Immersion is Attention / Becoming Immersed

Shen-yi Liao

Unpublishable (2007-2017)[*]

Children sometimes lose themselves in make-believe games. Actors sometimes lose themselves in their roles. Readers sometimes lose themselves in their books. From people's introspective self-reports and phenomenological experiences, these *immersive experiences* appear to differ from ordinary experiences of simply playing a game, simply acting out a role, and simply reading a book. What explains the difference? My answer: attention.

1. Introduction

Children sometimes lose themselves in make-believe games. Actors sometimes lose themselves in their roles. Readers sometimes lose themselves in their books. From people's introspective self-reports and phenomenological experiences, these *immersive experiences* appear to differ from ordinary experiences of simply playing a game, simply acting out a role, and simply reading a book.

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[*] The earliest ancestor to this manuscript was written for my (PhD Dissertation) Dossier Reading Course with Kendall Walton. It was then presented at Western Michigan University (November 2007), Australian National University (June 2008), Kansas State University (2011? 2012?), and Nanyang Technological University (January 2013). I am grateful to many people for excellent feedback, but especially: Robin Wang, Kendall Walton, Daniela Tagliafico, Susanna Schellenberg, Sara Protasi, Ali Niedbalski, Shaun Nichols, Teru Miyake, Andres Luco, Dustin Locke, Marie Jayasekera, Lina Jansson, Jim Hamilton, Salvatore Florio, Andy Egan, and Tyler Doggett. I got a few rejections from journals around 2012-2013, but mostly this manuscript just sat in my Dropbox while its time passed it by. Some of the material made its way to Liao and Doggett 2014 (thanks Tyler!). Some of the materials were made obsolete by other important works on this topic, especially Kampa forthcoming, Kind 2011, and Tagliafico manuscript. Since the manuscript was advertised in Liao and Doggett 2014, I still get occasional inquiries about it, so I thought it best to make a version of it publicly available. This version was finalized in July 2017, which cut away outdated and extraneous material, and added some others inspired by recent conversations with Samuel Kampa. If you want, you can cite it as: Liao, S. (unpublishable 2017), "Immersion is Attention / Becoming Immersed".

Philosophers have given *attitudinal* explanations of the difference.[1] Doggett and Egan (2007)—with inspirations from Currie (2002), Currie and Ravenscroft (2002), Velleman (2000), and Walton (1990)—argue that we need to introduce a new attitude called *i-desire*, which is an imaginative analogue of desire, to cognitive architecture. On Doggett and Egan's account, what makes immersive experiences different from their ordinary analogues is that people who are immersed have their behaviors motivated not by their desires and beliefs, but by their i-desires and imaginings. Schellenberg (2013) argues that we need to revise cognitive architecture so that belief and imagination are not distinctive attitudes, but one continuous attitude. On Schellenberg's account, what makes immersive experiences different from their ordinary analogues is that people who are immersed have their behaviors motivated by desire plus some intermediate state between belief and imagination.

I disagree. On my account, immersive experiences involve a special kind of mental opacity. During immersive experiences, the contents of some mental states—such as the imaginings that involve self-attribution of motives—screen off the contents of other mental states—such as the beliefs and desires that actually motivate pretense behaviors. What makes immersive experiences different from their ordinary analogues is that people who are immersed are not attending to the mental states that they would ordinarily attend to, such as the ones that actually motivate their behaviors. Immersion is a shift in attention.

2. Immersive Experiences: The Self Presentational Aspect

Here are two cases to get us started.

> **Cops and Robbers.** Two children, Cop and Robber, were playing cops and robbers. Cop was pretending to be the cop and Robber was pretending to be the robber. In their game, the robber was getting away and the cop was chasing after her. Cop pointed her finger at Robber and yelled "bang!". When asked why she behaved as she did, Cop answered, "I wanted to stop him from getting away!".

> **Man on the Moon.**[2] On the set of the biopic *Man on the Moon*, actor Jim Carrey was said to have completely adopted the persona of his character, the comedian Andy Kaufman. As Carrey reported afterwards, "I didn't really exist for three months. I'd get up from my bed, and I'd walk down the hall as Andy Kaufman.". Indeed, the adoption of the Kaufman persona affected how Carrey behaved on the set. When asked to explain why Carrey spat on another actor on the set, his manager said, "Jim was immersed in the role as Andy, played it as Andy would have.".

