

***Feelies*: The Lost Art of Immersing the Narrative**

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the materializations of story world entities that are distributed with game packaging, here referred to as *feelies*, as props that support narrative elements in story-driven digital games. The narrative support is suggested to function on *global* and *local* levels, where the first one refers to the immersive effects concerning the story world, and the latter to the immersive effects concerning the situation in which the player is accommodated to via a player character. Additionally, analog feelies are suggested to possess a *tactile* aspect that has the potential to enhance their immersive impact at both effective levels. These concepts will be explored through early text adventures *Deadline* (Infocom 1982) and *Witness* (Infocom 1983).

Keywords

immersion, feelies, narration, interactive fiction, adventure games

INTRODUCTION

Interactivity, the two-way flow of information (Naimark 1990), has repeatedly been proposed as the defining element of digital games (e.g. Ryan 2001; Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Dovey & Kennedy 2006; cf. Smuts 2009). While academic exploration of gaming experiences has rarely taken into account the analog aspects of these games (Toivonen et al. 2011), this paper examines the materializations of story world entities that are distributed with game packaging as a part of the ontologically interactive digital game product.

What makes these supplementary materializations, generally referred to as *feelies*¹, of exceptional interest here is the fact that they are not interactive in the same sense as the principal, digital part of the game. Despite this, they do maintain a game function, characteristically that of providing story-related information (in forms such as maps and booklets) and can therefore be seen as props that support narrative game elements. Here the focus will be on the immersive effects of that narrative support.

In the context of digital games and gaming experiences, immersion has been used in several different senses (Calleja 2007; 2011). In this narrative framework the concept is understood through Laura Ermi's and Frans Mäyrä's (2005) *imaginative immersion* (cf. Ryan 2008; Calleja 2011), in which "one becomes absorbed with the stories and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character." In short, imaginative immersion arises from story worlds and their (player) characters.

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The study will begin by visiting the conflict between storytelling and play. After describing how free play tends to disintegrate imaginative immersion, feelies are presented as props that are able to support that immersion. The immersive potential of feelies is divided into *global* and *local* levels, referring to the immersive effects concerning the story world and the situation in which the player is accommodated to via a player character respectively. Since the renewed interest in analog story-related material has lifted early Infocom packaging up to a focal position (Loguidice 2004; Mathes 2004), the key examples of this paper, *Witness* (1983) and *Deadline* (1982), are selected from that particular company.

CLASH BETWEEN GAME AND IMAGINATIVE IMMERSION

Recognizing feelies as narrative tools entails acknowledging the fundamental obstructions of ergodic storytelling. These obstructions can be described as a “clash between game and narrative” (Juul 2001), which refers to the capabilities provided for the player to affect story events. This in turn increases the player’s leverage in the shared storytelling process between the author and the audience. The more narrative control is given to the player, the less narrative control is left for the author.

A similar clash surfaces from the relationship between game and imaginative immersion. Since immersion in a game’s story world and in its characters is based on the player’s configurative choices and performance in addition to her or his non-configurative interpretations, imaginative immersion in games provides a correspondingly augmented position for the player at the expense of the author. This concerns both levels of imaginative immersion: that of the *global* story world, and that of the *local* situation in which the player is accommodated to via a player character.

Clashing Player Characters

Recalling Ermi and Mäyrä, players’ identification and feelings are usually intended for a player character, which is distinct from other game characters due to the player’s exceptional control over it.

In the context of story-driven games, player characters are occasionally left undefined. For instance, almost half of the works of Infocom (defunct 1989) do not even define the protagonist’s gender. While *Zork* (1980) addresses the player merely as “you” or “adventurer,” *Bureaucracy* (1987) uses the player’s personal information to accommodate her or his own life as the basis of the story. In these cases, the player character can be considered more as an entry-point to a fictional situation than as a character to identify with (see Aarseth 1997, 113; Ryan 2001, 308). In other words, and especially in the context of games, character identification does not necessarily refer to identification with scripted identities but can also refer to identification with undefined identities (which may rather be described as accommodable situations).

