

# ***The Ethics of Playing Black Bodies in VR***

Emergence - ADN Lecture Series Fall 2022

**Chris 'Topher' Maraffi**

cmaraff@ncsu.edu

Asst Professor of Media Arts, Design and Technology

NCSU Department of Art & Design

**NC STATE**

College of Design



- **Chapter 2: VR Storytelling for Social Justice and the Ethics of Playing Black Bodies.**

**Abstract:** Using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed role play principles of a "spectactor" 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.

[https://proxying.lib.ncsu.edu/index.php?url=https://search-ebSCOhost-com.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=3333806&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_17](https://proxying.lib.ncsu.edu/index.php?url=https://search-ebSCOhost-com.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=3333806&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_17)



# Introduction

- This paper relates to my design work on the Mitchelville XR Tour and navigates how to collaborate on Black histories that have been actively suppressed.
- Seeks to answer the question: Why as a white man am I interested in creating educational media about Black history and culture, and can I design interactive media scenes with Black historical characters ethically?
- Begins to develop and apply XR design frameworks that draw from empathic theatre practices such as Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.
- Analyzes related work by artists of color to find a best-practices for framing Black narratives and representing playable Black characters.
- Refutes critics of framing VR as an “empathy machine” on the technical and ethical issues.



# Mitchelville Historical Tour Project

- **NEH & Epic Games Megagrant Funded Project.**

<https://tophermaraffi.com/2020/06/08/mitchelville-ar-tour/>



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES



- **Free augmented reality tour app for mobile phones, and other virtual-mixed reality headset experiences.**
- **Visualize Mitchelville scenes and related narratives of emancipation and Civil Rights in Beaufort County.**
- **Collaborate with Gullah community leaders, artists, and experts to develop an immersive experience that will be accessible and sustainable.**





# Suppressed Stories of the Reconstruction Era

“...I'd venture that few American historical periods are more relevant to understanding our contemporary racial politics than Reconstruction.”

— Dr Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*

<http://www.reconstruction360.org/>

- How can we use VR to time-travel to historical places of emancipation and freedom, where travelers can meet heroes in the black community and experience their stories in their own words?





# From VR as Perceptual Illusion to Empathic Affect

- The most impressive VR entertainment experiences can transport you to impossible storytelling worlds.
- The VOID VR theaters used participatory stage magic principles to create full-body perceptual illusions.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcHmS48nN48>
- As themed entertainment, they incorporated multimodal design principles from theatre, cinema, and games.
- Can we apply a similar design approach to more serious themes in VR to create empathy for social injustice?





# Evolution of Mediated Empathy Machines

- White XR designer Chris Milk was criticized for claiming VR was the “ultimate empathy machine” (2015), and film critic Roger Ebert claimed the same title for movies ten years earlier, but I argue that the original empathy machine was theatre.
- Since the 1970s, *Theatre of the Oppressed* founder Augusto Boal wrote extensively about empathy as a stage mechanism and designed improv role play games to move spectators into the center of a scene focused on confronting injustice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXHil1TPxvA>



# Serious Play: The Mechanics of Empathic Theatre

- Boal's participatory theatre method cast community members into a protagonist "spect-actor" role to safely act out an improvised scene of oppression, while a "joker" that represented the community as a whole would narrate and contextualize the action.

(Boal 1992)

- Boal's theatre dynamics functioned like another 1970s improv game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, where players used LARP to act out fantasy scenes directed by a dungeon master.

- Game designer Gonzalo Frasca suggested that Boal's method could be used to develop a *Games of the Oppressed* (2004), but his ludological approach did not consider narrative player/NPC interaction as a viable application for the spect-actor and joker concepts.





# Playable Black Heroes in Video Games

- The video game industry still has a diversity problem in both content and production.
- But there are increasingly relevant playable Black characters... Miles Morales, Lee Everett, Clementine and Markus. (Spider Man: Miles Morales 2020) (Walking Dead 2012)  
(Detroit Become Human 2018)
- Some games have confronted issues of historic and contemporary racism through playable Black characters... Assassin's Creed's Aveline de Grandpré and Adewale characters, and Lincoln Clay in Mafia 3 (2017)... but not without criticism.



