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idea journal

**fiction, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

vol. 19, no. 01

2022

**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association**



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design + production

Dr Ir Renske Maria van Dam

correspondence

Correspondence regarding this publication should be addressed to:

Dr Chris Cottrell

Chair IDEA

chris.cottrell@monash.edu

this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.⁰¹ Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXlc7HWlc3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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dancing in your brain!: interiority, affective witnessing, and xenoethics

Cathryn Klasto

HDK-Valand,

University of Gothenburg

0000-0002-7671-5892

abstract

This text-based essay examines the corporeal interiority and ethical spatiality of Braindancing. Braindancing can be defined as a source of entertainment as well as a form of psychological treatment within Night City, the urban centre of CD Projekt Red's 2020 video game *Cyberpunk 2077*. Commonly known as BD, the Braindance manifests as an interactive technological interior, allowing participants to relive the hyper multisensorial and emotional memory of someone else. There exist both legal and illegal markets for BDs, both alluding to its role as a normalised and intimate form of everyday surveillance. Within the context of the year 2077 and the fictionalised game setting, Braindancing operates across the blurred boundary of physical reality and digital fantasy. It offers an escape from the systemic violent and ultra-capitalist conditions that govern the physical urban environment of Night City, while also reinforcing those conditions through the addictive lure of personalised fantasy.

By analysing the interior world of the BD, this essay reflects on our current reality. It begins by applying philosopher Johnny Søraker's construction of *intravirtual* (inside the game space) and *extravirtual* (outside the game space) in order to examine how the BD generates multiple interiors that collapse thresholds between player, character, and game space. It then turns to look at the role of ethics that underpin the BD, considering how, through the collapse of thresholds and extra-intra identities, particular ethical atmospheres are produced. In doing so, the essay puts forward the argument that intravirtual ethics has the capacity to shift how ethics is understood and mobilised extravirtually. This frames a conclusory consideration of xenoethics as a lens that could affect how ethics is understood and practised today. In analysing this fictional context, the essay questions how we define and categorise ethics and considers what can be learnt from future-oriented spatialities currently contained to fantasy.

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welcome to night city

*Welcome to Night City. The only limit to what you can do is what you're willing to become.*⁰¹

Night City, a fictional geographic location, operates as an autonomous megacity constructed between North and South California on the Pacific coast of the United States of America.⁰² It is the primary site of the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, a first-person action role playing game released in 2020 by Polish game developer CD Projekt Red. Set in 2077, fifty-five years from our present moment, *Cyberpunk 2077* instructs players to personalise the default character of V in order to gain access to the violent, chaotic, and electrifying reality of Night City.

Night City was first conceived of as an urban territory in the 1990s by American businessman Richard Night. Concerned with growing crime and an impending economic collapse, Night designed a utopian self-sufficient environment financed through amassing capital from corporations that were keen to invest in a place where corporate growth could be allowed to flourish. From its completed construction in 2005 to 2077, the year in which we are introduced to it, Night City underwent violent struggles including two large-scale wars and many incidents of corporate terrorism, the majority of which centred on the fraught power dynamic between ruling corporations and Night City citizens. By 2077, corruption, violence,

and high-level crime are defining attributes of everyday existence in the city; the six districts making up the territory are teeming with gangs, mercenaries, cyberpsychos, and junkies, all trying to survive in an acute atmosphere of brutal hyper neoliberal capitalism.

Every human in *Cyberpunk 2077* is cyborg, meaning they are made up of both organic and human-made material. All humans have a slot connected to their brain where data can be uploaded to their neural network in the form of biochips. The central storyline of the game consists of V becoming infected by a damaged biochip known as the Relic, created by the ruling Japanese mega corporation, Arasaka. The relic contains the engram, or memory data, of 2000s rockstar Johnny Silverhand; meaning that when V inserts the relic into their neural shard slot, the engram is uploaded to their brain and threatens to replace V's consciousness with Johnny's. Players must attempt to find a reversal cure for this corporeal takeover for both characters to survive — V within their physical body and Johnny through the body of the technological biochip. The hunt for a cure takes V on a journey through the hellscape of Night City, a journey that allows for sustained interactions within all six districts of the city, with an extensive and diverse range of characters.

This essay responds to the framework produced by philosopher of ethics Johnny Søraker, whereby he identifies a relation

between the *intravirtual* worlds of games and the *extravirtual* realm of our physical existence.⁰³ By establishing Night City as an intravirtual laboratory bound to the parameter of the game's digital interior, I argue that this generates opportunities to expand our knowledge and practice of exterior or extravirtual urbanism. The role of time is critical in this process. While Søraker places emphasis on the division between the two realms as a way of understanding real time versus virtual time, I am interested in tracing the echoes that exist between these two times: the intravirtual time of the year 2077 and the extravirtual time of the year 2022. In many ways, Night City as a territory of neoliberal capitalism, corporate power, violence, and technology represents an amplified image of today's cities situated within the global north.

Night City lived through environmental collapse and growth in urban density due to climate migration, something extravirtual cities in 2022 currently find themselves grappling with. Night City has been built out of the corporate power of key individuals such as Saburo Arasaka and Donald Lundee Jr, a fact somewhat mirrored in contemporary extravirtual global society through figures like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Alongside these symmetries, which blur the boundary between intra and extra, Night City is also one of the most extensive interactive future urban environments in existence, with a staggering 600 million hours having been spent in the city across all gaming platforms.⁰⁴ As a result,

it has the capacity to function as an accessible interior space in which tactics and strategies for alternative ways of being can challenge *both* intravirtual and extravirtual time and their interconnected urban atmospheres.

