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THE CHANGING FACE OF VR

Edited by
Jordan Frith, Michael Saker

Pushing the boundaries
of experience across
multiple industries

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Chapter 2

VR storytelling for social justice and the ethics of playing Black bodies

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Abstract

Using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed role play principles of a "spect-actor" and joker figure as a performative lens, I analyse VR storytelling experiences by artists of colour that confront social justice issues and educate on Civil Rights history using a variety of platforms from 360 video to room-scale VR installations. I argue that narrative framing to cast a spect-actor into the body illusion of a protagonist of colour can be done ethically, and role play with NPCs designed as joker figures representing the oppressed community can promote empathic understanding.

Keywords: Ethical VR, Experiential Storytelling, Serious Play, Empathy Machine

Introduction

The experiential and performative dynamics of VR have increasingly been used by artists of colour to explore issues of social justice related to racism and Civil Rights. In this chapter, I argue that VR storytelling design principles developed for entertainment have the potential to surpass the impact of traditional documentary cinema when ethically applied to social justice narratives as multimodal serious play. The embodied 360 perspective of VR world simulation can safely transport spectators to an immersive representation of an oppressed community, and narrative framing with body illusions can cast them into the role of a protagonist in that community's struggle against systemic racism.

Innovative VR social justice experiences like *Carne Y Arena* (2017), *I Am a Man* (2018), *Traveling While Black* (2019), and *The March* (2020), employ design principles from cinema, video games, and participatory theatre arts to transport viewers into a serious simulation of another time, place, and community. The VR experience of taking the first-person perspective of an undocumented immigrant crossing

the Mexico-US border at night, or as a Black sanitation worker in Memphis during the 1968 Civil Rights protests, will be examined through the performative lens of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed "spect-actor" and "joker" roleplay concepts (Boal, 1992). Because the \$160-billion video game and VR industries still have a diversity problem, most of these projects were collaborations between artists of colour and white developers, with stated goals of enhancing player immersion and empathy towards the portrayed subjects.

As a white designer collaborating on a similar research project for a Reconstruction-era African American heritage site, Mitchelville XR Tour (Maraffi, 2020), I will discuss how the framing of VR storytelling has shifted from perceptual illusions to empathic theatre. I will also address critics of framing VR as an empathy machine on the technical and ethical issues, including the serious play of Black avatars in social justice simulations. In our virtual tour project, we are using extensive historical documents from the Library of Congress to model the world of Mitchelville's nineteenth century 3D structures and historical figures. But to immerse visitors in the illusion of presence in historic Mitchelville and create an empathic experience with the people who lived there, we are working closely with Gullah-Geechee community leaders, preservationists, and performers to represent their unique culture. We are applying some of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed system to design protagonist avatar roleplay that will encourage performative participation in a docudramatic simulation, while also employing a joker role to guide spect-actor improvisation through narrative framing that contextualizes the scene in a broader community struggle.

From VR as illusion to empathic through multimodal serious play

Previous work has shown that innovative VR entertainment attractions like The VOID's *Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire* (2017) used stage magic principles to create the illusion of being transported to impossibly scaled worlds populated with characters that display uncanny liveness (Maraffi, 2021). The VOID functioned like a nineteenth-century magic theatre, employing simulation-dissimulation techniques to misdirect a guest's attention away from the VR mechanism to a "hyper reality" experience that had a multimodal tangible aesthetic not possible in other types of screen-based media. It showed the potential of VR to be a new type of theatre of attractions that incorporated performative design principles from cinema, games, and participatory theatre. Such VR experiences display a literal 360 representation of the game design concept of a magic circle as world-building illusions (Stenros, 2012), where the players' first-person perspective is located in the centre of an embodied 3D avatar that acts in the virtual world with life-sized AI-controlled interactive characters. The multimodal play experience reflects theatre arts theorist Edward Gordon Craig's vision of a Theatre of the Future performed by "uber-marionettes" or super-puppets (Craig,

1907; 1919). This chapter will focus on exploring how both these successful VR entertainment techniques of world-building and performative role play are also being applied to edutainment or docudrama simulations of nonfiction Civil Rights histories, allowing participants to witness and, in some cases, act in scenes of oppression and emancipation. I will examine how some immersive VR storytellers of colour are reframing the medium from an entertainment illusion machine to an empathy machine for confronting social justice issues related to racial bias.

