

Game Narrative Review

Basil Tutza

Drexel University

bt629@drexel.edu

December 2025

IMMORTALITY

PC, Mac, iPhone, Switch, PS4/5, Xbox

Mystery/Horror

August 30, 2022

Sam Barlow, Half Mermaid

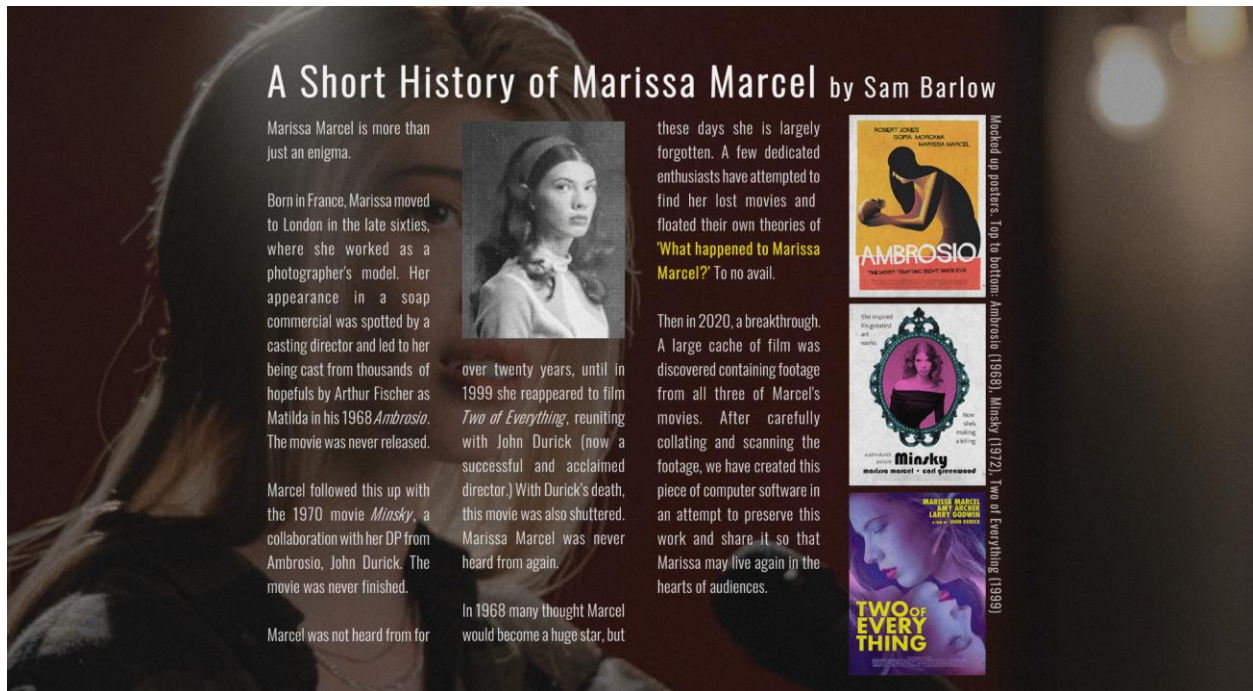
Half Mermaid

Sam Barlow, Barry Gifford, Amelia Gray, Allan Scott

Overview

Sam Barlow's award-winning game *IMMORTALITY* is, despite its simplistic gameplay, highly narratively complex. At a baseline level, the game only asks one central question: What happened to Marissa Marcel? Behind the skin of this mystery, however, lays a decades-spanning story about the history of film, the everlasting power of art, and, given enough attentiveness, immortal, human-devouring vampires.

But let's start more broadly. *IMMORTALITY* is a game which presents itself as an interactive gallery, exhibiting never-before-seen footage from three films all starring actress Marissa Marcel. Strangely, none of these films ever actually made it into theatres; and it's up to the player to determine why, presented only with *IMMORTALITY*'s over 250 clips. Said footage, however, isn't discovered chronologically—instead, the player uncovers new clips based on *match-cut*, the relation of two clips via a shared motif. In practice, this leads to timeline “hopping” guided by player choice; a player may, for instance, be watching a clip from the 1960s, select Marcel's face as their motif, and be transported to a clip over thirty years in the future.



The in-game “About” screen, which contextualizes the in-universe explanation for IMMORTALITY’s existence.

The three films follow Marcel’s career from the 1960s into the late 90s, whereupon she died in, to be blunt, a literal blaze of glory. Chronologically, these three films are *Ambrosio*, a religious, psychosexual horror film from the 60s; *Minsky*, an artsy, 70s crime drama; and *Two of Everything*, a thriller from the late 90s.

On top of all of that, *IMMORTALITY* is best sorted into three distinct narrative layers, the interconnectedness of which lays the foundation for its central mystery. Hereafter, these layers will be referred to as:

- **Layer 1:** The production of each film as viewed through the interactions of the cast and crew.
- **Layer 2:** The plots of each film.
- **Layer 3:** The supernatural underpinnings which transcend these other layers.

And, finally, to address the elephant in the summary: *IMMORTALITY* is a game which makes good on its title, featuring two literally-immortal entities hidden within its clips. These beings offer both the solution to *IMMORTALITY*’s mystery *and* the source of much of its unexpected horror, unearthed as they are by reversing the footage when prompted with a sound cue and controller vibration.

