

# LATENT COHORT: Centring Imaginative Agency

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## Keywords

Agency, Identity, Proxied Embodiment, Perception, Cognition

## Format of work

Physical role-playing game on postcard, distributed by physical installation.

## DESCRIPTION OF WORK

*LATENT COHORT* is an experimental physical game of espionage which activates the player as a “sleeper agent”, changing how they perceive interactions with their environment. Play begins when a player attends a Cold War-era dead drop – an espionage tradecraft technique where secret messages can be passed to a covert agent without arousing suspicion.

Each player can retrieve a single sepia-toned postcard from the drop. The player reads a redacted teletype message addressed to them, including an activating code phrase. The message threatens the player that they are under surveillance by a dangerous enemy, and to act as normally as possible. The player is instructed to not change their expected behaviour, lest they are identified and subject to redacted consequences.

This invitation to play changes the player’s perspective on their own actions – from unintentionally following their normal routine to intentionally performing actions that mimic normal routine. This invites the player to consider the momentary question, “Is this how I would act if I weren’t scrutinising how I act?”. As players build confidence in that answer, they meet the broader question: “If my intention is to embody myself as I would when not playing, how is that any different to not playing?”.

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

**Background:** Both academia and industry increasingly define games by their ability (or obligation) to provide agency. In academia, agency is being discussed as a lynchpin of the aesthetic value of games, or a defining factor in games’ position as art (Nguyen 2020, Lantz 2023). Industry designers are developing a folkway-like expectation that designs will prioritise player agency by providing uninhibited personal control over the gamestate (Bycer 2015, Cook 2021, Crawford 2024). Both conversations habitually define agency by mechanical actions to influence ludic economies or the player’s ability to choose narrative progression or direction.

However, the undiscussed form of agency arguably contributes more to games’ claim as artform: A player’s evolving understanding of their own identity and meaning within their environment (Aberdeen 2018). Fuist (2012) defined this kind of “agentic imagination” as “the active ability of social actors to shape their identities through

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immersive imagination”. Agentic imagination is not generated through systemic interaction or narrative authority, but through a games’ capacity to deliver a new embodied identity (Chee 2007; Swink 2008, p28) to which the player makes themselves subject (Sicart 2009, p68). This transition from existing meaning in the preceding real world to the meaning generated by this proxied embodiment is self-reflexive: It is dependent on the player’s comprehension and perception rather than the games’ systemic structures.

*LATENT COHORT* provides self-reflexive agentic imagination through gamefully-mediated shifts in the player’s identity. Unlike other games in this space, *LATENT COHORT* achieves this effect not by introducing *new* systemic behaviours the player performs, but by changing the player’s *perception* of non-game behaviours they were already performing.

**Contribution to field/industry:** *LATENT COHORT* provides a novel exploration of gameplay: Play takes place wholly within the player’s perception of actions, given new context by the text. *LATENT COHORT* offers players an opportunity to increase their understanding of agency by experiencing agentic imagination independent from reinforcing systemic, narrative, or organoleptic structures.

**Significance:** *LATENT COHORT* players will experience how little game interface is needed to meaningfully shift a player into agentic perception. Players will consider how reliance on systemic power fantasy and sense-pleasure limit what we call the aesthetic experience of play, or even art.

## EXHIBITION

The work will create a simulated dead drop location in an 80cm wide x 80cm tall x 50cm deep installation set upon a table. Players can attend this installation throughout the conference. Conference attendees will be directed by a label to take one of the postcards on which the game text is written. This will create a game artefact addressed to the player, which sets the diegetic and endogenous terms of the player’s shift in perception. Participants will then apply the game’s lens over their engagement with the existing space and crowd of DiGRA Australia 2025. Players will apply new meaning to familiar situations, discovering new player agency in a non-systemic, semantic sense.

## BIO

Sidney Icarus (they/them) has more than 15 years of experience designing playful and meaningful interactions across military, healthcare, government, and recreational applications. They are a full-time digital game designer and operator of applied game consultancy Wax Wings. Sidney is the designer of Australian Independent Role Playing Game of the Year 2023 *Decaying Orbit*, and spoke at DiGRA Australia 2024 on player strategy selection through *Action Paths*. When not playing with game design, Sidney enjoys spending time with a coffee (Magic) and their cat, Radar.

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