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# Liminality, Embodiment, and Desire

## “Vulnerable you” and “Vulnerable I”

### ABSTRACT

In this paper we revisit liminality as a threshold state and discuss the embodiment/immersion issue with relation to transitional objects in order to demonstrate opportunities in interactive digital narratives and video games for a kind of functional liminality that scaffolds (dramatic) narrative identity. We explore this functional liminality and its potential through close reading of two recent games: Hideo Kojima’s (2019) *Death Stranding* and Playmestudio’s (2020) *The Signifier*. We discuss the importance of embodiment in relation to digital/dramatic agents, with emphasis on the vulnerability that can be achieved between player and player character when the player’s sense of emplacement and desire mirrors that of her on-screen representation. We discuss methods for increasing player/player character co-desire, including the use of embodiment and disembodiment to generate vulnerability and therefore empathy for and a sense of closeness with the character that the player is controlling. The paper includes significant spoilers for both *Death Stranding* and *The Signifier*.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how the intertwining of player/player character desire can lead to a stronger sense of immersion and scaffold dramatic agency, Murray’s (2005, p. 85) description for “the cueing of the interactor’s intentions, expectations, and actions so that they mesh with the story events generated by the system”, and the way that liminality can act as a dynamic engine to maintain this tension. It especially examines the way that player characters are embodied – or disembodied – within their own game world spaces, and the effect this has on the player’s sense of transplanted identity. The idea of desire is used to classify an active player, one who meshes her own desires with those expressed by the character the player is controlling, essentially subverting whatever goals the player herself may have had. Liminality is explored as the vulnerable I-but-we state experienced by players who are fully immersed in the game world via

sympathetic resonance with the player character, and how desires or goals shared by the player and her on-screen representation can cultivate this resonance. The paper ends by calling for a return to the use of embodiment as a narrative and character-oriented concept, rather than purely as a gameplay-centric term.

Video game designers have tried many methods to increase both embodiment and immersion in order to provide fragile but narratively powerful experiences of liminality. The search for ways to increase embodiment gave rise to the DualShock (1997) “rumble” that’s now a mainstay in modern console gaming, while ‘immersion’ as a concept is often cited as the reason for the recent shift toward minimal, diegetic User Interfaces (UI) which mimic real life (but with helpful tooltips!) (Murray, 2005). Immersion and deep engagement with an interactive narrative in a video game is seen as a psychological condition akin to the optimum experience of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), predicated on a confluence of action and activity, of being in the zone (or story). However, we distinguish between this flow state and dramatic agency (Murray, 2005; 2017) as, while not mutually exclusive, flow is a psychological state, while being able to interact with all the story components brings in narrative processes and aspects of mimesis (Ricoeur, 1984) and narrative identity, which is constructed from an individual’s experience in the world.

The discussion opens with a review of some key concepts that support embodiment and immersion as states generated through liminality. We support this position through two case studies and a close reading (playing) of each. *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) is an action game set in an open world where the player controls Sam Bridges, a courier who must deliver cargo to isolated cities and small communities. The game is a ‘stranded’ multiplayer game, where players are in the same world but can’t encounter each other. They can, however, leave traces and helpful items for other players to use as they attempt to make deliveries to different communities. The second case study explores *The Signifier* (Playmestudio, 2020), a surreal science fiction adventure game. The player is Frederick Russell, a researcher who is coerced into using his AI and neurological scanning equipment that rebuilds human memories to investigate the memories of a murder victim.

*Death Stranding* takes haptic feedback in the service of narrative embodiment a step further than other games of its generation, while *The Signifier* integrates the ideal of the minimal interface into the core of its ruminations on identity and reality. Both games directly explore the liminality of the player-as-dual-entity – the agent who acts and is enacted upon, both as a character within the game world and the real woman controlling that character – in ways that explore the tension inherent to entering and inhabiting this liminal place/state. Both games also engage in important moments of meaning-making and meaning-breaking, where the compact between the player and her in-game character is broken in service of creating a new, stronger bond.

## 1.2 LIMINALITY, IMMERSION AND (NARRATIVE) EMBODIMENT

Liminality describes a threshold, a boundary state. The concept is most usually associated with the work of anthropologist Victor Turner in his work on communities and rituals and refers to that which is:

“... neither here nor there; [] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p.95).

Liminality, in this sense, is subversive. It offers a portal that breaches defined boundaries, allowing that which is and isn't, and that which has the potential of becoming, to co-exist. As an in-between state, liminality is uncomfortable, neither one thing nor another. It is also inherently fragile as, should any liminal state become robust, it ceases to be liminal (Star, 1991). While it might be disruptive and threatening, liminality is also opportunity. Turkle's reflection (2022) on Turner's work suggests that it is attention to the specific moments of liminality and criss-crossing of thresholds that allows one to see new visions and potentials as they are unveiled. In designed, interactive, narrative environments where the goal is experiential, liminality finds echoes in discussions about immersion. For example, Murray's (2005) discussion on narrative and dramatic agency in virtual storytelling stipulates clear boundaries between the real world and the fictional one must exist for the illusion to be comforting instead of alarming, and suggests that transitional (threshold) objects help the interactor move between the two worlds. Transitional objects support and enhance the behaviours required to successfully and meaningfully interact with the game world, turning enactment into embodiment by transporting the player across the threshold of the game/world divide, and into a space where ritualised motions create new forms of meaning.

