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Rosamund Davies https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8645-8271
(University of Greenwich, United Kingdom)

Talking to You

Addressing the Viewer in Virtual Reality Narratives

Abstract
A recurring feature of virtual reality (VR) narratives, in addition to the 'spatialized storytelling' approach that has been extensively discussed in recent screenwriting literature, is the less examined but frequent use of both fictionalized address of a textual narratee/character and direct address of the viewer. This article investigates the different ways in which such forms of address might be used to script aspects of VR experience such as presence, emotional engagement and empathy. It focuses, in particular, on the ways in which they might serve to highlight and creatively exploit the tension between immersion and self-consciousness in the viewer's experience. Drawing on analysis of VR narratives and on discussions with the writers/directors of these narratives, it employs the concepts of metalepsis and double deixis to offer new insights into this particular feature of VR storytelling.

Keywords
screenwriting studies, scripting, narrative, Virtual Reality, VR, second-person narration, narrative *you*, direct address, pronouns of address

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Introduction

Virtual Reality (VR) narratives are a developing form of content, which offer the viewer a simulated experience of being inside a world, rather than watching a story play out on a screen. Scholarship and practice in this area is multidisciplinary. My own inquiry, however, is situated within the field of screenwriting studies, which might be defined as "concerned with studying the screenwriting process […] and the screenplay text (in all its

manifestations)."[1] This article focuses on the use of pronouns of address in the scripting of VR narratives, as part of a wider consideration of their role in VR narrative design.

Within screenwriting studies, discussions of scripting VR experiences more often concern VR narratives than VR games. Such narratives, which are strongly underpinned by cinematic conventions and concerned minimally, if at all, with gameplay, are sometimes, but not exclusively, referred to as cinematic virtual reality narratives (CVR).[2] Within these discussions, the centrality of *spatialized narrative* has been emphasized,[3] pointing to the necessity of scripting a space and the viewer's encounter with it, rather than simply telling a story. Significant attention has also been paid to the implications of particular roles assumed by the viewer within the story,[4] including those of "silent witness, participant or protagonist."[5] It has been acknowledged, however, that in all these roles the viewer has a first-person experience of the world in which the story takes place.[6]

Within game studies, this first-person positioning of the viewer has been equated to the way that second-person narration (i.e the address of a narrative *you*) within literary fiction and other prose texts positions the reader/narratee[7] in relation to the diegesis.[8] Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, suggest that the function of both the first-person perspective of game experiences and the "textual second person"[9] is "simulated immediacy."[10] Other scholars, meanwhile, have pointed to different effects. Jill Walker Rettberg (as Jill

1) Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 2.
2) Kath Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality: A Critical Study of 21st Century Approaches and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
3) See e.g. ibid.; Miriam Ross and Alex Munt, "Cinematic virtual reality: Towards the spatialized screenplay," *Journal of Screenwriting* 9, no. 2 (2018), 191–209; Joakim Vindenes and Lars Nyre, "Prototyping first-person viewer positions for VR narratives with storyboards and pilot productions," *Journal of Screenwriting* 14, no. 3 (2023), 251–269.
4) See e.g. Mads Larsen, "Virtual sidekick: Second-person POV in narrative VR," *Journal of Screenwriting* 9, no. 1 (2018), 73–83; Katy Morrison, "Scripting the silhouette: Writing around the participant in interactive virtual reality experiences," *Journal of Screenwriting* 14, no. 3 (2023), 271–287; Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera and Julia Sabina Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character: Narrative integration of the user in cinematic virtual reality," *L'Atalante: Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, no. 35 (2023), 109–124; Simon Weaving, "The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality," in *Screenwriting for Virtual Reality*, eds. Kath Dooley and Alex Munt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).
5) Kath Dooley, "A question of proximity: Exploring a new screen grammar for 360-degree cinematic virtual reality," *Media Practice and Education* 21, no. 2 (2020), 82.
6) See e.g. Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*.
7) The narratological term 'narratee,' as defined by Wolf Schmid, designates "the fictive entity to which the narrator directs his narration." Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert, eds., "Narratee," *the living handbook of narratology*, accessed March 7, 2025, http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Narratee.html. Although the narratee is distinguished from the actual reader in that they are, together with the textual narrator, a product of the text, the narrator and the narratee constitute a "fundamental link and relay between real author and real reader" (Gerald Prince, "Reader," *the living handbook of narratology*, June 8, 2011, accessed March 7, 2025, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/52.html.). Since the narratee is the entity to whom the narrator is telling the story, the reader tends to identify closely with the narratee.
8) See e.g. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010); Jill Walker, "Do you think you're part of this? Digital texts and the second person address," in *Cybertext Yearbook* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2001), 34–51.
9) Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person*, xiv.
10) Ibid.

Walker) suggests for instance that the "feeling of being part of the text,"[11] engendered in the reader by the narrative *you*, might be considered a form of "forced participation,"[12] which she likens to the conventions of contemporary capitalist culture:

> Where looking into your eyes, pretending to see *you* rather than yet another customer is the way to ensure a shop's (or a book's or a game's) existence. Where stories, whether in tabloids, hypertext fictions or games, must seem to be about *you*.[13]

Ensslin and Bell discuss similar concerns in their analysis of an interactive digital fiction that "problematizes neoliberalist subjection to commodity capitalism."[14]

Within screenwriting studies, meanwhile, although second-person narration has been touched upon,[15] the discussion has not, to date, been much expanded, and it is my aim within this article to do so. Drawing on theorizations and analyses of the use of second-person narration within literary theory, games, interactive digital fiction, and contemporary theatre, and on concepts of presence and immersion, I seek to understand how these insights might relate specifically to VR narratives that are not games, and which tend to be informed by cinema conventions. I discuss two examples of VR narratives devised and produced by contemporary theatre companies, which, I argue, provide illuminating case studies of the potential uses of second-person narration, with regard to the positioning of the viewer in relation to the story and the story world in VR narratives.

