



Arguing for an immersive method: Reflexive meaning-making, the visible researcher, and moral responses to gameplay

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Abstract

This article argues for the adoption of an immersive-participatory method when analysing interactive media. It builds upon and extends existing theorisations of immersion and applies them to the development of new methods of analysis. This paper theorises immersion during gameplay as an affective, embodied state, which is both active and passive and achieved via both visual and imaginative engagement with the game world and haptic communication with the player character. This article's argument is fourfold: firstly, it situates and negotiates the tensions surrounding the major debates, discussions and analyses in the study of immersion, both within gaming and in wider contexts; secondly, it argues for the inclusion of a participatory immersive method to be undertaken by the researcher when analysing media (especially interactive media such as video games); thirdly, it outlines the ways in which this method could be implemented by researchers, and finally, it draws on examples from my own research journal and discusses the possibility of a moral habitus which allows the player to engage in violent gameplay without experiencing the moral dissonance that can disrupt immersive states. Ultimately, this article aims to render the position of the researcher visible in order that we might gain critical purchase on the immersive praxis of gaming and the ethical/political responses of the player. In so doing, it is hoped that this article will aid theoretical and methodological innovation in this field and provoke discussion in a wider media studies context.

Keywords

Immersion, interactive media, reflexivity, autoethnography, ethical response, habitus

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A number of researchers of videogames have posited that the main difficulty facing games scholars is not *why* we should study them, but *how* (Mäyrä, 2008: p.2-3; Buckingham, 2008: p.1). Application of theories from other disciplines is both useful and insightful, but many debates within the field have centred on whether this approach is sufficient in and of itself. As videogames are demonstrably both visual and aural, as well as, at least in part, structured around narrative, it would seem that videogame researchers cannot ignore the scholarship which exists in fields such as media studies, literature studies, and sociology. Beyond this evaluation, however, the videogame must be recognised as a medium distinct from literature and film due to the rules which define and restrict interactive play. As these rules impact upon other elements of the game (such as narrative), the rule set which governs gameplay must therefore be analysed alongside the other visual, aural, temporal, social, and experiential elements of a game in order to give a fair and full analysis.

If we consider both the significant expenditure of time and effort needed to play videogames, it seems a commonsensical view that they have the potential for significant cultural and social impact on players. While this view needs to be investigated and supported, especially as it is a background assumption for the moral panic which has fuelled media debates around the effects of violent games (see for example Pow, 2012; Daily Mail, 2012), it is nevertheless useful to consider the interactions and perceived engagements which form the basis of gaming praxis and which have led people to make these assumptions. For many narrative-led AAA (“triple A”) games (which are the focus of my research) in order to play the game to completion, whether simply beating the game or actually aiming for a 100% achievement rating, the time spent immersed in the gameworld often totals tens if not hundreds of hours.² This time is not spent on a passive process; not only because videogames require active involvement on some level in order to function and progress, but also because there is a necessary process of “internalising” the controls and active problem-solving involved. To “beat” a game, therefore, some level of involvement, both physical and psychic, on the part of the player is necessary. I propose that in order to better understand and theorise this process of engagement, one method which enables us to get critical purchase on this relationship is to practise it as a subject. To this end, this article’s argument is fourfold: firstly, it situates and negotiates the tensions surrounding the major debates, discussions and analyses in the study of immersion, both within gaming and in wider contexts; secondly, it argues for the inclusion of a participatory immersive method to be undertaken by the researcher when analysing media (especially interactive media such as video games); thirdly, it outlines the way in which this method could be implemented by researchers, and finally, it draws on examples from my own research journal to illustrate how an immersive method can yield interesting results whilst also detailing some of the practical issues I faced when utilising this method in my research.

² Whilst some games take less than ten hours to complete (including various indie games and shorter AAA titles such as the *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War* series) many range from taking tens to potentially hundreds of hours (if, for example, playing an *Elder Scrolls* game as a “completionist”). The website *HowLongToBeat* (2015) aggregates player-reported game lengths according to play style.

This article proposes that an immersive participatory analysis whereby researchers openly and visibly research videogames through play could be a useful tool which enables them to potentially gain insight and get critical purchase on elements of both the game and experience of play which other methods of visual analysis, on their own, do not address. I believe it is a valid mode of analysis due to the interactive nature of videogames. It also enables the researcher to utilise their position as an “insider”. This perspective is not only considered to be essential for understanding videogames by some members of the gaming community,³ but it also provides insight into the experience of gaming. In order to analyse many different elements of the game (such as the differing experiences of difficulty levels), or in order to be able to play the narrative through to completion, the researcher must have certain skills and a level of familiarity with a game’s controls and the user interface. In addition, this method allows the researcher, when combined with other qualitative methods, to analyse not only the media elements of the game, but it also enables them to discuss the game’s mechanics and immersive elements which can only be revealed through gameplay.

Naturally, the videogame researcher who engages in an analysis of representation and mechanical gameplay elements is most likely already someone who plays themselves and uses that gameplay to fuel their discussion (perhaps through an implementation of more traditional media analytical tools, such as semiotics or discourse analysis). However, by rendering their position visible, these researchers could engage with the immersive dimension of gameplay and thus utilise a critical tool for further understanding which would triangulate, develop and deepen their discussion.

