

# Immersive Theatre and Virtual Reality Performance: Embodiment, Presence, and Dramaturgy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersections between immersive theatre and virtual reality (VR) performance, focusing on how both practices reconfigure embodiment, presence, and dramaturgy in contemporary performance cultures. It argues that immersive and VR-based works challenge traditional theatrical paradigms by dissolving the proscenium boundary and repositioning the spectator as an embodied participant within the performance environment. Through sensory engagement, spatial mobility, and interactive agency, audiences experience performance as a lived, multisensory encounter rather than a distanced representation. The study further explores how presence is constructed across physical and virtual domains, highlighting VR's capacity to generate mediated forms of embodiment while maintaining perceptual immersion. It also analyses the shift from linear dramaturgy to nonlinear, spatialized, and participatory narrative structures, where meaning emerges through audience movement, choice, and interaction. Drawing on qualitative, quantitative, and hybrid methodologies, the paper demonstrates how immersive theatre and VR performance converge in their redefinition of audience-performer relations and their expansion of dramaturgical practice. Ultimately, it positions these forms as critical sites for rethinking performance in an era of technological mediation and experiential aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Immersive theatre, Virtual reality performance, Embodiment, Presence, and Dramaturgy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Immersive Theatre and Virtual Reality Performance: Embodiment, Presence, and Dramaturgy. The past few decades have witnessed an increasing interest in both immersive theatre and virtual reality (VR) performance across the fields of theatre and performance studies [1]. This widespread interest can be attributed to contemporary social, political, and technological developments that fundamentally affect how performances are envisaged, produced, and experienced [2]. These two innovative performance modalities overlap in several ways, advancing a shared conceptual language that informs both scholarly investigation and theatrical practice, and offering critical insights into three interrelated issues: embodiment, presence, and dramaturgy. Immersive theatre and VR performance stimulate bodily awareness through nonstandard modes of address, encouraging exploration of theatrical presence in a lived, material, and situated way [3]. Moreover, they provide an opportunity to rethink the nature and function of dramaturgy when performance occurs outside conventional temporal and spatial constraints. The framing of performance as a participatory encounter in the here and now underpins the selection of two specific conceptual pairings, embodiment and immersive media; presence and verge technologies—illustrating how contemporary practices encourage both the academic study and creative exploration of these fundamental aspects of performance [4]. Immersive theatre relies on spectators' bodily engagement to produce intimacy, emphasizing sensory awareness beyond sight and hearing. Spectators experience the space physically by sitting or squatting on the floor, breathing in smells, tasting the air, and feeling the warmth of others [1]. Unlike traditional theatre, immersive performances create vivid immediacy by bringing images and sensations into physical presence. This form of theatre enhances sensory engagement through physical closeness, contact, and movement, stimulating senses like touch, taste, and proprioception, the awareness of one's body in space [2]. Exploratory works allow audiences to navigate the space actively, further engaging their bodily perception and awareness of the environment [1].

### **Theoretical Foundations**

In immersive theatre, spectators become a crucial part of the experience as their presence allows the performance to occur. The work, therefore, addresses the use of immersive technologies in theatre, along with the concepts of embodiment and presence, and the resulting change of dramaturgical principles [2, 6]. The term “immersive performance” can encompass a range of disciplines, from dance to installation art, while the labels “VR play” and “VR theatre” generally refer to works designed specifically for head-mounted displays (HMDs) [7]. While there are notable instances of what is called immersive theatre that do not employ the audience’s embodiment, it is increasingly understood that the term describes practices that centre the viewer’s corporeal involvement and the perceptual implications that arise from this [1]. Theoretically, immersive theatre offers a significant model for analysing many VR works due to the parallels in staging, spectator agency, narrative structure, and worldview [3].

#### **Embodiment in Immersive Media**

Upon entering an immersive theatre performance, the familiar conventions of theatrical behaviour may not apply. The audience enters a spatial extension of the stage and becomes a physical presence within the performance environment [4]. Such immersion, understood as a relational body-to-body experience, is matched by a further layering of perception through the incorporation of smell, touch, temperature energy, and proprioception [1]. Proprioception, an often-neglected aspect of shared awareness in theatre, registers knowing a body’s position in space, intrinsic muscular force, and the resonance of objects carried, held, or explored [2]. A spectator may also wander through a performative installation, forming their own experience individually or collectively with others, revealing how attention moves selectively among and within the sensations offered [3]. In virtual reality, movements and gestures replayed back and forth in the intermediary space on the stage show that the body works forwards and backwards, looping back to phrase and recreate one’s own presence or the presence of others [4]. Within the immersive projection of virtual spectators, the enduring presence of another appears as a palpable within-the-body echo as the subject senses an extension of the performance even outside the VR goggles, after having taken them off [5]. While tracking movements of other bodies remotely only remains an evident perceptual disjunction, the recollection of the patterns of their physical movement in a prior shared phase now returns in forms of choreographic traces [6].

