

Wolves of Darkness

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The Elusive Conditions of Physical Immersion

Introduction

Playing with the senses of the player, bringing him in a place that intend to recreate another place, all these features appear in the game *Wolves of Darkness*. Through all these factors, this game intend to question the term of immersion. But how can we describe immersion ? ‘The sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality’ is a part of how immersion can be defined, as brought to light by Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä¹. Beyond the concept of immersion, also stand the term of ‘presence’ which refers to a ‘psychological experience of non-mediatation’ and intend to evaluate the immersivity. If we focus on immersion that refers to a special state of mind, then what are the conditions to reach this state ? Through the setting up of the game *Wolves of Darkness*, we will first see in what consist the game to then analyze it, to end on a reflection on what could be the conditions influencing the immersion, especially in a physical experience.

Description of the game and concept

The game *Wolves of Darkness* can be depicted as a single-player physical game where the player find himself in a complete dark room when a story starts to be told. Inspired by Norse Mythology, the narrative part is based on an old viking myth² that explore the topic of light and darkness. Considered as a goddess, the Sun (called Sól) who dwelled across the sky tried on an eternal flight to escape from the devouring wolf of darkness. This endless race would have represented the transition phase between winter and spring, and the fact that seasons are coming one after another indefinitely and inescapably. As the player enters in the room and is given Sól in hands, he is told this story, and progressively appears Sól, that shines trough the dark. All around the player start to appear wolves, symbolized with eyes shining through the dark, attracted by the brightness of Sól and wishing to swallow all of her light.



Wolves of Darkness being played, where the player has Sól in the hands.

The player is then told that he must protect Sól by fighting the wolves using a torch, as commonly the wolves are afraid of fire. The more he lets appear eyes, the more the brightness of Sól will decrease and conversely the more he fights wolves, the more the brightness of Sól will increase. There are different levels in the game, which results in an intensification of the speed of the eyes' apparition. At the end of the game, the player can either win or lose, depending on if he was able to fight enough wolves or not during the time of the game.

Analyze of the gameplay

As the goal of the game is basically to scare away one of the two opponents to protect the other, the mechanics of the game³ are for the player to point a light (the torch), in order to remove a light (the wolves), that affect on the quality of light (Sól) the player keeps in his arms. About the dynamics and the ways players choose to act, were observed different strategies mainly due to the limited time, the presence of two objects (torch and Sól) in the hands of the player and the way wolves appear. Thus there were actions as repeating a certain kind of pattern with the torch, or waiting for a wolf to appear close to it to fight it more easily, or different manners to appropriate space while having Sól in the arms. Aesthetics arised from these dynamics, and particularly from the latter that produce a double behaviour of protection and fight. The player can have the sensation of being the protector of the light and be part of the story, the challenge part contributing to it as the player's attention is requested from every part of the room. The game needs the player to be concentrate and to focus on the space all around him. It can leads to emotions like surprise and anxiety, and a state of constant anticipation. About observing the game from different play classification⁴ made by Caillois, there is a clear dominance of *Mimicry* (games of make-believe), because of the intention of creating an environment similar to a forest using different inputs such as visuals, objects, sounds which intend to bring to mind a forest-like setting. The competition aspect and thus *Agon* category can also be noticed as the single player is competing against the game and computer.

Introduction to Theoretical Aspect of Immersion

After analyzing the gameplay, we can focus on the game on a theoretical aspect and question the immersion aspect of it. To this end, a contribution about this topic from L. Ermi and F. Mäyrä¹ is an interesting basis, especially what they call the SCI (Sensory-Challenge-Imagination) model, that aims to evaluate the immersion in the game by dividing the concept in three sections. Even if this model mainly revolve around video games, it is still an interesting approach to evaluate a more 'physical' immersion through this model. 'The sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality' happens for virtual reality worlds but can also be observed in physical worlds, were players appear to be more rooted in reality, using objects and being aware of the surrounding environment. Consequently, a focus on what are the conditions for immersion in physical games can be done more specifically, using what can be relevant in *Wolves of Darkness* in support.

From Suggestion to Illusion : A Sensory Approach

The sensory aspect is a fundamental point in the creation of an immersive game and deserve to be developed. The audiovisual stimuli used in games are one first step to immersion. However, does it have to be shaped in a certain way to make the experience more immersive ? As pointed out by L.Ermi and F. Mäyrä, the fact to believe that the more realist is the game, the more the players are immersed in it is a common thinking. It might be true for some cases, but if we look into more physical games like *Wolves of Darkness*, it can be raised that by the basic use of light and darkness, a whole universe is suggested.

Moreover, in the SCI model, voluntarily oriented on video games, only the audio and visual aspects are studied. In Virtual Reality, a definition of immersion can be that the player becomes unaware of its own physical state, but becomes physically present in a non-physical world, by the main use of audiovisual inputs as a first step. Then what about immersion in a 'tangible' space ? In physical games, audiovisual aspect is obviously one component, but not only, others senses are also emphasized. The senses of touch and smell are for example present in *Wolves of Darkness*, due to the fact the player carries different objects with him. In addition, elements like branches and leaves within the scenography not only contribute to the visual atmosphere by mimicking a forest, but also bring odours that act on a rarely solicited sens.