(Liberation 2012)

(Freedom Cry 2013)



# Virtual Green Book: VR Time Travel to Civil Rights Landmarks

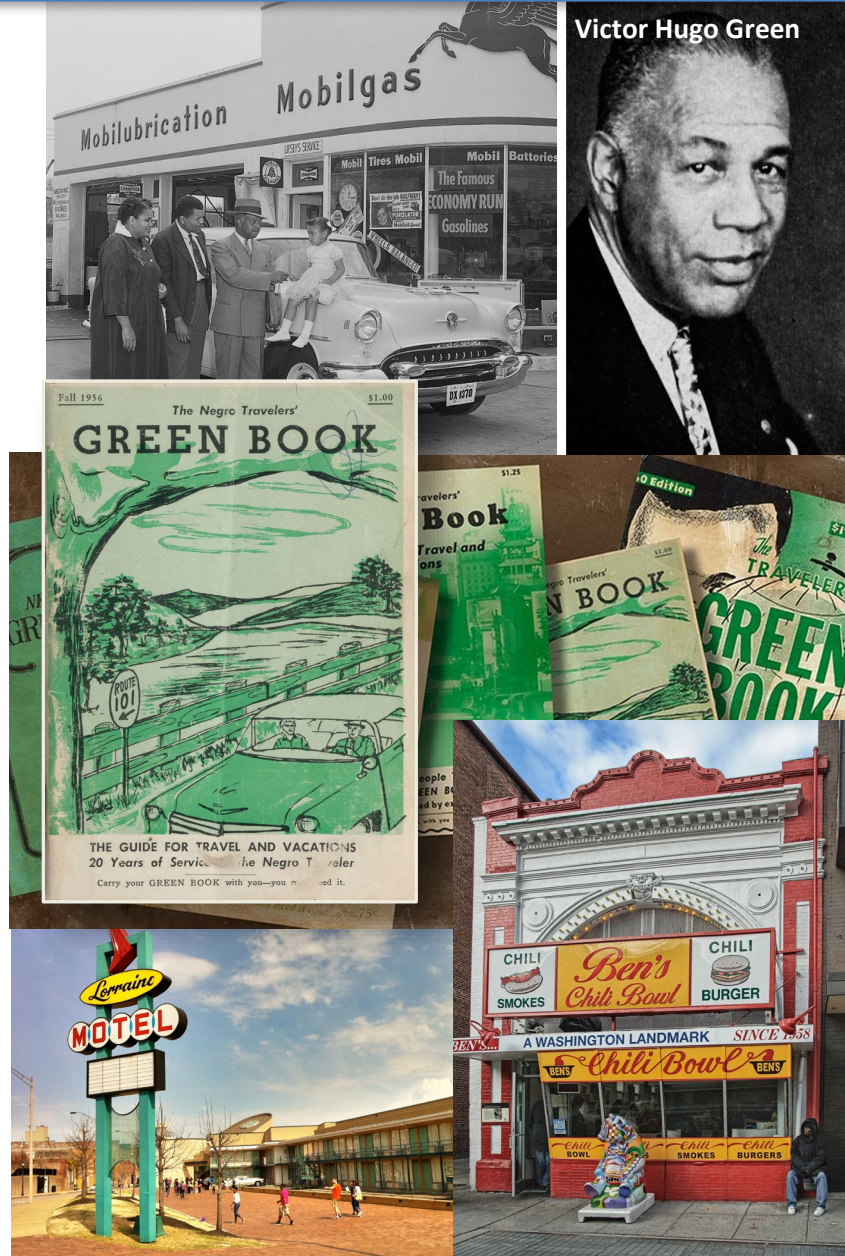
- The Green Book (published by Victor H. Green Co., 1936-1967) guide to safe travel in the black community during the Jim Crow era.

(Giorgis 2019)

- VR moves our perspective to the center of an increasingly realistic simulation, which has been shown to be perceptually immersive through body swap illusions and perspective-taking.

(Wiederhold 2020)

- Impossible experiences like traveling back in time to key moments in Civil Rights history are starting to be explored.





# Travelling While Black VR Film (2019)

“I think we all know America hasn’t really dealt with the issues around racism, and slavery, and the legacy of slavery,” Williams states. “I think that we have to have, in a way, ‘conversation starters,’ and I hope that this VR piece, *Traveling While Black*, is just that.” — Roger Ross Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOBwXOgIb8>

- Cinematic 360 video scenes of historical recreations and contemporary documentary interviews of the owner and patrons of Ben’s Chili Bowl in DC, and their experiences of segregation and discrimination.
- Visuals and narration create strong storytelling from the point of view of the 360 camera, but lacks any ability to explore the space or break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall to interact with the community it portrays.