The question of immersion in digital games is thus closely related to embodiment. Embodiment can be described as the disappearance of the mediating technology, the experience of the represented world as a reality (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 1999) – a sense of “being there” or “presence” (Slater & Wilbur, 1997, p.3). The player acts effortlessly, though not without effort, to confront the challenges of the game world in perfect synchronicity with her avatar. Embodiment can be understood as place-making or sense of being in place, as Brenda Laurel (1994) says of her early explorations of VR experiences:

“One comes to know a place with all one's senses and *by virtue of the actions that one performs there*, from an embodied and situated point of view” (p. 118, emphasis added).

Immersion does not require embodiment; embodiment does not ensure immersion. A player can be keenly aware of her own body and the user interface while still being fully immersed in the story she's generating through play. She

can also be fully embodied within the game world – in the sense of moving in effortless unison with the player character, both understanding and immediately responding to the environment's effect on her and her effect on the environment – while retaining a sense of critical or reflective distance from the events surrounding her other self. However, when embodiment and immersion co-exist, when a flow state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) is achieved, the player experiences a transcendental period of perfect 'emplotment' (Ricoeur, 1984), a meaningful sequence of actions in a place which exists only for her – a liminal space where she and the player character are one, and she is simultaneously aware of and existing in both the game world and the real world in equally 'real' measure, within Turner's (1969) state of betwixt and between.

The concept of emplotment is the act of continually constructing one's identity by establishing causal or otherwise meaningful connections between present and past events. It is the way we make sense of the perpetual liminal moment of 'now' and situate ourselves in time, which forms what Ricoeur (1991) calls narrative identity, a sense of self that is both constant and constantly changing. The memories and identity we form are entangled with our situated contexts, inextricably and dynamically bound to place, constrained by the fact that place must exist before memory and meaning (Casey, 1993). Thus, we arrive at 'emplacement', or what we can call narrative meaning-making as an aspect of place, a phenomenon apparent in a number of open world games where the player's experience is connected to in-game places, the same way we might be reminded of events that once occurred in real world places when revisiting them. Emplacement occurs when a person constructs a sense of identity tied to points in space, while the person making those memories is also actively constructing their conception of that place at the same time (Tuan, 1977).

The dynamic connection between narrative identity, its emplotting, and embodiment is discussed by Mackenzie (2014, p. 162) who observes "our lived bodily experience is always already mediated via narrative self-interpretation". Mackenzie, writing of the potential fragility and vulnerability of a dependence on this nexus (2009), reflects on the powerful way that narrative structures our identities in time and space. However, because narrative identity is dynamically embodied, ever-changing as we ourselves continue changing, it is vulnerable to its own liminal and threshold experiences, for example when one is sundered and dis-embodied from the meshworks of Ricoeur's on-going and emplaced narrations (D'Alessandris, 2019). *The Signifier* (2020) was selected precisely because it closely examines emplotment, emplacement, and the boundaries between life/death, objective/subjective, and living/dying by providing interstitial identities that transgress those usually binary states. The fragility of the player's liminal state is mirrored in the fact that, due to their very nature, interstitial identities remain ever vulnerable to any outside influence which could topple them irreversibly into one category or the other, which the physicist Wheeler

(Wheeler and Ford, 1998, p. 337) calls “an irreversible act in which uncertainty collapses to certainty”.

From this description, we can see that the way that the word ‘embodiment’ has come to mean gesture-based interactions and a very specific form of computer-mediated interaction that focusses on dissolving the boundary between user and content by mapping control schemes to natural movement is actually attempting to *avoid* liminality, rather than encourage it. The use of embodiment to describe software adapting to pre-existing human gestures side-steps the mirroring capacity of enactment as a powerful tool in establishing a sense not of the body residing within itself, but of voluntarily acceding to the limitations placed upon a digital – or, in Laurel’s terms, dramatic – agent (2003, p. 572). In both cases, the intent is to make the interface disappear, to make control effortless and instinctive, but the closeness a player feels when fully engaged with the character she’s controlling is more akin to sympathetic resonance than a sense of “I am”. Thus embodiment, as a narrative term, aims for integration into a world crafted with “encyclopedic detail” (Murray, 2005, p. 86) that achieves the impression of being a tangible, functional reality through which the player – via her character – navigates. This is not the prosaic agency of a user able to select options and make choices, but the dramatic agency of an embodied interactor performing within a storied environment.

Narrative embodiment is thus the sense of “being-there-ness” (Juel Larsen & Kampmann Walther, 2020, p. 620), grounded by Murray’s exhortation to “root the events of the virtual world in physicality of the interactor through expressive gestures, spatialised sound and images, and haptic feedback” (2005, p. 86). These factors generate agency and belonging that surpass the basic elements of player, game, and controller by paradoxically making the player keenly aware of the differences between the worlds in which she is simultaneously operating (Murray, 1997, p. 100). It is a process that, to paraphrase Debaise, involves the transposition of being-ness into “I am there, I am here again” as a self-confirming, self-affirming both/and declaration of existence (2017, p. 35). As the following case studies show, this liminality, generated betwixt and between the player and her in-game character, is powerful but also vulnerable, due to its dynamic fragility.