As this essay is a first theoretical step in testing this potentiality, I have chosen a modest intravirtual aspect of Night City to critically examine in relation to the extravirtual. It takes as its focus the popular entertainment form of the Braindance (BD), a neural experience that allows the viewer to relive someone else's memories, including their senses and emotions. While not a defining aspect of the main storyline, V does come into close contact with BDs at various points in the narrative, particularly through their relationship to Judy, an expert in BD technology.

To provide a brief breakdown of the BD, characters record their experiences live using specialist technological equipment that allows electromagnetic sensors to read brain activity. Recordings are then converted into digital data and stored on the Net or a carrying device such as a disk or chip. These recordings, in their 'raw' data form, are then typically sold to a BD company that edits and enhances the sensory and emotional dimensions of the raw data. This edited BD is then sold or rented to those looking to experience the particular memory, either using personal equipment or by visiting a BD arcade (Figure 01). Some BD companies, as capitalist entities, hire actors to stage false



Figure 01.

Characters using braindance headsets to experience the memories of someone else. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, Cyberpunk 2077® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. *Cyberpunk 2077* game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.

memories to increase sales, while others work with Night City celebrities to record their everyday life, which offers the average citizen the capacity to temporarily 'become' their idol. There are also illegal BDs known as XBDs (Extreme Braindances) or Black BDs, which are elicited by small underground teams via criminal means. They are deemed illegal, as they document real people's experiences of murder, torture, rape, death — both from the perspective of the victim and the perpetrator. Usually, victims have been kidnapped and forced into these macabre acts for the XBDs to circulate on the black market.

Applying a critical spatial analysis, I focus on two specific aspects of the intravirtual BD phenomenon. The first part of the essay engages the first: analysing how BD technology produces layers of neural

interiority, or brain interiors. Typically, there is the interior brain space specifically produced by the BD feeder technology that allows the participant to observe the original memory; the interior brain space of the person who produced the original memory that contains their so-called 'raw' emotions and senses; the interior brain space of the character's neural system that is witnessing the original memory; and the interior brain space of the extravirtual player who is controlling the actions of the character who is observing. As argued, these interior layers function as a foam structure; each have a co-isolated autonomy but are stabilised through transitory relays of experience that cross ontological thresholds. This consequently frames the second aspect of the essay: the ethical dimension of the interior interdependent structure that produces both intravirtual and extravirtual

affect. In particular, this second part considers what the ethics of witnessing are within these entangled interiors and what witnessing means in both the intravirtual urban territory of Night City and in our extravirtual urban futures. This leads to the consideration that xenoethics not only exists within the intravirtual realm; its theoretical structure may also prove useful in guiding our encounters within present-day physical interiors.

analytical approach

I begin this first section with a definition of critical spatiality and how this definition is reflected in the analytical approach I am taking towards both interiority and ethics in this context. Almost twenty years after architect Jane Rendell defined critical spatial practice aided by the work of French theorists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, it remains the most concrete and clear definition in use. She articulates that taking a critical approach to the praxis of spatiality (how space is understood and practised via everyday activities and creative application) means embedding transformatory reflection.⁰⁵ This, she argues, can be implemented in imaginative ways to challenge the existing social and spatial order defined by global capitalism into something different.⁰⁶ Critical spatiality is thus a praxis approach towards space (in an expanded understanding of the term) that foregrounds social critique and social change.

Philosopher Armen Avanessian proposes that critical spatial praxis transcends established boundaries, limitations, judgments, and

distinctions,⁰⁷ a notion found mirrored in Christine McCarthy's definition of interiority. Interiority is a particular category of spatiality which 'enables the recognition and definition of an interior.'⁰⁸ Not restricted to architectural insides so to speak, it is 'a transformative concept, dependent on social, cultural, physical and technological developments.'⁰⁹ Conceived of as a temporal condition, the boundaries of what we understand as interiority are constantly shifting in line with the future — something that is also the case for ethics. If we agree with philosopher Alain Badiou that ethics manifests in relation to infinite situations and thus contains a multiplicity of truths,¹⁰ ethics becomes a process of speculative position-making as opposed to a restrictive, answerable, and binary-focused discourse. To put it simply, its ontological boundaries are always being (re)defined, a repetitive act that secures its contemporary relevance.

A critical spatial analytical approach is thus useful in my task of interrogating the social order of ethics across interior infrastructures produced by neoliberal capitalism in both intravirtual and extravirtual times, spaces, and scales. To put it differently, I am interested in engaging an intravirtual analysis of spatialised ethics (as manifested through the BD) to lay the ground for extravirtual ethical change. A critical spatial analysis supports my desire to imagine modes of operating ethically otherwise in the spatial present. This is needed in order for us to have any hope of securing a radical future that presents as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

Having cemented this red thread of transformation that entangles critical spatial praxis with the production of interiority and ethics, I now turn to applying a critical spatial analysis to a BD narrative as a way of identifying how these neural intra and extra interiors interact. My focus in this section will be on how interiority manifests within the layers of brain interiors and how a shared atmosphere is produced that binds them into a foamy co-dependent structure. This structure then becomes the foundation for a further discussion in the second section pertaining to intra and extra ethical transformation.

