

# Immersion, The Greatest Hook

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*Abstract: People play certain genres of video games for definitive reasons. The underlying phenomenon of these manifested reasons, and the source of "hooking" a player to a game, is Game/World Immersion. Immersion, therefore, is the single most important factor as to why people play certain genres of video games. The various elements that are present in such games, such as audio or visual, are there to create the sense of immersion and are the building blocks of it.*

## Introduction

There is a driving force that compels certain people to play 3<sup>rd</sup> person action/adventure, role-playing, and first person shooter games. These gamers, hardcore or casual, play for definitive reasons. The underlying reasons why people are drawn to interactive digital entertainment are escapism, stress-relief, challenge, and socialization. These motivational factors are linked to a single phenomenon, for these genres, that manifests itself as these categories. This phenomenon is Game/World Immersion.

## Design Factors

The sense of game immersion is created by multiple elements. The audio and visuals of the game are the obvious ones. The more realistic the game looks, the greater the immersion. The reason why we have evolved to 3-dimensions is to enhance the realism, and ergo the immersion. With the addition of balanced game-play challenges, the player is further drawn into the virtual world. The actions that are required to overcome these challenges give life to the virtual world and once again, enhance the immersive experience.

(1) “Many successful immersive video games lead the player toward completion of pre-planned goals, just like novels or movies. Ideally, when those goals are accomplished and the player is rewarded for those specific successes, the player should feel as though it could not have been accomplished without his skill” –Steve Woyach (Dunniway 66,81)

(1) “Unfortunately, this method presents a dichotomy for the player, because the elements of story and gameplay are naturally separate. Thus when the two are intertwined in a game, the player often feels that either the story is an unwanted distraction from the gameplay or that the gameplay is a tedious drawing-out of the story. However, the evolution of video games has resulted in a new technique for integrating story and gameplay more intricately than in the past.” –Steve Woyach

This implies that due to the phenomenon of interactivity in games, players are “dropped” directly in the virtual and can perform actions in it, either interacting with the world, or on the world. Furthermore, gameplay elements, and as mentioned by Steve Woyach, are directly connected with the story, both which create a cohesive environment and an enhanced immersive world. So not only is the “look” of the game a building block for immersion, but the “feel” and gameplay also are factors that add to an overall immersive experience.

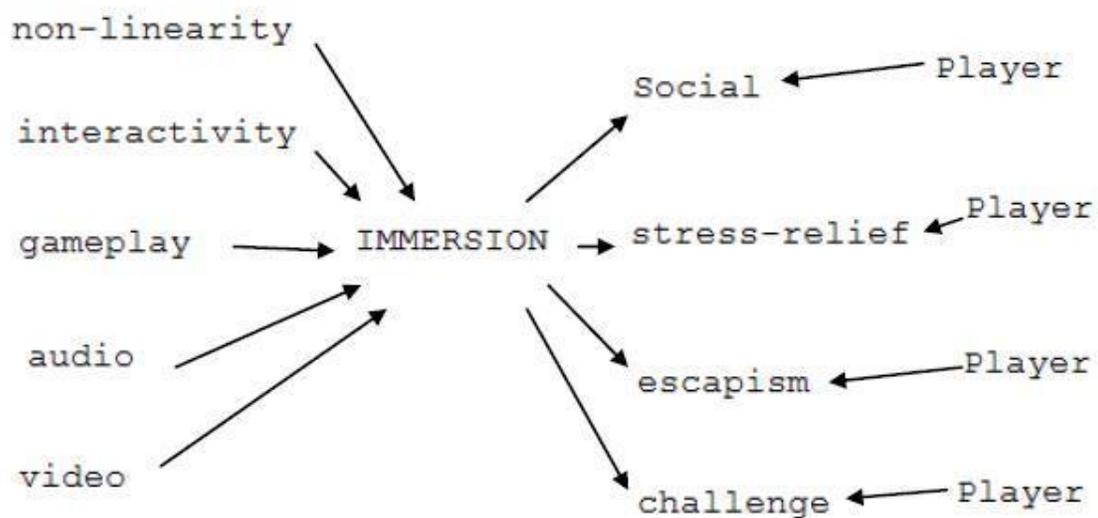
The non-linearity that interactivity creates, as well as the audio and visual of a game, creates the “look” and “feel” of the game which in turn immerses the gamer into the virtual world. The story of the game is also a critical element of world immersion. Life is a story about oneself from the individual’s perspective. Through video games, we can virtually live out other possible paths by choice and interaction. We choose which path we want to live via the game the user decides to play.

