

Autonomous Identities

Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities

The concept of immersion has been one of the hot potatoes in Nordic role-playing discussion. In this paper I question the necessity of character for immersion and argue that interaction is a trivial concept in defining role-playing. I compare the Turku, Meilahti and Post-Bjorneborgian Schools in regards to the concept of character and immersion. I explore the impact of perceived realities in achieving immersion and the effect of immersion on gaming reality. I also compare larps with Temporary Autonomous Zones, and attempt to see what is necessary for the two to become one.

The character immersion that role-players in general, and the Turku School in particular, have been trying to achieve is impossible. It is an ideal based on a faulty premise of character that originates with traditional fiction and that cannot be applied to immersive, immediated artforms like role-playing. Likewise, the emphasis on interactivity is trivial and unnecessary.

Role-players like to think they can be their characters and that their characters are individuals independent from the players. Yet they can never achieve “complete immersion” and feel inferior for this inability to perform. The problem is seeing the character as another person instead of a method for accessing the larp.

This essay is written partly as an attempt to update and post-modernise the ideas of the *Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 1999), specifically those concerning character and immersion. When the Turku Manifesto is mentioned, it should be read in this light. This article will hopefully help explain the original Turku Manifesto and develop the ideas presented there, as well as those presented in other articles I’ve written and the two “opposing” schools; the Meilahti School and their model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003), and the multi-tier immersion theory by the Post-Bjorneborgian School (Harviainen 2003). This article is in part an attempt at a synthesis between these three different schools of thought and an attempt to elaborate the potentially revolutionary nature of role-playing.

Immersion

According to the *Meilabti Model*, the relationship between the player and the character is very simple: “A player is a participant who assumes said roles [that form the character] within the diegetic frame.” The internal processes and interpretations of the player are irrelevant for the game as a whole until they are expressed and become part of the diegetic frame. Before that they are merely “individual narrative readings” (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003.)

Compared to the Meilahti Model, the Manifesto of the Turku School presents a very modernist view of character and immersion. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that seeing self as narrative is the essential part of identity creation. The Turku Manifesto saw this the opposite way: that character identity can be created by seeing the narrative as the self. In other words, a player can become the character after reading the character’s written description.

The Turku Manifesto focuses on the process of immersion, or internally becoming a character. “Role-playing is immersion (“eläytyminen”) to an outside consciousness (“character”) and interacting with its surroundings.” According to the Turku Manifesto, it is precisely immersion, coupled with interactivity, that defines role-playing. (Pohjola 1999.)

Every participant shares what happens, using immersion and interpretation to create an entirely unique portrayal of the events for themselves – a subjective diegesis. Markus Montola writes:

Many people, such as Pohjola (1999) and Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002), use diegesis to mean an objective truth of the game world. I believe that understanding a diegesis as a subjective truth proves more accurate and fruitful. Every participant constructs his or her diegesis when playing, the crucial process of role-playing being the interaction of these diegeses. The difference of players’ diegeses is essentially larger than the difference of different interpretations of a movie diegesis.

[...]

The contents of a role-playing diegesis and a movie diegesis are different. When it comes to role-playing, it’s important to understand that a diegesis is much more than a fictional world with characters running around. There is a lot happening in the heads of the participants constructing the diegeses. A lot of what we imagine into our diegeses never comes up; single character’s personal plans or well-hidden emotions for example. They exist only in the diegesis of that player, though the he may communicate them to others’ diegeses, either by diegetic or non-diegetic means. (Montola 2003)

Hamlet’s Monologues

The larp *Hamlet* employed some experimental methods. Perhaps the most important of these was the use of monologues to convey the mood to the characters and players. This method made brilliant use of the subjective diegeses of a larp.

The traditional role-playing would halt, and the characters (not just the players!) would gather around a stage and observe one of the key characters, like Hamlet or Claudius, speaking to themselves. This was used to represent each character's inner monologue. It worked to set the mood of the game, and also to illustrate the inner workings of each characters minds. The characters had been constructed in such a way that each monologue was relevant for every character, but in completely different ways.

The most famous monologue, Hamlet's "To be or not to be", often understood to deal with Hamlet's pondering between life and death or action and inaction, was brought to life by dozens of simultaneous interpretations.