In my own research I have employed this method and utilised my own knowledge of and familiarity with games, their genres and controls, and gamer vocabularies in order to get critical purchase on the as yet undertheorised consideration of how the immersive character of videogames can interact with their goals, rewards and ethical systems to produce various subject positions. This has been achieved through an examination not only of elements of gameplay, but also examining various degrees of interactivity and player engagement, and – by combining this approach with other modes of media analysis – through a thorough analysis of various games’ media elements. Through utilising this method in conjunction with other more traditional modes of media analysis, I have been able to explore, through visual, audial, technological, and immersive aspects, the embodied and affective dimensions of immersive gameplay; to deconstruct the normative and transgressive elements of game mechanics vis-a-vis the ‘ethical field’ of gaming; and to theorise how immersive interaction with the gameworld creates gendered subjectivities. A case study of how utilising this method can yield interesting data and generate discussion will be explored at the end of this article such that the practical and theoretical reasons for the application and utilisation of this method can be made clear.

³ See for example the discussions on blogs *GoingRampant* (2010) and *TheMalesOfGames* (2013) about feminist, blogger and media critic Anita Sarkeesian’s comment that she is not a fan of video games.

Moral gaming

Before delving into the methodological literature which forms the basis of my arguments, I am going to briefly parse the emergent field of moral gaming in order to situate the case study discussed at the end of this paper. I will present entries from my own immersive research journal in order to highlight the potential discussions which can be explored by practising this method, as well as highlight its shortcomings. Earlier studies in the area of violent gameplay have been often concerned with representations of violence. Whether analysing the violence represented in videogames (Dietz, 1998) and videogame advertisements (Scharrer, 2004), examining the difference in presentation and type of violence in different types of games (Smith et al., 2003), or testing player's aggression levels and prosociality during and shortly after violent gameplay (e.g. Eastin, 2006; Carnagay and Anderson, 2005; Anderson and Murphey, 2003; Bartholow and Anderson, 2002; Ballard and Lineburger, 1999), many studies into videogames and violence can be connected by their concern regarding the impact of violent gameplay on the player. Some research has focused on morality and moral mechanics and is chiefly concerned with the range of options players are given when choice along a moral axis is built into the game's code and narrative. Marcus Schulzke (2009) argues that games which present the player with the option to behave morally or immorally teaches them practical wisdom and encourages them to ethically examine their virtual-world actions and interactions. Several researchers (Boyan et al., 2015; Joeckel et al., 2013; Weaver and Lewis, 2012) have found that players own moral foundations can act as a predictor for their in-game ethical decisions along these (often binary) moral axes. These studies are interesting and insightful, but aggressive response, prosociality, and the binary of moral options presented to the player comprise only a small slice of play experiences which could be examined when exploring ethical responses to gameplay.

The case study I will present explores the potential ethical responses to certain elements of gameplay (not only binary moral choices but also the more general ethical experience of gaming) and employs the notion of habitus to explain the negotiation between player and game system in their coproduction of ethical gameplay. In *Distinction* (2010 [1984]), Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as a (structured and structuring) structure which is acquired through everyday practises and experiences and is "internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practises and meaning-giving perceptions" (166). Where appropriate, habitus allows an individual to navigate certain situations successfully. I follow Loïc Wacquant's (2011) thinking that, rather than being a supposed vague, inexplicable and unoberservable "black box" (see Jenkins, 1991), habitus is a useful tool which enables us to "illuminate the variegated logics of social action [and] ground the distinctive virtues of deep immersion in and carnal entanglement with the object of ethnographic inquiry" (p.82). Graeme Kirkpatrick (2012) has already applied the concept of habitus to gaming in his assertion that the process of internalising gaming control systems can be understood as "a historically specific habitus" (n.pag). In presenting and discussing my case study, I propose to take this assertion further by applying the notion of habitus to the player's internalisation of a

game's moral rules which occurs when they immerse themselves in a virtual world. Before turning to this discussion, however, the reasons for deploying an immersive method when analysing media must be fully explored.

Negotiating immersion

The concept of immersion is relevant to many fields of research from language learning to the development of virtual reality technology. Several media users and critics (especially those who discuss highly interactive media such as videogames) have posited not only that it is a key component of their interaction with media but also that it is what makes that interaction enjoyable (Jennett et al., 2008: p.4). Yet this media effect remains under-theorised (Cairns et al., 2006: p.2). There are several fields in which the concept of immersion is mobilised in some form or another to explain a specific effect, and there is not yet consensus between scholars as to how to define immersion, its key elements, and the factors which limit it. Diane Carr (2006) notes that, for different scholars, "immersion, as a concept, implies different things depending on whether it is borrowed from literary theory, virtual reality analysis or presence theory" (p.53). Many, such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: p.18), follow Janet Murray's (1998) assertion that immersion is the feeling of being transported to a fictional world; akin to being submerged in water (p.98). Words such as "transformed", "enveloped", and "being there" often emerge in the literature (e.g. Dyson, 2009: p.1), but gaining a theoretical and critical purchase on such an experiential and subjective concept is challenging. Jesper Juul (2005) argues that Murray's definition of immersion is misleading when applied to the study of videogames. He states that players may be "absorbed by the game as a *real-world activity*, and the player may for the duration of the game or in isolated parts of the game also strongly *imagine* the fictional game world" (p.190).

