The Limits of Immersion: Case Study of Desolatium a VR Graphic Adventure

Mª Inmaculada Parra-Martínez

Universidad de Murcia
C/Progreso 27,
Molina de Segura, Murcia (30500)
+34-628305048
mariainmaculada.parra@um.es

ABSTRACT

The aim of this proposal is to offer a critical reflection on the process of development and production of an immersive VR indie videogame (*Desolatium*), exploring from an academic perspective whether the limits that virtual reality and real-life scenarios stablish towards the game narrative enhance or hinder the players' experience. *Desolatium* is a first-person, Point & Click, Graphic Adventure based on Lovecraft's mythos, funded through a crowdfunding campaign during the covid-19 epidemic by an independent studio in Murcia (Spain). The objective of the game is to offer an immersive experience through different technical and narrative strategies, combining elements from classic graphic adventures, such as *Myst* (Cyan, Inc, 1993), role-play mechanics and escape room puzzles.

As this paper will show, this game started as a crowdfunding campaign planned as a transmedia project, which would extend the storyline and the game's visual and textual content through different social media and a short pre-game (*Desolatium: Prologue*, Superlumen, 2021). It also served as a tester for a research project about digital narratives that I am currently working on. Hence, I participated in the development of the game as narrative designer, writer, and co-producer, providing an academic foundation to it. For this paper, I will compare this game's production process, given its particular characteristics, to those described by authors such as Keith Burgun (2012), Michael Sellers (2017) or Michael Killick (2022).

As stated above, one of the main objectives of the game was to offer the players a full immersive experience into the world of *Desolatium*. While being aware of the difficult task of defining immersion for a game of these characteristics, we considered that creating a sense of *presence* could not be achieved just by means of a VR medium, as it is a function of the design and potential of the game narrative. Therefore, we opted for an integrative approach towards immersion. First, from the perspective of narratology through the definitions of Janet Murray (2016) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2003); and second, from the considerations on immersion, presence and incorporation in relation to Virtual Reality by Gordon Calleja (2011) and Alisson McMahan (2003).

To achieve its immersive objective the game presents specific technical and narrative strategies. In relation to the first, *Desolatium* has been produced using hyper-realistic graphics, as all the scenarios have been generated by recording real locations in 360º with the integration of 3D elements, and 8D surrounding sound effects to enhance the transportation experience (Ryan, 2003). In the case of narrative strategies, on the one hand the game offers the chance to play as four different characters, each providing

essential information to complete the story, and several paths and endings depending on the decisions made by the players. And, on the other hand, the pre-campaign involved the creation of fictitious social media profiles and news reports connected to the events that take place in the game, and interactive twitter threats in the form of "create your own story" narratives.

Despite both, the technical and the narrative strategies, several elements were observed as contributing to a negative immersive experience. I associated these to Ryan's taxonomy on the different types of immersion: spatial, temporal and emotional (2003) and McMahan's list of necessary conditions for immersion and the *emersive* effects that can appear by deviating from them: sock, ironic distance and palimpsestic attempt (2003). Some of these hindering elements were the integration of the already mentioned 3D objects in the scenarios, or the difficulties to follow the complex and multi-character storyline expansion. These and other characteristic features of virtual reality games seemed to limit the affordances of the narrative design developed for *Desolatium*, as it was clear from the feedback received from the beta testing.

With this proposal, I intend to offer an academic insight into the difficulties of the production process of an immersive videogame of these characteristics, involving real-life scenarios shooting and dubbing. Besides, I will show how the intention of producing a technically immersive narrative can actually limit the potential of the game's immersive factor. As the experience of producing this game will reveal, while hyper-realistic digital environments seem able to keep the narrative and visual tension at a fictitious level, real-image scenarios are too familiar to engage the players into fantastic narratives, requiring of other kind of strategies to achieve the goal of immersion.

Keywords
Game Design, Virtual Reality, Digital Narratives, Immersion

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bolter, et al. *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality.* MIT Press, 2021.

Burgun, Keith. *Game design theory: a new philosophy for understanding games*. A. K. Peters/CRC Press, 2013.

Calleja, Gordon. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2011.

Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016.

Killick, Michael. *The Way We Play: Theory of Game Design*. Apress, 2022.

Marak, et al. *Gameplay, Emotions and Narrative: Independent Games Experienced*. Carnegie Mellon University, ECT Press, 2017.

McMahan, Alison. "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method form Analyzing 3-D Video Games." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Routledge, 2003, pp. 67-86.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2016.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Schneider, Greice. 2013. "Resisting narrative immersion." *Studies in Comics,* vol.4, no 2, October 13th 2013, pp. 333–354. *Intellectdiscover,* https://doi.org/10.1386/stic.4.2.333_1

Sellers, Michael. *Advanced game design: a systems approach*. Addison-Wesley, 2018.