#### **Presence and Verge Technologies**

Verge technologies foster both physical and psychological embodiment through theatrical presence and a strong sense of agency [1]. They position performers and audiences as equal partners in building a shared narrative. As Gabelmann 1 observes, the collaborative effort in constructing the narrative enhances “the feeling of proximity to other participants” and ultimately promotes intimacy [2]. Agency does not negate constraints but coexists with them. Narratives ultimately channel presence toward the virtual rather than the environmental, making an embedded notion of presence more appropriate than the directed focus associated with traditional media [3].

#### **Dramaturgy in Nonlinear and Spatialized Performance**

Unlike the linear structure of traditional theatre, immersive performances often feature nonlinear and spatialized dramaturgies, prompting more active audience engagement through movement, decision, exploration, and interaction [7]. The audience typically participates at their own pace, enabling personal meanings to emerge. Interactive performances furthermore allow audience actions to shape the flow of events. Collective experiences remain possible, however, such as when the audience gathers in one location before dispersing alone or in small groups, or when all participants must choose simultaneously from multiple options [1]. Within this context, the notion of dramaturgy should be viewed in the broadest sense as the crafting of the relationship between agent, medium, and content [2]. This applies equally to material, spatial, and discursive elements beyond text and performance. Embodiment constitutes the fundamental ontological condition determining each audience member’s individual engagement with a participatory work and remains central to any analysis of the relevant creative strategies involved [3].

#### **Historical Trajectories and Conceptual Shifts**

From the ancient Greeks to the twenty-first century, the theatrical tradition has been defined by a shared space or enclosure within which specific configurations of performers and audiences gather to engage in a temporally limited ritual of enactment [5]. The performance happens in the presence of a fictional other who communicates with a plurality of recipients, denoting the simultaneous occurrence of three interdependent axes: temporal, spatial, and perceptual. Takis and Gholamian characterize proscenium theatre as a paradigm in which the ideal conditions for the transmission of a message are established, while Vertov highlights the cinematic apparatus as a means to liberate the spectator from the frames of conventional art [6]. Immersive performance achieves commitment to the life act within a radically open yet organized field. In the proscenium tradition the sharing of performance occurs through the transferring of pre-recorded messages to be received or not, whereas immersive theatre aims directly to share life [7]. Thus, although the immersion imposed by heads-mounted displays (HMDs) and other bodily wearable devices is equally illusory, an at once real and commonly shareable invariant among Virtual

Reality (VR) plays transpires [8]. Specialization by paradigm or mode affirms distinctive aesthetic objects as such. From theatricality to immersive, performance has travelled a long way spanning from a hermetically closed and hence purely representational media to Participations in parallel Modes [9, 10]. The extension of temporal Shared, complementary to the coextensivity of spatiality, unravels yet another avenue across theatre and art, racing toward emergence [1].

### **From Proscenium to Immersive Space**

Traditionally, theatrical staging has tended to bring the performing body into the foreground of focus through spectator actor positioning defined by distance, perspective, and a proscenium arch that privileges the framed image while tuning out elements of the environment that support the performance [1]. Within these constraints, audiences are attuned primarily to text, voice, and gesture while the material surroundings recede behind the actions occurring on stage [2]. In immersive formats, however, the proscenium is disassembled, the environment becomes the dominant carrier of meaning, and the audience is invited to roam freely and investigate at will. Scenographic elements including the architecture of the space, the arrangement of the objects, and the chemical composition of the air, undergo critical transformations that exert considerable influence over how the event is both experienced and understood [3].

### **VR as a Medium for Theatrical Presence**

Virtual reality (VR) has been more recently adopted in the theatre industry, with performances where participants don a VR headset while seated or performances delivered remotely, making it difficult to classify as fully immersive theatre [5]. However, at the intersection of dramatic media, VR performance has emerged. Immersive theatre is defined as an experience where the boundaries of the theatre are dissolved, whereas the term presence pertains to a sense of “being there” [6]. The notion of presence has been examined in the fields of virtual reality (VR), telepresence, and mediated art, encompassing various ways of perceiving [2]. The concept of presence in theatre can be approached at a bodily level through the participation of actors in space, engaging the audience within the theatrical event. Nevertheless, in VR performance, through disconnection from the outside world, awareness of the space shifts to the virtual environment available within the system [7]. The only sense deriving the perspective of time, space, and sound is entirely generated within a VR system. Immersive theatre and VR performance can both be seen as emergent expressive modes that embrace change [8]. VR performance can be viewed as a theatralisation in that it offers the same audience, performer, and fiction relationships as live performance and immersive theatre while communicating the quality of virtuality. The development of VR performance could constitute a “technology international” [9, 10].

