

Chapter 1

Introduction: the seductive power of immersion

Alke Gröppel-Wegener

orcid.org/0000-0002-9431-1592

Jenny Kidd

orcid.org/0000-0003-0188-2140

This introductory chapter considers some key themes, concepts and approaches that underpin the book. It uses existing scholarship to explore the terms ‘immersion’ and ‘storytelling’, noting that neither concept is bounded or stable. It examines why ‘the immersive’ is such a seductive concept in our present cultural, social, economic and political moment(s), and thus why its study is important. It also offers an overview of the book’s structure.

Doing ‘something immersive’ is increasingly seen as a way of maintaining relevance and securing visibility in a crowded and complex content landscape. As this book will demonstrate, the quality of *being immersed* is facilitated in diverse ways and in a multitude of contexts. While the term has more recently been used to describe developments in the fields of virtual, augmented and mixed reality, there are many analogue experiences that can be considered immersive: street games, interactive theatre and built environments such as theme parks and historic sites for example. Indeed, many forms of immersive storytelling collapse the binary between physical and digital contexts, allowing holistic storyworlds to be constructed, and inhabited. Immersive storytelling is exciting and evolving terrain, raising practical and ethical questions as we investigate here.

This book uses a range of current examples to explore different forms of storytelling. It understands much compelling and creative contemporary *storymaking* to be collaborative, transmedial, multimodal, experiential, performative and (sometimes) ungovernable. Focusing on diverse practices the book traces different ways stories are being experienced in our contemporary mediascape, discussing what is gained and lost in different genres of immersive storytelling. It unpacks complex terms to suggest a framework within which we begin to understand the quality and promise of immersion. We critically analyse the ‘immersive turn’ within its broadest creative, cultural, technological and social contexts, whilst recognising it as an increasingly economic and political project also. Examples are drawn internationally, reflecting the fact that immersive media are the subject of transnational popular and scholarly attention.

We (the authors) have both been researching at the intersection of immersion and storytelling for many years, exploring diverse connections between narrative, genre, environments and experience. Our joint perspective makes this book a unique resource; it is both critically and practically attuned, and offers ways into research design for immersive contexts. Such research raises complex methodological considerations which are often rendered invisible in the reporting of case studies, yet this book acknowledges and confronts them head on, making our reflexivity visible, and itself a productive resource.

This introductory chapter considers some key themes, concepts and approaches that we return to throughout the book. It uses existing scholarship to explore what we mean when we talk about ‘immersion’ and ‘storytelling’, noting that neither concept is bounded or stable. It examines why ‘the immersive’ is such a seductive concept in our present cultural, social, economic and political moment(s), and thus why its study is important. It introduces key concepts that will underpin analyses in the book and begins to problematize meaningful distinctions between analogue/digital, physical/virtual and online/offline.

Given the complexity of immersive storytelling as a research subject, we now offer four different approaches to sketch out where this book sits - the analogy, the experience, the history and the definition - before concluding with an overview of the book’s structure.

The Analogy: Liquid metaphors and the glass-bottomed boat

We as researchers come to this writing project from not quite opposite, but certainly different, directions and perspectives. Alke’s background is in theatre design and she has had a fascination with how theme parks work ever since having to write a paper on English Garden Architecture as an undergraduate student. Subsequently she investigated what museums can learn from theme park design, and became interested in how story experiences can be created without performers. Jenny’s background as a web developer and (then) digital storytelling researcher later led her to research within cultural heritage contexts, with a particular interest in their performative and digital dimensions. In recent years that has included action research in the build, test and evaluation stages of immersive projects. We met more than a decade ago at an event put on by a museum theatre company we were both working with at the time, albeit on different projects. This event had on the surface all the hallmarks of an immersive experience: a themed environment, a (fictional) backstory and performers that were interacting with the audience as characters. But neither of us felt fully immersed, and at times the experience was downright

uncomfortable. We have had many conversations since that time, attempting to understand what was happening.

Consulting scholarship has helped us little in our reflections on this immersive encounter: According to Matthew Reason the term ‘immersive’ is one with ‘extremely tricky conceptual grounding’ (2015: 272). Alison McMahon proposed in 2003 that the concept of immersion in video games had become ‘an excessively vague, all-inclusive concept’ (2003: 67) and Adam Alston has more recently observed that ‘the immersive label is flexible’ to the degree that it can ‘jeopardize terminological clarity’ (2013: 128). No clear definition exists, yet we all seem to have an idea of what we are talking about when we use that word ‘immersive’.

