Research Paper

The 'Bleeding' of Love and Longing: Psychological Transference and Countertransference in the Role-Playing Game *Before Your Eyes.*

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Abstract:
Role-playing video games of the 21st century, as media that incorporate ludic and ergodic elements, attempt to offer more complex and dynamic interaction between players and characters of the game. These interactions involve the players' identification with the characters — the process of internalizing the character's narrative, roles, goals, and perceptions — and lead to the psychological immersion of the former in the latter. Furthermore, immersion results in 'bleed' which is the unconscious flow or transfer of emotional, psychological, and physical states between the players' self and the virtual self of the character. While bleed is an uncertain and unconscious phenomenon the intensity of which is subjective, many role-playing video games are designed to seek this experience. Video game architects attempt to draw out the positive effects of bleed to trigger the flow of particular emotions, especially those that can help produce catharsis — a state when the emotions of the player and the character are synced to produce powerful moments of emotional expression. In this paper, I analyze the various strategies of GoodbyeWorld Games' first-person role-playing video game Before Your Eyes (2021) to facilitate the psychological transference and countertransference of feelings of love and longing. My analysis of the game, based on experiential, interpretative, and theoretical study, recognizes four strategies that the developers employ in Before Your Eyes to facilitate bleed: first-person perspective or point of view, immersive gameplay mechanics that are based on cognitive and tactile feedback, abstraction in graphic design and weak social contract.

I. Introduction

The Collins English Dictionary defines a video game as "any of various electronic games that are played by manipulating an input device in response to the graphics on a screen" ("video game"). Though technically sound, this definition lacks a nuanced understanding of video games as one of the dominant emerging media and dynamic forms of interactive (audiovisual and kinetic) experience. Various game and new media studies have begun considering video games to be not only forms of entertainment or artifacts of contemporary culture, but also as media that includes everything from the ludic to ergodic. As a type of simulation, narrative, performance, and art, video games act as playgrounds of interaction, instruments of education, and objects of psychological studies. Furthermore, as video games develop, producing varieties of subgenres and incorporating experimental techniques of 'play' or active engagement, they introduce "innovative changes in audiovisual production and reception patterns" (Roig et al. 95).

In the 21st Century, the role-playing game, or RPG, has become one of the dominant and rapidly evolving genres in video games. RP(Video)Gs owe their origin to table-top RPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons (1974) and live-action role-playing games (LARPs) and share similar terminologies and narrative elements. Furthermore, they introduce psychological complexities of personal-individual perspectives toward player and non-player characters of the game. As Bowman and Lieberoth comment on role-playing games (RPGs) in general, they "can be ludic, narrative, and social – but they are always on some level, psychological experiences" (245). Role-playing video games, through the usage of advanced technologies and incorporation of experimental and interactive techniques in game designing, attempt to offer more complex and dynamic

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interaction between the player and the characters, leading to the psychological immersion of the player into the characters of the game world.

Many phenomenological studies on role-playing games have documented players' experiences of immersion where expressions such as 'losing oneself in the game' or 'being enveloped by the character' are recurrent. Immersion, in simple terms, is the absorption of consciousness and its (usually temporary) detachment from reality into an all-consuming environment. While immersion can also be perceived as a fundamental state of human consciousness, I am strictly limiting the definition to 'immersion as a phenomenon.' Furthermore, immersion occurs simultaneously at various levels and into myriad elements of the game world in role-playing video games such as immersion into activity, environment, narrative, community, and character. However, the scope of this paper limits the discussion only to the phenomenon of 'immersion into the character.' Immersion into the character refers to the experience of enacting the game character i.e., becoming the character by psychologically identifying and internalizing the character's narrative, roles, goals, and perceptions (Oatley 445). Identification of the self with the character plays a crucial role in enhancing and facilitating this kind of immersion in role-playing video games. Identification works in two ways. On one hand, it may cause the dilution of players' self and their immediate surroundings due to either the adoption of the character's perspective or an unconscious realization that similarity exists between the self and the character (Maccoby and Wilson 77). On the other hand, it may become a product of the cognitive and emotional state of immersion, leading to increased attachment to the character and the establishment of para-social relationships. In both ways, identification enhances the intensity and prolongs the duration of a player's immersion into a video game character, creating an optimum environment for the occurrence of 'bleed.'

Bleed is the unconscious flow or transfer of emotional, psychological, and physical states between the player's self and the virtual self of the character. It is of two types: bleed-in or transference and bleed-out or countertransference. Transference is the flow of emotions, thoughts, perceptions, and so on from the player into the character. When such a bleed occurs, the character becomes the extension of the 'self' where the player's emotions, personality, psychology, and perceptions take over the character's attributes. Conversely, countertransference is the flow of emotions, thoughts, perceptions, and so on from the character into the player. During this kind of bleed, the player loses the awareness of the 'self' as the character's emotions, personality, psychology, and perceptions take over that of the player. The terms transference and countertransference must not be mistaken for those used in psychotherapy. Though the phenomenon is similar to an extent, the relationship dynamics between the player and the character are very different from that of the therapist and the client. While there exists an objective distance between the therapist and the patient, role-playing video games attempt to reduce or remove that distance through immersion. Bleed is an uncertain and unconscious phenomenon. The frequency and intensity of bleed are subjective as some players may experience strong 'bleeding' when playing RP(Video)Gs while others may never experience anything. Nevertheless, bleed can be consciously sought and role-playing video games can be designed to cause the flow of particular emotions, especially those that can help produce catharsis — the state when the emotions of the player and the character are synced to produce powerful moments of emotional expression. Though many role-playing video games work on strategies to produce transference and countertransference and draw out their positive effects, bleed is intrinsically neither positive nor negative.