### **Methodologies for Studying Immersive Performance**

Immersive performances have expanded dramatically since the early 1990s, in both theatrical and digital media. A brief overview of methodologies for studying these developments will showcase the effectiveness of embodiment, presence, and dramaturgy as a conceptual framework [3]. The two most visible methodologies are qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research can take the form of either observational or participatory approaches, each of which offers valuable data and fosters a deeper understanding of immersive experiences. Purely observational methodologies have grown in immersivity and interactivity as cameras and drones enable richly documented experiences beyond the limitations of static video [4]. Participatory approaches include the so-called extended participant observation in which the researcher adopts a character role, allowing the investigation and the investigated to inhabit the same spatiotemporal framework. Quantitative research employs the latest scales and indices for measuring presence and embodiment [5]. In hybrid methodologies, multiple approaches and tools are combined and juxtaposed within the same immersive experience [1].

### **Qualitative Approaches: Observational and Participatory Methods**

Embodiment is a fundamental aspect of immersive theatre, entailing the audience’s physical engagement with the work. Immersive approaches produce intimacy and, at times, direct reciprocity among performers and spectators by requiring the latter to engage their bodies in specific ways [1]. Immersive theatre broadens sensory awareness beyond the visual and auditory. Closeness, movement, exploration, and the act of touching deepen the significance of the space itself and transform it into an environment of personal meaning [2]. Many immersive works permit spectators to sit on the ground, smell, taste, and hold the environment, favouring immediacy over mere representation. Proprioception, the awareness of one’s body in a given space is accentuated by acts of exploration, object-holding, and movement through the performance’s topography [3]. The potential for VR to provide haptic and tactile sensations directly through the interface when combined with immersion and agency supports embodied engagement [4]. VR is conceived as embodying and enacting other characters, avatars, or agents. Players direct the scale of their actions and corresponding reciprocal audience responses while maintaining a protective distance from full identification [5]. Even in an avatar-enabled performance, agency remains distributed among characters, the audience’s imaginative and dramatic involvement persists [6].

### **Quantitative Metrics: Presence Scales and Embodiment Indices**

Quantitative metrics for the pragmatics of contemporary immersive theatre and VR performance include scales for the individual user's sense of presence or embodiment [2]. Builders of virtual environments design immersive characters, bodies, situations, and toys to reduce distance between the player and the game, a principle governing analogue performance, spatialisation, and site-specificity in immersive theatre [3]. Nevertheless, the operations variously indexed through presence scales, embodiment indices, media presence, inner presence, and psycho-physiological synchronisation [3] have not received adequate scrutiny, the result being affirmation by makers but discreet owner/operators of such spaces, suggesting a matrix might divulge more on convergence between such practices [4]. Despite extensive literature examining VR's potential to compensate for deficits of liveness and presence perceived to infect or neutrally affect conventional theatre [4], international companies presently engaged in multi-location staged play, participatory narrative, and audience agency nonetheless grapple with how to comprehend and articulate the distinctive dramaturgical properties the medium broadly described as atemporal possesses, and why sharing such experiences on cinema screens has proven so popular [5].

### **Hybrid Methodologies**

Different performance scholars advocate for different methodological approaches. Theatrical forms tend to emphasize long and detailed analyses, while VR studies prefer short and standardized systems or metrics [4]. Addressing both tendencies, hybrid approaches are possible that combine qualitative and quantitative aspects, for instance through methods calculating selection rates for alternative routes along with performance-descriptive commentaries [5]. Another consideration is whether to study the spectator's bodily engagement and material environment, an aspect presently neglected in existing research [6]. Immersive theatre underscores participation through the audience's bodily engagement, yielding an atmosphere of intimacy and enabling further meanings to unfold across the surrounding space [1]. When spectating from fixed seats, theatrical reception conventionally occurs via vision and hearing. Immersive theatre invokes the entire body by stimulating still other senses. Spectators might move individually or together and take up different bodily positions squatting, sitting on the ground, lying down while soundscapes, scents, and various materials extend the experience beyond the naked eye and ear [2]. Such physical closeness augments the potential for additional sensory involvement: images, heard or pictured, appear more vividly rather than remaining imaginary; smells, understood via memory, become more concretely present; even textures reach participants' own skins, bodies, and haptic contexts. Immersive theatre thus intensifies participation through movement and exploration, drawing the surrounding space into spectators' own bodies [3].