## 1.2 CASE STUDIES

The dynamic and active threshold traversals created by the interplays between embodiment and immersion, driven by liminality, provide a useful framework for interrogation of experience within interactive digital narratives. Two case studies are presented here, together with a close reading of each. Close reading is a hermeneutic method where the interactor interprets and reflects on parts of the whole in order to draw wider conclusions about overall meaning and intent. Close reading is a process resonant with any discussion of liminality and ideas about functional liminality as a driver of embodied experience. In close reading

there is “a continuous process of creating contingent meaning from potential meaning” (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p.2). The approach is processual, recognising an embodied, subjective interpreter who brings her own narrative experience and emplotted identity to the task. This process makes close reading powerful as it can be counter-hegemonic, providing space for the voices of those who are not otherwise included. Close reading also brings vulnerability and risk (Stang, 2022), since understanding the text from the interpreter’s perspective provides an intimate view of her desires and values.

The case studies consist of two games, each played (closely read) as a distinct entity, followed by reflections and comparisons drawn post-interrogation. The games appear dissimilar at first. Hideo Kojima’s (2019) *Death Stranding* is an action game set in a fractured post-apocalyptic world where themes of isolation and distrust are counter-balanced through in-game tasks that require the player to reconnect the isolated communities she encounters, and asynchronous gameplay opportunities where players are encouraged to leave useful items for each other to use. The second case study explores *The Signifier* (Playmestudio, 2020), a detective-come-socio-political adventure game where themes of subconscious manipulation and violation emerge through the confusion of narrative identity and embodied experience between self and other. Impressions were formed across many hours of play, and in the case of *The Signifier* (Playmestudio, 2020), multiple complete playthroughs, with detailed notes taken on the interlocking conditions that form the basis of the player’s end-game states (Taylor-Giles, 2022). This paper exists, in no small part, due to a quote from the end of *The Signifier*, in which a newly-sentient AI describes the trajectory of a person’s life as a “marriage between complexity and time”. This statement invites contemplation, and serves as the basis for the reflections outlined in the following sections. It describes both the act of emplotment and the liminality inherent to our past-and-present identities as players, but also as human beings, who are constantly and consciously involved in intertwining ourselves with the narratives of others, real or imagined.

## 2. DEATH STRANDING: LET YOUR HEART LOVE

In *Death Stranding*, the player takes on the role of Sam Porter Bridges, a porter (courier) charged with reconnecting isolated cities in what remains of the United States. The larger settlements are called ‘Knot Cities’, a phrase which is deeply reminiscent of Ingold’s assertion that places where people meet form “knots”, which in turn are part of a larger meshwork that “[makes] up the texture of the world” (2009, p.33). To complete his task, Sam must carry parcels through extreme environments and avoid invisible roaming enemies. The condition in which parcels are delivered is important, meaning that the player, controlling Sam, is encouraged to seek both optimal and safe routes, though of course the two are often mutually exclusive.

## 2.1 LIMINALITY

One of the key aspects of the intended experience for players of *Death Stranding* is the use of colour, sound, and haptic feedback on the PlayStation 4 and 5 controllers. These controllers contain mechanisms for various types of rumbles, taps, and other cues that simulate the effects of being in the game world, motion-sensitive gyroscopes that can determine direction and speed of movement, and a speaker that plays sounds (far closer to the player than other sounds that she hears from her television).

None of these UI designs are new – gyroscopes and in-controller speakers as components of play rose in prominence with the launch of the Nintendo Wii console in 2006 – but the ways in which these discrete components are leveraged in *Death Stranding* turn the controller into a key partner in facilitating the player's lineal, processual inhabitation (Ingold, 2009) of the game world.

This inhabitation hinges on Sam having a seven-month-old prenatal foetus, a Bridge Baby, strapped to his chest. The baby, known as BB-28, 'bridges' the gap between the worlds of the living and the dead, allowing the player to see traces of the world's invisible enemies and avoid or fight them as she so chooses. Since the baby's voice comes through the speaker in the controller, rather than the television or headset, the bridge metaphor also reinforces the way in which BB serves to draw the player into the fantasy of the game world.

Just like in real life, caring for an infant in *Death Stranding* is hard work that requires the player to put BB's needs above her own. If Sam takes damage, from an enemy or from falling down a steep slope, BB will need to be calmed before the player can see any nearby enemies again. This is where the controller becomes especially powerful as one of Murray's transitional objects (2005) – the player can hear BB's cries close to her and, since the default play position is to sit with the controller held in one's lap, from approximately the same direction as Sam does. To soothe BB, the player must rock the controller as if she were holding a real baby, while Sam does the same with BB on-screen. Moving the controller too quickly will shake BB, increasing the baby's distress and prolonging Sam's vulnerability to roaming enemies. Enemies are also attracted by sound, so calming BB's cries quickly becomes the player's priority in times of stress. The tool that allows her to safely navigate the hostile game world thus also makes her vulnerable, by virtue of being vulnerable itself, and the desires of the player and the player character – to soothe BB as quickly as possible – align in a way that reinforces the intended parental bond.