IMMORTALITY is not only fully live-action, but so simple in gameplay as to beg a different, far more meta question than its plot would suggest: Why is this even a game? Analyzing *IMMORTALITY* takes analyzing what even *limited* interactivity adds to narrative—and, by extension, what sets games writing as a whole apart from its cinematographical roots.

Characters

Marissa Marcel – Who better to start off with than the figure who unites all three films? Marcel is a charismatic, conventionally-pretty actress who got her start in a 1968 soap commercial. Months later, she would audition for *Ambrosio*; her newness to the film industry painted her a unique “challenge,” landing her the role of Rosario/Matilda. While filming for *Ambrosio*, she entered a relationship with director of photography John Durick, who would go on to direct (and have Marcel star in) his 1970 debut film *Minsky* as femme-fatale Franny. After complications with *Minsky*’s filming (see: Carl Goodman), Marcel would not return to acting until *her* directorial debut alongside Durick, the 1999 thriller *Two of Everything*—in it, she plays both Maria and Heather in a prince-and-the-pauper-reminiscent plot. Before *Two of Everything*’s release, she is found immolated on-set.

Marcel was dedicated to the craft of filmmaking, magnetic in interviews, and artistically-inclined. Despite her depth, however, she was typecast as sensual, manipulative women in all but the film that she, herself, wrote and directed.

- (Note: The plot of *Ambrosio* will be explored further in the section dedicated to Robert Jones, and the plot of *Minsky* further with Carl Goodman.)

Arthur Fischer – *Ambrosio*’s executive director, whose successful film career prior led him to believe the film would be his *magnum opus*. Fischer represents the culture of 1960s filmmaking—the Hitchcockian ideal, with big ideas and a mastery over directorial traditions. He chose to adapt *Ambrosio* off real-life novel *The Monk*, seeking to capitalize on the popularity of more salacious dramas in order to revitalize a career slowly slouching into obscurity.

Fischer is simultaneously overtly sexual toward his crew and fixated on the innocence of his actresses. He, like many of the period’s formative directors, takes great pains to “shape” his actresses into their roles; it is his guidance which propels Marcel into her first sexually-charged film via, in his words, “casting for Rosario and sculpting her into Matilda.” It is presumed that his career mirrored *Ambrosio*’s failure to launch.

Robert Jones – *Ambrosio*’s star, playing the role of the film’s titular monk. Jones, himself, was a famous actor in the early 60s, compelled to join *Ambrosio* due to Fischer’s directorial notoriety. Jones is polite, professional, and seeks specificity in directing.

More prominently, however, is his role as *Ambrosio*—a religious scholar known as “the holiest man in Madrid.” The film charts his downfall as he discovers that a young monk in his company by the name of Rosario is really a woman; and that she, actually named Matilda, has been in love with him since before she joined the congregation. *Ambrosio*, over the course of the film, becomes so consumed by his sexual urges that he commits unconscionable evils, all under the watchful gaze of Matilda and her Satanic origins.

John Durick – First *Ambrosio*'s director of photography, Durick would go on to direct *Minsky* in 1970 after continuously butting heads with prior executives. Durick is a more conventionally artistic glimpse into filmmaking culture—even on the set of *Ambrosio*, he pitched longer, more surrealist shots which more aptly utilized the camera as a participant in the scene (and, due to Fischer's rigidity, were rejected).

This view of filmmaking shapes the style in *Minsky*, which is softly-lit, heavily color-graded, and features far more complex shot compositions than *Ambrosio* before it. He briefly plays the titular Minsky, casting his girlfriend, Marcel, as his killer. He also fixates on 1970s painting culture, concurrently fearing and romanticizing the seedy underbelly of the art scene. Despite this more cinematography-oriented outlook, however, Durick's directorial style still draws from Fischer's (and the industry's) inherent misogyny.

This appeared to shift, however, when he began directing *Two of Everything* almost 30 years after *Minsky*'s cancellation—a film co-directed and entirely written by Marcel. His style does not reflect in this film; the colors are desaturated, the camera work less complex. Durick seems to mirror this stylistic decay himself during *Two of Everything*'s production, frequently snapping at actors, fainting, and having spontaneous nosebleeds on set. His fate after Marcel's death is unknown.

Carl Goodman – *Minsky*'s proverbial Robert Jones; a charismatic male star with a career shaped by his good looks. *Minsky*'s production challenges him to take on a more nuanced role than he is usually cast for, challenging his masculinity *and* his traditionalism in equal measure. Like the film, he has an overtly queer stylistic slant which emerges as a result of his participation; he is shown kissing Durick, dressing in drag, and rubbing elbows with the film's Warhol-inspired transgender actresses.

In *Minsky* the film, Goodman plays the confusingly-named Carl Greenwood, a straight-and-narrow detective sent to investigate the murder of a famous artist known only as "Minsky." At the scene, he is confronted with the sensual, manipulative Franny, who promises to aid him in his investigation by dragging him through the art circles which Minsky frequented—though it's painfully obvious that she killed him. As Greenwood's composure slips, he falls for Franny, all while explicitly ignoring the evidence which condemns her.

In *Minsky*'s climactic scene, Franny (in drag) shoots Greenwood point-blank in the chest. Marcel's prop gun fired a real bullet. Goodman died on set.

