

The blurred lines between spectator and character: Narrative integration of the user in cinematic virtual reality

**Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera, U-TAD Universidad de Tecnología y Arte Digital
Julia Sabina Gutiérrez, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares**

Introduction: the paradox of immersion

The Baby's Cry (El llanto del bebé, Jorge Blein, 2017) is a live-action narrative virtual reality (VR) piece in which the spectators take on the point of view of a baby. As users, we observe how a grandmother interacts with the baby. She tries to feed the baby, but we cannot taste the food. The baby spits and cries, but we do not. This simple example illustrates the paradox of immersion in VR. Regardless of how believable a piece is, user engagement with the virtual world is always limited. This feature constitutes a major challenge for VR storytellers. How can the story integrate the spectator in the virtual world? And how can it justify their limited ability to interact with the environment? This article explores the overlaps between the character, focalizer, and user in CVR and proposes narrative strategies to navigate the paradox of immersion. First, we draw from traditional narratology, film theory, and scriptwriting. Second, through an analysis of live-action CVR pieces, we propose a typology of user-character, of narrative devices used to integrate spectators in the virtual world, justifying their presence as well as their limited ability to engage with their surroundings.

The rise of CVR

VR can be defined as “the presentation of first-person experiences through the use of a head-mounted display and headphones that enable users to experience a synthetic environment as if they were physically there” (Mateer, 2017: 1) and it includes a variety of techniques ranging from CGI to 360-degree live-action filmmaking or a combination both. Much of the literature about VR emerges from the fields of Psychology and Computer Sciences and responds to its simulative potential, which explains the popular misconception that VR intrinsically involves virtual spaces only created through CGI (see the popular works of psychologist Mel Slater or of computer scientist Frank A. Biocca). Media scholars and narratologists responded to the birth of VR in 1965 with great expectations. Until the nineties and early two-thousands, scholars privileged CGI-based VR because it could simulate impossible experiences, such as flying, and it could also fulfill limitless narratological fantasies through interactivity (Román Gubern, 1996; Maire-Laure Ryan, 2001).

The potential of an artform in which spectators are not passive observers but actual agents inhabiting the diegetic space led media scholars to focus on the type of VR experiences in which users can move around, interact, and modify the story. As Gubern explains,

Having been able to travel with our gaze with TV's bio-sedentariness, simulation today does not only involve our eyes but the entire body of the spectator, creating a hallucinatory nomadism... The cyberspace does not exist to be inhabited, but to be explored (Gubern, 1996: 166-167).¹

The initial and still influential response to VR epitomized the fascination of scholars with the idea of ending the subjugated relationship between the spectator and the screen. Because of this heavy emphasis on interactivity and simulation, the progressive rise of cinematic VR (CVR) is relatively recent, both with live-action cameras and with CGI. The notion of CVR refers to traditional narratives with limited interactivity influenced by cinema as its main predecessor medium. These narratives have remained marginal until recently due to what Kath Dooley calls VR's version of the cinema of the attractions, spectacular explorations of the novelty of this technology that highlight its simulative potential (2018: 97). In contrast, CVR forces the user to remain in place, even though they can turn their head and direct their gaze as they please. One of the main challenges for VR filmmaking has been its commercial viability, but a moderate democratization of VR equipment has taken place in recent years, leading to more low-budget 180 and 360-degree productions. Additionally, some major initiatives have supported the development of narrative pieces in VR, such as the initiative of *The New York Times* called “The Daily 360” or the

specialized sections of traditional film festivals like Sundance's New Frontier and the Biennale's Venice VR Expanded.

Above all, CVR consists on "a type of immersive VR experience" within "synthetic worlds" that are created through "pre-rendered picture and sound elements" (Mateer, 2017: 15). Because the virtual world is not generated through graphics processed in real-time, the interactivity of the user is limited as it relies on "predetermined viewpoints" within the virtual space, which in most cases is of 360 degrees (Dooley, 2018: 97). The main difference between traditional VR and CVR is the "inability of users to interact with elements contained within the virtual world" as well as to move around the synthetic space autonomously (Mateer, 2017: 15). This limitation constitutes the main challenge in order to explain the users' presence in the virtual environment because the spectator may feel the illusion of being physically present but will be unable to engage with their surroundings actively. With this in mind, how can CVR stories narratively justify this mismatch without disrupting the immersion of the experience?

After initial experimentation, creatives are defining some basic narrative and aesthetic conventions in VR. Prominent film directors such as Robert Rodríguez and Nacho Vigalondo have explored this technology. Pieces are hardly ever more than 20 minutes long because of the physical discomfort of wearing a headset. Many VR filmmakers privilege simple aesthetic choices to avoid confusing the spectator, such as sticking to a traditional three-act structure (Edwards, 2017), directing the user's gaze effectively to ensure that they do not miss any crucial information, and maintaining the same point of view throughout the entire piece to avoid confusion (Rath-Wiggins, 2016). Back in 1995, Keneth Meyer already foreshadowed this concern and recommended simple narrative threads and limited interactivity in CVR (1995: 233-237).

