Immersive Entertainment and its Problem with Terminology

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Abstract:

In the entertainment industry, the term immersive is thrown around quite a lot. It is often used to refer to the extent to which an audience is engaged with a story and its fabricated reality or fictional world, and is used in reference to many different media including film, videogames, virtual and augmented reality, and interactive theater. The issue is that the term is overused and vague, while at the same time "immersive" entertainment is rising in popularity. As things like virtual reality become more popular, it is important to understand what makes them impactful and entertaining. Thus, it is crucial that the term immersive be reexamined and either redefined or replaced. This research project will combine scholarly research with real world experience in order to try and understand the nature of immersion, and provide information that will hopefully help redefine the term.

Introduction:

One concept that is repeatedly drilled into the heads of film students like myself is that well made films maintain a concept called "the suspension of disbelief." This is the process in which the audience's knowledge that the characters and story unfolding before them are not real is circumvented. This is done typically through creating a captivating story within a world that follows its own logic. Ideally the film immerses the audience in a controlled fictional reality to such an extent that they forget about their own reality for the duration of the film. But what does it mean to immerse the audience? There are many other forms of entertainment that can immerse audiences in a fictional world (videogames for one example). As highly immersive technologies like virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) become more prevalent, it becomes ever more important that we understand what immersion is. There are many different art forms that emphasize immersing the audience in a fictional environment, whether that be through a headset like in VR and AR or through engaging the audience in active participation with the art like in videogames and immersive theater. However, the term "immersion" is quite vague and can be used to describe almost any medium. A videogame can be immersive by creating a vast and detailed world for the players to interact with, or even through incorporating virtual reality devices. At the same time a film can be immersive simply by maintaining the suspension of disbelief.

There is the potential for a prodigious new industry in the world of immersive entertainment as companies begin to take the various forms of immersive media and blend them into vast transmedia empires like Disney is doing with *Star Wars* and the *Galaxy's Edge* park, *Jedi Challenges* AR headset, and *Battlefront* games. The ways in which artists can fully immerse

their audience are becoming more widespread everyday, to the extent that immersion is arguably becoming an art form in itself. The problem is that this new art form, that of immersion, is poorly defined (Bishop). Going forward it is key that we understand what this new art form really is. This research will attempt to create (or progress towards creating) a comprehensive definition of the concept of immersion. This will hopefully help me and others I disseminate to understand immersion and the philosophy behind it, create better and more immersive experiences, and more effectively communicate its value to the general public.

Background:

This research has stemmed from a previous project of mine that investigated the immersive quality of live experiences, specifically live action roleplay (LARP) and interactive theater. That project focused on LARP as a specific and narrow cross section of immersive entertainment. It focused on what LARPing is, how LARPs create immersive experiences, and where LARPing fits in the modern world of entertainment. This project is an extension of that project, looking into the broader concept of immersion in general and its place in modern and future media.

In order to begin this project I did research on the concept of immersive entertainment in general. Through this scholarly research I came to a few findings. First: the term "immersive" is extremely vague and becoming increasingly undefined as its use rises in popularity (Bishop). Second: some professionals understand true immersion as any medium that envelops its audience in the sense that it allows them to walk into the worlds they are experiencing. It surrounds them with the art to the extent that their world is replaced by a fictitious one (Bishop). Thirdly, while

classical videogames are often described as "immersive" this fails to capture the nuances of the experience of gaming (Calleja). Gordon Calleja found a new although also problematic (Farrow and Iacovides) term for the process of immersion in videogames, "incorporation." Finally, this all led to a realization that there is a somewhat unspoken initiative amongst both scholars and practitioners of immersive media to define immersive entertainment. As transmedia formats (as seen with the *Star Wars* franchise and the *Galaxy's Edge* park) and highly immersive technologies (such as augmented reality and virtual reality) rise in popularity, it is becoming increasingly more important to be able to describe what immersive entertainment is and to do so in a way that communicates it effectively with consumers (Bishop). Understanding immersion will enable creators to not only make more immersive content, but also advertize their content to the general public in a way that portrays the appeal of its immersive qualities.

Methods:

The task at hand is to apply the scholarly research I have done with real world experience so that I have a better understanding of what immersion is, and thus am more capable at explaining and defining it. By experiencing various forms of immersive media with a research-backed critical eye, I hope to merge the scholarly understanding with the practical in order to bring the field one step closer to a universally effective conception of immersion.

In order to do this, I will need a comprehensive understanding of immersive entertainment. I will need to draw from experience of a wide breadth of media formats. These will include film and television, videogames (including classical screen-based games, virtual reality games, and augmented reality games), and live experiences (such as Disneyland,

interactive theater, and LARPing). For many of these I will be able to draw on past experience. However, for those which I have less experience I will need to go out and engage in them. The areas I need more experience in the most are VR, AR, and live experiences. In order to fill these gaps I will do the following. First: I will go to Disneyland. Along with the rest of the park, this will include a visit to their new attraction, *Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire*, which blends VR technology with a physical environment. As opposed to augmented reality technologies that project images onto what users can already see, this technology completely restructures the visuals while still utilizing a physical environment. Disney calls this "hyperreality" ("Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire"). Second: I will use my friend Andrew York's HTC Vive to test out various virtual reality games. Third: I will go to "Bicolline" which is a highly immersive program held in Quebec. A unique form of immersion that fits between Disney World and classical LARPing, Bicolline immerses thousands of people in a fictional medieval world and pits armies of hundreds of players against one another.

During and after exploring these forms of immersive entertainment I will record my emotional responses. I will make careful observation of how the various art forms impact me as the audience, and why I think they do so. I will record and compare my varying levels of immersion between each experience, and perhaps will even be able to distinguish different types of immersion. I will also compare this to past experience with other immersive media. This will help me develop a first-hand understanding of the relationship between immersive media and its audience, which is an essential step in defining immersion.

Budget:*

Item	Description	Cost
Bicolline All-Inclusive Package**	Includes transportation, lodging, food, and various event costs.	$1500
Disneyland Ticket	Ticket to attend Disneyland. I will take care of transportation to and from the park.	$157
Total		$1657

*Current rough estimates
**Package will be purchased through the company, The Voyage North

Expected Results:

The expected results of this project will be a paper that ties together multiple professional and scholarly views on the field of immersive entertainment with my own real world experience of a variety of immersive media. My goal is to synthesize these varying forms of understanding of the field in an attempt to get closer to a universal understanding of what it really is, and perhaps to propose a new term to describe it.

I have realized that many of my passions and skills, and much of my past experience is all pushing me towards making my career in the field of immersive entertainment. I am dedicating my time to studying it because it will be an integral part of my career. Thus I have established a goal: to dedicate at least one research project per year to the study of immersive entertainment. This way I will have a portfolio of knowledge and experience to supplement my film education. This paper will be the second part of a four year portfolio that ideally will lead up to my honors thesis, and perhaps even jump start my career. As someone who wants to dedicate

his life to the medium of immersive entertainment, I want to do as much as I can to understand

what it is and help forward its growth.

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