### **Case Studies**

This section begins with a survey of immersive theatre, including a brief history of examples, before focusing on three VR plays that share a common emphasis on audience agency; understanding how their narratives and architectures employ offer and influence the agents, and the ethical dimensions of audience choice [2]. It concludes with observations on the difficulty of discussing these works as theatre, and on the degree to which they share space with site-specific and proactive immersive works [1]. Immersive theatrical experiences in a variety of contexts and genres have blossomed internationally in the last two decades. Indicative works include Dreamthinks Speak, The Hundred Doors, Alice in Wonderland, The Erotic Theatre, The Great Gatsby, and The Masque of the Red Death [3]. In the VR space, The Murder of Sally Ann DeMarco, The Time Machine, and Within an inch of my Life are focused on specifying how audience agency relates to the narrative and propose an overall typology of theatrical approaches to it [4].

### **Notable Immersive Theatrical Experiences**

An audience member is invited to a secret location for a free thematic analysis of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew [7]. Once arrived, the members discover their participation is requested, and they become part of a series of interactions between the characters Katherine and Petruchio. Early in the play, the participants hear a proposal from Petruchio that induces them to clap their hands [1]. This interaction ensures a physical and digital separation between the participants in the staging, hence increasing both the experience of the performance and the distance between human-vs-computer relationships [8]. The practices surrounding presencing broaden the concept of stage. The presence and participation tie deeply to unquestionable bodily and spatial effort [9]. A man walks into a bar. The naked staff tend a carbonated drink served within a mechanical restraint. Seemingly despised, he anonymously becomes the fixed social experiment for his immovably passive adult actions. Nevertheless, the error of naming the play diminishes the sociological inquiry [10].

### **VR Plays and Interactive Narratives**

Contemporary immersive theatre offers multiple forms, including performances where the audience moves through the environment, wearing headphones and engaging throughout with performers [3]. A defining characteristic is the use of digital technologies for immersive storytelling, ensuring that audiences remain engaged, focused, and immersed in the narrative. The introduction of virtual and augmented reality has opened new expressive possibilities in both media [4]. VR plays and interactive narratives challenge the reality of virtual

worlds. Controllers can become barriers to full engagement, restricting hand movement and often set aside during exploration. The relationship between creators and participants remains complex; virtual bodies are mere facsimiles, rendering a fully connected experience impossible [5]. Early VR artists face challenges comparable to those of early television producers in establishing meaningful interactions. Experiments emphasize visual and auditory senses, while somatic understanding is less coherent but equally important. VR destabilizes perceptions of body and self in space, highlighting the medium's potential to challenge perception and understanding of reality [5]. A research project investigating the use of 360° video for VR drama addresses how theatre's traditional viewer invisibility and non-participation translate to VR experiences. The shared voyeuristic quality of both media is examined, along with the aesthetic value of invisibility in 360° video [6]. The project filmed the 2009 short play *Fellow Creature* as a 360° video to explore technical and aesthetic possibilities for theatrical drama. The story, set in a hotel room in Kolkata, India, involves two characters, Eric and Raj, and the implications of an invisible, passive, voyeuristic viewer within the VR environment [6].

#### **Audience Agency, Choice, and Ethical Considerations**

Immersive theatre and virtual reality plays offer agency, challenge spectators by presenting apparent choices, and condition responses [2]. In some works, audience agency appears restrained under strict conditions [1]. In such settings, even minimal control satisfies the desire for the option to perform a task [3]. The potential to influence narrative turns, however, generates tensions: participants can skew collective experiences by releasing or withholding input. Where ticket price directly supports, or art credibly claims, altruism, freedom paradoxically becomes fettered when contributions are compulsory or wished-for (performers bearing the burden resist or resent certain unspoken sanctions)[4]. Immersive formats encompass both location-based and mainstream media. In branching, avatar-based stories, participants embody characters despite separate accounts and destinations. Yet collaborative first-person shooters must cede negotiation of those roles and journeys, remaining responsive instead to individual input [5]. At higher tiers of accessibility and freedom inhabiting remains as appealing as it may be constraining. Iconic mainstream escapist titles (e.g. *The Sims*, *Second Life*) and vehicles of identity exploration and transgression (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto* series) engage participants as though outside a primary, agentic dimension. These operate solely or derivatively on non-physical bodies [6].