Maybe it is most helpful to consider, as many have done before (see Machon 2013 or Lukas 2016, for example), the analogy of water to introduce the idea of immersion. This is an idea we explore in this section, as well as in the images that accompany this chapter demonstrating different practices and levels of immersion. ‘Liquid metaphors’ (Wolf 2012: 49) are tantalising because they emerge etymologically from the word ‘immersion’ itself, and they indicate that there might be different levels or degrees here to ‘get wet’: we could throw a water balloon onto, or empty a bucket of water over, somebody, ‘immersing’ them for a split second; that person could stand in a waterfall, which might mean a longer and more intensive experience; we could partly immerse somebody, like in a bathtub; or we could go into full diving mode, sending somebody to the depths of the sea - deep immersion. In the context of crafting theme park experiences, David Younger explains how designer Tim Kirk thinks about guests as ‘Waders’, ‘Swimmers’ and ‘Divers’ - and designs experiences to allow them to choose their own level of immersion:

The Waders just want to walk around and see pretty pictures. The Swimmers want to get a little deeper; they might want some backstory, they might want to get into it a little more. And the Divers really want to know every shred of information that exists about that particular subject. We give them all this backstory in case they’re really, really interested, and if not that’s okay – they don’t have to read it, or they don’t have to look at it, and for the most part they don’t really do. At one level, they just want to ride the ride. (Kirk in Younger, 2016: 84)

All of these stages of ‘liquid immersion’ have their equivalents in immersive storytelling and we will draw on some of them as examples. However, what we are really interested in is deep immersion, perhaps the most difficult to achieve and the trickiest to analyse.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1 HERE]

The event we met at cast both of us not as being immersed ourselves, but rather as sitting in a glass-bottomed boat watching other people being immersed. Occasionally we would get splashed by water. Overall it was a bit weird. The event and our experiences of it raised searching questions about immersive storytelling as ‘form’, and about the limits of our methodologies for beginning to unpack it. This was in hindsight our initiation into the fragile and intriguing world of immersive experiences, an initiation which oriented us toward the pursuit of more - and better - opportunities for immersion. Over the years we discussed this issue, as well as going on trips to check out immersive experiences around the UK. At a catch-up meeting in late 2017, we discussed our current projects, our teaching, and how much our own processes had developed since our first meeting. We concluded that there wasn’t really a book out there that provided an accessible introduction to immersive storytelling contexts and how to approach researching them (by now ‘immersive’ was quite a buzzword and probably overused). Having wanted to do a project together for about a decade, we decided to write it ourselves.

The Experience: story as an agent of immersion

Unfortunately the water analogy only gets us so far. As analogies are likely to do, it provides a model of one aspect of immersion and ignores others. Using the liquid metaphor might mean that we pay too much attention to what surrounds an individual (or individuals) having the experience, as if an experience was external, which of course it isn’t. An experience, in the way we are understanding it here, is at the end of the day an internal and subjective phenomenon. Therefore, we also need to somewhat unpick the complex notion of ‘experience’ (Lash 2006) if we want to make headway in the area of immersive storytelling.

Many immersive experiences privilege multi-sensorial encounters. As Josephine Machon notes ‘in immersive practice, because all of one’s senses are heightened, it is difficult not to become acutely aware of the natural aromas of the space, of polished wood floorboards, of dank cellars, of earthy green woods’ (Machon 2013: 76). Such sensory stimulation brings participants into an immediate and felt entanglement with the practice; whether positively or negatively experienced. A number of researchers have activated multimodality as a framework through which to explore immersive work (Kenderdine 2016, Kidd 2017, Galani and Kidd 2018), an approach that makes perfect sense when thinking about examples that literally surround you, like immersive theatre, theme parks or a 360 degree art installation such as Martina Amati’s ***Under*** (see Figure 1.2).¹

[INSERT FIGURE 1.2 HERE]

¹ Examples highlighted in bold correspond to entries in the book’s Glossary.

But can this also apply to our analysis of something seemingly as simple as the experience of reading a book? People often talk about ‘being immersed’ in a book, and the idea of losing yourself in a fantasy world and going on adventures with the characters you encounter there is certainly a very seductive one. Thinking about the actual medium of words on a page, it seems unlikely that books can provide immersive storytelling experiences in the manner described above, after all there is nothing to tie up the senses beyond the visual, no inclusion of taste or smell (beyond the smell of the book itself, which is probably not connected to the content of any story within), and even sight can be easily distracted in most situations you are likely to read a book.

