

Immersion Is 'Hear': A Practitioners' Perspective on Immersive Podcasts

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ABSTRACT

Although the currently popular notion of 'immersive' content often equates it with Virtual Reality and the like, immersion goes much beyond. This paper argues that immersion is a psychological concept and it can often be located in the narrative, not in a particular device. In the first part, this paper reviews what immersion as a concept means along with different types of immersion and argues that any medium can be immersive although the way immersion is conceptualized and practiced may differ for every medium. Focusing on audio medium, this paper aims to study podcasting where the above-mentioned immersion located in the narrative is practiced. In the second part, the paper thus further explores podcasting as a medium with immersive potential, based on the insights provided by Indian independent podcasters who create 'immersive' podcasts. This study launches a sender-centric inquiry into creating immersive audio content. Through in-depth interviews of these podcasters, it focuses on storytelling in their podcasts, which includes two types of immersive elements- technological and narrative. The study, being qualitative in nature, does not generalize the findings but wishes to provide a bottom-up view of this alternative notion of immersion, as understood and practiced in the podcasting field.

Keywords: audio, immersion, narrative, podcasting, storytelling

Introduction

Virtual reality has become a new buzzword these days. What was restricted earlier to gaming is said to be slowly becoming mainstream now in other fields as well. The Technology giants like Google are coming up with more and more products like Cardboard, Tango, Daydream, and most recently, AR Core that help audience consume content both in VR and AR format. Not only for gaming or films, but the usage of VR has been studied and advocated in multiple domains right from journalism to education to retail. The immersive potential of VR and AR technology has been a salient feature in this buzz surrounding VR and AR.

VR content expects the audience to lose the sense of their actual physical world by completely 'immersing' themselves into a virtual world created around them. The immersion can stop here, which makes the VR environment non-interactive or the audience can at will change the elements in the virtual reality, which makes it 'interactive' VR.

Although immersion is not something that was invented with VR. CGI effects, animations or 360-degree videos, all have been visual tools for immersing a person in the content. VR is probably just a station on this ongoing

path of making media more immersive. Immersion as a concept extends well beyond digital realities (AR, VR etc.) and it should be looked at as such.

Review of Literature

Immersive Realities

In the recent body of research, usage of VR has been advocated in multiple domains, one such being journalism. In her much-lauded work, Nonny de la Penna (Penna, et al., 2010) advocates that VR is uniquely fitted to give the audience a first-person experience of being present at the site of a story and, it is 'immersive' journalism. They also suggest differences in low-level and high-level immersion. While this research certainly opens a new dimension for the journalistic content creation, it also reinforces the notion that 'immersive' experiences warrant a virtually recreated content. At the minimum, it assumes the requirement of predominantly visual content, aided by technology, to be able to 'transport' the user to some other reality, because 'immersion' is described in the terms of transportation.

While on the other hand, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) called this the Immersive Fallacy: the "idea that pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually

transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality." They challenge the notion that in order to be called immersive, transporting someone to a different world is necessary. In such case, clarity on immersion is crucial if one wants to avoid, in Alison MacMahan's (2003) words, "an excessively vague, all-encompassing understanding of immersion". Assuming any technology to be a pre-requisite for an experience is an extremely technologically deterministic view. Digging deeper into what exactly would immersion entail is hence necessary.

The idea of immersion

Immersion, as a concept is neither new nor restricted to the use of multiple technology-enabled devices. Immersion is basically a psychological concept, signifying the experience of a person to be completely absorbed in something. A proverbial bard or an age-old storyteller could thus produce immersive experiences, so can any film, advertisement or a book, if we go by the simple understanding of the term. JRR Tolkien is often credited for creating one of the most immersive tales of all time- The Lord of the Rings.

What makes the understanding of the term complicated then? The concept of immersion has been defined across multiple pieces of research from multiple era, with reference to something. Immersion as presence, immersion as engagement etc. (Ryan, 2003). Things become complicated when the understanding of the concept 'immersion' specific to one field is applied to some other field as it is. (Nilsson, Nordahl, & Serafin, 2016). On this background, reviewing some of the attempts to define immersion is warranted.

Academic inquiries into game design have had much to contribute to the meaning of immersion. Engagement Researchers propose that immersion is a result of engagement. The more engagement you have with the game elements, the more immersed you would feel. (Brown & Cairns, 2004, Jennet et al, 2008) Whereas other researches on engagement state that 'immersion' will broadly have "lack of awareness of time, loss of awareness of the real world and audience involvement and a sense of being in the task environment." (Haywood & Cairns, 2006).

Janet Murray (1997) had proposed one of the early definitions of immersion. She says that "The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from the air."

