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stop saying “immersion”!

In this article, I’ll be telling you why the term “immersion” is useless in communicating theory, preferences of play styles, and even actual play experiences. And I’ll be asking you to use other words instead.

I think the first time I heard of the term “immersion” was in an article by Paul Mason, editor of the (now defunct) fanzine *Imazine*. The term immediately had me in its spell. Immersion was exactly what I craved – to immerse myself in the setting, to really *be* there. This was in the early nineties, and I was trying out all sorts of neat new games – *Over the Edge* and *Amber*, for example, which thrilled me with their open systems and interesting settings.

For years and years I called myself an immersionist. When a friend of mine told me that in the GNS model, “immersionism” was simply a subset of “simulationism”, I couldn’t believe it. At the time, I understood “simulationism” to be the same as “detailed and complex rules attempting to mimic reality”. Which, of course, wasn’t what the GNS model said – but still, it made me think: “Those people really have no *idea* what immersion really *means*”.

Then came the years of theory. Reading up on the Big Model, sniffing up the strange smells of the *Turku Manifesto*, and understanding that there were some very different views on immersion: Both how it was

defined by different theorists, and how important it was supposed to be to the play experience.

I’ve always felt like an alien when describing my role-playing experiences. When I’ve said things like “I feel like my character is a semi-conscious, semi-autonomous part of me, living inside my head, being channelled through my rational faculties”, it’s a style of play that many seemed to see as impossible, insane, or undesirable. Even people who claimed to be interested in immersion.

But then, there were people who said immersion was about visualizing the (fictional) environment in play. Which made me go: “Yeah, that’s nice – but it’s not actually *immersion*”. And then there were those who talked about immersion being a state of flow – which made me think “Well, flow is certainly a *by-product* of immersion, but it’s not the same thing”.

And then I started really reading up on what people had been writing on immersion for the last five years.

Oh man.

We have to stop saying “immersion”. And I’ll tell you why.

Everyone's immersion is different. By that I mean two things. First of all, everyone has a different definition of the term. Second, everyone has a different subjective experience of immersion, even when they agree on the term: Immersion seems to be characterized by its subjective nature.

Definitions

By "different definitions" I don't mean just subtle differences. I mean people saying: "It's possible to immerse in the game system itself, instead of the character", while others say "Using a game system ruins immersion".

I'm going to provide a short list, with definitions, of the ways the words "immersion" and "immerse" have been used. This list is probably not exhaustive, nor are the definitions comprehensive or authoritative - for more information, visit the links given at the end of the article.

(References given in this article are, necessarily, vague; many points are mentioned and discussed in several of the blog/forum threads & articles linked to, and this is merely an attempt at summarizing several pages of discussion between many authors. I strongly suggest that readers looking for academic-style quotes read the referenced texts).

Turku: Immersion is an essential part of role-playing. The goal is to become the character, to experience everything through the character. Most of the expression takes part inside the participants' heads. (Pohjola, 1999).

Locus of engagement: Immersion describes what area of the game players choose to engage with. Thus, players can immerse in - engage with - their character; the game world; the system; strategy; story; drama; theme; or social interaction. (Another term, "socket", seems to be equivalent to "locus of engagement"). (Forge debate, 2002b; Sin Aesthetics blog, 2005).

Internal factors: Immersion is an internal state of mind, made up of three things: Processes, performance and sensations. Processes are thoughts and decisions that facilitate immersion; performance is what you do while immersed (such as think in character, easily describe aspects of the world etc); and sensations are what you experience - emotionally and physiologically - while immersed. (Forge debate, 2005; This is my blog, 2006; Interview 2 with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Interview with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006; Sin Aesthetics blog, 2006)

Examples of "internal factors" definitions of immersion are:

Flow: Immersion is the same as flow - the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfilment. Flow can be experienced during play, sports, music and many other activities. (This is my blog, 2006)

Channelling: Immersion is allowing the character to express itself through the player. The character is seen as a semi-autonomous entity residing in the player's mind, with a personality and will of its own. (Forge debate, 2005; This is my blog, 2006)