When Pelle, who plays the evil king Claudius' unswervingly loyal servant, hears the "to be or not to be" monologue, it speaks of the difficulty of being a good servant for an evil master. For the aging diva Perdita it becomes a reminder of how short life is, and drives her to drunken dissipations with a one-eyed apothecarist. (Hamlet, the larp)

The event is the same for all the participants, but is interpreted in completely different ways. This, of course, happens with all art. With larps it is made different, and perhaps more focused, through characters that give the context for the interpretation.

The Many Faces of Immersion

Larps contain four aspects: the characters, the setting, the events, and the mechanics (Pohjola 2003c). This is roughly analogous to the four way model presented in the Manifesto of the Turku School, where the players are divided respectively into immersionists, simulationists, dramatists and gamists (Pohjola 1999). The classic *Threefold Model* (see Kim 1998) and the later *Three Way Model* (Bøckman 2003) were similar with one lacking immersionists and the other simulationists.

J. Tuomas Harviainen provides another way to look at things by proposing that there are three kinds of immersion: Character Immersion, Reality Immersion and Narrative Immersion. According to him, every role-player can be divided into one of eight categories according to how they immerse. Not immersing on any level would make the role-player a Powergamer, immersing in the Narrative only would make one an Actor-Player, and so on (Harviainen 2003). These two categories are more or less similar with what the Turku Manifesto calls Gamist and Dramatist.

The Fundament Player (Character and Reality Immersion) is both the Immersionist and the Simulationist of the Turku Manifesto. Of the five other categories Harviainen sees two (only Reality Immersion, or no Reality Immersion) as transitory phases. The three that remain are the Simulator (Reality and Narrative Immersion), the Escapist (only Character Immersion), and the Extension player (all kinds of simulation).

Harviainen's division is very useful for game masters, but differs from the Turku Manifesto in not condemning Narrative Immersion. In Harviainen's terms, the Turku School propagates the importance of Reality Immersion and Character Immersion.

However, the Turku School still admits to two kinds of role-playing, immersionist and simulationist. The theory is that the immersionist experiences what the character experiences, while the simulationist only pretends to, logically deducing what the character would do next. In another article, I introduce another way to deal with these two kinds of playing with Aristotle's concepts of *ekstatikoi* and *euplastoi*:

What is translated here as "a strain of madness" actually means an ability to be taken over by your work, to immerse yourself into it... to "eläytyä". "Taking the mould of any character" was originally the Greek word *euplastoi*, and means thinking logically about the characters and situations, and thus simulating the outcome. "Lifted out of his proper self", on the other hand is *ekstatikoi*, which is writing spontaneously, in inspiration. (Pohjola 2001b.)

To make it short, immersion is inspired and natural, simulation is conscious and forced. However, something greater can emerge from both, as I will show later.

Pretending to Believe to Remember

Immersion is often defined as being in character or becoming the character. This is a very simplistic way of putting it. By immersing into the reality of another person, the player willingly changes her own reality. The player pretends to be somebody else.

But more than *pretending to be* the character, the player *pretends to believe she is* the character. It is this self-induced state which makes it all so cool.

The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. To more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember. The more she pretends to believe to remember, the more she starts to really believe to remember, and really remember to believe, and really remember and really believe. And she pretends to forget she is just pretending. This is what Richard Schechner (2002) calls "pretending belief". The need to immerse in fictitious realities is what Jane McGonigal calls the Pinocchio Effect:

Players were given an opportunity to reflect on the longing of the virtual to be real. The generation of this desire, and the concomitant consciousness of the impossibility of its ever being achieved, is what I call the "Pinocchio Effect." Pervasive games, at their heart, are the dream of the virtual to be real. And if pervasive games are the dream of the virtual to be real, then they are also the dream of the players for the real to be virtual. [...]

I would like to propose that this drive to discover real life problems in direct correspondence to fictional play is not strange or delusional, but rather a perfect illustration of what digital theorist Pierre Levy identifies as a fundamental aspect of our experience of contemporary virtuality. (McGonigal 2003b.)

By understanding a character as diegetic roles, the diegesis as the character's perception of the reality of the game world, and the player as the participant of the role-playing game, immersion can be defined like this: *Immersion is the player assuming the identity*

of the character by pretending to believe her identity only consists of the diegetic roles (See Stuart Hall (1996) for more exact definitions of identity and role).

