Illustration 1:
Player of the VR game Wild Skies, designed for Project Holodeck, USC School of Cinematic Arts and Viterbi School of Engineering, 2012.
From Analog to Digital Image Space  
Toward a Historical Theory of Immersion

Gundolf S. Freyermuth

Coming to terms with immersion in digital culture seems to require, above all else, a historical and transmedial point of view. So far, aesthetic immersion — whether seen as a utopia or a dystopia of art and entertainment — has been perceived predominantly under media-specific and normative perspectives. Concentrating on just one central aspect of immersion, my essay follows the transformations of the modern image space. The starting point is an overview of the status quo of (audio-)visual imagery, which is characterized by three constitutive elements: hyperrealism in 2-D/3-D, multi-/non-linearity, and interaction/interfaces. In a second step I cast a look back at the media-technological and media-aesthetic construction of the analog image space between the Renaissance and postmodernism, based on the principle of separation, and then describe its being called into question since the mid-20th century. In a third step, I venture to explore the ongoing construction of a new digital image space, based on the principle of fusion. It seems to be characterized by three trends: transmediality, augmentation, and new modes of immersion. In a final outlook, a historical theory of immersion is charted that discerns four modes of immersion according to four modes of mediality.

1. Introduction

These days the perspectival image space as it has evolved since the Renaissance seems to be imploding and exploding at the same time. The experience of explosion is, of course, created by digital 3-D. Its audio-visions, sounds and images, cross the boundaries of the screen and jump right out at the audience. Complementary to this, the introduction of so-called natural user interfaces (NUIs) — touch screens as well as gesture and voice control — has caused a sensory implosion: the collapse of the perspectival space that analog media technology, on the one hand, evokes through distance and, on the other hand, installs through physical separation both in front of and behind the image.

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1 This text resumes, combines, and continues observations I have previously made in German publications; see Freyermuth 2007; 2010; 2013.