

The multi-tier game immersion theory

Premise

Despite what many LARP schools proclaim, it is not possible to simply define people as “immersion” and “non-immersion” players. Nor does the badly outdated Three-Way Model fit the current LARP paradigm. As a result, this theory proposes a new model based on the idea that each game consists of several layers of differing elements and player templates can be formed according to whether or not they are able and/or willing to immerse themselves into those elements.

At the core this theory owes heavily to the classic Hermeneutic Circle used in

literary criticism. It treats the game as “subject matter” and players as its interpreters, thus placing them on a circular field of approach to the matter at hand. Another strong influence is the way in which cognition theory is applied in science of religion.

The key purpose of this theorem is in providing an alternative to value-based gaming, in which an immersion-capable player is often considered “good” and a non-immersing player “lacking” or less skilled. Instead of that, I propose a utilitarian model matching certain player types to gaming forms ideal for them, and vice versa.

Terminology and criterion issues

In all forms of LARP there are three possible levels of immersion. They are: 1) **Character immersion**, the layer commonly referred to with the word “immersion”. The ability to “become” a character, to assume its thought-patterns, ethics and personality. 2) **Reality immersion**, emplacement of oneself within the agreed-upon environment of the game. This includes acceptance of both a diegetic causality and the game’s level of potential for events beyond the mundane, such as the existence of magic or speculative

The Author

J. Tuomas Harviainen is a Finnish LARP designer known for writing heavily immersion-experience based games that favor intense personal themes such as sexuality, social repression, prejudice and sanity. He is also the founder of the Post-Bjorneborgan LARP writing school, and probably the only person believing it to be a serious method for creating high-quality games.

technology as “truth” within the constraints of the game.

3) **Narrative immersion**, acceptance of the existence of narrative elements within a game, and the willingness to treat them as actual events instead of an externally imposed story. The most important of the elements are the game’s plotlines and the dramatic value of individual events.

The key difference between role-playing games and other forms of role-playing is that in the former, a possibility for reality immersion exists. The latter may occasionally simulate the existence of a situation differing from the actual environment, but it is done to fulfill the needs of the characters instead of attempting to provide an immersion experience. Most of what this theory states is about players and games, but it can be extrapolated to describe the participants of most other forms of role-playing as well.

Player types

The basic player types are formed by combining the three immersion criteria and their negations.

1) **Powergamer** (C- R- N-)

Powergamers use gaming as an excuse for self-gratification. The point of a game is in actualization of personal desires, not in experiencing an alternative situation. This level of (non-)immersion is optimal for basic S&M role-play, but dangerous and unpredictable in game situations.

Extremely goal-oriented as a player. Generally more unwilling than unable to participate in immersion.

Summary: “*I Want...*”

2) **Actor-player** (C- R- N+)

Actor-players are able to immerse themselves into the plot and drama of a game, but not to their characters or the game’s reality. They are on stage, treating the other players as their audience. Their main goal is in enhancing the story with what they perceive as the most suitable additions to it. More at home in improvisational theatre (or a sandbox) than in a game, but may prove incredibly useful when cast as semi-autonomous players for important NPCs. Consistent to the game’s needs, but can end up doing things such as killing the characters of other players without a second thought for drama’s sake if left without close supervision.

Summary: “*The thing that would really fit now is ...*”

3) **Simulator** (C- R+ N+)

The Simulator is immersed within a game’s reality and narration. Her character relation is nevertheless an external one, and is based on situational appraisal and basic assumptions of the game’s themes rather than on an understanding of the character’s internal motives. From an observer’s point of view the difference is usually minimal. A Simulator is typically able to fully enjoy most LARPs, unless the games in question are very experience-oriented.

A Simulator may actually often be a more reliable player choice for plot-centered games than a character-immersing player.

Summary: *"This guy would probably do this."*

4) **Extension-player** (C+ R+ N+)

An Extension-player is fully immersed in all aspects of a game. He creates the character's personality out of the material given, and for the duration of the game becomes that person as a part of the story. His reactions are based on extrapolation from the material, and while experienced in first person they are essentially tied to the needs of the story. This means that he seems very "real" when in character, but is quite tied to predetermined elements, and thus often at a loss when a situation is not covered by pre-game information or its extensions. Optimal player for heavily pre-designed games, and by far the least likely player type to complain about general railroading.

Summary: *"I do this, because ..."*

5) **Fundament player** (C+ R+ N-)

A Fundament player is in character and accepts the game's reality but not its plot or drama. Instead, she takes the given background information, analyzes it and then (re-)builds the character's personality based on that information. The end result is a "complete" person whose internal values and logic the player follows during the game. Problems only arise if the character's thought patterns and the game's designer's plans do

not match. In those situations, the Fundament player keeps following the character's "natural" reactions instead of external instructions. All stimuli have to be applied within the game's diegetic frame for them to apply for her. The player type most likely to be called "good" by other players and "problematic" or "dangerous" by game organizers.