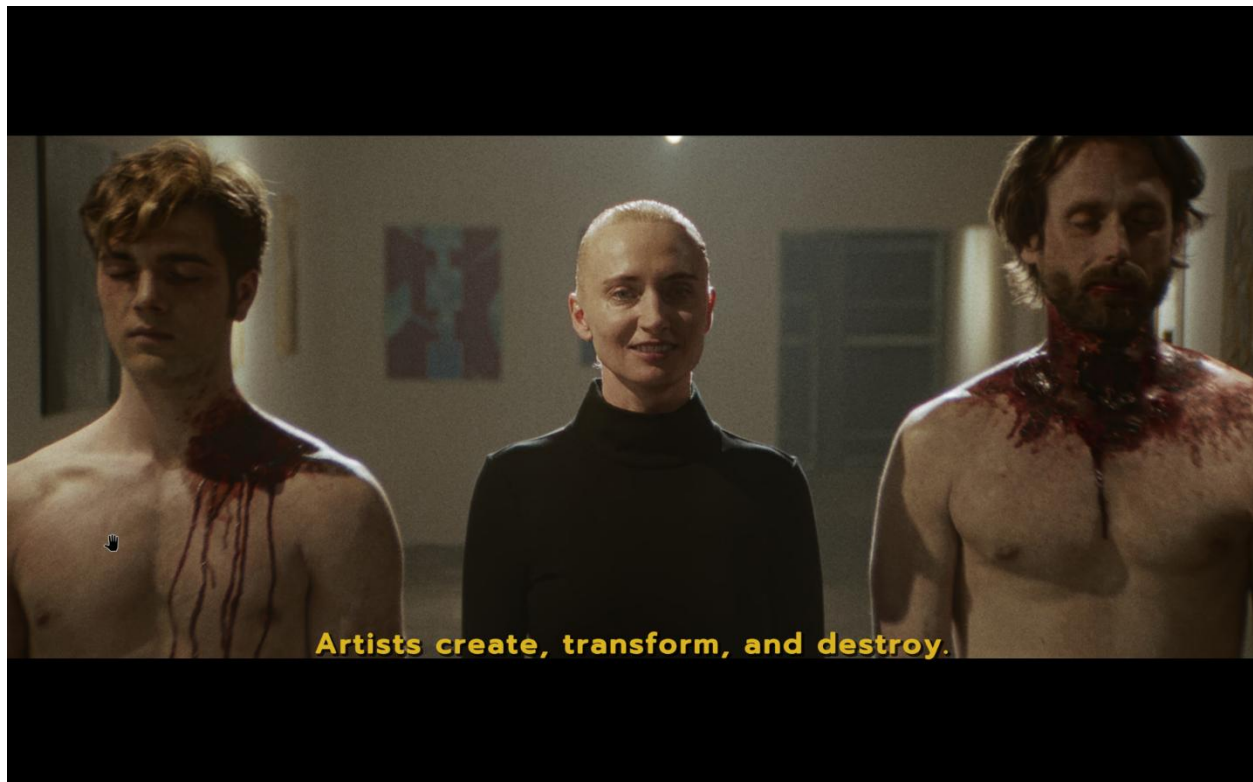
The One – Here's where things get interesting. Engaging with Marcel brings on a host of other questions: Why doesn't she age? Why does she sometimes seem *too* aware of the camera? The One *is* Marissa Marcel, at least in this footage—but The One is also an immortal, semi-vampiric being who wears the skin of preexisting humans.

The One has played many roles, and Marcel is just one of them. Hidden in the game's "subverted" clips, The One speaks directly to the audience; they are, canonically, *aware* of the player, and see fit to feed them bits of their history. Across all of these (of which there are around 50), The One is implied to have played the role of Eve, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus. During the

events of the game, we also see them consume John Durick, whose body they inhabit (alongside Marcel's) during the production of *Two of Everything*.

When replacing Marcel in the subverted scenes, The One is a sharp, terrifying presence; Marcel's warmth and conventional femininity are substituted for the gender-defying frigidity of The One, whose bold stare into the camera somehow pierces the fourth wall. Where Marcel is effortlessly bubbly, The One is often carnal—violent, sexual, bathed in religious symbolism evocative of Old Testament wrath.

The One is confined to Layer 3, though their attitude toward humanity fully informs the “character” of Marcel—humans, to them, are beautiful *because* of their mortality, and human art is transcendent because it decays. They mourn their inability to create something with that mortal context; to love, to fight, to die in the way that humans do.



From left to right: Carl Goodman, The One, and John Durick in a subverted clip from *Minsky*.

The Other One – Simultaneously The One's opposite and analogue, The Other One (or The Other) is the second of the two remaining immortals which prowl among humanity. Like The One, The Other has inhabited the skin of many a notable figure: The Other is Adam, Joseph, and Satan; though we also see them consume *Ambrosio's* fictional Devil, Carl Goodman, and *Two of Everything* actress Amy Archer.

Their conflict with The One forms Layer 3's narrative backbone; after crafting what they describe as “the perfect story” (the birth of Christ), The Other is perfectly content to leave humanity to their

useless creations. Nothing, they argue, will transcend the immortal impact of what currently exists—humanity will perform, and die, and stagnate, and the only thing to remain will be The One and The Other. The Other is, at best, indifferent toward humanity—The One is in love with the idea of them.

It is not known when The Other took over the body of Carl Goodman; just that they were “put to sleep” by The One as a result of the fatal gunshot. They would not reemerge until footage of Goodman’s death was discovered by Amy Archer, who, upon realization of The Other’s existence, became consumed by them.