Before Your Eyes, released in 2021, is a role-playing video game developed by GoodbyeWorld Games and published by Skybound Games. It received the British Academy Video Games Award for Game Beyond Entertainment for the year 2021, which is awarded to honor "games that deliver a transformational experience beyond pure entertainment." In the game, you take the role of Benjamin Brynn, an 11-year-old deceased whose soul is picked up by a canine ferryman in its journey to the afterlife. The ferryman helps you to revisit your memories and relive the events of your life, beginning at birth. The game, through its innovative mechanics and emotionally resonant narrative, causes the bleed-in and bleed-out of feelings of *Philia* (Deep Friendly Love), *Storage* (Familial Love), *Philautia* (Self-Love), *Eros* (Romantic Love), and Longing. In *Before Your Eyes,* the developers strategically utilize specific perspectives of role-playing video games, narrative structures, graphic design techniques, and gameplay mechanics to facilitate the psychological transference and countertransference of feelings of love and longing. My analysis of the game, based on experiential, interpretative, and theoretical study, recognizes four strategies that the developers employ in *Before Your Eyes* to facilitate bleeding: 1) first-person perspective or point of view, 2) immersive gameplay mechanics that are based on cognitive and tactile feedbacks, 3) abstraction in graphic design and 4) weak social contract.

II

Perspective is one of the most significant aspects of role-playing video games as it dramatically alters the cognitive experience and the intensity of players' immersion in the game world and its elements. There are three types of perspectives in RP(Video)Gs: isometric or top-down, third-person, and first-person. The objective distance between the game world and its characters is highest in the isometric perspective, with a modest reduction in the third-person and considerable reduction in the first-person (which offers a highly immersive cognitive experience). *Before Your Eyes* employs the first-person perspective and substantially reduces the objective distance between the character and the world it is situated in. This allows the players to closely identify with and immerse themselves in the character. Despite being able to reduce the distance and, therefore, the distinction between the character and the player, perspective alone is insufficient in completely removing some residual awareness of the real-virtual divide arising out of the player's consciousness to 'play' the game i.e., the diversion caused by peripherals used to control the character in the game.

To overcome this impediment in the pathway of bleed, *Before Your Eyes* employs an innovative gameplay mechanic. The interaction with Ben's memories is carried out solely through an eye-tracking webcam. The game is designed in a way that it responds and progresses after reading the player's eye movement and real-life blinking. This results in enhanced cognitive immersion wherein the player's physical body and sensory perception become that of the character. The objective distance is effectively removed, the player's consciousness enters the game world, and the player becomes the character — feeling what the character feels due to countertransference. The game also occasionally uses mouse clicks to emulate interactive activities such as playing the piano or painting in the game world. Lieberoth, Lankoski, and Järvelä, applying the theories of grounded cognition and embodiment to the experience of role-playing games, argue that "immersion and bleed are natural consequences of how the brain works" since knowledge is "inseparably grounded to bodily states and modalities" (18). It simply means that when we experience some things through and in our body while role-playing. Even if we are aware of the fictionality inherent to the activity, our mind is affected. When the flow of the narrative and the length of the memory are controlled by the player's eye-blinking, the player identifies and assumes Ben's memories for their own. The eye-blink mechanism perfectly emulates the fleeting and fragmentary nature of memories. When a player involuntarily blinks and advances into the story sooner than they desired, the memories cannot be rewound and therefore a strong sense of longing to revisit the memories seeps into the player. In such situations, transference occurs where the player's own real-world experiences with their own ephemeral and fleeting memories seep into the character and blend with their in-game experience. Thus, the eye-blinking mechanism invokes in the player an intense longing for revisiting memories even if the particulars of those memories are neither derived from their life nor necessarily relatable.

Relatability with the situations and other non-player characters in *Before Your Eyes* is further achieved through abstract graphic design. Unlike most role-playing video games in recent times, *Before Your Eyes* does not have hyper-realistic environments and characters. Hyper-realistic graphics crystallize the individuality of characters. The consequence of this is that the players are neither able to strongly equate them to other people in their real life apart from a few personality traits nor are they subjectively able to perceive them other than what the game supposes them to be. Abstract environment and character design facilitate the players to redirect their feelings for and perceptions of other people onto the game characters. The story of *Before Your Eyes* is strongly rooted in relationships. The player unconsciously redirects the attributes of their father, mother, pet, romantic interests as well as their precious belongings and home into those of Ben's. Bleeding occurs when the player equates their in-game relationships to their relationships in real life. This phenomenon produces strong parasocial attachment and feelings of love within the game. The player momentarily loves Ben's parents, pet, love interest, belongings, and home with a similar intensity with which they love their own because they unconsciously assume his relationships to be theirs.

