A Walk in a Box: Understanding Board Game Immersion

Gordon Calleja

Institute of Digital Games
University of Malta
gordon.calleja@um.edu.mt

Keywords

Immersion, board games, board game design, emergent narrative.

ABSTRACT

Immersion is both an alluring and problematic concept. Its problematic nature is partly due to the fact that the term tends to stand in for an desirable experiential state that relates in some way, to experiencing a cybertextual world. The allure of the term within general parlance is exactly this flexibility of experiential application: its usage implies that there is something engaging not just about the game, but the world it projects while leaving vague the precise nature of its allure. This is a boon for marketing departments creating hype for upcoming games, designers pitching games to publishers or even players trying to explain why a particular experience in a game world felt so intimate or special.

Until recently, immersion was a term that was mainly used in the realm of digital games. As board games grow in scope and as their designs focus more on weaving together mechanics and fiction, immersion is becoming more of a popular term, both among players and designers. I have interviewed 35 of the leading veteran board game designers and critics for a book project on the subject, and the term cropped up regularly in design discussions. Parallel to this development, game academics are increasingly turning their analytical gaze to board games with more studies exploring player experience and immersion.

Before delving into board game immersion, it is worth noting that exploration of immersion in digital games and virtual environments has been fraught with confusion (Calleja, 2011, Ermi & Mayra, 2005, Slater, 2003). Part of this is due to the ephemeral nature of the experience itself, blending multiple forms of involvement at a preconscious level (Calleja, 2011, 2014). Another challenge to a clear understanding of the concept relates to the semantic vagueness the term itself. This is the result of a confusion between the popular, non-technical or academic use of the term "immersion" adopted by various researchers (Brown and Cairns, 2004, Cairns et. al. 2006, Douglas and Hargadon, 2001, Ermi and Mayra, 2005) and the virtual environment specific conceptualization of immersion as the sense of virtual environment habitation developed by authors like Brenda Laurel (1991) and Janet Murray (1998), and later, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001).

The first step to formulating a clear understanding of board game immersion is thus to consider the challenges to understanding this experience that was encountered in the context of virtual environments and digital games and then build on the clearer perspectives established in that domain and adapt them to the case of board games.

While the two media are related, there are major differences in how the affordances of each medium shape player experience, and thus, immersion.

This paper starts with a clarification of the specific use of immersion as the sense of inhabiting a fictional world. I will then consider the ways in which board games afford immersion drawing on the interviews carried out with veteran designers. These interviews also yielded a wealth of data on how these designers sculpt player experience through the tools they have at their disposal. These points build towards the following definition of board game immersion:

> Board game immersion is the imagined habitation of a mechanically structured, spatially represented fictional world through embodiment in a single entity that is able to exert agency in accordance with the rules of that world.

The paper then argues that this definition sidesteps the vagueness of the concept inherited from digital games and exacerbated in recent papers that aim to create theories of board game immersion (Farkas et. al. 2021, Wake 2019). Finally, the paper ends with an outline of how the definition is useful for both analysts and designers.

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