# I Am A Man VR (2018)

Narrative VR can “tap into the emotions” of the user and “tell a much richer story” than an artifact behind glass in a museum, Ham explains. Facts and photos come alive in VR with the help of music, lighting, and other intricately planned details, creating an “intense” experience that encourages empathy and connection.— Derek Ham (Klocke 2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkXHPgQ0ftc>

- Interactive 3D scenes of 1968 Memphis sanitation labor strike with “I Am a Man” march, TV news on Civil Rights struggles of the time, and the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was assassinated.
- Avatar affords the role of a black sanitation worker and has agency to explore and pick up some objects, but full interaction is still limited.



(Pitts 2008)





# Flesh & Sand VR Installation (2017)

LA INSTALACIÓN

## CARNE Y ARENA

DE ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU  
Y EMMANUEL LUBEZKI, LLEGA A  
LA CDMX EN AGOSTO



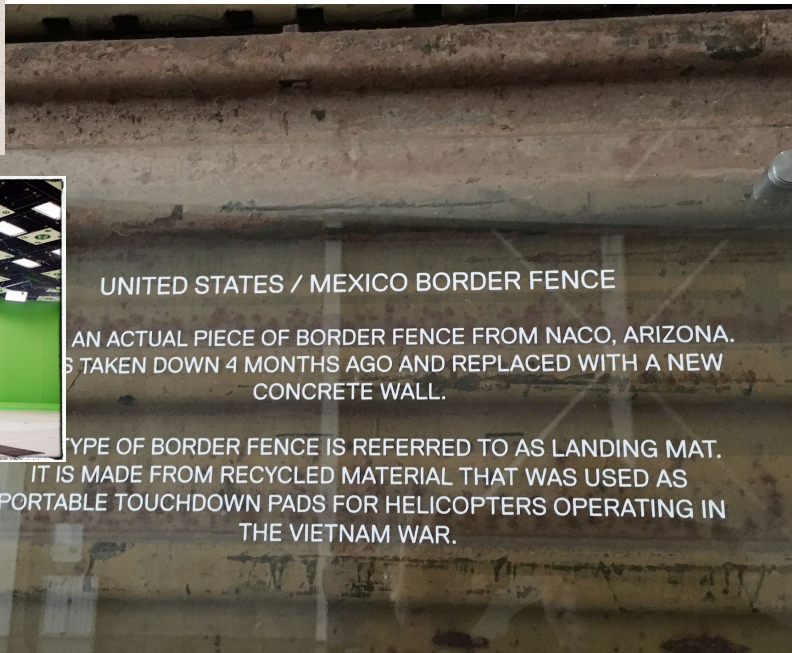
(Smith, 2019)



“...it’s part theater, part documentary, and it’s part-physical installation, it’s a virtual installation — it’s many different arts combined. For me that was fascinating, and the decision to work with real immigrants, to take from them their true experience that they share.” - Alejandro Iñárritu,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF-focK30WE>

- Inarritu interviewed immigrant refugees on their experiences, and invited them to perform the virtual characters in the VR scenes.



- Room-scale VR experience that was collaboration between Inarritu, ILMxLab, and the undocumented community.





# Time's The March VR Installation (2020)

“When you watch these stories, they’re more powerful, because you’re actually experiencing them instead of reading about them.”

— Alton Glass, Co-creator of Time's The March VR Experience

<https://time.com/5784009/martin-luther-king-jr-virtual-reality/>

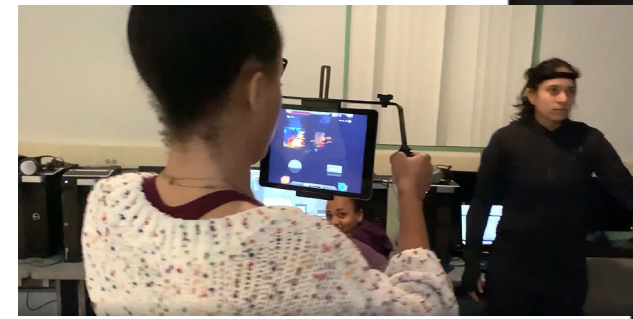
- Room-scale immersive VR installation with a hyper-real Dr. King at the DC Civil Rights march that culminated in his “I have a Dream” speech.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5VHE0hGV6Y>
- Time magazine, Alton Glass, and Viola Davis collaborated with film visual effects company Digital Domain (Titanic, Avatar, etc) to simulate virtual travel to a specific time and place in Civil Rights history.