The relationship of the character and the diegetic frame is an interesting one. It is impossible to define if a character exists within the diegetic frame or whether the diegetic frame only exists within the diegesis that is created by the character. The question is related to that of reality existing without an intelligence to perceive it. In other words, by immersing the player loses some of her own roles and assumes some new ones, leaving her only roles that can exist within the diegetic frame. In effect, the player transforms into the character. This process of immersion takes the player from the assumed objective reality into the diegetic frame, or conversely takes reality from the player into the character. Often the role of the player is not immediately lost, but diminishes and eventually disappears as immersion deepens.

Note that the kind of immersion the Manifesto of the Turku School promotes, “to think, experience and feel through the character” is made meaningless by further study, as it assumes that behind a character, an objective identity uses the character as a context, a lens to see the game through.

Interaction

The Meilahti Model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) claims that it is impossible to role-play alone. The Turku Manifesto argues that it is entirely possible. The argument for both is that role-playing should include interactivity. The Meilahti Model does not count interaction with the environment – the implication is that the diegesis exists only when transmitted through other players. The Turku Manifesto says the opposite – anything the character senses is part of the diegesis, and therefore it is possible to interact with it. And thus, in larps where no game master is present, it is possible and even commonplace to larp alone.

Both theories hold interaction as a key element in defining role-playing. The Turku Manifesto says role-playing is immersion into character and interacting with the character's surroundings. The Meilahti Model says that “a role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework”. The character's surroundings are practically synonymous to the specified diegetic framework. The two main differences are the lack of immersion in Meilahti and the lack of the necessity of the other players in Turku. Both say interaction is essential. However, it is not.

Interaction is not defined in either of these articles. Greg Costikyan explains interactivity in relation to game design by saying a game is interactive by its nature: “The outcome of the game will differ depending on your decision. The game interacts with the players (and the players with each other), changing state as they play. [...] That's true of every game. If it isn't interactive, it's a puzzle, not a game” (Costikyan 2002). This makes sense in sentences like “games are an interactive medium,” because that is a simple

way to explain the difference between a computer game and a computer animation, or indeed any passive medium. Interactive media interact with and are interpreted by the audience while passive media are merely interpreted by the audience. Active media like theatre or music are difficult to define in this regard. I will later explain on the concept of mediation in relation to this.

Costikyian sees a game as something that exists separately from the players and can interact with them. This definition of interactivity does not fit role-playing, however, as a role-playing game is not an object that can exist without players. Interactivity is a useful term when talking about the plot structure of role-playing games, which is why they are often called “interactive dramas”.

The difference between interaction and interpretation is difficult to pinpoint. However, any theatre performance is automatically interactive. The audience interacts with the actors, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other, the actors with the props, and so on. In some big theatre houses, the feeling of interactivity might not be present for the audience, but the potential is always there. Any member can at any time comment loudly on anything happening on the stage, and the actors will have to react to this, even if that reaction is pretending not to have heard it. Simply by experiencing a live performance the audience interacts with it – an indifferent audience affects the performers differently from an excited audience, and as a result physically sees a different performance. This is similar with all active media where the art is performed live. With passive media, like literature or cinema, the audience reaction does not affect the actual media product, except contextually.

A human being cannot choose whether to be interactive or not; A human being is interactive by default. It is pointless, then, to say that a role-playing game participant must interact for the game to be interactive. As long as the role-playing game has even a single human being, it has interaction. Similarly, a character (assuming it is relatively human) is automatically interactive and in interaction with its reality, i.e. the diegesis of the game.

A computer game might be called an “interactive drama” if the player gets to make some choices in the narrative, usually by selecting her own path through a story tree. Sometimes a computer game has an open-ended story-world, in which there is a practically infinite amount of randomly generated events the player can keep encountering for as long as she likes. In these cases, the difference between interaction and interpretation is the clear: manipulating sensory information (reading, seeing, and hearing the words, images and sounds shown by the computer) versus the interpretation of that information in the players mind. For example, the different shapes of *Tetris* would be information resulting from interaction, but the player seeing New York skyline in them would be interpretation.

