



## Playing with Mediation: Encounters and Entanglements

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This video essay explores how the videogame *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers Studio, 2023) allows us to play with various processes of mediation, thus transforming our encounter with the virtual world. The video essay also incorporates this playful approach into its own structure, allowing us to better reflect upon its effects.

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### Creator's Statement

*Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers Studio, 2023) is a narrative exploration game where discovery is dissociated from accumulation, conquest, and domination. But at the same time, the game cannot perfectly be defined as a so-called “walking simulator”: while its gameplay certainly is not premised on facing challenges and growing skills to achieve a win condition, *Season* does give its players several “tools for interacting with the game world beyond walking,” truly allowing them to “improvise creatively, [and to] play” (Juul 2019, 202; original emphasis). Indeed, whereas *Season* allows much room for aesthetic contemplation, it does so without removing “the ludological . . . aspects of the game,” and without completely forbidding players from “act[ing] upon the world and . . . modify[ing] what is seen” (Atkinson and Parsayi 2021, 520). To put it differently, players of *Season* certainly won’t feel a strong sense of “ontological interactivity,” in the sense that none of their actions can “cause events that bring lasting changes” to the virtual world (Ryan 2015, 162); however, neither will they feel completely reduced to an impression of purely “exploratory interactivity” where all they can do is “loo[k] at what exists,” with no options to do anything else that feels substantial or meaningful (Ryan 2015, 162).

*Season*’s gameplay is based on remediation: it invites us to play with “prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 260) which are embedded or simulated in the game. The player controls a third-person avatar, Estelle, who is equipped with a camera, a recorder, and a scrapbook, and who is tasked with discovering the world on her bicycle and gathering “the sights and sounds of this season” before it is wrecked by a mysterious impending apocalypse (*Season* 2023, Caro Village). Thus, whereas players have no power to stop the impending cataclysm and cannot affect any “lasting changes”

on the virtual environment itself (Ryan 2015, 162), they do have the ability to create media objects that embody their own personal encounter with it. *Season*'s simple—yet present—mediation-based gameplay invites us to engage with the game through a posture that is at once relaxed and proactive, contemplative and keen. Moreover, as we play with the tools at our disposal, the game keeps shifting the parameters of our visual and interactive experience: this creates a reflexive configuration, inviting us to question our relationship with what lies on the other side of the simulated lens, the screen, and the controller, “making us aware of the complicated imbrication of our bodies and our devices” and “productively confus[ing] the distinction between subjects and objects” (Anable 2018, 58, 68; see also Grusin 2015, 129). The play with mediation in *Season* can therefore affect our position as playing, seeing, and knowing subjects, decentring us and inviting us to approach mediation as an affective encounter with the virtual environment, rather than only as an effort to capture or control it. As a result, the game creates a sense of “ecological entanglement,” inviting us to consider its world as a “shared environment” where “everything, including the subject, is fundamentally entangled with everything else” (Heijmen and Vervoort 2024, 745).

While this play with mediation creates a strong sense of intersubjectivity—between player, avatar, and non-playable entities—it is important also to bring out its possible dangers and limitations. Even though “play/games do not have the full weight or impact of regular nongame activities” (Juul 2019, 194), a playful approach can appear “as deeply misguided, or as in poor taste” if it “ignores or erases historical violence or present-day privilege” (Patterson 2020, 57). With regard to the play with mediation in *Season*, this danger emerges especially during a black-and-white filmic sequence which abruptly interrupts the game's animated graphics. This is one of three sequences featuring FMV (or full-motion video), i.e. pre-recorded video or film footage temporarily replacing the game's computer-animated graphics. The video footage, recycled from a Super 16 mm movie project shot a few years earlier by the game's creative director Kevin Sullivan, is used to embody memories left behind by people fleeing the impending apocalypse and magically materialising in the mind of passers-by. One of these sequences is triggered as the avatar abruptly “remembers” another person's childhood memory: while the filmic footage shows a pair of white hands in close-up, the black avatar narrates in voiceover that she “remember[s] watching [her] dad make shadow puppets on the wall” (*Season* 2023, What is the Dig Site For?). Whereas there is no logical issue here (we know the avatar's father to be a black man, but this filmic sequence is meant to embody a memory left behind by someone else and does not feature the hands of the avatar's real father) this can still be an uncomfortable moment, because it resonates with the

lack of socio-cultural background provided for the avatar's racial identity, making it sometimes feel as if the game's characterisation could be "appropriating real culture and removing it from context" (Hetfeld 2023).