Yet, the idea of the immersive book (or story) is one that has fascinated storytellers for quite some time. *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende², for example, tells of a boy who slowly becomes immersed in a book. The first half of the novel is about him first acquiring and then reading the book. It describes how he becomes immersed, not only in his reading (we read what he reads, but also what he thinks about what he is reading), but through his interactions with the characters. In time - and in the middle of the book the reader is reading - the boy enters the book (or story), becoming immersed in it in the most comprehensive way, by becoming a character in its narrative. The idea of entering a fictitious world is not that uncommon in both literature and film. Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday Next* book series, for example, portrays a protagonist who can bookjump, ‘read’ herself into books and interact with the characters in them (most of them aware that they are fictitious characters). It also happens in film, for example in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) a film character comes into the real world from the silver screen and later takes a character from the real world into his world. In *The Last Action Hero* (1993), a child is given the opportunity to enter a movie and later needs to take its action hero back with him into the real world in order to track down the villain who has also escaped. In the TV series *Lost in Austen* (2008), a woman discovers a portal into *Pride and Prejudice* and ends up swapping places with the heroine and changing the narrative.

Yet *The Neverending Story* (in at least some of its editions), goes a step further and cleverly ties the reader into the protagonist’s adventures by being presented as itself the book the boy is reading. When the copper coloured cover featuring embossed snakes is described, it is difficult not to partially close the book to check the book you are holding, which is exactly as described within. When it is mentioned that there are two different colours of type within the book he holds, you realise that you have spotted the same two different colours of type within the book in your hand. Could you really be reading the same book that he is? Linking the content of the reading experience with its mode of presentation makes *The Neverending Story* one example where immersiveness is employed in a slightly different way – by making use of the real world

² Originally published as *Die Unendliche Geschichte* in 1979. It should be noted that there are significant differences between the book and the 1984 film adaptation (and later sequels).

as a touchstone that actually emphasises the experience you are having, and making the fantasy more real at the same time.³

The promise of becoming part of a story by either re-living a familiar scene, or taking a protagonist's place and changing the narrative, is evidently a seductive one. Whole new genres of story-making have developed around that possibility, such as CosPlay and Live Action Role Playing (LARPing).

Reading a book is about more than just reading a text then. Mangen (2008) references the multi-sensorial nature of all reading, although noting that it is a neglected area of research. 'Haptic perception' she notes 'is of vital importance to reading, and should be duly acknowledged'. 'Materiality matters' she concludes (Mangen, 2008: 405). However, analyses of these dimensions are complex given that, as Linda Candy states, 'every human being senses the world with perceptual faculties common to us all and yet each individual differs in the exact nature of that experience' (2014: 36). This is an important reminder that processes of participation, immersion and interaction are not straightforward, a point we will revisit again and again in this book.

So whilst the materiality of *how* an immersive experience is delivered matters - be it virtual or analogue - storytelling experiences have other dimensions that we explore in this book. This is the reason why, as the title of the book suggests, story is one of the central themes we explore.

The History: story, interaction and immersion

This section traces a (necessarily brief) history of the ways storytelling, interaction and immersion intersect. It will be seen that interaction and immersion have been central to peoples' experiences of story through time (Ong, 1982; Toolan, 1988; Herman, 2002). Technology has been enmeshed with these developments (although not a sole driver of them), so this section is also one that centres and is informed by media history.

The storying of events has long been understood as crucial to the development and maintenance of life and our understanding of our place or meaning within it. As Yilmaz and Cigerci assert, 'the history of storytelling is as old as human history' (2018: 2). Much has been written about the ways our cultures and histories are 'storied', noting that storytellers themselves have tended to have a great amount of power and influence within their communities (Carroll 2006). As Howard E. Gardner notes, 'stories, including narratives, myths, and fables, constitute a uniquely powerful

³ We have since spotted copies of *The Neverending Story* in paperback, with a different cover and using only black type. Unless they have changed the content slightly to make the links to this physical appearance coherent, the experience of reading them will probably be less immersive, as this link to the physicality is lost. How sad is that?

currency in human relationships' (1995: 42). Stories are also crucial to the creation of identity and a notion of 'self' (McAdams 1993); according to Finnegan, the self is 'formulated and experienced through self-narratives' (Finnegan, 1997: 69). We now experience stories endlessly, in our leisure time, through work, our politics, our education, and through increasingly personalised, narrativised and responsive advertising campaigns. Stories in the media help shape our societies and inform our agendas (although not simplistically as media and communications scholarship continues to remind us). Stories proliferate.