#### **Dramaturgical Practice in Immersive and VR Contexts**

Partaking as a performer or physically traversing the wider environment has become a familiar aspect of audience participation [1]. In response, immersive installations, lightshows, and audiovisual performances drive audiences outward, either permitting circumambulation of an artwork or commandeering their trajectories [2]. The tenuous demarcation between audience and performer prompts consideration of interlaced infrastructure, stage layouts, the artist/audience relationship, and design methodologies particular to immersive media [1]. These curated configurations incorporate site and space into the work while enabling nuanced articulations of spatial manoeuvres, movement, companionship, narrative, and ascription of sense to action [3]. In performance, the captured or live image concurrently attests to and accommodates mobility and displacement, animating bodies otherwise designated as spectators on conventional platforms and facilitating the activation of extended physical environments [4]. Increasingly, conventional object-design, scenographic, and lighting practices are supplanted by such spatial choreography, evident in works by O. D. H. S. Dance and Simon Martin [7]. Dramaturgical mechanisms governing user agency remain central not only to immersive theatre but also to VR as a widespread cultural medium. The progression of narrative, agency over a user-specific experience, and interactions between multiple users whether in pre-authored or algorithmically generated contexts remain critical to theoretical and practical inquiry [5].

#### **Spatial Choreography and Environmental Design**

The spatial choreography of immersive and virtual reality (VR) performance, how movement is organized and shaped by designers, playwrights, or choreographers, evokes an individual's sense of being inside rather than outside the action [1]. The arrangement and movement of both the audience and performers shape the development of the performance in time and space, whether the experience proceeds individually or collectively, or switches between the two [2]. The pathways of physical movement determine not only where and when the gaze can alight but also the perceived distance to the performance; differences of a few feet can metamorphose a detail into the grand perspective of a stage [3]. All attractors, figures, groups, or textures intervene by interrupting, engaging, or providing relief to the dynamics of proximity, duration, and rhythm. Spatial choreography can guide attention toward specific performers or direct it to a broader ambience; it can delay, redirect, or encourage movement through the space [4].

#### **Narrative Architecture and User Pathways**

Mapping is a central element in immersive theatre since it articulates not merely topography but the spatial nature of performance [1]. The notion of a map, in the broader sense, implies more than the fixation on coordinates and routes, directing a quest for a performance in an itinerary [2]. An itinerary is about exploring the structure of a space, perceiving how one travels it as a whole [3]. In immersive experiences, physical layout, route options, and

schedule acoustically pattern the performance, directing attention and concentration toward differences, thus determining how storylines resonate [4]. During site visits of a showroom space, adjunct performative actions together with audiovisual design sketch narrative outlines, articulating cheap yet profoundly gripping storytelling. Such patterning corresponds to the distinction between mapping and scoring [5]. Mapping as a notion concerns an explication of the theatrical system and its major components, linking the structure of physical space, the flow of attention patterns, and the configuration of presentational elements. Scoring conveys not performance in its due unfolding but a verbal reliance or score written either for oneself or for the next stage of the project [6].

#### **Sound, Light, and Haptic Feedback as Dramaturgic Elements**

Immersive and virtual-reality theatre rests on concepts of presence, embodiment, and non-linear dramaturgy. Theoretical examinations of presence, agency, and spectating have addressed the implications of immersive and participatory practices for live performance and other art forms, yet these notions have rarely been subject to sustained study in the context of immersive and VR theatre itself [8]. At a time when the commercial VR market has captured wider public and scholarly attention, the affordances and characteristics of these two partnered practices in relation to presence, agency, and non-linear, spatial, or site-specific dramaturgy have yet to be fully articulated [3]. Immersive and virtual-reality theatre arrivals theatrical experiences that employ, originate in, or have been enabled, extended, or transformed through an immersive or virtual-reality medium, embody ideas of presence and agency while reinforcing, opposing, or otherwise shaping non-linear dramaturgies [4]. At the core of immersive and VR performance lies the potential for audiences to engage with dramatic materials, not just narratives or characters through their bodies [5]. This physical involvement, however elementary, extends the implications of immersive experiences to the socio-political realm; the materiality of the socio-political becomes a matter of dramatization, provoking the question of how actions taken by and on bodies, the very rhetoric of the socio-political are captured or influenced by these emergent practices [6].

