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22 Immersion and Shared Imagination in Role-Playing Games

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One of the more complex concepts in the field of role-playing studies is *immersion*. Most players report having the phenomenological experience of immersion in role-playing games, using phrases such as "losing myself in the game" or "the character took over." However, the definition of the term itself is hotly debated in practitioner communities, as members soon realize that they are describing different sorts of experiences from one another (White, Boss, and Harviainen 2012). Some theorists suggest abandoning the term entirely; debates

about the nature of immersion often become unproductive when players feel the need to defend their preferred experiential modes or establish their gaming styles as superior (Holter 2007; Torner and White 2012). Ultimately, the term immersion persists despite these attempts to redefine and – in many ways – rebrand it. This chapter presents the different ways that players, theorists, and researchers discuss immersion in role-playing games, establishing six major categories: activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community. These categories are similar to the types established by Gordon Calleja (2011) in his work on video game immersion with some minor distinctions, as explained below.

Immersion is not a phenomenon limited to game play. Rather, immersion is a fundamental state of human consciousness taking many forms and encompassing a variety of experiences with distinct cognitive and emotional processes. Despite this plurality, all immersion arises from some form of psychological motivation to engage with certain stimuli. The defining feature that links each of these modes of engagement is that immersive play captures the attention of the participant. As Huizinga elaborates, play is "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (qtd. in White, Boss, and Harviainen 2012, 72-73).

As a metaphor, immersion relates to the feeling of being submerged in liquid and is often described as such. As Murray (1997) explains, "We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality … that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus … In a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible" (98-99).

Immersion is often conflated with the concept of *flow*, a term which also arose from this water metaphor; Mihályi Csíkszentmihályi's (1975) participants often compared the experience of engagement in a task to a water current carrying them along a certain course. This aquatic imagery is far older, however; the Buddhist and Taoist concept of *wei-wu-wei* – a paradoxical state of action that does not involve struggle or excessive effort – is also compared to water, as liquid has a yielding nature and ability to change shape, yet overcome things that are hard and strong (Loy 1985, 75). In this regard, immersion is not simply the sense of being surrounded by an all-consuming environment, but also relates to active engagement and agency within that experience.

Related Concepts

This section will present a variety of terms that are similar and related to immersion. Since they are often borrowed from different disciplines, they are often conflated with one another. For example, the term engagement is often conceptualized by "combining and relabeling existing notions, such as commitment, satisfaction, involvement, motivation, and extrarole performance" (Schaufeli 2013). These conflations often raise their own complications that we hope to, in some way, clarify here. Each of these concepts contribute specific dimensions to our understanding of the types of experiences associated with "immersion" in role-playing. However, additional insights are found in game studies: informally, through the development of role-play theory in various subcultures, as well as formally, through scholarly investigation.

Flow

Csíkszentmihályi's concept of *flow* is described as a mental state (colloquially referred to as "being in the zone") of full involvement, focus, and enjoyment in the process of an activity. The nature of the activity is important in that it should be intrinsically rewarding, but also require a balance between skill and challenge (Csíkszentmihályi 1990). People experiencing moments of flow often lose track

of time and become intensely focused on the activity. Flow states, whether in play or work environments, are often positively correlated with happiness.

Engagement

Engagement can describe multiple kinds of immersive activities (Brockmyer et al. 2009). The term engagement is utilized in multiple contexts, the most relevant here are *work* and *media engagement*. Scholars study work engagement by judging the degree to which employees are motivated and involved with work activities cognitively, emotionally, and physically though vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, Salanova 2006). Work engagement is often considered against its antithesis – burnout – occurring when employees are entirely unmotivated to work.

Media engagement studies the degree to which people become invested in a particular form of media content, such as a game. While work and play are often described in binary terms, some forms of gameplay, such as "leveling" or "grinding" in a computer RPG (CRPG) or a multi-player online RPG (MORPG), may be considered a form of work in order to receive a payoff. In some cases, this

work may be engaging, whereas in others, players may experience burnout from the effort of producing consistent outputs.