During the nineteenth century, technological developments such as the telegraph and later the telephone led to new ways of communicating across time and space (McLuhan, 1964: 97). These technologies would form the basis of an explosion of media and narrative that would involve radio, cinema and eventually television - Ong's 'secondary orality' (Ong, 1982: 133). Since the advent of computing and digital media many different pathways into - and through - narrative have emerged, not least computer games, virtual reality, social media, data visualisation and online streaming. YouTube, for example, has been a site of incredible dynamism within this space, impacting practices of audiencing, but more significantly perhaps, content production and the business models that underpin it (Burgess and Green 2018). The world wide web is full of new and exciting ways of constructing, accessing and monetizing narrative (McErlean 2018); self-publishing, hypertext storytelling, the playing of character games such as *World of Warcraft* online, and the submission of stories to news websites, for example. Ruth E. Page writes compellingly about multiple different forms of storytelling via social media including in Wikipedia, Facebook updates and the Twittersphere (2012, 2018). The web has become a live site for stories to be written and shared with a (possibly) global audience. It might be posited that 'the ancient art of storytelling is not lost but reformed' in these later manifestations (Sloane, 2000: 7).

In the book publishing industry, these shifts were preceded by a number of other developments that saw narrative beginning to push at the boundaries of the page. 'Choose your own ending' children's books first appeared in the late 1970s (for example Packard and Montgomery's *Choose Your Own Adventure* books launched in 1979), and a number of high profile publications which ignored or questioned the conventions of linear narrative, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) and B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) for example. The latter was published as a box containing unbound sections to be read in any order, an attempt to liberate the book from the tyranny of the spine. Janet Murray noted in 1997 that 'twentieth-century novels, films, and plays have been steadily pushing against the boundaries of linear storytelling' (Murray, 1997: 29), and we have seen this experimentation continue, and proliferate, into the twenty first century also (Ryan 2004, Ryan and Thon 2014). More recently, the Doug Dorst and JJ Abrams story *S* (2013) is presented in a conversation of handwritten notes within a fictional library book, leaving the reader a multitude of ways to encounter the narrative. The work of the Visual Editions publishing

team on the Editions at Play series (with google Creative Labs Sydney) is quite remarkable in this space, including, for example, Kate Pullinger's *Breathe* (2018)⁴ which accesses data via your mobile phone in order to 'internalise the world around you' as you read (Pullinger 2018).

We note elsewhere in this book that our approach to immersive storytelling takes us beyond an elision with Virtual or Augmented Reality, but it is important to introduce these developments here also. Virtual Reality (VR) - a term introduced by Jaron Lanier in the 1980s – tends to refer to a very particular set of practices. For Frederick Brooks there are three key features: real time rendering and viewpoint changes (as a participant moves their head), a virtual environment (concrete or abstract), and interaction (in Steinicke 2016: viii). VR is perhaps most recognisable in the form of interaction through head mounted displays, but it has had a long and difficult coming of age, as yet failing to live up to its promise, in part (according to John Bucher) because audiences continue to seek out 'linear logic' for storytelling rather than experiences (like VR) where 'chronology and causality tak[e] lesser roles' (2017: 84). Augmented Reality (AR) experiences differ in that they offer a composite view of both the 'real world' and a layer of digital content superimposed on top. AR applications such as Snapchat (launched 2011) and numerous experiential advertising campaigns have introduced many more people to the possibilities of digital media for world building and blended experiences. Examples of the latter include a 2015 AR campaign for VISA which featured interactive digital content (such as 'life size' giraffes, elephants and pandas) layered onto the real-world environment of a shopping centre in Poland, and the 2017 launch of the IKEA Place app which enabled users to see what products would look like within their own home. Industry professionals have begun to talk across this range of activities as Extended Reality (XR).

It is in this context - and including the VR precursor of the videogame in all its forms - that a large chunk of scholarship on immersion is located. Here immersion is principally understood as the extent to which 'computer displays are capable of delivering an inclusive, extensive, surrounding and vivid illusion of the reality to the senses of a human participant.' (Slater and Wilbur, 1997: 3) 'Presence', that is, 'the (psychological) sense of being in [a] virtual environment' (Slater and Wilbur 1997: 4), has been a particularly influential concept within that scholarship, leading to the pursuit of ever more sophisticated virtual environments so that participants might 'consider the environment specified by the displays as places visited rather than as images seen.' (Slater and Wilbur, 1997: 4) Our use of the term immersion incorporates - but does not depend on - this notion of presence, given that we wish to work across a more comprehensive set of experiences.