Michael Lombard and Theresa Ditton (1997) recognise two distinct categories of immersion: technological – the specific elements of a system which produce immersion; and phenomenological – what Carr (2006) terms the user's "imaginative investment" (p.54) in the virtual world. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) term these distinctions perceptual immersion and psychological immersion respectively, and they suggest terming the latter "absorption" in order to distinguish between the two (p.118). These categories have subsequently been built upon and expanded by games theorists. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005) create the SCI-model of immersion, which identifies three types of immersion: cognitive; sensory, or spatial; and emotional (sometimes termed narrative or imaginative immersion) (p.8). In his adaptation of this model, Dominic Arsenault (2005) proposes an SSF-model comprised of sensory immersion – where the focus of the senses is on that which the person is immersed; systemic immersion – "when one accepts that a system governing a mediated object replaces the system governing a similar facet of unmediated reality" (p.51), and fictional immersion – where the person believes there is more to the immersive world than is represented. Although the SSF-model was developed in order to theorise the immersive effect of gaming, none of these three types of immersion necessitate technological mediation;

indeed, we could apply them to the immersive plays Jacqueline Machon (2013) discusses in her work in that they engage the senses, have a system of rules (which the immersant must “buy into”), and represent a fictional world beyond the scope of what transpires in the play. Arsenault (2005) specifically mentions mediation in his definition of systemic immersion, however I believe that the user’s acceptance of the rules of the immersive world (be it a game, novel, or play) is the key component of this definition and this type of immersion. For example, in immersive theatre the rules of the play (i.e. the rules of the world created and the way the actors and audience-participants may or may not act within this world) are understood and followed by immersants; if an actor or a fellow audience-participant breaks the rules then the immersion could be broken.

Stages of immersion

In their study of degrees of immersion using grounded theory, Emily Brown and Paul Cairns (2004) identified three different degrees of involvement with the game which can subsequently be reached if the barriers to their effect are not removed.⁴ The first level, engagement, requires the player to invest their time, attention, and effort. The second level, engrossment, is when a player becomes emotionally invested in the game. The final level, “total immersion”, is often elusive and fleeting, requiring the player to feel “cut off from reality” and as though they are “in the game” (p.3). Multiple barriers prohibit the progression of immersion through the various stages – for level one, user investment, comfort with the genre and skill with the interface; for level two, a well-constructed and impressive gameworld, and for level three, user attachment and empathy (ibid.). These distinct levels of immersion are not necessarily restricted to the effects of gaming and could be easily reconceptualised in order to describe the degrees of involvement during the act of reading or watching a film. Indeed, Brown and Cairns (2004) assert that “immersion as understood by gamers [... is] comparable to immersion in reading and film” (qtd in Cairns et al., 2006: p.1). For example, a movie-goer may feel engagement during the act of watching the film as they have a fixed period of uninterrupted time in which to become engaged; they may become engrossed when the film is structured in such a way as to emotionally affect the viewer and when they mentally allow themselves to be involved to an emotional degree; and they may even potentially experience moments of total immersion, however fleeting.

Some of the theoretical confusion regarding the definition and utilisation of immersion as a concept is due to the conflation of terms with the overlapping effects of flow and presence. It is beneficial, then, to also define these terms so that their overlap with immersion can be understood and any conflation of them as effects of gaming can be avoided. Flow is defined as an optimal, extreme experience, where one is so engrossed in the activity that nothing else matters. It is often the effect produced when one is feeling “in the zone”. Although being similar to the experience of “total immersion”, Jennett et al. (2008) argue that flow is not the same as a state of high

⁴They found that when gamers described their feelings of immersion, the process they were going through were differing degrees of involvement and attachment to the gameworld.

immersion because one of the components of flow (as outlined by Csikzentmihalyi [1990]) is that there are clear goals; however, not all games which are understood to be immersive have distinct goals (e.g. *Myst*) and thus flow and immersion are distinct but overlapping categories (Jennett et al. 2008: p.6). Presence, likewise, is an extreme experience often described as the effect produced where a media user feels as though they have been transported into the world of the text with which they are engaged (among other definitions) (Lombard & Ditton, 1997: n.pag). It is consequently often associated with virtual reality, and is understood as being a “state of mind” (Jennett et al., 2008: p.7). Therefore, although there is significant overlap between the experience of total immersion and presence, one does not necessarily need to experience presence in order to feel immersed.⁵ In highlighting the distinction between these media effects we can focus our investigation on the concept of immersion as it is the effect which best allows us to study the nature of “immersive” media, in that it is graded, relies partly on structures within the text, and it enables an analysis of the researcher’s involvement and attachment with their object of study.

Immersion vs. Critical thinking

While interactivity has been hyped as a panacea for evils ranging from social disempowerment to writer’s block, the concept of immersion has suffered a vastly different fate. At best it has been ignored by theorists; at worst, regarded as a menace to critical thinking.

