



Virtual Reality Life Writing and Young Adult Media Practice

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of digital technologies on the production of life writing texts and media for and by young adults. Five categories in total are examined: (i) Fan Fiction, (ii) life simulator games, (iii) SNS (social networking sites), (iv) VR (virtual reality) documentaries and (v) Webtoons. The article begins by synthesising numerous critical studies on children's and digital life writing, before analysing two IVR (immersive virtual reality) documentaries in depth. It concludes by discussing the relationship between these on-the-go, online and immersive VR modes and fantasised futures, narratives of extremity and the slice of life genre.

Keywords: virtual reality, digital life writing, young adult literature

Introduction

A quick Google search will illustrate that virtual reality has become somewhat synonymous with immersive virtual reality or IVR. Within media studies, however, 'VR may mean using the Internet, as well as the hardware for entering into a virtual reality (Omni, OculusRift), or creating an augmented reality (Google Glass, etc.)' (Puchkova et al., 2017:135). In 'A study of Generation Z's involvement in virtual reality', the authors use the term in this broader sense, writing that: 'A virtual reality has a number of social and psychological characteristics: the ability to simulate activity by one or more users; disembodied and ontologically uncertain identity; anonymity (hiding one's real status); deliberate impersonality; identity expansion; the ability to have many different virtual personalities, etc.' (Puchkova et al., 2017: 135). All of these characteristics become particularly relevant within the context of life writing studies, especially in terms of representing online lives. It is, therefore, not surprising that many life narratives today are told in innovative and interactive ways made possible through VR. Generation Z, deemed 'The Digital Generation' or 'The Datafied Generation', are at the forefront of these changes. Social media has made it possible for online life narratives to be shared by a much larger audience than traditional forms, but this is by far not the only new development in the field. Fan Fiction, life simulator games, VR documentaries and Webtoons have all introduced new modes of recording lives that come with new advantages and risks for young life writing practitioners. Despite this, the impact of datafication on young adult lives as well as the study of young adult life writing in general are both under-researched fields of study (Lupton and Williamson, 2017), (Douglas & Poletti, 2016). This current article aims to draw comparisons between recent children's literature studies and life writing studies within this VR context. To this end, I conducted four interviews with scholars who had written about life writing or children's literature in the past. These scholars were Kate Douglas, Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer, Monica Soeting and Lydia Kokkola, whose insights were very helpful with the development of my research.

The Datafied Generation

It was only in the twentieth century that 'adolescence emerged as a new subject of attention in European and American public life' (Charnow, 2012:1037), (cited in Douglas, 2018:1027). And in many cultures still, adolescence is not recognised as a stage of life at all (Lancy, 2008), (Montgomery, 2009) (cited in Ulturgasheva,

2012:51). In the twenty-first century, scholar Fiona McCulloch contends that ‘children are often more internet-skilled than adults, and therefore, more aware of new media trends in the world [...] while adults are becoming increasingly child-like in their nostalgic desire to preserve their own youth’ (McCulloch, 2011:24-5). Similarly, scholar Julian Sefton-Green argues that the ‘digital age is one in which conventional definitions of childhood and adulthood are being redefined through social usage rather than in terms of biological age’ (Sefton-Green, 2004:4). This means that VR has not only opened up new avenues for self-representation, but that becoming digitally literate is part of the new coming of age process. The redefinition of childhood over time also makes categorising examples of young adult life writing tricky. As Kokkola pointed out to me when I interviewed her, many letters by royals in the past could be considered as young people’s life writing if we use contemporary definitions of childhood.

Recent developments in young people’s life writing

A recent change in children’s literature research is the ‘return to the body’ (Nikolajeva, 2016). Children’s literature scholar Maria Nikolajeva, who coined the term, writes that: ‘Until relatively recently, children’s literature research was predominantly inspired by cultural theory, viewing the child and childhood as a social construction rather than a material body existing in a material world’ (Nikolajeva, 2016:133). Now, however, ‘recent directions in literary studies, such as ecocriticism, posthumanism, disability studies and cognitive criticism, are refocusing scholarly attention on the physicality of children’s bodies and the environment’ (Nikolajeva, 2016: 132). The predominance of these concerns in recent years is also very apparent in the context of contemporary life writing by young people themselves, with two of the most well-known young life writing practitioners – Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg – using their life narratives to draw attention to these wider debates, such as the policing of girls and climate change. This creates two very different trends in the context of VR life writing: the first being the digital revolution and the impact of new media on the way we perceive abstract notions of childhood, and the other being a focus on the physicality and embodiment. The tension between these two trends, however, can be compared somewhat to the friction between online digital life and physical ‘real’ life in the material world. Between these two worlds is what has been termed as the ‘X-reality’, which is ‘the continuum between online and off, i.e., the “X-reality” that traverses the virtual and the real’, in which many children today have grown up

