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Affective Symmetry: Affect and Networks in Blizzard's *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void*

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Abstract

This paper employs a convergence of affect theory and social network analysis with data visualization of *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* (2015) to examine how the single-player campaign structures a largely non-player character (NPC) aggregate that interpellates a player into a position of an avatar other. The data visualizations map the complex network of interactions that exist even in the single player campaign through the virtual community of NPCs into which a player immerses him or herself. This analysis explores the dynamic interactive gameplay network experience of *Legacy of the Void* as an ethical negotiation of the other towards a more responsible version of player subjectivity through a process of deotherization.

Author Keywords

Game studies; affect theory; network analysis; deotherization

StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) is the third and final chapter of the *StarCraft II* trilogy and a stellar example of the real-time strategy video game genre. I propose a social network analysis of *Legacy of the Void* to examine how the single-player campaign structures a largely Non-Player Character (NPC) network. I will employ a nuanced critical game studies reading, including a convergence of social network analysis with affect theory to explore the dynamic interactive gameplay network experience of *Legacy of the Void*. Additionally, I will employ data visualizations to map the complex network of interactions that exist even in the single player campaign through the virtual collective of NPCs into which a player immerses him or herself through a process I will refer to as deotherization. *Legacy of the Void*, though a single player campaign, forms a spectral network that interpellates the player in a similar fashion to a physical community. The network restructures and expands with every mission, which I will display using data visualizations that re-create a metanarrative example of the Protoss' Khala, their telepathic communication. Furthermore, the network, once actualized through visualization, does not relinquish members who have passed on—died in the diegetic world—and their presence comes to haunt the human player and NPCs alike as the story progresses, only building upon an already powerful emotional connection of the player within the network.

While there are many useful analyses of *StarCraft*'s multiplayer aspects and the community that converges around it, especially within professional eSports (Huhh, 2008; Witkowski, 2012; Dor, 2014; Toft-Nielsen & Norgard, 2015; Szablewicz, 2015), there is little done regarding the single-

player aspect of StarCraft, or any RTS game series. I focus solely on the single-player campaign in this paper in order to examine how a purportedly single-player experience can nonetheless interpellate a player into a virtual, non-human community of the diegetic world. Even the aforementioned list of critics, which is by no means exhaustive, speaks to a common thread in an otherwise uncommon area of discussion. As Simon Dor (2014) notes, "Studying Real-Time Strategy games (RTS) is not commonplace in game studies today" (para 1). In response, I simultaneously look at past and present critical discussions within and outside of game studies to form a nuanced reading and methodology of a relatively underdeveloped area of game studies. *Legacy of the Void* exists somewhat as an outlier of an already small area within the critical milieu of common game studies discussion. However, due to game studies' multidisciplinary nature, it is difficult to offer a single, congruent definition of the field. Game studies, in its purest definition, is a study of games; however, 'game' is a rather obscure category, including card, table-top, sporting, playground activities, and, of course, video and digital games, to name a few. As dissenters often fault the video game medium for remediation, video game critics tend to distance game studies from its original manifestations of play. Ironically, this separation often hinders new modes of comparison and critique, especially the RTS, *Legacy of the Void*'s genre. Thomas H. Apperley (2014) explains:

> The strategy genre is usually divided into two subgenres: real time strategy (RTS) and turn-based strategy (TBS). Both RTS and TBS games have a similar aesthetic, a general god's eye-view of the actions taking place, with a tendency toward a more photorealistic depiction. However, both games, the TBS especially, cannot be considered remediated forms of any other orthodoxly conceived technological medium; rather they remediate the playing of the strategy table-top board game.
>
> Apperley, p.13 (2014)

Such an aesthetic return to prior form complicates the strategy game and, consequently, "this genre differs considerably from other genres in its visual aesthetic" (p.13). This differentiation often causes critics to ignore the seemingly nostalgic RTS.

To remedy this void in game studies, I will examine *Legacy of the Void* through a confluence of close and distant reading, which combines traditional literary analysis with data visualization to expose an affective immersion of player and network, subject and other, that I call deotherization. To begin, my particular influence for the data visualization aspect of my analysis come from Franco Moretti (2011), where he maps the character interactions of various works, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, using network theory. Network theory, Moretti explains, "is a theory that studies connections within large groups of objects: the objects can be just about anything… and are usually called nodes or vertices; their connections are usually called edges; and the analysis of how vertices are linked by edges has revealed many unexpected features of large systems" (p.80). Moretti describes these 'unexpected features' in terms of "the uncanny rapidity with which one can reach any vertex in the network from any other vertex" (p.80). A network is a relatively simple construct made up of "vertices and edges; a plot, of characters and actions: characters will be the vertices of the network, interactions the edges" (p.81). For his main analysis, Moretti maps the interactions of Hamlet's characters (the nodes or vertices) and their interactions (the edges) to create his networks. At its most basic level, nodes and edges manifest as "two characters […]

linked if some words have passed between them: an interaction is a speech act" (p.81). However, as his network focuses on speech acts as interactions, I find it interesting that in his analysis of Shakespearean networks, Moretti does not include the audience as a node of interaction or reception. Focusing on speech acts should constitute a thorough discussion of characters' asides and soliloquies because they are fundamental aspects of character development and performance, as well as moments that immerse an audience (member) into the narrative. Through my own network analysis of *Legacy of the Void*, I take particular interest in the position of the player within the game's network, which illuminates the fundamental importance of the player in the interactive medium of the video game. The cinematic and theatrical aspects of *Legacy of the Void* speak easily to such an analogy of asides and soliloquies; however, these moments of directed interaction, as my data visualizations will later reveal, are not rare instances within the game.