(Ryan, 2001: p.9-10)

It has been argued by some that a media user cannot be immersed in a text whilst also maintaining the distance necessary for critical reflection. Jay Bolter (1991) posits that virtual reality (by which he means technological and psychological immersion in a fictional world, be it literary or virtual) necessitates an abandoning of the user’s critical faculties and that VR is “a medium of precepts rather than signs” (p.230, as qtd in Ryan, 2001: p.10). Ryan (2001) counters this claim with her assertion that becoming immersed in a literary world is a complex mental activity and that concentration is required in order to insert the reader into an imaginative reality (p.11). To this assertion I would add two further considerations. Firstly, if we draw upon the three stages of immersion perspective, the abandoning of “the critical self” is not required for a low or even medium level of immersion to be achieved. It is not necessarily true that as one becomes involved with the text they are progressively blind or passive to the semiotic nature of it. Many people who read for pleasure experience a degree of involvement and attachment to the text, yet through our knowledge of meaning-making and reader response theory we do not therefore presume that the signs within that text are being passively converted into a set meaning for them. Each individual makes their own meaning from

⁵ Jennet et al. (2008) highlight this distinction using tetris as an example; a player can be immersed in the game but not experience presence (which would require that they feel they are *in* the world filled with falling blocks) (p.7).

the text whether they read critically or immersively and these meanings are in-part informed by the text and the individual's process of engaging with the text. Meaning-making from games, as with any text, is a negotiated and multifaceted process. It behoves the researcher, therefore, to consider practising an immersive method in order to understand how different levels of engagement with the text might produce different meanings and interpretations. Secondly, I would also add to Ryan's assertion by positing that the rejection of engaging immersively with a text in order to maintain critical objectivity only serves to narrow the scope of the research. By acknowledging the inability of the researcher to be completely unbiased and objective, through discussing their subjective experience of attachment and the emotions elicited by their involvement with the text, they can add another dimension of analysis to their study whilst making the research process more transparent.

Following Scott McCracken (1998) who criticises any understanding of immersion which positions the player as a passive consumer of games (p.118), rather than being thought of as a purely passive process which is antithetical to critical thinking, I believe that immersion needs to be conceptualised as being both active *and* passive. It is active in that it requires not only physical effort (to become au fait with the genre and controls) but also active imaginative and emotional engagement on the part of the immersant. It is passive in that the creation and sustaining of an immersive state relies in part upon the software and hardware to function such that the state is not disrupted. This method of immersively playing the game rather than merely observing allows the researcher to not only view gaming as a situated real-world activity, but as it involves reflecting on the praxis of gaming as it allows the researcher to discuss the "imagining" (which Juul [2005] asserts is a necessary part of gaming) that takes place when one is immersed in interactive play.

Why practice an immersive method?

The argument for utilising an immersive method when studying media is multidimensional and builds upon methods which are already utilised within various disciplines such as auto-ethnographic and autobiographical research.

Texts are immersive

The utilisation of an immersive method when studying a text provides a perspective on how means of engagement with a text can alter the meanings which a user may make. As these texts can be engaged with immersively, to fail to incorporate understanding of the attachments and emotions which immersive engagement fosters is to fail to analyse a key component of their function. Videogames are the ideal medium to test this method as they necessitate direct interaction; the player must actively interact with the controls for the game to progress and unfold. Of course, interaction is not the same as immersion, but by forcing the player to interact, the game is also encouraging a basic level of engagement. As discussed above, the lowest level of immersion that can be achieved only requires comfort with the interface and genre of the game. As one plays and one

develops and internalises the skills and knowledges needed to successfully navigate their way through the game world, one therefore begins to develop this level of immersion. Moreover, it is possible for the researcher to reach other levels of immersion whilst playing the game because of the length of time it takes to complete and because of their positioning as an active agent within the gameworld⁶ – they therefore are likely to begin feeling emotions from gameplay (tension and excitement against a boss; fear before a death; elation at a success). However, videogames are not the only medium which could be analysed using this method. We know that “consuming” a text (any text) is not a passive process – watching or reading also necessitates a level of attachment even if they do not require constant physical input from the user. Although the definition of immersion discussed here is based on an understanding of engaging with a technological text, it could be applied to non-technological, non-virtual reality media.

Modes of engagement alter investment in a text’s ideology

The act of playing a game is where the rules embedded into the game’s structure start operating, and its program code starts having an effect on cultural and social, as well as artistic and commercial realities.

(Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005: p.15-16)

The immersive method builds upon reader response theory in that it recognises that the meaning is not projected onto the user by the text; rather the user negotiates multiple meanings with and through the text. The user’s attachment to the text may interact with these meanings. Therefore, as immersive media necessitate a level of attachment, an immersive method of analysis may allow the researcher to speculate on how a player’s level of engagement may affect their understanding of, or investment in, the textual structures, themes and tropes specific to that text. Even if we do not position immersion as antithetical to critical engagement, we can still acknowledge that different modes of engagement may alter meaning-making. Machon (2013) asserts that within immersive theatres, “audience-participants [are] complicit with the concept, content and form” (p.279) and that immersive experiences lead to a more lasting encounter with the work’s themes (p.120). Therefore, an immersive method will firstly give insight into how the text is composed in order to structure engagement. This is achieved through the researcher reflecting on gameplay experiences and reflexively analysing their own responses to specific elements of play (i.e. by asking such questions as at which point did I achieve a sense of total immersion, how did that feel and what did that do to my understanding of that part of the text? Or – when encountering a specific element of the game – how does it feel to be complicit within this ideological framework?) In doing so, this method allows the researcher to reflect upon the intersection of game structures, immersive play and

