' car or game. It is well-behaved. Where this can non-patronizingly be applied to the idea of an ideo-pomorphized implied game object is in the observations of how games, thankfully, never behave.

One of the main ways that a game as played can differ from the implied game object, Aarseth describes, is glitches. Glitches are a fascinating avenue of research within game studies that sadly cannot be fully explored in this project. But to touch on it, in their work, Russell describes glitches as the means by which a game object[120] achieves genuine agency.[121] Any actor that is subjugated through hierarchical systems can be most clearly seen to have agency when it refuses to play the part that it is given. In games, this can be seen as the system 'breaking' or refusing to give the player their implied game. In society, Russel writes that LGBTQIA+ and feminist communities likewise act as glitches. In 'breaking' with assigned roles, objects and the objectified become actors (Russel).

120 To be understood through the language established in this work to be the game as it is experienced and understood through situated viewing and ideo-pomorphization rather than a strictly physical or cultural object.
121 Russell, Legacy, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020)

From the player's perspective, the implied game is a pure version of itself that does not have flaws or glitches. And the implied designer is making all of the right design decisions. We can therefore see conflict with the implied game arising from 'flaws' that are baked into the fabric of the game. Sometimes players have to reckon with design decisions they dislike in games they otherwise love.

For example, a common complaint about *Bloodborne*[122] is the healing system. Unlike its preceding game, *Dark Souls*, and much like its preceding game, *Demon's Souls*[123], *Bloodborne*'s healing primarily relies on non-renewable blood vials, which need to be continuously gathered, even farmed[124] for where necessary, lest the player run out. This is not a glitch, but a criticised decision. If one were to interpret this choice, one interpretation could be that the game places an emphasis on there being no safety to be found within the 'waking world' of Yharnam, where most of the game takes place. There are no refuges to rest or restock, and the player must make do with what they can find. However, regardless of narrative implications, it is objectively un-fun to farm for healing vials. This is especially true if a player is stuck on a boss, depletes their vials over multiple attempts and then needs to stop, leave the area altogether, and kill the same werewolves over and over for a half hour before they can get back to trying to progress the game. A commonly idealized version of *Bloodborne* replaces this 'flaw' with the replenishable healing items of the *Souls* games. One example of which we can see in the delightful *Soulsborne*[125] game, *Lies of P*, which combines the healing mechanics of *Souls* and *Bloodborne* with a replenishable healing supply that, upon depletion, can be restocked by one if a player hits enemies enough times, harkening back to the 'rally'[126] system of *Bloodborne* that works to compliment the consumable healing items.

Section 6. A set of guiding ideas derived from the implied designer

Now that we have made progress toward the particular flawed framework we are building in this chapter, let us now introduce three ideas that can give shape to how we shape our experiences with our ideo-pomorphized implied designers.

122 FromSoftware, *Bloodborne* (2015), PlayStation 4
123 FromSoftware, *Demon's Souls* (2009), PlayStation 3
124 'Farmed' here referring to the practice of killing the same enemies over and over again so as to gather experience points or specific loot. It is the epitome of un-fun gaming.

125 'Soulsborne' being a commonly used genre description and tag used to describe games that resemble both *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* in its aesthetics, themes, and mechanics.
126 'Rally' refers to mechanics that allow players or enemies to replenish lost health by striking their opponents, typically within a few seconds of taking damage.

Idea number one. Emergent gameplay moments are intended by our implied designers

As we have discussed, a designer cannot account for each and every frame a player might enter as prompted by the situations they craft. The designer(s) can attempt to guide the player to their intended solution, but such guidance must always fall short of telling the player what to do for their engagement with the game to be playful. As a result, the actual designer(s) cannot map out a perfect sequence of cause and effect for the player. But as far as the player is concerned, the implied designer, in providing the emergent moments of gameplay in response to the player's actions, can do exactly that.

As Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni highlight, if a player is aware that the space and objects with which they play are not transformed but created as the thing imagined, that is to say if the wizard staff is constructed to be a wizard staff and not a branch transformed into one, then happenstance is replaced with intention. A beautiful natural space (mountains, canyons, etc.) just happen to be beautiful whereas their digital equivalents are made specifically to be beautiful, there is an inherent intention to it. And this intention is focused specifically for the player to enjoy, interact with, and often consume. If an item can be foraged, then it is there for the player to forage. If a chest is found behind a waterfall, then that chest was placed there specifically to be found by the player. Because of this, it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish between an element of the game that is placed in the game for the player to consume and elements of the game that serve a different purpose:

> [W]henever players enter a gameworld, their virtual existence is already meaningful insofar as they perceive it as being offered to them for a reason. The gameworld presents a framework that is formed by the affordances disclosed to players, by the goals that they can accomplish, by existential threats within the gameworld, and by whatever else players can perceive as intentionally crafted by the implied designer. In line with this perspective, the gameworld itself and every object or event within it is recognized as having a special meaning because the player understands these objects and characteristics to be placed there intentionally by the implied designer (Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni, p. 9).

Idea number two: Implied Rules

With the idea of everything in a game having an intention ascribed to it, we can naturally progress to an idea of implied rules for our implied designer. Upton sheds light on the idea of implied rules

through their discussions of internal and external constraints. External constraints are understood to be the hard limits and rules of the game, the systems that determine what can and cannot happen. When we talk about systemic approaches to game design, we are talking about a complete focus on external constraints. Such approaches treat it as a given that when a player interacts with a game, they are able to determine the true, external constraints and act accordingly within them. Internal constraints, however, is an imagining of a player failing to understand, or perhaps not caring to understand, the true external constraints of the game and instead build their own understandings of how the game is to be played based upon their interpretations of emergent feedback. These understandings do not need to arise from mis-keyings to be considered as internal constraints. Whether a player's internal constraints align with the external constraints of the game is irrelevant. It is within the realm of possibility for a player to have internal constraints that match the external constraints perfectly and play exactly as they are supposed to. Most of the time, however, internal constraints will align with external constraints in some areas and diverge from the in other areas. There are also cases wherein a player forms their internal constraints around what they find to be actually possible within the game world if one deliberately breaks with an intended experience. This of course refers to the deliberate use of glitches and exploits that are not supposed to be there but can always be found if one knows where and how to look. Implied rules are, in essence, a player's interpretation of the game based upon their interpretations (their emergent feedback) of what occurs in the game, which can often be ascribed with an implied designer's intention.

