

Qualia

«How can the flux of ions and electrical currents in little specks of jelly the neurons in my brain generate the whole subjective world of sensations like red, warmth, cold or pain? By what magic is matter transmuted into the invisible fabric of feelings and sensations?»

– Ramachandran, Blakeslee & Sacks: *«Phantoms in the Brain»*

Introduction

This is an immersive, experiential, impressionistic role-playing game. It was written for the Little Game Chef competition, March 2009. It's about using characters as qualia feeds.

«Qualia»?

The term «qualia» is defined in different ways by different people. There's considerable debate on whether it refers to anything real, and how the term should be treated in different theoretical frameworks. Much like the term «immersion», in fact.

In this game, «qualia» refers to the subjective experience based on physical input. In the physical world, light can have specific wavelengths; in the mind, these wavelengths are subjectively experienced as colors.

Immersion, in this game, is based on the attempted transfer of qualia between the character and the player. Characters are seen as qualia feeds. The aim of the game is for the player to experience something analogous to what the character experiences.

What the game is about

This game has one central idea: The idea that the characters are an extension of the players' subjectivity and senses – or, rather, vice versa: That what the characters feel, should be what the players themselves imagine feeling. The focus is on atmosphere, on touch and smell, on emotion and memory - on qualia. All these things are influences on the player, through the character. The characters are minds to be tasted and felt, filters to experience the world through.

Thus, the players should not treat their characters as a means to create a story. They are not narrative pawns or plot focuses. Plot is irrelevant, in the

same way that winning is irrelevant. Immersion, being there, in the moment, in the atmosphere – this is the aim.

This means that controlling the character, taking action, is not the point of the game. Nor is building the character, showing their personality. The point is to *be there*. You as a game master will sometimes create memories for a character. Other players might do this for each other, if you let them. You might even tell them what they're doing at times, setting scenes – small actions, like picking up pebbles from the sand, or caressing a lover. It's not important what they do. What's important is what they feel like when doing it, what they sense, what associations it brings.

The three metaphors

The competition for which this game was written, has as a rule that the game must include certain elements; in this case, burn, midnight and sea. These are used as central metaphors in the game. Their meaning, the way I interpret it, is this (your interpretation may differ, since we're all humans):

Burn: Strong, destructive emotion.

Sea: Deep, silent emotion.

Midnight: The absence of the sun, thus the absence of conscious rationality and reason.

The starting scene sets the characters on the shore at night, looking out over the sea towards a burning oil well. This dream-like image is meant to set the atmosphere for the game, a clear message to the subconscious: We are at a distance from strong, extroverted emotions – the burning. We are facing deep, silent emotions – the sea. We are in a state of mind where reason – the sun – is not important, or even absent. To some people, metaphor is a familiar language; to others, it takes a little meditation to let it sink in. Let it sink in. It's midnight, the fire is far away, the sea is at your feet.

Playing the Game

I'm going to assume that you're familiar with role-playing games in general. This one is different in some ways. Pay close attention, and it'll soon become clear to you.

Rules to be observed at all times

- Characters are *qualia feeds*. They are the players' sense avatars, interfaces that allow the players to experience a different environment, a different body. Treat them as such at all times.
- Keep play *low key*. If the players are to experience what their characters experience, those experiences should not be so intense as to agitate the players and make them lose the connection with the character. It is one thing to «feel» the touch of rain on the character's face; another thing

- entirely to «feel» a knife cutting into her flesh.
- The game is a *dialogue*. Always ask how characters feel, what they do, how they associate.
 - Let the *atmosphere* guide you. Follow your intuition.
 - Focus on *internal states*. One of the players' primary functions is to feel, react, associate. Let them express these things.
 - *Memories are qualia*. Treat memories like sense impressions. They are beyond the control of the character in the present, and, as such, tools you use to spark impressions, emotions, reactions, associations in the character and player.

Things to avoid

- *Ignore plot*. Plot is irrelevant. Keep it as bare-bone as possible. The feelings of the characters *right here and now* are important. Their actions as connected to a perceived dynamic situation are not. If someone starts doing things to move the plot forward, use it as an opportunity to convey new impressions. «I want to set fire to the jungle to attract Corporate mercenaries!» «The light from the match illuminates your face and hands. The stars are shining down on you. The first leaf catches fire, spreading a scent of boiling plant oil. Soon, you are feeling the heat from the forest as it burns. The smoke billowing upwards reminds you of your grandmother's funeral. She was wrapped in silk as they put her into the ground. What was it your aunt said?»
- *Avoid physical conflict*. This will too easily lead to a powerful, but short-lived emotional investment that can discolor the entire experience. If characters get into fights, arguments or similar, cut to a different scene. One in the past, or one in the future. Or, perhaps, describe events in extreme slow motion. «Your fist is gliding through the air, slowly, slowly. On the ground before you, an ant crawls by, faster than your hand can move.» The dream resists.
- *Do not fall into monologue*. Keep it interactive. Engage the players.

How the game starts

1. Gather your players, no more than three. Everybody, have a seat.
2. Speak to your players in a calm, confident voice. Be unthreatening and secure. You want their trust.
3. Talk about what's to come. Tell them this will be an experiment, something new and enjoyable. Tell them it's a role-playing game, but it might be slightly different from what they're used to. It's an impressionistic game.
4. Tell them to close their eyes and picture the first scene. Use a calm voice. Think of yourself as the ocean, your words as gentle waves. You are conveying the feeling of being there, of potential immersion.

