

ZIP-SCENE

Conference

ART * VR

FESTIVAL OF VIRTUAL REALITY AND OTHER IMMERSIVE ART

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Art*VR

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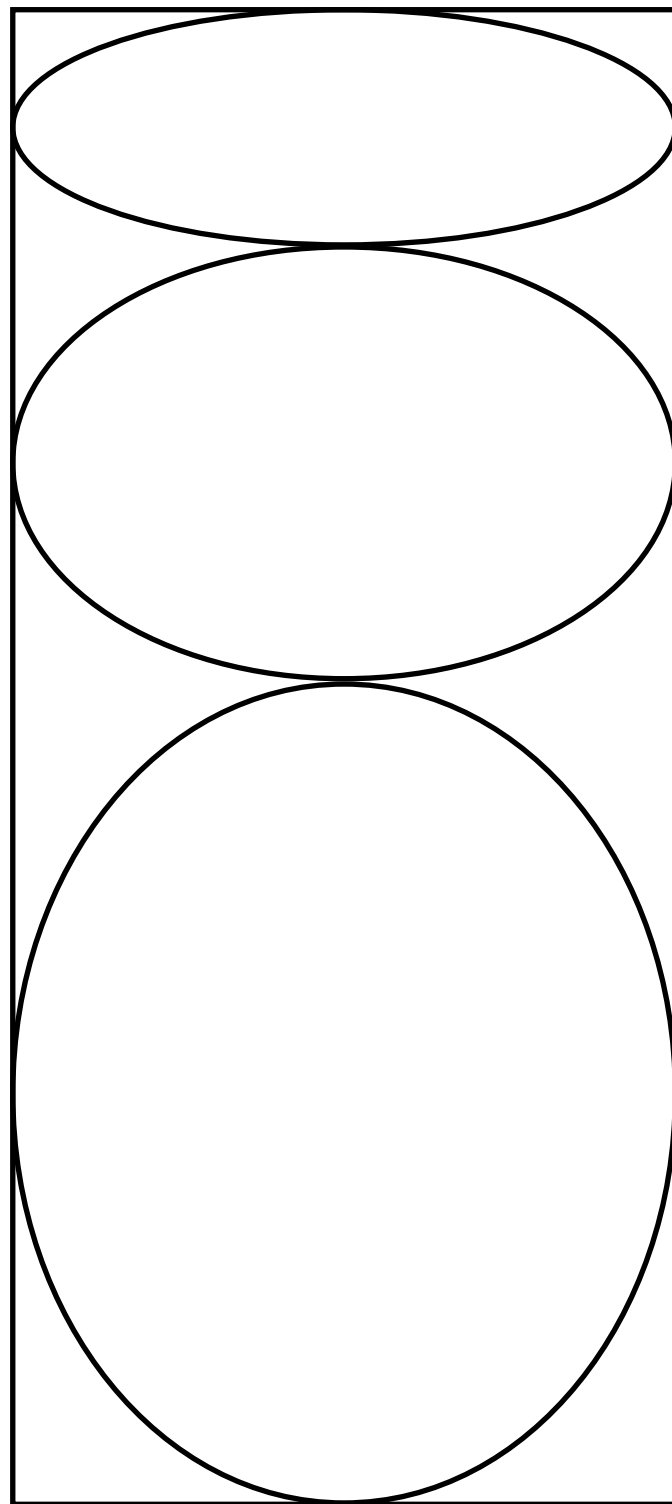
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Foreword

Since 2018, Zip-Scene has been bringing together creators from around the world, primarily Europe, but has always been based in Budapest. Last year, one of the keynote speakers from the 2022 event, Ondřej Moravec, approached us with a question: Would Zip-Scene be willing to relocate its epicenter from Budapest to Prague? This request fulfilled a long-time dream of ours: to expand beyond Hungary and explore new frontiers with researchers and creators of interactive digital storytelling artifacts. This year, our program structure has also evolved. While we revisit the theme of empathy, which was the focus of the very first Zip-Scene Conference, we have changed the format to accommodate creators invited by the Art*VR festival. These creators will share their artistic visions and perspectives on climate change and current crisis situations. Zip-Scene's goal is to enhance resilience among researchers and creators and facilitate new collaborations across countries and nations.

Ágnes Karolina Bakk, founder of Zip-Scene
22.10.2023

ZIP-SCENE

PROGRAM

DAY 1

NOVEMBER 2

09:55-10:00 INTRODUCTION

1st Panel - Education & Empathy with immersive storytelling

10:00-10:15 | **Shadrick Addy**: Ethical Guidelines for Developing Meaningful VR Content for Social Impact

10:15-10:30 | **Monika Górská-Olesińska**: Attentiveness or/ and Empathy? Encountering the Other(s) in Non-Fiction Virtual Reality Experiences

10:30-10:45 | **Florian Mundhenke**: Experience, Empathy and Ethics of Documentary VR

10:45-11:00 | **Francesco Melchiorri**: Immersive empathy between VR, TV, and Theatre: a comparison through performative aesthetics

11:00-11:10 | Q&A | 11:10-11:30 | Break

2nd Panel - Research & ethics including VR

11:30-11:45 | **Borbála Tölgyesi - Ágnes Karolina Bakk**: How virtually real is virtual reality?

11:45-12:00 | **Aste Amundsen**: Miss Turing's Kissing Booth - Human-Human vs AI-Human Interaction

12:00-12:15 | **Pola Borkiewicz- Piotr Maj**: Rethinking the principles of hybrid reality and the concept of ethics.

12:15-12:30 | Q&A | 12:30-13:45 | Lunchbreak

3rd Panel - Documentary Formats using Immersive Storytelling

13:45-13:50 | **Frederic Dubois**: Introduction

13:50-14:00 | **Laurien Michiels**: The Room of Resonance

14:00-14:10 | **Gwamaka Mwabuka**: Immersive Exploration of the Historical and Cultural Significance of Portuguese Trade on the Swahili Coast through VR

14:10-14:20 | **Samar Nahas**: Menopause: An immersive installation into the transformational phase of a woman's life.

14:20-14:30 | **Media Haqshenas**: A Pool With Two Figures

14:30-14:45 | **Jimena Aguilar**: Immersive audio to represent collective memory of violent events

14:45-15:00 | **Jim Osman**: (XR)'s Irrealist Tunnels, Allegory Through the Looking Glass: The Role of Speculative Fiction in Political and Moralistic Immersive Storytelling

15:00-15:10 | Q&A | 15:10-15:20 | Break

4th Panel - Case studies

15:20-15:35 **Selma Rizvic**: Presenting female rulers of Medieval Balkans countries using VR and AR technologies

15:35-15:50 **Jakub Šindelář**: How do you want me to get attached to this guy?' Affordances and obstacles for historical empathy via WW1 digital games (presentation)

15:50-16:05 **Reinhold Bidner**: Exploring Empathy through Interactive Storytelling in gold extra's Docuscape Experience "Once upon unsteady Grounds"

16:05-16:20 **Giorgio Chiappa**: Watched From the Wings as the Scenes Were Replaying: Immersion and Distance in Sam Barlow's "Immortality" (2022)

16:20-16:30 | Q&A | 16:30-17:00 | Break

Authors' Panel No. 1: Empathy, Impact, and Documentary

Cameron Kostopoulos (Body of Mine), **Joanne Popińska** (The Choice), **Michał Stankiewicz** (Wish You Were Here), **Krisztina Meggyes** (Missing 10 Hours), **Thierry Loa** (21-22 China)

18:00-18:15 Break

18:15-19:00 | **Roundtable:** Three leading developers on XR field in the Czech Republic will talk about their projects connected with the topic of empathy in XR.

Brainz Immersive, 3dsense/Comguide, Infinite

DAY 2 NOVEMBER 3

5th Panel - Immersive Remediations

10:00-10:15 | **Katharina Haverich:**
Brecht into the Metaverse

10:15-10:30 | **Sharon Clark - Tom Abba:** Newer Faster Quicker... Better? Reframing the Holodeck Exploiting the legacy of pre-existing technology in a narrative driven context

10:30-10:45 | **Martha Kicsiny:**
Embodied Encounters of the 19th Century

10:45-11:00 | **Rebecca Rouse & Lars Kristensen:**
LudoKonst: Intimate, Immersive, & Interactive Performance Play for Public Culture

11:00-11:15 | **Carl Erez:** Smoked Out: Lessons from a Multimodal Documentary Project

11:15-11:25 | Q&A | 11:25-11:35 | Break

6th Panel - Memory in immersive spaces

11:35-11:50 | **Jain Maulika:** Empathy through a War Museum

11:50-12:05 | **Georgii Molodtsov:** Second life of VR: how metaverse saved film festivals and brought new perspective to once single player "offline" experiences

12:05-12:20 | **Victoria Lopukhina:** The terrible narrative of the war or ethical responsibility is a difficult dilemma for the Ukrainian VR developers of museums about the war.

