Embody Kin with Games: Redefining Player-Game Relationships through Kinship Embodiment

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the concept of kinship embodiment, a multifaceted relationship between players and a game's virtual assemblage, where components such as avatars, NPCs, environments, and narrative devices dynamically interact to create a cohesive experience. Drawing on philosophical frameworks like dualism and animism, and incorporating perspectives from queer and Indigenous studies, the paper positions kinship embodiment as a new model for evaluating player-game relationships. Through a close-play analysis of *Hollow Knight*, the study demonstrates how the game balances immersive and outmersive elements, fostering an emotional bond that transcends established binaries. The metaphor of a molecule within a substance highlights how the interaction between player and game fluctuates, maintaining a critical yet intimate distance. By expanding the vocabulary of game studies, this research proposes kinship embodiment as a framework to assess games not just for their immersive and outmersive qualities but for their ability to cultivate a participatory and relational connection with players.

Keywords

kinship, embodiment, player-game relationship, immersion, outmersion, virtual assemblage

INTRODUCTION

Video games have often been evaluated through the lens of immersion, with many scholars emphasizing its importance as the hallmark of a successful game experience. From Murray's (1998) foundational exploration of immersion to Calleja's (2011) multi-axis framework, immersion has been broken down into increasingly specific terms like presence, involvement and incorporation. However, some recent work critiques the dominance of immersion, exploring alternatives like outmersion, which intentionally disrupts the player's immersion to foster critical engagement (Frasca, 2008). These contrasting approaches have sparked an ongoing debate in game studies, challenging scholars and designers to reconsider how we define a "good" game.

This paper argues that the dichotomy between immersion and outmersion is overly rigid and fails to capture the complex, dynamic relationships players form with games.

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Instead, it proposes the concept of *kinship embodiment* as a middle ground, where the player-game relationship is both immersive and outmersive, participatory yet reflective. Inspired by frameworks from queer and Indigenous studies and grounded in the interactive nature of video games, *kinship embodiment* redefines the player's connection to a game as akin to familial bonds—deeply relational, sometimes challenging, but always significant.

Using *Hollow Knight* as a case study, this paper demonstrates how a game can create kinship embodiment through its narrative, design, and mechanics. The analysis highlights how the game transcends established notions of immersion and outmersion, fostering a balanced relationship where players feel both connected to and distant from the entire game world. By proposing *kinship embodiment* as a new evaluative framework, this research aims to expand the vocabulary of game studies and provide designers with new tools to craft meaningful player experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Everything Is Equal in Virtual Spaces

Thinking and testing the application of traditional philosophical thoughts in virtual worlds and spaces, Chalmers raises an interesting point that dualism and animism, which seem to be not well recognized and proven in the real world, can be perfectly applied to virtual spaces (2022).

"René Descartes was the archetypal dualist, holding that minds are entirely distinct from physical processes. He held that thinking and reasoning go on in a separate, nonphysical domain, which interacts with the brain through a special mechanism" (Chalmers 2022, 256). Though Descartes' theory is widely rejected in the real world, it works perfectly in a virtual space. To prove this, here is the scenario: there is a group of people who were born in a virtual world. And "In the 'outside world,' which is the world we are living, they're strapped into immersive VR headsets" (Chalmers 2022, 265). Everything they ever see and hear comes from a headset and ultimately from the virtual world. "They never see and hear the outside world. From their perspective, the virtual world is their world. They experience avatars as their bodies move around the world. They build a life interacting with objects and other people in the virtual world" (Chalmers 2022, 265). In this situation, the minds of these people are non-physical in the virtual world but physically based on their brains in an outside world that they will never know. Their minds are separate from their physical bodies, and their minds and bodies interact through a mechanism that can never be understood in the virtual world, which fulfills the concept of Dualism.

Animism has been widespread in the indigenous traditions of different cultures believing that "at least living organisms, such as plants and animals, have these animating forces, and many have extended it to nonliving objects, such as rocks and clouds" (Chalmers 2022, 269). Animism is widely rejected in contemporary self-explanatory science, but we might have reasonably conjectured that animism was true in a virtual world by seeing that many special virtual objects have special causal powers of their own. For example, a gun may have special dynamics allowing a player to pick it up and fire it. In our real world, the behavior of a gun derives from underlying physics involving mechanisms within its firing mechanism, while in a virtual world, especially in video games, guns fire via special algorithms and codes governing such behavior. Sitting in my room by the table I bought on Amazon several years ago, I am

confident enough to say that this table is a man-made object without its own mind and agency because I can easily trace back its origin and process of manufacture. However, as a character in a fps game, I may find that once pulling the trigger, magically, a bullet will be spawned in the barrel with a velocity and acceleration. There is no logic or physics to explain such a phenomenon rather than saying that the gun has its own unexplainable mind.