#### **Technological Implications and Aesthetic Considerations**

In immersive theatre, technology enhances the subjective experience of space and location, while simultaneously challenging normative conceptions of performance [4]. Frequently, each audience member receives audio-visual inputs, and in some instances haptic or scent stimuli, from decidedly different sources and trajectories. Audience agency may be open and extensive, yet the dreamlike character of the experience often functions to determine narrative content and shape individual choice [5]. Elaborate immersive setups can be technically elaborate; however, the qualities of functionality, immediacy, and perceived simplicity remain critical to avoid unnecessary obstructions to subjective presence [1]. The participation paradigm also changes the dynamics of identity and the nature of ownership attached to voice and gesture, just as the nature of one-to-many broadcast dynamics turns dramaturgical questions towards character and narrative agency rather than towards the orchestration of temporal relations themselves [2]. Such changes are indicative of performance that operates equally outside the conventional location of the stage or performance space and without any strict requirement for a spectator at all [3].

#### **Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Multisensory Design**

Access to immersive media can be restricted for various reasons, including the nature of the experience, standing requirements, limitations to neck or head movements, and system constraints [1]. Using multisensory design can be particularly valuable for people with hearing, visual, or cognitive impairments since it becomes possible to convey something multisensory through visual means, audio approaches, or narrative support [2]. Employing multisensory design offers potential value to monocular, colour-blind, or deaf individuals. In VR, for example, employing vibrations can communicate space and guidance, which assists sight-disabled users [3]. Games designed for greater accessibility are designed for people having restricted movements of the arms, hands, or legs to ensure that more people can enjoy the same experience [4].

#### **Agency, Control, and Performativity**

At the intersection of immersive theatre and virtual reality (VR) performance, agency emerges as a key site of formal inquiry [1]. The emergence of sensory-rich media systems has expanded the horizons of creative practice, individual attention, and collaborative exchange [2]. A reflexive understanding of audience agency in these contexts will elucidate how moment-to-moment decision-making shapes experience, an understanding which, in turn, informs dramaturgical experimentation and critical engagement. Immersive theatre offers a pre-digitally immersive analogue to VR. In immersive performances, a wide range of audience behaviours and interactions are anticipated, from passive spectating to pro-active engagement and even role-playing [3]. However, the very term “agency” can signify different modes of activity, ranging from frictionless navigation through a sequence of pre-determined choices to a more generative, multiplicative agency that expands inventively over the encounter. Agency in distributed systems must therefore be approached in conjunction with an understanding of space. Immersive theatre examined spatial control, now intensified as VR opens a fourth dimension to endurance-based choreography and the manipulation of duration [1]. Immersive performance moves through a continuum from minimalist exposition to maximalist entrapment; agency responds in kind. Constricted environments cultivate

heightened scrutiny of elements such as scale, materiality, colour, and sound, while free environments encourage “taking stock” of multiplicity and supplementing action with voice or gesture [2]. When addressed in purely virtual audiovisual environments, immateriality and illusory presences raise new questions. Within pre-recorded, linear pieces, freedom to review content extends agency without inviting participatory co-authorship [3].

### **Pedagogical and Cultural Implications**

Immersive theatre and VR performance underscore both the potential of contemporary immersive media and the continuing relevance of established dramatic concerns [4]. To address embodied experience and spectator behaviour in immersive performance environments, practitioners take inspiration from systems, pieces, and scenarios shaped by the performative and non-performative uses of space [5]. The same drive to explore how different approaches to embodiment, presence, and configurative dramaturgy intersect to produce hybrid forms informs ongoing research at the CAVES project based at the University of Glasgow. Pedagogical initiatives aim to foster awareness of immersive performance and equip professionals and students with the tools and resources to exploit contemporary strategies, technologies, and materials [6]. Workshops, seminars, and collective labs engage cohorts across the Faculty of Arts and beyond. Opportunities for public outreach include collaborations with the National Theatre of Scotland, the Centre for Contemporary Arts, and the Immersive Media Foundation. These activities encourage the exploration of cultural memory, collective experience, and spatial narrative across multiple themes, contexts, and installations, as well as individual and collaborative experimentation in hybrid practice with frameworks drawn from immersive theatre and VR [7].

