

SAFE STATES: SYNCHRONIC LIMINALITY IN SURVIVAL HORROR

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ABSTRACT

This video essay explores the spatio-temporal liminality of games. Non-diegetic gameplay elements such as pausing and saving operate outside game worlds but are integral to them because they give players opportunities to plan and rest. In the survival-horror games, *Darkwood* and *Signalis*, these opportunities become semi-diegetic, cultivating player safety through liminal “safe states”: moments and spaces that afford interludes during fear-inducing gameplay.

In *Darkwood*, daybreak signals the safe state. Diegetic time does not proceed until the player character leaves the safety of their shelter, providing players with an uneasy respite to prepare for the next day. The shelter cultivates a temporary stillness—a break in the flow of time that caters to player comfort. In *Signalis*, safe states are scattered across the map yet serve a function like *Darkwood*’s daybreak. Both games demonstrate how safe states enforce active forms of recuperation distinct from the passive inaction of non-diegetic pauses.

Drawing on Mark J.P. Wolf’s theories of spatio-temporality and Darshana Jayemanne’s notion of synchrony in games, we argue that the uneasy security found in safe states is a form of “synchronic liminality.” This concept blends synchrony—the unifying elements of playthroughs that transcend players’ individual experiences—with the fleeting experience of liminality to define the paradoxical stability of safe states. These safe states matter to the design and study of games as they use semi-diegetic respites to not only maintain a balance between players and player-characters but also bridge their stories.

TRANSCRIPT

Note: this transcript was written by the authors, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

INTRODUCTION

CLAIRE: It's 2022 and I'm playing the newly released indie survival horror soon-to-be-darling, *Signalis*, developed by Rose Engine Studios. I'm having a pretty good time so far: the visuals are stunning, the story is evocative, and I've already added the soundtrack to my Spotify study playlist.

And most importantly, it's...stressful. You're always low on health with no healing items, there's a locked door that you're sure you have the key for—but no, you don't have it on you right now because you only have six inventory slots and you thought the *disposable* stun prod would be more important to have on hand. Meanwhile, hostile infected replikas are crawling out from the vents, the ceiling, the garbage bins, and the floorboards with the sole purpose of ripping you apart, you fight back but you run out of ammo and you can't switch weapons because the ammo for those ran out ages ago so you're almost certain you're about to die and it's been a really long time since you last saved your game meaning you're probably going to have to do this section ALL. OVER. AGAIN. So you make a hail mary mad dash for the door when—

Phew. The door hisses shut behind you and you can breathe again. Safely tucked away in this room, you can save your progress, restock your inventory, and grab that *stupid key*. The world is paused but it isn't stopped entirely—you're safe from active danger...for now. But, where is *this*? A haunted oasis in the midst of a techno-apocalyptic nightmare. Why does the game give you a space where you can take a bit of a breather away from the rest of the action? What makes it so special?

HORROR AND GENRE

ABBY: The use of Moonlight Sonata in this room is a loving nod to the pioneer of the survival horror genre, *Resident Evil*. Unlike other video game genres where the point is usually to empower the player, survival horror thrives off of restricting your agency. Dawn Stobbart, a researcher based in Lancaster, states that horror is built through “feelings of tension and terror—the trepidation and anticipation that the player feels as they move throughout the game.”¹

This tension is built in a few ways: you're dropped into actively hostile environments while coping with the paranoia and the stress brought on by inefficient combat mechanics, and these

¹ Stobbart, *Videogames and Horror*, 28.

hordes of enemies. Not to mention the lack of crafting materials, ammunition, inventory space, healing items, and basically any useful item you'd ever need.

The goal of these horror games is to make you scared, wary, and to force a power dynamic that keeps you, as the player, on your back foot.

