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PLAY, THEORY AND PRACTICE
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Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames

Piotr Kubiński

Abstract
Author of the chapter approaches the concept of immersion from a philological perspective and concentrates on those mechanisms and effects, which weaken the phenomenon in question. All those mechanisms – described collectively as 'emersive effects' – are considered in terms of their influence on the game structure, on the cohesion of the game world, and on possible interpretations. Occurring on various game levels, the emersive effects are sometimes a result of creator's mistakes, other times they are embedded in the convention of a game. The effects in question might also be achieved deliberately – for artistic or humorous purposes.[1]

Key Words: Immersion, emersive effects, emersion, videogames, irony, ironic distance, ludology, digital humanities, palimpsestic attempt.

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1. Introduction

According to many gamers, game-reviewers, and researchers immersion is often considered to be one of the most desired effects a game can cause: calling a game 'fully immersive' is probably one of the greatest compliments one could pay to its creators. But at the same time there is no universal consensus on what in fact immersion is. As Gordon Calleja summarises,[2] terms such as (tele)presence, absorption, incorporation, and immersion are still under discussion. The purpose of this chapter is neither to arbitrate this dispute, nor to propose its final solution; but since the main topic of this chapter is the phenomenon of 'emersive effects,' it is necessary to outline the category of immersion that serves as their necessary background. The definition adopted in this chapter states that immersion is an impression of a non-mediated participation in a digital world generated by the machine, a sensation of a direct presence, which makes players lose sight of the physical world surrounding them. Without intending to induce anyone to adopt such a definition, it is should be pointed out that this understanding of the term is related to the one coined by Janet Murray:

> 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. […] The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. *Immersion* is

> a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. 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, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.[3]

It is worth noting that, according to Murray, immersion is not a term inextricably linked to videogames and might also appear in non-digital media. However, virtual realities (and within them especially videogames) provide their unique techniques and possibilities that deepen immersion and players' *presence* in fictional world; that is why the debated term gained its popularity in the context of electronic entertainment.

2. Emersive Effects

Academic researchers who examine this matter tend to analyse how immersion works and what techniques, used by game developers, help players to immerse into the game's world. The aim of this chapter is to analyse this problem from the opposite perspective and to present the techniques and strategies, which (intentionally or not) reduce or even preclude the effect of immersion.

To examine that problem, one should start from indicating what conditions are necessary to create the sense of immersion. Alison McMahan, a prominent researcher of immersion in video games, points to three of such conditions:

> (1) the user's expectations of the game or environment must match the environment's conventions fairly closely;
> (2) the user's actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and
> (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent, even if they don't match those of "meatspace".[4]

That third condition (consistency of fictional world's conventions) seems to be the most interesting in the context of my research, as creating and choosing between those conventions are the game creator's textual (and in some cases: artistic) choices. Before concentrating on various examples of deviations within conventions, a general term should be proposed, which could embrace the whole phenomenon in its many aspects. Keeping in mind a Latin root of the word 'immersion' (lat. 'immergo' – to dive, to submerge), the term *emersion* or *emersive effect* (lat. 'emergo' – to rise up from water) will be used here to describe opposite strategies, i.e. those which reduce the sense of immersion, bring players back to the meatspace or – if one follows Murray's metaphor – forces that pull player out from

a swimming pool or ocean (e.i. from digital environment) back to his primary reality.

3. Shock

Emersive factors may affect players on many levels of their contact with a videogame. McMahan writes about bugs and errors in videogames, which she calls *shocks*:

> Shocks are poor design elements that jar the user out of the sense of "reality" of the VRE, such as the "end of the world" shock – the user can see where the environment ends; "film set shock" – buildings are incomplete; polygon leaks – seeing through cracks; and latency and motion sickness caused by poor design or overlong use of the hardware.[5]

One can say that shocks are elements which reveal *mediated character* of the virtual reality: its dependence on electronic devices such as computers or gaming consoles with their illusive technical nature. Rather than deliberate designing strategy, shocks are mostly the result of mistakes during the development of a game, or imperfections arising from the nature of digital medium. On less frequent occasions, however, game creators use *the structure* of such a startling element in a meaningful way. The eminent example of such a technique is Batman: Arkham Asylum.[6] In a scene where Batman is captured by Joker and Scarecrow, there is a moment (after a few Batman's hallucinations), when the game looks as if it had crashed and the screen freezes for a few seconds – long enough for the player to think that his gaming device has been broken.

Of course we can find more examples of games pointing to their screen-mediated nature. Murray underlines the importance of identifying an equivalent of the 'theatre's fourth wall,'[7] which is a symbolic, conventional border between spectators of a theatre performance (gamer) and the scene with actors performing on it (virtual reality). The sequence from Batman: Arkham Asylum can be compared to an act of breaking the fourth wall and pointing to the user that all what has been experienced is just a videogame with all its conventions. One might (quite reasonably) conclude that the concept of 'breaking the fourth wall' is not quite accurate in the context of video games, it is still hard to deny that such an event wrecks the feeling of immersion. Nevertheless, although it *pulls* the player *out* from the fictional world, it also gives something in return. The refreshing and amusing effect of astonishment might be even a bigger reward and could compensate for being knocked out of the in-game presence.