Immersion and Presence

The concept of immersion is central to much discussion of both VR experiences and videogames,[16] as well as to immersive theatre, which seeks to immerse an audience "in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged […] placing the audience at the heart of the work."[17] Equally, reading a novel can also be understood to be a deeply immersive experience. According to narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, the a priori for such immersion is that the reader mentally relocates from the time and place in which they find themselves to the imaginary timespace of the story[18]. This imaginative leap, or deictic shift, as it is

11) Walker, "Do you think you're part of this?," 48.
12) Ibid., 45.
13) Ibid., 47.
14) Astric Ensslin and Alice Bell, "'Click = Kill': Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, no. 4 (2012), 70.
15) See e.g. Larsen, "Virtual sidekick;" Simon Weaving, "Evoke, don't show: Narration in cinematic virtual reality and the making of *Entangled*," *Virtual Creativity*: *XR and Creativity: Transformative Technologies for Good* 11, no. 1 (2021), 147–162.
16) See e.g. Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).
17) Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22.
18) Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

termed within narratology, has become an integral and naturalized process through which audiences engage with narratives. Narrative techniques, such as suspense, dramatic tension, and emotional identification with characters, are employed to encourage the narrative receiver to accomplish this imaginary transportation from their own reality to within the diegesis.

'Immersion' is also often used interchangeably with other words such as 'presence' and indeed definitions of both terms overlap, differ and sometimes disagree, including in the field of cognitive psychology, from which much of the discussion either originates or draws. This is likely due to the range of contexts to which both notions may be applied, as well as to the close links between them. With regard to 'immersion,' the term may be used to refer to audience engagement in very different forms of media with different affordances, as well as to intense states of concentration, absorption or 'flow'[19] in a variety of tasks. The concept of presence, meanwhile, is used to refer both to real life situations, in which one is physically present, and to situations of 'telepresence,' such as in VR experiences, in which the experiencing subject has the feeling of being present in one environment, while actually being physically located in another[20].

One disagreement relates to whether 'immersion' is a property of a system or technological apparatus, as proposed by Mel Slater and others[21], or whether it is a psychological state, a "perception of being enveloped" as proposed by Witmer and Singer[22]. Slater understands a system's immersive capacity to consist in its ability to deliver a convincing alternative environment to reality, whether this be through a VR headset or a quadraphonic sound system. This proposition might be extended to the experience of immersion in a novel or a film, if the narrative techniques these deploy are understood to constitute a system. However, it seems less applicable to the experience of immersion in a task such as writing, drawing or solving a problem.

Slater's concept of immersion is closely tied to his understanding of (tele)presence as "a 'response' to a system of a certain level of immersion,"[23] wherein people behave as if they are in an equivalent real-life situation. Indeed, much discussion of immersion in cognitive psychology is closely linked to the concept of (tele)presence and many definitions of presence have resulted, as discussed by Lombard and Ditton in their influential survey and analysis, in which they also produced their own definition of presence as "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation."[24]

19) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

20) For further discussion of this see e.g. Marvin Minsky, "Telepresence," *Omni Magazine*, (June 1980); Calleja, *In-Game*; Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton, "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 2 (1997).

21) See e.g. Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, "A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments," *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, no. 6 (1997) 603–616; Mel Slater, "A Note on Presence Terminology," *ResearchGate*, January 2003, accessed August 7, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242608507_A_Note_on_Presence_Terminology; Mel Slater, "Immersion and the Illusion of Presence in Virtual Reality," *British Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 3 (2018), 431–433.

22) Bob G. Witmer and Michael J. Singer, "Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments: A Presence Questionnaire," *Presence* 7, no. 3 (1998), 225.

23) Slater, "A Note on Presence Terminology," 3.

24) Lombard and Ditton, "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence."

However, the definition of presence that I want to draw on here is the sense of "being in a world that exists outside the self."[25] Not only does this sense of presence stem from close attention to the external environment, it also involves a sense of self as both distinct from and connected to that environment.[26] This definition, which points to a level of self-awareness and proprioception, most effectively delineates both a relationship to and a distinctness from the notion of immersion that I am working with here. This notion encompasses both immersion as absorption, wherein the reader/spectator/participant is engaged "fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest,"[27] and immersion as transportation, wherein they are "imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place."[28] I understand both immersion and presence to be distributed processes that happen between people and the texts/systems/worlds they engage with, rather than residing wholly in one or the other.

Immersion and Presence in VR Narrative Design

We can certainly recognize some shared cross media techniques of immersion. The narrative immersion techniques of suspense, dramatic tension and emotional identification with characters, for instance, discussed by Ryan with regard to the novel[29], were core to the theatre before the novel emerged as a genre, and have become central to film and television drama. However, when it comes to a more detailed analysis of precise techniques and effects, we can identify many that are medium specific. The way in which a player may become immersed in a game through "kinesthetic involvement"[30] is not open to the reader of a novel, for example. Nor is the visual language of shot composition, editing, mise en scène, sound etc., which can give the film or television spectator the sense of being transported into a scene, directly available to the novelist, who may in their turn employ textual immersion techniques that are untranslatable to the screen.

It is nevertheless important to recognise that the distinctive affordances that may characterise one particular medium need not necessarily preclude the use of immersive techniques that are typically deployed in other media. It is possible to expand the immersive possibilities of one medium by applying or adapting the techniques that are used in another.