# Towards an Ethical Best Practices for White Collaborators

- Gender and facial features are very easy to change with emerging AI character creator tools, so avoid avatar stereotypes that could imply a 21<sup>st</sup> century minstrelsy or digital blackface.
- Stick to historical source material and provide character affordances that lead to believable and deep character representations.
- Advocate for artists, performers, and voice actors of color in the virtual production process.
- Collaborate closely with members of the represented community and provide educational programs for how to become content producers.



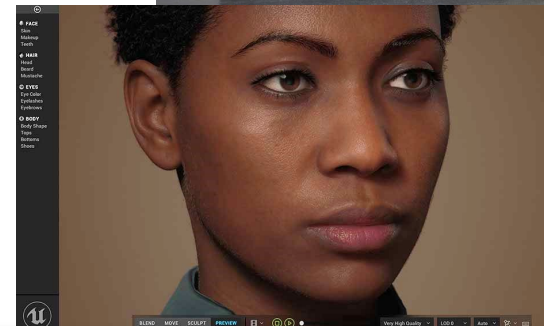


## Addressing Criticism of VR as and Empathy Machine

- **Nakamura criticized framing VR as an empathy machine because it is visceral not cognitive, and “virtuous VR” is identity tourism and not people of color speaking their own truth. Eitzen criticized VR as a medium for empathy compared to traditional cinema, citing a lack of framing and cinematography to direct the viewers attention, which transfers spectator attention away from others to their own experience.**  
(Nakamura 2020) (Eitzen 2021)
- **The examples in this paper show that serious VR storytelling is being adopted by black artists to tell their histories and truths, in collaboration with white designers and technologists. The most immersive VR experiences are not just perceptual 360 videos, but multimodal installations that are performative and cognitive through role play with joker guides that represent the community.**

# Going Forward: Critical XR Design

- Taking themed entertainment experiences into XR design frameworks that have a critical focus.
- What would a Disney's Hall of Presidents be like as an AR experience with Black heroes like Harriet Tubman? What would a Carousel of Progress show be like with Metahuman Gullah-Geechee figures, language, and culture?
- Using photogrammetry, performance capture, virtual production and XR to preserve and share the stories of living Gullah-Geechee elders.





# Paper References

- Austin, P. L. (2020) 'How TIME Re-created the 1963 March on Washington in VR', Time, 20 Feb. Available at: <https://time.com/5784009/martin-luther-king-jr-virtual-reality/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Barbot, B. and Kaufman, J. (2020) 'What makes immersive VR the ultimate empathy machine? Discerning the underlying mechanisms of change'. Computers in Human Behavior. Vol111, October, 106431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106431> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Bertrand, P. Guegan, J. Robieux, L. McCall, C. and Zenasni, F. (2018) 'Learning Empathy Through VR: Multiple Strategies for Training Empathy-Related Abilities Using Body Ownership Illusions in Embodied VR'. Frontiers in Robotics and AI, 5:26. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2018.00026> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Blair, R. (2015). Notes on Empathy, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Theatre/Education. p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org, 2. Available at: <http://p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?p=1101> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Boal, A. (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed. Originally published in Spanish as Teatro de Oprimido in 1974. Translated by Charles A. and M. L. McBride. Theatre Communications Group. New York.
- Boal, A. (1992) Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Translated by Adrian Jackson. Taylor and Francis, Routledge, London and New York.
- Carey, M. (2019) 'Director Roger Ross Williams on Emmy-Nominated VR Film 'Traveling While Black': "It's A Big Moment"', Deadline, 26 August. Available at: <https://deadline.com/2019/08/traveling-while-Black-director-roger-ross-williams-emmys-vr-interview-1202704524/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Craig, E. G. (1907) The Actor and The Uber-Marionette. The Mask (self-published periodical), Florence.
- Craig, E. G. (1919) The Theatre Advancing. On Learning Magic. Little, Brown, & Co. Boston.
- Cummings, J. Tsay-Vogel, M. Cahill, T. Zhang, L. (2021) 'Effects of immersive storytelling on affective, cognitive, and associative empathy: The mediating role of presence', New Media & Society. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820986816> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Ebert, R. (2005) 'Roger Ebert on Empathy'. Dedication Speech at the Chicago Theatre. Available at: <https://www.rogerebert.com/empathy/video-roger-ebert-on-empathy> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Eitzen, D. (2019) 'Why VR is NOT an empathy machine'. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/353650572> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Eitzen, D. (2021). The Problems and Potentials of VR for Documentary Storytelling. Cinergie – Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti, 10(19), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/12212> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Fisher, J. and Kozubae, S. (2020) 'Applied Theatre for Developing Participatory Design Fictions in VR'. Proceedings of CHI 2020 Extended Abstracts, April 25–30, Honolulu. Available at: <https://www.biopolisproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Applied-Theater-and-VR-DIS2020.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Frasca, G. (2004) 'Videogames of the Oppressed: critical thinking, education, tolerance and other trivial Issues'. Chapter in: First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game, ed., Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, MIT Press. Cambridge.