Referring back to internal constraints extending beyond external constraints through glitches and exploits, even if a player makes use of manoeuvres or tricks that, clearly, are not originally intended, it could still be considered as intended by an implied designer who may know better than the real flesh-and-blood designers. This idea could be strengthened further if a designer subsequently turns a glitch or exploit into a mechanic, following the mentality of 'It's not a bug, it's a feature!', as has been known to occur in games such as *Celeste* in where the fan-discovered Demo Dash manoeuvre was made into an official mechanic by the developers.

Idea number three, return of the crux

Regardless of how a player goes about forming their implied rules as a result of emergent feedback, they will then subsequently put those implied rules to the test. If a player discovers that enemies can be baited to kill themselves or otherwise remove themselves from the player's path, the player will attempt to do so with more enemies. If a player discovers a new move, they will attempt to use that move again in the future. If a player's implied rules state that certain techniques or strategies are not

effective, they will likely not default to using them in the future, regardless of whether or not such techniques or strategies could in fact be effective in certain situations or executed slightly differently.

After forming their implied rules, players will pit those implied rules against the external constraints of the game. If, in a situation immediately following a situation that gave rise to an implied rule, that implied rule does not bump up against the external constraints of the game, that internal rule will be more cemented as a 'true' rule, again regardless of whether or not it truly aligns with the external constraints of the game. If the opposite occurs, and a trick that worked last time does not work this time, the player will encounter a crux. They will receive emergent feedback that contradicts or recontextualizes their prior emergent feedback.

In this particular arrangement of processes, we can see that a player encounters a situation, receives emergent feedback from that situation, applies what was learned from the emergent feedback to new situations and then receives further emergent feedback. It does not matter if the emergent feedback aligns with intended feedback or if implied rules align with intended rules of the systems or external constraints because in any case, the feedback is always created through the intra-action of player bodies and game bodies to create new bodies of emergent experience. As this is an intra-active model rather than an interactive model, it does not matter what order any of these processes occur in.

Through this illustration of a cycle, we can establish a model of player-driven play that places the emphasis on emergent feedback rather than intended feedback. Let us now see how games can knowingly play with the processes of creating emergent feedback.

Section 7. Emergent Feedback driven play

Now that we have thoroughly explored the idea of using the idea of emergent feedback as a means of approaching an applicable approach to intra-active play, let us examine two ways that games can be seen to make use of emergent feedback.

7.1 No tutorial, just trial and error

First, a game can forgo the tutorial, dropping players directly into the game to struggle and fail repeatedly until they learn the game systems through trial and error. We can see this practice clearly in *Don't Starve*, and *Don't Starve Together*.[127]

127 Klei Entertainment, *Don't Starve* (2013), Steam

In these survival roguelike games, the player is offered no tutorial at all. They are dropped into the wilderness with only the simple task of ‘Don’t Starve’ to guide them. Every single facet to the game, from the sanity meter to threats present to even their chosen character’s abilities can only be learned from trial, error, and multiple deaths. That is of course unless the player looks up how-to guides online, but it would be up the player to actively seek that information, it will never be provided by the game directly. Without online guides, a first-time player cannot know that they must stay in light during night cycles, or that they need to prepare for the cold and scarcity of winter and the heat of summer. They cannot know about unique events, such as the monstrous Dearclops that attacks the player’s base at the end of every winter. And this is in large part because the lack of a tutorial deprives the player to receive any feedback as it may be intended. They cannot be guided to work proactively toward certain problems because they will miss any and all cues the game might leave for them to discover. A player can never know if they are being keyed into the ‘correct’ context or not, and therefore all contexts keyed by this game can be considered mis-keyings. The only reliably understood feedback is death, and all other feedback, all other lessons a player learns must be considered as emergent feedback.

7.2 This is your fault actually

The second method by which a game can make use of emergent feedback is to confront the player with the consequences of their own actions, placing the burden of feedback upon the player and allowing the game to remain ambiguous. Through this practice, our implied designer, while brought into being to help to understand the unknowable elements of the process of situating ourselves across infinite bodies as we take part in intra-active play, reminds us that we cannot understand them. All we have are our own flawed and personal interpretations of what is going on. To understand this, we will discuss our final case study of this thesis: Deconstructeam’s *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood.*[128]

It is easy enough to visualize unique moments of gameplay as occurring in faster-paced games, such as the roguelikes discussed as well as the *Souls* games. When multiple systems intra-act with a player rapidly processing and responding to situations as quickly as they can, moments of gameplay will naturally be uniquely chaotic. However, they can absolutely also occur in slow, decision-based games such as *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood.*

——, *Don’t Starve Together* (2016), Steam

128 Deconstructeam, *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* (2023), Steam

This game in particular achieves emergent gameplay moments by confronting the player with the decisions they themselves made in the past with inadequate information. In so doing, the game intra-acts through a give and take of uncertain emergent feedback. It presents a delightful duality of a story that one could approach on a mechanical level as a series of systems, with the game being a tree of choices and outcomes but can only be interpreted through an understanding of intra-activity. This is because the only reliable feedback we receive comes from ourselves, not the system. This is in keeping with the through line of our chapter, that during intra-active play, we can understand ourselves and the roles we play, but we can only understand approximations of our co-creator and the ultimate experience that we create.

The game begins with the playable character, Fortuna, appearing to open a direct dialogue with the player. She does this in the form of a forbidden ritual, chanting as follows:

> Stranger to my soul, invade my body.
>
> Stranger to my soul, invade my mind.
>
> Grant me an eye to see beyond my torment.
>
> Take my pride, my sorrow, my chains.
>
> Turn them into power, wisdom, revenge.
>
> Stranger to my soul, invade my magic.
>
> Stranger to my soul, become my faith (Deconstructeam).

This chant is ostensibly intended to summon Ábramar, the interstellar wish-granting Behemoth. However, those words do not really make sense in that context. It appears to actually be a ritual to summon the player. The player is the stranger to her soul, and it is the player that takes all that she is and in so doing grants her the ability to move forward in the game. In sacrificing her agency to the player, she has gained new agency. In this way, the playable character and our implied player for this game are made entangled.

