

## Introduction

Although digital games have been around for just over three decades, their presence in popular culture has become pervasive. Since the arrival of the first commercially available consoles like the Atari VCS and computers like the Spectrum ZX, Amstrad CPC, and Commodore 64, digital games have rapidly altered the landscape of media entertainment.

In my home village of Gzira, Malta, as soon as school was over, the roofs and streets used to be covered with swarms of kids playing football. As soon as the Commodore Amiga hit the shops, the streets and roofs emptied. Now, when the school bell rang, the swarms of kids had joysticks strapped to their bags instead of footballs. The football tournaments moved indoors to the flats of the lucky few who owned an Amiga. In the limited space of a densely populated town like Gzira, digital gaming provided sites for play that were not punctuated by the interruptions of cars driving through our chalked-in football pitches. The migration indoors caused by the Amiga was a felicitous moment not only for us, but for our worried parents and all the car drivers who were fed up with honking their horns and waiting for us to clear the street.

Aside from enabling us to transcend the practical limitations of our environment, digital games<sup>1</sup> became popular because they transported our imaginations to the places represented on screen. We no longer had to imagine landscapes of forests and mountains to roam in; they were right there in front of us. Since such terrain features were lacking on the island, we associated them with the fantasy literature we were so fond of. For Maltese kids who have never been abroad, forests and mountain ranges are the stuff of fantasy itself, and having the chance to inhabit those landscapes, albeit in an abstractly represented simulation, was an alluring part of digital games. On the other hand, digital games also offered a structure

for competitive play in games such as *Kick-Off* (Dini, 1989), in which the rules of the game, upheld by the machine, offered a more level playing field. Both broad forms of engagement often occurred in shared settings, with single-player games involving one player<sup>2</sup> navigating the environment and the others making suggestions or ultimately wrestling the joystick out of the player's hands.

These early encounters with computers made my friends and me feel comfortable in the cybernetic circuits that would become part of our everyday adult lives. Games introduced us to a symbiotic relationship with machines that we took for granted. We grew up acclimatized to a technology that would not only entertain us and facilitate our work life, but would ultimately change the way we thought and operated socially. I was part of the first generation of children to dive with great zeal into the alluring cybernetic circuit that games provide. Of course, digital games were not the only sites for engaging encounters with computing machines, but they were definitely, even in the late 1980s, the most widespread form of *involving* cybernetic engagements. Such a claim invites a question: What exactly makes digital games so involving? This book suggests an answer.

This relationship between player and game yields a novel form of engagement that calls for a dedicated theoretical understanding. This is not to say that perspectives on involvement developed in the context of other media are irrelevant, but that the specific characteristics of digital games, or at least a subset of digital games, need a more thorough analysis than such theories can provide. The study of player involvement in digital games requires an expansion and, at times, a rethinking of such theories. This book offers a perspective on player involvement in digital games that takes into account the games' specific qualities and characteristics. This perspective is embodied in the player involvement model that addresses digital game involvement ranging from general motivations and attractions to the detailed analysis of moment-to-moment involvement in gameplay.

An important component of player involvement is the shortening of the subjective distance between player and game environment, often yielding a sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen. This phenomenon is generally referred to in terms of *presence* and *immersion*. The latter is the more commonly used term in popular and academic discussions of game involvement, but its general use has diminished in analytical

value. The term *presence* is similarly affected, with the main writers in the field of presence theory often using the term with divergent or even conflicting meanings. This book will therefore examine the application of these two terms and propose a more precise conceptualization of the phenomenon that is specific to game environments. Rather than conceiving of presence or immersion as a stand-alone experiential phenomenon, this book sees it as a blending of a variety of experiential phenomena afforded by involving gameplay. These experiential phenomena are individually described by the player involvement model and in their more intensified and internalized blends have the potential to culminate in *incorporation*, this book's answer to the presence/immersion quandary. Although incorporation is ultimately a metaphor like presence or immersion, it avoids a number of problematic connotations that are present in the other two terms and, more importantly, provides a more robust concept for researchers to build on.

### A Brief Overview

Digital games constitute a broad family of media objects, some of which diverge so much in their constituent characteristics that they cannot all be taken as one homogeneous mass. Although we attach the label *game* to both *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) and *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1985), the differences between them are so significant that any discussion that considers them as equivalent media objects is prone to make generalizations that impede analytical rigor. Chapter 1 discusses the difficulties that researchers in game studies have experienced in defining games, and describes their constituent elements without restricting games to an essentialist definition. This framework will form the foundation of how digital games will be viewed in the rest of the book. It explains the rationale for the structure of the model and discusses the theoretical foundations and assumptions that underlie its formation.

The second chapter considers the related phenomena of presence and immersion and the way these have been used in presence theory and game studies, respectively. Vagueness and confusion have surrounded these terms, and this chapter outlines four challenges for understanding the experiential phenomenon they refer to in the context of game research.

The third chapter introduces the player involvement model developed through qualitative research. It explains the relationship between its two constituent temporal phases: macro, representing off-line involvement with the relevant game; and micro, representing moment-to-moment involvement during gameplay. After giving a brief outline of attention, the chapter addresses the difference between game involvement and involvement with other media such as film and literature. The chapter also divorces the issue of player involvement from the question of fun and the concept of the magic circle.

Chapters 4 through 9 describe in detail the six dimensions that constitute the player involvement model. Each of these is considered on two temporal phases of engagement, macro- and micro-involvement. Macro-involvement encompasses all forms of involvement with the game when one is not actually playing. These include the initial attraction to the game, reasons for returning to it, participation in the community it fosters, and other off-line plans and thinking that surround the actual instance of gameplay. The micro-involvement phase describes the qualities of moment-to-moment involvement within the respective dimensions. It deals with six dimensions of player involvement: control and movement (*kinesthetic involvement*), the exploration and learning of the game's spatial domain (*spatial involvement*), co-presence, collaboration, and competition with other agents (human or AI) that inhabit it (*shared involvement*), the formation of an ongoing story and interaction with the scripted narrative written into the game (*narrative involvement*), the affect generated during gameplay (*affective involvement*), and the decision making undertaken in the pursuit of both game- and self-assigned goals (*ludic involvement*).

Chapter 10 discusses the phenomenon of incorporation. This chapter will argue that incorporation's specific formulation avoids the four conceptual challenges outlined in chapter 2. It also argues for incorporation as a more accurate metaphor than presence and immersion. The chapter ends with an examination of how incorporation emerges from the combination of several dimensions of the player involvement model through two examples of incorporating experiences described by research participants.

Overall, this book provides a new representation of involvement in digital games and, in the process, builds an argument for rethinking the concept of immersion as a multifaceted experiential phenomenon.

Critical to a precise reconceptualization of the phenomenon is my introduction of a new term, *incorporation*, which can account more satisfactorily for the complex range of factors that make up the sense of virtual environment habitation, and can therefore provide a more productive concept for researchers and practitioners in various fields to work with. The player involvement model is intended to provide a common, holistic framework that will facilitate further research in the area.