neural interiority

V is first introduced to BDs through an interaction with a character called Evelyn Parker. Parker introduces V to Judy, the BD expert previously noted, and it is at this moment relatively early in the gameplay that V gains the necessary skills and equipment needed to interact with BDs. To introduce

V to the inner workings of BD tech prior to accessing Evelyn's BD, which is critical to the central storyline, Judy chooses to play a short 'sample' BD on V's headset. Functioning as a guided tutorial, Judy selects a corner store robbery in the district of Heywood, intentionally staged and recorded by amateurs. The BD begins with V neurally entering the recorded experience of one of the robbers, at the moment their criminal partner is instructing them to go in and rob the store (Figure 02). V, experiencing the adrenaline of the robber who recorded the scene, witnesses the robber load a gun and enter the store; holding a gun to the store's employee, the robber threatens to kill him if he doesn't hand over money. When the money is secured, the robber walks backwards to leave the store and when they reach the door, is shot and killed by an unknown source. This is the point the BD abruptly ends, and V returns to their singular neural existence and physical location within Judy's BD editing room.



Figure 02.

The beginning of the BD; the robber instructs V to rob the store. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, *Cyberpunk 2077*® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. *Cyberpunk 2077* game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.

There are six autonomous interiors produced during this BD narrative. I am classifying these six as the central interiors — there are arguably other minor interiors present in the scenario. The first is produced by Judy's computer, the so-called 'feeder' that transmits the BD to V. The second interior is Judy's own neural interior, her brain interior, which is processing her own experience of the scenario. The third interior is V's own neural interior, the space that is receiving the electro-transmitted BD from the headset. The fourth interior is the interior space produced by the BD technology, the corner store setting where the narrative plays out. The fifth interior exists only inside the fourth interior; it is the emotional experience of the robber who recorded the original scene — this is the interior V occupies when viewing the BD. Finally, there is the sixth interior, the extravirtual neural interior of the player who is both an active participant and a passive witness to all the other interiors. Each interior space is produced by both intra and extra corporeal-technological activity; a systematic coming together of organic and mechanical matter both inside and outside the threshold of the game.

Interiority as a process is produced both intravirtually and extravirtually within these six interior spaces via environmental manipulation fuelled by a condition of control; in other words, the boundaries for interiority are initially drawn by the rules that regulate the BD narrative as conceived by the system of the game world. However,

while temporality is an active condition for interiority,¹¹ the boundaries of the temporal condition cannot be presumed to be symmetrical.¹² For example, while the five intravirtual interiors cannot surpass the rules stipulated by the game world, the sixth extravirtual interior is not restricted by the same time or scale; that is, a player may experience the condition of interiority via the sixth interior space once the gameplay has stopped, whereas this extension beyond the boundary of the game is not possible for the other five. To complexify it further, intravirtual experiences of interiority can be collapsed into extravirtual interiors. For example, a player may bring the third interior (V's neural interior) into the sixth interior by reflecting on V's experience as well as their own after play has ended. This possibility for collapse not only makes clear that the boundary condition determines the flexibility, mobility, and extent of interiority,¹³ but also that the intra and extra experiences of interiority cease to be oppositional as they become part of a single continuum.¹⁴

When the gameplay activates within the fourth interior (the BD setting of the corner store being robbed), Judy's neural interior operates as an observer to both the BD playing out but also to the third interior of V's mind and the fifth interior of the original experiencer who recorded the BD material. It also becomes a mediator between the first interior of the feeder and the other interiors, as Judy is controlling the transmission of the

BD, and a direct connection point between the character of V and the extravirtual player as she guides the player's actions as V. Thus, Judy's voice as a sensory manifestation of the second interior moves across the boundaries of all the other interiors, functioning as a marker of the 'psychological squeezing of space' and establishing a 'geometry of intimacy' between the six interiors.¹⁵ McCarthy argues that a criterion for interiority is 'an imaging of closeness and the making of relationships,' something that is intensified through emotion.¹⁶

Emotional interiority functions as a catalyst for the thresholds existing between the interior spaces to blur; it becomes a balm for entanglement. As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed articulates, emotions not only establish the surfaces and boundaries of bodies and

worlds, but they also mediate relations by acts of binding.¹⁷ There are many emotions manifesting as interiority in this narrative. First, there is Judy's emotional state present in the second interior; she is anxious because Evelyn Parker has put her in a compromising position by introducing her to V and asking her to run a dangerous BD on her software. As a player operating in the extravirtual sixth interior, you feel Judy's anxiety, which heightens your own player perceptions. Then, there is V's third interior, infected by the fifth interior of the robber, who experiences high levels of adrenaline and fear, and ends with an intense burst of unidentified feeling (enhanced in the sixth interior by the vibration of the controller) representative of death. This, in turn, produces a strong emotional reaction from V, requiring Judy to calm them down after the BD has finished playing (Figure 03).