Now we start the ‘tutorial’, in which we learn the central gameplay mechanics: creating custom tarot cards and using them to read the fortunes of the various characters who visit us on our lonely asteroid home/prison. First, we set the terms of Fortuna’s contract with Ábramar. These terms fundamentally shape how the rest of the game will unfold. The poorly-informed and vague decisions the player makes during the introduction to the game (such as choosing for Fortuna to

want power, knowledge, or romance and choosing for her to want people to love her, fear her, or ignore her) determine what boons the player will get from Ábramar at later stages of the game and lock them out of the other boons no matter what the player does afterward.

It is common for games to give the player choices to determine the abilities of their character, but these choices can typically be reversed. For example, forgone starting weapons in role-playing games will be found later in the game. Classes can be changed, stats reset. In contrast this game charges players with determining how their future will play out, and does not allow the player to alter their choices or change the fate they chose for themselves.

We see the same practice occur in Deconstructeam's prior game: *The Red Strings Club*.[129] This game, like *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is a dialogue-decision based game about navigating interpersonal situations. However, in this game's case, it opens by offering the player the ability/responsibility of shaping the dispositions of various NPCs. The player briefly controls an emotionally intelligent robot worker who makes custom personality modifications for high profile clients. At first, you give them the modifications they ask for. But after a while, you are prompted to give them the alterations *you* think are best. These decisions are irreversible, and will shape the rest of the game in much the same way as Ábramar's contract. Beyond this, your main playable character fits within the 'wise bartender' archetype. It is your job to give people advice, but you cannot control or anticipate what that person will then do with that advice. By the end of the game, you are forced to situate yourself within and navigate the web of uninformed dialogue choices you have made and their unintended consequences.

What we can learn from these games so far in regard to the rest of this chapter is that the game is constantly confronting implied players with the real player's past decisions. The implied game is one in which a skilful implied player navigates delicate interpersonal situations through making the morally or strategically correct decisions. However, a player will often fall short of reaching the ideal implied game, not because of a glitch or mechanic they dislike, but their own prior decisions.

Returning to *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*, once the contract with Ábramar is struck, the game will continue presenting the player with these irreversible choices, the results of which will not be felt until much later. Fortuna is a fortune teller, or so she thinks. In reality, as she and the player learn around halfway through the game, Fortuna does not tell the future, she writes it. She has the ability to fill in the blanks, build new experiences where there is room for them. This included writing the past. She cannot alter memories, but she can create new memories, altering the fabric of reality to

129 Deconstructeam, *The Red Strings Club* (2018), Steam

make it so that event had always occurred. Through her readings, she tells the stories of people's lives through the eyes of her own implied author.

Through the rest of the game, she uses her power to shape the world around her by telling the fortunes of all who ask. Her conversations with and card readings of her visitors become intra-active play as through the laminations of agencies. The guest has the agency of telling their story and asking their questions, and the player, through Fortuna, has the ability to add onto their story through their readings. And from this intra-action, emergent moments will arise as no party of this intra-action can anticipate its consequences. All decisions trap the parties involved into their emergent feedback.

Conclusion

This thesis calls for a fundamental shift in how we approach the ideas of immersion and player experience with games. It works within the field of game studies, but is informed by the general attitudes of the games industry, which drives game production and the broader attitudes of what a game is, how it works, and what it can be largely independently of game studies. There is a clear schism between game studies and the game's industry, which results in ideas and approaches that have largely been discarded or built upon within academia being treated as central pillars by those who create the games we study. What this means is that as a project, this thesis has needed to build upon the new ideas of game studies, while needing to acknowledge old ideas and practices that are very much alive. Structuralism may be old news within academia, but its principles are clearly reflected and proliferated within the games industry and can be seen within the schema that are focused on how to make and sell games.

This project has been undertaken with a view toward broader work to bridge this gap. While primarily geared towards progressing game studies, it is also geared towards an ongoing effort to change the philosophies of game development culture. It calls for a shift away from attempts to create complete and pre-determined experiences and towards an approach to seeing games as incomplete objects until they are played. It is the act of playing a game that gives rise to emergent player experience, and it is the player's experience that will stay in their memory. A player's experience with a game will always be messy and disjointed. It will be interrupted by elements of their life and the varying states of the game itself, influenced by the hardware the game is being played on and the quirks of any particular piece of software. It will likewise be shaped by the quirks of the individual playing it: their personality, their background, their preferences, identities, political views, and more. None of these things can be controlled by the game's developer, and so the game any individual player experiences will be to a certain extent alien to its creators. It will grow and take on a life and identity beyond what was intended and planned for it. And likewise, a game (as ideo-pomorphized emergent entity) should strive to be a unique and memorable experience for the player. Expectations, norms, and understandings of how things can work and be understood should be playfully subverted, not algorithmically followed. A game is not simply a commercial product to be created to a set formulaic specification, but a living network of unique and un-recreatable experiences. If we are to understand games this way, we need to change our approaches to understanding how unique experiences arise.

The thesis makes a vital effort to progress this endeavour by altering our approaches to understanding first immersion and then interactivity in order to see games as fluid, intra-active experiences that resist total containment within any particular framework. Games, and media at large, should be seen as intra-active networks of actors and actants within an ever-shifting matrix wherein action and reaction, or cause and effect, cannot be separated. These networks give rise to phenomenon that can only be partially described through any one framework.

This effort is built upon Goffman's and Fine's uses of frame analysis to establish the fluidity of the mind and is bolstered through our engagement with flow theory and Bolter and Grusin's remediation of UI. It is situated alongside the work of Latour's work in actor-network theory to build a sociology of the social, an approach to gathering data on social phenomenon wherein new frameworks are built to understand the data as it emerges. This is distinct from the more commonly used 'sociology of associations' that looks for trends in phenomenon from the outset, working to fit new phenomenon into the schema of older or otherwise separate phenomenon. Latour advocates for a slow, deliberate, and patient approach to understanding a phenomenon on its own terms. And this approach is given shape here through Haraway's figure of the cyborg and Barad's use of intra-action to visualize how we can, as aptly described by the title of their book, meet the universe half-way.