The underlying concern is the user's limited media literacy regarding VR technology. Scholars and VR filmmakers address the danger of "overwhelming" the user with too much information. Thus, creatives recommend giving the user time to explore the environment at the beginning of the piece, to satisfy their "fear of missing out" (FOMO), and to acclimate to the virtual world (see Dooley, Santesmases, and Rath-Wiggins). In literature about VR it has become commonplace to discuss the need for a new audiovisual "grammar." This discussion revolves around how this new "language" can direct the gaze in a medium that is no longer limited by the frame (see for example Dooley, Mateer, or Edwards). Interestingly, these prescriptions contrast with some traditional dramatic paradigms since, as Meyer affirms in his exploration of dramatic VR, in most storytelling paradigms everything must contribute to the action (Meyer, 1995: 233). In sum, CVR must examine traditional narrative paradigms to articulate its own storytelling conventions.

The persistent concern to guide the user does not only respond to the cognitive side of the literacy gap, but also to a purely physiological aspect of it. Commonly referred to as "VR legs", the user's familiarity with the medium also involves their physical adaptation. Without a proper adjustment, headsets can cause different degrees of dizziness, known as VR sickness or cybersickness (Wolterbeek, 2018; Stanney *et al.*, 2020). For example, recent evidence shows that females tend to experience more motion sickness because VR headsets are designed to fit the interpupillary distance that most males have (Stanney *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, the user's sensory engagement may contradict their perception of the virtual environment, sending the brain contradictory vestibular cues. Ultimately, lack of familiarity with the medium and cybersickness can hinder the immersive potential of the experience. While VR is associated with immersion, the user may navigate between embodiment and physical dissociation.

Presence as a narrative axis

The presence of the user in the virtual world is the main element that the story needs to negotiate. In his sound article *Directing for Cinematic Virtual Reality*, Mateer connects VR's idea of presence to transportation theory. For him, the spectator must feel physically immersed as if they were present in the virtual world. Known as the spectator's suspension of disbelief in traditional cinema, transportation is defined by Green and Brock (2000: 701-702) as "absorption into a story (entailing) imagery [...] and attentional focus" and an "integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings" (Mateer, 2017: 17).

The phenomenology of VR immersion has incited great academic interest, with scholars aiming to explore the extent to which the brain processes VR experiences as believable as well as the

emotional impact they can have. Presence has become one of the main phenomena studied within this context, especially by psychology scholars. Strongly dependent on immersion, presence “is characterized as a psychological state in which the individual perceives himself or herself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli” (Blascovich *et al.* 2002: 105). As Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur describe it, “presence is a state of consciousness, the (psychological) sense of being in the virtual environment” (Slater, Wilbur, 1997: 607). Frank Biocca even defines it as a state in which “our awareness of the medium disappears” and we experience “sensations that approach direct experience” (Biocca, 2002: 102). Yet the plausibility of the experience should not be overrated as the main way to incite presence. As Janet H. Murray explains, VR requires the same level of commitment from the spectator as cinema. The suspension of disbelief is thus an active creation of spectators, who choose to believe in the story once they wear the headset or they sit at the movie theatre (Murray, J. H., 2020: 24-25). We consider presence as a defining element of the relationship between the viewer and the virtual world because of the impact that physical immersion in the synthetic environment has on the story.

For us, the defining element of VR is how the user enters the virtual world and is thus spatially present within the diegesis, regardless of the credibility of the piece. While we agree with Mateer’s claim that presence conditions the immersion, we consider that immersion and suspension of disbelief are not fully equivalent. In cinema the spectator agrees to believe in the diegesis while in CVR the user is placed within it. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain, most traditional film theories consider cinema as a window or as a threshold. Simply put, in the former case, theories such as formalism, constructivism, and Bazanian realism consider the screen as the container of a world (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010: 17). In the latter case, theories like neo-formalism and post-structuralism assume that the screen operates as a door to the diegesis, as a “liminal space” (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010: 38) between reality and the fictional universe. In spite of their differences, both approaches illustrate how the physical and metaphorical distance between the spectator and the diegesis in traditional cinema condition the suspension of disbelief. The spectator chooses to believe in a self-contained fictional world that is physically separate from them, and in which they cannot participate beyond their emotional engagement with the film.

Such distance disappears in VR because the user is placed within the virtual world, the spectator enters the diegesis with their entire body. This ontological difference between the two mediums complicates the relationship between character, focalizer, and spectator. These categories often overlap in film, literature, and especially in videogames. For example, it must be noted that interactive cinema offers a middle ground between these two ways of engaging with the diegesis. Examples such as *Black Mirror* (David Slade, 2018) allow the viewer to have an active role and become an actant and a demiurge of the story without being physically placed within it, as is the case in *butterfly effect* and interactive movie videogames. But in CVR the crossover becomes much more intense VR allows the user to become a character, a focalizer, and to a certain extent an actant. As a result, CVR entices the hybridization of these basic narrative elements and perhaps this is one of the reasons why storytelling in CVR is slow to find its way, since the most basic narrative concepts such as space or character need to be totally reconsidered.