Involvement

The notion of media engagement is similar to *involvement*, which often refers to the relationship between a consumer and a product (cf. Warrington and Shim 2000). However, involvement can also refer to various subcultural activities, such as extended participation in a sports team (cf. Kenyon 1970). This use of the term thus refers more to social modes of engagement than non-social ones, such as psychological identification with a brand. Erving Goffman defined involvement as "the capacity of the individual to give, or withhold from giving, concerted attention to some activity at hand – a solitary task, a conversation, a collaborative work activity" (qtd. in Smith 2006). Thus, involvement can describe investment with non-human actors – such as products or games – or participation in social group activities.

Absorption

The term *absorption* refers to a psychological tendency of certain individuals to become easily involved in mental imagery, especially fantasy. Absorption is considered a characteristic that "involves an openness to experience emotional and cognitive alterations in a variety of situations" (Roche and McConkey 1990). In this regard, absorption is considered an altered state of consciousness often associated with hypnotic susceptibility; internal imagery; and fantasy proneness, including daydreaming. Absorption is sometimes discussed as a form of non-pathological *dissociation*, in which an individual spontaneously enters another mental state, but is still capable of performing important tasks (Brockmyer et al 2009). While absorption may be a component that helps people enter into a flow state, this "total engagement in the present moment" does not necessitate an activity that balances skill and challenge and thus is not equivalent to flow.

Transportation

In communication studies, *transportation* theory emphasizes the importance of narrative as a vehicle for transporting the mind to another time and place (Gerrig 1993). Stories are potent ways to draw people into an experience by creating an identification between the audience and the narrative events experienced by the characters. This transportation effect is particularly strong in terms of persuasion, as identification with narratives may prove more compelling for audiences than

messages lacking stories (Green and Brock 2000). Transportation may be a stimulating factor that leads to absorption by inviting engagement with compelling fictional or non-fictional stories.

Presence

Drawing from several disciplinary approaches to immersive states of consciousness, *presence* theory in communication studies refers to the "illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated" (Lombard and Ditton 1997). Colloquially, it is described as the feeling of "being there" (when you are not) or that something virtual feels real (when it's not).

The term is derived from Minsky's notion of *telepresence* (1980), or the manipulation of real objects via technology without having to be present. For example, using a computer to control robotic arms in a remote location. Presence is now used quite broadly to refer to feelings of social richness (does an environment feel intimate, personal, warm, etc.), realism (does this seem real), transportation (feeling like "you're there", "it is here" and "we are together"), perceptual immersion (are my senses shut out from reality?), social responsiveness to a communication technology (virtual characters feel "real",

talking to a computer) (Lombard and Ditton 1997). Thus, like involvement, presence is an expansive term that engages multiple facets of experience, from the psychological to the social.

Engrossment

Gary Alan Fine (1983) discusses the concept of *engrossment* as a primary component of the social experience of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). Fine describes engrossment as the willing, temporary acceptance of a fantasy world and persona as real, indicating this process as a necessary component to play. He asserts that players "must lose themselves to the game," although he indicates that this state is not "total" or "continuous," and that such engrossment contributes to "fun" (1983, p. 4). While similar to transportation and presence, engrossment is unique in its emphasis on the adoption of a new identity within the game frame.

Dissociation

Dissociation refers to a range of psychological states involving the phenomenon of detachment from reality. Dissociative moments often arise from a need to cope with stress, from minor issues such as boredom to more serious forms of conflict,

such as trauma. These states include experiences such as daydreaming; a sense that the world (derealization) or the self (depersonalization) is unreal; loss of memory (amnesia); forgetting identity (fugue); assuming a new self (alteration); or fragmentation into multiple selves (dissociative identity) (Steinberg and Schnall 2000). While these temporary breaks from reality are often pathologized in their extreme forms, minor dissociative experiences are considered common occurrences by some psychologists. Dissociative theory provides a useful explanation for the ability of role-players to inhabit willfully altered states of consciousness, including alternative worlds and identities (Bowman 2010, Lukka 2014, Bowman 2015).