Breakdown

Even that brief glimpse into *IMMORTALITY* elicits an astounding variety of possible readings; *IMMORTALITY* as a commentary on filmmaking culture’s foundational misogyny, *IMMORTALITY* as an exploration of the evolution of cinema, *IMMORTALITY* as a metatextual entity which answers its own fundamental questions about the perseverance of art. *Truly* digging into every piece of the game takes uncovering the history of The Velvet Underground, Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe, and a slew of trans activists, all while maintaining a fluency in both the Biblical canon and film language. It is, to put it lightly, *a lot*.

In order to narrow that scope, this analysis is going to be anchored around a fundamental quirk brought about by *IMMORTALITY*’s framing: how its combination of film-oriented topic and rigid mechanics interact to form a narrative which, from an outside perspective, does not seem fit for gamification. Why not create a movie, a series, or another format which would attract a more film-savvy audience? What, this analysis asks, does a linear mystery gain from forcing the player to engage with it?

IMMORTALITY’s Structure

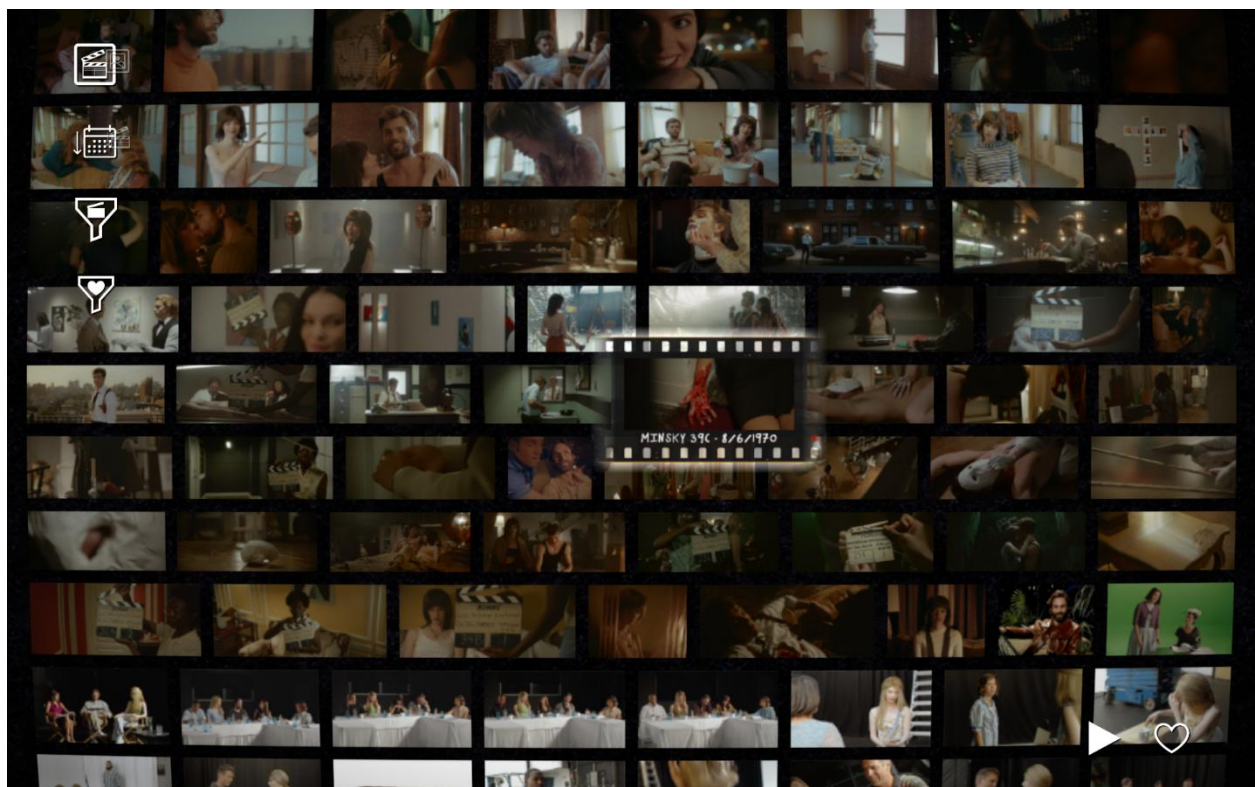
IMMORTALITY is, implicitly, a mystery game—though it doesn’t outright ask its audience to concoct a solution, *a la* Clue or Nancy Drew, it *does* frame its narrative with a core question which elicits many others. Unlike a more conventional game quest, which presents a goal explicitly and rewards the player when said goal is met, *IMMORTALITY*’s mystery only works if the player is willing to be intrinsically guided by sheer force of curiosity—and, furthermore, considers catharsis enough of a reward for a game well played.

IMMORTALITY is also, despite its utter lack of chronology, completely linear. Every player will experience its core plot points in a different order due to variable match-cuts, but those plot points will never, themselves, differ—only the extent to which each player understands their surrounding context.

To use a direct example: there is no single entry-point to Layer 3 that will introduce the player to The One. There are two reasons for this:

- a) The element of randomization in clip order; every clip contains a variety of motifs on which to match-cut, which taps into a network of randomized related footage relating to said motif. Only a limited number of these clips can be subverted.
- b) The game’s unwillingness to tell you that the subverted footage even *exists*, much less how to access it.

Engaging with Layer 3 is crucial to solving the mystery, but the speed at which a player finds a subverted clip will vary—and, therefore, some players will gain the needed supernatural context only fifteen minutes into the experience, while others swim at the game’s surface level for hours. Both players are drawing from the same pool of clips, and, therefore, engaging with the same narrative; just different facets of it.