Character and user in CVR

Not only are CVR users present in the diegesis, they can also become part of the story. Even though the medium offers many other possible articulations of the user’s point of view, most pieces still rely on so-called “first person narratives,” stories told from a subjective perspective of a character (Santesmases, 2020). The story is then presented through the perspective of said character, a common strategy in videogames, but a more challenging one to deploy in non-interactive narratives. The character’s inability to engage with the environment hits the core of a classic narratological discussion: the relationship between character and action. Characters constitute the most complex narrative element in storytelling and thus theorists and narratologists have historically pondered its nature and its function.

In spite of the diverse theoretical approaches to characters, there is certain consensus regarding the importance of their actions in the story. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, action is crucial

because it defines the character's nature. His understanding of the interdependence of action and character has informed storytelling conventions throughout history. Although it has not always been considered the hegemonic criterion, it is present in Cicero's writings and in classicist poetics (García Berrio, 1988: 185) and it strongly influences the approaches that resort to the concept of actant.

In CVR, the relationship between character and action emerges in the form of agency, which "refers to the sensation of authorship of actions" (Banakou, Slater, 2014: 1), more specifically of the actions of our body. As a result, agency requires a certain degree of synchronous multisensory interactivity with the virtual world or, at least, some level of interactivity with the piece. In their exploration of film conventions in CVR, Michael Gödde *et al.* conclude that "if the viewer feels part of the scene, his role also needs to be considered in the story" (Gödde *et al.*, 2018: 3). In pieces in which the user embodies a character, their actions cannot really define their nature, as they are often limited to head movements and do not interfere with the story.

In turn, many scholars consider that CVR users are passive witnesses of the story. For instance, Gödde *et al.* argue that CVR viewers only have two options: they are an active part of the scene and can interact with it ("lean forward") or they are passive observers with low involvement and presence ("lean back") (Gödde *et al.*, 2018: 3). However, other scholars propose a more nuanced approach to user engagement with the virtual world. Durán Fonseca *et al.* argue for a multilayered model. First, they claim that the user's attention divides in three levels by order of importance: the main narrative interest, the secondary narrative context, and the environment. While the user's attention focuses mainly on the primary plot, all the three levels are equally important to incite the user's immersion (2021: 105). Secondly, they also argue that interactivity has different degrees. For them, it unfolds in three levels: space, narrative, and interactivity with the virtual surroundings (2021: 106-109). Each level has different degrees depending on the technical sophistication of the piece. In short, according to their model, the interactivity and agency of the user vary greatly depending on a complex set of variables instead of operating as a passive/active binary. As a result, the user may feel present and engaged with the virtual world even if their interactivity is limited. Instead of feeling like a passive witness to a story, the user can feel part of it even if their ability to impact it is restricted.

With these studies in mind, we can conclude that if the user's presence is not properly integrated in the narrative, the piece will not only lose immersive potential, but it will also lose narrative engagement. As Kate Nash explains in her exploration of interactive documentaries, "the transparency of VR, its disappearance as a medium," and its simulative potential contribute to allow the user to imagine themselves within the diegesis with "a felt sense of reality" (2022: 105). Thus, it is important to question whether pieces that do not allow the user to interact with the virtual world, as is the case in CVR, risk frustrating the spectator if the user's inability to engage with the environment does not reinforce the overall narrative premise. Otherwise, the transparency of the VR medium may diminish, operating as what in conventional cinema is traditionally called breaking the fourth wall. In any case, we argue that the user's limited agency should not be perceived as a technical failure but rather as a justified feature of the character whose perspective the spectator assumes.

Redefining point of view

As narratologist Mieke Bal explains, the relationship between a story and the signs that convey it "can only be established by mediation of an interjacent layer, the "view" of the events" (Bal, Boheemen, 2009: 147). Every narrative has a focalizer whose interpretation of the events becomes accessible for the spectator and gives a particular meaning to the story. Most narratives across mediums rely on what Bal calls "character-bound" focalization or on "external" focalization. On the former, the reader of a text accesses the story through the perspective of a specific character. On the latter, the point of view belongs to "an anonymous agent, situated outside of the fabula" (Bal, Boheemen, 2009: 146-149). Most narratives deploy a combination of both, interlacing the perspective of characters with that of an omniscient narrator.