In chapter one, we discussed why it is important to change our approaches in this way. The chapter worked to establish a narrative for how the rich traditions of ritual and narrative, of the liminal spaces of uncertainty in ludic activity, were colonized. Structuralism was an effort to reduce infinite complexity and variety into universal truths. And despite the fact that this is not new information within academia, it still reflected in the education and cultures surrounding the production of the art that we analyse. For example, games education is to this day focuses on 'closed systems' that focus entirely on the game as crafted object. This object has clear goals, methods, and outcomes. A closed system focuses on guiding a player to feel how they are supposed to feel. A closed system works by reducing 'noise'. And 'noise' turns out to be a very large umbrella. It includes, on the foundational level, glitches or inconsistencies that break 'immersion' or believability'. It includes methods or strategies of play that do not fit within the intended experience. And it includes alternative interpretations of a game's story: a protagonist is a hero, and a hero is entitled to kill as many people as they like and bleed a land of all resources. In this example, an interpretation of gameplay as genocidal or harmfully extractive would likewise break immersion.

If we are to see beyond this approach, we must first move away from the idea that we can understand an experience in its entirety. We cannot know exactly what any given player will do with a game, and we should not try to anticipate every possibility. Rather we should approach understanding games from what they meant to the player. When we try to make a game a certain pre-defined experience for all people, we lose the infinite potential for art to be co-created intra-active play.

At the same time, in order for play to be co-creative, there do need to be ideas and expectations to be subverted. Creativity does not exist in a vacuum, and every game that has been discussed in this thesis has shown a strong identity in and of itself, whether it is the real designer's intended identity or not. Even if a game allows maximum player freedom to do what they want, for example in sandbox games such as *Minecraft*, players will go through the same intra-active process with their personal and ideo-pomorphized version of the game. For this reason, this thesis does not argue for a 'death of the designer' but rather for a levelling of hierarchies and expansion of possibilities for what games can become through intra-active play.

There should be no hierarchy between a designer's intended experience and a player's lived experience. In part, this is because any attempt to build a specific experience will prove futile (most of the time) as play is inherently subversive. If you want a player to have a playful experience, they must be allowed to subvert perceived expectations of what things mean and how things should and could be done. If you strip a player of this freedom, you are left with what is, arguably, not truly a game, but a work of interactive cinema. And a clear reason not to be content with making interactive cinema is that it will not stand up to repeat playthroughs. Games such as *Journey* are wonderful experiences, once. But a player will not make anything more of it than it already is. A game should allow for subversion, both of what it is perceived to be on the first playthrough and of what it is perceived to be after the first playthrough. Intra-active play always grows and deepens, and a rich first playthrough should build to a richer second playthrough if a designer wants to make a game that players love and keep coming back to.

A strong understanding of ideo-pomorphization is key. Ideo-pomorphization, as introduced in the work of Latour, serves a fundamental role in shaping how we can see the process of intra-active play without colonizing and reducing that idea. It gives form and shape to the idea of holding multiple cognitive frames at once as a conversation, as was established through discussing frame analysis and keyed contexts. Ideo-pomorphization also allows us to work to understand how we can

give agency to a game as collaborator and co-creator without forcing the inhuman game into the shape of a human via anthropomorphization. It also sidesteps the hierarchy between a thing that is created and the human who created it. The game object is (comparatively) static. Play animates it and imbues it with agency. The co-creation occurs within the head of the player, so naturally (within a hierarchal schema) the player would be elevated above the game, with the game relegated to a prosthetic extension of the player rather than an equal collaborator. Through ideo-pomorphization, we can flatten this hierarchy, and instead allow room for emergent experience. Ideo-pomorphization is able to do this because it ascribes inhuman agency rather than a human agency. As the agency is that of a non-human it lends three distinct elements to the dynamic between player and game:

1. The game can do things that a human cannot do.
2. The game in turn cannot do all of the things a human can do.
3. The game cannot be fully understood: it will always be, to an extent, alien and unknowable.

Point three is especially important for the flattening of hierarchies, as the ideo-pomorphized game is acknowledged as the ‘other’ in a way that is empowering rather than disempowering or marginalizing. It cannot be dehumanized because we are not humanizing it in the first place. Instead, it is shown to have different and unique strengths and weaknesses as per points one and two.

When we allow room for the game to become inhumanly empowered in this way, as something that can do things that we cannot and cannot fit within a human system of understanding, we remove our ability to colonize it and open ourselves up to the possibilities of new experiences when we play. We become able to intra-act rather than interact. And this intra-action born of acknowledgement of the other gives rise to emergent experience: new and unique experiences that are beyond the sum of their parts. Emergent experience is the final idea of this thesis, and the goal that it builds to. Emergent experience is posthuman gaming. It is play that exists beyond structuralism, beyond colonialism and the liminal. Emergent gameplay is closed systems opened.

Importantly, this thesis does not speculate on how intra-active conversations between human and inhuman actants can lead to specific outcomes. Rather, the thesis works to establish the conversation as a process of meaning-making with infinite potential. You cannot guess what meanings a player will co-create from this process, only that the meanings will be made. And if

these meanings are made, if the player co-creates an emergent game experience through intra-action with ideo-pomorphized figures of the game, the game has succeeded. It has become meaningful to the player.

Now that we have allowed room for emergent experience, we need a method for understanding it while allowing inhuman actants to retain their ideo-pomorphized agency. We need a new means of understanding the phenomenon of play without colonizing it by reducing it to fit neatly in a framework. To this end, this thesis establishes a processual method, inspired by Janik's use of processuality, for understanding play as a conversation between the player and a number of ideo-pomorphized actants. It works via four steps:

1. Visualize a concept or an umbrella term for an intra-active element.

   To this end, it can be useful to return to Haraway's concept of the cyborg: a posthuman entity that is comprised of all of its influences and simultaneously defined by none of them and by all of them. It can help to visualize the cyborg as the central point in an old wagon wheel or spider web with multiple spokes branching off the central point and connecting to larger rings.

2. Create three, or four (or really however many) cyborg intra-actors you want under the umbrella of whatever intra-active process you are studying.

3. Then focus on how these grouped bodies intra-act. How do they combine in various different ways to create emergent phenomenon?

4. Finally, delve into some of these intra-active cyborg bodies (it is unlikely that all of them could be fully unpacked in any one research project) to articulate some of its myriad sub-intra-active bodies and show how they combine in various ways in the same manner as step three.

This process is useful for advancing our understandings of emergent experience without colonizing the concept because it acts as a guid the formation of frameworks where they are necessary and helpful while limiting their potential for abuse of the concept. To that end, there are two important things to keep in mind. First, this is a process by which we can create a temporary framework to understand emergent experience. Second, in reference to Latour's sociology of the social, the resultant framework should only be applied to the phenomenon it was created for. When a new phenomenon arises, the processual method should be employed again to create a new framework.