Exploring these questions videographically not only allowed me to better illustrate the play with mediation that happens in the game by directly showing and juxtaposing its different elements, it also made it possible to embody this playful approach in the video essay itself, thus directly experimenting with what happens when mediation is transformed, truncated, and played with. Embodying the play with mediation in the video essay itself meant not only creatively transforming the images and sounds from the game, but also integrating a variety of—sometimes unholy—formal combinations. Thus, the essay brings together different types of audiovisual content, and, most importantly, different types of authorial interventions, with digital text presented in two different fonts (one very basic, one very unusual), handwritten text captured through a webcam, a Paint-drawn pause button, as well as a voiceover sequence. While my training at Middlebury video camp taught me to beware of mixing different types of presentation—avoiding for instance an alternation of voiceover and written text to structure the video essay—I tried leaning into multimodality and unpredictability as a way to play with videographic mediation, and thus to make my discussion of the game more "affective and experiential" (Grusin 2015, 132). Similarly, whereas my videographic work so far made a fairly linear and explanatory use of the voiceover (Folléa 2023), I endeavoured in this video essay to have a voiceover that would feel disruptive as much as it is explanatory (see Drăgan 2021, 114), to again embody the playful approach to mediation and experiment with its ability to destabilise our position as knowing subjects. Finally, the video essay format allowed me to clearly position myself as a white player and author, in a way that feeds into the reflection on the possible dangers of the playful approach to mediation: my footage of *Season* and its black avatar is almost always juxtaposed with thumbnails of my white hands using the controller, making it unambiguously clear that the risk of "ignor[ing] or eras[ing] historical violence or present-day privilege" (Patterson 2020, 57) should be carefully considered not only as it exists in the game itself, but also in the process of play, and of scholarly work.

All in all, I hope the essay's playful approach succeeds in eliciting reflection on the effects of playing with mediation, both in a videogame and in a video essay.

### Note

My thanks to Kevin Sullivan for providing the information about the game video footage shot on Super 16 mm and for allowing me to share it here.

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## Biography

Clémence Folléa is an Assistant Professor at Université Paris Cité, where she teaches literature, film, and videogame studies in the Department of Anglophone Studies. In 2016, she completed a PhD on the afterlives of Charles Dickens's novels — a topic on which she published several articles and a book chapter. Her more recent research examines how video games can open up possibilities for narrative, aesthetic, epistemological, and political experimentations, as well as ethical experiences. She

recently started delving into videographic criticism as a way to explore questions of immersion, agency, and mediation in videogames.

### **Reviewed by David O’Grady, UCLA**

Clémence Folléa’s lovely video essay about playing with mediation in the videogame *Season: A Letter to the Future* effectively—and affectively—explores how games writ large (though not always; art games are often a provocative exception) use their multimedia modalities to “entangle” us—to achieve ever-increasing thresholds of immediacy (Bolter and Grusin) and connection, and to situate us in the now of pre-reflective, self-conscious encounters with the world (physical or digital). *Season* in particular uses the immediacy of games to accentuate contemplation over action, and in this way is evocative of many meditative or slow-play games of late burgeoning to become their own genre (*Proteus*, *Everything*, *Walden: A Game*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, and many other titles). In *Season*, we pedal our protagonist/avatar Estelle on her bicycle around a landscape and document it through photographs, recordings, videos, and other acts of mediation before the world is destroyed by some unknown but imminent apocalypse. This information makes the game a ludic elegy, which looms over every choice about what to document and preserve for some future generation that, presumably, will survive and discover the mediated artifacts the player has created and left behind.

This creates an interesting tension in the player, who may document a scene for its personal, affective qualities, but also may be motivated intellectually by what is deemed important for historical preservation—for later receptions that will not be their (or Estelle’s) own. The game wrings a lot of poignancy from this juxtaposition of present pleasure/future purpose in all of its modes of preservation—and the entire theme of the game can be read as a metaphor of how we might document our own life for posterity before it ends.