In short, you have:

- No time
- No space
- No resources
- And like, a toy chicken (or some equally frivolous nonsense)

But if this guy [flash back to Chomper chase] is chasing you constantly, then you aren't going to want to finish the game. There has to be a balancing act between the action of the game, and the more "peaceful" moments that relieve pressure to let the tension build up again. As Mark Wolf says, you need both reprieve and recuperation to act as a counterweight against the horrors.²

PAUSES

CLAIRE: Of course, most games come equipped with the trusty pause menu. A function that lets you freeze the game world to step away for a second, recover after a jumpscare, run to the bathroom, or access the settings.

This pause functionality isn't unique to video games—you can pause a movie to go grab a snack, or toss a bookmark in to keep your place in your latest Goodreads trophy. They're specifically designed to be convenient and unnoticed—sure, you can customize your bookmark, or add a fun bonus to your pause menu—

ABBY: I miss you, movie bonus content...

CLAIRE: —but pauses are reliably function-first: you don't really think about it as an integral part of the media experience.

In survival horror games like *Darkwood* and *Signalis*, however, the pause function is brought *into* the game world, providing temporary relief in what we're calling "safe-states": curated times and spaces inside the game that give you a second to pause and breathe.

² Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, 83.

DIEGESIS

ABBY: safe-states are what creates the balance we mentioned earlier: they function to provide a reprieve from the tension, chaos, and threat of the gameplay, existing not necessarily as an *escape* from the rest of the game, but as a concealed, temporary place of rest. They are what we'd like to call a "semi-diegetic" break away from the game. Diegesis in video games can be roughly defined as "the game's total world of narrative action" (Galloway 2006, 7),³ or, in other words, everything that exists in the universe of the game—things like the environment, characters, and the plot. Following that logic, non-diegetic elements are those that are "external to the world of narrative action,"⁴--y'know, the infrastructure that supports the narrative and game universe—think pause menus, settings, and loading screens.

We're calling safe-states semi-diegetic because they exist in both realms. When Elster, the bio-mechanical protagonist of *Signalis*, rushes to a computer, the files that she's saving are her progress logs, committed to this external drive. The game similarly justifies her paltry inventory system with a helpful propaganda poster claiming that—

CLAIRE: "private property is a privilege!"

ABBY: They are diegetic because they exist and are justified within the universe of the game, but also non-diegetic because they're so limited in their story and mechanical functions. By leaning into this semi-diegetic nature, safe-states encourage an active form of recuperation. You can (and honestly probably should) prepare for the moment that the game resumes and re-immerses you in the main game. This is very specifically *not* a full break away from the game—you can still hit pause, get up, and leave. Instead, the safe-state is basically a temporary in-game break away from all the horrors of enemies, puzzles, and resource deficits.

Effectively, you can stand around and listen to "Moonlight Sonata" play for as long as you want, but the game is never gonna continue until you cross that threshold.

DARKWOOD INTRODUCTION

CLAIRE: While it's no "Moonlight Sonata," the morning drone that announces Darkwood's safe-state takes on a similar connotation. Darkwood was published in 2014 by Acid Wizard Studios. The game's set in a questionably sentient forest somewhere in Soviet-era Poland.

You play as the Stranger, a man desperately searching for his beloved key that he lost in a fight with a creepy doctor. This key opens an underground door that leads out of the pseudo-sentient

³ Galloway, *Gaming Essays*, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

forest which is actively corroding your humanity—a hot commodity to be sure. In his ongoing quest to survive, the Stranger finds nightly solace in different abandoned buildings strewn throughout the woods.

The game runs off of a day cycle with three phases—Day, Night, and Dawn. During the day, you scuttle around through the woods, investigating leads and finding materials to help you survive—boards to cover your windows, beartraps to slow enemies (or step in), gasoline for your generator to keep the various beasts away, and mushrooms to eat (they’re probably fine, you have bigger things to worry about). At night, you do your best to fix up whichever house you are camping out in, and try to fight off whichever beasts inevitably manage to get inside.