4. Ironic Distance

Similar surprise and playfulness may be achieved (again: at the cost of reducing immersion) by populating the in-game world with references that point outside the game's context. An example is provided by the second part of the Witcher series, The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings.[8] Half-way into the storyline, the player encounters a group of Elven rebels who use a secret password. The password shouted by one of the characters is 'Kier-ke-gaard.' Countersign to that turns out to be 'Hei-de-gger.' This is an interesting example at least for two reasons. Firstly: the joke is constructed in such way, that if player does not understand it (if he does not recognise two famous philosophers' names), he will probably think that 'Kier-ke-gaard' and 'Hei-de-gger' are just another Elven words and it is completely normal not to understand them. Additional argument for such a reading is that the notation of those words uses hyphens (as it is indicated by the in-game manner of transcription of the Elven language). But on the other hand the situation of the player who recognises the reference is even more interesting. To understand the joke, the gamer needs to use his cultural knowledge. As a result the player is in fact provoked to leave the on-screen fictional world, to remind himself of the actual reality of which he is supposed to forget by the means of immersive mechanisms of the game.

Situations similar to the described above create an ironic distance, which is yet another way to achieve artistic effect using an emersive factor. The element of irony is crucial, because through this mechanism, the authors of the game wink at the player and send him a second, hidden meaning. It is not, however, a classic literal or verbal irony, within which the actual meaning of the text is opposed to that one expressed in the primary one (or, as Søren Kierkegaard, great theoretician of irony, would put it: 'phenomenon is not the essence, but the opposite of the essence'[9]). In the cited example, one does not find such an opposite content. Instead game creators develop a different, whole new meaning functioning somewhat *over* the literal text.

Of particular interesting in this context is the division of ironic roles proposed by David S. Kaufer, according to whom there are three roles within an ironic situation: 1) ironists, 2) observers of irony, and 3) the victim of irony.[10] The triad can be expanded by a fourth element: 4) tools of irony. In the situation described above, the role of such tools is taken by the characters who pronounce the two names of philosophers. There is no doubt that Zoltan (the dwarf who says 'Kier-ke-gaard!') is not an ironist in this situation – he is oblivious to the additional meaning of his own words. Exactly as in the Polish version of the first Witcher[11] – a game, where a bard named Dandelion was singing songs of the popular band Kult, much recognised in Poland. Of course Dandelion could not known that he was using *someone else's words*, to borrow Bachtin's terminology. In both situations it is not the characters, but the creators of the game, who are ironists. The role of a (co-)ironist is taken by the player who recognises the duality of the message.

If one consistently draws conclusions from this scheme, the victim of irony is a user who is not able to recognise the ironical signal that was being sent, and who is not able to become one of the two subjects in this communication scheme. After all, irony puts a clear requirement: it must be identified. As Michał Głowiński, a Polish theoretician of irony, puts it:

> If the irony is not recognized, significant misunderstandings arise. Sometimes such confusion shows that the participant of the communication process is not able to go beyond his literal understanding of the words. As a result, his perception is lacking a particular factor of expression which is crucial to understand the statement in accordance with the nature and intentions of the speaker.[12]

5. Palimpsestic Attempt

Last emersive form, which is to be taken into consideration in this chapter, is connected to the very core mechanisms of games. Some of those mechanisms decrease the level of player's immersion, and yet they are constantly used. A good example is the well-known option of saving/loading a game status, provided by e.g. some cRPGs or strategy games. This means that player sometimes (rarely or in every moment of gameplay) is able to create a checkpoint that remembers all the settings of the game – including the exact story time. With the option of loading the game, you can always go back to the past events and experience them again or make them completely different than the original.

It is possible to name four structural reasons for implementing this option into a game:

> 1) it enables players to return to the game at any time without losing the progress of it (otherwise we would have to finish the game in one sitting);
> 2) in case of a failure (e.g., death of a protagonist), players can repeat a selected stage of the game without having to start anew;
> 3) players who feel dissatisfied with their actions (e.g. fight brought too much damage, business transaction turned out to be insufficiently beneficial), may want to repeat them to achieve better results;
> 4) players may want to know the alternative version of a co-created history.

It is definitely more beneficial to concentrate not on the motivations, but on the textual results of this mechanism. For example, in a cRPG game, such as The Witcher 2, the main protagonist may face an unexpected danger (e.g. enter the

place full of enemies). If the result of such action is a failure, the player might want to load the game, then prepare for the 'unexpected' fight and eventually achieve success. As a result, we end up with two (or even more) alternative versions of the story. Note that the player can return many times to once saved game. All those imperfect attempts have an undisputed influence not only on the player's experience (in fact: they are part of that experience) but also on the in-game's world cohesion and therefore: on player's immersion. One of the factors which contribute to fictional (not only digital) world's cohesion is *psychological realism*. That means that all character's actions and all other diegetic events: (1) must be subject to the rule of Cause and Effect; and (2) must be possible to be explained by in-world's (diegetic) factors and motivations. If this psychological realism condition is not fulfilled, then a game (but also: a film or a novel) is less believable.