To conclude, videogames as digital intra-active media offer us the opportunity to move away from the narratives, traditions, and practices of colonizing thought. Play breaks down our understandings of what is possible and how the world works. Play allows for new experiences, new worlds and new ways of understanding them to emerge. Co-creative play allows our experiences to transcend individual limitations and tell stories that could never have been told on our own, or in any set of circumstances beyond the here and now with all of its infinite and unique complexity. In understanding emergent player experience, we are given the unique opportunity to work towards changing the story of how stories can work, both in games and art in general. And if we can change the story, replace formula with ever-shifting process, we can grow and build new creative futures beyond the scope of what we can understand now.

An Entangled Index of core ideas and terms for easy reference

Introduction

In this final section, we will present a very entangled accounting of the core terms and ideas as that have been introduced and discussed and how our uses of them evolved over the course of the thesis. By virtue of being entangled, ideas will be referenced in the support of other ideas before they themselves are introduced. This section is intended to function as a resource that enables readers to quickly access the specific terms and ideas used to incorporate them into their own projects. To that end, it is not truly presented to be read in order, but rather through a process of cross-referencing.

The liminoid space

Since it was introduced, the liminoid space has been a consistent focus of the entirety of the thesis. It has served as a core foundational concept. Its use speaks to the goals of this project to break with established notions of how we approach art through structural, structuralist, and systemic frameworks as well effecting a call for new theories to be introduced to understand it and work to apply it.

It is introduced by Turner in ‘Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual’ as a means of building upon the liminal space. In my application of this theoretical and subjective depiction of experience, it does not reject the use of liminal states outright so much as it symbolizes the natural conclusion of the process of taking a logical idea to its organically illogical ends. It represents what happens when we follow the trail of logical process beyond what is currently understood and into uncertain possibilities. Turner discusses liminoid is a space for playful, quirky, and subversive practices, more generally linked to the margins of social groups and therefore representative of what can be seen, thought, and experienced rather than what generally is. Liminoidality exists then in the space of rejecting common understandings as arbitrary and working to form new understandings.

The liminoid space is built upon the liminal space, which we can understand through the discussion of ritual practices. In ritual, the liminal has been described by van Genep as the period of in-betweenness within the temporally and physically demarcated ritual space in which individuals suspend, or invert, their perceptions of self and their place within the community while the community as a whole can be understood to be reassessing its approaches to maintaining its wellbeing. At the end of this original approach to liminal ritual, all involved parties end the period

of uncertainty and enter into a new period of new certainty. For clarity, such rituals can certainly be enjoyable and treated as a space in which to cut loose and have fun, but such activity is, in this piece, considered as playful activity enabled by inversions of social norms, not as play which subverts social norms.

In comparison, we have the more narratological approach to the liminal, which emerged later in the century. While a much broader and more comprehensive research project could be conducted on the evolution of narratological liminality, this thesis necessarily limits the scope to having its origins in the work of Campbell who bases their work off the structuralist approach to sociology attributed to Levi-Strauss. Unlike the ritual practice of liminality which can be considered as rejuvenating, returning to a state of certainty in a new perception of the self and/or community as a process of reinvention we can see the narratological approach to the liminal as renewing, returning to an original and pure state or golden age.

If we want to look past the narratological approach to the liminal, we can turn to the work of Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and metaphors*) who built off of Genep's use of the liminal in ritual and applied it to modern day leisure practices that had largely replaced ritual as the space and setting in which social roles are suspended. This in turn takes us to Turner's concept of the liminoid, which discusses play within the liminoid as distinct from ritual within the liminal through the inversion/subversion distinction we have discussed (Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual').

If we compare the liminoid to the liminal on a structural level, we can see a number of other core distinctions to draw. First, there is the approach to being in an in-between state. Within a liminal space, there is an inherent expectation and understanding that the person within the space will leave the space. The liminal is inherently temporary. It is the uncertain and nebulous middle ground that can be articulated easily through the metaphor of a physical journey. If you leave home to drive to your university, the liminal space is the road and the interior of your car. And when you arrive, the liminal space has been resolved. This metaphor works well for describing the liminal ritual, whereas to describe the liminal story, it might be more apt to say you leave home, go to work, and then return home. In this case, work is the liminal space and home is the starting and ending point. The liminoid, however, is not inherently tied to being in-between two certain states. One might start in a state of certainty (or, as has often been the case in works of postmodern literature, one might start within the illusion of certainty that soon dissipates), but upon leaving that state of certainty, they can never return to it. The liminoid space is one of permanent impermanence and permanent

uncertainty. It can also be viewed as being forever between a starting point and an end point, but with the end point permanently out of reach.

The next core distinction to draw is a state of constant change. As one never reaches the conclusion of a liminoid space, they never stop changing, learning, and growing. This notion of the liminoid space can allow for it to be viewed as a much larger space that contains within in several, perhaps infinite liminal states. It is not as if a person goes into a liminal state, experiences a change, and then never enters another liminal state again. For as long as a person is alive, they are (and should be!) changing, growing, and learning.

Within the specific contexts of play, we have used the liminoid space as a means of positioning play as the exploration of infinite possibilities. Subversion is a practice that never ends as future subversive practices will naturally begin to subvert the prior subversions, and then start to subvert *those* subversions, and continue forever. And in so doing, new ways of thinking, acting, seeing, and being will be discovered. In this thesis, we explored this idea through Barad's core term of intra-action which is used to begin to visualize play as a co-creative process of creating new cognitive frames laminating them, and situating oneself within them, and navigating through them during the process of play.

Frame Analysis

To unpack frame analysis, we can see the progression of how this body of theory was grown and developed along a number of different conceptual arguments and visualization practices. Our use of it has resulted in two further ideas that each follow their own paths of analysis and development.

First idea: we hold multiple cognitive frames at any one time.

These cognitive frames are understood to ultimately be their own processual groupings of shifting and changing contexts. These groupings of shifting contexts are here presented under the goal of simplifying the ever-shifting mass of contexts into single bodies. A cognitive frame is one headspace, or one perspective, one keyed context. It represents a temporary demarcation of cognitive space within which statements and actions are understood as having particular meanings and implications. We can here see that the notion of the term is necessarily contradictory. It is a tool used in the effort of limiting infinite possibilities to singular possibilities. At the same time, it is itself a processual grouping of concepts and therefore contains multitudes.