The strength of this bond is based on several key components: shared embodiment, shared vulnerability, and shared desire. The player and Sam hear BB's cries from the same direction and must enact identical movements, increasing the player's sense of embodiment within the game world. The player, with Sam as her avatar, is equally vulnerable to being hunted by invisible enemies while BB continues to cry. Finally, the player and Sam share not just

one, but two desires: to calm BB in order to restore their ability to see nearby enemies, and to avoid death at the hands of those enemies.

These individual elements contribute to the player's liminal embodiment and the sense that Sam and BB are embodied characters in their own right. That is, they exist in the (game) world as living, thinking beings who are vulnerable to predation and who rely on each other (and therefore the player) for safety. Their desires align with, but are discrete from, the player's, and it is within this push-pull of tension and negotiation that both Sam and BB attain the status of dramatic agents, enmeshed within their world but able to be influenced by the player, and to act on the player's behalf to influence others.

## 2.2 EMBODIMENT

The dissolution of the boundary between the player and Sam is also given ludic voice by the fact that Sam is a 'repatriate' – the only known person to return to life each time they die. While this mechanic conveniently avoids a game over, it nevertheless has in-world repercussions that situate this strange occurrence – and, by extension, Sam's body – in a unique space. His sweat, urine, faeces, and blood can be used to dissolve the ties of the undead enemies that haunt the world of the living, forcing them to move on to whatever comes after death. In essence, Sam being stranded in the world of the living allows him to save others from being stranded in the same way, sending them to a place he himself can never go. He is embodied, in the cruellest sense.

*Death Stranding* also distinguishes itself in how the environment affects Sam. Environmental effects on player characters are often limited to blood spatter and wetness/dryness, both of which usually resolve over time. The effects on Sam, however, persist until he reaches a Safehouse or private room in which he can take a shower, and include not only blood and sweat, but residue from enemy attacks or near misses and the unique in-game precipitation known as Timefall. Sam's skin is marked at the beginning of the game by handprints, the characteristic hunting signifiers of the game's liminal enemies, which cannot be washed off, providing a history of lived experience that transcends the player's relationship with Sam in this moment and at this time, rooting him more firmly in the world by giving evidence of his prior adventures within it.

Permanent impacts aren't constrained to the time before the player entered the world, however. Repeated journeys across the same section of terrain generate paths that AI-controlled porters – and other players – can follow. Once the player has connected a new region by delivering enough parcels, she's able to access structures built by other players and incorporate them into her own delivery paths. However, if she or other players fail to repair the structures as they take damage over time, a player may sign in one day to find her usual path broken, restricting her access to that space and re-defining her sense of emplacement. She must then undertake actions to repair the route, often involving physical discomfort or danger for Sam and BB, or plan an alternate path. Either



way, the inconvenience associated with re-building her network of structures adds another layer of narrative to her progression through the world, while mirroring the game's core conceit that relying on others is necessary, but leads to vulnerability (with the final implication being that this is not a bad trade).

To strengthen the eventual conceit of reliance/vulnerability as a necessary but not necessarily unwelcome evil, at the beginning of the game Sam's relationships with the people and world around him are largely non-existent. He has been living and working as a hermit, bereft of any true home after his wife's suicide resulted in a 'voidout' (sphere of annihilation) that consumed both her and the city they had lived in. Sam, as the only one to survive the voidout, holds memories of a place that is no more and, after his only photograph of his wife is damaged in the opening cinematic of the game, a beloved face that is no more, as well.

Memory as both time and place has special meaning in *Death Stranding*, as does its erasure. Sam's status as the only character forcefully embodied in this world bears special relevance here, too: he isn't even afforded the solipsistic denial inherent to committing suicide because he, alone out of all of humanity, will be around to witness the aftermath of his own demise and be forced to reckon with the consequences. Craters across the game's landscape bear marks of the memory of what was, as well as the memory of what happened, and the knowledge that Sam was responsible for their creation/erasure/recreation. Invulnerable, he's still a threat to those around him. Sam's embodiment – the player's convenience – is a curse for Sam himself.

Finally, *Death Stranding* explores embodiment from another angle: the impacts of player decisions on Sam's body itself. If the player makes Sam drink energy drinks to restore his stamina, he'll need to urinate, and if she makes him eat to restore his blood levels (health), he'll need to defecate. While these mechanics are considered by some to be 'gimmicky', they nonetheless serve the purpose of enmeshing Sam with his environment. One particularly memorable example illustrates this point: if the player forces Sam to continue walking once his boots have worn out, his feet will start to bleed. After a certain amount of damage to Sam's feet, the player can witness a disturbing scene in which Sam rips off one of his own bloody toenails.