«It's the middle of the night. You're down by the sea, watching the waves rolling in. It's warm. Out there on the horizon you can

see fire – an oil well is burning. The island is dark. Behind you there are a dozen tree huts, where you live. You've never met the people who own the oil wells. They fly over the islands sometimes, in big round flying things. All you have is boats woven from straw.»

5. Tell each of them who their character is. They should still have their eyes closed, so touch their shoulder when you say it. Something like this:

«You are a woman, born on this island. You have two children who left home a year ago. You haven't seen them since then.»
«You are an old man, the woman's father. Your wife, the woman's mother, died many years ago.»
«You are a young girl. The woman is your aunt. You are of marrying age.»

6. Ask each player in turn what they're feeling and thinking as they're standing there looking at the burning well. Between each turn, describe how they're feeling the waves lapping at their feet, how the sea reflects the moonlight, how the smell from the burning well mixes with the smells of the night flowers of the island.
7. Let the players open their eyes, if they want to.
8. Tell the players they are stepping out into the sea. Describe the warmth of the water, the sand beneath their feet, the slight chill of the midnight air. Ask them how they feel, what they do. Let them play a little. (This, again, is a metaphor: They are immersing. Their subconscious minds are getting used to the water.)
9. Now, after a while, when they're comfortable, but before they get bored, ease into the flow of the rest of the game.

The flow of the rest of the game

From here on, you're on your own. That is, there is no set structure. You will follow your own intuition, the subtle interplay of the group.

That sounds very wishy-washy, doesn't it? GM secret: If you're not sure where to go, just pick one technique and one scene from the lists below. It really doesn't matter much which ones you pick. The players' minds will fill in blanks and connections from the previous scene – and remember, it's *not about plot*. It's about the here and now. A wedding scene, followed by a dream on the beach, followed by a walk in the forest ten years ago... it's all good, as long as the players are sensing, associating, reacting.

Techniques

- *Play to their senses.* Describe smell and touch. Heat, cold, the water on their skin. The smell of sand, of bodies, of fish, of fire, of burning herbs, of a lover's hair, of cinnamon. Let other players describe senses.
- *Ask for associations.* «You smell the citrus trees. What comes to your mind?»
- *Ask for reactions and emotions.* «She is hacking open coconut after coconut. You watch her. What do you feel?»
- *Outsource.* Use the players' minds as sources of ideas and images. Ask them questions like: «There's something on the roof of the hut. What is it?» «You remember an old dispute with your son. What was it?» «Something falls from the sky. What is it?» «The person next to you has a physical defect. What is it?»
- *Change characters as necessary.* A player starting out as an old man, may play a young girl next, or a monkey looking down on the characters. He might return as the ghost of the old man. Think of this as changing camera angles; you're changing atmospheric angles.
- *Move in time.* Go back and forth through the lives of the characters. Build and revisit memories. Perhaps one scene was about the marriage of one of the characters. Come back to it later, see it through the eyes of another participant. «You are also at the wedding, hiding outside in the bushes. The bushes scrape against your skin, making an unpleasant, tiny noise. Who is next to you?»
- *Ask for memories.* You're free to ask other players to describe a character's memories, or do so yourself. «She is thinking back on her fifth birthday. What does she remember?»
- *Run dream scenes* where you take total control of character actions, if you wish; do it as a conversation, where you describe what the character does, and the player says how the environment reacts. «You pick the rose. What happens?» «The petals fall off.» «You throw one petal into the air. What happens?» «It keeps flying up and up, until it disappears from sight.»

Scenes

- Gathered around the fire, eating fish.
- In a boat together.
- Underwater, meeting the fish.
- The wedding, long ago.
- Giving birth.
- Close, close to the burning well.
- In a dream.
- Singing together.
- Performing magic.
- Dying, alone or with someone else around.
- Alone in the forest at night.
- Having sex.

How the game ends.

When you feel it's time to finish the game, finish it. It's better to finish a little too early than a little too late. You might want to finish with sunrise at the beach, the brilliance of the sun making the burning oil fade in comparison. It's a good way to symbolize the awakening from the dream of the game, the return of reason.

After the game, your function is to be present and calm, and to make the players' return from the game a pleasant one. Sit peacefully – don't jump up and start doing stuff! Chat a little, but let the players lead the way. Take it easy. Perhaps after a while, you put on some music.

Design notes

This game is based on a session of impressionistic play conducted by my friend OPG¹ at a local con in 2006. I have taken many techniques and elements that were introduced in that session at the spur of the moment, and attempted to synthesize them into concepts and instructions so that they can be re-used. Some techniques and elements have been dropped, some emphasized or enhanced.

I've tied everything to my own world-view when it comes to the interplay of metaphor, immersion and the subconscious, to further my understanding of what happened at that session and how it might be generalized for further use.

This game has been a learning experience for me, but it feels like the start of something, not a finished idea or product. The categorization and integration of ideas – such as qualia feeds – is nowhere near finished.

¹ Name withheld to protect my anonymity in this contest. Full name will be revealed at the reader's request, and in any form of publication after the contest.