12:20-12:30 | Q&A | 12:30-13:45 | Lunch Break

Authors' Panel No. 2: Immersive Anthropocene

Mihai Greco (Sol-Air), **Jacco Kooistra** (Let Nature Heal), **Emilia Sánchez Chiquetti** (Origen), **Jenny Qinya Guo** (Once a Glacier), **Jan Kerhart**, **Felix Gaedtke**, **Gayatri Parameswaran** (Berlin 2037)

14:45-15:00 | Break

7th Panel - Affective relations: empathy, imagination and care in immersive experiences

15:00-15:15 | **Francesco Bentivegna:** (Re)imagining Utopias through VR

15:15-15:30 | **Paul Clarke:** Participatory Futuring Through Performance and Augmented Reality

15:30-15:40 | **Jess McCormack:** VR Dancing Postcards: imagining new ways to move through the city

15:40-15:50 | Q&A | 15:50-16:05 | Break

8th Panel - Access to the virtual 'other'

16:05-16:20 | **Agnieszka Przybyszewska:** Sylleptic "you" protagonists, ontological resonance and empathy in XR narrative experiences

16:20-16:35 | **Martin Polák & Andrej Gero:** Gametherapy

16:35-16:50 | **Rory Willats:** Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!': White masculinity and the ethics of ritual in Virtual Reality

16:50-17:05 | **Ash Eliza Smith:** Mu Mu: Designing Beyond the Human in VR

17:05-17:15 | Q&A | 17:15-18:00 | Break

Authors' Panel No. 3: Fragile Inner Worlds

Aron Fels (Eurydice, a Descent into Infinity), **Chloé Lee** (Temporal World), **Maciej Czuchryta + Marta Wieczorek** (Simple Songs about Death), **Steye Hallema** (The Imaginary Friend), **Zoe Roellin** (Perennials)

DAY 3 NOVEMBER 4

10:00 Introduction

10:10 Demo pitch 1: Jacobs Journey

Joanne Popińska

10:20 Demo pitch 2: Mrs. Houdini

Agnes Karolina Bakk

10:30 Demo pitch 3: Tent

Lou Doye + Rory Mitchell (online)

10:40 Demo pitch 4: Fragile Home

Ondřej Moravec, Volo Kolbasa

10:50 Demo pitch 5: Panel Story

András Szabó

11:00 Demo pitch 6: Na Sera

Mimi Harmer

11:10 Demo pitch 7: Dream Screen

Johannes Krell

11:20 Demo pitch 8: Care

Thomas Villepoux

11:30-12:00 | Q&A | 12:00 | Lunch break

Authors' Panel No. 4: Welcome to My Fantasy

Thomas Villepoux (Jailbirds), **Suling Yeh** (Over the Rainbow), **Flow** (Adriaan Lokman), **Clément Deneux** (Missing Pictures: Naomi Kawase)

14:00 | Q&A

13:30-16:30 | **Francesco Bentivegna**: Watering a Flower - (re)imagining utopian technologies for immersive worlds (workshop)

14:30-17:30 | **Dimitar Uzunov & David Bassuk**: Creating Sci-Fi and Fantasy Transmedia Storyworlds (workshop)

17:30 | CLOSING NOTE | 19:00 | AWARD CEREMONY

ABSTRACTS

NOVEMBER 2

1st Panel - Education & Empathy with immersive storytelling

**10:00-10:15 Shadrick Addy: Ethical Guidelines
for Developing Meaningful VR Content
for Social Impact**

As virtual reality continues to take root in education environments and design classrooms, it's essential that design educators prepare students to be good stewards of virtual reality technology. A move away from existing practices that prioritize students' consumption of VR content to hands-on approaches that prepare students to become creators of meaningful VR content becomes a necessary step. This paper aims to contribute to the latter discourse by proposing ethical considerations and approaches that can serve as a guideline for course projects that focus on designing immersive virtual experiences, especially those that emphasize social impact. The guidelines are as follows: Identify clear objectives and justification, implement UX design methodologies, integrate collaborator/expert review, integrate moments of reflection, and prioritize authenticity. This paper reflects on the design and development of a course project, *Eyes of Mariam VR*, to showcase the practical implementation of each guideline. *Eyes of Mariam VR* is an interactive first-person virtual reality experience that puts participants in the shoes of an African teenage girl experiencing firsthand the dangers of obtaining basic education during civil unrest in her homeland – a fictionalized African region. The narrative follows real events and the ensuing implications of school attacks in the region. Through this experience, students explored the use of virtual reality as a narrative-based experiential media aimed at cultivating empathy for children experiencing traumatic events in their pursuit of education.

**10:15-10:30 Monika Górská-Olesińska: Attentiveness
or/and Empathy? Encountering the Other(s)
in Non-Fiction Virtual Reality Experiences**

In her influential book "Interactive Documentary: Theory and Debate", Kate Nash explores the different ways in which the viewer can be positioned vis-à-vis the VR experience, either as themselves (as tourism, encounter, or with an attitude of witnessing) or through forms of imaginative self-other hybridity [Nash 2021, 102-120]. Drawing on Nash's taxonomy, I will propose a comparative analysis of the two award-winning VR factual projects that create the experience of encountering the other, based on the ideal of the face-to-face as the basis of intercultural understanding. One of my case studies is "The Choice" (2021), an interactive VR documentary about women's reproductive rights by Joanna Popińska. The other is Zohar Kfir's "Testimony" (2018), which tells the stories of survivors of sexual assault and their healing journey. I will analyze the rhetorical devices used and the aesthetic choices made by both directors to encourage the enactment of attentiveness and to immerse the audience much more deeply in the stories being told (Popińska promotes the form of engagement in the VR experience based on relationality, not only by introducing the mechanism of intimate, interactive conversation but also by adopting the technique of re-enacting the conscious and mnemonic realities of the protagonist through immersive spatial animations, while Kfir resists visual spectacle, creating a "deep listening space" that prioritizes the reception of testimony over the illusion of "being there"). Based on my analysis, I will critically engage with the ongoing debate on empathy as a multidimensional concept (Ruberg 2020) and attempt to offer a more media-oriented perspective on the subject.

**10:30-10:45 Florian Mundhenke: Experience, Empathy
and Ethics of Documentary VR**

Documentary VR is one of the most interesting evolving fields of immersive cultural practice. What used to be called immersive journalism, i.e., the attempt to offer the user physical experiences of factual journalism, has become much more film-oriented in recent years. Most projects, therefore, tell stories that have a relation to

reality and allow the protagonists to enter real-life narratives. There are two main categories to achieve this empathy: First, I can let the protagonist become part of the story and let him/her participate in the narrative from the perspective of the experiencer. Second, it is also possible to suggest participation (or even collaboration with others) involving an action structure via low-threshold interaction. Most of the time there is an intrinsic (i.e., affective) empathy and an extrinsic (more action-based) empathy working together. A question that must be asked with more and more advanced projects is the ethical nature of the project and the user's role of involvement in scenarios of threat, poverty, or violence. In concrete terms, what does it mean when you are an observer in a refugee camp and must watch a family being harassed and mistreated while you just stand by? The lecture would like to take up these two sides and show how important it is not to forget the ethical component in increasingly technically adept work. For this purpose, some experiments will be presented, which are primarily related to the generation of empathy via the two factors of storytelling and interaction; this should also clarify how the concept of experience corresponds to it. After that, the ethical component will be evaluated. Diverse problems will be named, for example, the possibility of not being able to get involved or not being able to act correctly or, even worse, experiencing things that can also influence the user psychologically or even damage them. To this end, some strategies are then formulated on how to counteract this and how selected projects managed to handle these risks.

10:45-11:00 Francesco Melchiorri: Immersive empathy between VR, TV, and Theatre: a comparison through performative aesthetics

Battle Hymn (2019) by Yair Agmon is a VR film selected by Venice Virtual Reality 2019. From a FPS point of view, the movie enforces an empathetic connection with the spectator, to underline how huge the impact of a conflict is in the life of civil as well as military people. In May, the 29th 2020 Omar Jimenez, a CNN journalist, is arrested live on air with his four people crew during his reporting job about the first Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The footage of the arrest, starting as a normal live tape for a news channel, grad-

ually transforms itself into an involuntary very emotionally immersive clip: although the clip couldn't be defined as immersive because of its traditional footage format, on the other hand, there are so many characteristics of the second part of the live video which connects it with some VR cinematographic products. Festen. Il gioco della verità (2021) by Il Mulino di Amleto is the first Italian drama adaptation of Festen by Thomas Vinterberg. The original staging puts in dialogue different media in a constant, simultaneous double storyline representation using a live camera the cast shoots a part of the pièce constantly, in a non-stop sequence on stage, screened on a transparent canvas which frames the entire proscenium. Thus, the audience can follow both the real, live-action as well as the audio-visual live streaming, a partial but autonomous representation of what is going on stage. The presentation will focus on the similarities and differences of the considered case studies through an aesthetical point of view (Carbone, Dalmaso, Bodini 2016, 2019, 2020, 2022, Pinotti 2021) (Bolter-Grusin 1999) to stress traditional screen borders and consider the performative aesthetics (Fischer-Lichte 2008) as an applicable theory in a different field. In this sense, if «imagination behaves, literally, like a 'generator of VR'» (Montani 2022), our way of perception via media could be analysed also looking for immersive characteristics in un-immersive products, which enable us to connect VR development to classical performing arts history (Mamone 1981) as well as to today's live broadcasts such as TV news.