Dawn functions as this “safe-state” we keep talking about—after the chaos and stress of night, the horror gives way to dawn and time freezes until you cross the fence around the safehouse. Time doesn’t progress, the gasoline doesn’t run out, and the creatures can’t appear. You can (finally) craft, reinforce, and trade without needing to fear what resides outside your pathetic cone of vision. The game enforces the Day Cycle via the Floor Gore—a collection of unkillable spores that hunts the player down if they are not enclosed safely within the hideout by nightfall, essentially corralling you into a convenient location for the most stressful phase of the gameplay loop.

But, what actually makes the hideout safe? Each hideout has an oven that looks something like this. When you light the oven, it spews out a selectively-toxic miasma that repels the floor gore—the pipes running along the floors illustrating the area of effect. This oven is also where the Stranger cooks his ‘odd-looking mushrooms’—found conveniently in ‘poisonous mushroom patches’—critical ingredients for the hallucinogens that grant him special powers.

Darkwood is vague about what exactly is causing all the nastiness in the forest—it frequently blurs the line between reality and dream, and the Stranger is an incredibly unreliable perspective with his hallucinations (probably not helped by the miasma that he’s pumping into the hideouts, nor the mushroom concoctions that he’s brewing in the ovens). The reliability of the safe-state—arguably, the only true constant you have—is in part what makes it so special.

ANTICIPATORY PLAY

ABBY: safe-states are reminiscent of Brian Upton’s notion of “anticipatory play.” This occurs during the moments between the action of the game where the player puzzles out their next steps. Upton notes how this is most common in slow games,⁵ but it occurs across a broad spectrum of genres. For example, when you’re trying to sneak from one side of the room to another, before you take a single step and risk alerting the enemies, you have to first observe their movement

⁵ Upton, *Situational Game Design*, 45.

patterns, check your weapons loadout, and make note of any blindspots in their paths. Once you're secure in your observations, you hatch a plan and when you're ready, you step inside.

Safe-states create space for anticipatory play in genres like survival horror. Tension is generated by always forcing the player onto their back foot, leaving no time to do anything other than react to the hostilities that surround them. The safe-state expands upon the threshold that Upton writes about, rather than being a "clear boundary that tells the player that there's been a significant change in context,"⁶ safe-states provide a discrete moment of pause and planning. You're both still and active at the same time—you can play in a limited way, and that play is preparatory. If a threshold is a door, the safe-state is like an airlock—a liminal space you get to dwell in until you're ready to break the seal.

While safe-states do contain anticipatory play, it's only one portion of what they offer. Unlike traditional play, safe-states are necessarily both an internal and external process—the ludic parts of the game induce or impact the player's affective state, but the external actions, such as barricading your hideout, or reconfiguring an inventory, are equally crucial. These actions are also basically exclusive to the safe-state—you can't save or access your inventory in any other rooms in the game, and while it might be mechanically feasible to re-barricade your hideout at night, it's realistically nigh-impossible due to the active threat posed by literally everything around you. Similarly, barricading during the day wastes your precious minutes that could be much better spent gathering resources or exploring. Safe-states carve out a space for these actions in the game.

AMBIENCE

CLAIRE: While the hideout provides *some* sense of safety—at least, in the sense that you aren't being immediately killed—it is important to remember that it is *not* a safe-state. To explain this difference, we have to turn to the concept of *ambience*. Alexander Galloway, a professor at NYU, describes ambience as "a moment of equilibrium" where the "user is on hold but the machine keeps on working."⁷ Staying in the hideout at night might keep you safe from the floor gore, but you are still vulnerable to attacks from other enemies (and the dark, and the scary noises, and basically everything else...) If you stand still in the middle of a room at night, you will inevitably perish. Like Galloway says, "if the passage of time means anything at all, then the game is not in an ambient state."⁸ Safe-states are, among other things, ambient in this sense: time is either frozen, like in *Darkwood*, or imperceptible, like in *Signalis*.

I want to point out that the safe-state is not exclusively represented by the borders of the hideout itself, but rather in the full Dawn phase—where time *and* space both freeze. You can stand in the

⁶ Ibid, 47-8.