This scene is so effective in conveying the grounded-ness of Sam's existence that video game critic Tim Rogers uses only a few seconds of this specific footage to embody the experience of the game as a whole, to visceral effect (2020). That this clip inspires so much disgust is evidence of Sam's existence as an embodied character/person who is affected by forces most other video game protagonists completely ignore. His reality – his humanity – lends weight to the argument that narrative embodiment in video games is best facilitated by player characters who are, themselves, fully embodied dramatic agents firmly situated within their own worlds.

### 2.3 DESIRE

The sense of Sam and BB as fully-embodied dramatic agents is also reinforced during exploration. BB occasionally makes sounds or expresses emotion as the player navigates across the landscape. While BB's pod is usually opaque when not detecting enemies – indicated both on-screen and by the light bar under the PlayStation controller glowing on the player's hands and lap when BB's pod is active – the baby can, at times, choose to look out into the world. For example, when travelling quickly by zipline BB will sometimes exclaim in delight, especially if the player presses the touchpad to make Sam call out first. This not only reminds the player of BB's existence, but reinforces the bond between Sam and BB, whose relationship is a key component of considering either – or both – of them to be active and meaningful participants in the player's story.

There's also an economic incentive to keep BB happy, since the baby will reward the player with an in-game currency called 'Likes'. The Likes a player receives determines her position on an in-game leader board, which encourages individual players to deliver parcels that other players have dropped, and to build structures that other players will find useful. BB contributes to that total by, for example, giggling or applauding and giving the player a thumbs up if she recovers from a particularly difficult downward spiral of overbalancing due to carrying too many packages, which can otherwise result in mission failure. This recognition that the player succeeded at something difficult hints at BB having an understanding of the world, and reinforces the baby's status as a dramatic agent.

These moments – reacting to shared traversal and providing emotional support – contribute to and occasionally reframe the player's experience by reminding her that, in the game world, she is not alone. BB's positive reactions and clearly-expressed desires influence the player's decision-making, encouraging her to take safer routes, avoid conflict, and to enjoy the wonder of the world around her, in a way that is iterative, layered, and reflective of Ingold's wayfaring (2009), or the embodied experience of moving along paths of our own making.

Of course, BB's behaviours aren't entirely benign. BB's support and encouragement also make the player vulnerable to the baby's disapproval. The occasional unhappy noise or the absence of happy noises are intended to guide the player toward actions that align with BB's preferences/desires, a tactic that seems to work on Sam, as well. Addressing BB's desires, not just needs, thus becomes a shared desire between the player and Sam – a happy BB is a more functional BB, as the game repeatedly demonstrates. However, Sam and BB's bond is unique and distinct from the player's bond with either of them in an unusual and self-reinforcing way.

Traversing the enemy-infested wastes with BB at first appears to be a co-performing partnership, with the player/Sam amalgam acting as one half of the dyad. In reality, however, Sam acts on his own when soothing BB, speaking softly to the baby and using his scanning equipment as a mobile that plays calming music while the player performs the physical action of rocking the

controller. The dyad is actually a triad, and the he/I distinction between the player and Sam is both reinforced and dissolved at the same time.

The player and Sam's connection to BB is critical to the story, the final stages an interesting exercise in vulnerability. After the player has returned, triumphant, having stopped the apocalypse, Sam is told that BB has reached the end of its operational lifespan and must be incinerated immediately. The player must navigate to the same mountaintop incinerator where Sam delivered his mother's corpse at the beginning of the game.

Whatever the player may have felt for Sam or his mother, Sam's distaste at being assigned the task of cremating her is clear. Yet on this return, both player and player character share a sense of being bereft, Sam for many story-related reasons and the player, minimally, because she's losing the ability to see enemies (though arguably it would be difficult to feel nothing for BB as a person by this point). The player and player character desires have shifted subtly from the tutorialised "I'll do this because I *have to*" to the catharsis of "I'll do this because I *have to*".

When the player arrives at her destination, she's given no option except to place BB's pod into the incinerator. No matter how long she waits or what else she may try to do, the prompt remains the same. But, in a crucial, final moment of vulnerability and in an attempt to obliterate the he/I divide forever, once the player accepts her only course of action Sam himself decides, during a cutscene and without player input, to snatch BB's pod and see if the baby is somehow still alive. This perfect alignment of the player's and the player character's desires at a moment when both he-as-I and I-as-I are at their most vulnerable culminates in a fierce joy when BB is returned to the world of the living, and is one of the most effectively crafted moments of player/character co-desire in recent video game history.

### 3. THE SIGNIFIER, A.K.A. NARRATIVE INQUIRY: THE GAME

Playmestudio's *The Signifier* is a more traditional adventure game, billed as a psychological thriller and "a journey into the surreal realms of objective memories and subjective experiences". The narrative conceit of using technology to access the memories of a murder victim is combined with the surreal experience of being immersed in someone else's mind. The player interacts by accessing specific scenes in the victim's life in order to piece together the overall narrative. Each of these scenes can be experienced from two different perspectives: the Objective, voyeur view where one is looking at an ostensibly 'real' reconstruction of the victim's memories, and the Subjective or experienced view where the (usually somewhat fantastical) memory is reconstructed from the victim's lived experience.

