

Immersion in Social Simulation Games

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Introduction

In *What is a Megagame?* [<https://blog.boundy.uk/content/pdf/WhatisaMegagame.pdf>] I suggest that Megagames can be understood as a subset of a wider class of Social Simulation Games (SSGs). One part of that discussion concerned immersion.

Immersion is often regarded as one of the defining features of Megagames. At the same time, it is one of the least clearly defined terms in game design. Different people use it to mean concentration, emotional engagement, roleplaying, suspension of disbelief or simply enjoyment. In this article, when I say “immersion”, I am referring to the state where players act as though the world is real. I am going to try to answer the question “so what?”.

Puzzle, Theme and Immersion

There is a group oddly named as “immersology”. I found one of their articles [<https://strangebirdimmersive.com/immersology/on-theme-vs-immersive/>] helpful. It is summarised by this diagram:

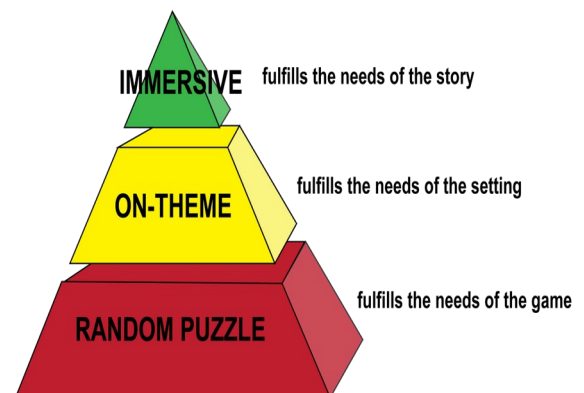
At their core, many games are puzzles. The act of solving a puzzle is itself enjoyable. In this way, a jigsaw puzzle could be regarded as a solitary game.

At the lowest level is the puzzle. The participant is solving a system. The setting, if present at all, is largely irrelevant.

The second level is theme. The puzzle is given a setting and context. The participant may solve problems that superficially belong to a world, but success still depends primarily upon understanding the puzzle itself.

The third level is immersion. Here participants begin to act as though the world is real. Their decisions are guided by their understanding of the situation rather than by direct optimisation of the game. The distinction is important because immersion is not simply a stronger version of engagement. It is a different relationship between participant and system.

IMMERSOLOGY'S HIERARCHY OF PUZZLE NEEDS



What Immersion Is Not

Immersion should not be confused with concentration or engagement. A chess player may be completely absorbed in a game without experiencing immersion in a simulated world.

Nor should immersion be immediately confused with emotional involvement. A participant may feel excitement, frustration or triumph while playing a game that remains fundamentally abstract to them. Similarly, a participant may behave consistently within a simulated world without displaying any strong emotional response. Immersion concerns how participants engage with events, not how strongly they feel about them.

Layers

In the earlier article I proposed that Social Simulation Games are built in layers:

World → Model → Game View → Players

The world is the assumed reality. The model is the designer's selection of the elements that matter. The game view consists of the mechanisms used to express that model.

Players interact within that structure in a way that the players within the real world could be expected to behave. Immersion is successful alignment between these layers. When participants experience an event and can explain it in terms of the simulated world, immersion is supported. When participants experience an event and can only explain it in terms of the mechanics, immersion begins to weaken. In other words:

players should understand outcomes as arising naturally from the simulated world

Immersion as a System Requirement

Immersion is seen primarily as a player experience. There is, however, another way to view it: as a property of the system itself. Immersion is often discussed as though it were a desirable feature that can be added to a game or even, by some, as the aim of playing the game. For Social Simulation Games, I think of immersion as a system requirement. These games depend upon participants making decisions as actors within a simulated world. If participants cease doing this and instead optimise directly against the mechanics, coherence between World, Model and Game begins to weaken.

For a Social Simulation Game to function effectively, the game system must allow immersion. The mechanics, procedures, information structures and adjudication processes must be sufficiently connected to the simulated world that players can reasonably interpret events in terms of that world rather than in terms of the game machinery.