However, in VR, the notion of a "first person" point of view needs to be examined. The belief that some stories are told in first person while others are told in third person is too simplistic. Bal challenges this assumption explaining that the narrator will always have a focalizing voice, a tone

or a perspective that colors the story. The popularity of the simplistic distinction between first and third person narration responds to how invisible the narrator's voice can be in a text. In film, the suspension of disbelief leads spectators to assume what they witness, accepting the perspective deployed in the film. But VR enhances, and not diminishes, the self-awareness of the spectator over their own existence. As the example of cybersickness shows, the physical experience of the spectator plays a stronger role in CVR than in traditional filmmaking, and therefore adds an extra layer of subjectivity to the meaning of the piece. Secondly, the user may manipulate their own point of view by moving their head. Third, VR allows the spectator to take on the body of a character that exists in the story.

The direct assumption of a character's point of view in VR has incited great enthusiasm regarding its potential for social transformation. Psychologists, activists, journalists, and documentary filmmakers praise VR's potential to enhance the user's empathy for someone else and refer to this type of focalization as perspective taking.² Accordingly, many pieces and simulations use character-bound focalization to raise awareness about social topics, such as *Carne y Arena* (Flesh and Sand, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2018), *1000 Cut Journey* (Courtney Cogburn and Elise Ogle, 2018), and *Eye to Eye* (co-created by PETA, Demodern, and Kolle Rebbe in 2018). What these works share in common is their aim to incite empathy for socially oppressed groups, and most of them are created by non-profit organizations and university labs. As Grant Bollmer explains in his analysis of empathy in VR, "digital media are thus assumed to provoke an empathetic response from an individual while playing games, communicating within virtual worlds, and beyond—if these technologies are properly designed" (2017: 1).

He problematizes this notion by tracing the aesthetic construction of empathy as a culturally situated concept. Specifically, Bollmer claims that the notion of empathy assumes that the user accesses someone else's experience "without clear mediation" while in reality the user "absorbs the other's experience into their own experience" (2017: 2). Erick Ramirez also challenges the assumption that VR is an empathy machine. He describes his experience with *1000 Cut Journey* claiming: "I can't escape my own subjectivity to see or experience things from [the protagonist's] point of view" (Ramirez, 2018, para. 12). In sum, the user can feel with the character, but not for the character, as one cannot rid their own subjectivity. Perspective taking does not necessarily equal empathy for the character, as empathy is a mediated experience that relies on complex devices. As Donghee Shin concludes in his study of empathy in VR, trying to spark empathy through focalization is not enough to create an intense emotional response in the spectator (Shin, 2018: 72).

To return to the previous example, we are the baby but the baby is not us, and far from being a frustrating technical failure, that can be a very engaging exploration of the user's point of view. We propose a more diverse deployment of focalization in CVR. The following typology is informed by Nash's classification of interactive VR documentaries according to first-person media. In her approach, she divides the integration of the users in the piece in two main categories, as they can offer the possibility of being in another place or being someone else (2022: 107-112). She further elaborates these two options, explaining that the user can make sense of the VR experience as "being there as a tourist", "being there as encounter", "being there as a witness" or "being another." Our proposed typology is not incompatible with her categorizations, but instead of exploring how the integration of the user "shapes the experience epistemically and morally" to articulate their implication with the depicted reality (2021: 107), we analyze the overlaps between character, user, and focalizer from a narratological standpoint to propose narrative strategies that navigate them successfully. In turn, the examples in the next section illustrate how the overlapping point of view of user and character can constitute a narrative justification for the user's inability to interact (as is the case in *The Baby's Cry*), a political decision to help the users feel part of the protagonists' community (as in *Hard World for Small Things*, Janicza Bravo 2016) or a way to deconstruct the individual subjectivity of the protagonists (*Travelling While Black*, Roger Ross Williams 2019).

Proposed typology and case studies

1. Immobilized protagonist

The forenamed *The Baby's Cry* is a 360-degree narrative piece in which the user takes the perspective of a baby whose siblings are trying to trick in different ways. This independent six-minute-long piece is made with basic equipment. The story takes place during a family reunion and revolves around the pranks of the baby's mischievous cousins and siblings. The only thing spectators know about the character whose perspective they take is that the baby never cries. Thus, the children take on the mission to make the baby cry for a change. They prank the baby in ways that allow us to experience impossible positions such as being inside a washing machine or floating on the edge of a window. A similar narrative strategy can be seen in the more commercial piece *Ceremony* (2017), directed by renowned filmmaker Nacho Vigalondo. In this three-minute-long, 360-degree horror story, the user embodies an unidentified person surrounded by other people seated in a circle wearing VR headsets. The immobilization of the user then matches the posture of the character, who is supposed to be wearing a headset in the story too. Progressively, a group of masked men enter the room and start killing the other guests, a massacre that users can only witness.