Types of Immersion

The remainder of this chapter will discuss six general categories of immersion: activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community. Each category is informed by work game studies along with theoretical models from other fields. These types roughly correspond with Calleja's (2011) work on video game immersion with minor distinctions as this section also includes analog forms such as TRPGs and larp. For the purposes of the remainder of this chapter, immersion

refers to the psychological experience of heightened attention while participating in a fictional game reality by enacting a role.

Obviously, no player fits into one category exclusively; indeed, players can experience and enjoy different types of immersion. Additional categories likely exist. Also, readers may notice that several of these theories overlap in content, using different language to describe similar states of immersion. Furthermore, many of the concepts in this section arise from motivation theories in role-playing studies. Indeed, the desire to immerse in particular ways is closely linked to motivation (**see Chapter 13**). Also, while the physiological aspects of engagement in each form of RPGs may differ, each of the following categories of immersion can occur in all modes of play.

Furthermore, multiple intensities of immersion likely exist. Brown and Cairns (2004) describe three levels of immersion: *engagement,* the lowest level of access, which involves an initial investment of time, effort, and attention; *engrossment*, when the game affects the player's emotions; and *total immersion*, also called presence, where the player is detached from reality and completely focused on the

game (1-4). Therefore, players likely engage in several immersive modes simultaneously and with varying levels of intensity.

In role-playing game studies more broadly, immersion is also at times a debated term. As we will see, immersion is a multifaceted phenomenon with distinct levels of engagement, each with potentially gratifying elements.

Immersion into Activity

Some forms of immersion focus upon the repetitive execution of a particular task or activity involving a certain degree of agency, or *kinesthetic involvement*, as Calleja (2011) terms it. This *immersion into an activity* most closely aligns with the concept of flow. In flow states, players engage in an activity that requires a balance between challenge and skill and has clear goals, progressions, and immediate feedback (Csíkszentmihályi 1975). Entering into flow states requires a certain freedom from distractions, both internal – such as fear or anxiety -- and external – such as a ringing telephone. Indeed, flow states can often draw participant's attention from other physical or environmental needs. Flow states are often correlated with positive affect; in others words, regular, enjoyable

immersive experiences can make people happier, providing a sense of accomplishment, lowering anxiety, and improving self-esteem.

Game scholars often find the concept of flow useful for describing the experience many participants report of "getting into the game" or losing track of time while "in the zone." As Csíkszentmihályi states, "Games are obvious flow activities and play is the flow experience *par excellence*. Yet playing a game does not guarantee that one is experiencing flow" (36-37).

In MORPG theory, Yee's (2006) *escapism* could include all of the categories in this chapter, but most closely resembles a flow state in the sense of a diversion of concentration from the mundane world. For larpers, McDiarmid's *exercise*, *flow*, and *crafting* categories are understandable as immersion into activity. Exercise refers to enjoyment of physical activity, flow is "losing oneself in the moment," and crafting refers to "creating non-ephemeral things" (5-6).

In other theoretical formulations, Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) discuss *challenge-based immersion*, which involves a satisfying balance of challenge and ability including

the use of motor skills. Ernest Adams (2004) describes *tactical immersion*, which refers to rapidly cycling manual operations that require skill. Similarly, Björk and Holopainen (2004) discuss *spatial-motor immersion*, which occurs as "the result of feedback loops between repetitious movements players make to perform actions in the game" (Björk 2011).

These descriptions are particularly relevant for games that require some sort of repetitive physical action, such as defeating foes by pushing buttons in *World of Warcraft* or fighting with foam swords in a boffer larp. Crafting tools in a larp or "grinding" to gain loot in an online game may also qualify. In all of these cases, game rewards motivate these tactile or spatial-motor activities, so this category is closely linked to the next one: *immersion into game.* These ludic motivations may separate games from other immersive tactile activities such as practicing archery or playing the piano, although participants aim for a certain degree of mastery and achievement in each of these cases.

