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Special Issue

**Revisiting Teaching and Games. Mapping out  
Ecosystems of Learning**

edited by

Björn Berg Marklund, Jordan Loewen-Colón and Maria  
Saridaki

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# Let the Magic Circle Bleed. Bridging the Gap Between Games and Reality

Jessica Creane

### Abstract

Games are often intended to draw us so completely into a fictional world that we forget that there is a world outside of the game, however, forgetting ourselves in a game means we must *come back* to ourselves at the end, begging the question: who were we when we were playing? The conventional wisdom of the magic circle (Huizinga 1949) suggests that we press pause on our real lives when we enter a game space. Identity permeability in games, or *bleed*, (Stark 2012) suggests that there is no such pause button; that players lend their agency and identity to an in-game role, where that agency and identity is altered by the gameplay such that when the players *return* to themselves they are in some way changed. Bleed occurs when in-game learning is so effective that players experience that learning across two realities, evoking a shift in world view. This is where educational environments become necessary; providing context and community as players learn to re-think their out-of-game reality based on in-game experiences. In this report, I will outline the relationship between the safety of the magic circle, the illuminating potency of bleed, and the role of educators and facilitators in bridging the gap between games and reality.

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**Keywords:** Magic Circle, Bleed, Larp, Role-playing Games, Playable Theater, Game Education, Player Identity, Immersion, Impact Games, Role-less Role-playing, gameenvironments

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It is entirely commonplace to pause a video game. This lovely little feature, pioneered by Jerry Lawson in the 1970s (Murnane 2016), allows us to feel as if we can move back and forth between two realities whenever we please; opening and closing a portal to a world in a different time period, with a different social contract, or with different laws of physics, all of this accomplished with no more than our finger pads. Oh, the power. The power, however, goes only one way, as we have yet to figure out how to pause corporeality to enter a virtual reality. The digital world, once paused, may wait for us without a perceivable passage of time, but our physical friends, families, colleagues, and bodies will not. No matter how immersed we become in a game, how powerful a flow state we enter while playing, or how deeply we relate to a character we are playing, we can never press pause on being ourselves.

Despite the persistence of our physicality, the guise of playing a game as a character can sometimes lead us to feel as though we take a break from being ourselves. In this way, we can compartmentalize our in-game actions as serving a master other than ourselves, be it a compelling character, a good story, or an in-game win. This buy-in to the story ultimately allows us to justify abiding by (or not abiding by) an entirely different social contract than the one we are accustomed to in our out-of-game lives.

The practice of making choices based on (potentially) dramatically different criteria than the ones we are used to is, in essence, an act of visioning. Visioning is a common, sometimes meditative, practice of imagining a future scenario (starting a company, marriage, interstellar travel) and thinking through what actions one would take to reach or thrive in that scenario. Visioning serves as a way to inform our choices in a present scenario (for instance, accepting a promotion at your current job, beginning to date after a long hiatus, or investing in companies exploring space travel). The difference between traditional visioning and visioning by way of

gameplay is that traditional visioning is grounded in personal cause and effect whereas gameplay visioning often outsources that cause and effect to a character, thereby absolving the player of contextualizing what their in-game decisions can teach them about their present out-of-game lives.

This does not mean that in-game visioning cannot help us to better understand ourselves. Games play an important role in helping us to better play the role of ourselves; a role we are both stuck with and blessed with, depending on our perspective on any given day. It is also a role that provides us a great deal of agency and myriad choice points. According to Jesse Schell (2008, 320), "freedom... forces your imagination to work hard." Role-playing games, while likely not as freedom-rich as real life on a moment-to-moment basis, are freeform thought experiments that invite us to step into the mindset of a character or into the challenges of a particular scenario and figure out what to do within the constraints of that scenario. With so many role-playing games to choose from, I can decide if I want to spend 60+ hours as an assassin in a video game or two years of Sunday afternoons as a Cleric in a tabletop campaign. Whatever I choose, I am committing to spending time thinking through the consequences of my actions, or rather my character's actions. No matter what social contract my character abides by, it is the player's mind that thinks through the options. It is tempting to assume that because it is my player-mind that is doing the processing around choices for my character that I can easily apply what I learn in the thinking process to choices I make out-of-game, however, most games are designed to be immersive, to pull us into the story in such a way that we forget who we *really* are. This may allow a player to get better at a game over time but not necessarily to improve at extrapolating from in-game learning as a means to improve their experiences outside of the game.





of the cell and the outside environment. This barrier protects the very particular internal environment of the cell, however, it also opens up to allow for information and materials to pass through in both directions. The cell's membrane is semi-porous, letting some materials pass through easily, keeping other materials out, and allowing some materials to pass through only under particular conditions (say, when they hold a positive electrical charge).