This tension between recognizing medium specificity and drawing on techniques from other media is exemplified in much of the discussion of VR narratives within screenwriting studies, which is often concerned with developing strategies for VR narrative design. Scholars have extensively debated the extent to which both narrative immersion techniques common to theatre, film and television drama — such as suspense, dramatic ten-

25) Giuseppe Riva et al., "Affective interactions using virtual reality: The link between presence and emotions," in Kat Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality: A Critical Study of 21st Century Approaches and Practices* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 32, 42.
26) Ingvar Tjostheim and John Waterworth, *The Psychosocial Reality of Digital Travel: Being in Virtual Places* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 62.
27) Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 62.
28) Ibid., 63.
29) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*.
30) Calleja, *In-Game*, 54.

sion, character identification — and the specific visual language of cinema, can be combined with the design of a meaningful spatial encounter for the viewer within a virtual world.[31] Larsen[32] and Vera and Gutierrez,[33] for instance, suggest that the development of a central character arc, which underpins much mainstream drama, is tricky to import into a VR narrative, because the voyeuristic observer position assumed by the screen spectator is not the same as the viewer/participant's embodied sense of presence in a VR world. If the viewer takes up the silent witness (passive observer) position with regard to what in games would be called a non-player character, they may feel insufficiently engaged as a bystander to the character's journey, without the use of the cinematic language of shot composition and montage to direct their attention and promote their identification. To employ such language would, however, interfere with the viewer's sense of their own embodied presence and freedom to look wherever they want within the virtual world, which are the unique properties of the medium.[34]

On the other hand, the positioning of the viewer/participant as a first-person protagonist can be equally problematic. In many VR narratives, contrary to the forms of agency accorded to the first-person player of a videogame, the first-person protagonist is consigned to a passive role in which things happen to them, without their being able to influence events, beyond whatever emotional response they might have internally.[35] Larsen refers to this position as "catatonic mode."[36] Furthermore, if the viewer is assuming the POV of a defined character, rather than a virtual version of themselves, their sense of their own powerlessness and passivity as a viewer can interfere with their ability to identify with this protagonist, into whose virtual body they have been transported. This passivity is a more extreme version of the "forced participation" alluded to by Walker,[37] with regard to the way in which interactive texts script the reader/player's actions as *you*. The passive first-person protagonist of many VR narratives is denied even the illusion of agency.

Both the silent witness and the protagonist positions, Larsen proposes, fail to incorporate within the viewer's narrative experience the intense sense of embodied presence that results from VR's first-person spatial immersion effect. This sense of presence, he argues, prompts the viewer to expect interactivity and kinetic agency within the virtual world, something they do not expect from a cinema, television or reading experience. When such agency is lacking, this can induce feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, negatively affecting the viewer's sense of both narrative and spatial immersion.

Theories and practices developed for videogames, within which first-person POV protagonists are numerous and interactively engaged in gameplay, world exploration and to

31) See e.g. Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*; Larsen, "Virtual sidekick;" Ross and Munt, "Cinematic virtual reality;" Vindenes and Nyre, "Prototyping first-person viewer positions for VR narratives with storyboards and pilot productions;" Weaving, "Evoke, don't show."

32) Larsen, "Virtual sidekick."

33) Vera and Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character."

34) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*; Weaving, "Evoke, don't show;" Weaving, "The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality."

35) This is particular true of VR narratives shot on 360 video, which tend to offer limited interactivity compared to that offered by VR environments constructed through real-time simulation.

36) Larsen, "Virtual sidekick," 75.

37) Walker, "Do you think you're part of this?."

some extent narrative construction, have much to offer here, regarding the role of interactivity in promoting immersion. However, the concern for many CVR creators is that the level of agency bestowed on a first-person protagonist in games is incompatible with the kind of tightly crafted narrative they want to employ.[38] Larsen nevertheless seems to draw on game design in his proposal of the sidekick character[39] as the solution to the problem of developing coherent and engaging character arcs in VR narratives. VR narratives that engage the viewer/participant as sidekick, such as *The Imaginary Friend* (Steye Hallema 2023), in which the viewer/participant plays the titular role to the eight year old protagonist, incorporate a measure of scripted interactivity. The viewer/participant is repeatedly called on by the protagonist for help or advice, and, in doing so, seems to play a role in advancing and determining the narrative.

Screen media and screenwriting scholars have also proposed other solutions to the positioning of the viewer. Vera and Gutierrez, for instance, suggest making the first-person protagonist's limited agency the central premise of the narrative. Taking the example of the VR narrative *The Baby's Cry* (El llanto del bebé; Jorge Blein, 2017), they explain that it positions the viewer in the first-person protagonist position of a placid baby, who never cries and who is put by its mischievous/diabolic siblings in extreme situations, in order to provoke it to finally cry. In this example, they argue, the viewer's passivity aids their immersion, because it is motivated by entering the subject position of the helpless baby. The viewer's phenomenological experience of the virtual environment thus promotes emotional engagement with the events of the narrative, aligning narrative and spatial immersion.

Such narrative strategies aim to naturalize the viewer's position within the diegesis, in order to increase both narrative and spatial immersion. As such, they also aim to minimize the viewer's sense of ontological boundary transgression. As Vera and Gutierrez put it "In cinema the spectator agrees to believe in the diegesis while in CVR the user is placed within it."[40] While this induces a heightened sense of presence within the virtual environment, they argue, it can simultaneously provoke self-consciousness, since, even while responding to the sensory stimuli they are receiving that locate them in another 3D environment, the viewer remains aware of their actual location in a different physical reality. This means that a viewer's experience of VR may not always or only be an uncomplicated sense of 'being there.' This may be accompanied or even outweighed by the uncanny sensation of "being somewhere you are not."[41]

38) Larsen, "Virtual sidekick."