⁴ *Breathe* is also connected to the Ambient Literature project (Ambient Literature, 2016).

Other concepts considered within videogames scholarship that contribute to both immersion and presence are the notions of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and engagement.⁵ Seah and Cairns argue that immersion is different, but related, to flow. ‘Flow is a harmonious psychological state whereby a person is engaged in an activity that is challenging but not beyond the skills of the person and has a clear sense of progression towards a goal. The outcome is a positive and rewarding experience.’ (Seah and Cairns, 2008: 2) They go on to argue that games can be immersive without providing flow and hypothesise that ‘immersion is a precursor to flow. During flow, people are wholly engaged in their activity to the exclusion of all other concerns. This sense of being “lost to the world” matches well with the colloquial sense of immersion.’ (Seah and Cairns, 2008: 2)

In other developments, there has been increasing excitement about the possibilities of integrating our biomechanical information with immersive storytelling experiences (in for example *Jekyll 2.0*, Mandal 2015), as well as storytelling using artificial intelligence (see for example *It’s No Game*, 2017), immersive documentaries (see the work of the **i-Docs** project), immersive journalism (such as *River of Mud*, 2016), immersive music (LA Philharmonic’s *VAN Beethoven* VR application, 2015), immersive art applications (such as *Tiltbrush*) and immersive installations (such as the work of Random International on *Rain Room*, figure 1.3). Immersive media have found their uses for military purposes also, including as training and recruitment tools (such as the US Marines’ **Augmented Immersive Team Trainer**, 2016).

[INSERT FIGURE 1.3 HERE]

As the above demonstrates, and whilst anxious not to overplay the role of the digital in processes of immersion (ours is not a ‘technocratic’ approach⁶) there are interesting things happening at the boundaries of the digital and the physical (Petrelli et al. 2013). ‘Hybrid’ (Ciolfi 2017, Causey 2016) and ‘mixed reality’ (Ohta and Tamura 1999) experiences are becoming more common, and it is increasingly recognized that the distinction between being online and being offline needs to be problematized. Kevin Moloney’s term ‘postdigital narrative’ is perhaps a helpful one in this regard (2012). Today’s uses of digital media are not disembodied, as recognized in investigations into haptic technologies for example, and Anne Mangen has proposed that researchers should pay more attention to the role our bodies, and in particular our fingers and hands, play in what she terms ‘immersive fiction reading’ experiences via digital devices (2008). Although we downplay the centrality of digital media in definitional terms in this book, much immersive storytelling practice does demonstrate and benefit from what might be termed ‘thinking digitally’ (Causey 2016: 436).

⁵ both of which we will refer back to in Chapter Four.

⁶ Our approach echoes that of Kelly McErlean (2018).

In recent years, and as allied to the experimentation with VR, AR and XR above, there has been much focus on the spatial components of immersive storytelling. Jason Farman (2014, 2015) reminds us that these are not new concerns however, noting links between story and space through time: ‘Storytelling is important for the production and practice of space because the meaning of a space is typically communicated through the stories attached to those spaces ... stories, spaces, and communities are intimately tied together’ (Farman 2015: 101). The possibilities presented by spatial immersion in storyworlds have been explored in theme parks for quite some time, but have perhaps been most epically demonstrated in recent years in the popularity of the *Pokémon Go* mobile application. There have been many other explorations at the intersections of story, space and immersion; in studies of cultural heritage, for example, there have been many attempts to play at the interstices of space and story, often facilitated via digital technologies. (Poole 2017, Keil et al. 2013, Kidd 2017, Ciolfi and McLoughlin 2017) Historic Royal Palaces’ *The Lost Palace* (2016) has attempted to ‘re-create’ the lost Palace of Whitehall in its original location (it burned down in 1698) using haptic technologies and binaural (3D spatial audio) sound, and Alberto Galindo demonstrates how a mobile application can be used to connect people with stories in space in his overview of the making of the 9/11 Memorial Museum mobile application (2014).