Applying dualism and animism to virtual spaces, we know that players are combinations of virtual bodies and minds based on brains in the outer world. Nonplayer characters/objects are "controlled not by a brain in the outer world but by algorithms inside a computer in the outer world" (Chalmers 2022, 268). Therefore, I argue that everything is structured in the same way as a combination of a virtual tangible body and a separate, intangible, and indecipherable mind. Knowing that there is no limitation to the forms of virtual bodies, there is no way to tell the difference between players and non-player characters/objects. Same as any other non-player object, a player is no more than a single unremarkable element in the virtual spaces. Furthermore, this discussion implies and provides possibilities and spaces for discourse and analysis of equal and mutual relationships between players and non-player characters/objects. Because everything is equal in virtual worlds.

Dichotomy: Immersion vs Outmersion

Game scholars have interrogated the term immersion and argued for new specificity. Noting that the one-way trajectory of immersion popularized by Murray (1998) is doomed to oversimplification, they tend to use specific definitions to delineate immersion from presence, incorporation, involvement, etc. Calleja breaks down the distributed legacy of immersion and how it "refers to experiential states as diverse as general engagement, perception of realism, addiction, suspension of disbelief, identification with game characters, and more" (2011, 25). He proposes an alternative model as a multi-axis framework for incorporation, consisting of six axes of involvement between player and game.

This complication of player-game relationship is contextualized by Taylor's notion of "circuit of relations" as argued, "We do not simply play but are played. We do not simply configure but are configured. In the long run, this is not meant to be a one-way descriptive street but instead an approach that suggests a circuit of relations that runs across a number of actors, human and non, conceptual and material" (2009). Assemblage, a concept borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari[1], a dynamic ensemble that encompasses a network of heterogeneous components that interact, function together, or produce effects (1987), is the term productively depicting such a "circuit". Mukherjee has similarly used this frame in his discussion of video games and storytelling that there exists "a multiplicity where different identities, events and actions coexist and influence each other even as they are constantly actualized as options in the game" (2018, 214).

Each of the above approaches operate under the assumption of an implied goal of videogames—whether termed immersion, involvement, or incorporation. This ideal hinges on the player seamlessly "slipping back into involvement the moment any dimension requires the player's full, conscious attention... Intrusions from sources unrelated to the game environment detract attention from the game, undermining involvement and thus incorporation" (Calleja 2011, 171).

But what if this assumption is flawed? Some Game scholars explore this doubt further by looking at games that deliberately disrupt immersion. Outmersion, a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca (2008)[2], offers a broader categorization for games that procedurally create "critical distance" (Frasca 2001) by pushing the player out of the pool of immersion (Murray 1998) to experience the games from outside perspectives.

Frasca's early work on agency and immersion is built on dramatic theorists Brecht and Boal's work that "intended to break immersion in order to make the spectators view the representation from a critical distance" (2001, 173). Projected the idea onto video games that intentionally create "critical distance", Frasca developes his layered framework of outmersion as part of the player's experience. As summarized by Mukherjee, "outmersion" means critically analyzing the game from a distance, not being presently involved in the game activity (2018), while Frasca complicates the concept further by expanding it to what he describes as "meta-outmersion" meaning that player becomes self-aware of outmersion itself. In other words, the player sees herself critically reflecting on the game and connects this experience with the world outside the game, the so-called real world (2008).

Based on the model of outmersion, Berge argued the legitimacy of outmersive game design, the design of games that intentionally involve "dissonance, alienation, and critical distance", distancing the player from the game by "breaking their attention: drawing it to or outside the game" (2021, 37).

This creates a dichotomy between immersion (and its related concepts) and outmersion, placing them on opposite ends of a spectrum. It reflects a broader tradition in game studies to begin with dichotomies, such as the Ludology vs. Narratology debate. However, what comes next should be efforts to deconstruct these boundaries and explore mixtures or combinations of the two poles. In this case, we need to develop a practical, nuanced model that more accurately represents the diversity of existing games.

As discussed, immersive approaches rely on the ideal of a highly immersive environment, while outmersive approaches apply only to specific games that intentionally disrupt immersion. If we try to categorize most games using these two types of models, we often find that the games fall short of these strict, and arguably extreme, conditions. Are games inherently imperfect, or are our frameworks for understanding the player-game relationship inadequate?