The focus on interaction within the Khala of the game's campaign offers an analysis of affective connection and emotional commitment to gameplay that is not necessarily common in the majority of real-time strategy (RTS) games, or science-fiction games as a whole. *Legacy of the Void*, as the third and final installation of the science fiction real-time strategy game *StarCraft II* trilogy, builds upon years of player attachment to character networks. The game centres on the alien race called the Protoss, one of three playable races in the *StarCraft* universe, with the other two being the human Terran and the monstrous Zerg, respectively. Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of the *StarCraft* series, describes the Protoss as an "ancient humanoid race with highly advanced technologies largely based on their mastery of psionics" (Barba, 2015, p.87). The game's campaign follows the alien Protoss, as their leader Artanis desperately seeks out the scattered remainders of his people in order to confront the fallen god Amon before Amon destroys the universe. The player, along with a group of powerful Protoss, joins with Artanis to mass a war band capable of challenging ostensibly unconquerable obstacles. The player enters into the gameplay as a Protoss avatar called the Executor, a ranked member of the Protoss' militaristic caste, and supposedly communicates with the NPCs through the Protoss' psychic abilities.

The way in which the player effectively and affectively immerses in the network of the Khala, and the game at large, is through the phenomenon of interpellation. Louis Althusser (2001) explains interpellation as a process:

> Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'

> Althusser, p.174 (2001)

The ostensibly unmistakeable interpellation requires the acknowledgment of that who was hailed, and Althusser notes that "Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man" (p.174). Though he separates the instance of interpellation from an individual within ideology, Althusser explains that "in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and

the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (p.175). Furthermore, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects" (p.175-176). This theatrical metaphor takes place when a player enters a diegetic world and supposes a separate identity from his or her (already) interpellated subjectivity in reality. This instance is not exclusive to *Legacy of the Void*, of course; however, the convergence of a non-avatar presence and the NPC's direct dialogue, along with the concept of the Khala, makes *Legacy of the Void* an interesting case.

This meta-textual and multimedia aspect of the game further immerses a player within the game's campaign, as the player's avatar is one of the most important members of Artanis' network. Thus, the player is instantly connected—diegetically speaking—to the NPCs of the narrative via "A psionic energy field called the Khala [which] creates a telepathic connection between all Protoss— or, more accurately, between all Protoss with intact nerve cords" (Barba, 2015, p.88). The expectation at the beginning of the game is that the player, like his or her fellow Protoss, possesses this nerve cord in order to engage in the dialogue that occurs throughout the game's campaign. The virtuality—having no physical sound outside the mind—of Protoss communication is important to their race, as "Protoss 'speak' in telepathic bursts of a language called Khalani, and they can control which entities 'hear' their conversation" (Barba, 2015, p.88). Speaking with orifices is bizarre to the Protoss and their telepathy is not merely speech, rather a different process that offers them a deeper kinship with those engaged in the communication. In short, Protoss communication is always a speech act, just a speech act without a mouth, an interaction that underlies an important emotional investment from one Protoss to another, allowing the player, as the Executor, to connect with his or her fellow NPCs. The multimedia medium of the video game portrays the Protoss' telepathy via voiced dialogue, simulating real interaction and furthering the player's engagement within the Protoss collective as the Executor, which I will discuss at length later in this paper.

Speech Acts and Data Visualizations
In my attempt to map the Khala, along with each other interaction in the game, I created all of the following five data visualizations of *Legacy of the Void*'s character network through compiling each main interaction that occurs during the campaign. The dataset is relatively simple in construction, possessing only a source and a target for each speech act. Furthermore, I generated these visualizations through the program *Gephi* using a single dataset and quantifying the degree of each interaction through a colour-coded blue spectrum. The nodes that have the most interactions, or edges, are the deepest shade of blue and the less significant nodes fade along the blue spectrum. I also chose to curve the edges, facilitating the already natural symmetry that occurs through the relatively small network. As Moretti (2011) notes, "with few characters, symmetry seems to emerge by itself, even in the absence of an aesthetics of symmetry" (p.96). Indeed, symmetry arose when I began to frame the visualization of the social network of *Legacy of the Void*'s campaign. This visualization creates permanent marks for what would normally be passing remarks; to paraphrase Moretti, when we play the game, we are always in the present: what is on screen appears and then it disappears—there is no physical trace of the speech act. However, visualizing these speech acts changes the nature of the interactions. Though the Protoss sever their ties with the Khala, its presence lingers as both an affective memory and an integral piece of their collective legacy. Likewise, these interactions now linger once they are visualized because "Here, nothing ever disappears. What is done cannot be undone" (p. 84). Data visualization overcomes temporal limitations posed by a close reading, by "making the past just as visible as the present:

that is one major change introduced by the use of networks" (p.84). In this notion of visibility and presence exists the greatest benefit of data visualization(s) as a method to "read" a videogame without having to repeatedly replay specific sections or the entire campaign. These passing interactions are no longer narrative specters but fully captured instances of virtual community constructed; the player interacting with non-beings—the ghosts in the machine—becomes a moment or many moments of situated presence: the NPC speaks to the player at this precise moment and that moment is now captured.