Such a clear difference does not exist in role-playing games as the diegesis is entirely subjective. Sensory information is first interpreted by the character to form the subjective diegesis, and only then are both the diegesis and the sensory information interpreted by the player to form the interpretation. If the player achieves full immersion

and suspension of disbelief, the player will only interpret the diegesis and leave the interpretation of sensory information to the character.

Immediacy

Role-playing games are often falsely called an interactive medium or interactive art. While not untrue as such, it is a trivial concept since all art and all media are interactive – not necessarily when they are perceived or experienced, but definitely when they are created. If role-playing games could be recorded or observed from the outside without participation, there obviously would be nothing interactive about them. What sets them apart is precisely that they can only be experienced as they are created. Creation of any form of art is a constant circle of action, interpretation and reaction, being interactive, interpretational and expressive at the same time.

Media can be divided into three loose categories: passive, active and interactive. Passive media are recorded, and the audience cannot affect the media product as such, only the context and the interpretation. Passive media include cinema, literature, recorded music and the like. Active media are sometimes called live arts and include theatre performances, poetry recitations, and concerts. In active media, the experience is less mediated, and the audience has theoretical possibilities of interacting with the performers – sometimes so much that the division to performers and audience can be hazy, like in karaoke. Interactive media are media in which the audience must take part in the performance for it to continue, such as a computer game or hypertext.

The fourth, transcendent category is “immediate art”, art that is direct in that it is experienced as it is created and has no use for the division between performers and audience. Role-playing games are definitely immediate, but the definition can also encompass parties, communal storytelling and even improvised music jams.

An outside audience cannot understand a role-playing game, although it can seem like an interesting performance. Role-playing games take place in the present moment and are transmitted directly from person to person. This makes them immediate:

All experience is mediated – by the mechanisms of sense perception, mentation, language, etc. – & certainly all art consists of some further mediation of experience. However, mediation takes place by degrees. Some experiences (taste, smell, sexual pleasure) are less mediated than others (reading a book, looking through a telescope, listening to a record). Some media, especially “live” arts such as dance, theater, musical or bardic performances, are less mediated than others, such as TV, CDs, Virtual Reality. [...] Therefore, as artists & “cultural workers” who have no intention of giving up activity in our chosen media, we nevertheless demand of ourselves an extreme awareness of *immediacy*, as well as the mastering of some direct means of implementing this awareness as play, immediately (at once) & immediately (without mediation). (Bey 1994.)

That is to say, the interactivity of role-playing games is not relevant, but their immediacy is. I have written briefly about larp as an immediate medium in another article:

Live-action role-playing games as events lack aspects of traditional media, although characters, through which the expression happens, can be considered media. Live-action role-playing games are also bodily and all-encompassing works, in which each movement, sound, taste, smell, touch and even thought are part of the work. However, immediatism's understanding of play is even larger. Whereas free time is an emptiness that must be filled with entertainment, play is its opposite – a self-fulfilling and self-rewarding thing. Play is anarchy, while free time, entertainment and art are societal. (Pohjola 2003c)

Role-Playing

Since there is no use saying role-playing is interactive, the definition needs to be revised. Simply taking interactivity out of the definitions, or replacing it with immediatism, would not work. According to the Meilahti Model, immersion without interaction (“alone”) is daydreaming. According to the *Dogma 99*, “larp is action, not literature” (Fatland & Wingård 2003). In a way, both are right. Immersion without action is daydreaming and can result in or be the result of a narrative.

This is where the surroundings, or the diegetic frame, come back in the picture. The role-player must immerse, or take on the roles that exist within the diegetic frame. This means that for the duration of the role-playing game, the character must exist within the diegetic frame. The character will automatically sense and be sensed by the diegetic frame. The diegetic frame can contain other characters, or it can sense and be sensed as unintelligent or inanimate surroundings. (In this case the sensory process can be simpler, like grass bending when a weight is put on it.) The diegetic frame and the character(s) can be presented physically with live-action role-playing methods, verbally with tabletop role-playing methods, or with several other methods like text, drawing, puppets, miniatures or digital avatars.