# Paper References

- Gilbert, L. (2019) 'Assassin's Creed reminds us that history is human experience: Students' senses of empathy while playing a narrative video game', *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 47:1, 108-137, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1560713> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Hammar, E.L. (2017) 'Counter-hegemonic commemorative play: marginalized pasts and the politics of memory in the digital game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry', *Rethinking History*, 21:3, 372-395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256622> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Hecker, C. (2008) 'Structure VS Style'. Game Developers Conference Proceedings Keynote Lecture. San Jose. Available at: [https://www.chrishecker.com/Structure\\_vs\\_Style](https://www.chrishecker.com/Structure_vs_Style) (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Heliotis, P. (2017) 'Filmmaker Alejandro G. Iñárritu on Breaking the Fourth Wall', *AnOther*, 05 September. Available at: <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/10124/filmmaker-alejandro-g-inarritu-on-breaking-the-fourth-wall> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Hocking, C. (2007) Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what the game is about [Blog post]. Click Nothing: Design from a Long Time Ago, Oct 07. Available at: [https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html) (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Johnson, S. (2020) 'First look: In VR, Martin Luther King Jr. delivers soul-stirring 'Dream' speech at DuSable Museum'. *Chicago Tribune*, 27 Feb. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/museums/ct-ent-martin-luther-king-virtual-reality-the-march-review-ttd-0228-20200227-sji62kswmzasxgsi5rjjvsbqba-story.html> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Klocke, C. (2018) 'I AM A Man | VR Civil Rights App', NCSU College of Design, 25 January. Available at: <https://design.ncsu.edu/blog/2018/01/25/i-am-a-man-vr-civil-rights-app/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Leonard, D. (2019) 'Virtual Anti-racism: Pleasure, Catharsis, and Hope in Mafia III and Watch Dogs 2'. *Humanity & Society*, Vol. 44(1) 111-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619835863> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- LOC. (1936) *The Negro motorist Green-book*. New York City: V.H. Green. [Periodical] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016298176/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Maraffi, C. (2020) *Historic Mitchelville AR Tour NEH Design Document*. Available at: [https://tophermaraffi.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/mitchelvilletourdesigndocfin\\_maraffi\\_2020.pdf](https://tophermaraffi.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/mitchelvilletourdesigndocfin_maraffi_2020.pdf) (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Maraffi, C. (2021). 'Stage Magic as a Performative Design Principle for VR Storytelling'. *Cinergie – Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti*, 10(19), 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/12234> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Milk, C. (2015) 'How VR can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine'. TED 2015. Available at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_milk\\_how\\_virtual\\_reality\\_can\\_create\\_the\\_ultimate\\_empathy\\_machine](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine) (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Murray, S. (2018) 'Poetics of Form and Politics of Identity; Or, Games as Cultural Palimpsests', in *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 67–113.
- Nakamura, L. (2020) 'Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous VR and the automation of racial empathy', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 19(1), pp. 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920906259> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).