I argue that it is more productive to deconstruct this dichotomy and explore new aspects and vocabulary to discuss the player-game relationship. By doing so, we can better account for the complex, dynamic interactions and relationships that exist between players and games.

Kinship in Games

Based on the previously mentioned application of dualism and animism in virtual spaces that assembles a system of interaction among players' minds, players' bodies, non-player objects' minds, and non-player objects' bodies, I argued the philosophical grounding of mutual communications within the assemblage of games. Based on Banks' social typology of player-avatar relationships including "avatar-as-symbiote relationships", there exists a social relationship in which players and avatars intertwine with each other (2015). Such a relationship contains "moderate or shifting

self-differentiation, moderate to high emotional intimacy, mixed player and avatar agencies, and emphasis on negotiating identities and sense-making" (Banks 2015, 13). The player doesn't simply "put on" the avatar like a mask or costume. Instead, both the player and the avatar participate in mutual processes of becoming more similar, typically toward an idealized version of the self (Banks 2015).

While Banks' model provides sociological and ecological perspectives on player-avatar relationships, it overlooks the broader, beautiful world that extends beyond players and avatars. Both discussions strongly suggest the potential for a model that depicts a player-game relationship as partially immersive and partially outmersive—simultaneously influencing and being influenced. Within these magical worlds, filled with social bonds, disembodied souls, and hard-coded yet indecipherable systems, the term that emerges most fittingly is kin.

"Making Kin with the Machines" proposes an expansive view of kinship, extending it to include nonhuman entities such as AI and computational systems. Kinship here is defined as a dynamic network of relationships based on respect, reciprocity, and interconnectedness. The article highlights that "everything is animate and has spirit...all my relations refer to relationships with everything in creation," (Lewis et al. 2018) emphasizing a holistic system where all components contribute to a shared existence. Similarly, in virtual worlds, especially games, players, avatars, NPCs, and environmental elements form an interconnected ecosystem, resonating with these Indigenous ontologies.

"Queering the Kinship Story" extends kinship beyond biogenetic ties, underscoring the significance of social narratives and shared histories. It argues that kinship stories are "constructed through relationships with others and are part of a relational rather than individual discourse" (Garwood 2022). This aligns with the narrative assemblage in games where players and virtual components collaboratively create meaning, producing a narrative that transcends traditional player-character dynamics.

I argue that by integrating these definitions, kinship in virtual spaces represents a multifaceted relationship between players and the game's components. Like Indigenous and queer conceptualizations of kinship. It recognizes the agency and role of all entities (players, avatars, NPCs, environments) within the game assemblage, interacting, functioning, and producing effects in a collaborative manner. It differs the player from the game though part of the game at the same time. It turns the player into a molecule within a substance, where getting too close causes them to be pushed away, and staying too far apart pulls them back together.

Kinship Embodiment: A Hybrid Concept

Drawing from the expanded definitions of kinship from Indigenous epistemologies and queer family narratives as discussed, the application of kinship to video games hones in on relational connection and shared narrative-building. However, in video games, there is a fundamentally differentiating element of embodiment in this relationship: in gaming, kinship is not solely about relational connection but rather includes physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement through interaction and control. The game embodies the relationship in its way of situating game worlds uniquely where kinship is not only created but also interacted with dynamically and through participation.

According to Gee, video games are “action- and goal-directed simulations of embodied experience” (2008). Players do not merely observe or engage with the game’s world—they inhabit and control it. This projection of the player’s identity and agency into the avatar and the game environment creates what Gee terms the “projective stance,” a duality where the players impose and be imposed by the games. This dual process of inhabiting and shaping highlights the embodied nature of gaming. Unlike previously discussed kinship concepts, which emphasize relational ties, games require active, goal-directed participation, allowing players to physically embody and cognitively engage with their environment.

Therefore, I argue that kinship embodiment integrates the relational and narrative elements of kinship from Indigenous epistemologies and queer family narratives. While by incorporating "embodiment," it highlights the action-driven and interactive qualities that are unique to video games. It positions the player-game relationship as an evolved form of kinship, where connection and embodiment converge to create a special bond. As a molecule within a substance, it makes the player a unique one.