An acclaimed narratologist, ML Ryan highlights the psychological nature of the concept of immersion further by stating that immersion actually involves the process of 're-centring in which the consciousness of user relocates itself to another world'. (Ryan M.-L., 2001)

A Typology of immersions

A sufficient body of research, upon examining the concept of immersion, agrees that it is not a simplistic, monolithic concept. Moreover, it is not only about being transported from one place to the other. Immersion can be of many types. Sherman and Craig's (2002) oft cited work on VR separates the two types of 'immersions'. They mention of physical immersion, which is achieved by being physically involved in an experience using most of the senses, and mental immersion which is achieved by imagining the narrative. In another typology of immersion, (Ermi & Myra, 2005) talk about sensory immersion, challenge-based immersion and imaginative immersion. Sensory immersion, as the name suggests is achieved by the use of audio visual aids whereas imaginative immersion is said to be achieved when the games let the users use their imagination and empathize with the characters. In a broader sense, they correspond to Sherman and Craig's suggested types.

Macmahan further works on the concept of 'presence', theoretically more to do with sensory immersion, and proposes two further types of immersions. She calls it perceptual level immersion, which is achieved by blocking out the real world to the most possible extent by the use of goggles, headphones etc. The second is psychological immersion, which is achieved with the user's mental absorption in the world.

There have been other perspectives to look at immersion too. On the basis of level of consciousness, (Nakatsu & Tosa, 2002) categorize immersion as passive and active. Passive immersion is the one where the user completely loses his or her own consciousness, much like a trance. Whereas the user retains his consciousness in active immersion and is able to perform tasks in the immersed environment. Connecting these types back to the field of VR, one could say, that 'interactive VR' as mentioned above would require active immersion while the non-interactive VR would require passive immersion. Ryan, in one of her earliest works (1994) underlines this point, that VR cannot be reduced to passive immersion, the interactive aspect of VR has to be considered.

Jon Noel Thon (2008) proposed another typology of immersion with specific reference to gaming. Thon does not agree with Ryan in her 'transportation' concept, but looks at immersion more in terms of 'shift of attention'. He talks of spatial immersion, which is the players' shift of attention from his real space into the game world, ludic immersion is described as the shift of attention to interactions in the game. Narrative immersion refers to the shift in attention towards the unfolding the story of game and the characters therein and social immersion, understood as the communication and social interaction of the players in the game space, strengthens their narrative immersion.

Ryan's (2001) typology can be applied to this concept of narrative immersion of Thon. Ryan distinguishes between temporal and emotional immersion. Temporal immersion refers to some suspense- a desire to know what happens next. The emotional immersion refers to the 'shift of attention' towards the fate of characters in the story. The desire to know what happens to the character at the end of the narrative plays a significant role in the narrative immersion (Thon, 2018)

Immersion myths

Narrative immersion, thus, focuses more on the story, and it is device or technology agnostic. Pierre Gander (Gander, 1999) provides a useful definition of immersion here. He argues, that immersion in a context of a story would have: *attention directed at a storytelling source, mental construction of a story*

world and an emotional state of mind, as a response to the story. A particular technological element can affect the level of immersion, but immersion in story itself does not necessarily get created due to the physical existence of a certain device.

Moreover, Gander also counters two myths prevalent with reference to immersion. 'The more senses a medium engages, the more immersive it is' is one myth, while 'the more audience can interact with the medium, the more immersive he will feel' is the other. He argues that even the early researchers in this field like Ryan or Murray carry this myth forward. In fact they also confuse all these three concepts together, by making statements like more interactivity leads to more immersion (Ryan, 1994), for which no evidence is available other than the researcher's assumption. One should instead look at the immersion in VR content and immersion in the traditional medium as *different* and not as one being superior to the other.

In quite contrary to a popularly held belief that immersion means all-consuming experience, Bell et al (Bell, Ensslin, & Smith, 2018) also suggest that immersion is a lesser totalizing experience and the audience gets consumed in and pushed out of the content multiple times. In light of such arguments, extending our understanding beyond the myopic views of immersion is desirable.

Immersion in Audio

The literature cited above clearly elucidates one thing, and that is the concept of immersion moves much beyond the 'sensory' or 'physical' dimension of it. Immersion is certainly not about technology but about experience. (Nilsson et al, 2016) Experiencing a story and being immersed in its world, is hence, possible in many more ways beyond currently-selling-as-hot cakes- VR content. Only virtual creation of and virtual exposure to places which almost feel like real is not 'immersion'. This paper takes the existence of multiple types of immersion as a point of departure and suggests that we need to look at immersion holistically, moving much beyond VR. In this, the paper separates immersion from being located in the device and locates it into a narrative, aided by technology. Possibly every digital medium of storytelling, thus,

have some immersive potential. Further, the paper proposes to look at podcasting as one such medium.