# Paper References

- Narcisse, E. (2012) 'White Actress Will Voice Assassin's Creed's Black Heroine', Kotaku, 29 August. Available at: <https://kotaku.com/white-actress-will-voice-assassins-creeds-Black-heroine-5939009> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Narcisse, E. (2013) 'This Assassin's Creed Heroine Is a Great Black Game Character. Here's How It Happened.', Kotaku, 27 Feb. Available at: <https://kotaku.com/this-assassin-s-creed-heroine-is-a-great-Black-game-cha-5987083> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Neely, E. (2017) 'No Player is Ideal: Why Video Game Designers Cannot Ethically Ignore Players' Real-World Identities'. ACM Computers and Society 47(3), 98-111. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3144592.3144602> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Patane, I. Lelgouarch, A. Banakou, D. Verdelet, G. Desoche, C. Koun, E. Salemme, R. Slater, M. Farnè, A. (2020) 'Exploring the Effect of Cooperation in Reducing Implicit Racial Bias and Its Relationship with Dispositional Empathy and Political Attitudes'. Frontiers of Psychology. Oct 28. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.510787> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Patterson, J. (2020) 'Lessons from Time's ground-breaking two year immersive VR project, The March' FIPP, 30 March. Available at: <https://www.fipp.com/news/lessons-from-time-vr-project-the-march/#> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Ramos, D. (2020) 'The Messy Truth: Van Jones, Brie Larson and Elijah Allan-Blitz Talk The Immersive Empathy Of Eye-Opening VR Series', Deadline, 27 August. Available at: <https://deadline.com/2020/08/the-messy-truth-of-vr-experience-van-jones-brie-larson-elijah-allan-blitz-representation-inclusion-diversity-1203022976/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Rathje, S. Hackel, L. and Zaki, J. (2021) 'Attending live theatre improves empathy, changes attitudes, and leads to pro-social behaviour'. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Vol95, July 2021, 104138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104138> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Rueda, J. and Lara, F. (2020) 'VR and Empathy Enhancement: Ethical Aspects'. Frontiers of Robotics and AI, 7:506984. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2020.506984> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Santos, D. (2020) 'Why the gaming industry is now one of the most exciting industries to work in', Medium, 07 July. Available at: <https://medium.com/@dsantos.rgf/why-the-gaming-industry-is-now-one-of-the-most-exciting-industries-to-work-for-rgf-fb8ca9aae1be> (Accessed: 27 May 2022)
- Smith, P. (2019) 'Into Iñárritu: How CARNE y ARENA Set the Bar for How VR Should Be Experienced', Immerse, 08 August. Available at: <https://immerse.news/into-i%C3%B1%C3%A1rritu-how-carne-y-arena-sets-the-bar-for-how-vr-should-be-experienced-de852124a6ff> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Srauy, S. (2019) 'Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry', Games and Culture. 2019; 14(5): 478-497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Stearns, E. (2019) 'Setting the Tone - Ethan Stearns, MWM Immersive (Carne y Arena, Chained)', Immersive Design Summit 2004, September. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIvcUK8laew> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Stenros, J. (2012) 'In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play'. Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global - Games in Culture and Society, Vol. 10, ISBN / ISSN 2342-9666.

# Paper References

- Sunderland, P. (2019). The Virtual Worlds of Cinema: Visual Effects, Simulation, and the Aesthetics of Cinematic Immersion. PhD Thesis. University of Sydney. Available at: <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/21052> (Accessed: 27/May 2022).
- Tapley, K. (2017) 'Oscars: Alejandro G. Inarritu's VR Installation 'Carne y Arena' to Receive Special Award'. Variety Magazine, Oct 27. Available at: <https://variety.com/2017/film/awards/oscars-alejandro-g-inarritus-virtual-reality-installation-carne-y-arena-to-receive-special-award-1202601265/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Thériault, R. Olson, J. Krol, S. Raz, A. (2021) 'Body swapping with a Black person boosts empathy: Using VR to embody another', Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218211024826> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Utichi, J. (2017) 'The Birth of An Art Form: How Alejandro G. Iñárritu And Emmanuel Lubezki Learned To Master VR – Cannes', Deadline, 21 May. Available at: <https://deadline.com/2017/05/alejandro-g-inarritu-emmanuel-lubezki-carne-y-arena-virtual-reality-cannes-1202099184/> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).
- Wiederhold, B. (2020) 'Embodiment Empowers Empathy in VR'. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, Volume 23, Number 11, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.29199.editorial> (Accessed: 27 May 2022).