(1) “This results in a tremendously complicated design and programming process, but can give rise to an unparalleled range of freedom in terms of gameplay. The player can choose from an infinite number of strategies, because their imagination is the only limit to

how they can proceed. As in life, we are given a set of abilities, skills, and procedures, and we are free to use them as we will. Thus, a giant leap is made towards immersion.”

-Steve Woyach

The following diagram illustrates the building blocks of immersion, the different manifestations of immersion, and the connection with the player:



## The Avatar

Furthermore, a high ranking game element that creates immersion is the avatar. You play as the avatar in a game and consciously or unconsciously assign your identity to that main character. In doing so, you have actually placed yourself directly in the virtual world. This would not be possible without some sort of avatar. Since it is very rare in 3<sup>rd</sup> person action/adventure, FPS, or RPGs, to exist without an avatar, the game itself, by default, is an immersive experience by virtue of having an avatar. Some games allow you to customize the avatar which causes an extra level of the player attaching his/her identity and personality to that avatar.

- (2) “This connection between the player and the player’s position in the game space implies a type of identification, in that the player identifies sufficiently with objects or characters of the game space to function in response to that game space through a self-image that is inserted into the constructs of the game space and then internalized by the player (subject)” – Laurie Taylor

In her article, “When Seams Fall Apart Video Game Space and the Player”, Laurie Taylor discusses a concept called Telepresence where the player exists in multiple places at the same time. This means the player not only exists in physical space, but in the virtual world as well. This is simply another way of saying that the player is immersed in the virtual world as well as existing in physical reality. Taking the example of the God of War series, the avatar is a Spartan named Kratos. The connection to Kratos is a psychological will for great strength and power. In the game, the player can feel the strength of the character through various actions and challenges. By feeling what the character experiences, the player has connected with the avatar and since the avatar is in a virtual world, the connection also places the player in the virtual world. For other avatars, players make different connections with the avatar for different psychological or emotional reasons. In the end, you can be anything you fantasize about as long as the avatar permits it.

## Manifestations

If escapism is one reason why people play games, then where are they escaping to? The obvious answer is the virtual world. This concept is synonymous to compelling immersion. If people play games to relieve stress, the question becomes how. The game provides an outlet from mundane issues, and by the very nature of the word ‘outlet’, we are implying virtual immersion. If someone is playing a game simply to socialize via technology, a philosophical concept arises of whether this is still a virtualization of reality. For example, when you talk on the phone, you hear the voice of the person on the other end, but how do you know whether he or

she is really there? This concept is similar to ‘Schrodinger’s cat’. If the conclusion is that this scenario exists only virtually, then immersion, yet again, has triumphed.

## Conclusion

From what has been discussed, creating an interactive immersive experience seems to be the primary goal of 3<sup>rd</sup> person action/adventures, first-person shooters, and role-playing games, and the underlying reason why people play these genres. If this is indeed true, then by logical deduction becomes the first and greatest hook of this form of media for these genres. Hooks that exist outside of immersion are then simply different manifestations of the source, which is immersion. The argument that the multiple factors that compose the game itself are directly connected to immersion, would make the existence of these genres without immersion a contradiction, and would negate such existence. This leads me to believe that since people do in fact play these genres, and these games’ root is immersion, people buy and play games, hence being ‘hooked’, foremost to be dissolved in a virtual world where the spectrum of possibilities are only limited by the game’s creator’s imagination. As games evolve, an interactive motion capture game with a 360 degree display will not reveal itself unless designers are attempting to create an ultimate immersive experience.

## References:

1. Woyach, Steve, "Immersion Through Video Games", Illumin, Issue ii: Vol 9
2. Taylor, Laurie, "When Seams Fall Apart Video Game Space and the Player", Game Studies, the international journal of computer game research, Vol 3 , issue 2