As I mentioned earlier, my dataset is relatively simple in construction, possessing only a source and a target for each speech act between two characters (including the player, the Executor), and the data visualizations are quite simple in design; however, its simplicity belies the complexity of the connections it displays. Though large for some video game standards, the campaign consists of twenty-eight characters who make significant appearances (not counting real-time interactions of controllable units in each mission who reply to every player command), with twenty-seven of those characters being NPCs. Of those twenty-eight characters, twenty-four characters have more than one interaction. Three NPCs only have one interaction, and consequently do not appear in the data visualization of *Figure 1* or *Figure 2*, which offers a proportional distribution of the network interactions (above two degrees). The three NPCs are Tychus Findlay, Kate Lockwell, and the Moebius Core—all of whom are major characters in the first instalment of the trilogy, *Wings of Liberty*, which centres on the human Terran. *Figure 3* offers a visualization that includes all twenty-eight characters, and from that visualization we can see that two out of the three characters interact solely with the Executor, which may account for why they do not have more than one interaction, as the player does not have the option of verbally replying to a NPC's address. From the twenty-eight main characters in *Legacy of the Void*, I mapped all one thousand three hundred and forty-two interactions that exist as unique and integral pieces of dialogue throughout the entire campaign. These speech acts occur in missions, cinematics, and interactive "briefing" zones within the Spear of Adun campaign hub, as spoken dialogue between NPCs and NPCs and the player. Dialogue in missions occurs as the player progresses through specific objectives, while the dialogue in "briefing" zones occurs when the player directly interacts with a character or group of characters through clicking on the NPC(s). Cinematics are more theatrical in nature, with the player set aside as one of the spectators, though there are often times when a NPC will look directly at the screen, interpellating the player in that moment specifically. Characters will even engage the player more explicitly, speaking directly to the player such as when Artanis, at the beginning of the game, announces, "We have been through much together, Zeratul, but far too many have sacrificed in the hope, that this moment could come to pass. *Executor, commence the invasion!*" (Blizzard, 2014, emphasis added). However, these speech acts are not the only instances of dialogue and the majority of the player/NPC interactions manifest as cries of aid or offerings of advice or strategy during the missions.
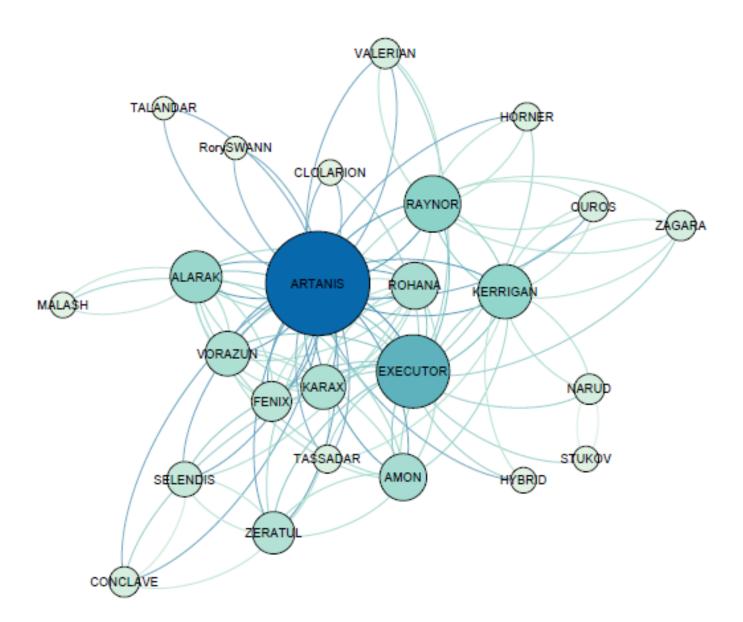
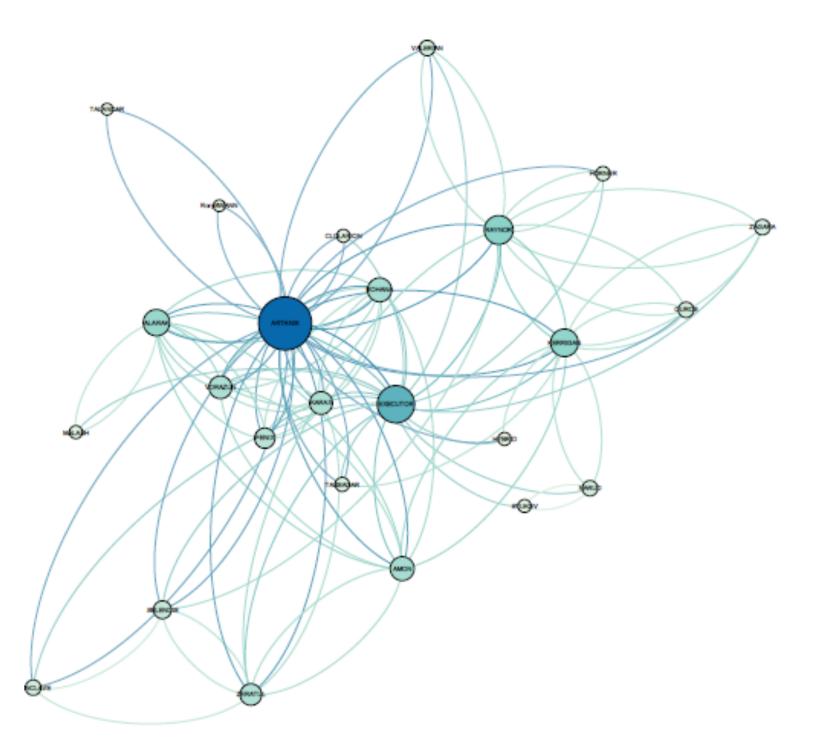***Figure 1****: Legacy of the Void with characters interacting more than once.*