The possibility to accommodate to a situation in the form of a player character makes digital games exceptional in terms of imaginative immersion construction. Because of the more or less determined structure of each scripted storyline there is nevertheless constantly a potential clash between what the player may want the character to do and what the author has scripted for the player. Whereas limiting the variety of available choices and actions directs the player to implement the specific choices and actions that advance the story, these limitations simultaneously threaten the player’s identification with the player character and so also her or his sense of acting in the story situation.

Clashing Story Worlds

Contra interaction, Espen Aarseth proposes spatiality as the defining element of the digital game (1997, 101–102; 2000). Without denying the importance of spatiality in games, this paper chooses to oversimplify the concept by discussing it in terms of the environments in which stories take place, here referred to as *story worlds*.

As players explore story worlds they learn more about them, which tends to strengthen their imaginative immersion by intensifying the sense of being in those worlds. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) gives an idea of the multilayered process through which players' become immersed in these worlds:

The reader constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but building this always incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience, and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts. (91)

While other texts, cultural knowledge and previous experiences set up the foundations on which imaginative immersion rests, they also initialize the hermeneutic process of reshaping that immersion by driving the player to fill narrative gaps with specific images and to choose certain actions over others.

Eventually, in the same way that the player character invites the player to freely assume a role but expects the role to be performed in a particular way, the story world invites the player to open exploration but expects it to occur within set boundaries. This edge of the clash between game and imaginative immersion is descriptively portrayed in Richard Powers' novel *Plowing the Dark* (2000), in which the author's initial excitement with the text-based *Adventure* (Crowther & Woods 1975–1976) develops into a severe disappointment:

It took only an hour to discover just how small the adventure really was. What had seemed wider than the whole of California was, in fact, largely a cardboard prop. He could not, for instance, climb the tree in the forest and look out from its crest. He could not scoop soil up into his bottle and pour it down the little grate. He could not spread food pellets in the woods to coax out wild animals. If he walked too far in one direction, the newfound continent simply stopped [...] one by one, the qualities that the cave's strewn treasures promised fell away into chicken wire and papier-mâché. Infinity shrunk with each primitive property that this universe shed. (107)

In one sense, the story world appears in its most complete form before the player enters it. The more the player explores, the larger the world appears; yet when the boundaries are encountered, it begins to disintegrate. While exploration may intensify the player's imaginative immersion in the story world, it may equally undermine it.

IMMERSIVE FEELIES

Starting a story-driven game initiates the gradual construction of the twofold imaginative immersion, which is generally considered an aesthetic merit (Caillois 1961, 135; Sutton-Smith 1997, 61–62, 164; Murray 1997, 98; Calleja 2011, 25; cf. Ryan 2001, 95–97; Salen & Zimmerman 2003, 451–452). In what follows, the materializations of story world entities that are distributed with game packaging will be presented as props through which imaginative immersion may be strengthened.

Most story-driven games provide preliminary information about their stories and worlds. Some games are set in already-established worlds such as J.R.R. Tolkien's "Middle-earth" or Frank Herbert's "Duniverse," others introduce new and unique realms. In both cases, the player is positioned in an exclusive situation, which is typically explained on the back cover of the game package or in an electronic manual. Additionally, most games provide the player with an introductory cut-scene or a literal prologue. The above cases, however, are not materializations of their story worlds but rather parts of the broader concept that Gerard Genette (1997/2001) calls *paratexts*: the accompanying materials that ensure the reception and consumption of the actual work.

In the 1980s when the videogame industry had not yet adopted reduced packaging, games were regularly sold with extra analog material. While the strategic purpose of this material was to attract the buyer and to function as copy protection, it also had the potential to enrich the gaming experience:

since the actual visual output of early computer games was fairly limited, the packaging back then was sometimes a way to make up for these failings and help absorb the player in the software's universe [...] with elaborate hand-drawn or painted box covers, detailed manuals, and frequently, well-crafted additions such as gameboards, maps, reference posters and counter pieces, which are often casually referred to as "feelies". (Loguidice 2004)

Unlike most of the accompanying material found in the package, *feelies* are part of the narrative work itself. They are selected entities of the particular story world that have been given a physical form. This grants them an unusual ontological status. As the author builds her or his story world and its entities on the basis of a referential world, usually on the so-called real world (Iser 1993); reconstructing story world entities into real world entities grants the articles, feelies, another imitative layer, making them *hyperfictional* (cf. Aarseth 2005).