11:00-11:10 | Q&A | 11:10-11:30 | Break

2nd Panel - Research & ethics including VR

11:30-11:45 Borbála Tölgyesi - Ágnes Karolina Bakk: How virtually real is virtual reality?

Although the idea of dying physically from a virtual wound may seem far-fetched, and we do not need to worry about it anytime soon, using virtual reality can produce psychological and physiological changes in users, just as it has the ability to elicit powerful emotions that may be difficult to manage (Martens, 2019;

Dammen, 2021). Users may feel joy, fear, or despair that feels as real as it does in actual life, despite the fact that the events are virtual and even users are cognitively aware that what they are seeing, and hearing is not reality just an illusion (Slater, 2022). This idea finds a connection to David Chalmers' (2017) writings, where he emphasizes that "rich virtual reality" should not be considered a secondary or less significant reality. In line with our approach, we assert that VR deserves equal seriousness in research as real-life or physical interventions. Expanding on this notion, we draw upon the work of Michael Madary and Thomas K. Metzinger (2016), whose pioneering article on VR ethics introduces the idea of a potential code of conduct to uphold good scientific practices in the VR field, benefiting both researchers and consumers using VR technologies. Another often overlooked aspect, within the ethical approach in conducting research, is the narrative aspect of VR productions. Many times, "the designers of these applications aim to create empathy toward the unimaginable and provide critical information framed with artistic concepts, which can help bystanders" (Bakk, 2023). In our presentation, we will offer an overview of the ethical issues related to conducting research in VR, focusing on our case study, Zenctuary VR, that serves as a „rich virtual reality" environment, and its design was carefully iterated. We will showcase existing studies that address these ethical concerns from both physiological and philosophical perspectives and we will pinpoint those through our design process. This presentation aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of ethical approaches in VR experiments, and serves as a starting point for a foregrounding study that reviews the existing ethical practices.

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L., Barnett, N., Conrady, R., Wright, L., Thymes, B., & Shirtcliff, E. A. (2021). Evoking Stress Reactivity in a Virtual Dance Competition. In *Advances in Simulation and Digital Human Modeling: Proceedings of the AHFE 2020 Virtual Conferences on Human Factors and Simulation, and Digital Human Modeling and Applied Optimization*, July 16-20, 2020, USA (pp. 48-55). Springer International Publishing.

11:45-12:00 **Aste Amundsen: Miss Turing's Kissing Booth - Human-Human vs AI-Human Interaction**

Miss Turing's Kissing Booth is an interactive fair-ground-style booth show and AI-Human vs Human-Human personalised-interaction experiment. It explores the unique qualities, mechanics and possibilities of human-human communications by contrasting them with the conversational capabilities of an AI chatbot. Designed for the casual audiences of street theatre, festivals or gallery settings, it explores these themes via the medium of comedy sexting. The installation proceeds from my discovery that the main frameworks for assessing the quality of Human-Human interaction derive from the field of Human-Computer-Interaction and specifically frameworks used by designers to help create more convincingly human AI chatbots. Through this lens, 'human' is assumed to equate to 'better' interaction. Whereas my personal observation suggests that two pandemic years where most humans primarily communicated and conducted public debate through remote text interfaces have eroded the quality of human-human interaction, especially where that interaction is digitally mediated. So while AI have got markedly more human lately, humans constrained by online chat platforms could perhaps be seen to have got less so. How does the attention of a chatbot designed to elicit an emotional response and bonding compare with that of a self-absorbed horny human whose capacity for 'theory of mind', perhaps not excellent to begin with, has been eroded by prolonged isolation? How are these changes reflected in the rise of phenomena such as fictophilia and fictosexuality? What aspects of interactions do audiences most value in communications, and are humans still best placed to deliver those? Does theatre have something uniquely human to offer vs AI as an

arena of live embodied human interaction? Do we need new criteria for assessing the quality of interaction? New definitions of what is uniquely human or uniquely valuable in what is human? And what percentage of horny human chatters would, in fact, pass the Turing test?

12:00-12:15 **Pola Borkiewicz- Piotr Maj: Rethinking the principles of hybrid reality and the concept of ethics.**

The acceleration of cultural and societal transformation processes associated with rapid development of automation reveals a deep fracturing of old systems and dominant narratives. The experience of the pandemic highlighted a crisis of public trust and information chaos both encompassing communication channels as well as professions of public trust, not sparing medics. Grassroots social movements are gaining strength and means of expression leading to shifts in the balance of power. The inclusion into this process of hitherto discriminated voices is taking place on an increasing scale reviving many opposing tendencies and polarizing discourses. In a post-pandemic world, no one has any illusions anymore about digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011), the illusory separation between the digital and physical worlds and the foundation of synthetic environments on materiality (Crawford, 2021). Experiencing hybrid reality on a global scale has accelerated the disclosure of the nefarious goals of the owners of digital platforms. Despite that, we still haven't embraced the knowledge gained regarding the role of recommendation algorithms (Harris, 2020). In the meantime, each week brings new AI models incrementally more deeply inscribed into our reality (Harris, Raskin, 2023). Among the tools at the disposal of humanity in its strife for development, reflection, critical analysis and constructive discussion have always been pivotal, and we postulate their broader implementation into interactive digital narratives (Koenitz, 2023). We will try to reevaluate the issue of interacting with technology with special regards to human values, as more and more people gain insight into the differences between human and machine perception, relying on AI models on a daily basis. We want to propose a rethinking of the direction of the current development of synthetic environments and discuss

the ethical issues of AI in order to employ its potential to enhance human development and activities within the framework of responsible innovation. We propose to elaborate on the role of such current developments as Decentralized Social Web, ActivityPub Protocol, interoperability between platforms, Ethical Design Principles, Privacy in XR, Neuro-Rights, Brain Data and incorporate our own experiences and ethical conclusions from our VR research project the New Forms and Technologies of Narratives (2019-2023).

12:15-12:30 | Q&A | 12:30-13:45 | Lunch break

3rd Panel - Documentary Formats using Immersive Storytelling

13:45-13:50 **Frederic Dubois: Introduction**

13:50-14:00 **Laurien Michiels: The Room of Resonance**

The Room of Resonance is an interactive WebXR story that ultimately questions the manner in which we deal with media consumption. Particularly how people are affected by filter bubbles, algorithmically curated content and its implications in society. The narrative of the work draws inspiration from the Middle Dutch animal epos "Van den Vos Reynaerde" (The Fox Reynard) in which the setting represents an animal kingdom where a plague of blinding polarization is happening. A jester guides you through the story, introducing and concluding each chapter in which you can explore the living space of an animal dealing with this "curseth plague". The embedded narrative unfolds in a poetic manner yet offers sharp comments on their media consumption behaviour which will ultimately resonate into our own lives. The project aspires to foster a sense of reflection and a feeling of solidarity because although filter bubbles can cause polarization among people, it is also important to note that we are not purely what we consume either, and that people are in fact quite layered. The Room of

Resonance will be connected to a master thesis which aims to further investigate the implications of algorithmically curated content and its impact on the media consumer. The thesis will be developed more precisely the coming year.

14:00-14:10 Gwamaka Mwabuka: Immersive Exploration of the Historical and Cultural Significance of Portuguese Trade on the Swahili Coast through VR

This presentation explores the immersive and interactive VR experience, *Zamia*, which delves into the historical and cultural significance of Portuguese trade on the Swahili Coast. Drawing upon the concept of empathy and the evolving dimensions of ethics in XR technologies, this presentation highlights how the *Zamia* Project utilizes VR as a medium to engage audiences, foster empathy, and encourage critical thinking about historical narratives. The presentation begins by discussing the changing landscape of empathy and ethics in XR technologies, from the early conceptualizations of empathy in the *Holodeck* to the emerging concept of the *Metaverse*. It examines how these dimensions of empathy have shaped the ways in which users interact with immersive digital narratives and how ethical considerations have evolved in the design and implementation of such experiences. The *Zamia* Project serves as a case study that exemplifies the potential of immersive exploration in fostering historical and cultural understanding. Through the VR experience, users are transported to the Swahili Coast, where they embark on a journey to uncover the secrets of Portuguese trade. They interact with the vibrant underwater environment, engage with historical artifacts, and confront the complex legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Furthermore, the presentation examines how trust and the sense of criticism play a crucial role in shaping users' understanding of old and novel interactive digital narratives. It explores the ways in which the *Zamia* Project incorporates gamified elements, realistic 3D animation, and playful storytelling to establish trust and encourage critical thinking among users. By immersing participants in an interactive historical narrative, the *Zamia* Project aims to create an empathetic connection with the past, fostering a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage of the Swahili Coast. Through this presentation, attend-

ees will gain insights into the potential of immersive VR experiences to shape historical understanding, promote cultural empathy, and provoke critical reflection on the ethical dimensions of interactive digital narratives.