Immersion into Game

Another mode is *immersion into game*, in which players adopt what Bernard Suits calls a *lusory attitude*, meaning that they become "willing to strive toward the

game's goal using only the methods prescribed by its rules" (qtd. in White, Boss, and Harviainen 2012, 73), although certainly any form of game play is lusory in nature. In Calleja's (2011) model, this type is called *ludic involvement*. Challenge-based immersion also includes this form of ludic mindset, including strategic thinking, cognition, and problem solving (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005). Similarly, Björk and Holopainen's *cognitive immersion* is "based upon the focus on abstract reasoning and is usually achieved by complex problem solving" (Björk 2011). For Adams (2004), this concept is called *cerebral immersion* and is usually associated with mental challenges. In order to be game-like, these challenges often include a tension between risk and reward, which creates a productive intersection between what Lazzaro (2004) calls *frustration* and *fiero*, or triumph.

Along these lines, Bowman (2010) describes complex problem solving as one of the primary functions of role-playing games. This function includes tactical problem solving, such as synchronizing an adventuring party's strengths to defeat an enemy; puzzle solving, such as deciphering a riddle; and social problem solving, such as finding ways to navigate political hierarchies (110-119).

Immersion into game resembles the creative agenda of *gamism*, in which players focus upon achievements and "winning" when possible, although not all role-

playing games have win conditions (Edwards 2001). For MORPGs, in Bartle's (1996) taxonomy, *achievers* and *killers* fit under this category, although "griefing" other players is also understandable as a form of transgressive play in many game contexts (Stenros 2015; see Ch. 24). Yee's (2006) *achievement* type corresponds with this type as well, with its subcategories of advancement, mechanics, and competition. For larpers, McDiarmid's *comprehension*, *competition*, and *versatility* categories are understandable as immersion into game, as they focus upon ludic goals. Comprehension refers to figuring out puzzles and solving problems; competition refers to winning or competing with others; and versatility involves collecting important items for use in game situations (5-6).

Immersion into Environment

Role-playing games establish new environments in which meanings shift from the mundane to the extraordinary. *Immersion into environment* involves exploring the different aspects of an alternate game world, whether these characteristics are physical, mental, or virtual. Calleja (2011) refers to this type as *spatial involvement*, although he mainly discusses this experience as immersion into a virtual space rather than a physical space, as in larp.

This concept is informed by the theories of presence and telepresence. A TRPG that takes place over online video conferencing software is an example of the use of telepresence in gaming. Alternatively, with *virtual presence*, participants inhabit an imaginary, digital world such as *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life.* Presence has both a psychological and social component. Thus, presence also applies to the *Immersion into Community* category due to its emphasis on the importance of social interaction within the alternate world.

Proponents of presence theory often argue that the more realistic the setting becomes, the more immersion players will experience. Realism in this sense can mean accurate representations, such as a tabletop game's combat mechanics closely simulate the physics of the mundane world; alternatively, realism can involve attempting to render a visual space as accurate as possible: e.g., high-fidelity simulations in medical training (Standiford 2014); historical reenactment societies (Stark 2012); online worlds with 3D virtual reality technology and advanced graphics; and larps designed with the 360 degree aesthetic, in which all props and settings represent real places and objects in the fictional world (Koljonen 2014). Forge theory refers to this creative agenda as *simulationism*

(Edwards 2001). In this sense, realism also refers to a sense of accuracy in genre games such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, or post-apocalyptic.

Other terms exist for this concept in game studies. In Bartle's (1996) taxonomy of MUD players, *explorers* fit best into this category. Harviainen (2003) refers to immersion into environment as *reality immersion*. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) use the term *imaginative immersion* to refer, in part, to players becoming absorbed in a game world, but they further delineate the concept of *sensory immersion* to refer to the audiovisual execution of a game. Similarly, Björk and Holopainen refer to *spatial immersion*, which occurs as the "result of moving around [in real time] in a game" (Björk 2011). Cover (2010) also discusses spatial immersion, referring to the "space" of the storyworld, which may or may not involve narrative elements (108). For some theorists, the turning point for immersion is when players begin to accept the game world as their primary reference point rather than the mundane (Lappi 2007, 77).