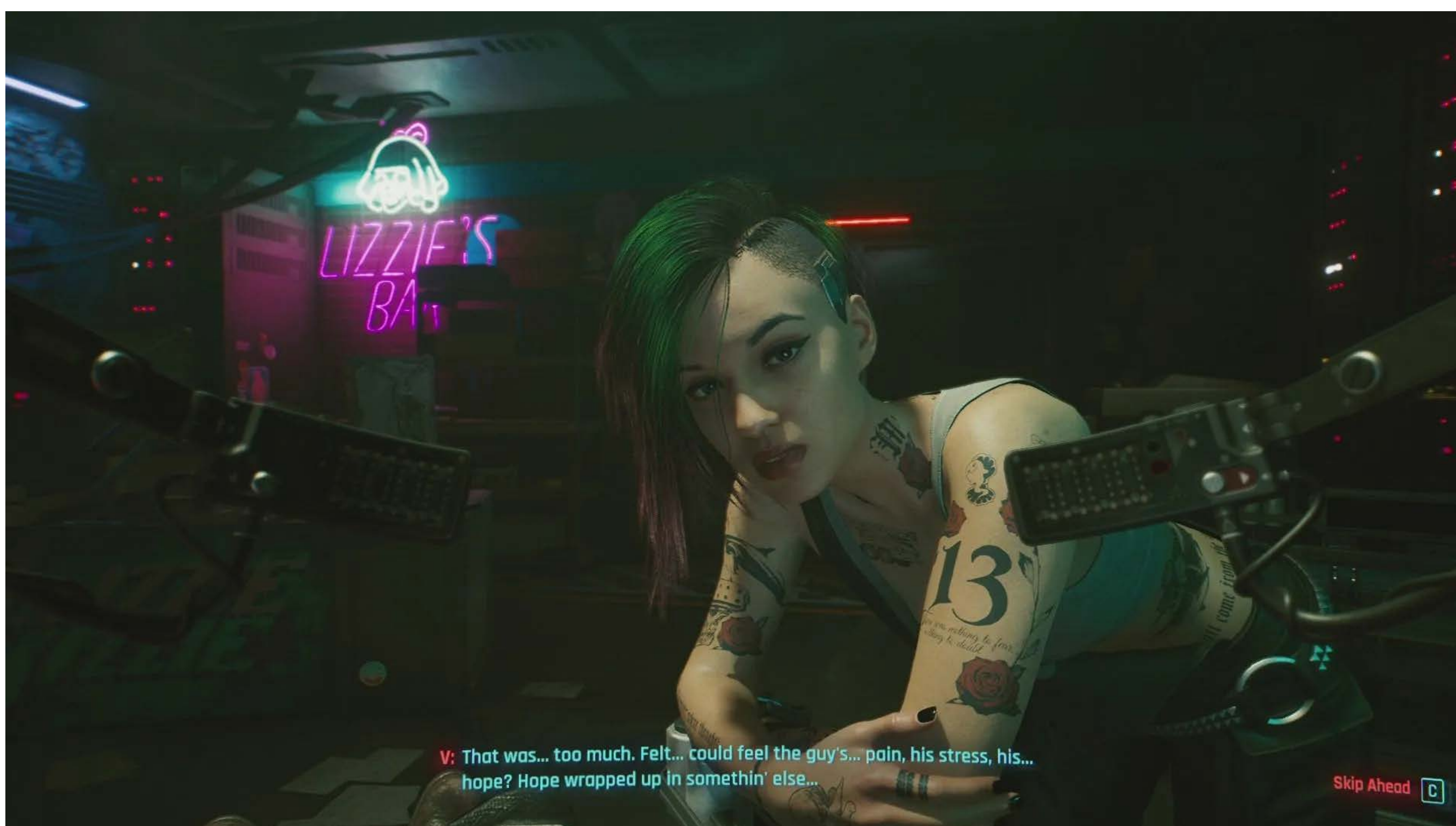


Figure.03.

V strongly affected by the emotions of the robber. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, *Cyberpunk 2077*® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. Cyberpunk 2077 game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The Cyberpunk 2077 game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.

This ultimately affects the player who is temporarily 'becoming' V — they have after all just experienced death thirdhand. This emotive condition of interiority moves through the boundaries of each autonomous interior — meaning it operates as an atmospheric condition that can affect both intra and extravirtual minds and bodies. This condition represents the 'possibility that the ephemeral and visually immaterial might construct interiority in its own terms.'¹⁸

To visualise and cement this single continuum of interiority in a way that identifies the temporal boundaries of each interior and their intimate atmospheric relationship, we can turn to the theory of foam. Specifically, I am referring here to the philosophical and networked approach of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, as detailed in his text *Foams*, the third volume of his *Spheres* trilogy. Foam, similar to interiority, is a fleeting form that manifests as a series of temporal processes Sloterdijk deems as 'leaps, redistributions and reformattings.'¹⁹ Foam is made up of autonomous cells, each consisting of its own 'self-augmenting context,' operating as 'an intimate space of meaning whose tension is maintained by dyadic and pluripolar resonances.'²⁰

Each of the six interiors in this BD narrative example operates as an autonomous foam cell that has its own intimate process of interiority. While the filmic walls of each cell do make visible an ontological separation, the cells remain tied within a singular

structure due to a tension or atmosphere that is capable of passing across boundaries and thresholds. This atmosphere, or air condition, infiltrates each microcosmic world and affects its social life.²¹ Equally as much as the physical infrastructure of the foam, it is this atmospheric affect that establishes the interiors as co-dependent. In this BD case then, the six interiors operating across intra and extra spaces, times, and scales are operating in a structure of coexistence, one that does not possess a hierarchy; that is, not one singular interior is producing an experience of interiority that is then distributed across the other interiors — but rather one of coequality, a multi-chambered system of mutual relations relaying back and forth and stabilising the whole.²² Artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah speaks of the filmic technique of montage in a similar way, arguing that seemingly mutually exclusive worlds with differing ontologies can be brought into a relationship, and, through that encounter, other onto-physical possibilities emerge that are not restricted or reduced to the condition of the individual.²³

