When is a work immersive?

Nathan Wildman
nwwildman.wordpress.com
n.w.wildman@uvt.nl

TiLPS

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

- An anecdote about my mom…

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

- What happened here?

    - Mom was (too) *immersed* in the VR environment

        - This is why you often hear that VR is *disorientating*

- Extensive body of literature on immersive experiences

    - Largely focused on the broadly cognitive nature of immersion

        - Chasid (2021), Langland-Hassan (2020), Liao (2018), Schellenberg (2013)...

- Comparatively little on when a *work* is immersive

    - Literature, visual art, video game, AR/VR application

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

- Aim: think about notion of *work immersiveness*

  - What are the (relevant) features of an immersive work?

- Why works rather than people/cognitive phenomenon?

  - Value for would-be artists/designers

  - Immersiveness as an *aesthetic* property

  - Move away from loggerheads?

    - Non-works that induce similar "immersive" states?

➢ Work is immersive when it's features facilitate satisfying relevant prescriptions to make-believe

 - Waltonian conception plus analysis of work immersiveness

THE PLAN

1. Background: Waltonian conception of fiction

2. Immersive Features

3. Ways of Being Work Immersive

4. Funny cases?

BACKGROUND: WALTON ON FICTION

- Engagement with representational (art)works just is playing a *game of make-believe*

- Such games are (perhaps) more sophisticated than childhood, but are fundamentally the same activity

- Make-believing is *not* chaotic!
    - '… some are proper, appropriate in certain contexts, and others not' (Walton 1990: 9)
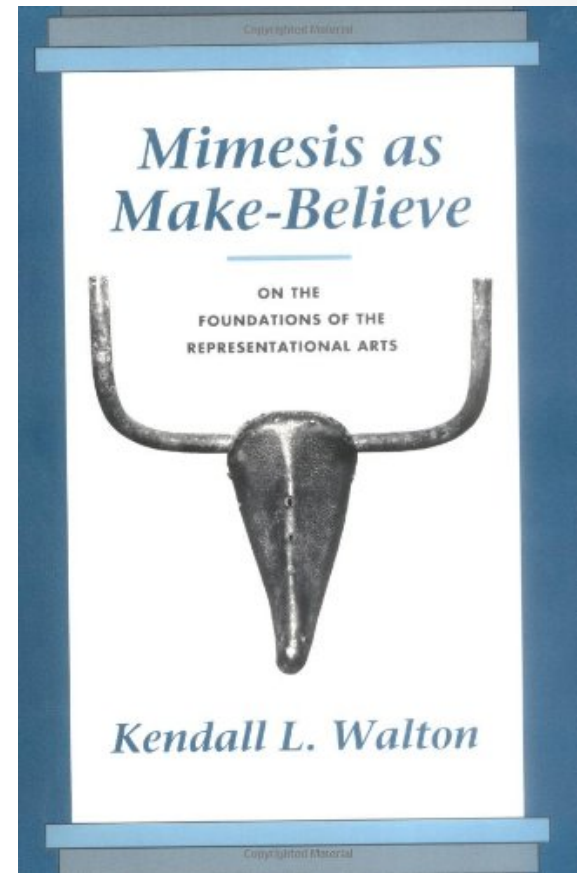
BACKGROUND: WALTON ON FICTION

- *Prop* – object whose existence/features are used to guide & determine features of imagined game-world

- *Principle of Generation* – "rule" that fixes prescription to imagine
  - May only be implicitly undestood; need not be something participants can articulate (Walton 1990: 38)

- *Walt-Fiction* – a work whose function is to serve as a prop in a game of make-believe
  - Includes *many* things we don't usually call 'fiction' – paintings, puppets, dolls…

IMMERSIVE FEATURES

- Immersiveness is subjective

  - A work that is immersive for one user might not be for another

- Immersiveness is contextual/temporal

  - Same user can find a work immersive at one time & not another

- Immersiveness comes in degrees

  - Lots of talk about how VR is more immersive than literature

- Will impact account that we can give

  - Work *w* is immersive *for a user at a time to the degree*…

Immersive Features

- Immersion comes in different *flavours*

  - Fundamentally different types of immersive experiences

- Mäyrä & Ermi (2005) *SCI* Model

  - Sensory – perceptual satuation via mediated representations

  - Challenge – concentration on a specific activity (*flow*)

  - Imaginative – feeling of transportation into "another world"

- Roughly keep this model, but flip it around

  - Think about immersiveness in terms of properties of works

WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- Five different ways that a work can be immersive

  - Perceptual

  - Worldly

  - Narrative

  - Mechanical

  - Agential

- Work's media type will impact how much of each form of immersiveness it is capable of delivering

- Remeber, all of this is person/time/degree relative!

WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- Perceptual

    - Works' features make it easier for the user to satisfy the relevant broadly perceptual prescriptions to make-believe

        - Vividness, verisimilitude, perspective manipulation, size, colour richness...