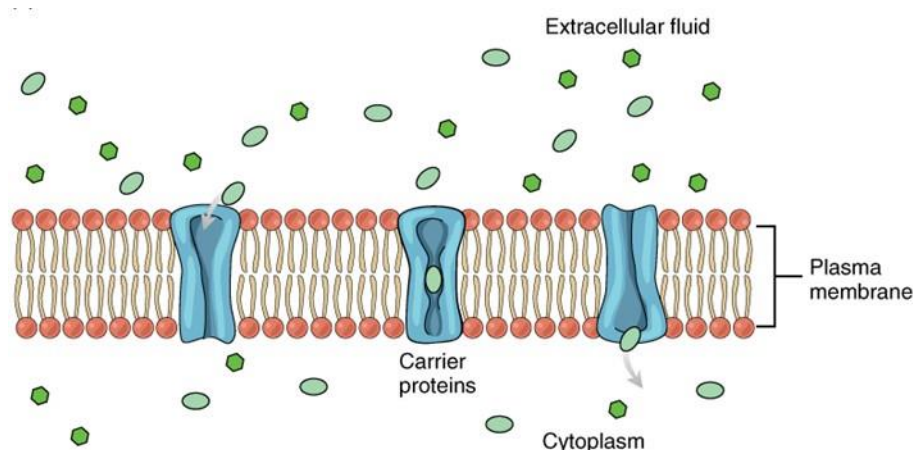


Figure 1. Cell membrane (Wikimedia Commons 2020).

The magic circle, like a cell membrane, contains within it a rich internal environment that is separate from the outside world, yet it is more permeable than we often realize. Players, for instance, travel freely through the barrier with minimal interference. Generally speaking, any player who willingly chooses to enter or exit a game state may do so. A game will not hold a player hostage inside its walls or it ceases to be a game at all. According to author and philosopher James P. Carse (1987, 4), "it is an invariable principle of all play... that whoever plays, plays freely. Whoever must play, cannot play." Our free will moves fluidly between in-game and out-of-game realities.

Other materials are largely confined to one reality or the other. My to-do list, for instance, is unlikely to follow me into a game space in a meaningful way. Even if I am







game had not started yet, that I was in a tutorial and therefore must fight just this once in order to proceed with the game. I was wrong. I had not tried hard enough to find a peaceful path to success. I erased the game and began again. It did not matter. I spent the rest of the game being reminded of my thoughtless, rash behavior. Each time the narrator called me out I thought back on a time I had been thoughtless or rash in an out-of-game scenario, most often recalling the times I had killed a bug in my vicinity because I was too lazy to bring it outside. I, Jessica, did not really kill anyone by playing *Undertale*, yet through the narrative of the game, I understood myself to be a person who is capable of rashness and violence in my life out-of-game as well as my in-game life. I brought my out-of-game experiences to the experience of playing *Undertale* (bleed-in) and *Undertale* provided a scenario for me to contend with my actions both in and out of the game (bleed-out).

### Playing with Bleed

The designer of *Undertale*, Toby Fox, consciously utilized the principles of bleed as a game mechanic, creating in-game consequences for players' out-of-game morality and regret, forcing the player to think about the permeable relationship between their avatar and themselves. According to author Russ Hudson, "presence is not a trance; you can be present with yourself while thinking about the future," (Parrish and Hudson 2020) yet most game designers either think little about bleed or avoid it like the plague, aiming instead for a player's full immersion in a fantasy world, exemplified by players forgetting that there is a world outside of the game or a *them* outside of their character. It is a sysaphusian task these days to define *immersion* but, for our purposes, we will take our lead from the immersive theater organization No Proscenium and say that immersion is "an experience that physically and (usually) narratively puts the audience on the same plane in which the primary action of the









Figure 4. *Fat Man Down*.