The game’s primary menu, displaying all of the player’s currently-discovered clips (not including subverted ones.)

The issue with mysteries (and therefore, *IMMORTALITY*’s goal) is *maintaining* that engagement. In a structurally “bad” mystery, a solution that is too easily-gained, past the suspension of disbelief, or otherwise overt to its audience kills engagement, and therefore the ability for the narrative to say anything of substance.

Beyond being a mystery, however, *IMMORTALITY* is also a game wholly concerned with film history and language—structurally, there is no *IMMORTALITY* without decades worth of film culture, both within the text and beyond it. *IMMORTALITY* is not, however, a film—nor is it a game with any pretenses of teaching its audience how to analyze narratives cinematographically.

These two issues are both crucial to understanding what interactivity brings to the game's narrative experience; why, most simply, *IMMORTALITY* is a game in the first place.

The Role of Interactivity

Let's return to that example with the two players. Obviously, their experiences with the mystery have been entirely shaped by their respective choices—one player is now engaging with every new piece of evidence through the lens of some supernatural conspiracy, while the other is completely unaware that they are being stalked through the footage. Both are, however, *equally* engaged with the mystery; because the game's core question (What happened to Marissa Marcel?) is primed at the top layer of the narrative, every layer of evidence serves to color and contextualize, not provide the solution. While the former player is, technically, *closer* to solving the mystery in some respects, the interactive element ensures that both players are actively seeking out what most interests them in each new revelation.

Functionally, this gameplay loop behaves as follows:

1. A player finds a new clip, which they watch in its entirety. For the sake of this example, we will assume this clip cannot be subverted.
2. This clip contextualizes some area of the game in Layer 1 or Layer 2, filling in a gap in one of those two timelines.
3. The player combs through the footage to find the motif through which they wish to match-cut, making a *conscious decision* to seek out some continuity—this may be in a prop, a member of the crew, et cetera.
4. Repeat.

Step 3 is where player engagement peaks; every clip becomes a **sub-question** of what the player thinks will get them the most “productive” clip in the direction of solving the mystery. (Or, to simplify, “What should I match-cut on?”) A player may, for instance, come to the realization that Carl Goodman only ever appears in *Minsky*, therefore guaranteeing that any match-cut on Goodman will chain into a different clip from that same film. *IMMORTALITY*'s lack of concrete goal markers lends itself perfectly to this self-guided practice; and with no time limit, solution screen, or extreme stakes, *IMMORTALITY* provides the perfect environment to indulge in every curiosity which may arise from any clip.

Say, for example, a player stumbles across the clip of Goodman being shot. In this instance, they have solved the sub-mystery of *Minsky*'s cancellation—but if they lack context as to who Goodman is, or even the plot of *Minsky*, that immediately creates a new sub-mystery for the player to chase through their choice of match-cut.

Because this loop is the game's sole driver of player choice, every aspect of the narrative filters through that critical Step 3; and because Step 3 is invoked with every single clip in the game, every clip is a new engagement peak that requires the player to consciously track the narrative's various characters, motifs, and presence in the timeline. Most simply: the mystery's linearity does not take away from the importance of the player's choices, which keeps the story continuously engaging for a player at any step of the deduction process.

This same concept is what allows *IMMORTALITY* to be so centered on cinematography without sacrificing its approachability. Crucially, the game design decisions which incentivize players into paying closer attention to plot beats *also* elevate film as a visual medium.

A player can become unknowingly “trained” to recognize each film through their respective stylistic quirks—something as simple as the font used for the captions can tip a player off to not only the film’s visual style, but its placement in the timeline (which, as discussed, is a critical aspect of that engagement loop). To piece together *IMMORTALITY*’s mystery, a player needs to develop something of a filmmaking eye; at a bare minimum, the ability to distinguish between a rehearsal, a making-of shot, and the final take will completely define how a player defines Layer 1 and 2’s content. From there, the same implicit motivation used to solve *IMMORTALITY*’s sub-mysteries encourages the player to, consciously or unconsciously, begin to engage with the films as stylistic entities in themselves—Durick’s contention with Fischer during *Ambrosio*’s filming, for instance, is wholly reflected in the direction he would take *Minsky* and its shots.

The game never requires the player to have a preexisting knowledge of film language—there is no point in the game which is made clearer by being able to determine the name of a shot—but it *does* physicalize many of its more abstract character dynamics through filmmaking techniques. Why is the camerawork in *Two of Everything* so shaky? Because The One is inhabiting both of the film’s directors, which exhausts them to the point of losing Durick’s photographic expertise. Why is *Minsky* so harshly color-graded? Because Durick has a specialization in lighting, and wishes to emphasize it in the edit.

Because the player is pushed to pay such close attention to each clip’s visual elements, the visual underpinnings which define each film’s look and feel entangle themselves with each clip’s sub-question. As an example: *Ambrosio* is, by and large, an incredibly traditionalist film in terms of its cinematography. Its camera is often static in scenes, transitioning from wide shots to close-ups via cuts, rather than continuity. A player who has been conditioned to recognize that baseline fact of *Ambrosio* will be able to distinguish shots wholly led by Durick, whose usage of the camera is less concentrated on the characters and more so on the scene’s lighting and the shape of its space. That player then gains both a clear insight into *Ambrosio*’s production—Durick and Fischer did not see eye-to-eye—and historical context for Durick’s style moving into *Minsky*.

