Posthuman Gaming in a Time of Planetary Crisis: Human Agency at the Crossroads of Technology and Ecology in *Signalis*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Huizinga (1955)'s seminal thesis that play precedes human culture draws attention to how digital games can operate beyond human-centered play in our current digital era. The rise of artificial intelligence amidst the convergence of new media technologies and human activity reveals the precipice at which gaming has become a posthuman phenomenon. As such, video games can be viewed as sites where human players are at the crossroads between digital technology and a planet that is in ecological crisis. The video game *Signalis* (rose-engine 2022) is one of many quintessential examples in which gameplay has become an *embodiment* of posthumanism. As humans, we not only play *for* a time of crisis but also play *in* a time of crisis. In this paper, we propose that "posthuman gaming," as exemplified in *Signalis*, both embodies (i) the destabilization of human agency and queering of human identities at the onset of planetary crisis, and (ii) the reinvention of horror games as a lens to re-imagine ways to confront ecological crises.

Signalis' posthumanism extends beyond the emancipatory postulation of transhumanism or simply playing as nonhuman, as the game further destabilizes the anthropocentric discourse of "man saves nature" through its aesthetics, narratives, setting, and gameplay—enabling what this paper will argue as "posthuman gaming." As a *Replika* (cyborg) unit named "Elster," human players must fully immerse themselves into the material assemblages and networks on unknown yet dying planets, while confronting other cyborg bodies during planetary crisis. The cyborg body itself suggests an unstable entity (or assemblage), echoing with what Puar (2012) argues as a posthuman intersectional understanding of bodies. This "cyborg embodiment" is also in line with Keogh (2018)'s perceptual approach of understanding players as a cyborgian amalgamation of player-and-video game. Furthermore, rather than escaping or reviving a dying planet, the players' goal is to retrieve fragments of memories for the sake of their (queer) lover's salvation, who is a human *Gestalt* ("shape" in German). This revelation towards the end of the game, or a *queering* of futuristic dystopia, seems to turn this posthuman tale into a queer romance and a mere psychological manifestation of fear and trauma at first glance. Nonetheless, the nonlinear and fragmented narrative of *Signalis*, apart

from challenging our human perception of temporality, also elicits what Keogh (2018) identifies as the hegemonic hacker's pleasure of bringing a digital Culture to a digital Nature. According to Keogh's account of cyborgism, human players are always integrated with, embodied through, and constituted by the video game—to which bodies are at once flesh, audiovisual, and hardware. In a similar vein, the game requires us to *feel* while *being* the cyborg bodies of Elster-player's.

In addition to using Keogh's concept of cyborgism, our examination of *Signalis* also shares many parallels with Poppy Wilde's "posthuman gaming" (2023). Nonetheless, our analysis offers key divergences from Wilde's avatar-player model developed from *World of Warcraft*, and aims to expand upon her definition of "posthuman gaming" by re-examining the cyborg via Elster-player. For instance, Wilde positions the cyborg as an extension of the (human) self that is still grounded in an anthropocentric worldview, and thus omits the cyborg model for exploring the posthuman "avatar-player" in favor of positioning avatar-player entanglement as a broader posthuman gaming phenomenon. However, we propose that the cyborgian model is not necessarily antithetical to posthuman gaming, but rather reinforces the significance of the gaming medium, as well as the specific game genre. For example, the act of playing as Elster, a fixed avatar, in *Signalis* bears great significance in conjuring posthuman embodiment that is equally informed by the player and specific game object; whereas Wilde's avatar-player model is less medium-specific. Moreover, we also argue in line with Joy (2015) that posthuman embodiment (via cyborg) is not limited to heternormative bodies, nor does posthuman gaming necessarily overshadow issues of power and identity involving queer gamers. Rather, cyborgism, or cyborg embodiment, can be utilized as a means to empower queer identities, as a counter to the dehumanization of queer people and their designation as non-human. As such, the Elster-player must be manifested, embodied, and performed in order to progress and make sense of the fragmented gameplay of *Signalis*, which we believe demonstrates a strong compatibility between queerness and cyborgism in "posthuman gaming."

Thus, queerness and queer ecology in *Signalis* should be seen as a manifestation of posthuman agency. Neimanis (2017) proposes the notion of water gestationality to reject the traditional understanding of the world through human heterosexual reproductivity. One can draw parallels between such nonhuman gestationality and Bioresonance, a phenomenon that is vital to the game's narrative and dystopian setting. Bioresonance, a form of bio-psychic power (or "technology" in the game) possessed by the Gestalts, is capable of manipulating thoughts and reality, and even creating the life of *Replikas* via neural pattern duplication of the *Gestalt* host. In addition to being an omnipresent phenomenon, we can also understand the entanglement of Bioresonance as a form of viral "sickness" which is depicted through the infection and corruption of *Replikas*. This viral entanglement reveals the concept of ecological horror as a result of human-centered hubris and the drive towards technological advancement at the cost of environmental destruction. The core of this ecological destruction stems from the technological development of *Replikas* which can be seen as queer embodiments of cyborg identities that challenge human (*Gestalt*) agency. Yet as previously emphasized, cyborgism in *Signalis* does not necessarily have to override or diminish the real-life experiences of queer subjects—in fact, it can even embrace them by challenging the normativity of humanistic and heterosexual reproduction.

Apart from ludic queerness, the thematic horror in *Signalis* also lays the foundation of *playing with* the unknown as both posthuman and a fear of the ecological Other which indicates the emergence of "posthuman gaming." The horror genre often depicts "symbolic representations of reality" where "monsters or ghosts stand for a feared Other" as a

metaphor for fears of race, sex, and class, and narratives (Sayad, 2021). The feared Other in the case of *Signalis* is represented by the queer embodiments of cyborgian *Replikas* that ultimately become corrupted through the human subjugation of nature—resulting from the anthropocentric division between natural and cultural phenomena (Latour, 1991). This humanistic conquest of nature driven by technological advancement also highlights the posthuman horrors that arise from the "interfaces and integrations of humans and technologies" that enable a posthuman subjectivity (Bolton, 2014). The narrative of *Signalis* recalls the failures of transhuman optimism by reminding us that *you cannot save the world* through a superficial integration between human and machine, nor by ignoring the "interconnected violence against and across the planet" (Cohen, 2023). The destabilization of human agency and the queerness of cyborg embodiment as showcased in *Signalis* reveal a unique convergence between posthumanism, queer subjectivities, and horror games, while demonstrating how posthuman gaming might serve as a useful framework to rethink and reimagine our current planetary crisis.

To conclude, this paper aims to further develop the concept of "posthuman gaming" through a close examination of *Signalis* and its queer, posthuman embodiment in its gameplay. Not only does the posthuman embodiment of Elster-player destabilize the human-centric agency and desire to conquer, but its survival horror atmosphere (and play mechanics) also fosters new ways to better position humanity within ecological crises. We hope to create more productive conversations on how to reconnect with ecology through technology, instead of merely seeing them as two ends of the spectrum.

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