14:10-14:20 Samar Nahas: Menopause: An immersive installation into the transformational phase of a woman's life.

Menopause-The Installation is an onsite journey built using generative and interactive projection mapping, consisting of three different digital narratives each representing the different phases of menopause, namely perimenopause, menopause, and post-menopause. The presentation will use a VR prototype to showcase the project. As a research-based project, my aim is to explore how immersive and interactive technologies and storytelling methods may be combined to design digital narratives that evoke a sense of empathy, presence, and awareness of the self as part of a collective. Menopause is a process of transformation, of metamorphosis. Women, and those whose sex by birth is female, go through a long hormone-driven process in which their body and their psyche changes and with it their lives. A woman leaves behind her youthful, child-bearing body. Her "sexiness" slowly fades. In a world that celebrates youth and youth-based beauty ideals, this can be a challenging time for a woman. Who is she without her youth, her youthful beauty? What is her place in the world? However, despite the physical and emotional stress, women in menopause shift into fifth gear, with much to offer. And yet, women are expected to "suffer" silently, to quietly disappear and make way for what is considered more attractive, desirable, not only in terms of physical beauty but also economic and social relevance, namely youth. Menopause is hard to explain to those who are not or never will be in menopause. How may we enable an emotional and physical understanding of this transformational process using interactive storytelling methods? This is crucial in terms of evoking collective empathy and critical reflection that are vital to moving past the taboo and initiating the essential societal changes. Menopause - The Installation maps out this transformation in immersive and interactive digital narratives, whereby each phase is linked to the other through a transitional passage. It stages the

different phases of the self in this process, starting with the self as dictated by the outside world (media, culture - perimenopause), to the self in a state of discovery and individuation (menopause), to the self as part of a greater whole (post-menopause).

14:20-14:30 **Media Haqshenas: A Pool With Two Figures**

My conference presentation will focus on my master's project, a narrative set in 2050 amid severe heat waves due to global warming. Asoo, a woman battling Alzheimer's, finds herself in quarantine with her AI voice assistant, Simond. She reminisces daily as a therapy, sharing nostalgic memories with Simond, and recounting her late partner's memoir. However, Alzheimer's erases this revelation each morning. The target audience includes art and film enthusiasts concerned about emerging realities including AI, global warming, and water scarcity. The core theme explores memory and technology's convergence, questioning their impact on human relationships and cognition, framed within a near-future context shaped by global warming. In this world, AI leaves behind the humanity. Human is not at the center of the world anymore. All that is left are abandoned places, isolated people, useless environments, and empty pools.

14:30-14:45 **Jimena Aguilar: Immersive audio to represent collective memory of violent events**

"Ciudad Perdida: el funeral de monseñor Romero" is an immersive locative audio documentary project that rescues eyewitness accounts of the massacre that occurred during the funeral of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero in 1980 in El Salvador. The funeral was scheduled for March 30, 1980 at the cathedral. Between 50,000 and 150,000 people accompanied the funeral rite in and around the Plaza Barrios. They were greeted with bombs and gunshots. Among the chaos, bombs and gunfire, 40 people died and around 200 were wounded. Three locative audio walks tell the stories of different survivors and different aspects of what Romero represents. In addition, the narrator and director of the project also intertwines the event with her family history marked by the armed conflict. We place special emphasis on the stories of women, who tend to be left

out of the history of the armed conflict. These are the sites where the past confronts the present. With this project, we invite the audience to listen to the stories of those who were in the funeral by tracing their steps in the city center with audios that can only be heard there. By anchoring audios to a geographic location, the project seeks to attract the audience to walk through the historical centre of San Salvador and experience it both within and outside the project. The project also serves as a digital performance, representing the concept of memory and its relationship to physical objects and spaces: physical spaces hold memories that are not visible to the naked eye, but are present and, like ghosts of the past, return when summoned. These are the places where the past confronts the present.

14:45-15:00 **Jim Osman: (XR)'s Irrealist Tunnels, Allegory Through the Looking Glass: The Role of Speculative Fiction in Political and Moralistic Immersive Storytelling**

Speculative fiction possesses the ability to indirectly and symbolically explore political and moral themes, potentially granting it advantages over explicitly political storytelling, which are prone to dismissal as polemical or one-sided. Through allegory, speculative fiction facilitates the engagement with political concepts in reflective and imaginative ways. Metaphor and analogy allow for the abstraction and reframing of complex social and political issues, thereby encouraging critical thinking and fostering empathy. For these reasons, speculative fiction genres may contain highly effective storytelling techniques that foster empathy and engagement of political discourse within various Extended Reality (XR) mediums. This potential is enhanced by the shared capacity of (XR) and speculative fiction to construct alternate realities. This presentation poses the question of how (XR) could serve as a more potent medium for political discourse compared to "realistic" representations of political content in immersive media arts. It examines the use of allegory, analogy, and metaphor in this context. In exploring the construction of speculative models of reality and the transportation of spectators to alternate realities, this presentation seeks to address how unconscious bias can be bypassed or confirmation bias circumvented. It critically contrasts and

critiques techniques of political storytelling and performance-making, including Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, defamiliarisation, estrangement, and problematisation, and compares their potential effectiveness within (XR). The presentation will investigate the measurable deviation from reality required for a speculative, other-worldly environment to stimulate empathy for moral and political discourse. It will explore how the effectiveness of different genres of speculative fiction within (XR) mediums can be measured. For instance, does speculative fiction that closely resembles our reality, such as near-future dystopias, environmental science fiction, or technological thrillers, possess a broader or narrower capacity for political impact compared to genres that deviate further from our consensus reality, such as irrealism, magical realism, and surrealism? Regarding the suitability of these speculative fictions across immersive media arts, the presentation will consider how multiple (XR) mediums contribute to the future development of speculative fiction in general. It acknowledges the influence of late-capitalist immersive technologies on the fragmentation of well-ordered and coherent medieval systems of symbol and allegory, which serve as the root for genres like fantasy and science fiction.

15:00-15:10 | Q&A | 15:10-15:20 | Break

4th Panel - Case studies

15:20-15:35 **Selma Rizvic: Presenting female rulers of Medieval Balkans countries using VR and AR technologies**

Creative Europe SHELeadersVR project aims to present in Virtual and Augmented Reality the female rulers from Western Balkan countries, the places where they lived and stories from their lives. Bosnian queen Jelena Gruba, Serbian princess Milica, Macedonian queen Marija Paleologos, Albanian queen Vojsava Tribalda and Montenegrin queen Izabeta Crnojević will appear in virtual reconstructions of the castles where they lived and will narrate significant events from their reign. Users will have the opportunity to virtually walk through these cultural monuments and find digitized

exhibits from museums holding related collections. We will present the work in progress including the selection of historical characters, filming 360 videos of selected locations, creating concepts and structure of VR and AR applications and filming the actress in roles of five queens on green screen. This presentation will show the potential of immersive digital storytelling in VR and AR in the presentation and preservation of cultural heritage and support to the development of cultural tourism.

15:35-15:50 **Jakub Šindelář: How do you want me to get attached to this guy? Affordances and obstacles for historical empathy via WW1 digital games**

The historian Thomas Kohut has recently argued (2020) that all historical understanding – that is, making sense of the past – is a two-part process that includes not only a reflective side but also an equally significant component of historical empathy that involves the attempt to understand the perspective of people who lived in the past, without necessarily reaching a full understanding or agreeing with those we try to empathize with. While the medium of digital games has been too often and too vaguely and inaccurately hailed as 'empathy machines' (critically discussed by Bonnie Ruberg (2020), the historical empathy in connection to digital games has so far remained relatively understudied. This contribution tries to analyze how digital games can also play a role in this specific kind of empathic process. Using mixed methodology combining autoethnographic analysis, close and distant reading of Let's Play video paratexts – a popular genre of streaming platform videos where people record themselves playing and commenting – of two digital games set in the First World War: the comic book graphic styled adventure game *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) and the photorealistic First-Person-Shooter *Battlefield 1* (EA DICE, 2016). Examining two commercially successful digital games that have been released in the relative time period, that is around the hundred years anniversary of the conflict, should allow us to determine the effect of the games' genres and other specificities that determine how effective this medium can be in fostering historical empathy. To explore the players' interaction with the selected cases will apply the player involvement model as proposed by Gordon Calleja (2011) to determine which factors

provide affordances and obstacles for the process of historical empathy involving digital games.

References:

- Calleja, Gordon. 2011. *In-Game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press.
- Kohut, Thomas. 2020. *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past*. Routledge 2020.
- Ruberg, Bonnie. 2020 "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of 'Empathy' in Video Games." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 1: 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz044>.