Figure 2*: Legacy of the Void with characters interacting more than once; spatially distributed.*
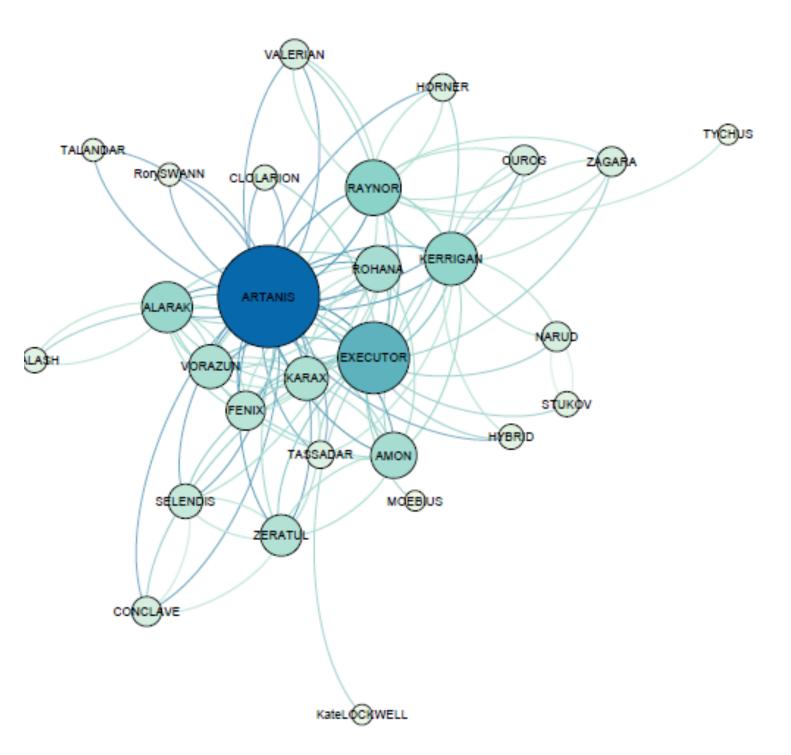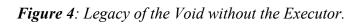
Figure 3: *Legacy of the Void with all characters.*

Figure 4*: Legacy of the Void without the Executor.*

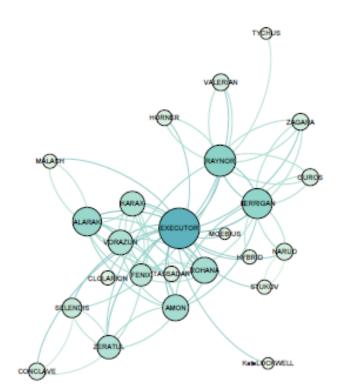***Figure 5****: Legacy of the Void without Artanis.*

The data visualizations for *Legacy of the Void* reveal useful examples of how player interaction functions within the network as a whole, what Moretti (2011) calls "the underlying structures of a complex object" (p.84). As shown in *Figures 1*, *2*, and *3*, aside from Artanis, the Executor—the player's avatar in the campaign—is a main node, signified by its size and shade of blue, within the web of interactions that make up the dialogue of the campaign. While Artanis, as the Protoss leader, is no doubt the main protagonist of the campaign, the Executor follows very closely behind him despite only having one-way interactions with all the other characters. If we remove the Executor from the network, as shown in *Figure 4*, the network re-aligns itself with Artanis firmly in the middle, further reflecting his position within the campaign. However, if we remove Artanis from the visualization, as recorded in *Figure 5*, the Executor exists as the central figure within the network. Consequently, the player's position in the network is always a key factor in the progression of the campaign. Through either absence, the network maintains the importance of both Artanis and the Executor as ostensibly mutual protagonists. To paraphrase Moretti, Artanis and the Executor are "therefore not free: because [they have] a duty towards the structure" (p.102). Both are necessary to the integrity of the network because either absence in the network results in the loss of connection of two minor character nodes in the network—a disruption in the game's network. Perhaps the most important thing that one can glean from these visualizations is the centrality of the player's position as the Executor. Despite Artanis claiming title as protagonist with Raynor and Kerrigan as the two other characters that make up the races' trifecta, the Executor still possesses an unquestionable importance in the gameplay and narrative, existing as one of the inner most and largest spheres of influence.

Examining the data visualization, one can postulate the speech acts—whether they are one-sided or two-sided—are laden with affective capital, forming a symmetrical network of interacting members. To better examine these speech acts as affective capital, I will follow Brian Massumi's theory of affect in my discussion of these connections. Regarding the turn to affect, Massumi (2002) argues, "There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and all theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information—and image—based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered" (p.27). However,

> In the absence of an asignifying philosophy of affect, it is all too easy for received psychological categories to slip back in, undoing the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism. Affect is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion. But... emotion and affect—if affect is intensity—follow different logics and pertain to different orders.

> Massumi, p.27 (2002)

Following Massumi, emotion is equally as productive in my critique as affect because "Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized" (p.28). Though affect centers upon a player's ludic experience of response and reaction, emotion becomes an effective means to understand the diegetic aspect of these reactions within the virtual community as the Protoss' Khala, "as the psionic link is not just mental but emotional as well" (Barba, 2015, p.88). The necessary (affective)

interactivity, and resulting (emotional) connection, within the narrative of the *StarCraft* story, converges to change the lens in which we view the game and the player.

In terms of affect, it is familiar to speak of a protagonist's affective response to a text, theatrical, or cinematic narrative; however, it is not familiar to speak of a player's affective response to a video game. I found some particularly generative emotions such as anger and frustration are often inevitable experiences in the *Legacy of the Void*'s campaign, especially during later missions, when repetitive failure became an important experience in understanding the various objectives. These instances occur after spending hours on any one difficult mission in *Legacy of the Void,* where I would have to reload a saved checkpoint multiple times just to overcome one of several objectives in a single instance. Apperley (2014) notes the repetitious gameplay of the RTS is definitive of the genre, comparing the beginner and expert player. One the one hand, "the beginner player is engaged with the play of the game on the level of response" (p.13). This response manifests itself through the beginner player's lack of knowledge regarding interactions and obstacles in the level. The only way to learn these interactions is through experiencing and, more often than not, failing before having the skill to overcome them. On the other hand, the expert player experiences a different form of repetition as

> The strategic play of the expert player comes from a combination of knowing the various options available and being able to correctly value them within the game context. This process is ongoing, as the player learns more about the values of the variables.