Each of these games pokes conscious, thoughtful, evocative holes in the magic circle, inviting players to examine, within the membrane of a game, the context and motivations behind their actions and desires, and subsequently to take that examination with them when they leave, applying what they have learned to their out-of-game life. Players feelings in-game are not simulated or disembodied, they are simply processed in a different context than they would be out-of-game. For Brice, a simple visioning exercise of a player who reads about the game and decides not to play it because it would be too painful, is an examination of the permeable membrane of the magic circle.

### Passing Through the Magic Circle

Bleed-inducing games are not without risk. "Play has a life of it's own. It can be guided, but never controlled" (Pearce 2011, 10). Designers specifically ask players to actively consider altering their identity, not just in-game but out-of-game as well, based on what they learn about themselves while playing. To drive the point home, each of the three aforementioned games is a somatic experience as well as a cerebral one. Players physically take actions in the game with the exact same body they will have when they exit the game, a body that might develop a knot between the shoulder blades during gameplay that will still be there the morning after the game. The risk of bleed-inducing games is not just that players will reject the possibility of self-growth but that they will embrace it, and, by extension, enter into a crisis of identity that affects them in ways the game designer could not foresee.

According to game designer and futurist Jane McGonigal (2011, 20), one of the things we must overcome in order to see games that are full expressions of humanity is that "...we're afraid of losing track of where the game ends and where reality begins." To mitigate and contextualize this risk, many larps build in a post-mortem; time for players to gently pull back from the events of the game and talk about their experiences in community rather than alone. This conversation might be led by the person who ran the game or it may be self-guided by the players. In educational settings, it is often a teacher who guides this process. More on that later.

In this time, players begin to tease out the nuances of bleed; which aspects of the game they have just stepped out of are still within the magic circle, which they have consciously carried out with them out, and which have stuck to their proverbial shoe; unanticipated emotional stowaways from their experience while immersed in the game.

If a game has induced bleed in a player they may wish to take stock of where that bleed is coming from, which sometimes brings them into memories of past actions, current desires, or other complex human experiences. Integrating a new understanding of oneself into a currently held identity is no small feat. People tend to make connections between what is important and what is easily retrieved from memory, sometimes conflating those two things or substituting an easier question for a hard one, both of which are all the more likely if players rush the thinking process (Kahneman 2011). In an intense game, one does not simply step over the magic circle and return, unaltered, to their out-of-game identity. To consciously process the experience, players may need to move through the membrane slowly and thoughtfully, like waking from a vivid dream. When we move from an in-game environment to an out-of-game environment we are not dropping a character so much as switching roles. We have no fewer roles to play out-of-game (student, daughter, wife, brother, parent, etc) than we did in-game, in fact, we are likely to have far more roles demanding our attention when we *come back to ourselves* than we did while playing an in-game character. The question is, how has our perception of those roles, or our embodiment of them, been altered by the gameplay?

**Role-less Role-play**

Thus far, we have focused mainly on the relationship between improvisational narrative games (mainly larps and role-playing games) that invite players to create and/or play as a character who is distinct from them in some way; to add a layer of fiction to the persona they are choosing to embody or, in the case of video games, control. This next section takes us into a category of games that I call *role-less role-playing*. Building on the earlier assertion that we can never press pause on being ourselves, this paradoxical term leans into the act of role-playing entirely within the

constraints of the roles we play outside the magic circle, roles we play when we are consciously not playing a game.

Before we go any further, it is important to note that there is value and complicity within role-less role-play, role-play involving character creations, and everything in-between. As a life-long theater maker, writer, performer, and director, roles have featured heavily in my life in fictional and non-fictional forms and I have an insatiable love for exploring the world through role-playing. What follows is an exploration of a distinct form of role-playing that is no less narratively driven or emotionally impactful than traditional role-play, rather one that speaks directly to the pervious membrane of games and reality, work that I have been actively engaged in as a game designer, larp writer, immersive theater creator, educator, and performer.

My personal interest in both the magic circle and bleed, and later role-less role-play, began in graduate school. Technically, I was not even studying game design when I signed up for a class on the history of games. I was finishing up an MFA in Devised, Ensemble Theater and had talked my way into a games studies class to learn about a different kind of play (or rather *plays*) than I was accustomed to. I began to voraciously explore the world of role-playing games, larps, interactive performance, and somatic practices while creating artistic work that contended with the relationship between player identity and transformation in and because of games. Role-less role-playing explores the idea that each of us contains within us a multitude of out-of-game roles (teacher, son, nihilist, optimist, aspiring entrepreneur, etc) and there is power in playing these roles in a game form without hiding behind the facade of a character. Role-less role-playing also implies that it is entirely possible to engage in a role-playing game within the constraints of our internal roles rather than

as a fictional character with a name, family, job, social status, relationship status, etc that we have never experienced, though, again, both forms of role-playing deserve our consideration.

