

VR's feminist embodiment

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality (VR) is often hyperbolically claimed to be an ‘unmediated’ medium – allowing its users to have an experience that is supposedly not shaped by the VR technology (Lanier 2017; Meta 2021). The assumption that VR is capable of producing an unmediated experience is based on the notion that VR is often thought of as a natural interface, where gestural inputs closely resemble how a player would intuitively move, making movements in VR seem natural. While this has been widely critiqued (Bollmer and Suddarth 2022; Ross 2018), conceptualising VR’s potential affordances in this way has shaped how we use VR for gaming purposes in ways that, as I will detail in this paper, both fails to engage with the specific affordances of the medium, as well as assumes a white, masculine, hyper-competent, nondisabled body as the platonic ideal VR player.

This paper builds on existing research that critiques the naturalness of VR as an interface (Bollmer and Suddarth, 2022; Ross, 2018), and research that highlights how fast paced hyper-violent VR games are often overwhelming in a VR context (Carter and Egliston 2024, 27), to recentralise how VR must negotiate limitations of the player’s body in ways that are generative. The negotiation of these limitations is not only a fact of VR that must be begrudgingly negotiated and designed around (LaRocco 2020), but rather is a generative affordance of the medium that should be consciously engaged in VR game design. This paper also furthers existing critiques of the ‘ideal’ VR user (Boyd 2014; Carter and Egliston 2024; Gerling and Spiel 2021), and the ideal gamer more generally (Consalvo 2012; Shaw 2012) to construct an explicitly feminist account of VR’s embodiment as situated (Haraway 1997), split (Keogh 2018; Sunden 2012; Weiss 1999) and – at times – discomfiting. I argue that the toxic narratives of the hyper-competent, masculine gamer in video game studies also informs the problematic assumption of VR as a natural user interface, as it fails to ask for whom the VR interface is considered natural. In contrast to this, the VR gamer both produces and is produced by the VR experience, and thus VR produces a particular form of embodiment that is more aligned with situated feminist knowledges (Haraway 1997) that some universal idealised norm of embodiment.

This paper also draws on research by feminist games scholars, who engage with assumptions about the ‘ideal’ video game player being hypermasculine (Jayanth 2021; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2012). Gaming cultures have a long history of toxic masculinity, with women and people of colour not only being excluded but often being unsafe in gaming environments (Chess & Shaw 2015; Consalvo 2012; Humphreys 2019). Other feminist games theorists have highlighted how the endemic toxic hypermasculinity present in games studies not only makes these spaces hostile to minority bodies, but also structures what stories can be told, by whom, and for

what ends (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter 2009; Jayanth 2021). While VR is a comparatively young medium in terms of its commercial uses, it too has a history of sexism and racism, both in terms of hostile digital environments (Clark and Le 2022), as well as the lack of consideration of minority bodies in hardware design (Boyd 2014; Robertson 2016; Stanney et al 2020). This paper suggests that reframing VR's embodiment in feminist terms is not only a question of ethics and inclusion, or a more accurate depiction of VR's embodiment – but that it is also a generative framework from which to analyse VR games.

To explore how this framework can be generative, I use InnerspaceVR's *Another Fisherman's Tale* (2023) as a short case study to detail how the explicit negotiation of both limitations of technologies and bodies, as well as the inherent 'unnaturalness' of VR can produce engaging and interesting VR games. The core puzzle solving mechanics stem from the player's mannequin-like avatar, whose wooden body parts can be detached and controlled. Each body part that the player detaches can be independently controlled requiring the player to constantly be in a state of self-referential split embodiment across digital system and material environment. Instead of VR attempting to accurately recreate the motility of the user's body (or at least the fantasy of it) in the digital environment in order to create a gaming experience that feels unmediated, I posit a reframing of VR's embodiment from a feminist perspective that instead emphasises a feminist reading of VR's embodiment, and how this reshapes how we understand the basic affordances of VR games.

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BIO

Kate Euphemia Clark is an interdisciplinary feminist researcher focusing on new media technologies and how they intersect with games. She is particularly interested in how new media technologies, such as virtual reality, are embodied and how popular notions of embodiment shape how we view and use technologies.