Having made clear the dependent spatial relation between the extra and intra interiors at play in the BD narrative, the next section will now turn to Akomfrah's point exactly, the potential for alternative onto-physical experiences possible precisely due to interior coexistence. In particular, it will consider the ethics of witnessing and how the intravirtual BD experience of witnessing may affect and influence the extravirtual.

ethical witnessing

The contemporary extravirtual understanding and practice of ethics in western knowledge production remains restricted by both the historical 'province of conservatism' and the lack of definitive consensus.²⁴ European philosophical ontoepistemological reason, which defined the Modern order, most notably through the work of Decartes, Kant, and Hegel, established a global colonial understanding of self-determination, within which ethics was cemented as a defining attribute of the subject and the rights (he) possessed.²⁵ This Modernist framing of ethics springboarded off the earlier work of the Stoics who philosophised the Greek origin of the word; that is the search for the virtuous good (as an extension and reflection of the self).²⁶

While most Modernists stayed true to this Stoical foundation, they disagreed on other aspects including the distinction between ethics and morality, the relation between the individual and the collective, responsibility, proximity to the law — to name just a few. These disagreements infused ethics with a transient atmosphere of confusion. However, it is important to emphasise among this long-standing lack of clarity the 2500-year-old notion of ethics as centred on goodness (as the wise choice of man). Interpretations of ethics across epochs have largely circulated and reformulated this gendered (and racialised) argumentation, establishing a deep-rooted conservatism based on a narrow binary system of good (ethical) versus bad (unethical).

This discussion of extra and intravirtual ethics, and the potential production of an affective economy that binds them, is centred on the premise that ethics, in both realms, no longer occupies itself with the search for what is good. Rather, it begins from the belief that what ethics is searching for is not yet known, as the answer(s) exists in the future; however, we know now that ethics possesses a radical potential that can produce new values within the spaces where judgment breaks down.²⁷ The intravirtual BD is an example of this type of space. If we construct ethics in itself as a game, something philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud tentatively attempted through dialogue in 1979,²⁸ then the production of new moves and efficacies become possible when one changes the rules of the game; when the rules change, the ontology of the game also changes.

In light of this, what then happens when we attempt to generate new moves and efficacies by engineering an affective ethical atmosphere that can move through this already identified intra and extra interior dependent structure via processes of interiority? To put it more simply and overarchingly, how might the rules of a fictional future influence what ethics is and how it is practised in the present? Before turning to the BD as the setting for this speculative questioning, it is first necessary to expand on the action of witnessing, as this will be the act from which I will examine this affective ethical atmosphere.

Witness studies has developed as a field of scholarship at the intersection between the law, trauma, violence, and memory studies, resulting in ethical witnessing as a subfield reflecting that interaction. The act of witnessing, as assumed from this disciplinary intersection, has negative connotations of crime, of being in danger, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time — evidently emphasised by the role of the witness in legal proceedings. However, if we strip the act of witnessing down to its most basic definition, it is simply to experience something happen, to observe something taking place.

As an intravirtual technology, the BD is built out of the experience of witnessing, in fact, layers of witnessing that take form within the differing interiors. BD witnessing offers a broader set of intravirtual connotations than in the extravirtual realm, in part because BDs offer a variety of experiences that operate on an extensive emotional spectrum; there is no solely 'good' or 'bad' BD experience as they market themselves as being able to take the viewer on a rollercoaster of emotions from start to finish. Consequently, recordings of violence and trauma are transformed to reflect their primary purpose: to function as marketable experiences of entertainment and enjoyment. According to Night City legislation, BDs cannot be used as evidence in legal cases due to emotional and memory bias.²⁹ Alongside this, most of the time the witnesser is choosing to observe, often paying to observe, and recorders have deliberately

placed themselves in a position from which to record — meaning there is no 'wrong' place or time — even if on the surface it may intentionally appear so. Witnessing in this intravirtual context then becomes a more nuanced and entangled experience that challenges extravirtual binary associations.

Literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub have argued that witnessing is an affective encounter that not only shatters one's own worldview but also challenges one's agency to imagine oneself as an ethical and political actor.³⁰ As such, they assert that the witness becomes 'radically transformed by the very process of witnessing,' as the ability to interpersonally relate to oneself and the Other who is being observed produces affective connections that offer the possibility to negotiate new subject positions.³¹ To critically witness, then, is to actively question the construction of ethical relations among subjects and spaces.³² In my next analysis of another BD narrative, I will function as the critical witness by witnessing how intravirtual characters witness and how their witnessing constructs certain ethical relations within interconnected neural interior spaces.