Character-bound focalization (*perspective taking*) is very popular in narrative VR. Because the user can only choose where to look, the immobilization of the character is the most successful way to deploy this type of focalization across different genres and production modes. But the user's inability to interact needs to make sense in the story and it often constitutes the main premise: the reasons for the character's lack of interaction serve as the main narrative conflict that triggers the story. In *The Baby's Cry*, the story takes place precisely because the character is a particularly easy-going baby who does not react much. With a very simple narrative premise, the piece successfully reconciles the immersion with the user's limited interactivity. Similarly, in the ironic *Ceremony*, the original story allows the user to experience mystery without questioning their limited agency in the virtual environment. The piece cleverly uses immobilization to reinforce the presence of the user, since, in a way, the character is also a VR user that manages to somehow *transcend* the headset.

Overall, immobilized characters offer a very simple yet creatively engaging way to integrate the user in the story, but they also pose an important challenge. Right from the beginning, the piece needs to be clear about why users cannot move or respond. Along these lines, we propose that the most effective way to design characters in this type of *immobilized character-bound* narratives is to return to Plato's relationship between action and personality. Since the character has limited action, it should not be very defined or have a relevant background story. This ambivalence is actually favorable to enhance the immersion: in order for the user to take the perspective of the character without being alienated, the character needs to feel like a *blank slate* who does not have much information about what is happening, whose past is irrelevant to the story or unknown for the character, such as a detective interviewing suspects (see Blein and Diego Bezares' 2016 *Being Sherlock Holmes*), or a confused patient waking up after decades in criogenization (see Randal Kleiser's 2019 series *Frozen*).

2. The observing ghost

The beginnings of the first VR pieces are reminiscent of the beginnings of cinema, when the Lumiere brothers sent cameramen to different parts of the world to bring viewers closer to realities that were distant, and therefore exotic, to them. Along these lines, the renowned Canadian VR studio Felix&Paul produced the documentary *Nomads* (Felix Lajeunesse and Paul Raphael 2016), a piece that transports users to different parts of the world to show the everyday life of nomadic cultures such as the Massai and the Sea Gypsies of the Borneo coast. These fragments of CVR are purely descriptive and contemplative, as they do not have a traditional narrative. Instead, the piece takes users through situations such as a canoe trip, the preparation of a meal, and ultimately, daily moments in the subjects' life documented in an attempt to preserve these traditions. The camera is with them, but they do not recognize its presence: spectators are merely voyeurs that do not affect the lives of the depicted subjects. The user takes the role of an observer, a "fly on the wall", a witness whose presence theoretically does not alter the story, evoking traditional observational anthropological documentaries. As such, their presence in the diegesis needs no narrative justification.

A more dramatic use of the observing ghost user can be found in the fictional piece *Kowloon Forest* (Alexey Marfin, 2019), which deploys this technique differently. *Kowloon Forest* is a 360-degree, 8-minute piece showing some private moments in the lives of five strangers in Hong Kong, a premise that serves to reflect about the challenge of finding intimacy in such a densely populated city. The user is totally transparent throughout the piece to the point that *we* are placed right in front of the main characters. *Kowloon Forest* starts with some written messages and a voice-over introducing the story. In the first scene, the camera is between the protagonist and her mirror while she removes her makeup. This setup allows spectators to enter her privacy without qualms: they can observe her ritual and visually explore her room, clothes, beauty products, photos, plants... The rest of the piece unfolds with a similar *mise-en-scène*. A man eats while watching a live video about a girl eating food. Again, the camera is between him and his computer and users can look at him, at her, and at his space. In another scene, two Filipino migrants play cards and the camera is placed right between them. To create this experience Alexey Marfin used CGI to make the camera disappear. In *Kowloon Forest*, VR technology takes voyeuristic fantasies to a next level, because the voyeur does not look through the peephole of the door but is in the middle of the action and enjoys the pleasure of being invisible. In the absence of a linear narrative, the piece privileges interesting settings that catch the users' attention during each scene. In this type of piece, the lack of narrative is replaced by voyeuristic pleasure, placing users in underrepresented, inaccessible, or exotic (to them) spaces where they can look at everything without remorse.

3. The companion

Hard World for Small Things (Janicza Bravo, 2016) is a 360-degree narrative piece that denounces police brutality against unarmed African Americans. Its style is realistic and it introduces the user to a slice of the life of a group of friends. In this way, this 6-minute story places spectators in the middle of an action, on a car ride with a group of friends casually chatting. This type of character-user differs from the previous one in that the spectator is made to feel part of the situation, rather than an invisible observer. As such, their presence in the story requires better integration. In *Hard World for Small Things*, users are seated in the back of the car, the camera is located at eye level, articulating a primary internal ocularization (Gaudreault, Jost, 1990) that makes us feel like just one more crew member in the convertible car driving around LA. Even though users cannot interact with the friends, they can feel a strong sense of presence by listening to their conversation and looking around. The camera placement, along with the casual and relaxed conversation, serve to facilitate the feeling of belonging to the group. Being a passenger in a car effectively justifies the user's inability to move around, which intensifies the sense of immersion.