However, while analysing the above-mentioned example from The Witcher 2, one will face a certain dissonance. If the main character dies in the first attempt because he was taken by surprise by his enemies, then the player loads a game. In the second attempt the gamer will start preparations before entering the dangerous spot (e.g. the witcher will drink some strengthening potions). But then one could ask about a psychological realism of the situation: why did the witcher Geralt really drink his potions? The first (failed) attempt showed that he had not in fact expected any enemies. The obvious answer is: Geralt did not know but the player did and it is the player's knowledge that determines Geralt's actions. Their real motivation lies in an *abandoned (failed) attempt*. Therefore if we want to analyse the course of events in all their complexity (i.e. including motivations, causality etc.), we need to take into consideration not only the 'final version' of events but also those failed attempts. This has a crucial importance especially for the theory of narrative or theory of interpretation. In traditional media the reader/viewer always faces a finite version of events – of course there are texts that are open for interpretations[13] and texts that play around with the narrative frames (e.g. films like *Memento*, where time of action is reversed and consecutive scenes reinterpret each other), but generally interpretation of a traditional-media's plot is usually linear, because the *text itself* is not fluid. Meanwhile in those digital texts which involve user's participation (especially in plot-concentrated videogames) interpretation of events very often needs to be as *non-linear* as the gaming experience itself.

To describe these versions of fictional events, which mutually influence each other, I submit the term, which refers to Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality. Genette compared literary hypertexts to medieval *palimpsests*. Palimpsests were manuscripts written on material, in which the previous text was wiped or scraped out; as Genette describes it: '[o]n the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through.'[14] This Genette's metaphor is surprisingly adequate when considered in

the context of player's various attempts which *superimpose* one on another and need to be interpreted as a whole. That is why I call them *palimpsestic attempts*.[15]

6. Summary

As shown in this chapter *emersive effects* – that is moments or mechanisms that weaken player's immersion – appear in many aspects of game's structures. *Shocks* (which are the result of game's technical imperfections), *emphasising game's mediated nature* (which sometimes is unintended side-effect), creating *ironic distance* (e.g. as a result of a joke referring to the outside of the game's cultural contexts), or breaking the rule of *psychological realism* (according to *palimpsestic* nature of some games' course of events) – these are just a few meaningful examples of mechanisms triggering the concept in question and they surely do not make a complete list of emersive factors. Given samples bring several significant conclusions: Firstly, immersion does not need to be the most important or the most desired effect delivered by videogames, and player may get pleasure from other in-game elements, which may be contrary to the immersion and may pull the player out of felling of presence. Secondly – and that is a result of the first statement – video games as a medium are torn between two opposite tendencies (one is their immersive potential, but the second is *emersion* with all its various – and not yet well-discovered – potential). Thirdly, axiological status of emersive effects is not unequivocal. Sometimes emersion might be a result of designer's or programmer's mistakes or of game's frailty as a medium (which has rather young tradition and still coins its language and conventions). But on the other hand sensible and meaningful use of emersion (like in the scene quoted from Batman: Arkham Asylum) should be considered as a proof of maturity of the medium. Using mediality to create a meaningful message is a very strong postmodern artistic technique (similarly as in other forms of cultural expression, such as literature or films), which may cause various effects – e.g. user's reflection on the character of in-game's experience. Therefore understanding of those effects should be developed and deepened in further researches, and they definitely should not be omitted or ignored in game studies, as they play an important role in comprehending the specificity of videogames as a medium.

Notes

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[2] Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2011).

[3] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 98-99.

[4] Alison McMahan, 'Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 68-69.
[5] Ibid., 76.
[6] Batman: Arkham Asylum (Rocksteady, 2009).
[7] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 103.
[8] The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings (CD Projekt RED, 2011).
[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 247.
[10] David S. Kaufer, 'Irony, Interpretive Form and the Theory of Meaning', *Poetics Today: The Ironic Discourse* 4, No. 3 (1983): 451-464.
[11] The Witcher (CD Projekt RED, 2007).
[12] Michał Głowiński, 'Ironia jako Akt Komunikacyjny', in *Ironia*, ed. Michał Głowiński (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2002), 5-16.
[13] Concept of open text/open work (it.: 'opera aperta') was developed by Umberto Eco in Umberto Eco, *Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
[14] Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
[15] I presented this concept for the first time during in the paper 'Kategoria "Próby Palimpsestowej" jako Narzędzie Badania Narracji w Komputerowych Grach Fabularnych' ('Category of "Palimpsestic Attempt" as a Tool in Narrative Studies of Computer Role-Playing Games') at the conference 'KULTURA POPULARNA – CZĘŚCI I CAŁOŚCI. Narracje w Kulturze Popularnej' which took place at Warsaw University, 7-9 of October 2010.

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Piotr Kubiński, PhD student at Warsaw University (Institute of Polish Literature, Section of Comparative Studies). While interested in many aspects of videogames, new medias and digital humanities, currently his research is concentrated on poetics and semiotics of videogames. Observations made in this chapter are abbreviated version of one of the topics in author's doctoral thesis, which is in progress.