15:50-16:05 Reinhold Bidner: Exploring Empathy through Interactive Storytelling in gold extra's Docuscape Experience "Once upon unsteady Grounds"

The presentation displays an examination of the concept of the docuscape and its application in the interactive online performance, "Once Upon Unsteady Grounds". The narrative revolved around the captivating journey of dance artist Mara Vivas as she navigated her fears and aspirations during her migration to Europe. Drawing upon diverse global perspectives, the online performance interwove Mara's personal account with narratives and insights from individuals representing various cultural backgrounds. Defined as a documentary virtual space, the docuscape is an artistic form currently under investigation by gold extra. This research explores the interconnectedness of different research aspects within virtual and interactive spatial installations. For the performance, gold extra utilized Mozilla Hubs, an online platform, to create an immersive and transformative experience. Mara Vivas, a professional dancer who defected from Venezuela after a tour with the National Ballet of Caracas, emerged as the central figure in the performance. Having endured poverty and life-threatening experiences during her childhood, Mara embarks on a quest for work, security, and survival in Europe. The pivotal events of August 2nd, 2001, when Mara arrives in London but encounters both a disaster and a miracle at passport control, serve as the foundation for "Once Upon Unsteady Grounds" and continue to reverberate in Mara's life. Through the magic of virtual spaces, gold extra allows the audience to accompany Mara on her journey, offering them a unique opportunity to experience the events from both Mara's perspective

and the airport's. Furthermore, the performance features live appearances by individuals from Iran, Ukraine, Mexico, Thailand, and the United States. These guests share their own experiences of traversing national boundaries, societies, and ideas, offering valuable insights that contribute to the audience's understanding and empathy. This research contributes to the exploration of interactive storytelling methods within the docuscape framework. By examining the narrative techniques employed in "Once Upon Unsteady Grounds" and its ability to engender empathy in the audience, we shed light on the potential of virtual spaces for creating meaningful and transformative experiences. The findings of this process contribute to the wider discourse on interactive art, immersive storytelling, and the power of digital platforms in facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

16:05-16:20 Giorgio Chiappa: Watched From the Wings as the Scenes Were Replaying: Immersion and Distance in Sam Barlow's "Immortality" (2022)

In Sam Barlow's recent outing "Immortality" (Half Mermaid, 2022, PC game) the player is cast in the role of a film archivist confronted with a recently discovered cache of lost films starring fictional actress Marissa Marcel (played by Manon Gage), whose ultimate destiny remains unknown. "Immortality" belongs to the genre of interactive film video games, but instead of providing the player with fixed narrative branches, the game allows us to organise and scrub the footage – in this, we are aided by the controller vibrating in segments harbouring hidden material (which we can uncover by combing the footage back and forth) and by our own intuition, connecting fleeting details, faces, and objects that appear through the three Marissa Marcel movies and backstage scenes / interviews from the 30+ years of her fledgling career, trying to unearth the truth about the demonic influences that have taken over her existence as a person and an actress. In this presentation, I will analyse "Immortality" as a prominent example of a mixed-media experience mimicking a form of real-life labour (in this case, the archiving and sorting of footage for film preservation) as a storytelling means, waving a tale that is all about the frustration of writing, acting, and existing in a creative industry marred by gender and

power dynamics; the horror undercurrent of the game enhances instead of trivialising these themes. Analogue and digital fused in my personal experience of the game, going at my own leisure through the many hours of footage, my fingers and ears carefully heeding for the rumble signalling a hidden scene, and a notepad by my side to keep track of recurring symbolism, names, and clips. In my presentation I will discuss how this peculiar brand of immersion through distance (with the player acting as an external instance rather than as someone directly present in the game world) ends up engendering empathy and involvement, and I will do so with reference to scholarship on horror games (Stobbert 2019) and on videogames as complex narrative artifacts in which participation and disengagement merge in dialectical ways (Ensslin 2015, Van de Mosselaer 2022).

16:20-16:30 | Q&A | 16:30-17:00 | Break

17:00-18:00 **Authors' Panel No. 1: Empathy, impact and documentary: Cameron Kostopoulos** (Body of Mine), **Joanne Popińska** (The Choice), **Michał Stankiewicz** (Wish you were here), **Krisztina Meggyes** (Missing 10 hours), **Thierry Loa** (21-22 China)

18:00-18:15 Break

18:15-19:00 **Roundtable: Three leading developers on XR field in the Czech Republic will talk about their projects connected with the topic of empathy in XR. Brainz Immersive, 3dsense/Comguide, Infinite**

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5th Panel - Immersive Remediations

10:00-10:15 **Katharina Haverich:
Brecht into the Metaverse**

A group of performers with varying abilities and backgrounds ventures into the early metaverse to rehearse a play by Bertolt Brecht. Accompanied by a film team - in the process of diversification - they show what awaits us both on the way to "the Metaverse" and on site... 2023: bit by bit (literally), the Metaverse is being designed and constructed. Behind closed doors, by the same people who built Facebook. Trustworthiness gravitates towards zero. National spaces are being released by the company META (Spain and France, August 2022), others will follow. Who checks on the ethics of this new universe, that we are meant to work, socialize and fall in love in? Will the architectures of the Metaverse allow for the repetition of IRL (in real life) problems like racism, ableism, misogyny and ageism? You may never know and hope for others to look into this. Lucky for you, we are setting out to perform Brecht's "Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar" (1941) together with a retired Turkish media artist, an actress with Down's Syndrome, a blind electrician, a sex worker and a father from Eritrea under the direction of performance and media artist Katharina Haverich (Berlin). Watch us playtest the Metaverse to aid your virtual preparedness.

10:15-10:30 **Sharon Clark - Tom Abba: Newer Faster Quicker... Better? Reframing the Holodeck Exploiting the legacy of pre-existing technology in a narrative driven context**

Within the field of immersive digital media, theatre and film there exists a wilful sightlessness to the potential of older technologies to afford effective and impactful immersive experiences. Our collective veneration of the Holodeck as the arbiter for immersion, accompanied by a rush to embrace the 'new' (whether exhibited as VR headsets, AI generative engines or AR devices) results

in our retraining our audience anew with each iteration of the forms in which we work. Our audiences are asked to make sense of new techniques and forms for presentation and engagement with our work, and that familiarisation process can frequently distract from their participation in and commitment to a nevertheless carefully designed and executed immersive experience. Mining the legacy of the Ambient Literature project, the work of immersive company Raucous and a series of reframing provocation workshops held at UWE Bristol and the Pervasive Media Studio in 2023, we will discuss a manifesto for practice and technology within immersive narratives that calls for an attending to older forms of media alongside newer iterations of technological forms. We will consider how older technologies still have the vitality and resilience to deliver narratives whilst mediating between artist/writer and audience. Furthermore, there will be explorations around how pre-existing versions of technology can mitigate critical engagement issues of trust, agency, presence and accessibility between these invested constituents.

10:30-10:45 **Martha Kicsiny: Embodied Encounters of the 19th Century**

Critics often debate the potential and cultural roots of “immersion” as a form of art, questioning if its spatial illusions and voyeurism is merely fit for entertainment and to be a monetizable commodity. Such an option is partially due to the forgotten and silenced chapters of visual culture, that could provide significant understanding of the origins of the artistic and technological developments aiming to create virtual experiences preceding the Virtual and Augmented Reality projects of our decade. Thus, I advocate for more informed awareness of the historical and artistic roots of XR so it gains its well deserved place in the cultural canon. For my argument, I revisit the less-known stereographic work of Eadweard Muybridge, as an example of early immersive experiences utilizing empathy to share embodied encounters of the diversity and richness of communities and landscape of the vast US, in an era before affordable domestic tourism, to create a sense of national identity. Both his less-renown early photographic period, as well as his acclaimed chronophotography and zoopraxiscopos projects, can provide insights into

the holistic approach of 19th century free-minded innovative artists and innovators. For them, the possibility of simultaneously combining time and space into a photographic project had not yet been deterred by the fierce canonization of media that appeared by the end of that century dividing photography and cinema, while discarding spatially-oriented stereography as a dead end. In my opinion, these important examples of innovative photography prove that 21st century XR media has deep cultural roots that evolved in the intersection of art and technology, and aiming not only to create culture and entertainment but also to form the political consciousness of communities. Another outstanding achievement of the first wave of stereography was its democratic nature as they aimed to distribute this medium to all social classes and ages, ranging from the working class to the British monarch. Thus, our contemporary understanding of XR has much to learn from these early achievements of the somewhat forgotten medium of stereographic photography.