### **Education, Training, and Public Engagement**

Immersive theatre invites participants into an intimate engagement with manipulated time and space, collapsing the boundaries between performer and spectator [1]. Such bodily experiences, which amplify spectators’ physical presence throughout the performance event and encourage a fuller integration of the body in the engagement with the work, shift the understanding of presence from a question of psychological distance to a focus on the physiological where, how, and by what means an audience or participant encounters the work [2]. Immersive media become primarily relevant through the reflections they propose, rather than through their supposedly immersive and captivating qualities [3]. Virtual reality theatre addresses corporeal presence in a similar manner. It presents a veritable space-to-time analogue to theatre’s movement from the proscenium arch to environments in which the spectator experiences the shared space of the scene through movement across and around it. Through avatars displayed on-screen, projected bodies in the world, and corporeal bodily actions, the audience lives the performance of the action before their eyes; they do not simply view from a distance, safe on a seat [4]. Immersive media thus invite additional thought concerning the framing and embodiment of the agency when the body directly interacts with another language while crossing from one experience of agency to another. Once previously conquered by the gaze alone, presence now engages the body in dramatic interventions that shape, significantly redefine, and sometimes even escape an encompassing narrative framework [5].

### **Cultural Memory and Spatial Narratives**

In immersive theatre and virtual reality, action often unfolds in uniquely conceived spaces, yet these spaces themselves rarely feature in the articulation of narrative [3]. A work’s narrative is instead articulated along other lines, such as thematically or through clusterings of significant actions. In immersive theatre, elaborately detailed, non-transformative scenographies exclusively encoding the narrative’s sites are common; these allow significant transferences between embodied conditions in the scenography and the shared physical environment of the audience [1]. In one of the purely virtual works discussed in the adjacent section, the protagonist bicycled through a scattered collection of memories, with each intervening memory fragment remaining visually intact; similarly, the spaces of an entire VR play might be retained yet the action occur freely in only a few of them [4]. In these contexts, narrativity thus eludes formalisation. The term spatial narrative has conversely been employed to describe the particulars of spatial organisation and configurational structure that spatially-congruous yet non-narrative action must nonetheless engage [6]. Pinterest-board curation of selected interiors and their mutual adjacencies or conversely prescribed sequences for traversing them might encapsulate such configurations. The notion of spatial narrative continues to retain traction within VR, where even the slightest alteration to virtual material, configuration, or positioning of other elements feeds into narrativity and remains mappable along conventional narrative thesauri [7]. In immersive and VR instances prepared from theatre texts, other junctures also surfaced. Certain moments, for example, had the characters returning to prior physical states and uttering words already pronounced, producing echoes that broke both forward progression and linear building. The alteration of one individual’s speaking voice also generated the immediacy of insights predicated solely upon that voice [8]. The label narrative architecture finds favour in the applied game studies literature, although its connotations of levels, routes, choices, and branches exert less resonance within the chosen instances than in correspondingly familiar designs elsewhere. Thematic mappings of conditions exhibit greater pertinence in immersive theatrical settings still further untethered from authored textual substrates [9].

### **Challenges, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Institutional and aesthetic boundaries make immersive theatre relatively rare and prohibitively expensive for many practitioners. VR theatre is also limited [3]. Presence requires suspension of disbelief, yet social VR rarely delivers. VR-viewer games circumvent physical projection and haptic contact; those involving lower fidelity, simpler replications of physical experiences tend to be less engaging and convincing [4]. Social VR provides virtual presence at cognitive-sensory levels but lacks a full multi-sensory experience. If the metaverse proves viable, technology proven for gaming, highly immersive experiences and educational training will be rolled out by the social media companies involved [5]. When theatrical forms and modes converged, immersive and VR experiences unfolded in turns, pleasures and processes in real-time, theatre's essential capacity to generate and hold serious absurdity was lost [6]. The present endowed by dramatic and ludic action, temporality marked by expression and perception, simultaneously spatial and temporal, sacred and secular, simple, pure, strong lacked distinctiveness and intrigue. Used to resourcing meta-materials for economizing and speed, reducing tech services to a simple plug-in now used in all national and international subscriptions, immersive VR procedures must-in-future-wait-for-an-actor to perform-for-and-into viewers-a-vivid-embodied-afro-electronically-verse-desire-playful-touch, and converging-focus[7].

### **Ethical and Consent Considerations**

Scripted performers, both live and 3D-generated can foster the illusion of shared presence, prompting consideration of how this might operate in hybrid theatre, combining VR with live performers or even with actors appearing solely through inaccessible 2D media [3]. The pandemic accelerated interest in methods of quasi-live performance beyond the proscenium, a mode rigidly maintained by the pre-2020 North American theatre-for-young-audiences scene [4]. Current results indicate that on-screen action at least can retain both presence and embodiment in traditional theatre and that a related quasi-live agent may enable the same in immersive work [1]. Techniques for achieving a semblance of agency through choice predominate in contemporary immersive presence, while engagement in VR is now often used synonymously with agency, choice, or interaction, even if the term works impressively across proscenium defaults [5].