It is also conceivable to role-play in a diegetic frame that is strictly personal, that takes place inside the role-player's head. The Meilahti Model labels this daydreaming, even though the required “interaction” is there – between the character and the diegetic frame, both existing inside the player's imagination. There is also nothing stopping the same role-player from creating several different characters that interact together within the diegetic frame. This method is often used by writers and tabletop role-playing game masters:

Sometimes, when you play a character long enough, explore the character's feelings and attitudes and memories, that character becomes a “real” individual, a new role inside your head. [...] When writing a scene with many characters in drama or prose, or when gamemastering a tabletop role-playing game, the same phenomenon occurs in an exaggerated form. All the characters, or the NPCs start to live inside your head. (Pohjola 2001b)

Most likely the character's presence in the diegetic frame is not only about sensing, although it can be. Even unconscious, the character is present in the diegetic frame and

interacts with it. Of course, the role-playing game often becomes more interesting when the character's actions become more meaningful.

Theoretically, a player does not know when her character is communicating with a character played by another player and when simply with a previously created part of the diegetic frame. In larps, the players' characters usually stand out, but not always. If a character is listening to voices in a protected space in a dark room, it is impossible to know whether the voices are coming from other characters or a pre-recorded tape. For this reason, other characters are simply a part of the diegetic frame, and interaction with them is no more valuable or "real" than interaction with a computer or a tree, although often more interesting.

Considering that existing (and as a result, interaction) within the diegetic frame is a part of immersion, I define role-playing like this: *Role-playing is immediated character immersion.*

Inter-Immersion

Pretending to believe leads to real belief. Pretending to believe you are someone else leads to immersion, to believing you are someone else. How exactly it leads there happens when the diegesis enhances this belief instead of the feeling of pretence. This is what I call inter-immersion:

"Another important difference is the relationship between immersion and interaction. For Dogmatists the interaction, what happens during the game, is "the reality of the LARP." For Turkuists, that reality exists only inside the head of each player. Of the thesis and anti-thesis can be formulated a synthesis: The reality of LARP comes from the collective experience of immersion shared and strengthened through interaction. The reality of LARP comes from inter-immersion!" (Pohjola 2001a)

Back then, I defined inter-immersion as a state achieved when one or more immersed players interact with each other and their surroundings. In the term, interaction is seen as happening between players as well as between the surroundings, in short, interaction between the character and the diegetic frame. Thus, inter-immersion can be explained without mentioning interaction. Inter-immersion is a phenomenon strengthening the identity of the character (as opposed to the identity of the player), which occurs when the player is immersed inside a believable diegesis. Inter-immersion can also help a simulating player to become immersive, and the lack of it can lead an immersive player to become simulative. The chances for inter-immersion can be enhanced by anything from good propping to exciting events.

Inter-immersion is the recursive cycle of immersion: staying in character helps the player to stay in character. Seeing other characters, acting within the diegetic frame, observing diegetic reactions, experiencing the environment, these all help in enhancing the player's immersion. (They can also be considered as tools for constructing subjective diegeses (Montola 2003)). When everything a character does enhances the believability

of the diegetic frame, and everything in the diegetic frame enhances the identity of the character (as opposed to that of the player), the player enters the positive feedback loop known as inter-immersion.

Usually beginning on the second day of multi-day larps, a player's memory starts helping inter-immersion. At that point, the memory is full of things done as the character, things pertaining to the fiction of the larp. When the character sits by idly and the mind starts to wander, it does not stumble into things outside the fiction, as it only finds memories that enhance the immersion.

As the player reaches the inter-immersive state, she starts to forget she is just pretending to believe it is all real. She acts as if she really believes the diegesis, and when everybody else does the same and reacts to each other's beliefs (instead of the pretensions), they forget they are just pretending and start to really believe.

Temporariness

The realities of larp, the diegetic frames, are not only limited physically to be within the "objective reality", but they are temporary as well. They are called into existence at the beginning of the larp and are put back at the end. Therefore, the diegeses of a larp are temporary realities.