This scene sets an easy-going mood contrasting with the abrupt outcome of the piece. The car stops at a grocery store, where conflict emerges. Many actions occur simultaneously, and users can observe everything from the back seat: some members of the group run into their friends at the grocery store, one of them picks his grandmother up, and the other passenger is talking on the phone. The first four minutes of the piece introduce the group, but the conflict takes place abruptly only in the last two minutes. A group of plainclothes police officers approach the car. They accuse the driver of parking in the wrong spot and question whether the car is stolen. Suddenly one of the boys from the group, who had previously entered the grocery store, bumps into one of the officers, who immediately shoots him dead. In this moment, the director surprises the user with a change in perspective: the camera is suddenly placed inside the grocery store. After positioning the user as one of the traveling companions, their presence at the store is not justified. This new camera placement serves to show what happens inside the store and to intensify the abruptness of the event. The ubiquity of the camera, which is one of the advantages of cinematographic language, becomes purposefully abrupt and strange in this CVR piece. The lack of transition disconnects the user from the piece, especially since their presence to that point had been very well integrated. This way, *Hard World for Small Things* illustrates how making the user feel like a companion can be very impactful to raise awareness about social injustices, in this case racist police brutality. The piece also shows how changing the user's position without a clear justification can constructively break their sense of belonging within the virtual world.

4. Multifaceted user

This last category is in fact a compendium of the previous ones, but it deserves to be analyzed separately because the combination of the aforementioned resources can create a powerful strategy on its own: the deconstruction of the user's sense of subjectivity. Directed by the renowned Roger Ross Williams, *Travelling while Black* (2019) is an award-winning VR documentary often described as an immersive experience about the challenges of African American travelers during the Jim Crow era.³ However, an often-overlooked aspect of the piece is its focus on the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by police officers while he played with a toy gun at a park in 2014, even though it takes up half of the 20 minutes of the piece's duration. Therefore, the piece reflects about racism in the United States in a broader sense, establishing connections between the segregation period and police brutality against blacks in present-day America. The opening of the piece evokes the beginning of a traditional film, in an empty movie theatre. The screen shows documentary footage while a voice-over explains the importance of Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Shortly after, the image on the screen surpasses the frame and a new environment surrounds the viewer. From this point on, the piece takes place in two main locations: the iconic family-owned restaurant Ben's Chili Bowl, in Washington DC, and the inside of an old intercity bus. The first half of the piece consists of a series of testimonies from older African Americans recounting their experiences as black travelers as well as specific memories of racist discrimination. In some cases, the testimonies can be heard through a voice-over along with documentary footage and recreated flashbacks that are screened on the walls of the restaurant or the bus. In these moments, the camera slowly moves throughout the spaces with very subtle trackings and zooms and it feels as if the user is just a ghost observing the scenes. In other cases, the subjects share their stories with others at the restaurant, while the camera takes a seat at the table joining the group. Even though their presence is never acknowledged, users no longer feel like ghosts but rather as companions who are part of the community, sharing stories with the rest of the members. The dynamic montage stops abruptly in the second half of the piece, which consists of a long take in which Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice, tells the story of her son's death. She is seated at one of the restaurant tables with another woman and with *us*, and the restaurant is full of people listening to her testimony. The conversation is interrupted only by a short scene at the movie theatre showing the footage of her son's shooting.

The focalization in this piece is multifaceted: it combines multiple subjectivities and points of view through the editing of the piece, it relies on oral stories as a valid historical source, it uses archival footage, it integrates recreated flashbacks, and it depicts multiple subjects sharing their experiences. For the purposes of this article, we focus on how the user's ubiquitous perspective contributes to articulate a sense of fragmentation and multiplicity. Instead of using character-bound focalization in a simplistic way to evoke empathy, *Travelling while Black* shows how a combination of perspectives can be greatly impactful to raise awareness as well as to create a compelling narrative. The user's point of view consists of a mixture of some of the typologies listed above: users are observing ghosts witnessing the reality with distance, bystanders accompanying the main subjects at the restaurant, and even spectators in the purest sense of the word, movie theatre included. This way, the piece manages to approach the topic in its complexity. First, it avoids presuming that the audience is predominantly white and needs a *first person* narrative to understand how racism feels *first hand*. Secondly, it eschews the naive notion that a 20-minute experience can make non-blacks understand the experience of anti-blackness in America through character-bound focalization. Third, and most importantly, with this fragmentation of subjectivities, the piece honors the experiences of multiple African Americans in their diversity instead of depicting one single unified narrative of racism. Thus the testimonies appear as unique to each of the subjects but also as part of a bigger, systemic, collective issue. *Travelling while Black* creates a simultaneous sense of immersion and of Brechtian distancing: users can feel literally and figuratively close to the subjects sharing their memories but they also become aware of the apparatus mediating in the virtual experience. Ultimately, this narrative strategy serves to convey collective experiences more accurately, as it challenges the notion of a unified individual subject. The multifaceted user allows the piece to incite self-reflective

empathy: it raises awareness about a social issue as well as about our inability to live directly through the experiences of other subjects impacted by it.