Before developer Chris Milk's TED talk on the potential of VR to be the "ultimate empathy machine" (2015), movie critic Roger Ebert similarly framed cinema as a "machine that generates empathy" (2005). But the same thing could be said about live theatrical productions, and a recent study did indicate that watching live theatre can increase empathy and pro-social behaviour in spectators (Rathje, Hackel, and Zaki, 2021). Theatre of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal considered empathy a powerful emotional relationship created between spectator and protagonist, and "...one of the mechanisms of the dramatic ritual which can be put to good or bad use." (Boal, 1985, p. 181). According to Boal, a bad use in Aristotelian tragedy was to wield empathy as a weapon over spectators by making them passive witnesses to the dramatic action using an invisible fourth wall. In his Forum Theatre system developed in the 1970s, he reversed this power dynamic by casting spectators as "spect-actor" protagonists (Boal 1992), thus removing the fourth wall and shifting their perspective to the centre of the scene. With similar improvisational theatre game dynamics to live-action role play (LARP) in Dungeons and Dragons tabletop games developed in the same time period, including a "joker" role that functioned like a Dungeon Master, Boal's system utilized the roleplay dynamics for confronting oppression instead of fantasy entertainment. Though Gonzalo Frasca suggested that Boal's exercises could be simulated in serious video games to address social and political issues (2004), his ludology approach rejected both fictive narratives and nonfiction histories and did not apply Boal's performative principles to player avatar interaction with non-player characters (NPCs) in computer role-playing games (RPGs).

While there has been some research on adapting Boal's methods in VR as a model for generating future-oriented design fictions (Fisher and Kozubaev, 2020), the scope of this chapter is not to translate Boal's Theatre of Oppression system into VR, but instead to draw from his and other performative principles related to empathic theatre. Even more than screen-based video games, Boal's spect-actor concept fits the embodied first-person perspective of VR avatars, where a representation of the player's head and hands can perform a life-sized character in the centre of a 360-world simulation. Performance studies show that playing a character role requires empathy, because actors "...need to be

able to empathize with and advocate for our character, no matter how heinous her behaviour.” (Blair, 2015). In Boal’s method, the spect-actor forms an emotional connection to the “ethos” or struggles of their character in the *mise-en-scene* staging of a social conflict, while the joker figure explains the scenic “dianoia” or motivating reasons for the struggle in the context of confronting community oppression (Boal, 1992).

Boal’s decomposition of the empathy dynamics in a dramatic scene to performative interaction between the spect-actor and joker roles reflects the dual-stage magic principles of simulation-dissimulation (Maraffi, 2021). In Magic Theatre, the magician invites a spectator to willingly volunteer for an acting role in the show, and then applies dissimulation in the form of misdirection and “patter” to frame the illusion as a trick to be solved by the audience. Game developer Chris Hecker considered style vs structure decomposition to be essential to solve “hard interactive problems” (Hecker, 2008), and certainly generating wonder or empathy in an interactive experience is a hard problem. In a VR social justice experience based on Boal’s empathic theatre concepts, the player as spect-actor would be invited to perform as an avatar of colour, and the system would provide a joker function through life-sized NPC guides or storytellers that represent an oppressed people, and who frame the scene as an ethical problem to be solved by players. What Boal makes clear in his work is that participatory theatre was the original empathy machine, and that empathy is generated by the spectator’s perceived closeness to the protagonist and cognitive engagement with the struggles of a community against systemic oppression.

Boal’s Forum Theatre application of the ethos and dianoia principles to his spect-actor and joker roles reflects the multidimensional psychology decomposition of empathy to affective and cognitive types. Psychology studies have associated presence and immersion in VR to a sense of embodiment through body-swap illusions that allow users to “see through another’s eyes” (Wiederhold, 2020), and by generating empathic concern and self-other merging through embodied “perspective-taking” (Thériault et al., 2021). The VOID VR experiences created body-swap and other embodiment illusions based on stage magic principles of perceptual and cognitive misdirection to facilitate VR storytelling immersion (Maraffi, 2021), which align with cinema studies on perceptual and narrative immersion as a source of character empathy, such that “...perceptual immersion is primary and immediate, narrative immersion is secondary and conceptual, operating largely through cognitive processes resulting from the temporal development of narrative” (Sunderland, 2019, p. 11).

Other VR psychology studies have explored the multidimensional link between empathy and immersion and how presence and agency in embodied VR is central to the empathic experience (Cummings et al., 2021; Barbot and Kaufman, 2020). Some VR embodied perspective-taking studies have indicated a reduction of

racial bias through cooperative role play as a Black avatar with other Black NPCs (Patane et al., 2020), and others suggest embodied VR role play in an avatar designed to counter stereotypes can have a Proteus Effect, decreasing implicit racial bias through positive and non-stereotypical traits displayed by the avatar (Bertrand et al., 2018). Theatre, cinema, and psychology studies have similar multimodal framing of both immersion and empathy in a simulated experience through perceptual illusions and cognitive framing. This multimodal serious play framework provides a lens for analysing and designing VR storytelling experiences that address social justice issues related to racial bias.