One way that we can address this dualistic nature of the notion of cognitive frames is to view the person or participant in the activity or interaction as holding multiple cognitive frames in their mind at once at any given time.

If we apply this idea to the practice and process of play, we can see that the visualization of participants as having multiple coexisting cognitive frames aids greatly in approaching the notion of emergent experience. To illustrate this, we will discuss how this occurs across multiple types of play, distinguished by the mode of play and involvement of other players.

First, let us discuss this idea within tabletop play.[130] In the setting of a tabletop game, each player can be understood to have multiple co-existing cognitive frames. There would be the frame of being their regular self within the guiding context of spending time with their friends. There would be the frame of the character that they are roleplaying as during the play. This frame would be further contextualized, or laminated, by their personal understandings of the characters that the other players are using and roleplaying as. There would be further laminations in the form of understood goals. The player would have goals for what they want their character to do in the particular session as well as any potential long-term goals for their character such as a particular character arc across the campaign (that is if this is within a ‘campaign’ setting and not a one-shot setting), which will in turn be laminated by the player’s frames for how they understand their co-players’ short-term and long-term goals for their characters. Then there are all of the cognitive frames that may be associated with the game master and their campaign. The player would have the dual-conscious process, understood as co-existing cognitive frames, as the campaign as the game master presents it as something to experience in moment-to-moment gameplay and something to reflect upon as a constructed story that is itself being constantly modified and laminated due to the improvisational nature of tabletop play. And all of these frames would be co-existing within the minds of each individual player, taking on different forms and perspectives for each of them.

Second, we can consider ‘couch co-op’ understood as both playing a video game cooperatively in person (on a couch in the living room) and one playing a video game while another person spectates. In such instances, there are the frames of interacting with the game and exploring its possibilities as would be the case in solo play coexisting with more social cognitive frames. You are playing and hanging out with friends or family. This state of play would involve cognitive frames of direct socialization outside of play, as the involved parties would be talking while play

130 We are here discussing a particular generalized understanding of a tabletop gaming session, which can comprise any number of players, but generally occurs in groups between three and six players with one additional player playing the role of game master.

simultaneously occurs. The topics of discussion would naturally include what is occurring in the game but not be limited to that. It would include discussions of what each person thinks about the game, itself a process that includes multitudes of cognitive frames, as well as general discussion that could have nothing to do with the game being played at all. It is worth highlighting this as one cannot hold a very involved conversation while watching a film. Those two cognitive frames would struggle to co-exist. However, during social play or couch co-op, they can and do occur and co-exist naturally.

Third, we can consider online multiplayer play in the guiding contextual setting of an MMORPG. In this setting, we can visualize the players having the initial cognitive frames associated with moving through the game sequentially, fulfilling missions/quests etc. On top of that frame, the player would have the added frame of continuously gaining experience points, levels, and new equipment. However, these two frames must also coexist with the inherently social elements of the game. You are not simply moving through a game world, but moving through a world populated by other players, who will all have different levels (of character progression and power) and different levels of experience playing the game. These players will in turn exhibit behaviours that have nothing at all to do with the contexts of the game, such as trading collectibles, customizing outfits, and being silly, kind, mean, etc. to each other. On top of these shifting social dynamics are those of party dynamics wherein a player will have dramatically different experiences within the shared experience of a dungeon or boss-battle depending on the roles of their class. A healer will naturally hold a different frame, or set of frames, from a tank or damage-per-second character.

With all of these numerous co-existing cognitive frames established and discussed, we come naturally to our final guiding concept regarding the use of frame analysis, which is intra-action. Intra-action is the posthumanist conception of entangled agencies proposed by Barad. It takes the established notion of play as comprising innumerable co-existing cognitive frames, which can be most easily seen and understood when we discuss multiplayer play as we have done above, and help us to see how they act upon each other to create emergent experiences.

Intra-action is the process wherein one entangled body acts upon another entangled body, which in turn acts upon the first body. This should not be considered in the same manner as one body acting and another reacting, as within intra-active play there is a decoupling between action and reaction quickly resulting in it becoming unclear and even unhelpful to consider which is which.

This occurs because the bodies involved in intra-activity are entangled, they cannot be considered as autonomous enough to leave the intra-active body and are only considered as autonomous to the extent that it is useful to do so. Intra-action gives way to a greater emergent body, which is comprised of all of its comprising elements and becoming whole greater than their sum. It is the eternally shifting nexus of co-existing cognitive frames and the experience(s) that emerge from their intermingling.

Second idea: keys and keyed contexts

Keys are first introduced as the means by which one can move from one rigid state of mind into another rigid state of mind, an idea we can understand through moving between a primary space and a secondary space as they are described by Tolkien (*Fairy-Stories*) or moving into and out of the magic circle as described by Salen and Zimmerman. This liminal and structuralist reading of keys can be described through a clear physical metaphor: the key that unlocks a door and lock the door behind you, or as Upton describes it, the threshold or doorway you walk through to enter another room. However, keys and keyings as a concept within liminal frameworks can be approached through the established idea that the liminoid space is built upon the liminal space. Theories that work within liminal frameworks will naturally take on elements of the liminoid space if we continue to examine them towards their logical ends, and keys are no exception.

The analysis of the concept of keys and keyings has led to three distinct terms that each move our understanding of keys to the liminoid. The first is one that Goffman themself discusses: laminations.

Laminations

Laminations can be regarded as typed of keys that do not transition a person from one distinct cognitive frame into another cognitive frame. Rather, they work to modify the cognitive frame(s) that the person currently holds. Laminations are, as the name implies, an additional layer that changes the state of the current cognitive frame, making it denser and more complicated in the face of a new context arising within the current context rather than generating an altogether new frame.

Goffman is noted to express concern regarding the liminoid potential of laminations, claiming that it can cause a participant in an activity, or a spectator of a performance to become confused and lose track of just what is supposed to be occurring here. Rather than skying away from this potential as they advocated for, this thesis sought to lean into it to discover what can be learned from traversing

such confusion or ungrounding. The result of this has been discussed through intra-action in the work of Barad and the cyborg and situated viewing in the work of Haraway. In the post-human intra-active space, we have discussed the notion of cognitive frames reaching a logical end point where there are infinite shifting and changing frames to be found within the practice of playful co-creative entangled actions. The reason that these infinite contexts are constantly changing and shifting is because they are constantly being laminated.