10:45-11:00 **Rebecca Rouse & Lars Kristensen: LudoKonst: Intimate, Immersive, & Interactive Performance Play for Public Culture**

The presentation discusses the inaugural iteration of LudoKonst, an bi-annual festival of performances at PlayLab in Skövde, Sweden. PlayLab is an experimental research, performance, and teaching space that is collaboratively led by the University of Skövde and Skövde Municipality’s Culture division. Housed in Skövde’s youth culture house, PlayLab has a mission to innovate at the intersection of games, technologies, and performing arts via democratic means, with a focus in youth and inclusion. PlayLab defines games as structured experiences that centre play as an interaction mode, highlight social aesthetics, and often include boundary systems like rules; defines technologies as objects that are either digital or mechanical systems for experience design, which have a performative nature revealed through human interaction; and defines the performing arts as people-centred artistic traditions focusing on the human body as an expressive medium. Politically, PlayLab values incompleteness and work-in-progress aesthetics as productive and necessary for creative innovation, and reflects these values in the structure of the the

organisation itself, which will always remain in progress and growth. PlayLab also focuses on inclusion across all categories of identity but also with specific attention to the inclusion of youth and across class boundaries, meaning PlayLab works to be financially accessible to the broadest possible group of people, both as collaborators and audiences. Through this interdisciplinary theoretical and political perspective on games, technologies, performing arts, and people, PlayLab presents a range of new works, classes, and projects each year, now including the LudoKonst festival.

11:00-11:15 Carl Erez: Smoked Out: Lessons from a Multimodal Documentary Project

Towards the end of summer in 2020, the CZU Lightning Complex Fires began, covering vast swaths of both Santa Cruz County and San Mateo County in the state of California and causing long lasting damage. As we approach the three year anniversary of the fire, only a small portion of the homes that were destroyed have been rebuilt. In this thesis, I argue that this issue is impacted by multiple sources, both structural and interpersonal, and thus propose an artistic vision that utilizes multiple forms to contend with this multiplicity. This ultimately resulted in the creation of *Smoked Out: Watching Them Scrape Our Home Away*, a documentary piece composed of three parts: a verbatim theatrical performance composed of interviews with individuals going through the rebuilding process; a mobile game that explores some of the bureaucracy involved; and a forum in which audiences can contend with the issues at play. These are informed by larger traditions of documentary theater, serious games, and *Theater of the Oppressed*, respectively. This project made use of both the physical and digital worlds to discuss these personal and structural issues, and was created in part to connect two groups: a student body largely unfamiliar with the fires but very involved in housing issues, and rebuilders who wanted documentation of the issues they faced and greater awareness of the systemic issues in play. This presentation will in brief cover this project and the lessons learned from it, both as a multi-medium work and as a piece attempting to support discussion surrounding systemic issues.

6th Panel - Memory in immersive spaces

11:35-11:50 Jain Maulika: Empathy through a War Museum

National War Memorial Museum is an academic project which aligns with the theme “interactive museums and archives”. It is designed on a 3D software, Blender and is hosted on YouTube as a 360 degree video. The museum is divided into four different exhibits i.e. Controlled Narrative & War Correspondents, War Profiteers, Civilians and Soldiers. This Museum came into being when I discovered most of the war museums glorify wars, weapons and “winning” the wars. So it made me question things like, who benefits from these wars? Which kind of stories get told? Who should be responsible for it? This project was an attempt to change the narratives used in the war museums. The National War Memorial Museum looks at wars with the perspective of humanity. It questions the vision of existing war museums through interactive games, audio visuals, recorded accounts of war correspondents, artworks and by providing a space to reflect and have conversations. This museum pushes us to focus on damages that it does instead of glorifying wars and celebrating the sense of pride and patriotism that may come from “winning” it. This museum can be an agent of change and can create a more empathetic society. Empathy and inclusivity needs to be inbuilt in the architecture of these institutions to actually promote it. The layout of the museum prompts non authoritative and non linear narrative and visitor flow so that they can decide the kind of experience they would like to have. This approach was taken because people with PTSD from war or conflict may not want to engage with similar content that might trigger them. To immerse the visitor in the experience, the museum needs to be a safe enough space for them to question and explore their biases and prejudice they may have. Hence, the vision of this War Museum is to build a world where war is not used to instil pride, patriotism or nationalism, but seen as a failure of empathy, humanity and diplomacy.

11:50-12:05 Georgii Molodtsov: Second life of VR: how metaverse saved film festivals and brought new perspective to once single player “offline” experiences

During the pandemic goEast Film Festival was one of the first festival to transport the cancelled physical edition to virtual reality platforms, VRCHAT to be specific. That led to an incredible experience, scaled by festivals like Venice, Raindance, SXSW, NewImages and many other, with one idea in mind: creating VR world which represents the spirit of the festival as well as give an access to once “festival-only” works to online audience. Pandemic wave has passed and festival one-by-one coming back to reality, looking for a “hybrid” aspect, which would benefit from both virtual and real presence. In 2022 goEast Film Festival introduced VRChat Lab – we commissioned 3 projects which were developed from the scratch for VRCHAT in 2 months period. One of them, “Bloodbath” by the Ukrainian team who had to flee Ukraine to Prague due to the full scale Russian invasion to Ukraine, become one of the first works in VR, evaluating the ongoing war and its consequences and received special prize at the Raindance Film Festival. The difference between the goEast version in April 2022 and Raindance version in October 2022 was the multiplayer aspect: first version could have been experienced by only one user, while the Raindance version brought multiuser aspect which brought fully different perspective on the way the work was experienced by each one of them. Using that knowledge, in 2023 goEast changed the format of the lab: we invited authors of existing and premiered “offline” projects to be partly transported to VRChat. One of the projects, “Temporal world” by Chloe Lee (made for one user with haptic suit) become one of the most visited VRChat worlds, bringing over 2500 visitors to the work with 16 users at once in one instance. Our panel would have a look into the described projects and will research the aspect of single/multiplayer visiting and how it change the work, empathy and overall user experience while keeping the same visual and storytelling structure.

12:05-12:20 Victoria Lopukhina: The terrible narrative of the war or ethical responsibility is a difficult dilemma for the Ukrainian VR developers of museums about the war.

In their presentation, Ukrainian VR developers Victoria Lopukhina and Tim Voronkin from ZViT Studio delve into the challenging ethical moments they faced while creating two VR museums about the war in Ukraine. “Ukraine. War. Genocide XXI” and BLOODBATH VR Chat - were intended to spread truthful information about the war and evoke empathy for the Ukrainian people, but turned out to be a personal challenge for the developers. “Ukraine. War. Genocide XXI” is a virtual three-story museum. It features a vast collection of virtual exhibits, including photos, videos, satellite images, maps of combat operations, and 3D models of destroyed Ukrainian historical heritage such as museums, monuments, and sacred buildings. The scale of the virtual exhibits is equivalent to 8,500 m² of a real museum. The BLOODBATH VR Chat project is an immersive artistic endeavor that utilizes VR technology to recreate the events of February 24, 2022, when the missile cruiser “Moskva” attacked Snake Island and ordered Ukrainian border guards to surrender. The accompanying VR museum presents war crimes committed by Russia in a chronological order, sourced from official records. Drawing from their personal experiences of being in the war zone and evacuating to a safe place, the developers share the moral and ethical difficulties they encountered during the creation of these war-related projects. They emphasize the importance of empathetic storytelling in effectively conveying the realities of war and explore the dilemmas faced by VR developers when presenting sensitive content. The speakers address the ethical considerations involved in striking a balance between raising global awareness and avoiding sensationalism. They discuss the measures taken to ensure a respectful and informative experience for users, as well as the impact of these VR museums on visitors from different countries. The presentation also delves into the immersive experience for Ukrainians, examining the emotions evoked when viewing a VR museum about an ongoing war in their own country. Moreover, the presentation touches upon the effect that working on projects related to the war in Ukraine

had on the developers' mental health and emotional well-being. They share the artistic interventions and technical techniques employed in the VR experiences to mitigate potential trauma for users while still delivering a powerful and empathetic experience. By sharing their personal journey and highlighting the ethical responsibilities faced during the creation of these VR museums, the developers aim to shed light on the complex nature of addressing war-related topics through immersive technologies.

12:20-12:25 | Q&A | 12:30-13:45 | Lunch Break

13:45-14:45 **Authors' Panel No. 2: Immersive Anthropocene**
Mihai Grecu (Sol-Air), **Jacco Kooistra** (Let Nature Heal),
Emilia Sánchez Chiquetti (Origen), **Jenny Qinya Guo** (Once
a Glacier), **Jan Kerhart**, **Felix Gaedtke**, **Gayatri Parameswaran**
(Berlin 2037)

14:45-15:00 Break

7th Panel - Affective relations: empathy, imagination and care in immersive experiences

15:00-15:15 **Francesco Bentivegna:**
(Re)imagining Utopias through VR

This proposal presents a workshop that delves into the adaptation of short stories into virtual reality (VR) worlds, with a specific emphasis on (re)imagining utopian technologies to cultivate positive empathy. By merging the realms of storytelling and technology, this workshop aims to foster a critical understanding of empathy and envision immersive experiences that are emotionally captivating. Drawing from my experience as an artist, lecturer, and tutor in the Immersive Arts MA course at the University of Bristol, this workshop can be tailored to fit either a concise 20-minute slot for panels or an extended 2+ hour session (both cases, max 20 people). The structure begins with a comprehensive introduction to utopian technologies, VR storytelling, and their poten-

tial for building empathy. It is followed by an overview of techniques that focus on capturing the narrative essence and creating immersive designs when adapting short stories into VR worlds. Finally, participants engage in hands-on group activities to create paper prototypes of their adapted stories. Overall, this workshop offers a targeted exploration of adapting short stories into VR worlds while reimagining utopian technologies to enhance empathy. By seamlessly integrating storytelling with imaginative approaches to creative technologies, participants will be inspired to craft immersive experiences that foster positive connections and empathy within their audiences. This workshop will be part of the 'Affective Relations' panel made up of researchers from the Theatre Dept. and the Centre for Creative Technologies at the University of Bristol. Collectively they will interrogate the claims of immersive technology as an 'empathy machine' as well as the opportunities these technologies offer to explore experiential, embodied and affective relations. The panel will be made up of a series of provocations and practice-research case studies that variously explore narrative re-imaginings, intergenerational collaboration, socially engaged place-making and participatory futuring with creative technologies.

