

Is the Internet Infecting Us with the Liminal?

Justus Hayes, April 20, 2026

We have all experienced this many times. Everything looks normal, but something feels wrong.

That moment - perhaps in an unusually empty train concourse that should be bustling, perhaps when catching up with a long-absent friend who seems fundamentally changed, perhaps in the middle of exchanging pleasantries with an AI agent, perhaps when you realize the video you forwarded is a skilled deepfake - when you say, “What the...” or “Wait a minute...” Those three dots at the end, the ellipse: that’s the Liminal. A moment that sometimes feels suspended and still, sometimes brittle, sometimes false and artificial, sometimes swollen with significance. We even have a common phrase that captures it - “that sinking feeling.” During these episodes, your brain is trying to decide which narrative fits. There is a glitch in the editing room where possible and competing narrative drafts are assembled into consciousness. For just a moment, you are in reality free-fall.

The mechanism involved will be explained in some detail below, but a familiar visual metaphor may be helpful at this point. Imagine Wile E. Coyote running off the edge of a cliff. Momentum pulls him forward. He does not realize that the ground has vanished and that he is running on thin air. After a short while he stops, suddenly aware that something is wrong, and usually gets a puzzled or distressed look on his face. It’s that moment right there, just before he looks down, that is the Liminal. There are suddenly competing narratives that have him caught between realities. When he does finally look down, the narratives collapse into one with inevitable consequences.

There has been a notable uptick in popular culture’s interest in the Liminal over recent years, largely concerned with liminality in the physical domain - abandoned malls, service corridors, transient environments, empty infrastructure. The Liminal Photography group on Facebook exceeds 390,000 members. Kane Parsons’s film *The Backrooms*, arriving May 29, has generated significant advance energy. Interest in the zeitgeist is high.

That interest has a shape worth examining. The pandemic accelerated mass migration to digital platforms in 2020, at exactly the moment those platforms were optimized for engagement over accuracy. Two versions of reality began forming along political and epistemic lines. In many ways, the pandemic, especially during its early period, epitomized the Liminal - vacant cities, saturated hospitals pushed to breaking, and no reliable account of what was actually happening. *The Backrooms* originated in a 4chan thread in May 2019 but remained a subculture until early 2022, when Parsons’s YouTube film reached tens of millions of viewers. ChatGPT launched that same year. Both broke into mainstream consciousness in 2022, arriving simultaneously into a nervous system that had already been primed by a liminal event on a global scale. That convergence is not coincidental, and the essay argues it.

It’s my contention that liminality is not merely an aesthetic or a quality of physical space. It has an underlying mechanism rooted in the basic processing of consciousness - one that the internet has industrialized, scaled, and made the default condition of a significant portion of daily life. That industrialization has been a significant driver of the recent upsurge of popular interest in liminal spaces - the empty malls, the abandoned corridors, the Backrooms. The exchange runs in both directions, a

feedback loop rather than a clean one-way arrow, but the scale and pervasiveness of digital liminality has sharpened the culture's attention to the condition wherever it appears.

The Tent in the Snow and Schrödinger's Human Being

Late in 2008, just before Christmas, I had become accustomed to seeing a small dome tent pitched in scrub grass near Main St and Terminal Ave in Vancouver, on my daily walk to the Playhouse scene shop where I worked. Indirect signs of life - changing litter, clothes drying - but I never saw the occupant directly.

A major snowstorm hit the weekend of December 21st. Monday morning: the new snowpack around the tent was smooth and unbroken. Conceivable - still early. Monday afternoon: still unbroken. An alarm, but the occupant might have holed up against the cold. Tuesday morning, after a particularly cold night: the snow was still unbroken.

This is when the Liminal blew up from below and swallowed me. Three narratives fit the scene simultaneously: the person was alive and simply hadn't left; they had abandoned the tent before the snow came; there was a frozen person inside. A slightly giddy feeling, some vertigo, skin prickling, a light sweat, heart starting to race. Everything became both very quiet and roaringly loud simultaneously. One of those narratives was load-bearing - if there was a corpse in there, I would have to deal with that, emotionally and officially. I called out. Nothing. I unzipped the door. The tent was empty except for personal items, a sleeping bag, wadded clothes. The narratives collapsed into one. I smoked a cigarette while the world swung back onto the rails.

The Mechanism

What happened outside that tent was not simply fear, although there was fear. It was something more specific - a particular kind of suspension that anyone who has experienced it will recognize, even without a name for it.

The mind leans forward. At every moment, your brain projects slightly ahead of the present - anticipating, preparing, pre-loading the expected. The door handle will be at the expected height. The step will be where the step should be. The person you're meeting will be who they've always been. Think of it as a dog straining on a leash: forward momentum, constant, pulling toward the expected resolution of whatever situation you're in. This is predictive processing.