Texts on spatialized narrative (Rieser 2005, Ryan et al 2016, Kitchin et al 2017), locative narrative (Ritchie 2014), mobile art (Rieser 2011) and increased focus on storytelling media as ‘pervasive’ and ‘ambient’ (Ambient Literature, 2016) indicate the depth of possibilities for thinking about story and space. As Rob Kitchin, Tracey P. Lauriault and Matthew W. Wilson argue, geography is becoming a key ‘organizational logic’ on the web (2017: 2), but we might say beyond that also when it comes to experimentation with story and experience. For example, Anežka Kuzmičová, Theresa Schilhab and Michael Burke note in their study of fiction reading on mobile phones (m-reading) that ‘immediate environment and broader situational context’ give reading via mobile ‘unique affordances’ (2018: 1). Story becomes enmeshed with, and informed by, its environment. In this book we look at a variety of ways stories and storyworlds intersect with space, and consider how immersive interaction can alter our sense of a particular place, and our future encounters with it. This is most vividly demonstrated in Chapter Three where we look at the *Traces/Olion* project, an immersive site-specific storytelling encounter at St Fagans National Museum of History, Wales.

We also note more nuanced treatment of the term ‘participation’ emerging in scholarship, and respond to it in this book. Jason Warren observes that even though five practitioners might offer ‘five different answers’ if asked to define immersive theatre, they would all agree that ‘it’s a form that gives the audience greater access to the performance... to become part of the artistry rather than just spectators’ (Warren 2017: vii). John Bucher notes in his study of virtual reality contexts that ‘storytelling ... is less about telling the viewer a story and more about letting the

viewer discover the story' (Bucher 2017: 7). In scholarship about art, theatre, human computer interaction and games 'the term audience becomes vexed' (Machon 2013: 92) and the term 'participant' dominates (in Candy and Ferguson 2014 for example). Interactions within immersive storyworlds can be 'planned or unplanned' (White 2012: 230), and some might be facilitated through more extensive framing than others; an actual or metaphorical 'contract' between maker and participant. Some are built around threshold moments that are invaluable as markers for participation and immersion; punchdrunk's *Small Wonders* (2018) for example uses a number of doorways to step immersion within the storyworld, and *Traces* (2016, outlined in detail in Chapter Three) uses a series of archways. This practice can also be found in literature, where Alice goes down the rabbit hole and Narnia can be accessed through the back of a wardrobe. Related is the theatre concept of the fourth wall - the imagined wall that completes the proscenium arch in a traditional theatre, which in some practices is 'broken' when performers directly address the audience (as also sometimes happens in filmic media). Suffice it to say that processes of participation are not straightforward, especially as responses to them have affective and evaluative dimensions that might be unique to individuals (Reason 2015).

It should be noted that while a traditional 'value chain' exists for many practices of cultural consumption (Paterson 2002), where a linear design - production - distribution process operates beyond (and precedes) often quite passive acts of consumption, many contemporary formats now disrupt that model. Sven Birkerts proposed that the advent of digital media would lead to traditional value chains being 'bent into a pretzel' (1994), and this we have begun to see, not least in the context of video sharing sites like YouTube, or crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter.

There is thus a rich scholarship informing the individual themes covered in this book. But, as noted previously, there is no one text that responds to these developments by offering a framework for critically unpacking practice at the interstices of immersion and story. In the next section we offer a definition of those practices, and in the next chapter, we go on to introduce that framework.

The Definition: Defining immersive storytelling for our purpose

We take a fairly broad understanding of immersion within the contexts of media and culture. This understanding is informed by our readings from a variety of subject areas not least immersive theatre, games, theme parks, human computer interaction and studies of digital culture. Other scholars might set their boundaries around this term in different ways, but do tend to activate a similar lexical repertoire for talking about a set of features that are understood to

characterize immersion. The coming together of these characteristics is variously described, but typically involves a collocation of perspectives on participation, space, the senses and story. In her study of *Immersive Theatres* Machon demonstrates that collocation of terms as she identifies the central features of immersive practice in informing her own definition: ‘Audience involvement’ (and ‘audience evolvment’), ‘a prioritization of the sensual world’ and a recognition of ‘the significance of space and place’ (Machon 2013: 70). Nandita Dinesh’s definition of immersive theatre similarly echoes these themes as she talks about ‘a form that creates a multi-sensorial, participatory aesthetic for its spectators’ (2016: 2), and Alston writes about ‘theatre that surrounds audiences within an aesthetic space in which they are frequently, but not always, free to move and/or participate’ (2013: 128). In talking about spaces such as theme parks, Scott A. Lukas refers to immersion as ‘the idea that a space and its multiple architectural, material, performative, and technological approaches may wrap up or envelop a guest within it’ (2016: 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 1.4 HERE]