Characters share and do not share this problem. Characters are temporary identities that the players assume for the duration of the larp. Without a character, a player cannot access the diegesis. Yet, a typical character is a part of the player, a part of the player's identity. According to the Meilahti School, a character contains some but rarely all of the roles the player's assumed objective identity contains:

There is no need to differentiate between the roles the player assumes within the diegetic frame and the roles assumed outside of it (in fact "player" is a role as well). [...] A character is a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional "story of self" binding the separate, disconnected roles together. (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003)

Sometimes a player participates in a larp but does not want to or is not able to play her character as written, but to form a diegesis of the larp, to participate, the player needs some diegetic roles to identify with. Juhana Pettersson comments on poorly designed larps:

In these games, the character [description] provides in-game context but little more. Often the only way to go is ignoring the character as written. But if I'm not playing the character [as written], or being myself, then who am I? In a genre game, the answer is easy, because I've acquired a set of mannerisms suitable for the style. It may not be a character [designed by the game masters], but it looks like one, if you haven't seen me play too often. (Pettersson 2003)

Pettersson has a selection of archetypal roles which allow him to play in most larps. This is true with most role-players, who default in playing one of very few characters archetypal to them if not given enough incentive to do otherwise. Typecasting often enhances these archetypes.

In this way a player can exist within the diegetic frame through small changes in her identity. The opposite can also happen; The character can exist outside the diegetic frame, in the “objective reality”, through small changes in the way reality is perceived. When the player conjures up her character’s identity and enters gaming reality, she starts to see the “objective reality” as a diegetic frame, even if not the diegetic frame indigenous to the character. In this state, which is often briefly induced subconsciously, the character will start to think of the “objective reality” in terms of the game: “If vampires exist, then that means the invasion of Iraq is an Assamite plot!” This phenomenon is what Jane McGonigal describes as gaming reality:

Elsewhere, I have described in detail the phenomenon I call “gaming reality”, in which fans of pervasive play approach real life problems such as unsolved crimes, the prevention of terrorism and political graft as if it were an immersive game. (McGonigal 2003b)

She refers to her earlier article *This is not a game*, in which she writes:

It is far from clear at this early point in the genre that the astonishing effectiveness of immersive gamers in a collective play environment can transfer to the real world as successfully as their game-play mindset. The objective impact of immersive play, we might say, has not yet caught up with the subjective changes produced by immersive aesthetics.” (McGonigal 2003a)

In short, gaming reality takes place when the roles of the character are invoked consciously or subconsciously outside the diegetic frame. Often the identities of the character and the player exist simultaneously in these situations and can even have internal dialogue.

Making Up Rules

All games are played according to some kind of structure, typically rules (Costikyan 2002). The players agree to act in a certain way within the limits of the game and expect the others to do the same. These rules differ from the rules existing in the players’ everyday lives in the sense that they are temporary. The players start to follow the rules when the game begins, and when the game ends, they stop following the rules. If all goes well, they do not have to think about the rules or that it is just a game, because it is so interesting that they do not want to.

Ice hockey is a good example of this. Grown men skating as fast as they can to move a piece of plastic to a specific area. Seems pointless, yet it is immensely popular. This is because the players and the audience do not concentrate on the fact that it is a

game but on the reality within the game – whichever team gets the puck to the other team's goal the most times wins. Wilful suspension of disbelief makes the game feel relevant even if it is not. But when it feels relevant, it becomes relevant.

In real life, people are expected to always follow the rules, and even when they break some of them, they follow some larger rules that deal with breaking the rules. The matrix of these rules makes up our society. Most of them are arbitrary, but still necessary.

According to McGonigal's ideas about gaming reality, when a player learns a new set of rules, it is natural to want to apply it to other things than what it is intended for. The difference between live-action role-playing games and other games is that they make gaming reality work. Hockey sticks will not be of much help on a first date or in a political debate, but one can experience and rehearse both situations in a live-action role-playing game. I touched this subject in Panclou:

Shamanistic ritual is LARP applied to religion. We have characters inside our heads. New ones join when we read a good character description and play the character for a while. They are not physical people, nor are they spirits. They are individuals inside our heads. Usually, for those that the modern world considers to be sane, those individuals are not as dominant as what we consider to be our true selves. Sometimes they step up, though, and we get a glimpse of what a character of ours would do in our place. (Pohjola 2001b)

In live-action role-playing games, the game master makes up rules for the society. She can decide on a new language, new style of clothing, or change the laws entirely. She temporarily changes one set of arbitrary rules to another.

This can be compared with Hakim Bey's anarchistic concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ): In a TAZ, willing participants agree on a new set of rules that are in effect within the Zone. The Zone is independent of any outside state or law, and is supposedly dissolved as soon as it is discovered by the establishment:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it.

[...]