Conclusions

This article addresses the main narrative challenge in CVR: the justification of the user's presence considering the paradox of immersion. Rather than understanding limited user interactivity as a technical constraint, we argue that it can be integrated in the story creatively. To that end, we analyzed some of the most popular features of VR, such as presence or agency, in relationship to traditional narratological notions and film theories, such as focalization. Drawing from film and narrative theories allowed us to propose different ways to integrate the user in the narrative without the need for sophisticated interactive technologies, depending on their role and level of implication with the story: the immobilized protagonist, the observing ghost, the companion, and the multifaceted user. With this classification, we attempt to conceptualize the role of the user beyond the simplistic binary active/passive. Even though we focus on live-action pieces, our findings can also apply to CGI-based CVR. In addition, we argue that the most engaging pieces are the ones that explore the ambivalence of subjectivity in VR, stories that consider the impossibility to escape the user's own experience and that experiment with point of view without taking empathy for granted. First, the popular technique of character-bound focalization needs to deploy very simple premises to be effective, as is the case in *The Baby's Cry*. Secondly, more observational pieces based on visual exploration can be powerful in stories that rely more on documentation and space, such as *Nomads*. Third, the user's point of view should only change throughout the story if the narrative justifies it properly, fragmenting the user's focalization when it makes narrative sense, as in *Travelling while Black*. We argue against the notion that the physical point of view automatically involves an emotional point of view. Instead, we propose more complex articulations of focalization that incorporate the paradox of immersion creatively, harnessing the potential discomfort or self-awareness of the user to create mystery about the character's past, dissociation from the virtual body, or self-reflective distance from the story.

Notas

1 The original quote is in Spanish and has been translated by the authors of this article: “Después de que el biosedentarismo televisivo nos había permitido viajar activamente con la mirada, ahora la simulación no solo afecta a la vista, sino a todo el cuerpo, determinando un nomadismo alucinatorio del espectador... El ciberespacio no existe para ser habitado, sino para ser recorrido.”

2 See The Human-Computer Interaction research cluster (University of Melbourne) and the Virtual Human Interaction Lab (Stanford University).

3 The piece is accessible at The New York Times’ Youtube channel with the title *What Was It Like to Travel While Black During Jim Crow?*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UUFn7iyymo>

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Destacados

Página 3: VR allows the user to become a character, a focalizer, and to a certain extent an actant. As a result, CVR entices the hybridization of these basic narrative elements. And perhaps this is one of the reasons why storytelling in CVR is slow to find its way, since the most basic narrative concepts such as space or character need to be totally reconsidered.

Página 3: The character's inability to engage with the environment hits the core of a classic narratological discussion: the relationship between character and action.

Página 4: Ultimately, the user's limited agency should not be perceived as a technical failure but rather as a natural feature of the character whose perspective the spectator assumes.

Página 9: We propose more complex articulations of focalization that incorporate the paradox of immersion creatively, harnessing the potential discomfort or self-awareness of the user to create mystery about the character's past, dissociation from the virtual body, or self-reflective distance from the story.

Resumen (español)

Pese a la intensa sensación de inmersión que la realidad virtual (RV) ofrece, la interactividad de los usuarios con el mundo virtual siempre es limitada. En las piezas narrativas tradicionales de VR, también conocidas como VR cinematográfica (VRC), los usuarios pueden presenciar una historia pero apenas pueden influir en ella. Esta limitación crea una paradoja en la que los usuarios se sienten inmersos en un mundo virtual con el que no pueden interactuar. Este artículo se centra en las estrategias narrativas empleadas en la RVC para integrar a los espectadores dentro de la diégesis. La paradoja inmersiva invita a académicos y creadores audiovisuales a repensar paradigmas narrativos tradicionales para poder aplicarlos a este nuevo medio. En este sentido, la limitada capacidad de interacción de los usuarios debe reforzar la premisa narrativa. Mediante un análisis de un corpus de piezas de RVC grabadas en imagen real, este artículo propone una tipología de usuarios, a saber, diferentes formas en las que el espectador puede ser integrado en la historia negociando de un modo creativo las maneras en que el personaje, el focalizador, y el espectador pueden coincidir.