Our definition of immersive storytelling incorporates two tiers of practice explored in the chapters that follow. Firstly, we are interested in bounded encounters with story designed with deep immersion of groups or individuals in mind. Examples of this kind of practice include works of immersive theatre, street games, and VR experiences. These are (often) most easily understood as stand-alone encounters. Secondly, we are interested in the possibilities for immersion that come about when a number of different experiences are layered into more extensive and expansive ‘storyworlds’ (Harvey et al. 2014). Such storyworlds are often co-created by a multitude of creators and/or producers, ranging from brand and franchise storytellers to fans. These storyworlds can be transmediated, transnational, multilingual and diachronically complex objects of study, and interacting with them often means being involved in a multi-layered, multi-faceted and incredibly active unfurling of story (‘official’ and ‘unofficial’).

In the first kind of practice, the demarcation and isolation of ‘an immersive activity’ as an object of study is perhaps more straightforward; the promotional materials may frame the encounter *as* immersive, although whether each participant agrees that it was immersive afterwards is a different matter. Audience members might buy a ticket and be invited to turn up in a particular location at a set time, perhaps they are asked to put on a pair of headphones or VR headset, maybe they are even provided with some sort of costume or mask, and at the ‘end’ of the experience, to take it off. The markers of immersion here are physical, environmental, and now even ritual; participants in such encounters will know to expect immersion and, increasingly, will understand how to perform their immersion also. In the second kind of practice referenced above the boundaries are perhaps less clear and the moment (or moments) of immersion more difficult

to ascertain. There are storyworlds that are tightly controlled when it comes to their visual and narrative appearance (such as the *Harry Potter* storyworld, the example we are employing in Chapter Two), but there are also storyworlds that embrace a more fluid approach, particularly when the creators change regularly as is the case in some comic book franchises, where complete reboots and changes in appearance seem to be almost commonplace. These storyworlds are also examples where fashioning your own props or taking part in CosPlay or Live Action Role Playing might be appealing. By focusing on ‘immersion’ we foreground the embodied, performative and experiential dimensions of interactions with these storyworlds in a way that the term ‘transmedia’ (for example) does not do sufficiently for our purposes, and we are not the first to work across these types of immersion in tandem. According to Anne Mangen’s helpful distinction, the first of these practices might be understood as a form of ‘technological immersion’ in that it is crafted and *might* involve the use of tools, whereas the latter is perhaps more closely aligned with ‘phenomenological immersion’ in that it relies on our mental acts of imagination and cognition (Mangen 2008). This mirrors Wolf’s distinction between ‘physical’ and ‘sensual’ immersion and what he terms ‘conceptual’ immersion (2012: 48).

For us, there are a number of characteristics that unite both of these types of practice under the banner of ‘immersive storytelling’, echoing scholars in this field introduced above. Firstly, they are audience and (often) participation centered. Secondly, each is at its most impactful when it is experienced as viscerally affective and every effort is made by designers to maximise the likelihood of such affects. Thirdly, each example of immersive storytelling is uniquely attuned to its contexts. Lastly, and importantly for our purposes here, both practices are story-led. These characteristics are echoed in the framework we introduce in this book, which explores how story emerges at the interstices of the creative process, the creation itself and the experience of participants. We introduce the detail of these ‘Orientations’ in Chapter Two.

Overview of the book

Having established our parameters in this introduction, we now offer an overview of our approach and arguments presented in the book.

Research design in the realm of the experiential, the embodied and the locative is fraught with complexity. Immersive contexts raise practical and ethical considerations for researchers and evaluators that we are only beginning to consider. In this book we use our experiences as action researchers creating and evaluating immersive encounters to understand the logics and challenges inherent to immersive experiences. We reference scholarship from disciplines as diverse as media, games, theatre, theme park design, human computer interaction and museum studies to make sense of the quality of immersion.