> Apperley, p.13 (2014)

Regardless the level of expertise, the player's affective engagement (and often emotional investment) with the game results in an effective means to progress through the gameplay.

The networks represent an affective connection between the player and NPCs, since the data visualizations offer a display of affects turned actions because "a network of speech acts is a network of actions" (Moretti, 2011, p.94). Paradoxically, *Figures 1-4* display the importance of the player's position within the game's network, despite never having two-sided interactions with any of the other characters. The NPCs constantly speak to the player and, unlike a theatrical experience, NPCs do not act without the player successfully completing sets of objectives. A mission does not progress if a player loses all his or her units or fails to complete an objective in a certain amount of time. On the other hand, a theatrical performance could continue without an audience, although such a performance would defeat the purpose of the production. On a third level, the act of reading a book requires a reader's concentration and, similar to the game, will not continue if the reader does not read the text. However, even in more interactive texts or movies that break the fourth wall, the process is still one-sided and the characters do not require the reader or viewer to react. A film viewer and a book reader do not work, aside from acting as spectators or readers of each respective narrative form. Katherine Ibister (2016) notes a similar reality and argues, "at their heart, games differ from other media in one [...] fundamental way: they offer players the chance to influence outcomes through their own efforts" (p.2). Within *Legacy of the Void*, the player as Executor literally works for the narrative, becoming integral to the interactions and thus the network of the game.

Artanis and the Executor, as NPC and human player, respectively, are key figures within the network, affecting the structure regardless of their nature. Massumi notes:

> Affect, like thought or reflection, could be extended to any or every level, providing that the uniqueness of its functioning on that level is taken into account. The difference between the dead, the living, and the human is not a question of form or structure, nor of the properties possessed by the embodiments of forms or structures, nor of the qualified functions performed by those embodiments.

<div align="right">Massumi, p.37-38 (2002)</div>

The NPCs are not without affect (and the resulting emotion at the story level), even as scripted beings that rely on the player's interactive and reactive mode of engagement. Interaction opens a series of reactions, each building on one another as a series or, more accurately, a network of events. Just like the speech acts in Shakespeare's plays, the speech acts in *Legacy of the Void* are crucial moments of (re)action that constitute the progression of the campaign and actualization of the player's gameplay, which "could be seen not as binary oppositions or contradictions, but as resonating levels. Affect is their point of emergence, in their actual specificity, and it is their vanishing point, in singularity, in their virtual coexistence and interconnection—that critical point shadowing every image/expression-event" (Massumi, 2002, p.33). Though the nodes, the player or NPCs, are sites of emotion, the edges, the structuring aspect of the network, are sites of affect; they are the in-between that allows for the network, the emotion, the emergence.

The player comes to traverse the dichotomous boundaries between emotion and affect through necessary micro-actions within what Jim Bizzocchi (2006) describes as the micro-narrative. In establishing an analytical framework to understand games, Bizzocchi notes that an integral aspect of a narrative framework, the micro-narrative emerges as a player progresses through a narrative arc:

> As we go deeper into the game, and examine smaller individual moments of play, the concept of a localized arc takes on considerable force. The changing context for play is constantly set up with fresh complications and challenges, the gameplay itself is an instantiation of the narrative development phase, and intermediate successes and failures act as interim resolutions and localized climaxes.

<div align="right">Bizzocchi, para. 29 (2006)</div>

Micro-narratives in the *Legacy of the Void* campaign - which exist within each individual mission where the player's main task consists of controlling one's army - exposes an affect-drive, action and reaction, where emotion only arises at moments of success or failure and affect presides the in-between, the constant instances of engagement. As the micro-narratives form the complete mission, which then pieces together the campaign's narrative arc, affect resides within the interactions of the network of the player and NPCs. Each interaction brings about its own affective capital; what then rests in these visualized nodes of the NPCs are thoughts and feelings crafted together by a group of skilled game designers. Massumi (2002) likens affect to an impingement—

the cause to an (emotional) effect. Following this logic, he argues, "the body infolds the effect of the impingement—it conserves the impingement minus the impinging thing, the impingement abstracted from the actual action that caused it and actual context of that action" (p.31-32). In an imprecise, though productive, comparison, an emotion manifests as the effect of the affect—what is registered, qualified, and remembered. The affect is fleeting whereas the effect remains. When returning to the data visualization, I read the edges, the speech acts and interactions, as the visual aspect that come to represent the affect between the nodes, whether NPC or human, that form the network.

The interactions throughout *Legacy of the Void* offer interesting ways to think about how affect and emotion frame an understanding of often protean and nebulous player identity, as well as how affect structures the emotional resonance of a player's attachment to a social aggregate of NPCs within a single-player gaming experience. How we interact with any community—NPC or RL—simulates micro-interactions with unique individuals, especially those deemed the other in our own political and social relations. A virtual interaction via a (simulated) telepathic web of affect—the Khala—offers an avenue to deconstruct the notion of the subject/other, which (may) inspire a more responsible, or at least responsive, version of subjectivity. Narrative, whether passive or interactive, reflects our interactions with those around us—human or non-human—at an ontological level. To empathize or sympathize with the other is to empathize or sympathize with the game's network of humanoids, simultaneously like us and unlike us, making us more aware and active in our interactions with the living and virtual beings around us.