Sometimes, as in the cases above, people are so immersed that they seem to, from their own perspectives, lose themselves in the make-belief and lose touch with reality.

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[1] Kampa (forthcoming) appears to give an attitudinal explanation of the difference too, since he argues that we need to introduce a new attitude called *palief* to cognitive architecture. However, Kampa also emphasizes the importance of attention in his explanation. In fact, on Kampa's definition, palief might be reducible to attention. Chasid (2017) gives a *content* explanation of the difference. On Chasid's account, what makes immersive experiences different from their ordinary analogues is that people's imaginings are highly specified by *design assumptions* of a fictional world.

[2] This case has been repurposed in Liao and Doggett 2014.

From her own perspective, Cop "shot" the robber because she wanted to stop him from getting away. From his own perspective, Carrey spat on the other actor because he wanted to be his usual rude (Kaufman) self.

These immersive experiences of playing a game and acting out a role seem to differ from ordinary experiences of simply playing a game and simply acting out a role. The difference can be found in the self-presentational aspects of these experiences: the introspective self-reports and phenomenological experiences of immersed people versus their ordinary counterparts.

We can contrast Cop's immersed experience with that of a father who is not particularly engrossed in playing cops and robbers with his child, but still behaved the same as Cop did. In his self-reports, the father is likely to explain the behaviors as the result of wanting to *pretend* to shoot the robber. Phenomenologically, the father is unlikely to experience the episode as a cop, but only as a father playing a game with his child. In recognizing his own pretense as pretense, the father remains—to borrow a phrase from Velleman 2000—"securely outside" of the game.

We can contrast Carrey's immersed experience with that of an ordinary actor playing the role of Andy Kaufman. In his self-reports, this actor is likely to explain the behaviors as the result of wanting to *act out* the Kaufman character. Phenomenologically, this actor is unlikely to experience the role as Kaufman, but only as an actor who is in the Kaufman role. In recognizing his own acting as acting, this actor too remains "securely outside" of his role.

3. Immersive Experiences: The Motivational Aspect

[In addition to the self-presentational aspect, immersive experiences can also have a behavioral aspect that concerns the mental states that actually motivate behaviors. Here, my account is basically the same as the Humean one given in Kind 2011, section 4. Like all other behaviors, pretense behaviors are motivated by beliefs and desires. More precisely, these are beliefs and desires about what would further a pretense episode. See also Langland-Hassan 2014.]

4. Problems for Attitudinal Accounts

4.1. Immersive Experiences Come in Degrees

Here is another case.

> **Becoming Immersed.**[3] A father, Father, was playing as the cop in a game of cops and robbers with his child.
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> In the beginning, he was simply playing along to entertain his child. If he were asked about the motivations for his behaviors, he would answer that it is because he wanted to pretend to do the things that a cop does.
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> However, as Father kept playing, he got more and more into the game.

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[3] Again, this case has been repurposed in Liao and Doggett 2014.

> In fact, after a while, he was so into the game that he lost himself in the pretense. At this point, the robber was getting away and the cop was chasing after her. Father pointed her finger at Robber and yelled "bang!". If he were asked why he behaved as he did, he would answer, "I wanted to stop her from getting away!".

Sometimes, as in the case above, people go from not being immersed in a pretense to being immersed in it. That is, being immersed or not is not binary; immersive experiences come in degrees. In this case, given the continuum between non-immersive and immersive experiences, it is unlikely that Father can notice when he went from not being immersed to being immersed.

Becoming Immersed is a problem for Doggett and Egan (2007). On Doggett and Egan's account, the distinction between non-immersive and immersive experiences has to be binary. Behaviors in non-immersive episodes are motivated by desires and beliefs, but behaviors in immersive episodes are motivated by i-desires and imaginings. So, their account must posit a kind of mental capacity, as exemplified when Father's lack of awareness of when he went from not being immersed to being immersed. More importantly, their account seems to fundamentally mischaracterize the nature of immersion.