And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that "anarchist dream" of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now. (Bey 1985)

Since live-action role-playing games are so similar to the Temporary Autonomous Zones, creating larp societies enables and empowers us to comment on real-life societies and even change them. Larpers are not doomed to play in temporary pocket realities (no matter how autonomous) inside the "objective reality", but they can change their reality for good. Identities can change and so can realities. I will elaborate on this further when I talk about the nature of diegeses.

Learning from History

There is a pattern in the history of games that helps understand gaming reality. Modern role-playing games evolved from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which evolved from complex strategy games, which in turn evolved from simple strategy games.

There is a pattern, and a very clear one when you know where to look. Each new generation of games is less abstract. Where *Go* is about capturing and re-capturing land, *Chess* is about a war between two nations, *Chainmail* is about commanding armies in battle and *Dungeons & Dragons* is about directing a singular adventurer in a dungeon, modern role-playing games are about acting as any individuals in any setting.

Where the chessboard with its 64 squares abstractly represent a battlefield, in *Chainmail* the players use a miniaturized version of an actual battlefield. Where in *Dungeons & Dragons* the players use a dungeon to provide a very limited environment for action, in modern role-playing games the players can use any environment they want to. The games seem to become less abstract all the time.

The same development can be seen in computer games. When using the computer as a platform has more or less reached its limitations, the games will move off that platform (such as pervasive reality games) or will start to include that platform (such as games where the computer is just the character's interface to the game world, like in *Alpha Centauri* or *In Memoriam*).

It is "gaming reality" taking place in reverse. Players accept the rules and reality of the game, and subsequently start to see their own reality in the same terms. Perceiving reality as a game and game as reality is very difficult when the game is so abstract that game actions are simply not applicable to real-life situations. As an episode of *Futurama* phrased it: "Not all things can be solved with chess, Deep Blue, and one day you will learn that."

It is entirely possible, even easy, to see "objective reality" as a role-playing game. Making the games more complex and less abstract has made gaming reality stronger and more fulfilling. The next logical step is to lose the barrier separating games and reality once and for all.

Diegesis: A Temporary Reality

As pretended belief becomes real belief, subjective diegesis turns into subjective reality. This is only temporary, however, as after the larp, a participant first stops pretending to believe and then stops believing. The subjective reality returns close to what it was before, and the diegetic frame returns from being reality to being fiction again.

In role-playing games, the diegesis is temporarily the participant's reality and the character her identity. Role-playing provides a way for a participant to lose some of her roles and to adopt new ones.

Larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday identity and the social expectations reflected on that identity. Similarly, larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday reality by providing methods for creating other realities inside and on top of the assumed objective reality.

As larps grow less abstract and more complex, they start to resemble not just fictitious realities, but also possible realities. They become Temporary Autonomous Zones in which the participants willingly live a different life. If the same happens with characters, they will start to resemble not just a fictitious identity but also a possible identity – perhaps like the player living in the TAZ.

I propose that all that is necessary for a Temporary Autonomous Zone to be created is for the participants to take on a *Temporary Autonomous Identity*. And what, indeed, are characters if not Temporary Autonomous Identities?

Characters and diegetic frames are temporary in the sense that they are not present all the time. However, gaming reality makes the lines between reality and game, character and player, fuzzier all the time. Though Bey says a TAZ must have a clear beginning and a clear end, I say we can carry the TAI (and the TAZ) with us all the time in our heads. More to the point, once we have immersed in the characters, we cannot get rid of them. Instead, we always have a Temporary Autonomous Identity with us, and that will set us free.

Conclusion

In role-playing games, the subjective diegeses are created through immersed interpretation. Pretending to believe that this diegesis is “real” becomes inter-immersion and hence enhances immersion. Inter-immersion and the diegesis together with the Pinocchio Effect make diegesis turn into objective reality, i.e. reality that is the game becomes temporarily real for the player that is the character.

Perceiving the subjective diegesis of a role-playing game as reality makes it increasingly easy to perceive reality as a subjective diegesis of a role-playing game. Reality becomes gaming reality. It is possible to act in the “objective reality” as one would in a larp.

Since it is possible to perceive reality as a larp, it is also possible to apply methods of larp creation into molding reality. Thus Temporary Autonomous Zones can be created, i.e. we can larp that our reality is different. Our character for a TAZ is a Temporary Autonomous Identity, one that lives with different rules than we are expected to.

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