Judith Butler (2005), in speaking to the possibility of giving an account of oneself, acknowledges, "We start to give an account only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment" (p.10). For Butler (2005), there is always necessarily an other who must receive our own address because "giving an account… draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion" (p.12). The existence of the audience is important to a construction—and account—of one's self because an other must be present in order for one's account to be received and acknowledged. This moment of reception, however, is a crucial moment of connection as "this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself" (Butler, 2005, p.21). Following Butler's conjectures, the presence of an other is fundamental to my own ethical perspective within *Legacy of the Void,* and I openly acknowledge a departure from moral theorists such as Mary Flanagan (2009) and Miguel Sicart (2009) as their notions of morality bound within social norms as reflected in a game's rules and system. Indeed, Sicart explores player-subjects and the ludic experience through ethics as a practical science, removing, or at least ignoring, the affective and emotional aspects of a player's ethical dilemma when negotiating an other. Sicart focuses on the moral (re)actions taken within the game system's parameters, and his perspective of a game's moral qualities remains within the subject of player despite, or in spite of, any notion of emotion and immersion, whereas I am interested in a player's ethical responsibility to the other.

The primacy of the ethical relation transpires through a necessary vulnerability and transparency because one offers his or her address to a largely unknown recipient; assumption and power dynamics shift as one offers him or herself to the unknown. Furthermore, Butler (2005) notes "one who receives becomes, in a certain way, an allegory for reception itself, for the phantasmatic

relation to receiving that is articulated to, or at least in the presence of, an other" (p.68). This ethical relation to the other contrasts Sicart's (2009) moral considerations, as he focuses on the notion that "ontology of games calls for an expansion of our moral universe to take into account the simulated environment where a game takes place, because it is not about how we inhabit a world, but how that world allows us to inhabit it" (p.36). There is also an implicit ethical imperative lacking within Sicart's moral assumption of the simulated environment: not only how we inhabit a given world but also how we react to others that inhabit that world that are not pre-determined by rule parameters. Returning to *Legacy of the Void*, there is a necessary account of multiple selves occurring through the Khala's network and the NPCs speak to the player, who exists as an outsider, an other, and who must assume another identity in order participate in the account of the interpellating community. The Khala's network does not only interpellate the player, it interpellates the player as Executor, and the player must be willing and able—at some level—to embrace him or herself as the other in order to assume—and account for—his or her identity as the Executor (if only for a limited time in a limited space). This consideration brings me to my final examination as to what happens then when phantasy becomes (virtual) reality: a process I have coined as "deotherization."

Deotherization
To begin, I draw inspiration for deotherization from Jacques Derrida's general project of deconstruction and, in particular, by his acknowledgement that "I can address the other only to the extent that there is a separation, a disassociation, so that I cannot replace the other and vice versa" (Caputo, 1998, p.14). Furthermore, deotherization is a reconsideration of previous ethical work done by aforementioned theorists such as Butler (2005), Sicart (2009), and Flanagan (2009), as well as an extension of critics such as Ibister (2016) who argues:

> The player moves through the game world taking actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and struggling towards his or her or her goals. Players controlling avatars project themselves into the character on four levels: visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy.

> Ibister, p.11 (2016)

Deothering occurs at the site of the player and his or her avatar. The process relies on a player's emotional attachment to his or her avatar through an implicit process of deconstructing the subject/other binary. The player comes to re-negotiate these singular and opposing dichotomies as the binary begins to flux into a spectrum of familiarity and empathy, as well as player engagement. Subject and other are re-evaluated, putting aside their contrasting identities as singular and opposing constructs in an attempt to work through the game. As Ibister (2016) explains, "over the course of gameplay, players extend themselves further into the motivations and the visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy possibilities of the avatar, forging an identification grounded in observation as well as action and experience" (13). This extension is a process situated upon the spectrum of what I call deotherization; the further a player as subject emotionally invests in the avatar as other, the further a player becomes deothered. Thus, the player and avatar create a virtual bond that allows for the player's emotional connection to the Khala and other NPCs, despite their otherness, in order to complete the game. Connected through mechanical, technological, and virtual means, each represents two halves of a whole: the player subject completes the avatar other,

the avatar other completes the player subject. The spectrum operates through different degrees of recognition and empathy between the subject and other. Though the subject defines itself against the other, there may be enough points of contact (or, in the case of *Legacy of the Void*, affect) where empathy and acknowledgment can flourish. Deotherization is not simply a familiarization with a distinct other where the subject can identify with an entity that is not itself as a spectator watching a film, or a reader reading a text. Instead, deotherization can also be understood as a profound de-familiarization with one's self in attempt to situate one's self within the perspective of a video game avatar-other. The player as subject others him or herself and the consequent identity is a new subjectivity for whatever amount of time and point of suspended disbelief.

The process of deotherization may appear to run aground against claims such as Flanagan's (2009) position that:

> Computer interfaces are still designed as if players and users themselves are only partly bodied, or even disembodied. The relationship of the body to the mind, and now to the network, must be better articulated beyond various forms of utopian rhetoric, particularly in the era of the 'social networks' frenzy, where ranges of intimacy and knowledge are set computationally, and often by systems designers, rather than by participants.

