

# Boundary making practices in Virtual Reality

**Kate Euphemia Clark**

Monash University  
kate.clark@monash.edu

## Keywords

Virtual reality, embodiment, empathy, Derrida, hospitality, Levinas

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual Reality (VR) is often heralded as an ‘empathy machine’ that has the ability to reduce racial bias, increase awareness of homelessness, and shine a light on sexual assault (Blascovich & Bailenson 2011). Many popular VR works place marginalised bodies in the centre of their experiences in an attempt to increase empathetic connection to these subjects. Much of the research surrounding VR – that often comes from cognitive psychology – aims to create empathy by changing in- and out-group dynamics (Kilteni, et al., 2013; Maister, et al., 2015; Schutte, & Stilinović, 2017). The central idea of much of this research is that after a particular VR experience, the user will become more likely to perceive whatever identity they inhabit as a part of their in-group.

This paper presents two core issues with this line of thought. Firstly, the idea that a particular VR experience can change a person’s behaviour in a particular, preordained way, oversimplifies how people consume media and the messages that they observe, process, and enact from media objects. Moreover, this understanding of VR shares many common misconceptions with the moral panic surrounding video games and violence or anti-social behaviour that have been thoroughly critiqued by video game scholars (Goerger 2017).

Secondly, and of central importance to the argument presented in this paper, is that understanding VR as reshaping in-group/out-group dynamics relies on the maintenance of social – and bodily – boundaries, despite the common claims to the contrary (Maister, et al., 2015). While it may seem as though VR experiences where the user ‘becomes’ their avatar demonstrate that VR necessarily redraws how we perceive our own bodies; and there is much research that comes to this conclusion (Ehrsson, 2007; González-Franco, et al., 2014); there also exists a more subtle reaffirming of both social and bodily boundaries that occurs in many VR experiences.

This idea of the paradoxical, simultaneous breaking down and redrawing of boundaries will be explored in this paper through the work of both Emmanuel Levinas (1979) and Jacques Derrida (2000). Emmanuel Levinas (1979) suggests that the foundation of an ethical relationship with another person lies in our inability to encompass them. For Levinas, our responsibility to the other lays the foundations for ethics (1979). Many VR experiences that lay claim to empathy and implicit bias training actually attempts to encompass the other through ‘becoming’ a caricaturised avatar of that particular group.

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2021

© 2021 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

This paper will also use *Clouds over Sidra* (Arora and Milk 2015) as an example to explore how Derrida's understanding of hospitality can be applied to VR. *Clouds over Sidra* (Arora and Milk 2015), produced in collaboration with the United Nations, was presented at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2015 that took some of the world's most rich and powerful people through a day in Syria's Zaatari refugee camp through the eyes of Sidra – a 12 year old refugee. This discussion of *Clouds over Sidra* will reframe VR in relation to Jacques Derrida's (2000) understanding of hospitality – an opening up without condition that paradoxically also relies on the creation of boundaries. Many of the current VR projects develop a sense of hospitality that is highly conditional and therefore often fail to produce an effective response to social issues. Therefore, this paper suggests that we need to rethink how VR is framed, used and marketed, particularly in contexts such as racial bias training in the police force.

## BIO

Kate is a PhD student focusing on embodiment in digital games and virtual reality. Kate is interested in the relationship between digital environments and real-world environments and global warming. Currently, Kate is working on her PhD, which will detail a critique of the idea that virtual reality is an 'empathy machine' and its use in relation to both global warming and racial bias.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arora, G., & Milk, C. *Clouds over Sidra*, <https://www.with.in/watch/clouds-over-sidra/>, 2015.
- Blascovich, J., & Bailenson, J. (2011). *Infinite reality: Avatars, eternal life, new worlds, and the dawn of the virtual revolution*. Harper Collins.
- Derrida, J., & Dufourmantelle, A. (2000). *Of Hospitality*. Stanford University Press.
- Ehrsson, H. H. (2007) 'The Experimental Induction of Out-of-Body Experiences', *Science*, 317(5841), pp. 1048–1048. doi: 10.1126/science.1142175.
- González-Franco, M. *et al.* (2014) 'A threat to a virtual hand elicits motor cortex activation', *Experimental Brain Research*, 232(3), pp. 875–887. doi: 10.1007/s00221-013-3800-1.
- Goerger, Michael. (2017) "Value, violence, and the ethics of gaming." *Ethics and Information Technology* 19.2, pp. 95-105.
- Kilteni, K., Bergstrom, I. and Slater, M. (2013) 'Drumming in Immersive Virtual Reality: The Body Shapes the Way We Play', p. 9.
- Levinas, E. (1979). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Maister, L. *et al.* (2015) 'Changing bodies changes minds: owning another body affects social cognition', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 19(1), pp. 6–12. doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2014.11.001.

Schutte, N. S. and Stilinović, E. J. (2017) 'Facilitating empathy through virtual reality', *Motivation and emotion*, 41(6), pp. 708–712.