Chapter Two introduces one approach to the analysis of immersive storytelling experiences and storyworlds, an approach that underpins discussions and data presented in the chapters that follow. As Farman ponders (referencing Hayles): ‘Within this media ecology, “medium specificity” is important when we consider the narratives conveyed (Hayles, 2004). What kind of story can a particular medium tell? What are the medium’s affordances or constraints for telling stories?’ (Farman 2015: 106) We introduce a framework that explores just that by focusing on the layers of each experience as a way of thinking about stories and storyworlds, and how they shift and migrate. In order to make our framework systematically sound, we start from a notion of experience that is somewhat broader than experiences that *have* to include story or that *have* to be immersive, let alone deliver deep immersion. In order to illustrate our framework, which we have termed the ‘Layers of Experience’ framework, we draw on a variety of ways of telling a story that are all located within one storyworld: the Wizarding World of *Harry Potter*. We explore the production of immersion through the franchise’s varied textual and illustrative forms, filmic and theatrical genres and the themed lands⁷, as well as considering their analogue and digital dimensions, and mapping other extensions of the narrative up to the present day. Using one storyworld gives us the opportunity to not only demonstrate how to analyse one storytelling genre, but to also consider how a number of genres centred on the same story can work together to build a multi-layered, immersive storyworld. For readers not familiar with this storyworld, we have prepared a section in our Glossary that gives an overview of the examples we are referring to, although it should be noted that this is not an attempt to map the whole of this storyworld completely, as this is far beyond the scope of this book.

Chapter Three puts this ‘Layers of Experience’ framework into a practical context by applying it to one case study. The case study used here - *Traces/Olion* (which we will mostly just be referring to as *Traces*) - is an immersive storytelling experience which we have had unique access to over the course of this writing project. First we introduce *Traces*, before offering an overview of the production process, ambitions and principles that underpin it. We then present an analysis of participant responses to this experience of immersion, exploring the extent to which those who participate in immersive experiences are able and willing to co-produce and direct them, and whether agency within such encounters is practicable or desirable. We demonstrate that what constitutes an immersive experience can differ wildly depending on individual inclinations and contextual circumstances.

Chapter Four then draws the lens back to take stock of immersion in its larger contexts. It introduces arguments *against* ‘the immersive turn’ in cultural narratives and experiences. These arguments focus on (for example) a perception of participatory spaces as in reality tyrannical and oppressive, and the promotion of ‘experience’ as a cynical tool of marketers and public relations.

⁷ Themed lands are the different areas that usually make up a theme park.

The chapter uses the concepts of ‘aesthetic capitalism’ (Murphy and de la Fuente, 2014) and ‘the experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) to frame these debates. Here questions about agency, ethics, banality and replication take centre stage. We conclude, however, that this is a more ambivalent process than some scholars have posited. For Mikhael Tara Garver immersive media offer precisely a countenance to the ‘hierarchical interaction’ that we encounter in many other of our cultural interactions and can be considered as in some ways empowering (in Bucher 2017: 81). Immersive storytelling can re-connect us and offer us the kind of intimacy that other everyday spaces in our lives do not, workplaces and social media spaces for example (Machon 2013: 26). Indeed, what emerges is a desire amongst many practitioners to connect to and consider questions about social justice, representation and politics, and a hope that such practice can prove transformational. As Jason Farman notes immersive storytelling *can* make previously marginalized stories visible, increase empathy, and engage people with place in ways that are fundamental and consequential (Farman 2015). As indicated here, there are ‘political, aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical questions that are embedded within immersive forms’ (Dinesh 2016: 2) and we discuss them in this chapter.

In Chapter Five we offer a number of concluding reflections on the relationship between experiences, story and immersion drawing on the themes raised in this introduction, and throughout the book. We consider their interplay and intersections in both the context in which we are likely to find immersive storytelling experiences, and in how we can approach them as researchers.

This book - which was always intended to be a short one - is the first to look across the diverse fields invested (and investing) in immersive storytelling experiences. It does not look at each of those fields in turn to offer, for example, a detailed introduction to and analysis of virtual reality, or theme parks, or immersive journalism. Its ambition is bolder than that: to look across these evolving fields and to find touch points so that immersive storytelling can be articulated as itself a practice we can systematically explore. We use a detailed case study, and lots of examples, to illustrate our discussions. These examples are drawn internationally, and more information can be found about them in the Glossary, often including a weblink so you can find out more about them if you so wish (entries in the Glossary are indicated throughout in bold type). It is likely that at least some of these examples will prove ephemeral or be rendered obsolete in what is a rapidly evolving landscape. But we anticipate the debates they shine a light on will be with us for quite some time to come. Immersive storytelling continues to be fertile, instructive and sometimes contentious terrain, as we will go on to demonstrate.