### **Technical Constraints and Budgetary Realities**

Technical constraints and budgetary realities influence immersive theatre productions, mediatizing audience immersion by extending the experience of gaming. Alternative modes of participation involve more senses and thus enact an aesthetic, and not just participatory, transition from one media to another [10]. Theories of immersion posit that the full regulation of signal dimensions provides the most powerful immersion. Many immersive theatre productions developed narratives that brought their audiences directly into the stories in what remained but basic structures: basic narrative shapes intensified the thrill of the experience; alternative modes of participation incorporated hitherto excluded senses; and the book indicated the full breadth of the mediatic spectrum and towards which senses and signalling modalities immersive theatre might mediatize an audience [4]. Full-spectrum narratives were already recognizably immersive, yet financial and technical limits nevertheless acted as fundamental constraints [5]. Physical narratives and sensori-emotional engagement elicited reflection on the perception of the world by mediatizing the awareness of sensing, something that became increasingly relevant as stories acquired greater theoretical precision [6]. The temporal elaboration of a narrative genre such as interactive fiction within the constraints of immersive theatre became inextricably intertwined with the cognitive framing of the mode within a multisentential projection of articulation [7]. Narratives illustrated how time and sensation governed not only the structure of media transitions but also the very arrangement of the basic modes of immersive storytelling itself [8].

### **The Future of Shared Presence in Hybrid Environments**

Video-games, media art, and media architecture have long circulated ideas about combining physical and digital environments [5]. Stagecraft routinely collapses these divides. How to bridge them in experiential narratives that elevate storytelling and sense of belonging for avatar and human participants? Theatrical exploration continues into reality, a compelling proposition, since VR and AR consider "the real" from multiple points of view. Projects could encompass ambition as well as intimacy. Classrooms, conferences, public forums, studio visits, and performances raise community awareness of contemporary theorists and practitioners [6]. Narratives might embrace longing and reunion without technically requiring interventions from a higher authority or disruptive projection. Exploring mixable texts and media dedicated to healing family bonds is advisable. Developing facilitation protocols that lead safely away from episodes of pervasive denial, epidemic disruption, and debilitating loneliness is especially urgent [7, 8]. Past pandemics find resonance when roaming even more remote regions. These numerous futures remain intriguing yet daunting to pursue in parallel. Physical materials affect phenomena at human scale. Certain phenomena remain elusive in expansive digital realms [9]. Endeavors exploring transcendent, timeless, extraordinary, sublime, spiritual, or numinous presence are nonetheless valuable. Similar spaces of longing and reunion can prove confusing or uncertain on-screen yet rooted in culturally stable places. Interactivity and immersion enhance influence further when placed inside familiarly bounded nomadic formats

such as correspondence or storytelling à la radio. Notable whereabouts include Karawane, ISO, N, I, and MCEBIAL, colloquial vernaculars that accompany periodic universal link trails and multilingual messages forwarded from assorted sender domains [9]. Traces spanning materiality and abrupt emergence remain equally relevant, warnings inscribed long ago suggest reconsidering asymmetric longings, since multidirectional time furthermore complicates their terrain [10].

## CONCLUSION

Immersive theatre and VR performance collectively signal a significant transformation in contemporary performance practice, shifting emphasis from representation to lived experience. Both forms disrupt conventional spatial and temporal boundaries, repositioning audiences as active participants whose bodily presence becomes central to the unfolding of the work. Through multisensory engagement and interactive structures, they extend performance beyond visual and auditory reception into tactile, spatial, and proprioceptive dimensions. A key finding is that embodiment functions as the foundational condition of both immersive theatre and VR performance, shaping how presence is perceived and sustained across physical and virtual environments. While immersive theatre foregrounds shared material space and co-presence among participants, VR performance constructs mediated environments in which presence is technologically simulated yet experientially compelling. In both cases, dramaturgy shifts from linear storytelling toward spatial, nonlinear, and participatory configurations, where narrative emerges through exploration, choice, and interaction. Despite their innovations, both forms also raise critical challenges, particularly regarding agency, accessibility, ethical participation, and the limits of technological mediation. These concerns underscore the need for continued methodological development and interdisciplinary inquiry. Overall, immersive theatre and VR performance expand the conceptual and practical boundaries of theatre, offering new frameworks for understanding how performance operates in increasingly hybrid, technologically mediated cultural landscapes.

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