Digital games were not the first narrative products to include hyperfictional articles. For instance, long before the Digital Revolution analogous material were employed by several novels and films (see Gomery 1978). In the broad sense of the word, J.R.R. Tolkien's poems, treatises, maps and works of philology about Middle-earth and Frank Herbert's short stories and glossaries of Duniverse can all be seen as feelies that reach out from the story worlds of their actual novels. Janet Murray (1997) calls these textual extensions of narratives "encyclopedic writing" and states that they invite "our participation by offering us many things to keep track of and by rewarding our attention with a consistency of imagination" (111).

The consistency of imagination is a reward gained when readers get to place the elaborated characters and events in their imagined story worlds. Hence, what significantly affects the immersive power of an encyclopedic writing is the instance when it is read. If readers are to thoroughly enjoy Tolkien and Herbert, they will read the story after (or partially at the same time as) going through the encyclopedic material. This is the primary way of dealing with the feelies of digital games as well.

The next two sections demonstrate the immersive functions of feelies through the detective text adventures *Witness* and *Deadline*. As a recap, Ermi and Mäyrä's model of imaginative immersion allows the immersive effects of their feelies to be divided into

- (i) Immersion on the level of the story world and

(ii) Immersion on the level of the player character.

On the first level, feelies support the player's immersion in the story world. This will be termed *global* immersion. On the second level, feelies support the immersion in the situation in which the player is accommodated to via the player character. This will be termed *local* immersion.

WITNESS: GLOBAL AND LOCAL IMMERSION

Before going into the feelies of *Witness*, it is worth citing the standard introduction on its box cover. The introduction shortly describes the story world and the situation that the player is about to enter:

Los Angeles, 1938: a seething brew of tawdry glamour and ill-gotten flitter, tinsel and tong wars, scandals, speakeasies and skullduggery. But out here in the foothills, listening to the Santa Ana Wind howl its way through canyons that seem continents away from the black hearted pit of the Big Avocado, a small-town chief police detective like you can almost feel at peace with the world. Almost, but not quite. Because there's something in the wind, something that could turn your tranquil tank town into the newest feature exhibit at Madame Tussaud's. You've been summoned by telegram to the bungalow of one of the local "pillars of society," a soldier of fortune in need of protection from the threats of a sleazy writer who has him over the ropes.

In addition to the preface, the player is provided with several physical items that can be considered materialized story world entities. An issue of *National Detective Gazette*, a fictitious police magazine, includes written articles some of which are related to the assignment in the game. As the player character is requested to investigate a telephone threat, the writing about increasing telephone harassment, for instance, can be considered a *locally* immersive element that supports the sense of acting in the specific situation. The immersive effects of the rest of the articles are rather *global*—in the manner of encyclopedic writing—as they do not convey information about the particular situation but general details about the story world, which is in this case, the city of Los Angeles in the late 1930s.

A similar feelie, a copy of the actual California newspaper *Register* (dated February 1, 1938) also functions on both immersive levels. The player does not know which of the dozens of articles in the newspaper are original, yet some of them are directly embedded in the game. A closer look reveals an article about the death of the victim's wife, for instance; or if the player decides to talk about movies with the victim's daughter after her arrival from the showing of *Dead End* (1937), she ironically refers to the paper's discussion about rising Hollywood stars: "I don't think this Bogart guy is pretty enough to make it big."

There are three more feelies with locally immersive potential: the investigation request, a suicide note from the victim's wife, and a matchbook that is found in the beginning of the story. As one can discuss the details of these items with story characters, they intensify the imaginative immersion by connecting the player's observations of the analog material to the digital game.

It would be tempting to claim that the story world materializations extend the physical borders of the game's *magic circle*, the space "within which special rules obtain" (Huizinga 1938/1955, 10). Feelies, however, do not function in the same way as the digital part of the game: they are purely representations of the story world, and

configuring them has no direct effect on it.