<div align="right">Flanagan, p.232 (2009)</div>

Here, Flanagan does not give the credence to players immersed in their role within the network of a game such as *Legacy of the Void*. Both Sicart (2009) and Flanagan (2009) focus on the moral implications of game design and rules. Neither critic opens up the possibility of the ethical dimensions still intact despite the ostensibly limited parameters put in place by game designers and systems. Players still have the choice to engage with the parameters in place and the game's affective quality hinges upon the player's affective connection to the game. There must be some level of immersion and flow—and by extension, a degree of deotherization—to enjoy the ludic experience. If not, the game simply becomes an unnecessary task. Deotherization is not permanent by any means, of course, and the player can easily remove him or herself from this state of deotherization by removing him or herself from the game's participatory narrative; however, this detachment comes at the cost of completing the game. If one is to see him or herself through the campaign's progression, one must inevitably engage, at some level, with deotherization as he or she occupies the presence of the Executor to complete *Legacy of the Void*. Thus, in *Legacy of the Void*, deotherization arises from a particular investment in the Protoss NPCS from mission to mission because their success is also the player's success: if they die or fail, the player also fails and progression halts. One could think of the often innocent statement: "I keep dying on this level"; or, "that boss keeps killing me" as examples of player alignment with the Executor. The Executor, as the site of deotherization, brings gameplay and narrative together; and in order to achieve victory and beat the game, a player must merge his or her identity with the Executor—if only for the duration of the game.

Deotherization is, perhaps, more conducive in *Legacy of the Void* as a RTS game because there is no actual avatar on screen, which aligns with Flanagan's (2009) observation that:

Even though the body is not visibly acting a scene to an observer, the participant is bodily engaged. While lived experiences culminate in a variety of complex physical, social, and philosophical realities, even simple games… can provide an emotionally complex slice of an experience, and present a layered, 'nomadic' perspective by shifting from player, to character, to world citizen and more.

Flanagan, p.242-243 (2009)

Whereas simple games with short durations of gameplay make explicit a 'nomadic' perspective, longer, more narratively intense games require prolonged alternate perspectives. A change must occur for even a small duration of time. Again, this connection is not merely familiarization or spectator-actor connection; one must be the Executor in order to succeed. Of course, just as with the subject/other, deotherization exists on a spectrum and no two players may ever have a similar merging with his or her avatar just as no two spectators will ever have a similar connection with a protagonist. However, this process still exists on a different level because of the necessary participation/interaction demanded of the player. Simply put, you can fall asleep while watching a movie and it will still finish; you cannot fall asleep playing a video game. Deotherization, then, exists only in interactive or participatory media—the ergodic literature of game studies past. This process of deotherization (like all various instances of deotherization) speaks not only to StarCraft II but to all linear, single player games—I chose *Legacy of the Void* for this particular paper because the meta-textuality of the Khala existing within network theory adds another layer of emphasis in my deotherization reading.

Following the process of deotherization, I argue that within *Legacy of the Void*, a single player experience is never actually singular because of the necessity of the player interactions with, or through, the NPCs as a projection of an other existing within a kind of dispersal of subjectivity. Deotherization inevitably adds another level of companionship with the NPC network because mission objectives often require certain NPCs to survive, ensuring the player feels some degree of protectiveness over his or her virtual companions. Interestingly, the interactions that occur with the player, the Executor, are one sided as NPCs speak to him or her usually through orders and discussing strategy, during either briefing and in-game missions, and vice-versa. The player, as Executor, exists as a mute member of the community, yet a member nevertheless—the presence of the player's action(s) compensate for the player's lack of voice. Dor (2014) stresses the interactive nature of controlling an army of uniquely AI- and player-controlled units, which is at the heart of the single and multiplayer RTS experience. Players begin a chain of command and reaction "when they give an order to a certain unit by a mouse click or by hitting a key, the order takes a certain time and is fulfilled independently by the unit, thus giving the player the opportunity to manage something else in the meantime. Optimizing units' actions is thus at the core of RTS gameplay" (Dor, 2014, para. 5). However, that requires both an obedience from the AI managed units and a reliance on the AI managed units. These actions have significant affects and effects on the gameplay—and narrative—and NPCs will warn, chide, and congratulate the player through the missions with the majority of the interactions manifesting as cries of aid or offerings of advice or strategy. The player thus exists as an affective (as well as effective) void where speech acts are absorbed but no speech acts are expelled. Instead, the player absorbs the affect from these NPCs and returns these acts as effective—as causing effect—acts that create units, buildings, or other necessary components towards completing an objective. The player exists as a point of conversion

between affect and effect—balancing them in a symmetry not unlike the one found through the data visualizations.

Through the (constant) player/NPC interactions, the NPCs create a virtual network for the deothered player and through this connection, the player never feels, or should never feel, isolated or alone during the events of the game, being a critical member of the Khala. The virtual connection (in the sense that it exists both within a digital world and without other physical participants) exists in the single-player campaign where the player as Executor and the NPCs form a social aggregate. However, the single player's desire to 'socialize' with these other members requires much more reliance upon deotherization as a unique level of immersive ethical responsibility to the other(s) because forming an alliance with these Protoss NPCs is necessary to overcome objectives and progress through the game. Each mission is a group objective rather than a single player challenge. Even in the missions where one or several of the main NPCs are controllable units, each NPC speaks to the player as he or she moves (via the player's control) around the environment, sometimes even disagreeing with or reprimanding a player for his or her in-game decisions. These constant networks, as displayed in the *Figures*, re-create a metanarrative example of the Protoss' Khala, their telepathic communication, and though every Protoss character eventually severs their ties with the Khala to defeat Amon, their interactions become all the more important. Consequently, individual entities actively choose to exist within the network, and work together as a collective to traverse the game's campaign. The player depends on the NPCs to accomplish objectives within any particular level, through either offers of advice, offers of units, or offers of meta-mission abilities, which often gives the player a notable advantage over the game's environment. While some objectives may not require communal support and give the player bonus abilities when completed on his or her own, the main objectives always require some level of communal support, whether that be escorting and protecting an NPC, using an ability granted by an NPC, or defending one's base until an NPC arrives. This dependency upon the NPC improves the overall interactive experience of the campaign and these relationships become more complex and nuanced as the difficulty of the campaign increases over time.