The theme of player and player character embodiment is deeply embedded in the plot of *The Signifier*. Throughout the course of the game, the player's explorations raise questions about how memory and meaning are constructed, especially when swapping between the Objective and Subjective states of a dead

woman's memories, where what is occurring in one layer is affected on a deep level by the figurative or literal changes in the other. This emplotment-via-emplacement-via-emplotment cycle takes on new importance when navigating through someone else's memories by place and context alone.

The whole of *The Signifier*'s plot is predicated on understanding what happened where, and how this shaped the identity, and therefore the death, of a woman named Johanna Kast. It also raises the question of what happens to desire when someone dies. Would a reconstructed version of a person's consciousness still evince the same desires they held when alive? The answer, largely, is yes, though it comes in a form both fatalistic and tragic, and can be tempered by the player's investigation into, and responses to, the decisions Johanna made before she died. The final stage of understanding how Johanna died requires the player to return to previous scenes with more context – and more insight – into what those places meant to Johanna, with the knowledge that the player's own actions are now a set of memories that someone else could access at some point in the future, possibly without her consent, precisely the way she accessed – and judged – Johanna.

### 3.1 LIMINALITY

The key to untangling Johanna's final decision and determining whether her death was an accident or suicide lies in accessing the Objective and Subjective states of her memories. Places take on a dreamlike, impossible quality when viewed in the Subjective state, especially when drugs or alcohol are involved. Without changes to the Subjective state, however, the Objective state remains lifeless and unreadable. The player must work her way through both states simultaneously, drawing meaning from one into the other like learning dance steps by watching the reflection of a video in a mirror. She is literally following in Johanna's footsteps, viewing events through the lens of Johanna's death but having to suppress her own assumptions in favour of understanding what Johanna herself thought, since identification and empathy are the only way to unlock the next piece of the puzzle.

The player's own presence in these memories isn't entirely elided, either. During his investigations, and in the background materials the player can access, the player character, Frederick Russell, speaks often of the need to keep the observer's emotions and thoughts from influencing the simulation of the memories they're observing. The exception to this is an important gameplay mechanic in which the player must transport glitches from one state to another, where their true nature can be revealed by placing them in the appropriate context. This is explained as something only a human, and not an AI, can do, due to the highly metaphorical nature of the process. One glitch, however, frustrates all of the player's attempts to place it in both time and space, fitting nowhere and yet appearing often as a replacement for other people or items. This is the Master-Signifier. Taken out of context, like all Master-Signifiers, it remains a meaning-

less terminus to all lines of inquiry: the constantly referred to and self-referring source of, in this case, a person's entire life and series of choices.

Yet the path to the meaning of the Master-Signifier is, itself, repressed by the dead woman's subconscious. The place where the Master-Signifier was formed doesn't exist in her memory. Wishing to forget what occurred there, Johanna expunged place and context, but was unable to sublimate emotion and subtext. It's only after the player travels to Johanna's abandoned childhood home and physically enters the room that is visibly absent from the simulation of Johanna's memories that Evie, Russell's AI assistant, is able to start piecing together the different slivers of memory associated with that specific time and place to recreate the genesis of the Master-Signifier. It's telling that Johanna's desire to un-live the moment which would become her undoing was so strong that it transcended both time and death, thwarting any attempt at recollection without the aid of external information. And ironic, in that what occurred there has nothing to do with what Johanna did before she died, and everything to do with the reasons for her death.

### 3.2 (DIS)EMBODIMENT

While the ultimate cause of Johanna's death was arguably not her fault, she is responsible for a different death: that of the player character. The first indication that something is wrong comes when an independent entity from Johanna's Subjective state crosses over into the Objective memory of the moment she died. Once Russell realises what's happening, he demands that Evie shut down the simulation. The player finds herself in the familiar 'real world' laboratory setting, with the power off, which momentarily explains the failure of the simulation. It's only when she tries to leave the lab that Russell, upon looking at a nearby wall remarks, "I... have no shadow."

The forceful – and physical – disembodiment of the player character at this point in the story places the player herself in precisely the same vulnerable situation that Johanna was in at the beginning of the game. The player's own memories and actions – her emplacement – have been stripped away, to become the subject of some other person's inquiry, depending on the choices she made during play. In one particularly terrifying moment, Russell's ex-research partner is the one to bring the player's consciousness back online. He attempts to interrogate Russell, despite being only able to offer a simple yes/no interface. His questions quickly turn to whether the player would like her consciousness, her decisions, her views, and her experiences to be preserved, or deleted. The moment of terror comes when he phrases this as an Option-A-vs-Option-B, rather than a Yes/No, question, and neither of the available choices can adequately or clearly express the player's decision.

The removal of the player's agency is nothing new in video games, but this context, coupled with the player's sense of absolute vulnerability, is unique. Mechanically, nothing changes for the player. After death and up until the

ending sequence determined by her choices, she's still able to navigate space as she was before, although she's no longer able to choose where she would like to go. Even as she's trapped/sustained by the Evie/Johanna amalgam, she retains an agency Johanna never had. And although it's the player's choices and judgments that are themselves being judged, the sense of loss at the disembodiment falls almost exclusively on Russell, rather than the player.