Diversity and Black character representation in historic video game worlds

Despite the \$160 billion USD video game industry being four times the economic draw of films in 2020, including the VR games sector (Santos, 2020), there is still a diversity problem in who produces and is represented in game titles. Developer interviews indicate there are normative pressures on companies to repeat popular narrative tropes and cast a white male figure as the default player character, a design decision that is often facilitated by casual or colour-blind racism in the industry (Srauy, 2019). Ubisoft's popular *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-2020) introduced playable Black protagonists in *Assassin's Creed 3: Liberation* (2012) and *Assassin's Creed 4: Freedom Cry* (2013), both downloadable additions to the main storyline, using the science fiction plot device of time travel to situate players as Black freedom fighters in eighteenth-century New Orleans and Port-au-Prince during the North Atlantic slave trade.

Game studies researchers have argued that diversity in character representation can expand the potentials of play (Murray, 2018), fulfil an ethical obligation to the variety of video game consumers (Neely, 2017), and is a way to foster real-world empathy for others (Gilbert, 2019). Interviews with high school students who played *Freedom Cry* indicated an increased empathy for enslaved peoples by playing Black protagonist Adewale and experiencing how much freedom mattered to the character. *Freedom Cry* has been called "counter-hegemonic commemorative play" which uses character role play "to enable the legitimacy and acceptability of marginalized identities" (Hammar, 2017, p. 388), possibly through a Proteus Effect of performing the Adewale avatar. Murray compares the Aveline de Grandpré character in *Liberation* to the historical figure Harriet Tubman, especially the intersectionality of the "persona" character dynamic, where players must change costumes or perform different social roles to infiltrate plantations and emancipate Black NPCs (Murray, 2018). Though praised extensively by game critics (Narcisse, 2013), *Liberation* is not without criticism, as Ubisoft hired white actress Amber Goldfarb to voice the main protagonist rather than a performer of colour (Narcisse, 2012). This highlights some of the ethical issues of representing bodies of colour for gameplay in a greater entertainment

industry that continues to lack diversity and has a history of employing white performers to portray stereotypical ethnic characters in twentieth-century cinema all the way back to nineteenth-century theatrical minstrelsy.

Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Liberation* and *Freedom Cry* video games frame their time travel metanarrative with the tagline "History is our playground" and has been criticized for representing enslaved Africans as gameplay resources while sanitizing the extreme abuse of slavery in the game world (Murray, 2018). In addition, though these titles have been shown to increase student engagement with historical periods through role-play, the interaction may not promote critical thinking about how the narratives are framed (Gilbert, 2019). The lack of cognitive engagement with the portrayed history may be a result of lacking a joker figure that represents the oppressed community and comments on broader social themes. Other games like *Mafia 3* (2017) did design some joker dynamics into the Father James NPC, a Black priest and fellow Vietnam War veteran who continuously challenges Lincoln Clay on his violent choices and how they affect the community. The game's extensive use of 1960s diegetic media in the form of staged radio and television broadcasts frequently creates an immersive documentary aesthetic, situating the game world in a simulation of the Jim Crow South in the Civil Rights era. Although gameplay as Clay requires dynamics that resemble the violent Black-man stereotype, performing Clay's violence in the context of believable systemic racism has a racial justice affect that can feel transformative to players (Leonard, 2019).

Virtual green book: VR time travel to explore Black civil rights landmarks

The *Negro Motorist Green Book* was an essential travel guide for Black Americans published by Victor Green from 1966-1967 when the systemic racism of Black Codes and Jim Crow laws made car travel hazardous for people of colour (LOC, 1936). The metaphor of a virtual Green Book seems fitting for VR applications that create the illusion of going back in time to experience safe spaces in the Black community that were central to the struggle for Civil Rights. In this section, I will examine two such VR experiences of historic Green Book landmarks; one, a room-scale VR 3D simulation of the Lorraine Motel during the 1968 Memphis Black sanitation workers strike where Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, and the other, a 360 VR docudramatic experience of how Ben's Chili Bowl diner in Washington DC sustained the Black community throughout the Civil Rights era. Using a multimodal serious play lens, I will examine whether the illusion of historical world-building using the perceptual immersion of VR may lead to affective empathy, and whether the storytelling approach has potential for narrative immersion to generate cognitive empathy.

Derek Ham's *I Am A Man* (2018) room-scale VR experience affords you the role of a Black sanitation worker during the 1968 Memphis sanitation labour strike

This is an abbreviated pre-press sample of **Chapter 2: VR storytelling for social justice and the ethics of playing Black bodies** by Christopher Maraffi, from the new book *The changing face of VR: Pushing the boundaries of experience across multiple industries* (Frith and Saker, eds 2022).

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