Situation immersion: Feeling as if you're in the story, not necessarily the character. (Forge debate, 2005)

Trance: A state where the player is in a suggestible frame of mind. (Forge debate, 2005)

Character attachment: Having a personal, emotional attachment to the characters. (Sin Aesthetics blog, 2005)

Catharsis, kairosis or kenosis: Adapted from literary theory. In cathartic play, the player feels as if he himself undergoes the trauma of the story, and emerges cleansed after the experience. In kairotic play, the player experiences the same

integrative processes as the character in dramatic moments. In kenosis, the player abandons his ego to transcendently partake in the emotions and sensations of play. (Sin Aesthetics blog, 2006)

Subjective experience

As can be seen from the above definitions, much of the focus is on what players experience during play - what goes on inside their heads. If two players portray the same actions for their characters, but one does so based on a script, and the other because he identifies with the character, a Turku immersionist would probably say there was a great difference between the two: The first isn't immersing, the second is.

In theory, if you're working from a definition of immersion that focuses on the subjective, it's impossible to see from the outside whether someone is immersing or not. You have to ask them how they feel. Not only that - you have to be sure you're talking about the same thing.

Asking if someone is immersing is almost like asking someone whether they're in love; some will confidently say yes!, some will say they've never experienced it, some will say they're not sure, but they think so. Still, we talk about love all the time, as if it's a clearly defined thing and everyone knows what it is. (Forge debate, 2002b; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006)

Making and breaking immersion

There seems to be some consensus about what can help you immerse, and what will totally break immersion.

Here are some things that seem to help immersion: (Forge debate, 2005; Pohjola, 1999; Interview 2 with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006)

- > The setting should be believable and detailed.
- > Characters should be believable and detailed.
- > The flow of the story should be well-paced.

- > Players need time to visualize and think ahead.
- > Mechanics, if any, should be smoothly incorporated into the game.
- > Players should have experience with immersive play.

And some things that may break immersion:

- > Having to pause the game to consult the rules
- > Having to use rules often, especially in tense situations
- > Players talking about things outside the game
- > Having to make snap-second decisions for the character
- > Mechanics that aren't directly translatable into game-world descriptions
- > Fast-paced games
- > Thinking outside the character to make decisions

I can hear all of you 90's immersionists out there thinking: "This is old hat. Everyone knows these things". But every single one of the statements above have been debated at length, several have been disproved by actual play, and some are even contradictory to some definitions of immersion. A few examples from my personal experience:

- > I've run improvised half-hour games in generic settings. The setting and characters were hardly detailed at all before play began. Strong immersion was reported by several players.
- > Some players make decisions for their characters based on what would make a good story, in games such as Prime Time Adventures. Many of these report immersion - even a strengthened feeling of immersion after converting from strict in-character decision-making.
- > Meta-mechanics have been used to great success to enhance immersion. I've used hypnotic, ritual and scene-sharing techniques, in all cases getting reports of increased immersion from several players.

There is no reason whatsoever to take these old claims at face value. I propose that there is no set of techniques that must be present for immersion to occur; nor is there any set of techniques that is guaranteed to break immersion. Techniques should be chosen or designed for each play group, taking into account the preferences, experience and personality of each participant, as well as the group's history and internal dynamics.

Conclusion

I do believe that immersion exists. I even believe that many people share the same view of what it means. However, in communicating about games or game theory, the term is diffuse and problematic. Advertising a LARP or pen-and-paper RPG as “strongly immersive”, or discussing whether this or that technique fosters immersion, is a bit like saying “how do you make music that inspires love?”

When designing a game event of any sort, the game designer or larpwright should be specific and concrete when thinking and talking about techniques and goals. Saying “this game is about feeling exactly like your character, and therefore, everyone has to speak in character” is okay. Saying “this game is about achieving a trance-like state, and you should use ritual phrasing and strong pacing to achieve this” is also okay.

Saying “this game is about immersion” - that's not okay.

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