⁷ Galloway, *Gaming Essays*, 10

⁸ Ibid.

middle of the room for as long as you want but the game will not continue until you decide to cross the broken fence surrounding the hideout—a physical symbol of the temporally-limited boundary. This is where the other part of ambience comes in. Inherent to both ambience and the safe-state is the “‘charged expectation’ ... It is about possibility, a subtle solicitation for the operator to return.”⁹ Like we mentioned before, the limited story and mechanical elements in the safe-state invite you to return to the “main” gameplay—a much more exciting, if terrifying, option than sitting around watching the computer glow.

While Mark JP Wolf states that “time pressure is often necessary for the creation of narrative suspense,”¹⁰--which is pretty important in a horror game--safe-states create time pressure by making you aware of how limited your options are in this technically infinite space: you can stay here forever, but the game demands interaction to proceed. The unlimited timeframe in a safe-state acts like a reverse countdown--as the (metaphorical) clock ticks onward, the player grows more anxious of the return to the diegetic game-world. Essentially, the game slowly builds up a sense of dread instead of an immediate panic through the ambient nature of the safe-state.

HORROR PT 2

ABBY: The cruelty of the safe-state is that they only give you everything you want outside of the main game. In the main game of *Signalis*, almost every mechanic is a deliberate slog: There is no convenient back button, you can only carry 6 items at a time including equipped items (even though there are puzzles that have more than 6 pieces to solve), you can’t move the camera, which limits your field of vision, and resources—when you can fit them in your inventory—are few and far between. Once you reach a safe room, though, everything changes. Here, you can take the time to save your game, access your full inventory, enjoy rejigging your equipment loadout (again), organize the rest of your inventory, and read through the documents that you picked up along the way.

Similarly, in *Darkwood*, outside of the Dawn phase, you’re vulnerable to every threat imaginable. Resources drain quickly, your attacks are pretty slow and weak, and everything you can see is limited to the previously mentioned pathetic cone of vision. At dawn though, the sun doesn’t set, gasoline doesn’t deplete, and the game will finally autosave. The only thing separating you from the chaos in-game is this visible threshold--the fence.

CHRONO/SYNCH LIM

CLAIRE: Something worth noting about safe-states is that you instantly know when you’re in one— they have a consistent visual and audio cue that lets you know that you’re now in a space

⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰ Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, 88.

outside of the game's space and time. To explain this, we've come up with the term, "synchronic liminality." It's a mouthful and we are sorry, but just bear with us for a second:

Starting at the end, "liminal" is one of those words that gets thrown around a lot—especially with the rising popularity of media like the backrooms. It conjures up images of carpeted hotel hallways, old malls, and sickly yellow office spaces—stagnant but unsettled. Essentially, liminality is about dwelling in transition, the midpoint between two distinct states in space and/or time. Conveniently for us, that's exactly what we've been talking about with the safe-state—it exists neither in the meat of the games, nor the bones. We're using the word to describe the ambient act of the safe-state: these are places of preparation and transition—the point is to leave them.

Then we have "synchrony." We're borrowing this term from Darshana Jayemanne, a researcher at Abertay University, to describe the unifying, universal, and consistent elements across different playthroughs that can transcend a player's individual experience.¹¹ Because people can play video games in dramatically different ways, it's helpful to identify certain things like tutorials, cutscenes, and bottleneck moments that every player must experience. If you play *Darkwood*, you *will* tussle with the creepy doctor and lose your keys; and if you play *Signalis* you *will* crawl through the nasty little flesh hole (don't—don't think about it too hard).

We're expanding this concept of synchrony to apply not only to experiences across different people's playthroughs, but repeated experiences throughout a single playthrough. We're moving away from Jayemanne's definition of synchrony so that instead of: "synchrony only being perceptible for players *at the end of the game*,"¹² the specific liminal form of synchrony found in a safe-state is perceptible for a player whenever they re-enter it. No matter how you play the game, or where you are on the map, every *Signalis* player will walk into multiple rooms with a glowing red computer screen and an orange box. Similarly, every *Darkwood* player will experience the flashbang of Dawn on a new day, no matter what hideout they're in.