METHODOLOGY

Close-play for analysis is an established practice in game studies (Dechering et al. 2018; Kleinman et al. 2018; Kway et al. 2018; Salter 2016). This study involved close-playing *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry 2017) to excavate the game design elements and strategies that invoke the feeling of kinship embodiment. it is important to consider what Salter (2016) note as attention to the larger context of play with consideration for the full “game narrative assemblage” (Taylor 2009), not only as an important aspect of close-play, but resonating with the definition of kinship embodiment I argued, a multifaceted relationship between a player and the game as an assemblage, where all components—player avatars, non-player characters, environmental elements, and narrative devices—interact dynamically to produce a cohesive experience.

ANALYSIS

Hollow Knight (Team Cherry 2017) is a 2D side-scrolling Metroidvania Soulslike game features non-linear and utility-based exploration and a large interconnected world map. Nominated for distinguished awards and had sold over 2,8 million copies, the game has achieved commercial success for its exploration, art aesthetic, combat system, and narrative. In the game, the player controls an insectoid, silent, nonsexual protagonist called "the Knight" exploring an underground fallen kingdom called Hallownest. The Knight can combat foes using a sword-like weapon called a Nail and can master spells for ranged attacks. Enemies drop a currency known as Geo when defeated. Initially, the Knight has a limited number of health points depicted as masks. Players can collect Mask Shards to expand their maximum health. Engaging in combat allows the Knight to accumulate Soul in a container called the Soul Vessel. If the Knight loses all masks, they perish, and a Shade enemy materializes at the death spot. This event causes the player to forfeit all their Geo and restricts their Soul capacity. Defeating the Shade is necessary to reclaim the lost Geo and restore the usual Soul capacity. Gameplay resumes from the last bench the Knight used, which are found throughout the game world and serve as both save points and locations to switch charms, a special type of item that provide various bonuses and special abilities. Initially, Soul is used primarily to "Focus" and heal masks, but as the game progresses,

players can unlock and use it for various offensive spells. More Soul Vessels can also be found, increasing the amount of Soul the Knight can carry.

Player and Non-player Agency

player agency is generally paramount in the game, with each leap, strike, and dodge being a direct result of the player's input. This responsiveness is key to the game's satisfying combat and exploration. However, there are pivotal moments, where the game asserts its narrative authority through the Knight's actions, which are beyond the player's control. These instances are not mere breaks in gameplay but are critical in lending the avatars a sense of their own will and mind.

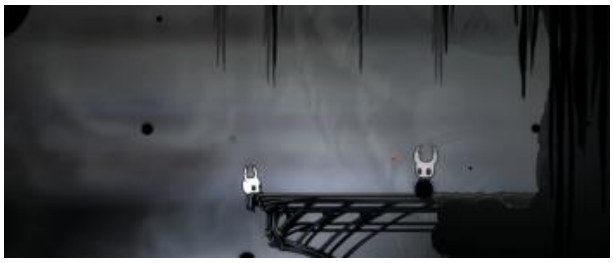

Figure 1. The Gaze

In Figure 1, the Knight, after scaling a cliff, pauses to regard Hollow Knight. The player's control is momentarily suspended as the game takes over, scripting a moment of stillness and contemplation. This instance, seemingly trivial in terms of gameplay, is profoundly significant for storytelling. It implies that the Knight, independent of the player, possesses an inner life, reflecting on the shared fate with Hollow Knight. This moment of non-player agency enhances the game's emotional depth and foreshadows the gravity of events to come.

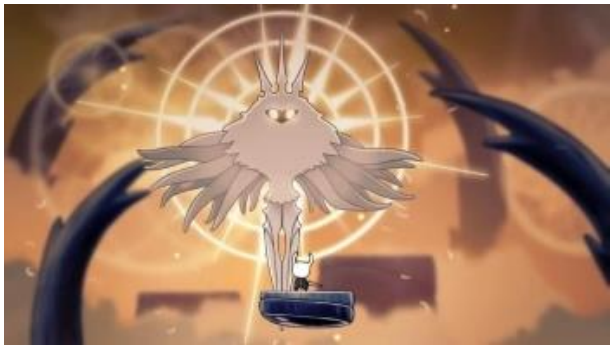

Figure 2. Declaration of Battle

The automatic gesture that the Knight makes when engaging the Radiance, as seen in Figure 2, is another example where the game momentarily asserts control. The Knight's unbidden action of brandishing the Nail is a ritual start to a dire combat that the player feels rather than initiates. This automatic action provides a smooth narrative transition into the battle, highlighting the Knight's readiness and determination as intrinsic qualities rather than mere reflections of the player's intent.