That said; feelies do question the concept of game rules. If rules of videogames are considered to “describe what players can and cannot do” (Juul 2005, 55), materialized story world entities enable a unique way of rule-breaking. In *Wishbringer* (Infocom 1985), the player character is supposed to deliver an envelope without opening it. If the player tries to open the envelope by typing “open envelope” on the parser, the digital part of the game rejects the command:

You're not supposed to open the mysterious envelope until the story tells you to do so.

Yet when it comes to the materialized envelope included in the game package, the player is able to defy the designed rules by breaking the seal at any time. Although feelies do not extend the borders of the story world, they are still linked to it in a way that may result in unexpected ontological disjunctions.

The interplay between the analog and the digital elements of the game constitutes a relationship that can eventually be employed to serve exclusive narrative as well as ludic purposes. In addition to supporting imaginative immersion, the materialized envelope of *Wishbringer* bears a narrative-pacing function. The first-person graphic adventure *Starship Titanic* (Digital Village 1998), in turn, ends in a stereoscopic sequence that requires the player to wear the provided 3D glasses (which represent a space helmet) to be played properly (see also Fernández-Vara 2009, 65).

DEADLINE: LIMINAL TACTILITY

The detective case of *Deadline* begins with a stack of analog investigation material, which the player is instructed to study before starting the game. The material consists mostly of documents such as police interviews, lab reports, murder scene facts, and the Corpus Delicti. By examining those documents the player is introduced to the situation and the story world around it. The analog process simulates the detective work of the 1980s in a way that could not be attained with digital content alone.²

In addition to the written documents, the case file includes a photo of the murder scene and a bag of pills “found near the victim’s body.” While these items do not convey relevant information, they are significant in a liminal sense. Here the term “liminal” refers to Murray’s (1997, 99–100) idea of computers as “liminal objects, located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds.” Relying on Donald Winnicott (1971; see also Turner 1969) she believes that stories are able to produce experiences that “evoke the same magical feelings as a baby’s first teddy bear” because they give adults a similar object upon which to project their feelings. While feelies primarily convey information about the story world, they also possess a physical, *tactile* aspect. In addition to the liminal story, players get the teddy as well.

Since the CD-ROM became standard in the 1990s, a large part of game material has been distributed in digital form (Toivonen et al. 2010; 2011). This dematerialization has also resulted in new narrative game elements that bear evident resemblance to the narrative support of feelies; for instance, in *In Memoriam* (Lexis Numérique 2003) modern detective work is simulated by providing information via actual emails and websites. Though these means are no doubt essential for simulating the present, they irretrievably lack the aspect of tactility.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the tactility of feelies may also function as a disintegrating element for the player's imaginative immersion: "Immersion cannot be complete if the attention of the audience is divided among several locations" (Ryan 2001, 300; see also Calleja 40–41). In statically timed games in which game states do not change without the player's input, such as in *Witness* and *Deadline*, the distractive effects can be considered minor, nevertheless.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented materializations of story world entities as props that support narrative elements in story-driven digital games. This support was suggested to function through *globally* and *locally* immersive effects, where the first intensifies the player's imaginative immersion in the story world, and the second intensifies the player's imaginative immersion in the situation in which she or he is accommodated to via a player character. The analog story-related material was also suggested to possess a *tactile* aspect, which has the potential to correspondingly intensify the player's imaginative immersion on the global as well as on the local level.

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ENDNOTES

1 The term is most likely taken from Aldous Huxley's dystopian fiction novel *Brave New World* (1932), in which *feelies* refer to a cinema-like form of entertainment that provides the sensations of touch and smell in addition to sight and sound.

2 For a more detailed description of the feelies of *Deadline*, see Sarah Sloane (1991, 68–69). A similar concept of crime solving was presented already in Dennis Wheatley's crime dossiers in the 1930s. The dossiers provided readers with analog evidence and then asked them to solve the crime. The correct solution to the mystery was concealed within a sealed section towards the rear of the folder. The dossiers were eventually adapted to digital games such as *Murder off Miami* (CRL 1986) and *Dennis Wheatley Presents a Murder Mystery* (Actual Screenshots 1990).

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