

# Narrative Engagement and the Role of Presence

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## Abstract

Presence as a phenomenon has been studied for over 20 years with an identifiable progression as to how the field has matured. Initial research explored the physical nature of what conditions were necessary to produce presence focusing on the physical representations of the experience such as vividness and interactivity. This soon segued into more of an exploration into the psychological understanding of what is to experience presence focusing more on the actual “being there” phenomenon experienced by people as they engaged in a CM event. However as our understanding of presence has matured the focus has turned to exploring the application of presence to different situations.

*The conditions necessary to produce presence.* Essentially, it is understood that three factors are necessary to engender presence. These factors are environmental fidelity, interaction and consistency of presentation. (Steuer 1992); (Usoh et al. 2000); (Witmer, Singer 1998); (Sheridan 1996)

*Presence as a state of mind.* The general consensus of presence is that it is a sensation of “being” in an environment. (Lombard, Ditton 1997, Heeter 1992, Heeter 2000, Nicovich 2012, Heeter 2003, Lessiter et al. 2001, Schloerb 1995, Schlosser 2003). Our understanding of presence is a collection of interacting elements. Essentially presence is a psychological reaction that comes about through an understanding of where we are in relation to a “space” or “environment.” This environment, however, must contain the elements necessary to engender this reaction.

*Presence in the field.* Since its inception as a concept, researchers have been attempting to connect the experience of presence with the conditions necessary to create it. However, researchers are now looking at applications in which presence can be useful. As such, presence recently as been applied to the fields of robotics (Tiberio et al. 2012, Kristoffersson, Coradeschi & Loutfi 2013, Escolano, Antelis & Minguez 2011), medicine (Tonin et al. 2011) and teleconferencing (Leithinger et al. 2014, Maimone et al. 2012).

*Connection and context.* Presence as a phenomenon has looked at the nature of “being” in an environment but it hasn’t explored the question of “why are we there to begin with?” In other words, what is the reason for engaging the displayed

environment? People (with very few exceptions) do not end up in a CMC environment by accident. The most likely scenario (and the one most useful to marketers) is that the interaction is voluntary and most likely anticipatory.

*Context, engagement and comprehension.* Certainly, the reason for being in a certain place must affect the impact the experience will have on the participant. In this manner, presence research has been like someone who wakes up with amnesia with nothing to do and is expected to react with a degree of connection that we label presence. Certainly, the reason that one has for participating in an experience must have an impact on how they will react to it. Engaging in this larger understanding of the world (and the events contained within) has been termed “Narrative Engagement (De Graff et al. 2009, Busselle, Bilandzic 2008, Busselle, Bilandzic 2009).” Narrative engagement is the degree of absorption into the story that is being presented. As part of this process the reader will make mental models of that is expected based on the queues contained within the story. Mental models are cognitive structures that represent some aspect of the external world (Busselle, Bilandzic 2008, Busselle, Bilandzic 2009). Congruency of understanding between the presented elements of the story and the anticipated mental model that is developed is Narrative Comprehension. Associating the events of the story with the developed mental model should lead to a more positive reaction to the story.

*Research Questions.* Based on the reviewed elements above the driving focus of this study is to determine what the relationship is between narrative engagement, comprehension and presence. The next step in this process is to test these relationships. Both narrative comprehension and presence are mental responses to portrayed (or realized) events. Based on the preceding factors the following two research questions have been developed:

Research question 1: Does narrative comprehension affect ones reaction to the story that is being provided.

Research question 2: Does experiencing presence affect this relationship?

*Future Directions.* The next step is to operationalize and test these reactions within a CM event. To this end, data will be collected in response to the videogame Oblivion with regard to the subject’s reaction to the anticipated events and the role presence plays in their level of engagement.

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**Keywords:** *Presence, Narrative Engagement, Narrative Comprehension*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** As technology becomes more immersive it will break the plane of videogames into more mainstream arenas of marketing and, as such, its impact will become ubiquitous.

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