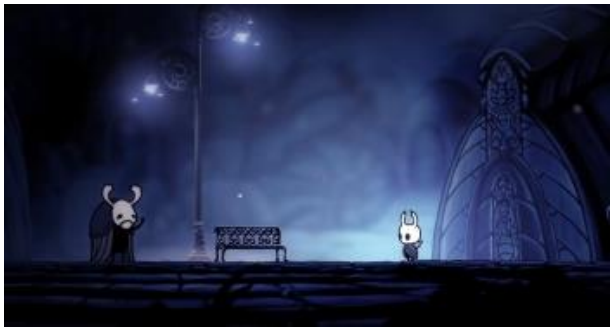

Figure 3. The Surprise of the Elder Bug

Figure 3 showcases the Knight's first encounter with the Elder Bug in Dirtmouth. If the player chooses not to interact, the Elder Bug's gesture of surprise is an unscripted reaction within a scripted event. This suggests that the NPCs possess their own awareness and expectations, reacting to the player's presence or absence in a way that imbues them with life. The Elder Bug's behavior encourages the player to engage with the world, as it creates a sense of living, breathing characters that exist independently of the player's actions.

The careful balance between player and non-player agency in *Hollow Knight* is central to creating a feeling of kinship with the avatars. The moments where the game assumes control are invitations for players to ascribe thoughts, feelings, and motivations to the avatars, thus fostering an embodied kinship.

Unlimited Revival and Permanent Loss

Unlimited revival and permanent loss in Hollow Knight dance with each other poignantly, making deep emotional impacts on players. These elements create a sense of connection with both the world and the characters in it. The game's Soulslike mechanics—demanding repeated play and revisiting the same locations—can initially feel tiresome, frustrating, or even disdainful. Players might traverse the same areas on the map countless times, growing weary of their details. However, these spaces and encounters hold deeper significance as they are often irrevocably altered or lost after specific events, leaving the player to grapple with the emotional weight of their absence. As the saying goes, "you never know what you have until it's gone."

This is perhaps best exemplified by Myla, a cheerful insect miner in the Forgotten Crossroads. When the Knight first meets her, Myla is happily digging and singing an optimistic, pleasant song, offering a rare moment of warmth in the desolate world. She cheerfully invites the Knight to visit her again, and her song becomes a familiar, if somewhat repetitive, part of the player's journey through the area.

Over time, however, Myla's fate takes a darker turn. After the Knight acquires the Vengeful Spirit Spell, her dialogue begins to subtly reflect the growing presence of the Infection within her. Following the defeat of the Soul Master and acquisition of the Crystal Heart, Myla succumbs entirely to the Infection, transforming into an aggressive Husk Miner. If approached in this state, the Dream Nail reveals fragments of her despair. Should the player choose to kill her, she lets out a haunting cry upon death.

Myla transitions from being an innocuous, even slightly irritating NPC with her constant singing, to a heartbreaking symbol of the Infection's reach. Her

transformation reframes those seemingly insignificant interactions, making players realize the beauty of her song only after it is silenced forever.

This interplay of unlimited revival with the permanent loss of characters and spaces gives Hollow Knight its unique emotional depth. The mechanic of unlimited revival, allowing players to always return after defeat, creates an illusion of permanence and control. Yet the game continually reminds players that some things cannot be undone: maps change, characters are lost, and cherished elements vanish, leaving only memories and the weight of what once was.

The emotional impact of Myla's fate mirrors real-life relationships, where routine and familiarity can lead to complacency or frustration. When loss occurs, it often brings an overwhelming sense of grief and longing, as players reflect on the value of what they once had. This blend of permanence and impermanence deepens the player's connection to the game world, creating a kinship that is not merely intellectual or mechanical but deeply personal and human.

One Bad Apple in the Whole Bunch

Zote the Mighty can safely be called one of the most controversial characters in all of Hollow Knight. Being quite full of himself, he claims to be the greatest hero in Hallownest and wields a shellwood nail he calls "Life Ender." To Zote, naming the nail gives it power. However, the truth is that the nail is completely ineffective, making it a perfect symbol of his inflated self-importance. Despite his boasts, Zote repeatedly finds himself in dire situations where the Knight must save him, though he never expresses any gratitude for these rescues.

Saving Zote early in the game leads to several encounters in other locations, each revealing more of his boastful and arrogant personality. For example, after being rescued from the mandibles of a Vengefly King in Greenpath, he blames the Knight for interfering with his "prey." Later, in Deepnest, he is found captured by spiders and once again requires the Knight's assistance. Despite these repeated rescues, Zote continues to belittle the Knight while boasting about his fabricated heroics, often taking credit for the Knight's achievements.