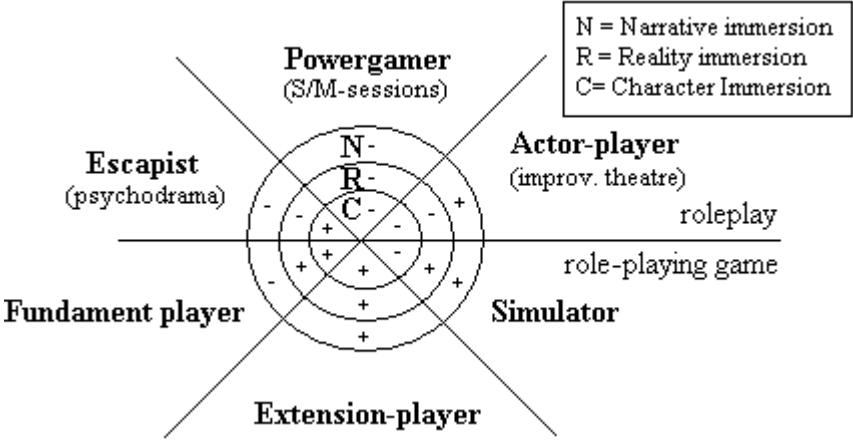
Summary: *"I do this, because it's my nature to do so."*

6) **Escapist** (C+ R- N-)

An Escapist player fulfills his fantasies through a character. He may accept a game's reality and/or plot, but only if it fits the needs of the character. "Translates" game elements for himself so that they and the character match. Treats the character as a second personality, and its game appearances as an alternate life. Usually very attached to a limited scale of character types, and fiercely protective of the ones he accepts. When accommodated by game organizers in advance, preferably at the initial planning stage, the best player imaginable. If not, the most problematic. Capable of nearly psychotic character immersion of the kind Turku LARP school members have wet dreams about.

Summary: *"I want this to happen."*

These six player types are the most common to appear in an organized LARP. Two more combinations are possible, but are normally only temporary, transitory phases:



7) the **Explorer** (C- R+ N-), a player accepting the game's reality but nothing else. Common among people observing a game by playing a semi-present character (a character isolated from plots and only used as an excuse to avoid the presence of off-game people within the gaming area.)

8) the **Tale-teller** (C+ R- N+), normally encountered immediately after a game. The state in which character-immersing players are still partially in character, and trying to wrap up the plotlines left open when the game ended. Common even among players who are not character- or plot-immersed during the actual game.

can be combined into a procession, represented by an **immersion circle**. A player is placed somewhere along the rim of the circle, and for a game designer's purposes defined as a member of one group, with possible leanings to one of the two adjacent player types. If a player's type changes, it is most likely to be a shift to one of those two groups instead of a complete switch further away.

An exception to the rule is temporary **adaptive immersion**, the process of consciously choosing a less intense level of immersion so that it matches the requirements of the game or other form of roleplay. It can be typically seen in experienced immersion-players participating in games designed purely for entertainment's

The relationships between the six more constant player templates

sake. To do otherwise would be to disrupt the game.

In my opinion, this is the only real criterion for defining players as good or bad: the feel for a game's internal dynamic and the ability to adjust one's own behavior to match it. In the case of non-immersed players, a similar criterion can be found in the willingness to perform within the boundaries set for the game, supporting the illusion of an communal immersion even if they are not participating in it by themselves.

Phenomenological typology

1) **Diegesis.** Of the six core player types, two (Extension and Fundamental player) can be seen as diegetic, two (Escapist and Simulator) as semi-diegetic and the last two as either adiegetic or pseudo-diegetic.

2) **Character/player relationship.**

Two of the player types are nature-creating (Escapist and Fundamental player), two nature-indicative (Simulator and Extension-player) and two performing (Actor-player and Powergamer). Of these, only the first two can be said to experience things *as* their characters. The others, depending on situation, experience things either *through* their characters or purely as themselves.

Utilitarian typology and conclusion

When choosing players for a game, it is essential to pick people capable of adjusting their immersion levels to meet the game's needs. If the game is not designed explicitly as an immersion experience based medium, Extension-players and Simulationists are interchangeably suitable for most roles. Escapists are a tremendous resource for any game if handled in advance, as are Actor-players who are given clear enough instructions. Fundamental players are best utilized by giving them characters containing roughly equal amounts of nature-forming, plot-enhancing and apparently irrelevant information. Unless very substantial advantages can be gained, Powergamers should be avoided.

To apply these templates, look at every character of your game. They all have an analyzable **participation factor**, on a scale from "nothing to do" to "completely railroaded". When you see where on that line the character is, you have enough basic information to find a matching player type.