Infra-languages

The second idea we are discussing under the umbrella of keys and keyings is infra-languages. Infra-languages, as they are discussed by Latour function as keys that are totally ungrounded from any context beyond what the infra-language communicates. Where this differs from the idea of keys that Goffman introduces is that keys are a transformed context that effects further transformed contexts. In theory, this language would be removed from such transformed terms as ‘magic circle’ or ‘flow state’ that could have different meanings in different contexts. Because infra-languages are distinct in this way, they would only be understandable to those who belong to the particular social group such as a particular fan group of a cult-classic game/film franchise. Anyone outside of such an in-group would then have no means of understanding it.

Latour’s idea of infra-languages represents an approach to understanding the liminoid that is distinct from the approach we have used throughout the thesis. We have typically approached the liminoid from the standpoint of starting within a perception of stability and certainty and then entering into the permanently uncertain. Infra-languages, however, as an extension of Latour’s goals for their sociology of the social, is deprived both of a certain end and a certain beginning. It begins, exists, and ‘ends’ in the uncertain, a state of being and becoming uncoupled from the need to have an origin. This also has the implication of taking liminoid play further than it has been taken in this thesis. If play has no distinct origin, it is also no longer a subversive practice as it is removed from any grounding context that it can subvert. This is a fascinating idea that cannot be done full justice within this work, and I can only hope that future research addresses it.

Mis-keyings

The third offshoot term of keys and keyings that we have discussed is my coined term ‘mis-keyings’. The idea behind this term is that it functions in a way opposite to that of general keys and particularly infra-languages. While these terms generally focus on how a person would respond to an introduced keying context *correctly*, this thesis sought to explore the implications of someone

responding to a keyed context *incorrectly.* This idea was discussed in the context of a player responding to the given feedback of a game system in a way that is counter to how someone who is within the intended audience may respond. In such a case, we see the beginnings of the ideas discussed under ‘emergent gameplay’ and ‘emergent feedback’ as will be elaborated on below.

Situated viewing

Haraway provides the idea of situated viewing wherein the person within a liminoid space is able to visualize themselves as a hub of constantly shifting intra-active bodies which we can here understand through the lens of ever-shifting cognitive frames (Haraway).

To exist in this space, embodying their figure of the cyborg, one works to situate oneself among and between the ever-shifting frames rather than trying to focus on one perception of self and one perception of the world around them. From this we can understand the idea of what we are to achieve as we exist in a liminoid space, and Janik’s use of processuality provides the means by which we can begin doing so. To situate ourselves among our shifting frames, we group them into a collection of intra-acting bodies that are each an umbrella for infinite shifting frames and laminations, as the fourth chapter sought to achieve.

Play is Entangled: Situated Flow

We have talked a fair amount about the idea that if one were to take theories that are grounded in a liminal understanding of how we interact with media such as immersion, secondary belief, keyings, and so on and take them to their ‘logical ends’ we will arrive naturally at an entangled intra-active liminoid state. Chapter three can be seen as illustrating that process through engaging with flow theory. Flow theory is an inherently liminal approach to establishing a process of achieving self-actualization through competition with and dominance over external forces. It can be seen to have clear connections to the larger movement away from Marxist or collectivist beliefs and toward a celebration of individualism in the post-World War II period and thus could be charged with being a biased ‘discovery’ of what the researcher wanted to see.

Flow theory as it is initially understood is a theory utterly devoid of entanglements. It is the pursuit of ‘optimal performance’ a state which, to put within the established language of this thesis, can be said to be a state of having only one cognitive frame present, with all distractions or unnecessary thoughts, opinions, or elements of personality purged for a short time.

However, when we begin to apply flow theory to games that make clear use of it, we can see how this approach to a singularity of self bleeds into a multiplicity of self through the need for pacing. High-intensity games, which highlight a subset of flow called high flow require periods of down time in which play continues. During such play, the heightened state of high flow becomes more akin to the low-intensity state of low-flow. Vise versa, games that are built to encourage a state of low flow have been shown to enter into periods of intense high flow. The two states of flow are not singular and distinct, they are entangled with one another, and you cannot have a video game that only makes use of one.

To understand this, we discussed the notion of remediation in UI, as it was described by Bolter and Grusin. Through this discussion we arrived at the idea of a state of remediation in which media is perceived to be simultaneously striving for immediacy, in which the user interface is invisible and hypermediacy, where the user interface is the focus of attention. Through this understanding, we have applied the same idea to high flow and low flow, arriving at ‘situated flow’ to draw parallels between this practice and the practice of situated viewing within the post-human space of infinite cognitive frames. Situated flow is the form of flow that arises from studying the originally liminal and dualistic theory of flow theory, it is inherently liminoid, existing through the co-creative and intra-active processes that may appear to oppose one another on the surface but actually co-exist and are co-dependent to create new experiences for the player.

Situating the self by ideo-pomorphizing our post-human partner(s) in play

Ideo-pomorphized game figures

Within the later stages of the thesis, we introduced the idea of ideo-pomorphization, which was introduced by Latour as a means of building their sociology of the social. It stands to contrast with the common notion of anthropomorphization insofar as anthropomorphization ascribes human-like traits, features, motivations, and capacities to act upon non-human entities. Ideo-pomorphization is the concept of likewise ascribing traits, features, and capacities to act upon non-human entities while still regarding them as non-human. We are still ascribing traits onto something external, but those traits are not human-like in the same way as anthropomorphization. In this thesis, we practiced ideo-pomorphization, with mixed success perhaps, to regard the figure of the external bodies of play that we intra-act with. Grouped processually, we arrive at the three bodies of:

1) Implied Designer

2) Implied Player

3) Implied game object.

Implied designer

The implied designer is a figure that is not strictly ideo-pomorphic not quite anthropomorphic either. It is proposed by Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni to represent a contemporary take on the older figure of the implied author, which has at times represented the author's persona that they build through the act of writing (Booth) and at others represented the parasocial figure that the reader forms through the act of reading and interpreting a work (Mosselaer and Gualeni). It represents a stand in all of the human effort that went into creating the artificial space within which the player co-creates emergent experiences. The primary idea for readers to take away from the implied designer is the notion that, unlike the real game designers, the implied game designer can be seen to have intentionally created all the spaces with which the player interacts and to have planned for all emergent gameplay moments that a particular player will experience. From this idea of intentionality ascribed to everything we see, we become able to play in a conversational manner, acting in accordance to or in defiance of the implied designer.