By expanding the scope of synchrony to include both multiple players experiences, and also the individual player's experience across the same playthrough, we can recognize the unique function of the safe-state—it isn't a bottleneck or a cutscene, designed to send the player off in a specific direction, but instead, a moment of reprieve that doesn't rely on narrative railroading to deliver this universal experience.

Putting the words back together again, synchronic liminality is the identifiable, consistent form of something that is neither here-nor-there—a uniquely paradoxical form of stability. In the case of video games—a medium arguably defined by player agency—these synchronic liminalities appear as persistent experiences throughout various playthroughs of the same game.

¹¹ Jayemanne, *Chronotypology*.

¹² Ibid

HORROR PT 3

ABBY: *Darkwood*'s day cycle makes the "temporal" part of synchronic liminality especially clear. Since resources don't respawn (which is another common survival horror trope), you're forced to wander further and further away from the starting area's much easier safehouse and into the unknown. The safe-state of dawn occurs roughly every 22.5 minutes, and cannot be accessed outside of this linear progression. Because *Darkwood*'s safe-state is so time dependent, being able to identify the hideouts as you get into the later stages of the game is pretty important. Luckily, they all come conveniently equipped with a semi-busted fence, a generator, a worktable, and a stove to cook the aforementioned freaky mushrooms in.

In *Signalis* though, time doesn't really work in the same way. There's no in-game clock so instead of only being available at a specific time of day, these safe-states manifest as physical safe rooms that you can access at basically any time. While the specific layouts of the rooms change depending on where they are on the map, you can still immediately tell that you're in one by the red glow of the computer screen, helpfully signaling the in-game save mechanic—as well as the orange storage box that serves as your extended inventory. The consistency of these safe-states is what creates synchronic liminality. While the rooms or hideouts you're in might change, the emotional and gameplay functions will always remain the same.

Signalis' safe-states are identifiable by their uncharacteristically quiet, low drone. It contrasts sharply with the industrial chaos that plays during tense moments of combat or, in many cases, tense moments of narrow escape. In *Darkwood* the light outside the hideout, barely visible through the gaps in the windows, slowly shifts into this suspicious bright red, before announcing the arrival of Dawn. As the light appears, a low drone begins that slowly grows louder, merging with and drowning out the usual nightly melodies of shrieks, wails, general banging, and the sound of your barricades crashing down.

This overwhelming cacophony is both hopeful and frightening (or, y'know, at least, irritating), as it can overwhelm important auditory cues—like that door being broken again. The night cycle ends with a flash of white, text indicating what day the player is beginning, and daylight finally permeating the hideout. You know you're safe because of this clock symbol, the warm light illuminating the hideout, and (usually), a trader waiting to do business with you.

Encounter enough of these safe-states and eventually, you are Pavlov-ed into relaxing as soon as you see and hear these cues.

CONCLUSION

CLAIRE: The safe-state, as a synchronically liminal event, is a double-edged sword. Yes, it relieves you from the pressure and anxiety of the main game, but these are still *survival horror*

games. These spaces curate anxiety while providing relief from active danger—the passive but foreboding counterpart to all those chase sequences we all love so much. The further you get in these games, the more you need the functions that the safe-states provide—puzzle pieces that don’t fit in your inventory, trades for items that you’ve run out of, and a chance to shuffle through all the items you wish you could bring with you.

And, of course, now that you need them, they’re harder than ever to find. Your dependence on these safe-states for emotional and mechanical utility heightens your desperation to seek out the next one, and makes you more reluctant to leave.

But remember! You can stand around and listen to “Moonlight Sonata” in perpetuity...

ABBY: but every song *should* come to an end.

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