For me, one of most entangling moments in the video essay occurs when Estelle begins to play an audio tape recording. She closes her eyes and the game screen goes blank—intensifying the sensory impact of simply listening instead of always looking. Folléa elegantly remediates this scene in her video essay, blanking our screen—inviting us to close our eyes—and leaving us only the sound of her voice. This is indeed an unusual experience for videogame play and video essay alike, and it drives home a crucial point about everyday entanglement with the world: our embodied, sensory bond with the environment has so maximized the affordance of light for eyesight (in Gibson terms) that we forget the intimate vitality of sound, and perhaps our other senses as well (touch seems particularly starved in a networked, post-pandemic world). *Season* and

Folléa’s video essay compellingly and movingly remind us that lived experience—and what we choose to remember and preserve—is as precious as any cultural artifact, and just as worthy of saving.

### **Reviewed by Matthew Thomas Payne, University of Notre Dame**

Most games are about winning and losing. Most of these interactive rule sets produce quantifiable outcomes based on user inputs. Most games transform the ambiguity of play into unambiguous results. “Avoid missing ball for high score” as it states on *PONG*’s cabinet; don’t let the stacked blocks reach the top of the playfield in *Tetris*; be the last player standing in *Fortnite*: most games abhor uncertainty and open-endedness.

But crucially, “most games” is not the same thing as “all games.” Clémence Folléa’s video essay is a welcome reminder, even for those of us who spend much of our time thinking about how games cast their affecting spells, that these needn’t be zero-sum affairs. All games are mediated by play. But what happens when we remove a game’s win-condition? Or what if that ostensible requirement was never present to begin with? What if an interactive text marshals play not for the purposes of eliciting performative mastery through repetitive patterns of self-optimization, but as a means of exploring mediation itself? What happens when a title highlights gameplay’s “play” rather than gameplay’s “game”?

Folléa’s “Playing with Mediation” explores the mediation at the heart of media-making and meaning-making—a consideration that is particularly salient for ludic texts. In *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers Studio, 2023), the player-character Estelle uses her camera and audio recorder to capture snippets of her world for posterity before it is erased by a cataclysm. Estelle organizes these images and sounds in a scrapbook for future generations, but no amount of photography or audio recording will save the day. This is not that kind of game. Rather, the game asks players to look, and to listen, and to record their surroundings, and then to arrange those documents as they see fit. And just as *Season*’s players save recordings to their virtual scrapbooks, Folléa’s “Playing with Mediation” is a multi-sensorial videographic recording of her own playful journey as Estelle.

Throughout her video essay, Folléa uses multi-frame compositions to show her interfacing with the game and with us. We see her hands cradling the controller, we watch her listening to the game’s characters, she speaks to us via direct address, and writes longhand on paper. Near the video’s midpoint, Folléa contends that one’s subjectivity becomes more vulnerable and entangled with *Season*’s mediation when it withholds assets and abilities that players have previously enjoyed (e.g., visual content and avatar control). Folléa’s then invites us to join her within *Season*’s storyworld after navigating

the game's menus and technical settings. It is a lovely sequence that embraces the participatory spirit of games and play, while also exploiting the affordances of video essays to showcase playful processes.

When control is wrested from the player, or when information is withheld, or when actions cannot be repeated (as with the chiming bell), games like *Season* remind us that they are playing with us, and that we have choices about how we play with them in return. And because games are nothing if not boundary exploration where the freedom of play collides with the structures of rules, then video essays about video games are not unlike *Season*'s protagonist. That is, both Estelle and Professor Clémence Folléa document how sights, sounds, and—yes—play articulate an embodied and multi-modal sense of self through processes of mediation. They both assert, perhaps humbly, perhaps defiantly, that “I was here” and that “I made this.”

Finally, I want to express my appreciation with the essayist's willingness to reimagine her work following the initial round of feedback. Reworking videographic work is often far more daunting than revising one's prose. However, Professor Folléa took the feedback to heart and the piece is better for it.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