In fact, immersion on the audio level is assumed while creating visual content for VR and other digital realities. But even if we speak about audio-only media, radio plays are immersive to a large extent. Immersive audio has probably got a fresh life since the advent and the popularity of podcasts. Podcasting is defined as recording and disseminating audio files in a digital form, which can later be downloaded and listened using the internet. Being a digital medium, podcasting also has many independent content creators (podcasters) who create 'immersive' audio content.

The 2014 podcast named 'serial' is considered a watershed movement in the American podcasting world, which made a large number of people get back to audio and be consumed in it. It was a true crime podcast, speaking of a real life murder mystery and it revived the medium of podcasting to a great extent. It also showed how podcasts can be an intimate medium, which can immerse a listener into its content. Several attempts have been made in recent times to exactly do what serial did—create a real-sounding world for the audience through podcasts. . (Mead, 2018)

Compared to the western world, podcasting is still a nascent medium in India. Although there exist several independent Indian podcasters who produce their own content, without any affiliation to any podcasting or media network. They produce a wide variety of content, with some of them also calling their podcasts as 'immersive'.

Research Gap

This research holds the notion that immersion can be created by any digital medium, as it is located in the narrative. Most studies on immersion of a medium are either actual content studies or they are audience studies, where audiences talk about the feeling of immersion that they got from a particular content. While that is obvious, since it is always the audience who gets immersed, the creator of 'immersive' content also conceptualizes this notion of immersion in a particular way while creating content. The studies on understanding how immersion is

conceptualized in the creator's mind have not been many.

This paper looks at independent podcasters in India, who create self-professed 'immersive' podcasts. It is curious to know about their idea of 'immersion' in the process of creating content. A broad-level idea of how this alternative notion of immersion is understood and by the practitioners and manifested in their self-professed 'immersive' podcast content is the gap that this research aims to fill.

Research Question

To be able to fill the gap mentioned above, the following research question was proposed: How do independent Indian podcasters understand immersion and implement it in their practice?

Methodology

The study makes use of semi-structured in-depth interview as the method obtained for data collection. Thematic analysis of these interviews was done in order to provide answers to the research question.

Sample: The population consisted of Indian independent podcasters, who claim that they produce immersive podcasts. This population is very small in number since podcasting is still in a nascent stage in India.

Using purposive and snowball methods of sampling, a sample of five podcasters were drawn. Creators of the following podcasts were interviewed: Indian Noir, Tiny Tales, Stories that fade with time, Curry podcasts and Karma is a witch.

Results and Discussion

Genre

These podcasts belonged to the genre of crime or horror. Additionally, the content of all of these was fiction, without an exception.

This is rather not very surprising. Apart from crime, horror is the genre that has seen a dramatic rise world over in the fiction podcasts which are 'immersive'. (Hancock, 2016) "Horror as a genre provides excellent opportunity to use sound effects to achieve the maximum possible effect on the audience's mind. It just frightens them more!" said a podcaster who creates audio mini-fictions on his podcast that feature supernatural elements.

Most other podcasters echoed this sentiment saying that their choice of genre allows them to include specific audio elements in their content very well. And since almost all of it is fiction, they think that effectively using audio elements builds up the narrative well and it would make their audience to really immerse better. Creating non-fiction content in their opinion would reduce the potential to use audio elements effectively.

The Inclusion of Audio Elements

When the podcasters say that their podcasts are immersive, all of them consider the audio elements to be one of the most crucial things defining the podcasts' ability to be immersive. These audio elements have to be identified separately from the usual background score and the intro-outro pieces of an episode. These are atmospheric sounds- the ones which would usually be found on the location where the story takes place. These sounds can either be natural- e.g. chirping of birds, wind blowing, raining etc. Or they could be artificial/resulting from human activities. These can range from anything like screeching traffic or honking to background whispers to running footsteps etc.

The podcasters reported to think of and include as many audio elements as possible to ensure that the audience's feeling of 'being there' increases. This is of course only auditory immersion since there are no visuals. The listener, in the podcasters' opinion, will have to "create and visualize a world of his own, the audio elements will help him do that'. For this to happen, these elements also have to be placed appropriately in the narrative.

Referring to the reviewed literature, the immersion these podcasters intend to create through audio elements can be called sensory information which will help achieve an imaginative immersion on the audience's part. (Ermi & Mayra, 2005)

It is vital to dwell upon the technological side of the creation of audio elements here. Binaural audio recording is the emerging trend when it comes to making audio more 'immersive'. To put simply, binaural technology means recording and reproducing sound in both the ears. (Moller, 1992) It is exactly how human ears normally function to

perceive audio in a three dimensional space. Since the normal audio recording in stereophonic format makes the sound 'flat', binaural recording is better since the listener gets a feeling that the sound is coming from all directions, and not just playing inside his head. Binaural technology is increasingly being used in VR and AR and even broadcast and audio productions. The BBC has been creating immersive content in audio, 360-degree video, and VR formats and has been using the binaural recording for that.