In the previous BD, I analysed the 'test' robbery recording Judy played for V. Now I will look at the BD recording Evelyn Parker shows to V — the BD that plays an important role in the central narrative of the game. Before V views Evelyn's BD, they call their

netrunner (cyber-augmented hacker) T-Bug to be an extra witness to the recording and provide V with guidance on what to do while inside the BD. To offer a brief summary, the BD narrative has been recorded by Evelyn and shows her in a penthouse apartment owned by Yorinobu Arasaka, son and heir of Sabouro Arasaka who is the CEO of the leading Night City corporation, Arasaka. Yorinobu is shown speaking on the phone to an unidentified person, a phone call that reveals both his resentment and estrangement from his father and information about the Relic (a device we later find out to be a biochip that stores digitised human psyches called engrams). The BD also reveals that Yorinobu and Evelyn share intimate relations, providing the reason

Evelyn would have been able to get close enough to Yorinobu to capture the revealing recording (Figure 04). In this BD instance then, there are five central connecting interiors at play: V's neural interior (as primary witness), T-Bug's neural interior (as secondary witness), the extravirtual player (as tertiary witness), Evelyn's neural interior (as recorder), and the interior space of the apartment reproduced by the technology.

Figure 04.

Evelyn recording her experience with Yorinobu Arasaka in his apartment. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, *Cyberpunk 2077*® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. *Cyberpunk 2077* game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.



Let us return to my suggestion that ethical potentiality arises within spaces that break down judgment. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, characters accept, embrace, and suffer from the removal of everyday ethical decision making: choosing the good or right thing. Night City is framed as a place one must learn to survive, and as a result ethical judgment is positioned as a luxury the majority cannot afford. Those who can afford to acquire ethics (or goodness) as capitalist commodity, such as corporation leaders, police chiefs, and politicians, position themselves as above ethics, as power does not require it to function. As such, ethics manifests as a no man's land shrouded by irrelevance by both those who suffer in Night City and those who thrive within it. This context is heightened within the interior of this BD narrative, as it reveals the merging of both intravirtual positions — recorder and witnesses (doll, hacker, merc — in Night City, a doll is typically a sex worker and a merc is short for mercenary, a person for hire to do any kind of job, most often dangerous and illegal) representing those trying to survive, and the interior space of the apartment (and subsequently the corporate figure of Yorinobu) as a site where ethics is willfully made absent by power. As such, the singular and contained notion of the good or the right choice is not a viable lens of analysing this ethical context because it is ontologically absent from all intravirtual interiors and processes of interiority. Therefore, in order to engage ethics as present within the narrative, it needs to be framed as something other. This 'other' is a transition from binary judgment to affective atmospherics.

In this BD narrative, ethics does not mobilise as a good or bad choice but as the affective interaction that occurs among subjects and objects situated within a particular space and time. Ethics, then, is the shifting of ontological security that occurs within a particular engineered atmosphere, a repositioning of whom one *becomes* (in the Deleuzian sense) in order to respond to the demands of the situation. Put simply, ethics *becomes* the transformation of the self within time and space in order to respond to the temporal moment. The process of transformation itself is caused by the affective atmosphere produced by the coming together of a particular set of conditions, in this case, the merging of five interiors. Ethics also, then, operates as a process of interiority.

To make this claim, the thinking of lawyer Andrea Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos is useful. Previously, I used the term 'air condition' when describing the atmospheric foam structuring among the interiors; with this in mind, according to Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, air is a material manifestation of the informational, emotional, and sensorial continuum in which affects circulate.³³ This continuum is made up of elements, meaning that air itself becomes an assemblage of elements engineered to produce affect. Atmosphere, then, as Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos articulates, is the 'excess of affect that keeps bodies together; and what emerges when bodies are held together by, through and against each other.'³⁴

To identify this argumentation in the BD narrative, the affective elements that create the individual neural interiors of the three witnesses (V, T-Bug, the extravirtual player) and the recorder (Evelyn) leak across their time-space thresholds and enter the temporal interior setting of Yorinobu's apartment. Yorinobu's anger at his father interacts with Evelyn's fear and arousal, which interacts with V's nervousness and excitement, which interacts with T-bug's desire and trepidation, which interacts with the extravirtual player's own emotive state. This interaction generates an affective atmosphere so that, as an extravirtual player, it is difficult to distinguish an ontological singular sense of self because you become multiple — held in a temporal state of conglomeration. This is intensified

through the overlapping voices within the BD interior and the gameplay cue to move between audio (Figure 05), visual (Figure 06), and thermal (Figure 07) layers of the recording. As an extravirtual player, you are sensorially engulfed by the atmosphere. Important to note is the affective atmosphere will be engineered differently each time the temporal BD interior structure is formed solely due to the extravirtual capacity to affect the intravirtual. As our extravirtual emotive elements cannot be programmed, we possess the capacity to alter the atmosphere and process of interiority that arises. This in turn alters the extent and form of ethical transformation, further cementing its inherent motile basis.