Palabras clave (español)

Realidad virtual; inmersión; cine inmersivo; focalización; presencia; agencia; personaje; usuario

Autoras

Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera es Directora Académica Adjunta del Área de Animación en el Centro Universitario de Tecnología y Arte Digital (U-TAD). Es doctora en Film and Media por la Universidad de Florida y licenciada en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Su investigación se centra en tres temas fundamentales: los cines transnacionales, especialmente en Iberoamérica y Europa; el rol de las mujeres en la ficción audiovisual contemporánea, especialmente en Europa; y la alfabetización audiovisual y los hábitos de consumo mediático de la Generación Z, con especial atención a su uso de medios interactivos. En 2017 Cristina recibió el premio Ruth McQuown del College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Universidad de Florida) en reconocimiento a su compromiso para eliminar barreras y considerar la diversidad en su investigación y en su estilo docente. Su actividad investigadora es inminentemente internacional, tanto en cuanto a estancias como a publicaciones, y ha publicado en editoriales como Routledge. Además, ha participado en festivales de cine como el de San Sebastián y trabajó en la producción de la película de animación 3D ganadora del Goya *Mortadelo y Filemón* (Javier Fesser, 2014). Contacto: Cristina.ruiz@u-tad.com

Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera is the Deputy Academic Director of the Animation Area at the University for Technology and Digital Art (U-TAD). She holds a PhD in Film and Media from the University of Florida and a BA in Audiovisual Communication from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Her research focuses on three main topics: transnational cinemas, especially in Ibero-America and Europe; the role of women in contemporary audiovisual fiction, especially in Europe; and the audiovisual literacy and media consumption habits of Generation Z, with

special attention to their use of interactive media. In 2017 Cristina received the Ruth McQuown Award from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (University of Florida) in recognition of her commitment to removing barriers and considering diversity in her research and teaching style. Her research activity is strongly international, and she has published with publishers such as Routledge. In addition, she has participated in film festivals such as San Sebastian and worked on the production of the Goya-winning 3D animated film *Mortadelo y Filemón* (Javier Fesser, 2014). Contact: Cristina.ruiz@u-tad.com

Julia Sabina Gutiérrez es profesora Titular de Comunicación Audiovisual en la Universidad de Alcalá. Es doctora en Ciencias de la Comunicación y Estudios Cinematográficos por la Universidad de la Sorbona, realizó su tesis bajo la dirección del eminente profesor y semiólogo François Jost por la que recibió la máxima calificación así como una mención especial del jurado. En 2018 recibió el Premio Internacional Sial Pígmalión de Pensamiento y Ensayo por la edición impresa de este trabajo. Se le concedió un contrato del laboratorio de excelencia LABEX ICCA (Industries culturelles et création artistique), situado en la Maison des droits de l'Homme de Paris Nord, para terminar su tesis doctoral donde, además, pudo profundizar en estudios sobre las industrias culturales. Ha impartido clases, seminarios y conferencias en la Universidad Paris 3 Sorbonne nouvelle, American University of Paris, UNED, entre otras. También desempeña una actividad paralela como guionista y escritora. Sus guiones han sido seleccionados en el Script & Pitch del Torino Film Lab, en el Script Station de la Berlinale Talents Campus, o el European Short Pitch. Su novela *Vidas samuráis* fue publicada en 2020 por la Editorial Destino en la colección Áncora y Delfín. Contacto: juliasabina.gutierrez@uah.es

Julia Sabina Gutiérrez is a Tenure Professor of Audiovisual Communication at the University of Alcalá. She holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and Film Studies from the Sorbonne University, she completed her dissertation under the direction of the eminent professor and semiotician François Jost for which she received the highest qualification as well as a special mention from the jury. In 2018, he received the Sial Pygmalion International Prize for Thought and Essay for the print edition of this work. She was awarded a contract from the LABEX ICCA (Industries culturelles et création artistique) laboratory of excellence, located at the Maison des droits de l'Homme de Paris Nord, to finish her doctoral thesis where she was also able to deepen her studies on cultural industries. She has given classes, seminars and conferences at the University Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle, American University of Paris, UNED, among others. She also has a parallel activity as a screenwriter and writer. Her screenplays have been selected in the Script & Pitch of the Torino Film Lab, in the Script Station of the Berlinale Talents Campus, or the European Short Pitch. Her novel *Vidas samurais* was published in 2020 by Editorial Destino in the collection Áncora y Delfín. Contact: juliasabina.gutierrez@uah.es

Título del artículo (inglés)

The blurred lines between spectator and character: Narrative integration of the user in cinematic virtual reality

Abstract (inglés)

In spite of the intense sense of immersion that Virtual Reality (VR) can incite, the interactivity of the user is always limited. In traditional narrative VR pieces, also known as cinematic VR (CVR), users can witness a story but can hardly impact it. This limitation creates a paradox in which users feel immersed in a virtual world but cannot interact with it. This article focuses on the narrative strategies used in CVR to integrate spectators within the diegesis. This paradox of immersion behooves scholars and creatives to rethink traditional narrative paradigms to apply them to this new medium. In this sense, the user's limited ability to interact needs to reinforce the overall narrative premise. By analyzing a corpus of live-action CVR pieces, this article proposes a typology of users: different ways in which the spectator can be integrated in the story, navigating

the overlaps between user, character, and focalizer successfully.

Key words (inglés)

Virtual reality; immersion; cinematic virtual reality; focalization; presence; agency; character; user