In the process of the formation of mixed realities where the real merges with the virtual through involuntary psychological transference and countertransference, a social contract plays an important role as a gatekeeper of the flow. In-game rules and aliases can be considered as social contracts that reduce the intensity of the bleeding process. The alias or the in-game character name is one of the most important facets of the social contract in role-playing video games. When the characters have names and the usage of these names is recurrent in the game, the process of immersion is affected and the bleeding phenomenon becomes weak. Though all the characters in *Before Your Eyes* have names, the narrative of the game dominantly uses a second-person address. In *The Cybertext Yearbook 2000,* Jill Walker explains that the usage of "'you' explicitly writes a narratee into the text" (9). When the non-player characters address the player character as 'you,' the player then exists within the game world as the character. Through the narrative technique of consistently using a second-person address, *Before Your Eyes* merges the player with the character and positions them as an active participant in the story

world. This leads to increased identification of the player as the character and the emotions of the narrative strongly affect the player. Though there are many instances in the game where the usage of second-person address during emotional in-game circumstances evokes strong feelings of love, one such potent instance is when Chloe asks Ben to close his eyes as she leaves a letter behind while exiting the room. The letter reads, "You *are* my first love." The second-person address instills a strong feeling of *Eros* (here, romantic love) and draws out a personal emotional response from the player.

<div align="center">III</div>

On a similar note, one interesting outcome of bleed is 'transgendering'. In role-playing video games, transgendering refers to the immersion and the subsequent transfer of emotions between the player and the character whose genders are different. Helen W. Kennedy, while examining the relationship between male players and Lara Croft (the protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* franchise), established the idea of transgendering in role-playing video games. Kennedy states that the relationship between the player and character "could be seen as analogous to the relationship between Case and Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Case is a "console cowboy" who is able to "jack-in" to Molly's sensorium and experience her actions and sensations – she becomes an extension of his nervous system" (2002). Thus, immersion in role-playing video games allows the bleeding of emotions free from the constraints of fixed gender boundaries. In *Before Your Eyes,* the player character, Benjamin, is a heterosexual male, and his relationships, especially romantic, are defined accordingly. When a female player or a player with a different sexual orientation immerses in the character of Ben, they are transgendered as the distinctions between the player and the game character are obfuscated. The merger of the character and the player can be considered as a queer embodiment whose feelings and the object of love depend on whether, at a given moment, transference or countertransference is taking place while playing. The fusion is not physical, as the perspective is of the first-person and Ben lacks an elaborate male body — a pure body of information that affects the process of identification. Rather, the fusion is emotional and psychological where, irrespective of the player's gender or sexual orientation, the player loves the character's romantic interest. This formation of a new queer identity in role-playing video games, in the words of Kennedy, "potentially subverts the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity" (2002).

As mentioned earlier, bleed is intrinsically neither positive nor negative. It is a phenomenon occurring unconsciously that players cannot necessarily control. The various strategies of game design in *Before Your Eyes* are aimed at exploiting the positive effects of bleed, primarily that of catharsis through intense emotions of love. Yet, it is also a game about longings, expectations, regret, and death. For the player, the narrative simulates the entry into the darker recesses of their repressed memories as it unfolds those of Benjamin Brynn, the character into whom the player is immersed. Excessive bleed may lead to the surfacing of repressed real-life traumas of the players. Also, during the instance in which the game viscerally captures the gradual loss of consciousness and eventual death of Benjamin, the player may feel suffocated, physically weak, psychologically disoriented, and depressed. Unchecked immersion of the player into the character can also lead to identity distortion when the character's personality traits are adopted permanently. Para-social relationships and extreme emotional attachments like loving non-player characters, in-game environments, and possessions can negatively affect relationships in real life. To overcome these impacts, *Before Your Eyes* attempts to steer away the player's self from the character by making the player aware of the game world and by distinguishing the character from the self. At the start of the game, a message reminds the players that "this is a *game* about blinking." Such a message strengthens the social contract and acts as an anti-bleed measure. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of steering away is not guaranteed. The reminder may prompt the players to steer away from the emotionally impacting experiences in the game, but they might end up being affected by them nonetheless.

II.   Conclusion

The phenomenon of the bleeding of feelings of love and longing in *Before Your Eyes* is extremely potent and indicates the immense capabilities of Role-Playing Video Games to affect our perceptions, cognitive experiences, and emotional and psychological states. Indeed, video games are not just forms of entertainment or artifacts of contemporary culture. They simulate what we call our realities and impact us as deeply as any real element, occurrence, or engagement does. To properly understand the significance of video games in our lives, it is important to play a game of questions. We must ask, "In what ways, to what extent, and in what intensities are video games transmuting and constructing our Self and how can we truly understand their role in the construction of our personal and cultural identities?".

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