Implied player

Then we have the implied player, a figure extrapolated from the implied designer to be the ideal player that the implied designer designed the emergent gameplay moments for. If a player acts in defiance of how they are expected to play, then the player would do so with a mind to acting in contrast to the implied player who always plays as they are intended to play.

Implied game

Finally, we have the implied game object. This idea is drawn from Aarseth to represent the idea of a perfect, intended game that does not include elements that clearly cannot be attributed to an implied game designer such as glitches, system failures, or anything else that cannot be ascribed intention and are instead labelled as unintended disruption. Without being so game-altering a notion as a glitch, the implied game object would not include any strategies that make use of the game environment in a clearly unintended way, such as finding a particular spot to climb onto that enemies cannot reach or finding a tiny nook in the environment that shelters the player from large area-of-effect (AOE) attacks. An implied player, then, would never experience glitches, and certainly never use such exploits, because as far as the implied player is concerned, they are not

there. The implied player is notably distinct from the real player as they always act correctly within the implied game object whereas a real player can act incorrectly (as understood through and informed by their implied designer and emergent feedback) and will play a non-implied game.

Emergent Experience:

The most important concept discussed throughout the thesis is the idea of emergent experience. Emergent experience is naturally a more open-ended and nebulous concept. It can be seen as the focus of a great many approaches to creating and understanding art. Although it is a different term, it has tie-ins with the terms ‘meaningful games’ or ‘meaningful experiences’ as they are discussed in foundational sources such as *Rules of Play*. Likewise, emergent experience can be linked to such theories as our original, liminal reading of flow theory in that unique experiences may emerge as one is experiencing flow, as flow would be considered a unique state of mind that is distinct from our regular, everyday experiences of self and the world. Within this thesis, emergent experience is regarded as the experiences that emerge from the process of intra-action. It emerges from the coming together of infinite and infinitely shifting and laminating bodies to create unique moments of gameplay that may have unique interpretations and unique long-term implications regarding how a player can regard a game or the state of play in general. To understand how we can go about understanding emergent experience, we employed the ‘processual method’ of grouping intra-acting bodies, which each themselves contain multitudes of sub-bodies. From this application of the process, we can see three distinct intra-acting bodies:

1) Emergent gameplay

2) Emergent feedback

3) Emergent narrative

Within this particular organizational model, we can see the three varieties of emergent experience positioned according to the order in which they may occur, with an awareness that this is only a surface-level distinction and that, as intra-active bodies, they occur in any order during actual play.

Emergent gameplay

Emergent gameplay is the moment-to-moment gameplay with an emphasis on the encounter with specific situations. Within each specific situation, a player rapidly goes through the processes of appraisal, and plan making, attempting to execute the plan, and then responding to the expected and

unexpected outcomes of applying that particular plan to that particular situation. This approach assumes that the player does not know exactly what to expect in the given situation, or do not think that they know what to expect. If there is a more firmly attached expectation in place, it would be more useful to use Upton's model of anticipation play and execution play (a duality that is likewise viewable as entangled through the same method of entangling high flow and low flow to arrive at situated flow). In either case, a player encounters a situation and acts in manner informed by their current understandings of how the game works and how they seek to engage with it. Their actions lead them to a result. This result can be viewed as the game reacting to the player's actions in some way, although it can also be seen simply as the game acting upon the player as it 'chooses' to and the player acting upon the game as they choose to. Who is acting and who is reacting quickly becomes pointless to consider. What is relevant then is the understanding of the two bodies of player and game intra-actively acting upon each other to create a unique moment of gameplay that likely could not be re-created in exactly the same way.

Emergent feedback

When a unique emergent gameplay moment arises, the player is then understood to receive emergent feedback. Emergent feedback should not be considered in the same way as regular game feedback. Instead, it should be considered how the results of player actions and game actions within emergent gameplay are interpreted by the player. It ultimately does not matter if the feedback a player receives from play is received the way that a designer may intend, as the player would have little ability to ever know how a designer would intend feedback to be received. Instead, a player will infer/construct what the implied designer intended the feedback to be and then weigh that emergent feedback against their own playstyle or preferences. Emergent feedback is strongly linked to the established term of mis-keyings, as mis-keyings are a particular type of emergent feedback. With that established, this thesis does not argue that emergent feedback will always be counter to any feedback that is intended by the game designers, but simply that it does not have to align and that designers should always account for the possibilities for players to display unpredictable behaviour in response to the signals they receive from the game.

Emergent narratives

Emergent narratives are described as the macro-impressions of the game as a whole as informed by collections of emergent gameplay moments and instances of emergent feedback. It can be described as the game's story, particularly if the narrative of the game is left somewhat opaque and open to

player interpretation, as is often the case in soulsborne games and metroidvanias. A player would take their personal experiences and use them as a guide to fill in the blank spaces left by the story elements explicitly presented to them. As an additional note to the discussion of emergent narrative within the body of the thesis, emergent narrative can also be seen as emergent character narrative. If a character is a largely blank slate, then of course the player will form an opinion of this person's personality based on the experiences they have with the character. Conversely, many action games, such as the *Uncharted* or *Tomb Raider* franchises have character depictions within cutscenes that diverge from the character's behaviour outside of cutscenes (i.e. the all-to-common critique of AAA game protagonists being non-violent in a cutscene shortly after killing untold numbers of people during gameplay). When such dissonances occur, the emergent narrative becomes one of hypocrisy or otherwise one in which the player forms a different opinion of the central character than the one the implied designer actively encourages them to form. Regardless of what shape of the overall impression, emergent narrative is an ultimately unpredictable outcome of play. It is the result of intra-active play and will continue to shape further intra-active play as it is the emergent narratives of past games that inform how a player will approach games in the future, wrapping back around to influence future emergent gameplay moments.

With all of these terms as well as the paths they have travelled throughout this thesis reiterated, both for the purposes of summary and for ease of access to the terms by the reader, we arrive at a 'method', or a means of approaching the formations of frameworks to fit the needs of future projects. It is informed by the principles and goals expressed by Latour in pursuit/creation of their sociology of the social as informed by their discussion of actor network theory.

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