39) Confusingly for the argument forwarded in this article, Larsen defines this sidekick position as a second-person POV because it "views the world near the action, such that the reader/viewer/participant shares the same space as the main character" (ibid., 79), differentiating it from the first-person perspective of the viewer/protagonist. This definition does not, however, accord with the notion of second person address that I am using here.

40) Vera and Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character," 112.

41) Andrews and Roberts, cited in Morrison, "Scripting the silhouette," 282.

Second Person Narration, Pronouns of Address and Metalepsis in Fiction, 2D and 3D Audiovisual Narratives

Whether the narratee position within a VR narrative is as protagonist, sidekick or silent witness, the viewer can be understood to always, at some level, inhabit a first-person perspective. Not only do they take up an embodied position inside the story world, but the events that they participate in or witness are focalized either wholly or partly through this position.[42] Vera and Gutierrez point out, furthermore, that it is the norm, rather than the exception for categories such as character, focalizer, viewer and narratee to overlap in VR narratives.[43] As raised in the introduction, this first-person positioning of the viewer/reader, while not identical, can be understood to correspond in many respects to the way that second-person address within literary fiction and other prose texts positions the reader. I want now to examine more closely how this works within such texts, before bringing these insights back to the discussion of VR narrative.

Second-person narration in prose fiction involves the narrator's use of the narrative *you*, which positions the narratee within the story's diegesis as I/me. The opening of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, in which the narrator invites the narratee to follow them into the notorious London slum of St Giles, offers an example:

> When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you are actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness.[44]

While the narrator never identifies themself, phrases such as "when I first caught your eye" suggest they are, like the novel's protagonist, a sex worker, an intradiegetic narrator addressing a narratee-client character. At the same time, the choice of words throughout indicates a double meaning, in which the relationship between client and sex worker is made analogous to that of reader and book: "when you first picked me up you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name."[45] This prompts the reader to understand the *you* that is addressed to include their personal identity as reader, prompting them to reflect on their own act of reading.

As narratologist Monica Fludernik points out, the term second-person narration (and by extension the narrative *you*) is actually something of a misnomer. What defines this kind of narration, in fact, is that it employs a pronoun of address,[46] which will vary according to the language used and might actually be a third-person pronoun (in the polite forms of Italian or German for example). This use of an address pronoun is characterized

42) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality.*
43) Vera and Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character."
44) Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and The White* (London: Canongate, 2003), 1.
45) Ibid.
46) Monika Fludernik, "Second Person Fiction: Narrative 'You' As Addressee And/Or Protagonist," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18, no. 2 (1993), 217–247.

by "the indeterminacy of the addressee function by which the current reader finds herself addressed but cannot immediately delimit the reference to one specific narrative level."[47] In other words, the use of a pronoun of address can be variously interpreted. It might be understood as directed at a narratee/character within the diegesis or equally to the audience outside it. Often it works to ambiguate the distinction between the two, as in the Faber extract above. David Herman uses the term "double deixis"[48] to describe such cases, where the pronoun of address seems to hover somewhere between a fictionalized address of a textual narratee — often a narratee-protagonist — that exists within the story's diegesis, and apparent direct address of the reader. In such cases, the story's narration seems to dissolve the separation between the viewer's subject position outside the story world, and the textual position of narratee, with which they are aligned, prompting the viewer to become conscious of their own subject position as a mediating force between these two parallel timespaces, between the fictional and the real.

The use of pronouns of address in this way constitutes a form of metalepsis, a narratological term, which designates a transgression of the boundary "between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells."[49] Metalepsis may occur across narrative levels within the story's diegesis, as in the much-quoted example of a short story by Cortazar, in which a reader is attacked by a character in the novel that he is reading. It may also be produced by a breaching of the divide between extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels, on the part of the narrator and/or narratee, as in the introduction of *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

Since, as discussed earlier, narrative techniques routinely aim to prompt a deictic shift whereby the narrative receiver mentally relocates themself to the timespace of the story, one might conclude that, at some level, all "fictional narrative is by nature metaleptic."[50] Such imaginary transportations function to increase immersion, and indeed Ryan cites second person address as a potential technique to achieve this.[51] However, the term 'narrative metalepsis' is more often employed to designate anti-immersion devices: aimed at making the narrative receiver aware of the narrative's construction and their own positioning in relation to it: raising ontological questions with regard to representation and concepts of fiction, reality and truth.

Within drama, film and television narratives, metaleptic address of the audience is frequently referred to as breaking the fourth wall. When it comes to digital games, however, Conway has argued that, in comparison to proscenium arch theatre, film or television, the interactive dynamic between player and game "instigates a completely different relationship between product and audience,"[52] in which "the player must be seen as both implied and implicated in the construction and composition of the experience."[53] This problema-

47) Ibid., 239.
48) Ibid., 349.
49) Gérard Genette cited in John Pier, "Metalepsis," *the living handbook of narratology*, June 11, 2011, accessed February 4, 2025, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/51.html.
50) Pier, ibid.
51) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 134.
52) Steven Conway, "A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 2 (2010), 146.
53) Newman cited in ibid.

tises the concept of the fourth wall as a clear dividing line between the diegetic and extradiegetic, when applied to games. He suggests that the interaction between player and game instigates a "magic circle," which can expand and contract. When the circle expands, through, for instance, an address to the player's extra game identity, or reference to a website in the real world, this can "further immerse the player, extending the immersion beyond the screen."[54]

Although VR narratives may not rely on gameplay to involve the viewer in the construction of the diegesis, they do position them within the diegetic world, thus also problematising the concept of the fourth wall. Furthermore, this first-person positioning is not achieved linguistically through pronouns of address and so cannot be understood to be identical to the literary second person. Nevertheless, as we have established, it shares with the latter the ambiguous potential to both effect and impede immersion. Within such narratives, moreover, pronouns of address can be employed to both amplify and counteract such effects.

