



ari-pekka lappi

playing beyond facts: immersion as a transformation of everydayness

Abstract

This paper presents the concept of immersion as a transformation of everydayness. The paper is critique toward theories that rationalise immersion in terms of identity, diegesis and/or shared imagined space. The starting point of this paper is similarity between the character and the player, not the difference between the character and the player that we have to overcome somehow, as usual. The key question is, how can a player achieve the state of everydayness in which her character lives, as everydayness is something we cannot be fully aware of due the lack of analytical distance?

INTRODUCTION

Immersion means feeling, thinking of and perceiving the world as a character would if she was real. In other words, immersion is a subjective experience of being a *part* of an imagined reality instead of being only in a *relation* to the imaged reality. Unfortunately these characterizations are far from being a univocal and clear definition of immersion.

Every theory of immersion aims – or should aim – to elucidate, (1) what immersion requires from player, (2) how it affects to player and (3) what player have to *do* to reach it. For these questions could be answered, we first had to define immersion in more specific and univocal terms.

Traditionally theories of immersion seem to contain three key aspects:

- 1 *Subjectivity*. Immersion is commonly seen as a *purely* subjective phenomenon (Holter, 2007). In this article I am going to argue that the non-subjective core of immersion is concealed by the purely subjective surface.
- 2 *A transformation of the experience of self*. Immersion is seen as a transformation of the primordial standpoint of the reality, fiction and oneself (e.g. as per Harviainen, 2007). However, it is not clear at all, what this actually means. For instance should we understand “*the experience of self*” through the concept of *action* or does it mean an inner *image* of oneself. In the first case, immersion is almost the same thing as

flow, if not the same. In the second case it is a form of trance or a transformation of the (primary) identity of a player. (Holter, 2007. See also Pohjola, 2004 and Harviainen, 2006). In this article I will try to clarify the meaning of “self” and “the experience of self” from a phenomenological point of view. My approach is, in essence, based on the hermeneutic methodology J. Tuomas Harviainen (2007) introduces in his paper “Core Hermeneutic of Role-Playing”.

- 3 *Imagined space*. Usually, *imagined space* is defined (a) as a totality of what is considered true within the reality of the game (i.e. as “diegesis”, see Lopenen & Montola, 2004) or (b) as set of shared premises of the fiction; i.e. as “shared imaged space” (Mäkelä et al., 2005) or “exploration” (Edwards, 2004).

In this paper I define “imagined space” as follows: *Imagined space* is an interpretation of all texts (from the written ones to images, music and discussions with other participants) that player conceives as relevant for her game.

In most cases, the terms “diegesis”, “shared imagined space” and “exploration” reflect well what I mean by “imagined space”. I suggest this more general definition to *imagined space* for following reasons:

- A Imagined space is usually ambiguous. This is, all parts of it are not always clearly articulated or conceptualised. To be considered as true, an entity in game reality cannot be ambiguous, ill-defined or totally metaphorical. Therefore the concept of diegesis does not cover all entities in the imaged space. Take (the interpretation of) atmosphere as an example of an ill-defined and ambiguous entity.
- B Imagined spaces of players are not necessarily *shared* at all. This is absolutely obvious and no one denies it. The actual question to be answered is, “should players’ interpretations be alike?”¹ With no doubt, as the discrepancy of interpretations increases, the *risk* of unentertaining play rises as

well. However, the discrepancies may also turn out to be very inspiring, for instance in the form of surprises. Since this is an aspect I want to elucidate in this paper, I do not define imagined space as no more shared than non-shared.

IMMERSION AND EVERYDAYNESS

Nature of Everydayness

Everydayness is something we do not usually pay any attention to, not to mention doubting it. If I doubt that no one could see *a chair* I see, I am probably hallucinating and well aware of it. This is, anyone could see the chair as I do. Anyone could touch it as I do. Anyone could think that the chair is made of wood – as I do. And finally as I say, “this chair is made of wood”, I expect others to agree with me, because anyone could have said it exactly as I did. Thus, after all, there is only little subjective in the visual sensation of a chair. The way the world exists to me is, mostly, the way it exists to anyone. It is easier to see small differences instead of big similarities. Similarly, it is a lot more difficult to understand how non-subjective our living is, than to grasp the subjective side of being. I call this primordial non-subjectivity to *everydayness*.

Everydayness is not objective or collective; it just lacks subjectivity and the sense of individuality. It is non-subjective, non-objective, non-special and almost unconscious. Everydayness reveals to us as obvious, certain and/or undeniable requirements of knowledge and acting. It is the basis of every belief, value and behaviour pattern.

A more detailed analysis of the concept of everydayness can be found in Heidegger’s masterpiece *Being and Time* (1927). Another relevant reference for further investigations is Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), since Wittgenstein seems mean pretty much the same thing by his term ‘the form of life’.

Definition of Immersion

Everydayness is the canvas on which our identity and subjectivity is drawn. In the character immersion we just project a fictional story to it instead of the story of our personal history – at least we make an attempt. My initial definitions of immersion is:

Immersion means that a player takes temporarily things included in (her) *imagined space* for a part of everydayness.

To be accurate, immersion is a continuum from light immersion to deep immersion:

Deep immersion means that a player is able to take *all* parts of (her) imagined space for a part of everydayness.

Light immersion means that a player had to exclude some parts of (her) imagined space from the area of everydayness but some immersion is still possible.

