Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming
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immersion
Commonly, dictionaries recognize two main uses for the term "immersion": the physical absorption of something into some substance and the more figurative use, in which absorbing involvement is concerned, such as in the learning of a language through immersion. The term is also an important concept in gamers' speech, where it gains several special meanings.
The experience of being immersed in a game appears to relate to both of these dictionary meanings of the term. Most contemporary digital games create an illusion of virtual **space**, in which players enact gameplay activities. This sense of being transported into "another place" while using digital technology has been studied in the fields of communication studies and human-computer interaction (HCI) under the concept of "presence." Such immersion can be examined by looking at the degree to which a player's perceptions are focused on the virtual **world** and the degree to which perceptions relating to the physical environment are "shut out" (Lombard and Ditton, 1997; Patrick et al., 2000).
Not all immersion is a direct consequence of being absorbed in sensory perceptions; even simple games without spectacular user **interfaces** can be very engaging because mental aspects of gameplay can also be immersive for players. Challenges and action are core elements of games (and indeed one of their defining characteristics), and engagement or absorption in action is an important part of game-related immersion. Studies based on game player interviews have tried to extract the meaning of "immersion" by asking what it means for players themselves (Brown and Cairns, 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005). Effort and attention directed toward a game appear to be important in keeping players involved. Immersive games absorb players completely, taxing their various faculties, ranging from motor skills, navigation, and cognitive problem solving to social and emotional involvement. Immersion, however, is not necessarily a measurement of how "good" a game is; some players prefer powerfully immersive experiences, whereas others prefer games that are **casual** and nonimmersive.
The phenomenon of enjoyable absorption in action, called "flow" by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is an "optimal experience" that can occur at the moment of perfect balance between challenge of task and the skills of the person. Feelings of powerful gratification and losing one's sense of **time** are often associated with flow experiences. Because typical game play is not as free of disruptions and breaks as are the ecstatic performances that Csikszentmihalyi describes, immersive gameplay appears related to flow, yet also different from it.

Sweetser and Wyeth (2005), who have developed a model of "GameFlow," include in it eight elements that relate to player enjoyment: concentration, challenge, skills, control, clear goals, feedback, immersion, and social interaction. Thus, the experience of flow appears to be often a part of immersion, whereas immersion is also a part of "gameflow"; analyses of immersion seem to lead to circularity. Nevertheless, analysts seem to agree that immersion denotes the degree of player's involvement with the game. Ermi and Mäyrä

(2005) have further divided gameplay immersion into three main dimensions: immersion into challenges and action, sensory immersion, and imaginative immersion. The experience of immersion in the playful challenge of a game appears unique to games, whereas sensory immersion also occurs in the visual arts and cinema, and imaginative immersion has long been known and studied as the kind of immersion that takes place while reading engaging literature (Ryan, 2001).

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Further Reading

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