Becoming Immersed is also a problem for Schellenberg (2014).[4] Her account does not face the same problem because it already posits a continuum between belief and imagination. As such, it might say that going from not being immersed to being immersed is a matter of shifting along the belief/imagination attitudinal continuum. However, for that explanation to work, there needs to be an incredible coincidence. For example, it is plausible that when Father was not immersed, he believed something like *I am a father pretending to be a cop*, but that when he was immersed, he imagined something like *I am a cop*. So, shifting along an attitudinal continuum is not enough to account for the change in his mental state; there must be a corresponding shift along a content continuum, from something like *I am a father pretending to be a cop* to something like *I am a cop*. Moreover, the shifts along the two continua need to coincide. And that is, to me, a coincidence too incredible for an account to require in order to explain immersion.

4.2. Immersive Experiences Need Not Involve Behavior

The problem that Becoming Immersed poses for the attitudinal accounts seem to gesture at a deeper worry. Attitudinal accounts are primarily concerned with explaining the behavioral aspect of immersive experiences. But this focus seems misplaced because it is not at all obvious that all experiences that can be characterized as "immersive" must have a behavioral aspect.

In the same way that we talk about children who lose themselves in make-believe games and actors who lose themselves in their roles, we also talk about readers who lose themselves in their books. However, being immersed in a book need not involve any overt pretense behavior. Similar immersive experiences can

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[4] This objection has been developed in Liao and Doggett 2014, section 3.1.

occur when people engage in other forms of passive imaginings (Kind 2011), such as when they watch a play, a movie, or a TV show.

It is not a surprise that attitudinal accounts are ill-suited to explain immersive experiences that involve passive imaginings, given their focus on the behavioral aspect. For example, it is not clear how Doggett and Egan's account can characterize the difference between a reader who lost themself in a book versus a reader who is only reading a book in a not-particularly-engrossed way. The two readers do not appear, on a first pass, to i-desire any differently.

4.3. Immersive Experiences Need Not Involve Imagination

In fact, we might take the thought one step further. Children who lose themselves in make-believe games, actors who lose themselves in their roles, and readers who lose themselves in their books still have something in common: they are all engaging in imaginative episodes. However, it is not at all obvious that all experiences that can be characterized as "immersive" must involve imaginings.[5]

In the same way that we talk about losing ourselves in our imaginings, we also talk about losing ourselves in yoga practices, in meditations, and in other non-pretense episodes. Of course, ordinary language can mislead. But the observation is that, at least considering the self-presentational aspect, there seems to be something importantly shared between imaginative and non-imaginative immersive experiences, especially phenomenologically.

Once again, it is not surprising that attitudinal accounts that focus on imagination-related architecture are ill-suited to explain immersive experiences like these. For example, it is not clear how Doggett and Egan's account can characterize the difference between an advanced yogi who flows through the Ashtanga sequence versus a beginner who is effortfully working at the poses. It is not that there are no differences to be found, but that, on a first pass, the differences do not seem to arise from the distinction between a belief/desire motivational system and an imagination/i-desire motivational system.

5. Immersion is (Shift in) Attention

The problems for attitudinal accounts suggest shifting our focus to the self-presentational aspect of immersive experiences. Once we do so, an obvious rival account emerges. In slogan form: immersion is shift in attention. This account can better explain why immersive experiences come in degrees, why immersive experiences need not involve behavior, and why immersive experiences need not involve imagination.

Hints of this attentional account exist (maybe because it is so obvious correct!?). Currie (2002) and Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) explore interpreting Velleman (2000)'s notion of entering into make-believe in phenomenological terms.

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[5] Yes, for those keeping score, I do think the locution of "imaginative immersion" in Liao and Doggett 2014 is misleading in this respect.

Kind (2011: 435) notes that "there's no reason we must maintain that the beliefs and desires posited by these explanations [of pretense behaviors] are conscious beliefs and desires." And, in an advertisement for this manuscript, Liao and Doggett (2014: 271) say that "Instead of looking for an explanation of immersion in terms of facts about a continuum between belief and imagination, we suggest looking for it in terms of facts about where our attention is turned." [Since then, Kampa (forthcoming) and Tagliafico (manuscript) have also independently developed accounts that highlight attention's explanatory role.]