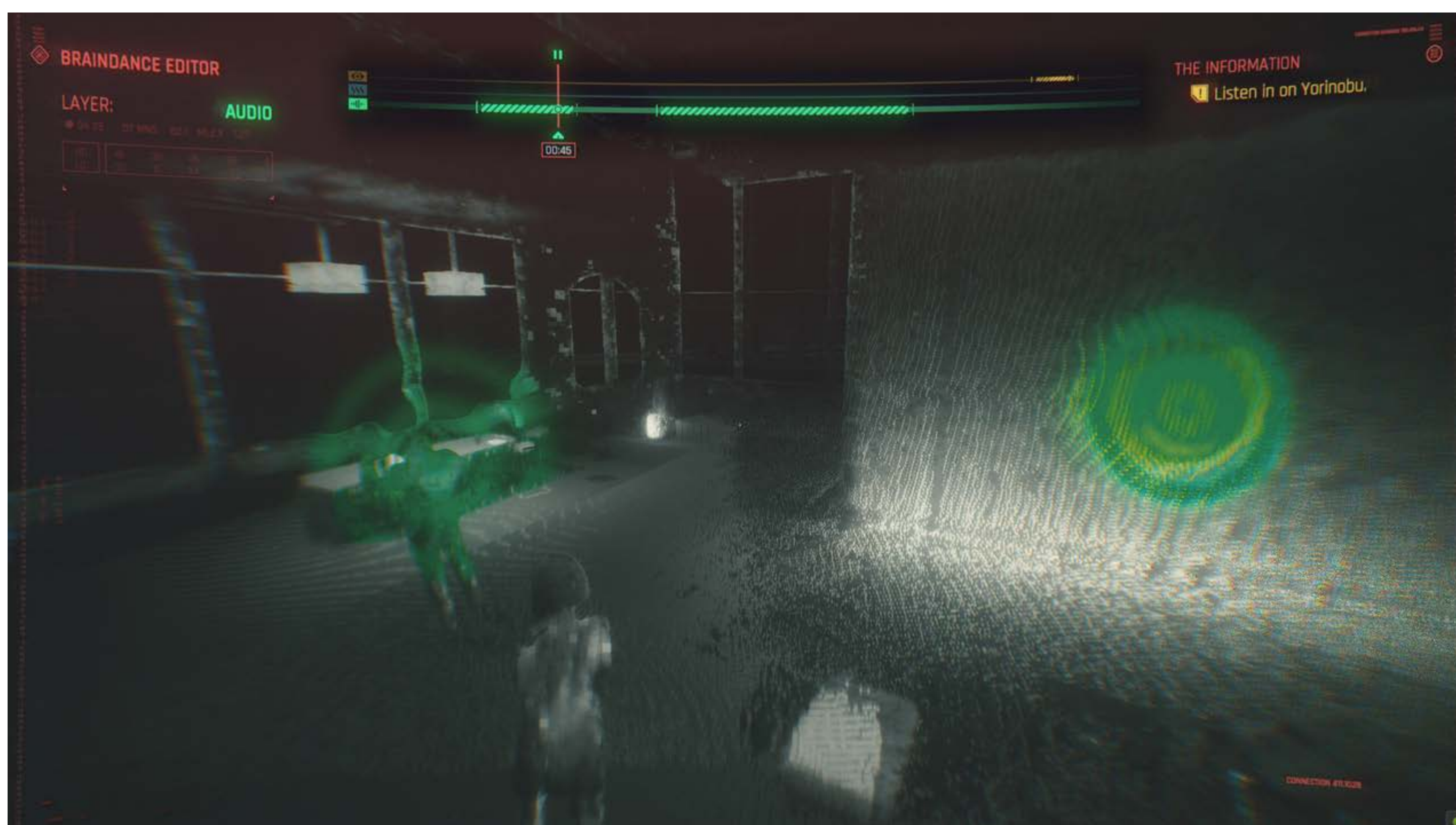


Figure 05.

Audio layer of the gameplay. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, *Cyberpunk 2077*® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. *Cyberpunk 2077* game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.



Figure 06.

Visual layer of the gameplay. Image credit: CD PROJEKT®, *Cyberpunk 2077*® are registered trademarks of CD PROJEKT Capital Group. *Cyberpunk 2077* game © CD PROJEKT S.A. Developed by CD PROJEKT S.A. All rights reserved. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game is set in the universe created by Mike Pondsmith in his tabletop role-playing game. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. With permission from CD Projekt Red.