The dependency and interactive nature of the NPC community also affects the player as a member of the collective. Player emotions are rooted in mission success but, more importantly, to the NPCs themselves; a player who has played through the entire series may have come to know these characters over two decades. Both affect and emotion offer a particularly interesting understanding of gameplay and immersion. Actions, including speech acts, have crucial effects on the player and the game alike. A player affects a game as much as the game affects the player. Furthermore, while other games may have richer and deeper emotionally driven narratives, *StarCraft II* builds upon, and offers the conclusion to, years of connections starting with the original game from 1996. A player's emotional attachment drives his or her desire to affect the network, to see through an emotional investment of over two decades. Thus, *Legacy of the Void* builds off of decades worth of emotional attachments to both the over-arching story, as well as beloved characters, which makes the deaths of several well-known characters all the more affective. Constructing the network serves as a memorial and reminder of these characters because even after they die, their presence lingers, their interactions remain, their effect becomes affect. A salient example of player/NPC affective relationships arises from my (diegetic) relationship with the Protoss Zeratul. Zeratul is introduced in the first *StarCraft* as both an integral character in terms of the narrative, as well as a character whom I have both played as and played alongside in each of the previous instalments of

the *StarCraft* series. His role becomes more important with each instalment of the series until he represents the Protoss race as an antihero champion. *Legacy of the Void* not only pays tribute to Zeratul's character legacy but he also occupies the position as prime mover in the campaign's story. He acts as the herald to an ostensibly inevitable oblivion through his own witnessing of Amon's ascent and, only within the first few missions, he sacrifices himself to protect Artanis from Amon's influence. As arguably one of the most beloved characters in the StarCraft series, his death took a large emotional toll on me as both the Executor and a long-time player of the series, further inspiring me to continue the campaign alongside Artanis to honour his memory. Adhering to the spectral nature of the data visualizations, Zeratul haunts each of the other characters' interaction as the reminder of the gravity of the ultimate objective in finally hunting down and destroying Amon.

In hunting down Amon, and avenging Zeratul's death, the player as Executor must participate in *Legacy of the Void* as an ethical imperative not only at the site of deotherization but at the narrative level as well. For Sicart (2009), video game ethics are always a top-down construction, coming from the game design to the player, never vice versa and, through this conception, Sicart argues "by creating a game world with a set of rules and a level design that limits the player's choices, [a game] creates an ethical experience" (p.52). Indeed, StarCraft limits the player's choice by forcing him or her to destroy warring factions of different races, possessed by Amon or not. Thus, the ethical experience manifests as a destruction of an other while simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, acting as an other from him or herself. Destroying Amon and his possessed forces creates a particularly stark ethical experience in that, from the beginning, Amon has never been any representation other than malicious and evil. Indeed, Amon's possessing Protoss through infiltrating their connection to the Khala offers a meta-textual example of unethical deotherization, an instance where the responsibility to one's self and the other collapses. Amon's power of possessing a Protoss through the Khala offers an analogy of deotherization at the narrative level: Amon occupies a space within a character, using him or her as an avatar for his own purpose. He was not and is not the possessed character but for even a moment, his presence, and perspective, comes to define his host's reality. They are no longer fully other to him as he has their thoughts, memories, and bodily movements and he is no longer fully other to him or her because occupation of their perspective works both ways: the possessed Protoss feels and understands Amon's thoughts and emotions if only for a moment.

Interpellation creates a key ethical rhetoric: one is hailed to act and to act necessitates a power dynamic that must be carefully resolved in order to maintain an ethical distance and respect to the other. Responsibility is fundamental in negotiating a relationship (of whatever degree) with the other and Butler (2005) argues, "responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other" (p.91). The responsible player should not impose upon the other and one possible way of affectively connecting and responding to the other is the suspension of a determined self by way of deotherization. The player is always already the Executor, a forced occupation did not occur and thus the deothered space created in merging the player-subject with the Executor-other allows for both a moral (in Sicart and Flanagan conception) as well as an ethical engagement, to the boundaries of the Protoss' otherness as both a Protoss and not a Protoss. A greater perspective emerges from having both an interior and exterior understanding of those with which one is connected, and Isbister (2016) observes "This joining of player to virtual self through avatar-based action marks a core innovation that games have brought to media, and extremely powerful one for

evoking emotion" (13). Indeed, the affective connections of Khala's network and emotional attachment of the deothered subject (as player and Executor) is fundamental to the initial psychological investment required for deotherization. The networks I have mapped and the affect and emotion that I examined to expand these connections all emphasize the importance of this innovative aspect of *Legacy of the Void* and all video games that offer the space for deotherization.

Conclusion

As I have discussed through this paper, employing data visualization and the concept of deotherization to study the affective networks within *Legacy of the Void* offers a unique insight into an already dynamic medium that would not be possible without a combination of these close and distant reading practices. Blizzard Entertainment's *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* challenges many traditional categories of both RTS video games and RTS video game criticism, thus my converging analysis is an attempt to do it justice. Through my methodology, I hope my analysis bridges ostensibly disparate critiques that may illuminate useful avenues for discussing RTS games and games in general. Following a game like *StarCraft II*, our methods need to continue to build unlikely networks between allies in order to embrace a means of communication and embody an effective and affective responsibility to one another and the other. These connections establish networks across disciplines to create a more responsible, or at least responsive, version of subjectivity, which furthers game studies at large. The possibility of enacting a more ethical version of one's self through *deotherization* speaks to the lasting power of games such as *StarCraft II* that offer fully-fledged characters and immersive gameplay. Indeed, *Legacy of the Void* is a fitting conclusion to one of the most influential RTS game series in the last two decades, and if its ability to further player's ethical considerations hold true then perhaps its legacy will be anything but void.

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