⁶ By active agent I do not mean necessarily an embodied agent within the world – many games can achieve this level of immersion and not be structured through “the eyes” of first-person perspective, or through the body of an avatar. Rather, as the player is always moving the game forward and is able to act agentfully (to a certain degree) within the game, irrespective of perspective, they are an active agent.

ideology, whilst also reflexively acknowledging their own emotions and position within the research. As “audience-immersants are encouraged to attend to the situations, narratives, and ideas within the world, and by extension to relate these to the equivalent in the wider ‘real’ world” (Machon, 2013, p.279) then performing an immersive method may also enable the researcher to know about the larger political, epistemic or cultural moment by immersively engaging with a text.

Adding a further dimension to research

As with autoethnographic journals, this method allows the researcher to utilise their experiences to give a further dimension to their research. When practised alongside other methods such as traditional media theory or qualitative content analysis, an immersive method allows the researcher to situate their analyses of the text alongside their own involvement. In my own research, through adopting this method I was able to analyse the gendering of the game as an immersive environment through experiences of play, which necessarily included interaction with the virtual environment and game processes. Furthermore, this method allowed me to both test and comment on the appropriateness of the utilisation (or adaptation) of existing theories in the analysis of videogames, which is a widely debated issue within the field.

Negotiating the researcher’s role: Autobiography, subjectivity, and reflexivity

Practising an immersive method requires that the researcher critically analyse their own approach to the text and document this interaction. By practising a method which explores their own attachment, researchers can gain insight into how that attachment impacts their research, changes the way they read, and affects the meanings they ascribe to the text. As an immersive method situates the researcher as the subject, then elements of autoethnography and autobiography are necessarily involved in the research process. Autoethnography as a research tool connects the cultural and the personal through viewing the social aspects of personal experience, and then employing elements of autobiography where the reflexive researcher looks inwards and refracts these interpretations (Ettore, 2005: p.536). It thus contains and demands a high level of reflexivity. Autobiography, when employed as a feminist analytic method, can be very useful in its ability to highlight the construction of knowledge in a particular time and space. The adaptation of autobiographical methods allows research which employs an immersive method as part of its analyses to articulate the experience of gaming. While there is a danger of positioning “my experience as the norm, against which others would be judged” (Letherby, 2002: n.pag), I believe the inclusion of autobiographical elements are necessary in the study of videogames because their “gameness” (Juul, 2001) requires a practical, “hands-on” approach; that is, one cannot research the game as object without interacting with it (as opposed to research which focuses on the player or the surrounding gamer culture). Furthermore, as argued above, one cannot interact with it without reaching at least a low level of immersion. By bringing in themes of autobiography, rather than presenting our research as falsely objective, we can

recognise our role in the creation of knowledge through the “story” of our play experiences. As Letherby (2000) argues: “self conscious auto/biographical writing acknowledges the social location of the writer thus making clear the author’s role in constructing rather than discovering the story/the knowledge” (p.90, as qtd in Letherby 2002: n.pag). This highlighting of the researcher’s role in constructing knowledge is important because elements of the self are always present in research, no matter the method employed. By recognising this, and through employing storytelling, research which employs an immersive dimension will therefore not “assume objectivity but, instead privilege positionality and subjectivity” (Riessman, 2000: p.3).

Although this research rejects the notion of there being an absolute truth which we can come to know through objective research, it also recognises that an entirely subjective and experiential account would not produce reproducible results and therefore could be criticised as invalid or not making a contribution to knowledge. In order to address these issues it is useful to consider Dianne Millen’s account of these issues in her research:

Whilst I do not believe that there is some sort of final, complete reality, and I am aware that my own subjectivity as female feminist scientist has affected the outcome of my research. I do believe in a compromise between a completely subjective, unique and creative account of experience and a partly reducible, objective and contextualised understanding in which my subjectivity has been critiqued. As Lorraine Gelsthorpe (1992: 214) remarks, ‘a rejection of the notion of “objectivity” and a focus on experience in method does not mean a rejection of the need to be critical, rigorous and accurate.

(Millen 1997: 8.5, as qtd in Leatherby, 2002: n.pag)

Therefore, the rejection of complete objectivity and the embracing of a more subjective experience-based research method needs to be tempered with an understanding of the self that will shape the process; that is, it requires the researcher to be reflexive about their own position and how this interacts with both their experiences and assumptions. Pamela Cotterill and Gayle Letherby (1993) assert that this ‘conscious subjectivity’ (which has replaced ‘value-free objectivity’) is important because it “helps break down the power relationship between the researcher and the researched” (p.72).