15:15-15:30 **Paul Clarke: Participatory Futuring
Through Performance and Augmented Reality**

This paper will discuss Uninvited Guests' Future Places Toolkit (2020), an Augmented Reality engagement activity for planning consultation and neighbourhood visioning. Future Places Toolkit (FPT) enables people to see speculative ideas they generate together visualised immediately around them, overlaid onto existing buildings in a site undergoing redevelopment. Through this case study I will consider how performance, interactive science-fiction storytelling and AR can support communities to imagine preferable futures for their places and explore their affective relations to these. Darko Suvin (1979) describes the 'cognitive estrangement' of science fiction, which can defamiliarise our observed environment in ways that function dialectically. Similarly, in *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Dunne and Raby (2013) propose that speculative design and sci-fi scenarios are 'aids for critical reflection' (p.4) on the present and on the impact

decisions we take today have on future probabilities. In Future Places Toolkit there is a gap between physical/social reality and the AR layer/co-designed fiction, such that participants measure life “as it is” in their place against how it could be (Zygmunt Bauman 2002). It is in between the reality of the neighbourhood now, “as is”, and the utopian “as if” of their alternate AR futures that critical comparison can take place. Drawing on findings from engaging communities in Knowle West, Bristol and as part of Birmingham’s Neighbourhood Futures Festival, this paper will explore whether AR and located science-fiction storytelling can help ‘people participate more actively as citizen[s]’ in co-creating ‘more socially constructive imaginary futures’ for their neighbourhoods (Dunne and Raby, p.5). Can immersive and interactive means of participatory futuring enable more representative people to narrate themselves into times to come and see themselves represented in their own co-created scenarios? Does this increase a community’s capability to imagine otherwise, to envision alternative imaginaries, build the capacity to anticipate, and take agency in shaping their places/futures? Using live 3D drawing and spatial audio, Future Places Toolkit materialises virtual possibilities for places and enables participants to explore them physically, in an embodied way. In the context of Zip-Scene, I will address whether these immersive approaches make futures for places more tangible, give a better sense of what they could be like to live in, and support participants to explore their affective/emotional relationships to possible futures for their neighbourhood.

15:30-15:45 Jess McCormack: VR Dancing Postcards: imagining new ways to move through the city

In a city like Bristol (UK) – named by the 2017 Runnymede report as one of the most diverse yet divided cities in the UK – how might creative technologies offer us ways to facilitate embodied dialogue and invite young residents of a city to imagine new ways of using and sharing the city? Acknowledging a body of research located in social psychology that has begun to focus on how adolescents as a particular group can interrupt patterns of segregation in society (Taylor and McKeown, 2021; Taylor, 2020, Simpson, 2018), this paper will reflect on a pilot practice project - an engaged VR dance project. This project brought together young

people from RISE Youth Dance Company (Bristol) and Virtual Reality filmmaker Aayush Dudhiya to experiment with co-creating 360° VR Dancing Postcards. The young people worked with the filmmaker and myself to explore site-responsive choreographic approaches and co-produced films that share their chosen location and communicate their experience of/ relationship to this location. Understanding that ‘words alone are not enough to express the totality of experience’ (Levy, 2014:1), this paper will reflect on how participants explored relationships to place using a combination of verbal and non-verbal methods and reflect on the possibilities for this to expose nuances in meaning and experience that cannot be communicated by either form of communication alone. In doing so, the paper aims to ask questions about the possibilities for creative practice to deepen residents’ understanding of each other’s experiences of place, to encourage new ways to imagine how they might engage with the city and seeks to imagine a better model for navigating our shared co-existence in public space. This paper will be part of the ‘Affective Relations’ panel made up of researchers from the Theatre Dept. and the Centre for Creative Technologies at the University of Bristol. Collectively they will interrogate the claims of immersive technology as an ‘empathy machine’ as well as the opportunities these technologies offer to explore experiential, embodied and affective relations. The panel will be made up of a series of provocations and practice-research case studies that variously explore narrative re-imaginings, intergenerational collaboration, socially engaged place-making and participatory futuring with creative technologies.

15:45-15:50 | Q&A | 15:50-16:05 | Break

8th Panel - Access to the virtual 'other'

16:05-16:20 Agnieszka Przybyszewska: Sylleptic "you" protagonists, ontological resonance and empathy in XR narrative experiences

The proposed paper is part of the broad discussion of narratological aspects of storytelling in XR and it builds on the threads signalled during the last ZIP-SCENE conference (e.g. Barbara's presentation on 2nd person narrative in VR). I will discuss the concept of "sylleptic you"/"sylleptic protagonist" and its usefulness for characterising VR experiences, with particular focus on 6DoF ones. Based upon Ryszard Nycz's category of "sylleptic I", the category of "sylleptic you" was proposed to characterise a particular kind of experience (foremost digital, but not only) with a strong metaleptic core (e.g. ambient literature experiences). Although an ambiguity of ontological levels seems typical for many 21st-century stories (McHale) and is crucial for "the magic" of XR immersion, we still don't have adequate terms and theories to characterise these phenomena. I ask whether "sylleptic you"/"sylleptic protagonist" category can fulfil this gap.

In my presentation, I also focus on how such an ontological play can be used within XR storytelling and whether they can be successfully applied to strengthen immersion and build empathy. While introducing the "sylleptic you"/"sylleptic protagonist" category, I will discuss Alice Bell's "ontological resonance" concept and suggest developing it further, so it can cover the broader spectrum of ephemera. The central case studies in my presentation will cover, but won't be limited to: the VR documentary "The Book of Distance", the VR literary adaptation "Wolves in the Walls", and "The Ghostkeeper Journal", the AR novel. Other examples mentioned as a context include VR narrative experience "Darkening", the VR theatre piece "To You", and the VR documentary "The Choice", among others.

The main goal of presented close readings, mostly comparative, is to characterise how successfully build story worlds using the structure of sylleptic you/sylleptic protagonist. In the last part of the presentation, I will dis-

uss some ethical questions linked to implementing the structure of "sylleptic protagonist" within XR storytelling. One of the issues that I am intensely interested in is the difference between fiction and nonfiction in this context.

16:20-16:35 Andrej Gero and Martin Polák: Gametherapy

GAMETHERAPY is an innovative startup bringing self-help VR applications for phobia treatment through therapeutic games to the market. Our projects pioneer a revolutionary approach: a gamified VR therapy designed specifically for tackling phobias. Imagine stepping into a virtual world where you can confront your fears in a controlled, immersive environment. Through interactive challenges and gradual exposure, this therapy harnesses the power of virtual reality to transform how we deal with phobias. This innovative fusion of technology and psychology is not just about gaming; it's about empowering individuals to overcome their deepest anxieties. Our projects open doors to a new era of mental health support, where immersive gaming experiences become therapeutic tools, offering hope and healing to countless lives.

16:35-16:50 Rory Willats: Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!': White masculinity and the ethics of ritual in Virtual Reality

We hear a voice implore through a small speaker placed in the mouth of one of the performers, "No. That's not what I look like. That isn't what I look like." This is the voice of someone being interviewed live in VR. A member of the audience chuckles at the categorical misreading of this person—a stranger chosen at random—someone we could call a naïve performer in "Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!'" "Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!" was performed in the spring of 2023 as part of UC Santa Cruz's Digital Arts and New Media: Future Stages research lab. With Aeschylus' "The Eumenides" as a narrative foil, this multi-media VR show sends three performers framed as "Virtual Furies" into social VR spaces to take up the hunt for Orestes—our avatar for a masculinity in crisis. Using live-interviews, dance, and puppetry, and with constant reconfigurations of the "hybrid performing body", the actors perform within, without, and through Virtual Reality for an in-person audience.

The performance is structured in three phases: The first explores the manifestation of VR development's military history in the embodied cognition of current users. The second, the desires and anxieties that drive the dominant trend for femme avatars. And finally, their inevitable confluence in an organization called "The British Armed Forces," a self-described "Waifu-based British Milsim-Roleplay organization." In this third phase, three members of B.A.F. are interviewed simultaneously. Through a close reading of the show—and its reception—using the lenses of the Aesthetics of Ambivalence and Critical Whiteness Studies, we can exam the ways experiences of white masculinity are navigated, manipulated, and remade in virtual communities; trouble the proposal of empathy as a guiding tool for developing new ethics; and evaluate the effectiveness of certain formal strategies for staging the affordances and dangers of VR identity play.

