

USE YOUR ILLUSION

Immersion in Parallel Worlds

Immersion is not merely a buzzword, but also a state of mind. Immersion means to be completely absorbed in a make-believe world. Most people love to be immersed in fiction. This fondness is born in childhood play, when very little is needed in order to enter a parallel universe. A stick makes one a knight, a hat makes one a cowboy. Children can totally immerse themselves in a fantasy world with a minimum of props.

As we age, however, reality intervenes. We require more and stronger external stimuli to create a world in which we can immerse ourselves. Therefore, we turn to books, movies or games; almost any form of “grown-up” entertainment requires a degree of voluntary immersion. We seek play in many forms to counteract everyday toil. The quest for ludic indulgence is formative for our (western) society.

Because there are numerous ways to achieve this goal of immersing ourselves in another world, it is necessary to examine the precise meaning of the term “immersion.” Any immersive action can be divided into two parts: the contribution of the human being and the tool of immersion – the reader and the book, for example. There is a specific relationship between the two that depends on the amount of effort the person has to expend and the degree of freedom he has in expending it. As we all know, a good book can be very immersive, and it supports our imagination. But while reading it, we have to strictly follow a linear plot. A small child’s fantasy world, on the other hand, has no boundaries. The “tool” part of the relevant immersion equation may be negligible, but the human contribution is therefore large – namely, a strong imagination. Watching TV, in contrast, does not require any imagination at all; our options are reduced to switching between channels. But it can still be immersive enough to make people gaze at the screen all day long. The following observations will concentrate on the immersive power of computer games – especially of the so-called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, abbreviated MMORPGs.

Due to the overwhelming technical progress in the entertainment industry, it seems that every new medium we humans have innovated has made it easier to dive into parallel worlds. But at the same time, each has also narrowed our freedom and imagination. The invention of video games, though, represents a new twist on this development. Computer games have reintroduced the freedom of influence to our fictional worlds and therewith amplified the degree of our immersion in them in a way that cannot be overestimated.

Although the first digital games were reduced to merely graphical symbols as abstract representations of ongoing action, they were highly immersive. The first

Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) worked perfectly with text only. The early gamers were attached to the ingame worlds because they allowed them to gain mastery over well-defined systems while simultaneously indulging in their very own fantasies. Influence and imagination easily compensated for the lack of photorealism. But it is only recently that the majority of the public has begun to take video games seriously. It has taken nearly 30 years for the medium to become a mass phenomenon.

The idea of immersion in virtual worlds became popular and newsworthy in the early 1990s. Besides the influence of *Star Trek*, this was mostly triggered by science fiction novels such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984) and *Snow Crash* (Stephenson 1992). Additionally, the first pictures of Virtual Reality (VR) helmets and cyber gloves were shown to the public at around the same time, and they nourished a feeling of standing at the advent of a completely new, immersive medium. Everybody expected the scientists to come up with the holodeck-like hardware that would be able to trick not only its users' intellects, but also their physical senses, to come up with, in other words, a tool for passive immersion that needed no contribution from its human user.

As it turned out, the game designers were on the vanguard of development, not the scientists. They concentrated on enhancing the much cheaper, software-induced immersion. And since most households already had a personal computer, by expanding the possibilities of desktop VR, they allowed users to avoid buying expensive extra hardware equipment. But much more important was the fact that game designers relied on the players' "willing suspension of disbelief" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge). Surprisingly, it was not necessary to outwit the player's mind and senses – both just had to be stimulated. The big challenge now is to develop a user interface that mediates between reality and fiction without affecting the experience of immersion.

Video games involve the player on many different levels, depending on the preferences of the user and the genre of the game. Richard A. Bartle, game researcher and developer of the first MUD, distinguishes between four types of player: the achiever, the explorer, the socializer and the killer. They all immerse – even in the same game – but in different ways. The software can weave the user into a synthetic world by means of good gameplay, aesthetics, narration or degree of simulation. Games demand involvement on the human side in the form of imagination and physical, social and intellectual engagement. Obviously, the video game medium is capable of including and combining all previous tools of immersion and even adding completely new ones to the mix. Given that, the restraints of classic media make them appear almost ridiculous in retrospect.

It is their participatory nature that makes video games so attractive. According to game designer Sid Meier (*Civilization* 1991), a game is a series of interesting choices. The player knows that every action he takes has an influence on the outcome of the game and is therefore emotionally attached to it. Only when given the freedom to choose between good and evil can we experience strong emotions such as pride, regret, power or responsibility, all of which stem from a feeling that our actions are meaningful. Freedom – the liberty to risk failure – is essential to all games.