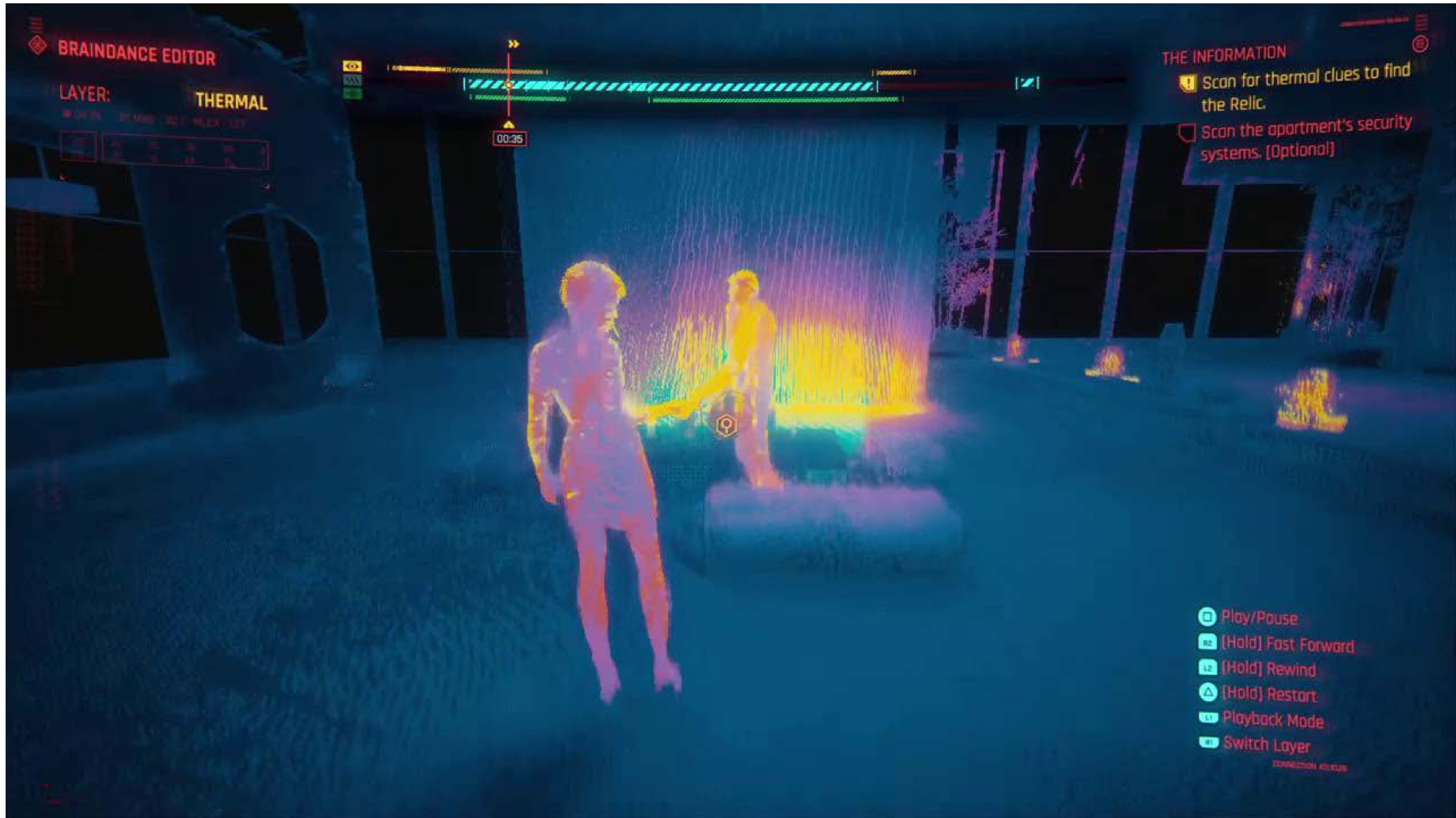


Figure 07.

Thermal layer of the gameplay.
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This totalising affect, which temporarily transforms the ontological self into a multiple site of influence, bears an interesting connection to the etymology of ethics. Stemming from the Greek word *ethos* (meaning character) and the Latin word *mores* (meaning custom), they combine to define how individuals interact with each other.³⁵ In other words, ethics at its root is not concerned with our individual ontological boundary or capacity to choose, but rather invested in the collapsing of boundaries through interaction. This takes us back to witnessing as a radical transformation process, and Felman and Laub's argument that interpersonal relations between observer and observed produces both affective connections and the possibility of new subject positions being formed.³⁶

In the BD narrative, the affective atmosphere as a process of interiority collapses the distinction between witnesser and witnessed. Through the ontological *becoming* Other (*becoming* more than the subjective self through the interaction of interiors) we lose an ability to distinguish between which interior is witnessing/being witnessed, which in turn produces a new temporal subject position. This position also erodes the intra-extra division because the player also experiences this collapse; the player moves within the BD as an interior structure rather than as a singular character. This entangled subject position manifests as a direct extension of ethics as atmosphere, as interiority, through

its foundation of affective assemblage. In *becoming* this new subject position, one is a convergence of situations, of truths; a singularity of experience is transformed.

This intra-extra blended context seeds the potential that extravirtual existence may have the capacity to depart from its longstanding commitment to ontological security and self-determination by cultivating an understanding of ethics as a multiplicity of situational processes. This leads us into a concluding discussion into the possibility of xenoethics as a framework of doing ethics otherwise, a starting point for this framing being that 'nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent or "given" — neither material conditions nor social forms.'³⁷ Could xenoethics be a critical element in the radical quest of rejecting neoliberal capitalism?

towards xenoethics

Xeno, simply meaning other or different in origin, has undergone a recent examination in multidisciplinary scholarship. While xeno constructions of feminism and architecture have been articulated,³⁸ xenoethics remains largely uncharted, with only loose references to its existence by creative practitioners.³⁹

Perhaps in an unconventional fashion, I offer xenoethics at this point in the essay as a way of identifying a path forward for theoretical development. The essay thus far has demonstrated that ethics can function as affective atmosphere, as interiority, as

a subject position assembled by multiple situational processes — all of which construct ethics as other (xeno) by departing from the history of the singular subject on a search for what is good. I have critically analysed the intravirtual spatiality of the BD to consider how ethical witnessing can undergo ontological transformation with the interior structure. This, in turn, has led to the question of whether spatial forms of xenoethics can be used to disrupt the norms of power that logiticise extravirtual neoliberal capitalism.

What this essay has made clear is that fictionalised and fantasy settings, as provided by videogames, produce viable spatial fields in which to explore xenoethics and the ontological pluralities its framework offers.⁴⁰ This exploration has the capacity to foster diverse economies through gameplay performances that reconfigure how space can be used in both intravirtual and extravirtual futures. Commons theorist Stavros Stavrides has made the argument that performing space refers to the performing of social relations, a process of living potentiality that combines experiencing and creating unfolding realities.⁴¹ I propose, then, that our collective task is to enact xenoethical-socio-spatial performances across multiple temporal thresholds and co-develop platforms where this knowledge can be shared and tested in the present.

author biography

Dr Cathryn Klasto is a transdisciplinary artistic researcher and theoretician with an interest in critical spatial praxis. They are currently a lecturer in Fine Art at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

notes

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