The *discovery* and *customization* subcategories of Yee's (2006) *immersion* motivation focus upon the exploration of the world and the simulation of the avatar. In larp, McDiarmid's (2011) *exploration*, *exhibition*, and *spectacle*

categories fall under immersion into environment. Exploration refers to experiencing the fictional setting; exhibition indicates showing off costumes, props, and abilities; and spectacle refers to experiencing these and other aspects of the game world, including sets and NPCs (5-6)

While increased realism in the execution of game worlds can increase immersion for some players, many theorists find that the assumption that increased production values or mimesis will lead necessarily to heightened engagement is problematic. With regard to digital games, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) refer to this assumption as the *immersive fallacy* (451). Johanna Koljonen (2014) describes similar problems with this mentality with regard to the 360 degree aesthetic in larp, stating that "a complete environment alone does not generate better role-playing" (89). Overall, a realistic world is not always sufficient to generate a sense of immersion in players, although it can help facilitate the transition from the mundane frame of reality to the frame of the game.

Immersion into Narrative

Fictional narratives can also produce immersive experiences. For the purposes of this chapter, *immersion into narrative* is distinct from immersion into an

environment due to the emphasis on fiction and story, although the two often overlap and work together. As Murray (1997) explains, "a stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us" (98). Calleja (2011) terms this type of immersion *narrative involvement*, indicating both pre-programmed narratives in virtual games and the ongoing stories produced by players through interaction with the game.

Box Insert 22.1: Fandom and Immersion

Narratives are particularly important when considering fandom toward a particular media product. Henry Jenkins (2008) describes fans as possessing "a strong fantastical identification or emotional connection with a fictional environment, often described in terms of 'escapism' or of 'being there'" (295). That connection with both the environment and the narrative can lead to forms of participatory culture, in which fans actively interact with the fictional material. Michael Saler (2012) explains that active involvement with such stories provides a sense of *reenchantment* and *ironic imagination* with reference to the everyday world, which is important to meaning-making in modern life. As many RPGs arise from popular culture or historical narratives, scholars can understand them as particularly dynamic forms of participatory culture in this sense.

Immersion into narrative is explainable through the lens of transportation theory. For instance, Adams (2004) refers to the transportational engagement with game stories as *narrative immersion.* While all narratives are potentially transportational, the act of role-playing is particularly immersive due to the *first-person audience* (Montola and Holopainen 2012; Stenros 2013). In RPGs, players both enact the narrative and observe it without an external audience. This mode of engagement removes some of the distance afforded by the more voyeuristic perspective of a medium such as film (cf. Mulvey 1975), as player-characters are affected by the story and have agency to impact it.

In terms of creative agenda, emphasis on story as the primary immersive quality of a game is sometimes called *narrativism* (Edwards 2001). In the United States, the Forge tabletop movement – and subsequent outgrowth Story Games – emerged, which "redefined the game space of the conventional tabletop RPG by taking procedures and game rules as serious reward systems in sculpting narrative and creativity" (Torner and White 2012, 8). In other words, rewards in Story Games are designed with the intention of developing more interesting narratives rather than focusing on game-driven achievements. These systems often

emphasize the co-creative potential of role-playing, distributing narrative control of various parts of the game world to the players. Many freeform larps take this approach as well, featuring pauses in play for the group to collaboratively decide upon the focus of the next scenes in the story.

Some RPGs feature narratives and emphasize rewards for unlocking "plot points." Cover (2010) refers to interacting with plot points in role-playing narratives as *temporal immersion* (110). Some American larps feature *modules*, where players must engage with pockets of narrative, often featuring a problem-solving element, but not always. MORPGs feature quests, which are wrapped in narrative trappings. For some players, these stories are viewed as significant moments shared between the player and the character (Banks 2015), as well as the community as a whole.