Role-less-ness does not mean that a player does not play as a person. As with *Undertale*, this form of role-playing keeps players in conversation with their past actions, present emotions, and future desires. In role-less role-playing, players' in-game actions are constrained by their out-of-game perceptions of self. They cannot do anything in-game that they are not capable of doing out-of-game, thus raising the stakes of each of their in-game choices and increasing the likelihood of bleed.

### **Role-less Role-play in Action**

The first game design/theater fusion piece I worked on was a playable theater piece called *Chaos Theory* in 2018. The piece creates a fictional scenario for players to enter into and casts audience members as themselves, inviting them to write down two things on a name tag when they enter the world of the piece: their name and their chosen area of scientific expertise, both drawn on their regular lives. For the latter part, audience members wrote down everything from *astrophysicist* (if they were, indeed an astrophysicist) to *succulent-ologist*; anything they felt they could speak authoritatively on. They were playing the role themselves, simply emphasizing their expertise in their chosen field of study. This was my first foray into crafting an experience that employed role-less role-play, keeping players firmly grounded in their own bodies while also highlighting their knowledgeability in a particular realm. The impact of this small act of self-identification is that players frequently a) feel good about themselves for being reminded that they possess expertise, b) more readily build connections with those around them since they already know a topic

that each audience member is keen to chat about, and c) felt comfortable in the world of *Chaos Theory* because they knew what was expected of them; specifically that they can both choose how to present themselves to others and also that they need not know anything about the actual science of chaos theory to play through the piece, seeing as that is not their stated area of expertise. Players are equal parts constrained in their role (based on their chosen area of expertise) and in control of their role (by choosing their expertise themselves) and while the initial ask invites them to play up a certain part of themselves it does not ask them to use fiction to justify it.

Throughout the piece, players engage in scientific experiments in the form of multiplayer games. Each game invites them to explore their personal relationship to order and chaos. By the end of the piece, they have created a list of experiments they wish to conduct in their out-of-game lives and they have been given a pep talk by a stranger to encourage their success. Some players have even taken a first step toward making their experiment a success or connected with other audience members who can help them on their journey. Players leave *Chaos Theory* having never taken on a fictional role but rather grown into a role-less version of themselves that did not exist at the beginning of the piece. They are still an *astrophysicist* or a *succulent-ologist* but that title means something different after 75 minutes of game-based exploration and reflection. We later heard from audience members who had succeeded in their experiments, including instances of starting a theater company, getting a long-craved tattoo, and finally booking a vacation with their daughter. The emotional resonance they acquire in the game invites them to bleed-out when they leave, taking their empowered emotional state with them into their out-of-game choice making.



Over the course of play, players are encouraged to track their response to each philosophy using in-game mechanics. This process invites them to explore their personal relationship to the ideas in play as well as to track the ideas and responses of their game partner, who they play each and every game with. Players learn what their partner values and desires right alongside their own self-examination. Before the piece ends, players must make a consequential, philosophical choice that affects both themselves and their partners both in and out of the game environment. In this moment, the in-game learning and connection that players have been experiencing individually and in partnership is put to the test, inviting players to consider their real-world commitment to their philosophical identity. Players flow freely between bleed-in and bleed-out throughout the piece.



Figure 6. *Know Thyself.*

The last example I will give of my experiential research into bleed takes the form of a mobile game called *R&J* (2017). *R&J* invites two players, strangers to one another when they begin the game, to spend five days playing through the plot of



Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* (Shakespeare and Levenson 2000) via text message. In this mobile role-playing games, players engage in game mechanics that mirror the events of the theatrical play, which took place over the course of five in-story days. These mechanics invite players to bring their own ideas about partnership into the conversations and actions of the game, meaning that no two runs of the game will ever be the same. For instance, when players *marry* their partner (this event takes place less than 24 hours after they meet, for those who are curious), players craft their own personal *wedding* vows that they enact later that day. Each vow ties into an out-of-game commitment that each player wants to follow through on but needs support to do so.

