

THE LIMINAL INTERNET

A multimedia essay and music suite by Justus Hayes

PRODUCER'S SUMMARY

Is the Internet Infecting Us with the Liminal?

That question is the hook, and it is not rhetorical. The answer this essay proposes is: yes, and here is the mechanism, and here is why it matters right now.

Why Now

The cultural moment is unusually well aligned. A24's Backrooms film opens May 29, bringing the liminal space aesthetic to a mainstream theatrical audience for the first time. Recent pieces in the MIT Press Reader and major Substack platforms are beginning to name the phenomenon without quite reaching its mechanism. The generalized unease about AI and digital life is widely felt and poorly articulated. This essay gives people the word for something they have already been experiencing. Once you have the concept, the instances multiply everywhere - the red car effect, operating on a feeling rather than a colour.

The timing argument is not merely opportunistic. The essay makes a specific historical claim about why this moment is happening now. 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 and ChatGPT 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.

The Argument

The Liminal is not an aesthetic or a quality of physical space. It is a mechanism rooted in the basic processing of consciousness - the gap that opens while the brain is trying to figure out which narrative fits the evidence.

The mind leans forward constantly, pre-loading the expected narrative - a draft of reality that says "Everything is normal." When the expected fails to resolve and contrary evidence begins to build, wrong drafts accumulate in the editing room of consciousness until the normal draft succumbs to numbers. The opponent process rushes in - the same mechanism that produces the afterimage when you look away from a bright light, the post-celebration crash, the hangover. The counter-state that was always there, suppressed by forward momentum, now floods the gap with a feeling of the un-real, the ab-normal. The body registers it before the mind catches up; that sinking feeling.

The mechanism is ancient - as old as dementia, the con artist, the psychopath, the friend who returns from a long absence changed beyond recognition. The internet did not invent it. What the internet has

done is industrialize it, scale it, and make it the default condition of a significant portion of daily life. That industrialization has been a significant driver of the recent surge of interest in physical liminal spaces - the empty malls, the abandoned corridors, the Backrooms. The physical was always there; the internet changed the receiver, not the signal. 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 been a major factor in sharpening the culture's attention to the condition wherever it appears.

This mechanism operates across six domains, organized in the matrix below by three imbalance modes: Vacancy (there is nothing where there should be something), Saturation (there is too much to process), and Source Instability (the fidelity of the source cannot be determined).

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

The interpersonal domain is oldest: the dementia sufferer, the con artist, the psychopath, the religious convert. The mask does not match the expected interior.

The physical domain is where most people first consciously recognize the condition: the empty mall, the abandoned institution, the service corridor. Environments designed to process people, now absent.

The digital domains are where the condition has been industrialized: consumer systems that manufacture desire without resolution; institutional systems that process without responding; engineered personalities that occupy human roles without human occupants; reality forgeries that assert false or absent sources. All of it suspended in an environment of AI slop - media packages with nothing in them, multiplying faster than they can be ignored.

The essay draws on recent journalism and criticism to document specific instances across these domains. Jermaine Fowler, writing in *The Humanity Archive*, tracks the collapse of epistemic ground in real time - a fabricated Buddhist monk with hundreds of thousands of followers, a synthetic influencer whose insignia was wrong and whose followers knew it and stayed, Benjamin Netanyahu's reappearance on video holding a cup of coffee whose liquid does not seem to move. Shira Chess, in the *MIT Press Reader*, identifies the Institutional Gothic - a new genre of dread built from the familiar alienation of corporate infrastructure rather than flesh-and-blood monsters. Evan Ratliff's *Shell Game* podcast documents what happened when he built a real tech startup staffed entirely by five AI agents and hired a human employee to work alongside them. Nobody, in the way she understood the word, was actually there.

The Format

The project is a multimedia package with two components.

The essay - two versions are complete, approximately 5,500 words for the full version and 1,900 words for the condensed version - is written for a general audience. It opens with a personal narrative set in Vancouver, develops the mechanism through four well-established psychological frameworks (predictive processing, Dennett's multiple drafts model, the opponent process, and Damasio's somatic markers), maps the condition across the domain matrix, and hands off to the music suite as demonstration rather than description.

The music suite - *Hope This Finds You Well*, consisting of five tracks - is built from the language of corporate communication, with identical lyrics run through five genre treatments: soft trap ballad, small swing combo, fado-adjacent, torchy big band, and cyber trip hop illbient. The suite operates on two levels simultaneously. The corporate language produces institutional Source Instability; the empty business clichés are vessels with nothing in them. As the tracks develop, a second question surfaces: at least one of the two voices trading passages 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 no resolution.

It is worth noting that this essay and its accompanying music were produced in direct collaboration with AI tools - conversational AI (ChatGPT, Claude) for the conceptual and written work, generative AI for the music (Suno) and the imagery (Midjourney). 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.

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

The Cultural Moment

There is a palpable generalized unease in the culture about the internet and AI - widely felt, poorly articulated, showing up in the surge of interest in physical liminal spaces, in the popularity of the *Backrooms* and its imitators, in the *Mall World* dream phenomenon (thousands of people independently reporting the same recurring dream of an impossible abandoned mall), in the anxiety about deepfakes

and the resentment of AI slop that has become a background condition of daily life. This essay does not manufacture that unease. It names it, traces its mechanism, and demonstrates that the condition is not new - only newly industrialized, newly pervasive, and newly acute.

The Backrooms film arriving in May is the immediate hook. But the essay's argument will not date with the film's release. The condition it describes is structural, not topical. The internet is not going to stop industrializing the Liminal. If anything, it is accelerating.

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.

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.

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