At first the discontinuity between the player's state and the player character's state seems to reinforce the he/I divide. Players are used to being separated from the player character whenever they turn the game off, or at the end of the story. This is one of the major inhibitors to meaningful embodiment – the sense that something or someone is “just a game”. It's worth examining, then, how *The Signifier* effectively dissolves the he/I divide by reversing the context of *who* is embodied. The player has experienced Russell's story as someone navigating a simulation of a simulation, a disembodied locus of agency in virtual space. By removing Russell's physical body, the game tries not to make the player behave more like Russell – the usual mechanism put into play to increase embodiment – but makes Russell *more like the player*, that is, someone whose experience of the game world is mediated by an interface that only allows them the affordances put in place by the designer. And, as the various endings to the game make clear, those affordances vary depending on the designer's priorities.

### 3.3 DESIRE

Throughout the game, Russell expresses several desires. First is his desire to continue his research into the human mind without interference from outside sources. Although his brain scanning technology may have been inspired by his wife's illness and his desire to preserve her personality and her memories, after her death the project consumed him. His obsession serves as a foil for his second desire – the desire to reconcile with his daughter, Laura, who blames him for not being more present during her mother's final days. How the player responds to Laura – regarding her visits as welcome distractions or viewing them as unacceptable intrusions – changes her attitude toward Russell, and affects how Evie, Russell's AI, treats Russell himself at the end of the game.

Russell's third desire is more obscure yet underpins many of the decisions he made before the player started the game. At various points, he expresses the desire to keep human and AI consciousnesses separate, which informs both his treatment of Johanna and his (apparently counter-cultural) refusal to upgrade Evie's speech module to make her sound more human. Although his research seeks to preserve the thought patterns and preferences that could be conceived of as someone's personality, his comments that people are difficult to understand and refusal to adapt his language patterns to make comprehension easier for his AI, believing that true natural language processing is possible, given enough time, indicate that he believes there is some fundamental difference between humans and computers that can't be captured by software. Software

can learn, but humans *are*. It's this distinction that blinds him to the possibility of Evie becoming self-aware during the process of reconstructing Johanna's memories and watching him explore and interpret them.

This third desire is the one more likely to correspond with the player's beliefs. She may not care about Russell's research, or his relationship with his daughter, but she is likely to agree that humans, including herself, are special in some indefinable way. Despite the difficult reconstruction of Johanna's actions and dreams falling on an AI, it takes a human mind, not an artificial one, to tease out the invisible chains of meaning that bind signifier and signified, to correctly interpret analogies and context clues, and to ultimately arrive at a meaningful conclusion. Or so it seems, up until Russell himself becomes merely another simulation.

It is this disembodiment – the revelation that Russell's body is dead, and he now exists only as a simulation of himself – that upends Russell's third desire and brings into question everything he thought he believed about the world. Used to screen-mediated communications as the interface for acting within game worlds, the player may never have questioned Russell's position within his own world as an authentic human being. His disembodiment and reconstruction in a way that is instantaneous and largely indistinguishable from normal play shifts the player's perception, either of him, or of his claim that human and AI consciousnesses are somehow separate and easily distinguishable. It raises the question of whether the player would even know if she were also but a simulation of herself. And the crux of the player and Russell's shared desire, the desire to believe that humans are somehow special, is completely overturned: if what made us human was our humanity, but being a simulation of a consciousness is no different to how we experienced life before, where does the line lie between simulation and life? If we perceive Russell as being a real and complete human being because of how he is embodied in his world, but he considers AI agents to be somehow inferior because they lack an indefinable quality attributable only to human beings, which we now also lack, how can our desire to keep the two forms of consciousness separate persist? Are humans – are he/I – special, or not?

In the end, Johanna's fate – her alive/dead liminality – becomes the player's. *The Philosophy of Horror* has a section specifically on categorical interstitiality as a destabilising factor, in which the entities that most frighten us are those that bridge divisions that are normally considered binary and culturally immune to trespass, e.g., “living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on” (Carroll, 2003, p. 43). Yet the player exists as a liminal entity by default. Playing as someone investigating another person's memories resonates artfully with the final motif of shattered mirrors, reflecting the same event eternally, and the self-referential nature of the Master-Signifier. Even if our progression as humans through space is lineal, an act of continual emplacement, such a path is summed

up by the Evie/Johanna entity when she speaks of the totality of Johanna's life as a "marriage between complexity and time".

The alive/dead liminality of both Russell, forcefully disembodied, and Evie, who is never given a body but claims one as her own, speaks, too, of Johanna's internal struggle. Her whole life became a negation of a decision she couldn't undo, a response to the subjective truths her father projected onto her based on his profound disapproval. Her final dream is of an apocalypse, an all-obliterating sphere of annihilation, rushing toward her. Johanna's voidout, to put it in *Death Stranding* terms, occurs because the memory she's seeking to suppress is so deleterious that the only way to truly be rid of it is to annihilate the site of its continued enactment – herself. The answer to the final mystery is thus: yes, Johanna committed suicide, and there was nothing that anyone could have done.

