Immersion: The Suspension of Reality in Horror Games

Tais B. Gogorza

Abstract
The article "Immersion: The Suspension of Reality in Horror Games" seeks to understand how the phenomena of immersion occurs during the experience of gaming. For this purpose, iconic survival horror videogames were analysed: "Resident Evil" (CAPCOM, 1996), "Silent Hill" (KONAMI, 1999), "Corpse Party" (TEAM GRIS GRIS, 2010) and "Amnesia: The Dark" Descend (FRICTIONAL GAMES, 2010).

Key words: Immersion, Videogames, Digital Narratives.

Introduction
Ever since we can remember, human beings like to tell stories and to listen to them, to escape reality or to see it through a different perspective. We have many instruments for that, such as books, movies and our very own speech. With the advances of technology, a new way of storytelling became possible: videogames. At first created for casual entertainment, today videogames are amazing digital narratives, with the use of images and sounds and one more aspect that makes this experience truly unique: interactivity. Not just the interactivity of pressing buttons, or the interactivity of reflecting upon a story that's been told, but both, at the same time. Combining graphics, sounds and controls, videogames are able to transport players to another world, in a way much more immersive than that of movies and spoken stories. But how this immersion happens? Does the player feel part of the game universe because it has realistic graphics? Or because the ambience is on point? Maybe it's because the sound is binaural? Or maybe the story is just really good, or the controls are responding perfectly? Is it something he does willingly, or is it something that lures him into it? When it comes to a more specific genre, these questions become more intricate: when someone is playing a horror survival game, how come they feel scared of something that isn’t even real? These are the questions this article seeks to answer.

Results and Discussion
When it comes to immersion in the context of videogames, there are a few main factors we have to observe and analyze: ambience (how the world of the game is meant to be perceived by the player), soundtrack (sound effects and music), graphics (the in game graphics and the visual identity of the game), narrative (what is the story and how it is told) and playability (how you play and how the controls respond to your actions). In addition to all that, there’s one more factor we have to considerate: how willing the player is to be immersed in the game. There’s a big different between playing a horror game with the lights on in the middle of the day and playing a horror game with the lights off and headphones on. This is because the more focused you are on the game, the more you can get immersed into it. So it's really a two way interaction: the game has to present a consistent world, but the player has also to be open to the experience itself.

Conclusions
What we call “immersion” is called “presence” by psychologists. What happens in the context of videogameing is a “spacial presence”. This phenomena happens when a media is perceived by its user as real, in the sense that a player experience the game as if he was really in that universe, performing actions according to the virtual world rules and making choices that fit within that situation. For instance: instead of fast travelling a world through the menu screen, an immersed player will travel normally all the way through the game map, as he would do in the real world. Therefore, immersion occurs when the player starts to use that virtual world as his spacial reference. This may happen consciously or unconsciously. To boost the experience of immersion though, the player needs to be focused in the gaming experience, not getting distracted by other actions or sounds from the real world. Even when those recommendations are followed thoroughly, there's still the game itself. Unlike the common sense, realistic graphics are not a “must have” characteristic for a game to be immersive: consistency is. A game has to have a consistent visual identity, a story that makes sense, a narrative that is believable, a soundtrack that speaks to the player’s emotions and an ambience that fits the world the player is meant to be in.

Acknowledgement
I'd like to thank SAE/UNICAMP for the opportunity, and my advisor, Professor Hermes Renato Hildebrand, for all the help he provided me.

TEAM GRIS GRIS. Corpse Party (Corpse Party: Blood Covered. Repeated Fear) [videogame]. Team Gris Gris; 5pb. Japan; 5pb; Marvelous USA, 2010.

DOI: 10.19146/pibic-2016-50818