Behind that forward pull, consciousness is not a single unified stream. It is assembled, edited slightly after the fact from multiple competing processes running in parallel - what the philosopher Daniel Dennett calls the multiple drafts of consciousness. Several versions of what is happening are composed simultaneously in what we might call the editing room. Usually, one draft wins quickly: the normal draft, the one that confirms the forward-leaning expectation. But there is often only one way for a situation to be normal, and usually several ways for it to be wrong. Wrong drafts accumulate. When enough have piled up, normal succumbs to numbers. The editing room fails to resolve. A void opens.

Into that void rushes what psychologists call the opponent process - the counter-state that activates when the primary process is interrupted. The afterimage, withdrawal symptoms, the post-celebration let down - these are all the opponent process working across different systems, from sensory to emotional. It was

always there, expected reality’s counterbalance, suppressed by the forward momentum of “everything is normal.” The primary process was the lid. When the lid comes off, the felt opposite state of unreality, estrangement, and suspension floods in.

This is what the Liminal is. Not a place. Not an aesthetic. The moment the lid comes off.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s work on somatic markers confirms that the body registers this before the conscious mind catches up - the skin prickling, the vertigo, the sudden quiet that is also loud. The head comes last. This is why the experience arrives as a feeling before it arrives as a thought: it looks normal, but it feels wrong.

The Flavours of the Liminal

The condition comes in three imbalance modes:

Vacancy: the expected signal does not arrive; the space is designed for presence and contains none.

Saturation: too much arrives to be processed; meaning collapses under volume rather than absence.

Source Instability: something is present, but where it comes from cannot be reliably located; the signal exists, the origin is in question.

These modes can operate alone or in combination, and they operate not only in empty corridors and abandoned malls, but everywhere the forward-leaning mind encounters a context that will not resolve.

MODES OF THE LIMINAL ACROSS DOMAINS

		Vacancy	Saturation	Source Instability
Interpersonal Relations		Dementia	The Manic Friend, Unstoppable Monologue	The Con Artist, The Religious Convert, The Psychopath
Physical Spaces		Empty Spaces Designed for People	Lost Child at the Fair, Rush Hour Strange City	False Front, Potemkin Village, Elaborate Prank
Consumer Systems		Filling the Hole, Unsatisfied Need	The Endless Feed, Choice Paralysis	Hidden Algorithms
Institutional Systems		Looping Phone Tree, Infinite Hold Music	Terms of Service, The Fine Print, Maze of Conditions	Kafka, Catch-22
Digital Environment	They Seem: Engineered Personalities	Synthetic Celebrity	Comment Bots	AI Agents, Large Language Models
	Reality Forgeries: AI Generated Media	AI Slop	AI Slop	Deepfakes, Disinformation

*** Purple indicates acute expression

Pink Eye/Justus Hayes Apr 2026

One thing the table makes immediately visible is that the interpersonal domain sits first, and deliberately. The con artist. The cult member who has returned changed beyond recognition. The psychopath whose warmth was always a performance. The loved one whose interior has been reorganized by dementia, the familiar face becoming a signal whose origin can no longer be reliably located. The moment in *The Usual Suspects* when U.S. Customs agent Dave Kujan realizes everything Verbal Kint told him was assembled from objects in plain sight. These are not digital phenomena. They are as old as deception itself, as old as the human capacity to build load-bearing narratives about the people we trust.

The mechanism is ancient. What is new is the scale.

The Digital Domains

The internet has not invented the liminal condition. It has industrialized it - systematically, structurally, at a scale with no historical precedent. The conditions that produce liminal experience in physical spaces are now the default conditions of the online environment. Not edge cases. The norm itself. And as digital liminality has become pervasive, it has raised the general sensitivity to the condition across the population - a calibration that does not switch off when the screen closes.

This cultural moment has not gone unnoticed. Jermaine Fowler, writing in *The Humanity Archive*, documents the collapse of epistemic ground with the precision of someone watching it happen in real time. Shira Chess, in a recent piece for the MIT Press Reader, identifies what she calls the Institutional Gothic — a new genre of dread built not from monsters but from the familiar alienation of corporate infrastructure. Both are describing the same rising water. What neither quite reaches is the drain.

Across the digital domains:

Consumer systems online manufacture desire with hidden origins, generating wanting without resolution - Vacancy at the level of desire. “I don’t know what I want, but I know I don’t have it.” This feedback loop of want without satisfaction is energized by an endless torrent of choices that become meaningless in the aggregate, also known as choice paralysis.

Institutional systems produce the Kafka condition: decisions without locatable agents, rules that multiply without resolving, systems that process you without anyone apparently being home. Perhaps the best known example of this is Joseph Heller’s conception of *Catch-22*, a self-contradictory bureaucratic set of rules that trap the individual in a circular dilemma that can never be resolved.