A qualitative researcher is always a ‘situated’ observer, thus their situation, background, and identity will all inevitably influence the research they produce, both in terms of process and results (Markula & Silk, 2011: p.4). One cannot produce objective observations, only observations based on the relationship between the observer and the observed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: p.21). This dialogue is not merely a relationship of person to other, however, as it is also internal to the researcher as they make decisions about the research process and revise their work (Markula & Silk, 2011: p.73). In my own research, as this is a media with which I am already actively engaged, and a subculture in which I actively participate, the main ethical issue with employing this method was therefore my “closeness” to the object of study. Thus recognising, understanding and documenting my self-reflexivity as a researcher was a key element of the process; I had to “give considerable thought to [my] own experiences [... and] ‘place’ [myself] in

relation to the issues [I] am researching” (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993: p.72). As I employed autoethnography and autobiography and positioned myself as the research subject, I therefore became “the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (Spry, 2011: p.711, as qtd in Ettore, 2005: p.544). It was therefore important to recognise the location of the self within the research as the research produced would be different if either performed by a different researcher, or by the same researcher at a different time (Letherby, 2002: n.pag). The immersive ‘reading’ process is a “contingent activity deeply rooted in [my] autobiograph[y] and the tools, means and knowledge they provide” (Stanley, 1992: 84). Thus, reflexivity allowed me to posit my readings as just that; my readings, whilst also locating my research in a specific time and place. This does not diminish my claims. Rather, it contextualises them and helps with avoiding the false objectivity that research on such subjects can easily stray into, and offers them as one of many interpretations of the gaming experience. Moreover, my offered ‘reading’ of the game cannot be taken as a reading of developer(s) intent, “for intentionality cannot be read from the text at all [...] what matters, and what is immediately accessible, is the [game] itself” (Stanley, 1992: p.85). In being reflexive and highlighting the self in the research which undertakes an immersive component, we are not confined to studying ourselves; we are situated, socially connected agents, whose self “encompasses second- and third-hand knowledges as well as first-hand knowledges” (Stanley, 1993: p.50). Autobiographical analyses are highly intertextual, meaning our experiences, and therefore our findings, are made in reference to our own background and situation, previous gaming experiences, and knowledge of the gaming community. Thus, in practising this method, reflexivity is taken up as a modality of the research in that it necessarily becomes embedded as part of the methodology; the immersed researcher must not only be open about their position in relation to the media they are embedded in, but they must also critically reflect on the nature of that interaction.

Practising an immersive method

In order to practise an immersive method, the researcher must consider the different levels of involvement with the text. To do so, they must think critically about how their individual engagement affects their research. Differing levels of engagement can be practised and analysed in order to understand how they correspond to different meanings and interpretations of the text. In order to do this effectively, the researcher must practise a method akin to elements of autoethnography whereby they keep a journal in order to document the ways they relate to the text. In doing so, the researcher is required to be honest about how they engage with the text (and the specific elements of the text they may be interrogating as part of their broader spectrum of analyses – i.e. certain narrative structures, tropes, ideologies or mechanics) physically, mentally and emotionally, and to critically reflect on their (and the text’s) involvement in that process. The result is greater transparency of the research process; just as an autoethnographer immerses themselves in the culture they are studying, so too should

the media theorist reflect critically on their immersion in the virtual world of their chosen texts.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise the contribution of the technology of gaming if its structures are to be understood (Bateman, 2008: p.12). As any interaction with a game requires influencing it (Kücklich, 2002), therefore any discussion of a game's meaning must necessarily be affected by the context of the player (Malliet, 2007: para. 9). Thus, there is a need to either play the game from multiple vantage points (Malliet suggests playing as though the researcher were the different "categories of gamer", i.e. socialisers, killers, achievers and explorers) or have a good understanding of the metagame (Aarseth [2003] recommends the secondary resources of the surrounding subculture of that game, which would include walkthroughs, message board discussions, industry and fan reviews, and "let's play" videos). In order to structurally analyse the meaning-making potential and affectiveness of certain game processes, such as differing combat styles or achievement hunting, it is necessary for the researcher to repeatedly and "expertly" play the game (Malliet, 2007: para. 11). In the immersive method, this detailed analysis of mechanical elements through thorough and repetitive analysis is achieved through play, and a portion of time could be spent exploring the metagame for inspiration about how to approach the gameplay via different styles.

Data is thus generated via the keeping of a research journal which documents the researcher's critical reflections on their close relationship to the object of study. By engaging with and playing the game through different perspectives and vantage points the researcher can comment on their personal engagement with the text. By combining this method with other modes of analysis the researcher can reflect on the elements of the game that they will be coding/analysing as part of a complimentary method in order to provide a different type of perspective on those elements. For example, a researcher performing qualitative content analysis may be making notes about the game elements which constrain, structure, and direct the moral decision making process. Practising an immersive method and keeping an immersive research journal will allow this researcher to gain a different perspective on these game elements, thereby furnishing them with an additional critical tool. As such, in employing this method alongside other modes of qualitative analysis, the reflexive researcher can gain insight into the more experiential, emotional, embodied, or affective elements of gameplay which they might not have access to otherwise.