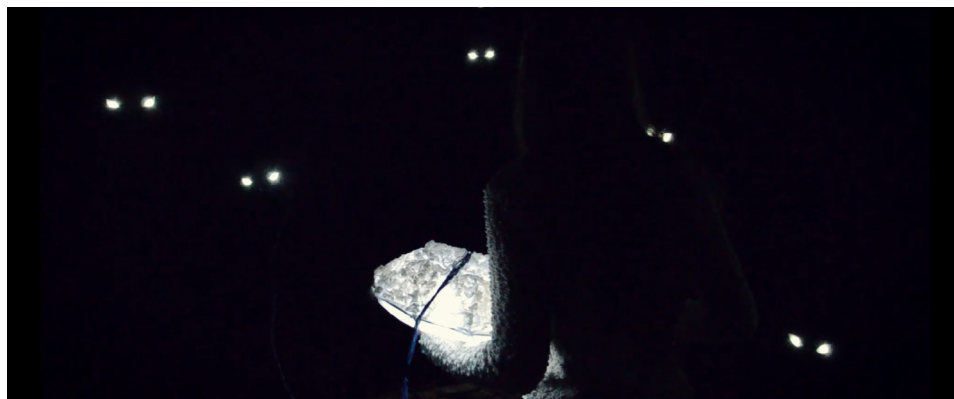
Uses of different stimuli in *Wolves of Darkness*, focus made here on sight and smell senses.

These various inputs participate to enhance the presence of the player and the global experience of immersion. Talking of what make a game immersive on a sensory aspect, we can draw a parallel with LARPs and the '360° illusion'. In this kind of games one of the requirement is that the environment of play should be as realistic as possible (for some of them at least). '360° illusion' aims that everything present within the game is part of the game, not only visually but also on how things work. The desire of immersion is carried to an extreme and must have a big impact on players' perception. In addressing the issue of immersion and how we can for example in LARPs pretend to be elsewhere and at another time (thanks to audiovisual effects), we can also highlight projects mixing virtual reality and physical elements. Projects such as *RoomAlive* (by Microsoft) which allow any room to become a complete new

game universe, using projection & mapping is a good example of a 'physical game' using virtual reality. In this case, what is interesting is the mix of this physical dimension which allows specific sensory stimulation combined to a virtual aspect that brings also new possibilities to extend the physical immersion (one example game is about chasing, with a physical object in hands, a creature that move all around the walls, which in the concept is very similar to *Wolves of Darkness*). What differs here with *RoomAlive* is that the statement of M. Sicart 'almost any space can become a playground'⁵ makes completely sens, and virtual content can participate in this purpose by extending and enchanting the physical space. If in that case it is just about adding an audiovisual information layer on top of a space, possibilities about mixing sensory characteristics from both physical and virtual environments seem to be endless.

Challenge and Imagination as Core Elements of Immersion

Another aspect of the SCI model to assess immersion is the presence of challenge, so we can wonder if immersion is ensured if the game keeps a certain kind of challenge ? In games, we have to be challenged both mentally and on the speed, that's why in *Wolves of Darkness*, the game intend to increase the difficulty as the time runs. In order to measure the challenge aspect, the notion of 'flow' brought forth to light by Csikszentmihalyi can be useful as the concept, very close to immersion, 'captures the experience of being fully engrossed'⁶. The core point is to find the right balance between player's abilities and the challenges proposed. The difficulty is that it's really easy to shift in and out of the game and thus break the immersion, potentially due to a lack of challenge.



Player being surrounded by the wolves : a double challenge of protection and fighting.

Then linked to the challenge aspect, we have the imagination part that in the game *Wolves of Darkness* is related to the narrative experience with the voice telling a story and this way setting a context for the player (when, where, what happens). The player is then able to project himself in another universe. In LARPs too, we can observe the same phenomena as the players tend to believe to be somewhere else, someone else thanks to a background story. It is also reinforced with their quality of pervasive games. The thing is that with that kind of games, even if it allows a powerful immersion, it is also extremely simple to shift in and out the game, if for a moment reality recovers.

Even if in this case the 'magic circle' is expanded and boundaries blurred, we can see that the place given to imagination in a game is a core element for immersion to happen.

In order to evaluate these different aspects, L.Ermi and F. Mäyrä made a questionnaire with various questions for each entries. What also appeared with this latter and their studies is that the player, his experience, background and state of mind has to be taken into account in the immersion evaluation, as facing the same stimuli, every individual won't respond in the same manner. So this is also an important criteria intertwined with all the different aspects of the conditions for immersion.

Conclusion

All these conditions addressed above are certainly a way to go into details in what is immersion, but we shouldn't forget that they are all linked and that one cannot go without the other. We can assert that it is not only the game in itself that create immersion but a set of components that may escape to the designer, including the background of the player, its motivation and faculties. Imagination for example, that is significant in immersion can vary a lot from one person to another. Children's imagination may be very powerful with just a slight stimuli (like shadows or shapes in the clouds). It also really a question of engagement, and how the player can convince himself that he is elsewhere, even in a physical space. Finally, we can point out the fragility of the immersive state and that there is no real 'magic formula' to create a good experience of immersion. Through all the conditions cited previously, the most important condition for immersion might finally be to find the right balance between all of what the player will experience within the game.

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1 - Ermi. L and Mäyrä F. :

Fundamental Components of the Gameplay, Experience: Analysing Immersion

2 - Kvilhaug M., about Old Norse myths and rituals :

http://freya.theladyofthelabyrinth.com/?page_id=397

3 - Hunicke R., LeBlanc M., Zubek R. :

MDA : A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research

4 - Caillois R. :

Man, Play and Games

5 - Sicart M. :

Play matters, Playful Thinking series

6 - Stenros J., Waern A., and Montola M. :

Studying the Elusive Experience in Pervasive Games

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