This all boils down to player *passivity* versus *action*. Watching a film is inherently *passive*—the audience has no impact on the way the story unfolds in the film’s intended experience. Even a non-chronological film is, by its structure, the same every time it is viewed. This lies in direct opposition to *IMMORTALITY*’s two goals: to hook the player into its mystery *and* to entice them into a grander understanding of how to engage with film as a medium. A passive mystery is one which does not require its audience to participate in order to experience its “solution catharsis,” and a passive education vessel is one which does not require its audience to actually come away with any knowledge. Bluntly: passivity is the mind-killer, and films are passive.

Unearthing the Horror

But even the minutiae of *IMMORTALITY*'s gameplay are meant to induce an *active* player mindset; to scrub through the footage, for instance, the player must physically roll a “film reel” backwards and forwards. The player cannot instantly select a section of a clip, as they would a digital film or YouTube video, but must maintain a subconscious context around motifs which they may wish to return to.

This is also where the player is likeliest to stumble into Layer 3—when rewinding certain clips at a specific speed, the player may accidentally “subvert” it, replacing the charming figure of Marcel with The One’s icy presence.

For a game which is not traditionally horror-oriented, especially compared to horror game canon, tripping into Layer 3 is incredibly chilling. When compounded with the other elements the player has become cognizant of through normal gameplay (the timeline, rules of cinematography, et cetera), The One’s unencumbered *awareness* of the camera is genuinely unnerving. Normal gameplay sets up a sense of consistency—the player explicitly learns the rules of the gameplay and how to distinguish the plots of Layer 1 and Layer 2, and implicitly learns to anticipate how the actors will regard the camera. The One ignores all of these.

As previously discussed, The One is aware of the player—though they do not clearly distinguish whether they are talking to specifically the individual or a hypothetical audience until the game’s finale. Instead, through their lack of adherence to conventions, that awareness is *implied*. They stare unblinkingly down the barrel of the camera. They monologue. They swing wildly from emotionless to frenetic, violent and animalistic and, most importantly, *uncensored*. The One is often nude, often bloody—a sharp divergence from the modesty-inducing smoke-and-mirrors employed in even Marcel’s most salacious scenes.

Layer 3’s horror isn’t just formed through contrast, however; it naturally arises as a result of keeping the player’s mindset active. As defined in the prior section, the sub-question drives the player to “hunt” for specific motifs, which tonally contextualizes their interaction with the plot as a *search*. Layer 3 impacts that search in three distinct ways:

- a) The player is rewarded for digging into the footage deeper than is anticipated, further incentivizing attentiveness.
- b) The player has a new reason to revisit previous footage for new clues about Layer 3.
- c) The player now knows that someone is speaking through the clips.

All of these can deeply impact the *mood* elicited by the clue search; the positive feedback of a completely new line of inquiry is undercut with the implication that, maybe, they have dug up an underlying truth they were never meant to see. That tug-of-war between two opposing elements—the hunger for a solution versus the fear of being watched—is crucial to the disturbing atmosphere elicited by *IMMORTALITY* as a whole. The game never has to pull its player aside to explicitly state that engaging further with Layer 3 is exposing them to The One’s cold gaze; that sensation is imparted onto them by context.

That is, until the game’s “final” scene—chronologically its last, it is the scene which answers, beyond the shadow of a doubt, “What happened to Marissa Marcel?” The player can uncover this clip before they reach the game’s credits. The player can fail to recognize that it can be subverted. But if the player has figured out the game’s “trick” (which they likely have, given the very specific

scenes which may chain into this one), they will uncover perhaps *IMMORTALITY*'s most horrifying moment.

Let's start with Marcel. She sits in a chair, lit three-pointedly. Her palms are up. She looks almost waxy. From stage right, Amy Archer approaches, strokes her hair, exits. She reenters with a can of gasoline, which she douses Marcel in.

Marcel nods, stiffly. Archer kisses the top of her head. She exits, lighting a match from off-camera. With one toss, Marcel, still completely stock-still, is completely engulfed by flame—her limbs collapse, her skin blackens, but she is made so hazy by the fire as to be reduced to a charcoal drawing. This is the end of Marissa Marcel.



“What happened to Marissa Marcel?”

Recall, however, that this scene can be subverted. The One replaces Marcel in her chair; stiff, palms up, expression blank. The Other takes the place of Amy Archer, though they only appear in the clip's first subversion.

In total, the clip can be subverted three times through a combination of backward and forward motion. The One grows closer with each. They do not speak. They snap closer. Closer. Until their face consumes the screen.

They breathe shallowly for a few seconds. They do not blink. They do not break eye-contact. They smile, shakily, though it doesn't touch those piercing eyes. And then, softly:

“I see you.”

No matter the amount of context the player has about Layer 3—whether this is their second or their twentieth time seeing The One—this moment is transcendently unnerving. It cements to the player that they have revealed *themselves*; this isn’t the game reaching out to the player, but vice-versa, the player physically trawling through the game to the extent of forsaking the protection of the fourth wall.



“I see you.”