Case Study

In my own research, data was collected via traditional modes of media analysis whilst also incorporating a self-reflexive, immersive participatory dimension. That is, I performed qualitative content analysis (utilising semiotics as well as discourse, narrative, and mechanical analysis) during which I played the game intensely and repeatedly, positioning myself as an immersant, whilst also keeping a journal of the experience of playing the games immersively. I then incorporated these data into the analysis and discussion by treating it as one would autoethnographic writing. The research journal is

therefore an exploratory and experiential narrative intended to be triangulated with other modes of qualitative analysis, or as the basis on which further research projects could be built. I realise here that in order to illustrate the kind of data gathered by this method alone (i.e. not including data from the qualitative content analysis I undertook whilst keeping the immersive journal) I will be directly extrapolating from the personal, to the public, to the political. The limit of this method is therefore that it works best when situated within a wider application of methods. The possibility of this method, however, is that it shines light upon the personal, experiential and emotional elements of gaming where other methods do not. The following discussion, then, must be tempered with an understanding that no truth claims can be made from this method. Rather, the aim of this research is to further the understanding of the process of gaming through an exploration of the relationship between their immersive, representative, and mechanical structures as experienced by the researcher.

Following the rules: Maintaining immersion with moral habitus

In this section I will outline some of the interesting immersive research journal entries in which I examined my reaction to moral decision making and violent gameplay. An examination of my own immersive research journal entries allows me to demonstrate and explore the applicability of the immersive method. As discussed in the section “negotiating immersion”, for immersion to be maintained, the world has to adhere to a set of rules which the immersant must buy into or go along with; any deviation or breaking of these rules that is perceived as unintended or inexplicable (from a glitch or poor design) results in a loss of immersion. Thus, as with a play or a film, videogame characters have to act “in character”. In my research I found this included both pre-scripted player characters as well as the player-created avatar where the game allows for a personality to be developed (this is a feature of many contemporary AAA narrative-led games). This means that during gameplay the player must be complicit in the violent actions of a character who resides in a violent gameworld or they risk loss of immersion by acting out of character. When performing my immersive method, I found that the desire for the world to make sense – for characters to continue acting “as they’re supposed to” – meant that I would intentionally perform acts which initially made me uncomfortable in the name of continuity, believability and immersion:

I felt very sad when Isolde begged me not to kill her son. I ended up punching her and killing Connor because my character was ruthless and I felt anything else would be out of character. I felt compelled to *keep character continuity* more than I felt I had to do the right thing, however uncomfortable it made me. It was still *more immersive that way*.

(Immersive Research Journal: *Dragon Age Origins*)

I really enjoy playing as Trevor. It's as if I can be immoral and enjoy it because *that's how Trevor acts*. [...] I felt ill when I kept accidentally hitting coyotes as Trevor and he kept saying stuff like "squish". But after a few hours of playing as him (a psychotic maniac) I found I was actually aiming for them. It had become fun to listen to his

reaction. It is something I as a vegan would never think was okay, but it just *seemed like something Trevor would do*.

(Immersive Research Journal: *Grand Theft Auto V*)

One character I played as was an evil rogue prince who dragged people to work and shot those he didn't like. When I did these things I didn't feel as much discomfort as I thought I would because I reasoned that it was part of this person's character – it's not me forcing people into slavery. It's just *what this character does*.

(Immersive Research Journal: *Fable III*)

Research into players' reactions to moral game decisions have found that guilt can be elicited through making “non-justifiable” in-game decisions (Weaver and Lewis, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2010). Although immersive states can co-exist with negative affects such as anxiety (Jennett et al., 2008) it is possible that certain negative emotions – such as guilt – could potentially serve to reduce immersion because the “moral dissonance” acts as a barrier to players emotionally investing in the game (which is necessary for the second level of immersion). Previous studies have found that guilt serves to encourage individuals to make what they perceive to be more moral choices (Tangney et al., 2007).

In order to maintain immersion, I began prioritising acting “in character” over altering my moral actions to the extent that I did not feel any “moral dissonance”. These moral decisions and actions produced negative affects until I understood/negotiated them as being necessary for character continuity. It is interesting to explore the moral response in my journals when engaging with games which contained “closed ethical design”; the “implicit system of morality” which is imposed “from above” (Švelch, 2010 p. 59). That is, the moral rules which have to be adhered to in order to progress in the game (i.e. I must shoot and kill the non-player characters who attack me otherwise I will die and the game will end).

As I played my sense of moral vs. immoral action within the game came to match the feedback of *reward and chastising within the mechanics*. I felt that killing an enemy was not an immoral action, because they attacked me first; that was the point of the game/their role within the game, and because the game rewarded me when I killed them. [...] I *took on board this morality* and therefore felt little discomfort when killing enemies.

(Immersive Research Journal: *Bioshock Infinite*)

I attempted to code GTA V early on in the research process and found it very frustrating. I *really struggled with the driving mechanics* because I never play driving games as a hobby. I found myself getting very angry and stressed whilst attempting to code it. There were some quests I seemed unable to complete. I was also feeling very *disturbed by the level of violence* and the seeming revelling in it. After several stressful and unproductive days, culminating in tears of frustration, I resolved to return to GTA V at the end of this stage of my research when I am more used to the coding process and when I felt I might have more patience and time to get used to the controls. [...] The driving was much less frustrating [during the second attempt]. More interestingly, I was *much more comfortable with the violence second time around*. I noticed the humour with which it is portrayed which I failed to see the first time.