(Coleman, 2011:3). Thereby, to critically examine children's life writing in a VR context, life writing scholars must negotiate the redefinition of childhood in the digital age, the refocus on how children's lives are being impacted by climate change, society and politics in the material world, and the new coming of age process in the X-reality.

Young people's own opinion

Today childhood scholars seem to be increasingly concerned with children's own opinions, which has led to more of an emphasis on participatory research practices (Moran et al., 2021:5). These trends in academic circles, however, do not necessarily speak to the wider public perception of children and young people. Douglas, for instance, argues that many people still hold the view that the 'child or adolescent cannot possibly have lived enough of a life, or have a useful perspective' to be a life practitioner (Douglas, 2020). Furthermore, in a study titled "'Young People These Days ...': Evidence for Negative Perceptions of Emerging Adulthood', researchers Kali H. Trzesniewski and M. Brent Donnellan found that young adults in the United States are often stereotyped as 'more immoral, narcissistic, and overconfident than adults and less agreeable and emotionally stable', and 'more self-centered, less hardworking, lazier, and promiscuous when compared to emerging adults of the past' (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2014: 211). VR life writing may have contributed to these stereotypes, but it can also serve as a way for young people to dispute them.

Self-proliferation and identity

The concept of self-assemblages has been discussed within the context of both life writing and data mining. In the critical text 'Virtually Me' (2014), life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that 'the autobiographical subject can be approached as an ensemble or assemblage of subject positions through which self-understanding and self-positioning are negotiated' (Smith & Watson, 2014). The statement here implies a sense of control over a process of self-proliferation that is beneficial for the life writing practitioner. By contrast, in the context of data surveillance, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) refer to 'surveillant assemblages' as 'the aggregation of data sources that combine to produce a digital doppelganger of the individual, and represent human subjects as digital archives [...] The transformation of people into data can encourage them to see themselves as data assemblages' (Lupton & Williamson, 2017:4). In this second statement, the

process of self-proliferation is out of the user's control and is either not entirely for their benefit or even detrimental. The former statement also implies that the user is deliberately occupying multiple subject positions, while the latter refers to an external entity 'copying' and archiving a user's online profile. This second statement is part of what has been termed as the 'datafication' of online lives. Simone van der Hof writes that: 'Datafication practices are part of a carefully orchestrated game plan, in which internet companies immerse users in interactive digital environments and nudge them to disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings as well as forecast inclinations' (Global Campus of Human Rights, 2021b). What these statements demonstrate is that digital self-proliferation can be both a self-conscious act driven by a desire for self-understanding, or it can be the by-product of access to online services.

This concept of self-proliferation has been spoken about within the context of both identity expansion and identity fragmentation. Natalia Kucirkova writes that: 'Education scholars, including myself, understand identity as a verb, as an action that is performed in dialogue with others' (Kucirkova, 2021:2). For instance, selfies are 'an act of socialisation; they reflect a desire for social and cultural participation and connection, for visibility and affirmation (Jones 2013; Freeland 2013)' (Douglas & Poletti, 2016 4). Kucirkova also argues that 'today's generation cultivates inner worlds that are fragmented, with diverse identity markers, such as archived photos, real-time text messages or records of movement [...] The Generation Alpha, that is, children born between 2010 and 2025 are the first generation to pioneer digital personalization that significantly fragments and augments their "selves"' (Kucirkova, 2021:1). This activity online is potentially problematic in terms of security and data protection. To partly bypass this issue, the age of consent for processing data tends to be lower than other age of consent laws that come in at around 16 or 18. Instead, 'It's very interesting that for data and for being protected from the digital economy, 13 was chosen' (Global Campus of Human Rights, 2021a). So, while categories of youth and ideas about childhood are always shifting, it is widely the case that children can legally access social networking sites at age 13; therefore, becoming a teenager today marks the legal point where children can become SNS life writing practitioners and consumers. It should be noted, however, that many children under the age of 13 (that is, Generation Alpha) have already joined social networking sites. For instance, in the United States an estimated forty-five percent of children under the age of 13 use Facebook on a daily basis (Canales, 2021). In addition, there is also the phenomenon of 'sharenting', a term referring to when parents publicise information about their children online. In 2019, The Atlantic reported that: 'The shock of realizing that details about your life—or, in