In addition to narrativism, other terms exist to describe this phenomenon. Harviainen (2003) refers to *narrative immersion*, while, again, Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) use the blanket term imaginative immersion to describe becoming absorbed by the story. Björk and Holopainen term this mode *emotional immersion*, which is "obtained by responding to the events that characters are part

of during the unfolding narrative structure" (Björk 2011), a term that also emphasizes the importance of character enactment, as described below. Yee's (2006) *role-playing* subcomponent of immersion involves narrative engagement, as well as character enactment. In larp, McDiarmid's (2011) *audience* and *protagonist* categories involve immersion into narrative. Audience refers to "experiencing a satisfying narrative," while protagonist involves becoming important to the story or personally impacting the game world (5-6).

Box Insert 22.2: Narrative Immersion and Narrative Structure

Role-playing narratives do not tend to follow a strict Aristotelian structure with multiple acts, a coherent arc, a rising climax, and a denouement. The form can change dramatically depending on the emergence of play and the amount of time spent immersed in the story. For example, in contrast to the tightly-scripted nature of action movie, campaign play is often likened to a soap opera, in which stories morph and change organically and indefinitely, while interpersonal dynamics may become more foregrounded.

Immersion into Character

Immersion commonly refers to the experience of enacting a character. This type is the major point of divergence from Calleja's (2011) model. Calleja speaks of

affective involvement in terms of becoming emotionally engaged, but does not directly address character enactment. Similarly, Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) discuss affect under the broader rubric of imaginative immersion, where the player empathizes with the character; Björk and Holopainen (2004) describe *emotional immersion*, which also relates to immersion into narrative, as described above. Cover (2010) uses this same term, specifying the importance of emotional connection to the character within the narrative (113). However, enactment is another step from emotional connection to character; Harviainen refers to this mode as *character immersion.* Yee's (2006) *role-playing* subcomponent of immersion also includes this sense of character enactment.

In larp, McDiarmid's (2011) categories of *catharsis*, *embodiment,* and *education* describe *immersion into character*. Catharsis refers to experiencing emotions through the character, embodiment involves decision-making based upon the character, and education refers to acquiring new knowledge or understanding through play (5-6). With regard to character immersion, some role-play scholars emphasize the form as conducive to identity exploration through enactment of alternate personalities or avatars (Banks 2015). Bowman (2010) considers this exploration of identity another primary function of role-playing games (**see Chapter 23**).

While role-playing, players sometimes experience what is known in drama therapy as *aesthetic doubling* (Østern and Heikkinen 2001), sometimes called *double consciousness* (Saler 2012)*,* in which they experience the game world both as themselves in an observational role and as their character (Montola and Holopainen 2012; Stenros 2013; Bowman 2015). However, moments do exist for some players in which the player consciousness is less prominent or even disappears completely for brief moments (Bowman 2015), an effect also observed in intensive improvisational theatre situations (Johnstone 1989, 151). Some players never experience a strong distinction between player and character; others always feel a strong distinction between the two, feeling a sense of detachment. In some instances, the character is a thin veneer or a one-dimensional social role, similar to the concept of a *persona* in terms of a player performing an expected function in society rather than a complex identity (Jung 1976). As Harding suggests, a role may simply be a change of perspective rather than another personality (Lukka 2011). In other instances, characters are experienced as complex, distinct individuals with goals, feelings, and psychological complexes that are separate from the player's, although information flows between the two (Harviainen 2005; Lukka 2011, 164). Lukka considers the player and the character identity in a constant state of overlap.

Therefore, discussing immersion into character is often one of the most difficult aspects of communicating about the role-playing experience. In the Nordic larp community, one philosophy of play called the Turku School posited by Mike Pohjola emphasized *immersionism* as the primary goal of role-playing (2003). Expanding upon the notion of suspension of disbelief, Pohjola suggests that in order to become immersed, players must actively pretend to believe the events of the game world are real and respond faithfully as their characters (2004). This process involves projecting reality outward rather than only accepting an alternative reality inward. Along these lines, Bøckman (2003) suggested a modification to the GNS model described by the Forge, replacing simulationism with immersionism as a key goal in larp engagement. Alternatively, the Meilahti School discounted this definition, suggesting instead that a character is important in terms of its social frame, rather than as an individual personality (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003), a topic explored further in the next section.