All the podcasters interviewed here were aware of this trend of binaural recording which can be very useful for increasing the 'immersive value' of their podcast. However, none of them actually practice this recording technique, since it is very resources-intensive. Large media corporations like BBC afford to do it, but an independent podcaster cannot, in their opinion. The atmospheric audio elements then, are not working for sensory immersion in practice, since the 'flat' sound cannot fully immerse the listener. They are indeed aiding the imaginative immersion, as the podcasters put it.

The Storytelling

The role of having a strong or powerful storytelling is essential for any 'immersive content'. (Gorini et al, 2011) If the immersive content is only audio in nature, the quality of storytelling becomes even more important. Because the medium does not have any ready visual cue, the burden of creating an altogether separate world to let the audience's imagination sink into, has to be borne by the narrative. This is not difficult to understand. After all, the great stories of all time proved to be quite immersive, without any audio-visual aid.

Since all the immersive podcasters interviews here work in thriller-fiction space, they claim that the job of storytelling becomes slightly easy, as "most content in this space is stories, and the audience is used to it" as put forth by a podcaster. There are certain points to this:

Relevance of the Topic: The podcasters, when working on the narrative, have to make sure that the audience connects with the topic on some level. "We have to have the story set in a way that could happen in anybody's life. Either the setting or the characters or the

events that unfold, have to be closely relatable to the audience, else why would they keep listening?" is how a podcaster puts it. The audience need to identify with the characters in the movie on psychological level if they want to feel 'immersed' in the tale. Thon's (2018) categories of narrative as well as social immersion are expected here on the audiences' part where they 'shift their attention' to the unfolding of story.

What Next? : Apart from being relevant, the story has to keep audience guessing about what happens next. Podcasters, hence, work towards audience achieving temporal immersion (Ryan, 2001). As is normally seen in any storytelling, the usage of cliff-hangers is done to keep the suspense up and let audience be temporally immersed (Anderson, 2016).

Using Pauses and Silences: An effective storytelling often features the effective usage of pauses and silences along with the spoken word. In oral narration, pause is used as an important structuring device (Oliveira, 2002). They are used, obviously, to transition from one part of the story to others, but also to build up anticipation of what happens next. Effective usage of pauses can thus help in creating temporal immersion, as discussed above.

Silences, can too signify many things. Silence on a single narrator's part can often increase the audience's 'shift of attention' to the storyteller than what endless spoken words would. A story can feature both 'being silenced', which signifies a character's loss of power or just 'being silent', a method of controlling the flow of conversation or narrative. (Fivush, 2010) In the case of the podcasters interviewed here, they reported that they weave both forms of silences in their stories.

Active Creation of belief:

This term can be found for the first time in the book 'Hamlet on a Holodeck' by Janet Murray. It was used in contrast to the popular term 'suspension of disbelief'. To Murray, immersion results in this active creation of belief. This is aided by extremely detailed, intricate narratives.

This creation of reality is true in case of podcasts in an interesting way. As there are no

visual cues, listening to the story allows every member of the audience to build an individual reality in his mind. This is in contrast with the case of immersive video content, where the audience has to consume the only reality that the creator has chosen and does not have an agency to seek or create any alternative reality. "There are multiple audience realities existing simultaneously in our case, as the story takes place in the mind of the audience", says a podcaster. This may well extend Kukshinov's (2016) point of view where he says that *VR is to be perceived whereas narrative is to be imagined*.

Limitation and Scope for Further Research

Since the study works on a very small sample and employs qualitative methods, the results cannot be generalized. However, it is intended to provide a very broad idea about some contours of this hitherto largely unexplored topic of how creators understand and implement the notion of immersion and is not to be generalized. This limitation itself provides scope for further research where more sample could be taken or triangulation of methods could be employed by looking at the content as well.

Conclusion

As immersion rapidly becomes a key-term in media studies, it is crucial to expand our understanding of other aspects of immersion apart from the one being considered in VR and alike. Any digital medium can become immersive, as immersion is not only a product of particular technology, but it is a product of the narrative.

This alternative notion of immersion is held and practiced by the Indian independent podcasters. They further bring two types of 'immersive' elements in their podcast content. Technological elements as well as narrative elements aiding immersion. If more advanced technology like binaural recording becomes more accessible, the level of immersion in their content could further increase, they report.

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