They can indeed be employed to naturalize the sense of metaleptic boundary transgression that can arise in adopting the first-person position within VR narratives, drawing the viewer into the diegesis. Such address may be to an implied viewer — positioned inside the VR interface but at a level outside the story world itself — as is often the case with onboarding instructions. However, it is very often to a narratee/character within the story, whose role the viewer is encouraged to assume in the narrative: as when the protagonist of *The Imaginary Friend* tells the viewer/narratee/imaginary friend character to *flap your wings to fly*. In another narrative, audio narration might position the viewer as protagonist, telling them *the year is 2040, you are on a mission to the planet Mars*. Pronouns of address may also be used to engage the viewer/narratee/character emotionally. A protagonist character might make a request such as *Help me find a way out!* or *Don't tell anyone, will you?* This fictionalized address of a character within the diegesis, through whose perspective the viewer is encouraged to experience the story, can encourage viewer immersion, in the sense of both transportation and absorption. The narrative *you* both plays on our instinctive reaction to think *me* when we hear *you*,[55] encouraging the viewer to identify with the narratee/character, and invites the viewer to participate in the co-creation of the story, giving them agency within the diegesis.

As Walker points out, however, such textual exhortations can still potentially feel like a form of coercion.[56] In my own experience of *The Imaginary Friend*, I was contrary enough to ignore most of the calls to help the protagonist in the role of sidekick, partly out of reluctance to take orders, and partly out of curiosity to see what would happen. I found that the story for the most part eventually continued along its scripted trajectory without my intervention. The exception was the ending, when the protagonist remained stuck at the bottom of a well, calling endlessly for help, and I was finally prevailed upon to "submit to the code"[57] and save him, not wanting to experience, even fictionally, the guilt of abandoning a child to such a fate.

54) Conway, "A circular wall?," 151.
55) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 138.
56) Walker, "Do you think you're part of this?."
57) Ibid., 41.

The sense of "forced participation"[58] that can characterise first-person character experiences in "catatonic mode"[59] can thus also be present in narrative constructions that offer the viewer more apparent agency. The narrative receiver's sense of 'I' as more than and potentially resistant to the narrative 'you' is not automatically erased by any textual devices or the properties of any medium. The viewer/reader/participant of any text makes the choice to take up (or refuse) the position of narrative *you* in response to the prompts the text offers. The choice made, and the extent to which it is conscious, depends on how the text is constructed, what the viewer/reader/participant expects or wants from it, and how these are negotiated in the act of reading/viewing/playing.

Although the prioritising of viewer immersion and a conceptualisation of presence as immediacy and "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation"[60] tend to frame viewer self-consciousness as largely undesirable in VR narratives, there is also a line of thinking which focuses on how the metaleptic potential of VR storytelling might be employed to promote reflection and criticality. Scholar-practitioner Katy Morrison, for example, taking postdramatic theatre as her reference, advocates an approach in which "the VR participant moves between modalities of experiencing and performing,"[61] destabilizing the division between audience and performance. In such narrative experiences, Morrison proposes, meaningful action for viewer/participants comes through their embodied engagement with the virtual environment as themselves, rather than through identification with the narrative arc of a fictional character. Rather than attempting to immerse themselves in the virtual world, they pay attention to "the affective interplay of real and virtual,"[62] mediated through their own body, as they experience the sensation of existing in and across the real and the virtual simultaneously. The internal reflection and transformation that can result from this experience, Morrison suggests, is ultimately what provides satisfaction to the viewer.

Vera and Gutierrez, meanwhile, highlight the capacity for VR narratives to explore what they call a "multifaceted" subjectivity.[63] Pointing to the techniques employed within the VR narrative *Travelling while Black* (Roger Ross Williams 2019),[64] which prompt in the viewer as silent witness "a simultaneous sense of immersion and of Brechtian distancing,"[65] they suggest that "this narrative strategy serves to convey collective experiences more accurately, as it challenges the notion of a unified individual subject […] raises awareness about a social issue as well as about our inability to live directly through the experiences of other subjects impacted by it."[66] This chimes with Bollmer's opposition to the notion of VR as an 'empathy machine,' in which a viewer can straightforwardly inhabit the perspective of another, and his counter proposition that "it is not in 'understanding'

58) Ibid., 45.
59) Larsen, "Virtual sidekick."
60) Lombard and Ditton, "At the Heart of It All."
61) Morrison, "Scripting the silhouette."
62) Ibid., 283.
63) Vera and Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character," 118.
64) A VR documentary about the historical and present experience of people of colour in the USA.
65) Ibid., 119.
66) Ibid.

the other fully through which I come to care for them, but through acknowledging the limits and the infinite inability to grasp another's experience completely."[67]

Discussing VR narratives, Dooley suggests that "perhaps the most powerful aspect of this new medium is its ability to foster different notions of audience identification and empathy."[68] However, this does not necessarily entail a vision of VR storytelling, in which first-person POV offers the viewer an embodied and unmediated sense of what it feels like to be someone else: a vision, which Bollmer critiques as "a negative annihilation of the Other as their otherness becomes nothing beyond what can be absorbed and experienced by oneself."[69] VR narratives might rather offer an experience in which the viewer is encouraged to reflect on their own positioning in relation to the diegesis, engaging presence as a distributed and intersubjective relationship with a world and with the other.

As Morrison points out, this interest in audience experience and self-awareness as part of the diegesis is a feature of much contemporary theatre performance, which focuses not on the mimetic recitation of a pre-scripted drama, but on the theatre performance as a "*joint text* [original italics] between actors and audience."[70] What becomes important is a collective experience, which:

> becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.[71]

This approach to performance also emphasizes the materiality and liveness of theatre as a real event, happening in real time, with audience members as co-participants, blurring the boundaries between staged and lived experience. This can give the audience both the sense of participating in something 'real' and a critical awareness of the processes through which meaning is constructed.