And that’s what *IMMORTALITY* is about: how choosing to engage with media breathes consciousness into it. Forcible engagement with a narrative—or, more aptly, gamification—is the only vehicle through which a moment like this would work. In shifting the burden of interaction to the player, the game never has to peel back its own layers. There is no “rug pull,” as would be necessary in a film, a novel, or any other passively-consumed medium. Within *IMMORTALITY*’s core context, it is inherently understood that the *player* has breathed life into The One as a character—while the game’s world saw only Marcel, it is the player who hunts for The One, the player who elevates them from fiction to metafiction.

The game itself echoes this in its final scene before its credits *actually* roll: The One, peering through gaps in the game’s UI, whispers, “I’m part of you now.” Solving the mystery has culminated in this moment: The One’s transcendence into a non-physical, immortal idea, buried within the player themselves. The player has, after all, made it this far—to even reach this scene, they have

uncovered a specific selection of subverted clips which wind throughout *The One and The Other's* odyssey. They have chosen, again and again, to carve through the game's fiction; and, in so doing, carve through the layers which inherently separate art and its viewers. That interaction, the game subtextually argues, is what keeps art IMMORTAL.

Strongest Element

The game's ability to seamlessly weave its horror into its gameplay is unparalleled given its simplicity. Again, one must consider *IMMORTALITY* as an active piece, rather than a passive one—were it a passive piece, the realization that something is conscious just beneath its fiction wouldn't feel *threatening*. The narrative would be revealing its own trick, and therefore reinforcing the idea that the fourth wall exists. In contrast, *IMMORTALITY* forces its player to get really close in order to dig up its scares, metaphorically sticking their fingers through the bars of the narrative cage. It is of the player's own devices that the narrative bites.

Unsuccessful Element

IMMORTALITY is, unfortunately for game narrative snobs, not an approachable experience. Despite how this analysis has emphasized how active its gameplay is, it is, fundamentally, like watching three movies. As such, it has bloat—for the sake of realism, the game is full of B-roll, bad takes, and scrapped material. The game can absolutely get tedious, especially in its endgame, where new clips frequently chain back into old ones, motifs get exhausted, and subverted clips become scarcer and scarcer. *IMMORTALITY* rewards patience, but the experience still stymies.

Highlight

A standout clip, one which really encapsulates *IMMORTALITY* as a whole experience, is Scene 45 of final film *Two of Everything*.

For context: in *Two of Everything*, Marcel plays two characters, Heather and Maria. Maria is a pop sensation, and Heather—despite being unrelated—looks identical to her, which they exploit in order to secretly trade places. During an event where Heather is posing as Maria, Heather is killed; but the world thinks that it was Maria who died, leaving the real Maria to solve the mystery of her friend's murder while posing as her.

Scene 45 occurs when Heather—again, pretending to be Maria—has finished up a \$10 million personal birthday performance. The man who bankrolled her is as slimy as they come, further reinforcing the misogynistic themes found throughout *IMMORTALITY*.

The man leads her up to her room. He's been trying to get her to drink, but she's been refusing. She thanks him as cordially as she can muster, gold microphone in hand.

"What does a ten million dollar night look like?" he asks. "It doesn't end with a polite nod at the door. I want to know you appreciate it."

He forces his way into her room, closes her door. He's stripping off his suit jacket.

Heather barricades herself in her bathroom. He shouts at her to come out from the other side of the door. Heather attempts to call Maria—Maria ignores the call.

Heather is desperate. She presses her ear against the door, waiting for the man to walk off; and when she gets her chance, she bursts through, pushing past him and out of the room.

But a scene can't encapsulate *IMMORTALITY* without being subverted. When rewound, The One replaces Marcel—but the fiction of the scene remains intact.

"No," The One hums as the scene starts.

"What does a ten million dollar night look like?" the man asks. "It doesn't end with a polite nod at the door. I want to know you appreciate it."

"No," The One spits.

The One is holding a gold microphone. They haven't moved, but the man shouts at them to come out. With their opposite hand, they grab him by the jugular.

"I'm gonna wait here all night," he chokes. That's when The One snaps something in his throat, and he collapses.

His body falls offscreen, but The One remains in the shot as they kneel over him, raising the microphone. It smashes into his face; once, twice, arcs of his blood sluicing over The One's angular cheekbones as air hisses between their bared teeth. Finally, after what feels like a full minute of beating, the camera shifts down to his bloody head, deformed into something simultaneously plastic and organic—no longer recognizable as human.

The music swells, sharp strings and a low drone. The One turns to the camera, their pale blue eyes boring out from a skull swirled with red.

"No matter how many I kill," The One snarls, "there are always more."



The One in 2OE, Scene 45.

This scene is a highlight because it, in five minutes, perfectly executes *IMMORTALITY*'s trick: it introduces an interesting theme in Layer 1 and 2 (the sexualization of female performers) which it then expands upon incredibly violently in Layer 3. It even features The One speaking directly to the audience; which, as previously discussed, incentivizes the player to continue digging into the motifs presented by the clip. Its implications are fascinating at any stage of player context: The One has killed, and frequently. Why does this scene's fiction in particular elicit such an enraged response? What does The One represent as an entity living in the skin of a female actress?

Critical Reception

Tristan Ogilvie, IGN (8/10): Ogilvie highlights the success of the game's horror, describing it as "alarmingly eerie" beneath its grounded skin. A great deal of the review is spent praising how "real" the game feels—directly comparing it to *The Blair Witch Project*—and the charm of *IMMORTALITY*'s character interactions; though this is undercut by a hefty critique of the match-cut system, which overly randomizes the discovery of solutions.