16:50-17:05 Ash Eliza Smith: Mu Mu: Designing Beyond the Human in VR

Mu Mu is a Real-Time 3D (RT3D) Virtual Reality (VR) game that uses systems thinking and network science to address planetary-scale problems through storytelling, data, and meaningful interactions. The first chapter, "Worlds of Connection," takes place in Cedar Point Biological Station (CPBS) in the Nebraska Sandhills, where a nearby pipeline, dam, fossil history, and robot farm all mix. This network science-driven Worlds of Connections chapter centers on a robot farm that uses precision agriculture and connects animals, plants, humans, and robots in an interdependent relationship to grow food. The long term-goal involves chapters based on emerging scientific research discoveries such as Spacehealth and cow-centered dairies. We use a One Health framework that links human, animal, plant and environmental health. In Mu Mu, player Mu Mu, Multi-species Multiplexes experience the system from multiple first-person perspectives—from prairie dog to robot to apple tree—and can make changes, see non-linear effects, build systems thinking skills, and experience the value of network science and systems thinking as tools to minimize climate change consequences that threaten planetary health. Set in the future, the science, theories, and data are based on the up-to-date science of today.

Planetary health needs empowered, ethical, scientific systems thinkers/actors who see interdependent networks. The Mu Mu will help meet this need. Players will try on identities, take actions, and see their actions' impacts on human, animal, plant and environmental health. Elements of the game include playing with scale, time, location, and perspectives as a tool for cultivating empathy and thinking past the human and expanding the design to incorporate other intelligences. Other continuities include an AI assistant that is tethered to a research lab on location in the story and an understanding of the interconnectedness of humans, plants, animals, technology, and the environment. This talk will present on developing the VR experience from development to playtesting and discuss the larger themes of the affordances and limitations of designing beyond the human in VR.

17:05-17:15 | Q&A | 17:15-18:00 | Break

18:00-19:00 Authors' Panel No. 3: Fragile Inner Worlds
Aron Fels (Eurydice, a Descent into Infinity), **Chloé Lee** (Temporal World), **Maciej Czuchryta + Marta Wieczorek** (Simple Songs about Death), **Steve Hallema** (The Imaginary Friend), **Zoe Roellin** (Perennials)

NOVEMBER 4

10:00 Introduction

10:10 Demo pitch 1: Jacobs Journey **Joanne Popinska**

10:20 Demo pitch 2: Mrs. Houdini **Agnes Bakk**

10:30 Demo pitch 3: Tent
Lou Doye + Rory Mitchell (online)

10:40 Demo pitch 4: Fragile Home
Ondřej Moravec, Volo Kolbasa

10:50 Demo pitch 5: Panel Story **András Szabó**

11:00 Demo pitch 6: Na Sera **Mimi Harmer**

11:10 Demo pitch 7: Dream Screen **Johannes Krell**

11:20 Demo pitch 8: Care **Thomas Villepoux**

11:30 Q&A 12:00 Lunch break

13:00-14:00 **Authors' Panel No. 4: Welcome to My Fantasy**
Thomas Villepoux (Jailbirds), **Suling Yeh** (Over the Rainbow),
Flow (Adriaan Lokman), **Clément Deneux** (Missing Pictures:
Naomi Kawase)

14:00 | Q&A | 14:15 break

13:30 - **Workshops**

13:30-16:30 **Francesco Bentivegna: Watering a Flower -
(re)imagining utopian technologies for immersive
worlds** (workshop)

14:30-17:30 **Dimitar Uzunov & David Bassuk:
Creating Sci-Fi and Fantasy Transmedia
Storyworlds** (workshop)

17:30

Closing note

19:00

Award ceremony

EARLY * WARE

FESTIVAL OF VIRTUAL REALITY AND OTHER IMMERSIVE ART

ART*VR: FESTIVAL OF VIRTUAL REALITY AND OTHER IMMERSIVE ART

**ART*VR COMPETITION
LOCATION: AUDITORIUM**

International Competition of Art*VR brings together 12 immersive projects from around the world that stand out for their unique artwork, original interactive elements, or impressive physical installations. Aiming to reflect the current trends in XR, the chosen projects show a wide technological range: there are films that use haptic jackets (Temporal World), body sensors (Body of Mine), olfactory stimulation (Forager), and even one that combines VR with a physical bike ride (Berlin 2037). However, the use of technology is not superficial - the projects combine creative interactive elements with a great narrative depth and introspective qualities as well. What is embedded in this year's selection is also reflecting on the state of the world and our relation to it. As an underlying theme, one can detect contemplation on the anthropocene (21-22 China), climate crisis (Let Nature Heal), interspecies relations (Origen), or the omnipresent uncertainty of how to process all these big questions as an individual. In the selection, you can find projects that recently got international recognition at the most prestigious festivals in the world, such as La Biennale di Venezia (Flow - Special Jury Prize, Eurydyce: A Descent Into Infinity), Tribeca FF (Over the Rainbow) or SXSW (Jailbirds). Some of them are shown in the world or international premiere (Berlin 2037, Simple Songs About Death, Let Nature Heal). A total of three awards will be given: Art*VR Grand Prize, Art*VR Best Design and Art*VR Best Storytelling.



**21-22 CHINA
THIERRY LOA
CANADA, 2023, 25 MIN**

**BERLIN 2027
JAN KERHART, FELIX GAEDTKE, GAYATRI PARAMESWARAN
GERMANY, 2023, 15 MIN**

**BODY OF MINE
CAMERON KOSTOPOULOS
USA, 2023, 15 MIN**

**EURYDYCE: A DESCENT INTO INFINITY
CELINE DAEMEN
NETHERLANDS, 2022, 25 MIN**

**FLOW
ADRIAAN LOKMAN
NETHERLANDS/FRANCE, 2023, 15 MIN**

**JAILBIRDS
THOMAS VILLEPOUX
FRANCE/BELGIUM, 2023, 30 MIN**

**FORAGER
WINSLOW PORTER, ELIE ZANA
USA, 2023, 8 MIN**

**LET NATURE HEAL
JACCO KOOISTRA
NETHERLANDS, 2023, 15 MIN**

**OVER THE RAINBOW
CRAIG QUINTERO
TAIWAN, 2023, 11 MIN**

**ORIGEN
EMILIA SÁNCHEZ CHIQUETTI
BRAZIL, 2023, 25 MIN**

**SIMPLE SONGS ABOUT DEATH
MACIEJ CZUCHRYTA, MARTA WIECZOREK
POLAND, 2023, 10 MIN**

**TEMPORAL WORLD
CHLOE LEE
GERMANY, 2023, 20-30 MIN**

VR INSTALLATION: DIMENSIONS OF EMPATHY

LOCATION: AREA C
(GROUND FLOOR)

The medium of virtual reality has often been labeled as an “empathy machine”. No wonder - we put on a headset and see the world through someone else’s eyes, with a 360° view and in a first-person perspective. What can such an embodied experience trigger in us? Does it make it easier to feel the pain of others, to understand their way of thinking?

This curated selection of 10 VR projects explores exactly that: How virtual reality can, as a medium, help us in mutual understanding. It does so while also leaving the voices of doubt present in the background, bearing in mind the technical imperfections of VR as well as the fact that, as an art medium, VR would be nothing without the influence of all the other arts - of theater, visual arts, or film.

The thematic range is broad: the projects reflect current social and human rights issues, such as mental health, ethnic and sexual minority rights, environmental grief, body image, (de)colonialization, women’s rights, or sexual harassment. We invite you to pick up a headset and shift your perspective.

EL BEAT
IRENE LEMA, SERGIO BROMBERG, CAROLINA DEL MAR FERNÁNDEZ
BRAZIL, 2023, 10 MIN

MISSING 10 HOURS
FANNI FAZAKAS
HUNGARY/NEW ZEALAND, 2022, 17 MIN

MISSING PICTURES: NAOMI KAWASE
CLÉMENT DENEUX
FRANCE, 2022, 14 MIN

MLK: NOW IS THE TIME
LIMBERT FABIAN
USA, 2023, 17 MIN

ONCE A GLACIER
JIABAO LI
USA, 2022, 10 MIN

PERENNIALS
ZOE ROELLIN
USA, 2022, 20 MIN

SOL-AIR
MIHAI GRECU
FRANCE, 2023, 15 MIN

THE CHOICE
JOANNE POPINSKA
POLAND/CANADA, 2021, 25 MIN

THE IMAGINARY FRIEND
STEYE HALLEMA
NETHERLANDS/BELGIUM, 2023, 25 MIN

WISH YOU WERE HERE
MICHAŁ STANKIEWICZ
POLAND, 2023, 28 MIN



NOTES