Contemporary theatre practitioners have also employed a range of media, including VR technologies, as part of this work. It is, I propose, instructive to examine how such works engage with questions relating to audience immersion, presence, metalepsis and self-awareness in VR narratives. In particular, I want now to analyse two VR narratives, by two different contemporary theatre companies, in which the narrative *you* is employed within voiceover narration to effect double deixis as a central device.

Adult Children

Adult Children (Ella Hickson — Sacha Wares, ScanLAB Projects 2021) is a virtual play set in Britain, during the Covid 19 pandemic, experienced through a VR headset and headphones. Lidar scanning was used to create a virtual stage set, populated by shadowy fig-

67) Grant Bollmer, "Empathy Machines," *Media International Australia* 165, no. 1 (2017), 74.
68) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*, 33.
69) Ibid., 72.
70) Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürss-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 17.
71) Ibid., 85.

ures who appear and disappear on different parts of the stage, including two female friends, who are the central characters. The viewer is positioned as a silent witness, a member of a virtual theatre audience in a black box theatre space, and is visually distanced from the characters in the way that a theatre audience member might be. They have 3DoF (three degrees of freedom), i.e they can explore the 360 degree space visually, turning their head etc., but not through any other movement. There are no close ups or other use of filmic language. The impressionistic theatre space around the viewer changes throughout the narrative. People and objects appear and disappear, as well as move around the space. The effect is not photorealism, but something more impressionistic (see Fig. 1). There is no lip sync dialogue. Instead, the story is narrated on the audio track partly through a series of phone conversations between the two female friends, who share their ongoing experiences and difficult moments of lockdown with each other, some of which we see play out on the virtual stage; but also through voiceover narration, in which the narrator has the voice of a child. Although the narrative is constructed around the character arcs of the two friends and the pandemic's impact on them, the voiceover narration draws the viewer into the story, prompting them to reflect on their own experience of the pandemic.

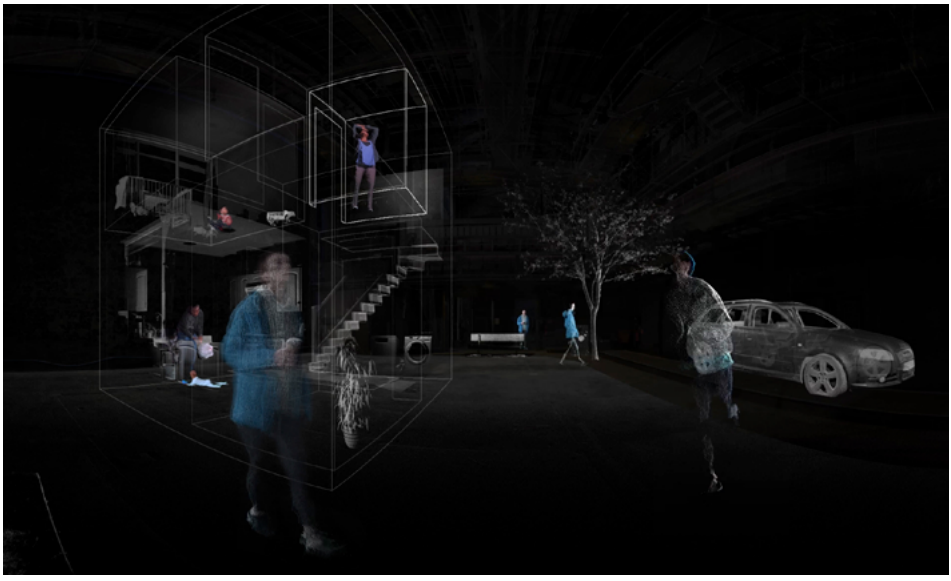

Fig. 1: *Adult Children* © Ella Hickson, Sacha Wares and ScanLAB Projects

The *Adult Children* script opens as follows:

> [We are in a scan of an empty theatre]
> NARRATOR: Imagine a space, a square —
> [It appears]
> Four people have lived, almost continuously, inside this cube — for nearly a year.
> The cumulative shitting, sweating; the amount of sound released.
> Excretions — spit, sex, snot —

> [Door slam. Very loud.]
> [A *appears.*]
> [A *walks and walks and walks and walks*]
> This is the schooling area.
> The eating area.
> The fucking area.
> The detailed analysis of contracts area.
> The hushed phone-call to anyone who will listen area.
> This is the place where you have to explain to kids about sickness and death, about violence and threat.[72)]

This opening narration raises a question as to what ontological level the viewer is occupying in this act of imagining, which, it is implied, takes physical form in the first visual they see: a three-dimensional square that slowly materialises and transforms into the transparent cross section of a house, within which most of the drama is staged. Who is the *you* that is addressed here? Is the viewer imagining this space in their role as narratee/spectator/character within the diegesis of the virtual narrative, or is this moment of imagining occurring in their own physical reality, an extradiegetic act, through which they are actually bringing the world into being?

The double deixis of this opening section provides a good sense of the tone and style of this piece and the way that it employs direct address as a narrative device. While, according to director Sacha Wares, the decision to include the voiceover was motivated by the need to engage the viewer in the story, making them feel more present within it,[73)] these opening words also serve to distance the viewer: setting up the experience as fictional, an act of imagination, rather than something real.