Keza MacDonald, The Guardian (5/5): MacDonald wastes no time in praising the mystery's structure, highlighting how elegantly it unfolds "no matter which clips you see first, or which character arouses your suspicions, or where your biases lie." They also emphasize the scale of the

story in both plot and themes—although this *can* cause the game to drag in pacing, they argue, that same scale is what makes the experience of the mystery so personalized.

Mikhail Klimentov, *The Washington Post* (8/10): Klimentov, unlike other reviewers, directly criticizes *IMMORTALITY*'s “need [for] an ending.” The game's adherence to mystery convention, they argue, dulls its broader existentialism by attempting to put a cap on its own questions, particularly through the use of the supernatural. They do, however, heavily acclaim the game's subtext, realism, and consistent intrigue, especially within the top layers of the narrative.

The game is also a BAFTA award winner for Best Narrative, beating out the highly-praised *Stray*, *God of War: Ragnarok*, and *Citizen Sleeper*, as well as a nominee for Best Game Direction and Best Narrative in the 2022 Game Awards. Manon Gage, in the role of Marissa Marcel, won multiple awards for her performance, as did the game's audio editing team.

Lessons

IMMORTALITY strikes such an interesting balance between complex ideas and simple execution that its lessons are applicable beyond its genre and form. Within the span of this analysis, however, are three chief takeaways:

- 1) Gamification can seamlessly introduce unfamiliar topics to unconventional audiences.** While not the traditional “serious game” or education-oriented experience, *IMMORTALITY* sets out to introduce film linguistics to an audience which isn't traditionally familiar with them. The game is able to succeed without being completely inaccessible due to its structure: interactivity through the sub-question slowly shifts the way the player engages with the piece, and more attention is paid to elements which would normally evade a passively-watching player.

At a broader level, gamification can be applied to almost any topic: and, evidently, has been in more traditional contexts (take your Duolingo or your Starfall). Gamification as a driver of subtext, however, is less utilized—the idea that a writer can simultaneously introduce narrative themes and new topics through interactivity has yet to really impact games writing.

- 2) Horror is elicited through the unexpected, not the conventionally frightening.** At the end of the day, The One is an actor; they are smaller than most of their co-stars, usually unarmed, and often nude. They are never imposing or bestial as outlined in horror gaming tradition—they are no Mr. X, no Pyramid Head, but they are made frightening by the game's *context*. The way they behave contrasts with everything the player has come to expect from *IMMORTALITY*'s characters and structure, and *that* is what seizes their attention. The One is unexpected, even after the player learns where they reside; their behavior is erratic, their appearances scattered enough that the feeling of being *seen*—not looked at, but really *witnessed*—never stops being uncanny.

In a swamped horror game market, being more than just shocking can be the line between drowning in a sea of jump-scare sims and winning a BAFTA. A horror writer can use any myriad of *IMMORTALITY*'s techniques to elevate their monsters; it just takes understanding that forcing your player into close narrative proximity with your threat will *always* feel more affecting than a model with big teeth.

3) A game narrative does not have to branch for player choices to be meaningful.

IMMORTALITY, of course, explores this through the sub-question. As discussed, the story is completely linear (traditionally passive), but imbues the player with the power to chase any line of inquiry.

Narrative-oriented games, especially in the AAA sphere, most often receive praise for a wide variety of branching pathways; and while that can be incredibly impressive, it takes a certain type of game design mastery to tell a linear story which still places value on the player's choices. A great deal of stories *aren't* improved by branching—a frequent issue with branching narratives is thematic and tonal consistency, for instance, which inhibits the ability of the narrative to take a solid stance on any of its ideas. When writers view branching as the beginning and end of player choice, they lose the ability to tell one completely solid story; and, in so doing, lock it into a simpler subtextual state.

Summation

Narrative design is, unfortunately, one of the least stable jobs in game development. Writers are often hired per-project, underpaid, and dropped after the game has shipped. Truthfully, the industry doesn't value writers—and why would they, when players come to *games* for *gameplay*?

IMMORTALITY is, perhaps more than any other game, a model of what gameplay-narrative linkage looks like; and it's beautiful. There are few games which unify their gameplay and story to this extent, especially not in such an unconventional way. You can't jump, or dash, or shoot in *IMMORTALITY*—every element is tailor-made to deliver its story, and yet it would be actively *worsened* if it were transplanted into a more story-first medium. Simply: *IMMORTALITY* is a game because there are stories which *must* be interacted with. Narratives marry so well with games because interaction is transcendental: they make a passive story immortal.

Sources¹

“Immortality.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 30 Aug. 2022, www.imdb.com/title/tt21911886/?ref_=ttawd_ov_i.

Klimentov, Mikhail. “Immortality Review: Its Flawed People Are Perfect, but the Game Is Not - The Washington Post.” *The Washington Post*, 12 Sept. 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/reviews/immortality-game-review/.

MacDonald, Keza. “Immortality Review – a Spellbinding Cinephile Puzzle about a Vanished Actor.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 31 Aug. 2022, www.theguardian.com/games/2022/aug/31/immortality-review-a-spellbinding-cinephile-puzzle-about-a-vanished-actor.

“Narrative.” *BAFTA*, www.bafta.org/awards/games/narrative/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2025.

Ogilvie, Tristan. “Immortality Review.” *IGN*, 30 Aug. 2022, www.ign.com/articles/immortality-review.

¹ Note: As I hope was evident in my passion for this game, no AI was used anywhere in this paper. I just use em-dashes.