Mutual Trust and Shared Premises

“To be a part of everydayness”, means only that the very ground of every element in the imagined space must be in the area of everydayness. In practice, this means only that there should be no facts the player must swallow only because game master states so or because otherwise she will ruin someone else’s game etc. Everything in the game must base on those things that the player conceives as most obvious and certain in the imagined space.

Usually players are not aware of the most obvious and certain things in her imagined space until someone violates them. However, this does not imply that players’ conceptions must be coherent, not even on the most primordial level. Contradictions in players’ imagined spaces – as such – are not crucial. Problems rise only if a player is unable to overcome the contradiction without making unwilling compromises. This is the case (1) if players do not trust enough each other’s or (2) if players do not have enough coherent conceptions of the game.

The lack of trust implies a need for shared premises and vice versa. Usually there must be a shared set of coherent or, as Lopenen and Montola (2004) put it, equifinal premises concerning especially content of fiction, style of the game and question on realism. However, some amount of mutual trust is necessary no matter how many premises players share, but shared premises are not necessary if players can trust one another blindly.

REQUIREMENTS OF IMMERSION

Relation between Player and Character

Immersion is possible if and only if (1) the player is not too different from the character and (2) the player understands and accepts the meaning of the difference. If the character is too different from player, a player cannot understand the character in terms of everydayness and therefore she cannot immerse deeply in the character. If the character is too similar to a player, she will fail to understand the meaning of difference.

The player has two different attitudes toward a character: Understanding and acceptance.

Understanding is related to knowing and beliefs. It is achieved via a hermeneutic analysis (see Harviainen, 2007). Player does not need to understand completely, why her character feels as she feels, thinks as she thinks and so on. She just needs to understand *enough to accept* the difference between her and the character and to consider that the character is “one of us” instead of “one of them”.

Acceptance is related to values and the way of thinking. It is a kind of leap of faith. Adapting Wittgenstein (1919), the player has to throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it (cf. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, §6.54). A player cannot immerse deeply in a character she hates or considers totally insane. Nor can most of us immerse in a fully rationalised

and analysed character. In these cases, the character will be emotionally *inaccessible*, no matter how well we *understand* motives, feelings, beliefs, values and thought patterns of the character.

In the phase of understanding a player identifies all relevant facts concerning the game (as a social event *and* a piece of fiction) and during the act of acceptance she goes beyond these facts.

Requirements of Acceptance

Acceptance is, by its very nature, a radical and extreme act. It requires extensive experience of life and it will take time to understand, what it really means to accept a character in this sense. A player may immerse deeply in a character if and only if she is able to really value all choices character had made without judging them at any level.

For example a player cannot immerse deeply in a character, who had murdered someone cruelly, if she cannot see the cruel murder as an obvious act that anyone would have done in a similar situation. If a player has to think that a character had totally different values and beliefs than her, before she can grasp the motives of murder and *deceitfully* accept it, the everyday life of the character remains inaccessible. Or, at least, the murder is not seen as a very part of the character. This is to say, that everydayness does not contain abstractions like values and beliefs, because they are not usually so obvious and certain for they would be nearly unconscious and outside the range of doubt. They can reflect something from the everydayness, but definitely they are just cold abstractions of it.

Light immersion is of course always possible, no matter how distant the character and the player are, but deep immersion requires absolute acceptance of all what is obvious and undeniable to the character. The ethical thought experiment I have sketched above is a good way to test whether my experience of life is extensive enough for the character.

Requirements of Understanding

A player has to be able to use the character document as a map *to* the character immersion. The road to the understanding is not necessarily analytical. Rather it is poetic and non-rational. This is why long and detailed character documents are every now and then seen as impractical: To understand, ‘what kind of a character I should immerse in’, a player does not need cold facts but interpretative hints or guides *to* the best possible interpretation of her character.

These hints or guides can of course be facts, but at the best case they help player to find *correct atmosphere* and *passion to get into an imagined world*. In other words, the best hints and guides are rather poetic and rhetorical than descriptive and argumentative.

This requirement is to be understood in two ways: At first, it states that playwrights should try to conduct a player to the best possible interpretation of the game world and her character. They should not try to give just a detailed description of a character or an imagined world. At second, player should not read the character as an image that represents most relevant features of the character but as a map that describes the path to the proper interpretation².

CONCLUSION

My argument contains three phases:

- 1 Deep immersion transforms the almost unconscious and non-subjective basis of being, so that player conceives herself as a part of imagined reality instead of seeing herself in a relation to it. I have called this nearly unconscious and non-subjective basis to everydayness.
- 2 The social basis of immersion is (1) mutual trust and (2) a shared set of premises. First one is necessary at some degree, second one is not necessary but, in practice, easier to achieve than first one. They are complementary and in real exist as a pair.

3 Immersion requires two acts from player: understanding and acceptance. Understanding means a hermeneutic interpretation of game texts. Acceptance is an act of rejecting all own prejudices, beliefs and values after player has understood characters prejudices, values and beliefs via (or through) them. In the phase of understanding player identifies all relevant facts concerning the game and during to act of acceptance she goes beyond these facts.

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Notes

- 1 E.g. Harvainen (2007), Loponen & Montola (2004), Edwards (2004) and Mäkelä et al. (2005) would probably reply that players’ interpretations concerning the game reality *should* be alike at least on the most fundamental level. I will question this normative assertion.
- 2 This is a coarse characterisation of hermeneutic analysis that Harvainen (2007) introduces with more details.