A few lines into the story, after the narrator has enumerated the many activities that must now all take place within the same four walls, evoking the claustrophobia of lockdown, there is the first explicit use of the narrative *you*: "the place where *you* have to explain to kids about sickness and death, about violence and threat." At one level this *you* seems to be addressed to one of the two central female characters, who is living with her husband and children in the house depicted on stage and likely to be dealing with such challenges (the other character is single). However, since the members of the audience in the initial screenings were themselves going through lockdown or, subsequent to the pandemic, have experienced lockdown, this narrative *you* also resonates with the individual 'you' of those viewers, particularly those who have themselves had to explain to their own children about "sickness and death, about violence and threat." Furthermore, this narrative *you* seems to also address the collective 'you' of the communal experience of the Covid lockdown and the virtual theatre audience within the virtual theatre space, making the 'you' addressed by the narrator simultaneously singular and plural.

Near the end of the script comes the following voiceover narration and action:

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72) Ella Hickson, *Adult Children* (2021), 1.
73) Sacha Wares, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

> "NARRATOR: Imagine a place where people can buy tickets to watch the pleasure and pain of strangers from a safe distance. [The audience starts to fill up]."[74]

This invitation to the viewer to reflect on the implications of their own act of viewing recalls the narrator's opening exhortation to imagine the story into being. While addressing the viewer explicitly in their identity as a member of the virtual audience, it also prompts them to think beyond the here-and-now of the diegesis to their experiences as a member of theatre and film audiences in the real world: to what the words "safe distance" evoke in the Covid and post-Covid era. It invites the viewer, as both an individual *you* and as part of a collective *you*, to consider how the collective experience of going through Covid both together and apart might impact how we as members of a society relate to each other, what we as audiences might want to see represented and how we might want it to be represented.

While the viewer might well assume that the voice of the child narrator belongs to a child of the character in the story, this is not made explicit. Moreover, the words that the child speaks sound very adult and not like anything a small child would say. The voiceover narration therefore takes on a rather unearthly dimension, seeming to speak from both within but also beyond the diegesis. In my own mind, as a viewer, the child narrator seemed to be speaking the words that all the children affected by the covid pandemic might have said if they had been able to articulate them. As Wares points out,[75] the title *Adult Children*, also prompts us to reflect on how children may have had to grow up too fast during the pandemic, while adults, including those in the UK government who threw illegal parties, had perhaps, sometimes acted like children.

Not only can the narrative *you* in *Adult Children* be understood as doubly deictic, that is to say that it points simultaneously to both the virtual here-and-now of the characters in the virtual performance and to the here-and-now of the viewer, there are, moreover, several dimensions to the viewer's here-and-now, all evoked simultaneously. The viewer's sense of presence as silent witness in the virtual theatre is individual, but also part of a collective presence, involving the virtual actors and the other members of the virtual audience. Furthermore, the viewer's individual experience (I/me) relates to their embodied existence not only within but outside the virtual space. Finally, it relates to their collective experience (we/us) of the covid pandemic and lockdown. The employment of the narrative *you* in the voiceover narration reframes the narrative away from an exclusive focus on the narrative arcs of the characters within the virtual play, engaging the viewer in a more dialogic encounter, and fostering a complex experience of presence, which encourages both empathy and critical reflection.

74) Hickson, *Adult Children*, 7.
75) Wares, personal communication with the author 2024.

Fig. 2–4: *Within Touching Distance* © ZU-UK

Within Touching Distance

Within Touching Distance (ZU-UK 2016–) is a VR narrative experienced through a VR headset and headphones, which also integrates elements of live performance. As with *Adult Children*, the viewer's virtual embodiment is 3DoF, however, the experience incorporates interaction through touch, with performers who occupy the physical space in which the viewer is situated. These performers synchronize their actions with those of virtual actors within the virtual diegesis. Prior to the start of the VR element of the narrative, the viewer is introduced by a performer into a physical bedroom set, where they lie down on the bed with the headset and headphones on (see Fig. 2). At the beginning and end of the narrative, characters in the virtual world address the viewer, while a performer (the same one who has onboarded the viewer) synchronizes their movements to those of the characters in the virtual diegesis, interacting with the viewer through touch in the real environment. The rest of the time the viewer is addressed by an audio narrator (again the voice of a child). The viewer takes the role of first-person protagonist, who at the beginning of the piece is a child.

The first character to address the viewer within the virtual diegesis is a maternal figure who sings to them. The sequence is filmed in 360 video in a setting that matches the physical bedroom set in which the viewer is lying. Synchronized to the mother character's movements in the VR environment, an actor in the physical space takes the viewer's hands. The viewer is then transported within the VR experience into an animated out of body experience (see Fig. 3) and then into a dreamscape (see Fig. 4), in which they are addressed by the voice of an unseen narrator. I will discuss this section more below. At the end of the narrative, the viewer is relocated inside the VR experience into what seems to be the same bedroom set from the opening sequence, although now rendered in 3D simulation rather than 360 video. Instead of the maternal figure, however, a nurse now speaks to them and helps them sit up on the bed. The first-person protagonist has now transformed into an elderly person with limited mobility.

Kesia Guillery, research associate on the project, reports that the writer and director of the work, Persis-Jadé Maravala, describes the live performer as embodying different representations of an amah: "a domestic worker with nursing and childcare duties in various parts of Asia."[76] The use of touch is an important element in a piece intended to function as a "metaphor of an act of palliative care,"[77] which "evokes the participant's own mortality and carves out a moment in which profound self-reflective self-care is enabled, in the face of the participant's recognition of their own state of inevitable collapse."[78]

The child narrator can be understood to be essentially narrating the story to themself as narratee-protagonist, who begins as a child being put to bed, into whose subject position the viewer enters to experience the VR narrative. The questions this child narrator

76) Kesia Guillery, Jorge Lopes Ramos, and Persis-Jadé Maravala, "Goodnight, Sleep Tight: Training performers as palliative carers in an age of system collapse," *Performance Research* 27, no. 6–7 (2022), 212.
77) Ibid.
78) Ibid.