The frustration deepens when Bretta, another character rescued by the Knight, becomes infatuated with Zote due to his lies and self-aggrandizing tales. Her home, once filled with drawings and dolls dedicated to the Knight, transforms into a shrine to Zote. To add insult to injury, players must battle Zote multiple times—both in the Colosseum of Fools and as the dream boss Grey Prince Zote—to disprove his claims and restore their own reputation in Bretta's eyes. These battles, particularly the Dream version, are unexpectedly challenging, which adds another layer of frustration to Zote's storyline.

Zote's character design deliberately upends the traditional reward system in gaming, where saving someone usually results in gratitude, rewards, or camaraderie. Instead, Zote ridicules the Knight, takes credit for their accomplishments, and causes trouble wherever he goes. This inversion frustrates players and serves as a reminder that even in a game, life isn't always fair. The game forces players to deal with a character who is not only ungrateful but actively undermines their efforts.

This design serves two purposes: it momentarily breaks the player's immersion by challenging their sense of fairness and control, while simultaneously deepening their emotional investment in the game. Zote's infuriating antics provoke a visceral reaction, making players hate him. Ironically, this hatred strengthens their connection to the game world. As the saying goes, "the best way for someone to remember you is to make them hate you," and Zote embodies this concept perfectly.

By introducing a character like Zote, Hollow Knight adds depth and complexity to its world. He serves as a reminder of life's unpredictability, where not everyone is kind or grateful, and good deeds don't always lead to rewards. This interplay of frustration and engagement reflects the concept of kinship embodiment: players are momentarily pushed away from immersion, only to be drawn back in with greater intensity. While Zote's character arc may be aggravating, it plays a crucial role in making the game world feel alive, pushing players to navigate both joy and annoyance, much like real-world relationships. Through Zote, Hollow Knight delivers an unexpected lesson: life isn't always fair, and there will always be a "bad apple," but even those moments contribute to creating a memorable and impactful experience.

CONCLUSION

Kinship embodiment is best described as a multi-dimensional relationship between a player and the game's virtual assemblage; every element in it, including player avatars, non-player characters, environmental elements, and narrative devices, dynamically interacts in the creation of a cohesive experience. The term respects the broader relational framework of kinship while highlighting the action-driven and interactive qualities unique to video games. It positions the player-game relationship as an evolved form of kinship, one in which connection and embodiment converge to create a deeply immersive and participatory bond.

Hollow Knight serves as a powerful example of this concept, showcasing how a game can go beyond established notions of immersion or outmersion. The game does not fully adhere to immersive approaches, nor does it align with outmersive design, though it incorporates aspects of both. Instead, it creates a unique sense of connection between the player and the game as a whole—not just with the avatar but also with the visual effects, environment, NPCs, and narrative. This connection can be likened to the metaphor of a molecule within a substance: the interaction force maintains a balanced distance between the player and the game. If the player gets too close, the game pushes them away; if they drift too far, it pulls them back—mirroring the dynamics of real-life relationships with our kin. Moments of frustration or fatigue may arise, yet the underlying connection remains steadfast and vital.

Hollow Knight illustrates the need for a new framework or vocabulary to evaluate games beyond the established notions of immersion versus outmersion. The term I propose, "kinship embodiment," aims to redefine how we assess a game's quality. Instead of dismissing a game as "not immersive" if it falls short, we can ask whether it successfully fosters a sense of kinship embodiment with its players. A game might fail, not due to a lack of immersion, but because it does not cultivate this dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

This argument is grounded in philosophical concepts such as dualism and animism in virtual spaces, which establish the potential for mutual, equal relationships within digital environments. Building on this, I analyzed the dichotomy between immersive

approaches (including expanded concepts like involvement and incorporation) and outmersive approaches. I advocate for a middle ground—a balance between these extremes—where a game doesn't need to be hyper-immersive to be exceptional. Instead, what matters is the proportion of these elements, akin to mixing potions: the right balance is key.

The term "kinship embodiment" emerges to describe this middle ground. Borrowing from queer theory and Indigenous studies, I adapt the concept of kinship to account for the distinctive qualities of video games. Unlike kinship in real life, kinship in games incorporates dimensions of control and embodiment, where players dynamically interact with the game world. By combining relational and embodied elements, kinship embodiment captures the participatory bond that forms between players and games—one that is both tactile and deeply emotional.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The original French word used by them is agencement, translated as assemblage in English.

[2] The article is hosted on a now-defunct site.