In studies on fiction, the transportation affect described above is often also associated with identification with characters (Kaufman and Libby 2012). In other words, the story as a whole is not the only form of engagement; readers also

connect deeply with the experiences and thoughts of characters, particularly when character perspectives are presented in the first-person. As role-playing involves a first-person audience with characters enacted by the players themselves, this form of identification can become heightened; a desirable immersive state for many players. Regardless of the type of narrative, identification can produce a temporary loss of self-awareness (Balzer 2011, 25), feelings of greater empathy with people from other perspectives, and an increased self-awareness about a player's own perspective upon reflection after the game (Meriläinen 2012).

Additionally, deep character immersion can produce feelings of *catharsis*. Players often report enjoyment as the result of crying in character or having extreme emotional experiences that they might find unappealing in mundane life, which get processed as positive experiences after the game (Montola and Holopainen 2012). Similarly, a person might find watching dramatic or horror films ultimately enjoyable and rewarding despite the intense emotional connection with the characters in their moments of tragedy.

Box Insert 22.3: Immersion and Bleed

Some theorists connect the immersionism ideal with the phenomenon of bleed, in which the feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states of the player affect to the character and vice versa (Montola, 2010; Bowman 2013). For example, the jeepform collective of freeform designers emphasizes bleed as "the point of play," as it can "create psychologically or emotionally resonant individual experience" (White, Boss, and Harviainen, 72). Bleed may heighten player identification with character (Montola and Holopainen 2012, 84). Other communities fear bleed, emphasizing rules such as "in-character does not equal out-of-character" in order to reinforce the alibi that separates the self from the character. In such communities, individuals are seen as "taking the game too far" when immersed too deeply into character (see chapter 13 for more information). Another concept related to the division between player and character is *steering*, when the player can temporarily take control of the character in order to direct action, even in immersionist play (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015; Pohjola 2015).

Degrees of character immersion are understandable through metaphorical language relating to the degree of control the character has over actions. In the steering metaphor, the player might drive the car, indicating complete control; might sit in the passenger's seat, indicating an active role while the character drives; might remain in the backseat while the character drives most action; or

might lie latent in the trunk while the character takes over complete action. Similarly, Turkington (2006b) has described the phenomenon of character immersion using theatrical metaphors (Bowman 2015). The player might act like a puppeteer, directing all actions of the character from a distanced perspective; might wear the character like a puppet on a hand, with slightly more immersion but strong control; might don the character like a mask, where the character is the primary actor, although the player still lies beneath; or may experience the character as a possessing force that takes control completely within the context of the game.

This concept of possession is echoed in improv studies, as well as in ethnographic accounts of role-players reporting deep states of immersion (Johnstone 1989; Bowman 2015). The degree to which a player may "repossess" the body during such immersive states, as well as the length of time players can achieve this state of immersion, is subject to debate. Other psychological states experienced in spiritual communities such as trance work (Johnstone 1989), possession (Bourguignon 2004), channeling (Hughes 1991), and aspecting (Sage n.d.) may bear similarities to this form of intense character immersion, although the fictional frame of the game may differentiate these experiences as liminoid rather than liminal. In other words, if a person believes themselves to be channeling an entity

from another dimension, that experience is phenomenologically different than enacting a fictional character in an imaginary world, even if some of the psychological descriptions are similar. In this regard, highly immersive character play is likely more akin to method acting than channeling (Bowman 2015). Indeed, revising his original work in the Turku Manifesto, Pohjola (2004) later claimed that total character immersion is impossible, if still a goal to which player should aspire.

Immersion into Community

The last category emphasizes immersion as a social state: *immersion into community*. For many players and theorists alike, the experience of role-playing immersion cannot be divorced from the social contexts – both in-game and out-of-game – within which they transpire. This concept correlates with Calleja's (2011) *shared involvement*, which includes competition, cooperation, and cohabitation with both human and non-human actors within virtual games.

Cover describes *social immersion* as a distinct category (116) and Björk and Holopainen (2004) explain immersion as being "deeply focused on the interaction [players] are having within the game" (qtd. in Torner and White 2012, 5).