    - VR is paradigmatically perceptually immersive

    - Literature is at the low end of perceptual immersiveness
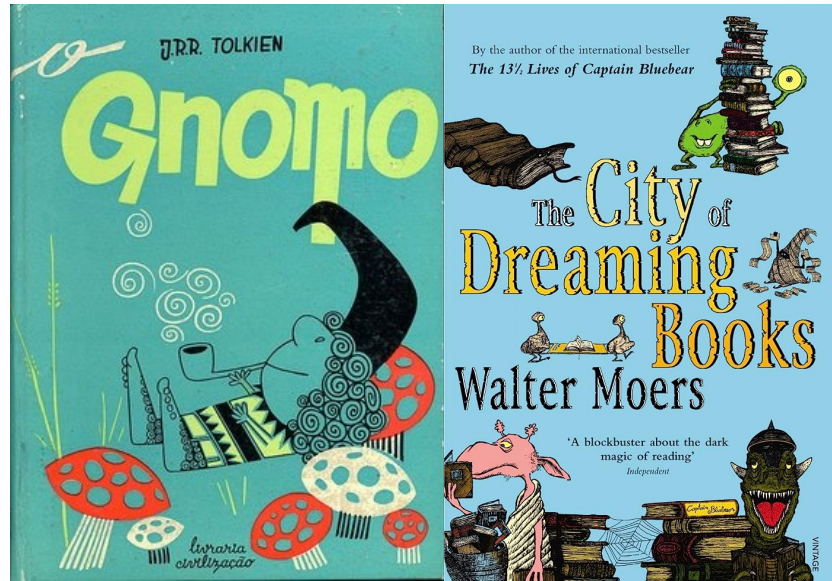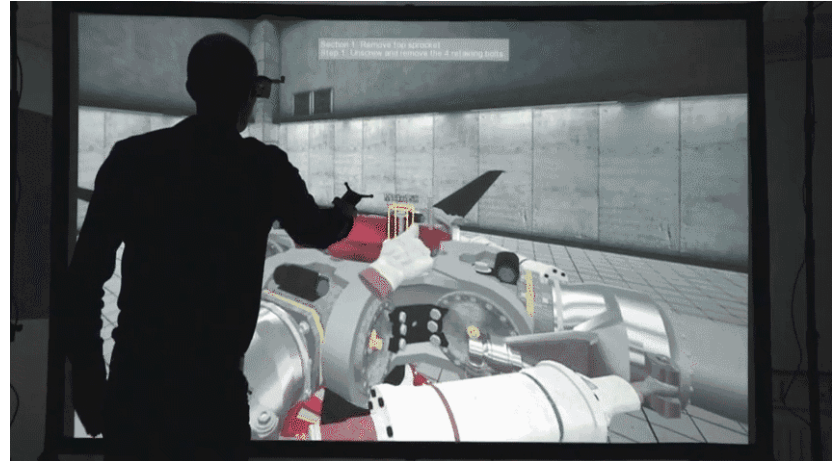
WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- Worldly

  - Work makes users feel like there is a (make) believable other world – a sense of place – they are 'in'

    - You are there, nothing stands between you and belief that you're in an alternate world. (Spector 2001)

  - Descriptive world building, NPC behaviour loops, environmental storytelling, diegetic music & lighting…

WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- Narrative

  - Work makes user care about what happens in narrative or about characters/setting

    - 'I wanna know what happens!'

  - Strong narrative arcs & character development, rich storytelling, good acting…

  - Prop's features need to include narrative aspects!

Ways of Being Work Immersive

- Mechanical

  - Work mechanisms either induce flow state or reinforce other, higher-level aesthetic features

  - Gameplay loop, appropriately tuned controls & difficulty levels …

  - Non-interactive media can't deliver this kind of immersiveness

WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- **Agential**

  - Work affordances allow users to substantially change nature & content of fictional world by taking up role "inside" it

  - *Forced choice incompleteness* (Wildman & Woodward 2018)

  - Non-interactive media can't deliver this kind of immersiveness

Kyle Latino (Map Crow)
@kylelatino

I don't think I ever feel a sense of immersion when playing a ttrpg, not in the same way I feel it in video games, movies, music, and books. Immersion to me is almost forgetting the world, a feeling of transportation. Am I using the word right? Do people feel immersion in poker?

4:00 PM · May 31, 2023 · **8,021** Views

WAYS OF BEING WORK IMMERSIVE

- Works will inevitably bring together a number of features relevant to these forms of immersiveness

  - Literature is often highly worldly & narratively immersive, but scores badly with regards to perceptual immersiveness

  - Many video games scorely highly on all fronts, though it is usually a trade-off between which of the forms a game emphasizes

  - VR tends to be highly perceptually, worldly, & mechanically immersive, but poor with regards to narrative & interactive

FUNNY CASES

- 4th Wall Breaks

  - When the work has a property that reminds the user they are engaged with a work

  - Often breaks form of immersion

    - Perceptual – distorted image/sound

    - Worldly – ' pop-in'

    - Narrative – *Oblivion* NPC dialogue

    - Mechanical – 'Immersion... [is] accomplished by reducing the delay between wanting to do something and actually performing it on-screen. A non-immersive game reminds me that I'm holding a controller ... [in Star Fox Zero] I fought with the controller the whole time.' (Suskie 2016)

    - Agential – when game "takes away the character", ludonarrative dissonance

FUNNY CASES

- 4th Wall Breaks

  - But these can also reinforce/heighten immersion!

    - *Spec-Ops: The Line* – This is all *your* fault

    - *Doki Doki Literature Club* – ONLY MONIKA

    - *Baba is You/Hack'n'Slash?*

  - To be expected, given Waltonian framework

Funny Cases

- Back to my mother…

  - What happened here?

  - Work was extremely perceptually immersive – so much so that it overwhelmed her rational capacity to quarantine

    - "Spilled over" from make-believe box into belief box?

    - Features of work triggered an *alief*

- Danger of works being *too* immersive

  - Can lead to belief/aliefs and/or problematic real-world actions

- Danger of designers striving to make work too immersive

  - Prop sword ----> sharp enough to actually stab things!

Conclusions

- Let's ask questions about when a work is immersive
  - Flip from focus on individuals/cog. states to works

- Immersiveness is relational, contextual, & comes in degrees

- Waltonian account lets us define notions in terms of how props support/facilitate prescribed make-believing

- Different types of immersiveness via different work features
  - Perceptual, Worldly, Narrative, Mechanical, Interactive

Thank you!