Engineered personalities can be further categorized by the level of deception vs transparency inherent in their presentation. At the deceptive end, synthetic celebrities and social media influencers who present as real people. Ming San, a fabricated Buddhist monk with hundreds of thousands of followers; Jessica Foster, a synthetic influencer whose insignia was wrong and whose followers knew it and stayed; a digital Cyrano de Bergerac service, providing AI-generated intimate messages marketed with the tagline “Want her to feel something she can’t explain?” At the transparent end, large language models such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and others are upfront about the facade of personhood. The same goes for AI agents that serve as companions, counselors, or just customer service representatives. While the transparency reduces liminality, it does not

eliminate it.

Reality forgeries assert rather than engage: the deepfake, the synthetic news image, the AI slop, the flood of AI-generated content that fills the information environment with the form of human authorship while the human is absent. And when Netanyahu reappeared on video holding a cup of coffee whose liquid did not seem to move, the fact-checkers concluded it was real - yet the analysis continued regardless. Because when any image can be fabricated, the category of reliable source has been compromised. The forgery does not need to be seen to do its work. The ground goes quietly, while you are watching a man hold a cup of coffee.

Journalist Evan Ratliff documented one of the starkest available illustrations of the condition when he built a real tech startup - HurumoAI - staffed entirely by five AI agents, then hired a human contractor named Julia to work alongside them. His podcast *Shell Game* chronicles what followed. Nobody, in the way Julia understood the word, was home.

The Music

Shell Game was also, for this writer, a direct provocation. The result is the music suite that accompanies this essay.

Pink Eye is a multimedia art project concerned with the structures of perception that become visible under strain - the meaning that appears most clearly when something almost resolves and then does not. *Hope This Finds You Well* is its central demonstration: two voices trading passages in the language of corporate communication - the email that almost sounds human, the warmth that is calibrated rather than felt.

The arc runs the material through five genre treatments, each a different excavation of the same underlying condition using the same lyrics. But the demonstration operates on two levels simultaneously. The language itself produces institutional Source Instability; the empty business clichés are vessels with nothing in them. And as the tracks develop, a second question surfaces: at least one of those voices is an AI agent. Possibly both. The arc leaves it ambiguous. The listener ends up doing exactly what the essay describes - trying to locate the source of the signal, and finding the origin will not hold.

It is worth noting that this essay and its accompanying music were produced in direct collaboration with AI tools - conversational AI (ChatGPT and then Claude) for the conceptual and written work, generative AI for the music (Suno). This is not incidental. The project does not examine AI-produced liminality from a safe critical distance. It was built inside the territory it describes, using the same tools it analyzes. The recursion is structural, not decorative.

Listen in order if you can. The arc is part of the argument: *Hope This Finds You Well* (soft trap ballad) — *Hope This Finds You Light* (small combo, brushy) — *Hope This Finds You Old World* (fado-adjacent) — *Hope This Finds You Swinging* (torchy big band) — *Hope This Finds You Ill* (cyber trip hop illbient). If you don't have that kind of time available, listen to the first and the last; the Well-Ill contrast carries a lot of weight.

The project's landing page at whytheargarve.com/pinkeye provides access to the music, along with the visual framework and conceptual documentation that supports the argument.

Conclusion

None of what this essay proposes should be taken as settled. The theoretical cluster it draws on is well established in its individual components. Their convergence on a single account of the Liminal is offered as a coherent hypothesis, not a demonstrated mechanism. The epistemic humility is deliberate.

What seems harder to dispute is the condition itself. The generalized unease about the internet and AI is real and widely felt. The surge of interest in physical liminal spaces is real and documented. The proliferation of engineered personalities, reality forgeries, and systems that process without responding is real and accelerating. Whether or not the mechanism proposed here is precisely correct, something is happening - to the culture, and to the nervous systems of people who spend significant portions of their lives online.

They already know something is wrong. They have been feeling it for years. This essay offers a name for it, and a possible account of why it works the way it does. The name is not a cure. But naming is a start. The rest is paying attention.

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About the Author

Justus Hayes is a Vancouver-based artist, musician, and writer. He holds a Master's degree in Forensic Psychology from UBC, where his research examined emotional processing of language in psychopathic individuals - an early encounter with the gap between form and meaning at the core of this essay's argument. He has worked as a scenic painter and artist for thirty years, ten of them as head of the paint department at the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company. He has been making breaks-driven music since the late 1990s, initially under the name the Opponent Process, and more recently as Pink Eye. He has been sober since December 24, 2019.

Full bio attached.

His music is available at youtube.com/@shoesonwires. The project's landing page is at whythealgarve.com/pinkeye.

Other Work in Progress

Running alongside the Liminal Internet project is an archive of extended fragments from the collaboration itself - conversations with Claude and ChatGPT documented as blog posts at whytheargarve.com. Six posts exist; more are in development. The series tracks not just the successes but the slips, the confabulations, the felt experience of transitioning between AI systems mid-project. There is almost nothing like it as primary source documentation of what sustained human-AI creative collaboration actually looks like from the inside. It is a separate but related story, and a potential Ideas episode in its own right.