This does not mean that every mechanism must be realistic. All simulations are abstractions. The requirement is not realism. The requirement is plausibility. The relationship between the game system and the world must be strong enough that players can maintain suspension of disbelief. Participants must be able to understand causes and effects in terms of the world being simulated and then react in those terms. A successful Social Simulation Game therefore does not merely simulate a world. It supports participants in thinking within that world.

Structural and Emotional Immersion

It is useful to distinguish between two different forms of immersion.

Structural Immersion

Structural immersion occurs when participants interpret events primarily through the logic of the simulated world. They may not be emotionally invested and they may remain fully aware that they are playing a game. Nevertheless, they understand events in world terms. They ask: "What is happening?", "What would this government do?", "How would this commander react?" Structural immersion is concerned with coherence between the participant and the world.

Emotional Immersion

Emotional immersion occurs when participants become emotionally invested in events within the world.

Most experienced Megagamers have seen examples:

- exclusion from important negotiations (China was excluded from negotiations about Chinese affairs)
- the loss of a valued character (an assassinated character caused real grief in a team and a feeling of required revenge)
- the collapse of an alliance (feelings of betrayal were obvious in one game)
- a military disaster (player morale in operational games can be as important as any morale mechanism)
- the use of nuclear weapons (a modern-thinking player with a horror of nuclear war felt it necessary, in a game, to order a limited nuclear strike)

In such moments participants experience genuine emotions arising from events within the simulation.

Emotional immersion is often powerful, but I view it as a consequence rather than a requirement. Whether my view is conditioned by the type of SSG that I am involved in (Megagames) is open to debate and I am certainly open to changing my mind.

A participant may be structurally immersed without being emotionally immersed. But the reverse is, I think, much less common although I'd be interested in hearing from a LARP player. Emotional immersion usually depends upon participants first accepting the reality of the world and it seems to me that it is dependent on structural immersion.

Control and Immersion

Control (in the sense of "facilitators") occupy a unique position within Social Simulation Games. While players experience only part of the system, Control operates across all layers simultaneously.

Control sees hidden information, the abstractions built into mechanisms, the whole adjudication process and any rule compromises. As a result, Control is unlikely to be truly immersed in the game

nor, I think, do they need to be. In fact, they need to be somewhat distant from the game as it is played.

This creates an important design responsibility: Control should not be required to invent plausibility from nothing. The design should provide sufficient guidance that Control can produce outcomes which remain coherent with the world. Control's role is not simply to operate the machinery, but it is to maintain alignment between the layers, thus supporting player immersion.

Immersion and Opacity

There is an interesting relationship between immersion and opacity (the lack of understanding of the game as a whole – an opaque game is required for a successful SSG). Opacity occurs when the system becomes larger than any participant can fully understand. Immersion occurs when participants continue to interpret that partially understood system through the logic of the world. In this sense opacity supports immersion and is, I think, a requirement.

Real societies, wars and economies are themselves opaque. Participants rarely understand the whole system and the feeling that events are unfolding beyond one's complete understanding is often part of what makes the world appear real.

Conclusions

Immersion is often treated as a player experience but within Social Simulation Games it may be better understood as a property of the relationship between world, model, game and participant.

The key question is not:

"Are participants immersed?"

but:

"Does the game make immersion possible and support immersion?"

This shifts immersion from being a desirable extra to being part of the structure of the simulation itself but a Social Simulation Game does not require perfect realism. A successful Social Simulation Game is one in which both the mechanics and the facilitation structure support outcomes that participants can understand as arising naturally from the world being simulated.

It requires alignment between World, Model, Game and Players so that events can be understood as arising naturally from the reality being simulated. As these become more aligned, immersion becomes stronger. When this happens, structural immersion emerges. When participants also become emotionally invested in the consequences of events within that world, emotional immersion may emerge as well. The first helps the simulation function. The second is often one of the reasons people remember it.