The bleed-in happens consistently as players form an intimate connection in a short span of time (just as Romeo and Juliet did) by conversing as themselves while in a fictional scenario. Bleed-out differs for each player. Some commit to the ephemerality of the event, others break the rules of the game and meet up in person (an outcome I find absolutely delightful), and at least two people have fallen in love while playing with the game, a fact they were all too happy to share when the game came to an end. The commitment of these players to being vulnerable and authentic with one another throughout the game allowed them to develop feelings of love that carried outside of the game environment.

It is helpful to note that while *R&J* does not have a real-time human facilitator, both *Chaos Theory* and *Know Thyself* (2019) do. Akin to many larps, there was someone outside of the audience experience (in both of the aforementioned cases more than one- both myself, as a performer and game runner, and a director, keeping an eye on the gameplay as well) to ensure that players were safe and engaged throughout the experience. Both pieces also include the theatrical version of a post-mortem, known

as off-boarding, a term that refers to the process of easing audience members out of an immersive experience, allowing them to pass back through the magic circle, however permeable, in their own time. This is a process we will now explore in-depth.

**The Ship of Theseus. Observing from the Shore**

Consider the philosophical thought experiment known as *The Ship of Theseus* (Plutarch 1859). This thought experiment puts forth a question of transformation and identity that can be summed up as follows: There is a wooden ship that sets sail. Slowly, over the course of ten years, each and every part of the ship is replaced – every plank, mast, nail, etc. Is the ship, ten years down the line and made of entirely different wood, the same ship that first set sail? The change has occurred so imperceptibly that someone onboard would have had to be actively paying attention to the gradual transformation in order to notice it, even in a situation where each piece of the ship that was currently undergoing transformation was distinct and identifiable, i.e., the sixth plank from the left on the upper deck when facing the bow of the ship.

It will probably come as no surprise that this ancient Greek paradox has been used to illustrate the complexity of human identity and the ways in which we change over time, to the point of being substantially different people than we once were, though our name and appearance remains, like that of the ship, relatively unchanged.

Humans are not made of such easily identifiable pieces. We cannot be identified like *the sixth plank from the left on the upper deck when facing the bow of the ship*, which makes it challenging to reliably track transformation over time. Video games ingeniously address the question of tracking change over time by setting criteria that

will be measured throughout the game and providing feedback to players that show them a) what has changed since they began playing, and b) where they are in the world of the game. The former often comes in the form of points, lives, and evolving player abilities, the latter in the form of a map or a progress bar.

These in-game metrics are extremely helpful to orient a player while they are playing but as soon as that player exits the game they leave those metrics behind. There is no progress bar for how much they have changed as a human over the course of play, especially in free-form and high-improvisation games. If players are to have any success integrating the lessons they learn in-game to their lives out-of-game they would do well have an observer on hand; someone who was not immersed in the transformative gameplay itself and can therefore provide perspective on a player's transformation, including providing perspective on what ideas the player explored over the course of the game, thereby replacing certain *planks* of understanding with new and different planks.

In this scenario in which the player is the ship, the observer can be, of course, an educator; someone who help the player to understand if and how they have been changing over the course of multiple gameplay experiences as well as help them to identify which cerebral, somatic, or emotional planks they should pry out of their identity and play through next, with an aim of transformation. In this way, educators not only help students to process moments of reactive bleed but also to be proactive about what aspects of their identity and curiosities about the world they want to bring to their next role-playing experience.

**Educators as Facilitators**

Educators, while playing a role of facilitator, are tasked with ensuring that students are safe and engaged throughout an in-game experience and that their off-boarding process is thoughtful and productive. In playing this role, educators provide safe passage for students back through the membrane of the magic circle, offering a guiding hand to players as they process what they have learned. Educators are primed to help students to make connections between their in-game emotions and their out-of-game agency.

Here we can draw inspiration from Zack Hiwiler’s “Players Making Decisions” (2016), specifically the chapter devoted to playtesting methods. While the methods he proposes are intended to be employed by game designers testing out an unpublished game before release, many of them can be applied to the player/creator who is both engaged in playing a published game that includes making up vast swaths of the game content as they go along, as is common in larps in role-playing games. This analysis can occur once the game is over and be led by either the facilitator or the players themselves. A few of Hiwiler’s suggestions include asking highly specific questions, creating a comfortable environment without distractions to help players focus on their experience, collecting data based on metrics that will lead to future successes, eliciting problem statements from the players, such as *I don’t understand how to \_\_\_\_\_*, and engaging in this process early and often.