Recall that, on the attentional account, there is a kind of mental opacity during immersive experiences: the contents of some mental states—such as the imaginings that involve self-attribution of motives—screen off the contents of other mental states—such as the beliefs and desires that actually motivate pretense behaviors. Here is a metaphor for thinking about what that means. Think of our awareness of what goes on in our minds as a spotlight. This spotlight shines on information about the mental states that are most salient. Ordinarily, the mental states that are most salient are the beliefs and desires that figure into our theoretical and practical reasoning at a given time. So, for example, the spotlight of a non-immersed pretender is likely to shine on information about the motivational sources of their pretense behaviors. However, atypical mental states can become more salient during immersive experiences. So, for example, the spotlight of an immersed pretender is likely to shine on information about the pretense, specifically the mental states that are imaginatively attributed to oneself. The turning of the spotlight can be a gradual process. Information about the imaginatively-attributed mental states can gradually come into the light, overshadow the information about genuine behavior-motivating mental states, until the latter is left in the dark.

We can cash out the spotlight metaphor with attention. Attention has both a phenomenological and a functional role. Phenomenologically, attention makes selected information salient in our qualitative experiences. Functionally, attention makes selected information accessible to other cognitive systems, such as the ones implicated in generating self-reports. As such, it is well-suited for explaining the self-presentational aspect of immersive experiences.

Attention also has other features that make it particularly suitable for playing the spotlight role.[6] A spotlight has limited radiance; to shine on one thing, it often has to compensate by turning away from another. Likewise, attention is a *finite* resource: when we turn our attention to one thing, we often lose our attention in another. A spotlight is directional and so necessarily must shine on some things but not others. Likewise, attention is *selective*: we focus on some things but not others. A spotlight shines more brightly on what is at the center of its field, but less brightly on what is at the peripheries. Likewise, attention is *intensive*: the amount in which we attend to some thing can be more or less. Finally, a spotlight can be turned on by an

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[6] The attentional account of immersive experiences relies on well-accepted features of attention that are catalogued in Kahneman (1973). However, there are also ongoing debates about the relationships between attention, awareness, phenomenological and access consciousness, and other related notions. The success of this account ultimately depends on the resolution of these debates. For overviews of recent neuroscientific, psychological, and philosophical works on attention, see Mole (2009) and Watzl (2011a, 2011b).

external trigger or by our own volition. Likewise, attention can be *voluntary or involuntary* (top-down or bottom-up).

What explains the difference between immersed pretenders and actors and their ordinary counterparts? The attentional account answers: the information that they attend to. Immersed pretenders and actors attend to the fictional content of make-believe, such as information about imaginatively-attributed mental states of their characters. But non-immersed pretenders and actors attend to the make-believe itself, such as information about the genuine mental states that guide the further development of the make-believe. What happens in Becoming Immersed? The attentional account answers: Father turned his attention from the make-believe itself to the fictional contents of make-believe, but there is no shift in the motivational system for his behaviors. In other words, attention explains why immersive experiences come in degrees.

The same basic idea can be naturally extended to address the other problems for attitudinal accounts. What makes readers who lose themselves in their books similar to children who lose themselves in make-believe games and actors who lose themselves in their roles? Answer: in all these cases, people are attending to the fictional contents of make-believe rather than the make-believe itself. When a person loses themself in a book, they attend to the happenings of the story world, the dialogues between characters, and other features of the story; they do not attend to the writing style, the plot structure, and other features about the book itself.

What makes the advanced yogi different from the beginner? Unlike the beginner, the advanced yogi is not attending to mental states of their motivational system, such as beliefs and desires about performing particular poses. Instead, they are attending to perceptions of their own mental and bodily experiences. In this case, it is not imaginative mental states that screen off motivational ones, but perceptual states that do. Yet, it remains fundamentally similar to immersive imaginative experiences because there is a shift in attention.

6. Conclusion

Unlike other philosophers, I do not think that the phenomenon of immersion calls for any revisions to imagination-related cognitive architecture. In fact, I do not think immersion and imagination are related in any fundamental way. Still, investigating immersive imaginative experiences reveals something important about the nature of imagination. Contrary to what other philosophers claim, the power of imagination does not come from its ability to motivate behaviors. Rather, the power of imagination comes from its ability to occupy our minds.

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