asks, however, reach out beyond this diegetic incarnation:

- Do you miss your childhood or are you glad it's all over?
- Were you closer to your mother or your father?
- Did your family, on some level, disappoint you?
- What is it that was never nurtured in you?[79]

Thus, while the pronoun of address refers to a narratee-protagonist within the diegesis (first child then elderly nursing home resident), the answers to these questions are only available in the viewer's own experience outside the virtual environment in which they currently find themselves. Described by the creators as "the voice in your head,"[80] the child who speaks to each viewer within the narrative becomes, "a shadow of their childhood speaking to their present selves."[81] It addresses them as a pre-existing subject, with a life and a memory that extends before and beyond their current presence within this narrative, but which they are invited to bring into it. At the end of the narrative, when the viewer experiences an unexpected metamorphosis from child to old person, they are again prompted to imagine themself not only into this role within the narrative, but also as experiencing their own future end of life. The narrator asks them: "the moment your personal narrative comes to an end what will it be like? where will you be?"[82]

In evoking and joining the bedtime ritual of childhood with the vulnerability that can come with old age and the inevitability of death, Guillery suggests that the piece not only offers the viewer a way to engage meaningfully with their own mortality, but also functions as a ritual, in which participants (viewers) and performers form a "temporary community" in order to "process the collective trauma we are going through as a collapsing society."[83] Maravala notes that the interpellation of the viewer into a relationship with the narrator through the narrative *you* is therefore crucial to the work, because "it's in the reflection of the other that we understand who we are."[84] In engaging the viewer as the *me* to the narration's *you*, direct address both establishes a sense of "connection and presence"[85] and makes an important contribution to the "multi-reality structure"[86] of *Within Touching Distance*, which "allows participants to simultaneously inhabit various roles in relation to themselves and their present moment."[87] In positioning the viewer as "simultaneously inside and outside the fiction,"[88] the double deixis of the narration's narrative *you* encourages the viewer's self-awareness and critical reflection, as well as immersion in a dreamscape.

79) Ibid., 214.
80) Ibid., 213.
81) Ibid., 214.
82) Ibid.
83) Ibid., 215.
84) Persis-Jadé Maravala, personal communication with author, September 2024.
85) Ibid.
86) Guillery, Ramos, and Maravala, "Goodnight, Sleep Tight," 214.
87) Ibid.
88) Habermas cited in Herman, *Story Logic*, 344.

Conclusion

VR narratives give the viewer the sensory impression of being bodily as well as imaginatively transported into the world in which the events of the narrative unfold. The viewer is thus always at some level occupying a first-person perspective, with regard to the 3D environment, since they experience an embodied sense of the narrative here-and-now being the same here-and-now that they themselves occupy. While the viewer's perception of a first-person experience can contribute to their sense of immersion, it can also prompt self-consciousness, particularly if they find their placement within the narrative hard to comprehend and/or it does not align with their actual sensations and reactions as viewer. The employment of pronouns of address (in English the narrative *you*) as part of the narration strategy can potentially help the viewer take up a role within the narrative, whether this be as witness, protagonist or sidekick, minimizing such self-consciousness and offering a more involving experience.

However, the first-person perspective afforded by VR narratives can also be incorporated into a narrative design that encourages viewer self-awareness and critical reflection. This approach to narrative design can make creative use of the tension between the viewer's real existence and the position they have taken up within the virtual world, making this part of the story. Such a strategy can only draw to a certain extent on the dramatic conventions and narrative strategies of mainstream cinema and television theory and practice, since these focus on the promotion of audience identification with the narrative arc of a central protagonist, paying no attention to the structuring of the audience's participation or self-awareness. However, strategies employed in other forms of narrative offer interesting possibilities. In this article I have focused, in particular, on the employment of second person (or other pronouns of) address, a technique associated with prose fiction, to encompass variously and simultaneously the fictionalized address of a textual narratee/character and an apparent direct address of the viewer beyond the text. I have also pointed to the ways in which such approaches resonate with contemporary theatre practices that position the audience as part of the performance.

The aim of this article has been, first, to offer new insights highlighting pronouns of address as an important tool within VR narratives, which can be used both to encourage immersion and to prompt in the viewer a sense of layered and mediated subjectivity: encouraging not only self-reflection but also engagement with the other, such as Bollmer[89] advocates. The two VR narratives that I have discussed in this article offer examples of such an approach. Second, in pointing to VR narratives that employ a technique used in prose fiction within contemporary theatre practice, I contribute new perspectives regarding the value of drawing on techniques developed within these other media, in order to exploit the specific potential of VR as a narrative experience.

89) Bollmer, "Empathy Machines."

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VR Narrative

Adult Children (Ella Hickson — Sacha Wares, ScanLAB Projects, 2021)
The Baby's Cry (El llanto del bebé; Jorge Blein, 2017)
The Imaginary Friend (Steye Hallema, 2023)
Travelling while Black (Roger Ross Williams, 2019)
Within Touching Distance (ZU-UK 2016–)

Biography

Rosamund Davies is Associate Professor, Media and Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. She has a background in professional practice in the film and television industries, in which she worked with both independent production companies and public funding bodies. Rosamund's research encompasses theory and practice across writing and audiovisual media. She is co-editor (with Paolo Russo and Claus Tieber) of the award winning *Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

Rosamund is author of many journal articles and chapters on screenwriting, including "The Screenplay as Boundary Object," *Journal of Screenwriting* 10, no. 2 (2019), 149–164; and "Nordic noir with an Icelandic twist: Establishing a shared space for collaboration within European co-production," in *Script Development: Critical Approaches, Creative Practices, International Perspectives*, eds. Craig Batty and Stayci Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Email: R.Davies@greenwich.ac.uk