Other schools of thought provide insight into the amount of information players are encouraged to share with each other throughout an off-boarding process, especially if a game is ongoing and players are simply off-boarding from a single play session rather than the entirety of the game. Among the list of “Jeep Truths” published by the bleed-inducing larpwrights known as Jeepform (2007), “Transparency is important to

facilitate collaborative play – there should basically not be any secrets...” and “the most important purpose of a story is to facilitate player interaction.” These, along with many other items on the list, remind us that collaborative gameplay comes down to player interactions and collaboration, be it between multiple players or between a single player’s experience of exploring multiple personas.

I have often found success in asking students four questions. First, what emotions they experienced while playing a persona. Second, when they have experienced those emotions in their out-of-game life. Third, what actions they took in response to those feelings in both scenarios. And fourth, if there are discrepancies between the two, why that might be and how they might explore those discrepancies in the future, both in and out of play. Educators may wish to ask questions of players in order to help them identify what they learned about the character they were playing, what that taught them about how they perform other roles in their lives, and how it felt to learn these things. They can also help players to identify the next steps to put those understandings into practice. If, for instance, a player engaged with Brice’s *Eat* (2013), a facilitator might ask a player what effect this game is likely to have on their spending habits, voting habits, or relationship with their friends who are deep in student debt.

In the processes of embodying a character or being immersed in a scenario, it can be difficult for a player to contextualize what they have experienced and how to learn from it. Moreover, if a player was experiencing a flow state while in-game, they may not have been aware of their body at all, making it difficult to *come back* to themselves during the off-boarding process. Educators can facilitate an off-boarding process in which players a) walk away with clear action steps that result from their in-game experience, b) take the time to contextualize their experience rather than brush

it off as having no consequences in their out-of-game life, c) begin to see nuanced connections between their in-game and out-of-game choices and patterns of behavior, and d) somatically process their experience, noting where in their body they feel/felt tension, relief, fear, love, etc, both in-game and upon reflection (Siegel 1999). The latter contextualization invites players to feel grounded and at home in their own skin rather than disembodied by the process of moving through the magic circle from one role to (a great many) others.

One of the facilitator’s jobs is to make this process of *coming back* as seamless as possible, helping the player to make connections between who they were while immersed in the game and who are will be today, tomorrow, and the next day in response to that immersion. Change is hard, but just as “the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible” (Brown 2017, 30), the role of the facilitator is to make personal growth irresistible.

**Conclusion**

Bleed occurs when a player experiences a shift in self-awareness that is so affecting, so impactful, that they experience that change in identity across two realities, both in-game and out-of-game. Drawing linguistic and creative inspiration from the Nordic larp scene, we see that sometimes players engage with a game through bleed-in; inviting or allowing their out-of-game emotions to impact the choices they make in-game, and sometimes they bleed-out; inviting or allowing in-character emotional responses brought about by in-game events to affect them outside of a game. Sometimes players experience both of these occurrences within the same gaming event. Sometimes bleed is a response to an unexpected event, either in or out of a game, and sometimes it is a pre-meditated decision, as evidenced by the larp and

role-playing games designers who use bleed as a game mechanic, as well as in role-less role-playing, in which players bring only their out-of-game personas into a game space. The process of harnessing and utilizing bleed safety and with agency is aided by the guidance of an educator or facilitator who is not actively involved in the gameplay itself but is able to help players contextualize and learn from their experiences by asking insightful questions and providing a safe space to for players to explore the relationship between in-game and out-of-game identity.

While many game designers prioritize immersion above all else, and may actively shy away from game-induced bleed, immersion and bleed are not inherently antithetical to one other. They can, in fact, support one another, especially if a facilitator is present to ensure that players are fully engaged in immersive gameplay and that they can contextualize the power of that immersion during the gameplay itself or in the off-boarding process. This connection between embodiment in an immersive experience and bleed allows the player to more consciously choose what experiences they opt to bleed-in and bleed-out of in future gameplay, empowering players to become masters of bleed and playful self-awareness.

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