Socializers in Bartle's (1996) taxonomy fit into this category. Yee's (2006) *social* classification also corresponds with this motivation, including the subcategories of socializing, relationship(s), and teamwork. In larp, McDiarmid's (2011) categories of *fellowship* and *leadership* fall under immersion in community, with Bienia (2012) finding fellowship to be the most important motivation in his sample group. Fellowship refers to enjoying time with members of the community, whereas leadership involves feeling important to the player group (McDiarmid 6). Along these lines, Bowman (2010) emphasizes the creation of community as another primary function of role-playing games.

As mentioned earlier, the Meilahti School rejected the concept of character immersion, emphasizing interactivity as central by viewing role-playing characters as "effectively just more drastic versions of the social identities people switch between when they move from one context to another" (White, Boss, and Harviainen 2011, 83). In this sense, role-playing is not an individual activity, but rather a form of *shared imagination*. This concept of social immersion focuses upon the ability to play with identity through what Todd Nicholas Fuist (2011) calls the *agentic imagination*: framing one's sense of self with regard to one's social roles rather than psychological ones. Fuist posits that role-players immerse on three levels of social practice and interaction: 1) their immediate gaming

group; 2) the shared imagined space of the game world; and 3) the greater collective identity of the gaming community (114).

Even within the Turku School, Pohjola (2004) stresses the importance of *inter-immersion*, which describes the ability for players to draw one another into deeper states of immersion through portrayals of character (89). From a narrative perspective, the players collectively create and adhere to the logic of a *paracosm* – or imaginary world. Similar is the notion of *group flow* (Walker 2010), an immersive state often experienced by players in sports or musical groups who "get into the groove" or are "in the pocket." While inter-immersion best explains social gaming related to character, narrative, and environmental enactment, group flow may help explain how players synch together in the overall experience of play or activities within play, such as working as a team in mass combats in a larp or MORPG.

Interestingly, these collaborative, socially immersive states can occur outside of the individual roles characters must enact. For example, a hero defeating a villain in a boffer fight requires both players to inter-immerse in the shared fiction and achieve group flow of activity, enacting a believable combat experience. In some

larp communities, team building activities such as pre-game workshops help to build a cohesive group ensemble of players in order to establish a greater sense of trust, inter-immersion, and group flow (Methods, n.d.). Out-of-game social activities may serve a similar function, helping to reinforce relationships out-of-character and strengthening the protective frame of the magic circle (Bowman 2013).

When considering creative agenda, immersion into community ties together all of the other categories, as groups work best when the players consciously agree to a particular mode of enactment. As White, Boss, and Harviainen explain, "Since identifying a group-level Creative Agenda is a matter of seeing what player-behaviors are socially reinforced, Forge theory implies an immersive ideal that is related to a mutuality of experience -- a game that 'clicks' for all participants" (71). Harviainen (2006) expands upon this point, stating that despite disparate play styles, players often do manage to inhabit successfully the same fictional world "because their interpretations of the game need not be identical" (78). Still, problems with differing creative agendas – which may arise out of alternate preferred modes of immersion – do occur, sometimes causing strife within communities and even group schisms (Bowman 2013). Therefore, understanding these modes of immersion, validating the experiences of others, and consciously

designing games with the variety of immersive states can help tailor role-playing to facilitate stronger group cohesion.

Summary

We began by discussing concepts related to immersion such as flow, engagement, and presence amongst others. Then, we examined six distinct categories of immersion (activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community) and discussed them in the context of existing theories and player's experiential goals (i.e. creative agendas). While the exact phenomenon of immersion still remains a subject of debate, the term itself remains in use. Establishing useful ways to frame various immersive experiences is important, as is avoiding privileging one mode of role-playing immersion over another. Through a better understanding of the ways in which various players find enjoyment through immersion, designers and organizers can create experiences that are more fulfilling for their player base at large. They can also identify the reasons behind issues arising within the community when players have differing creative agendas. Finally, through understanding immersion, scholars can better comprehend the reasons why role-playing games are so appealing and, in some cases, transformative for players.

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