(Immersive Research Journal: *Grand Theft Auto V*)

I found that a process of internalising the moral mechanics meant that I began to reach states of deeper immersion and enjoy the game without suffering any moral dissonance. I became complicit in the non-negotiable moral “rules” of the gameworld (i.e. I can legitimately shoot those who attack me). Of course, not all players will necessarily internalise the rules of the game in order to achieve immersion. However, we need to consider why it is that some players might comply with, and internalise, the rules as I did. Here it is useful to utilise Bourdieu’s concepts of fields and habitus as it allows us to account for these tensions. If we posit that there is an “ethical field” of gaming, it would serve to “produce and authorise certain discourses and activities” (Webb et al., 2002: 21) requiring that the players who strive to attain game capitals (skills, in-game tools etc) when they enter the field will “have its specific dispositions imposed upon them” (Murariu, 2010: 2) and must necessarily abide by its rules. Whilst doing so they will also try to change the hierarchy (i.e. beat the game) through the accumulation of these capitals. There is a process of negotiation and coproduction between the player and the game rules which are part of this field.

As has already been mentioned, at the beginning of playing a new game, there is a period of frustration and learning while the player internalises the control system and becomes at ease with the interface (see the emphasis in the above *GTA V* immersive research journal entry). As Kirkpatrick (2012) noted, in learning these controls in order to create and maintain a level of haptic (touch-based) communication with the game, players create habitus. It is this habitus which enables them to enter the first level of immersion. We can follow this line of thinking and view a game’s moral system, enforced by the game’s rules and rewards, as necessary for the player to negotiate and “learn” in order that immersion might be achieved. This negotiation does not necessarily constitute a blind internalisation; rather, there is an element of coproduction – the player can work both with the game rules and, to a certain degree, around them in order to achieve a system of ethical play which allows them to achieve immersion. For example, I negotiated this moral dissonance when playing as an anti-hero such that the violent actions were seen as part of a character’s nature or an unavoidable element of gameplay. In this way I was able to overcome the negative affective states brought about by such actions and was consequently able to achieve and maintain a state of immersion. I propose that this internalising of the control system and the negotiation of a game’s moral systems and rules can be thought of as a set of acquired dispositions; namely it becomes part of the player’s habitus. This habitus is what allows the player to avoid negative affects which might affect their achieving immersion. The consequences of a moral habitus which is coproduced with the game mechanics is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be interesting to explore how the ethical field of gaming (and the dispositions and habitus therein) overlaps with and impacts upon other fields, and how it affects players’ subject positions.

The obvious question which follows on from this work is whether other gamers experience the moral mechanics as I do. This is where the triangulation of this method with other modes of analysis and methods of data collection (such as online message boards or interviews with gamers) could extend, strengthen, and solidify this line of

thinking. As it stands, practising an immersive method and keeping an immersive research journal allowed for these reflections on my experience of moral gaming to take place and influence my future research.

Practical issues

When piloting this method, I would pause the game after interesting moments of gameplay or when I wanted to document a thought, feeling or realisation, and turn to my laptop or a notepad in order to jot down my thoughts. I noticed very quickly that this usually resulted in a total loss of immersion which then had to be re-gained when I unpaused the game and continued from where I left off. This was a major problem as I often did not know what would be coming up next and thus missed out on being immersed when a specific game event occurred (and as such had less of an insight, or at least a different insight, into it). This was resolved by making the switch to a voice recorder which could be used whilst maintaining eye contact with the screen. I could speak my thoughts more quickly than I could type and often the game afforded me a chance to do this whilst it was on a loading screen. I would type up my journal entries at the end of the day whilst the memories were still fresh. This allowed me to make reflections and additions where necessary. In general, however, I found the recorded journal entries were usually sufficient to capture my thoughts and feelings at the time.

Mental health and the immersive method

It is worth noting that there is potential for this method to take a mental toll on the researcher. Other researchers who have utilised autoethnographic methods that require immersion in a culture, system, theory or practise have noted that the intensity of immersive research methods as well as the anxiety produced by the process of self-reflection can be difficult to manage (see for example Wall, 2008) In order to get critical purchase on the immersive-experiential elements of oft-maligned adult (violent) videogames, I chose to immersively research titles which I occasionally found frightening and distressing – some were games I would not have necessarily played for fun. Moreover, the immersive method requires an extended and involved level of engagement with the text beyond what one would practise with more traditional modes of media analysis. As such the period of disengaging from a day's research was not as easy as I had anticipated and my mood suffered during my time "in the field".

Conclusion

This article has argued a case for practising an immersive participatory method when researching interactive media. It has outlined and negotiated the existing literature on immersion, explored why and how one could practise an immersive method, and given an example of research which has resulted from its application. A possible extension of this method would be to train a camera on the researcher and take a continual audio and video recording (akin to a "let's play" YouTube video). This would allow for the journal

entries to be made “hands free” and expressions and exclamations of the researcher could be observed alongside the gameplay video. It is my belief that not only would this method work well as a precursor to other qualitative methods which investigate gamer response to videogames and the activity of gaming, but it could also be employed alongside more traditional modes of qualitative analysis in other areas of media studies in order that the role of the researcher be made visible, reflexive, and utilised as a tool for further critical engagement.

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