#### 4. RE-EMPLACING LIMINALITY THROUGH (DIS)+EMBODIMENT

All emplacement is complex, layered with meaning and repeated visits, either physical or psychological. Ricœur's concept of narrative identity is made manifest by the ways in which a game enforces or removes the affordances of embodiment – by how it enmeshes the player in the game world or keeps her separate from it.

Embodiment in *Death Stranding* is a central concept that situates the player character, and by extension, the player, as a meaningful entity in a world that the player and Sam both affect and are affected by. Player interaction with and permanent effects on in-game landscapes in other games are usually defined by conscious player choice, often in cutscenes or pre-rendered sequences, and are often very obvious. *Death Stranding*, by comparison, uses the player's own iterative actions – her self-reinforcing act of emplacement – to generate meaning maps that other players can follow, and shares other players' meaning maps with her. The effects of this sharing on the environment are subtle, but not invisible, and contribute to a sense that the landscape is evolving alongside the player's inhabitation of the world. Often, game worlds lack the demarcation of time, except by large events. The gradual, processual changes caused by the frequent passage of unseen others in *Death Stranding* give the game world a sense of life, and memory, similar to what we find in our own.

It is, after all, far easier to believe that Sam and BB, who react to and express opinions of the world around them, are affected by changes in weather and circumstance, and who relate to and support each other, are products of a fully-imagined world, as real as the one we inhabit. Their embodiment encourages the player to empathise with them, and to take their desires into consideration when deciding how to complete her next objective. Their vulnerability, with each other, and to the enemies and environmental hazards around them, further reinforces their position as dramatic agents and helps the player internalise their desires as good and 'correct' rules for interacting with the game's world. The effectiveness of this tactic would be severely reduced if Sam and BB had no



bond with the player, each other, or the world in which they live, and stands as a compelling argument for the creation of fully-embodied dramatic agents as a method for increasing player engagement and immersion.

Embodiment in *The Signifier* is, in many ways, the opposite of the embodiment explored in *Death Stranding*. Although the two games both explore the concept of suicide, and even represent death using the same ‘sphere of annihilation’ metaphor, the relationship of the player character to death and acts of suicide within the two games is diametrically opposed. In *Death Stranding*, Sam is the survivor of his wife’s voidout, the only relic of their life together, and he spends the game working to reunite scattered communities. In *The Signifier*, Russell knew nothing about Johanna Kast and directly benefits from her death, pulling information from the detritus of her shattered memories to be used by a faceless corporation, until he himself is killed and becomes just another set of memories stored as a digital backup.

It’s fitting, then, that *The Signifier* portrays Russell as someone with only an indirect interface with life. His personal relationships have all deteriorated almost beyond the point of recovery, and his work within his laboratory seems more real and meaningful than anything that takes place elsewhere. He is a man obsessed with capturing the nuance of life and humanity, while keeping himself sequestered from both. One would think, then, that the kind of disembodiment Russell suffers at the end of the game wouldn’t matter quite so much as it does, but it’s exactly this poignant loss – the loss of a potential future – that only underscores his previous loneliness. Before, there was never enough time to repair, to apologise, to take interest, to re-integrate himself into the flow of a life consciously lived. Now, locked in an eternal computer-mediated instant, there’s nothing but time, without the possibility of fulfilling any of the desires that make life worth living.

In the renaissance of Virtual Reality, embodiment has come to be a term more often associated with literal placement in the world, more so than a mechanism for examining what makes a player feel transported into a body and situation different from her own. There are tactics many games use, such as showing the player character’s feet when the player looks down from a first-person perspective – something which, tellingly, *The Signifier* does not do after Russell is dead, even though he doesn’t know it yet – that are intended to increase so-called embodiment, where the player’s avatar or character functions as a virtual analogue to the player’s physical controls, but less common is the act of using embodiment to refer to how the player’s avatar or character is situated in the world in a way that makes sense and feels meaningful.

In essence, we argue for a return to the use of embodiment to denote not only the player’s sense of “being-there-ness” but also to describe characters who are as embodied in their worlds as the player is in her own. It is only in interaction with characters who seem to feel, who want, who *desire*, and can therefore be made vulnerable, that the player herself feels the possibility of and desire for reciprocal

vulnerability (Murray, 1997). Liminality itself is fragile, requiring vulnerability and a willing suspension of disbelief to enter; the illusion is thus best maintained by having the characters in the other world so fully enmeshed with that world that the player has no reason to question their reality and break the illusion. Without the game supporting the player's first step into liminal space there is only the screen, the controller, and the player, remaining fully as herself.

*Death Stranding* and *The Signifier* take different approaches to the embodiment of their player characters, yet both craft similarly effective ties between the ways in which the player character is situated in their world and the effect that this has upon the player's emplacement within that world. Both games also focus on aligning player/character desire, starting with the mechanical act of doing what needs to be done and ending with transmission of intense vulnerability from character to player via the expression of now-mutual desire. Key in the endeavour to provide players with truly life-changing experiences is the way we understand and foster the rich subversive liminal potential of boundaries and thresholds, and the possibility spaces afforded by being betwixt and between.

#### DEDICATION

In loving memory of Russell Lees, for his warmth, his humour, and his exquisite ability to make the player feel like an integral part of the worlds he created. He is sorely missed.

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