some cases, an entire narrative of it—have been shared online without your consent or knowledge has become a pivotal experience in the lives of many young teens and tweens’ (Lorenz, 2019). The author of the article comments that: ‘Several teens and tweens told me this was the impetus for wanting to get their own social-media profiles, in an effort to take control of their image’ (Lorenz, 2019). Thus, just like how digital self-proliferation can be both a self-conscious act or a by-product of access to online services, being active on SNS can be driven from personal desire or from a lack of control.

Fantasised Futures

In *Reading Autobiography* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe life writing as ‘a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject’, and they specify that life narrators ‘can return to the past, even the cultural past before the writer’s birth, or offer an imaginative journey into a fantasized future’ (Smith & Watson, 2010: 4,11). The anticipation of what the future might hold is a central concern in children’s life writing. In *Witnessing Girlhood* (2019), for example, scholars Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall write that: ‘Childhood is a space of projections: *This* child will have *that* future. It is also a space in which fantasized futures are imagined as real’ (Gilmore & Marshall, 2019: 110). The statement here brings up two central concerns: the child as a product of adult desire and the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and life-trajectory. The latter part of this statement is demonstrated in Olga Ulturgasheva’s research on ‘future autobiographies’ with young people, since in many cases she found that: ‘their narrated futures have recently turned into the recent past’ (Ulturgasheva, 2012: 40). Moreover, in a study titled ‘Children’s Prospective Life Stories’, researchers Annette Bohn and Dorte Berntsen found an ‘increase of events in early adulthood is found when children narrate their personal futures’, indicating that children’s fantasised futures may be predominantly fantasised young adulthoods (Bohn & Berntsen, 197: 2011).

There have also been a number of studies that look specifically at VR fantasised futures by young people. Life writing scholar Sanna Lehtonen, for instance, calls upon readers to recognise the legitimacy of Fan Fiction texts with self-insertion as ‘speculative life writing’ arguing that adolescent girls have used them as sites to play with different ‘gendered identities’ (Lehtonen, 2015). Similarly, in an article on life writing and *The Sims 3* game, scholar Julie Rak quotes from KaeLyn’s queer blog *Autostraddle*, where she writes that: ‘before I came out to everyone, playing *The Sims* was a way for me to safely explore queerness....Before I was ready or able to kiss a girl

in real life or to reinvent myself as the wild party girl or fierce leader or boho artist—all identities that eventually became a part of my real identity—I could play them out on my computer screen’ (Rak, 2015:166). Rak summarises that: ‘In other words, The Sims worked as a type of lab for Kaelyn to “test” queerness in fantasies without real-life consequences. The game also allowed her to test out fantasies which later became part of her identity and her life’ (Rak, 2015: 166-67). Here then, we see fantasised futures put into an anonymous makeshift practice made possible through Fan Fiction and these life simulator games. It also seems significant that many of these fantasised futures end up becoming reality. In this context, Lehtonen’s word choice of ‘speculative life writing’ seems more appropriate, since the characteristics of these fantasised futures seem more in line with speculative fiction rather than simply a fantasy.

Narratives of Extremity

While fantasised futures tend to point towards an individual future, life writing as testimony often points towards a collective one. Bloggers such as Malala Yousafzai, Isadora Faber, Martha Payne, Riverbend and Salam Pax have all used life writing as testimony to call attention to various causes ranging from calls for peace to educational reform to food access (Douglas & Poletti, 2016:20), (Douglas, 2018:1029). Thereby, highlighting the function of life writing as a mode for advocacy. This means that while fantasised futures are often kept private, life writing as testimony relies on the technological affordances of social media to circulate messages on a global scale. A further distinction is that many of the blogs mentioned above are ‘narratives of extremity’, which Douglas has argued are amongst the most widely read life narratives (Douglas & Poletti, 2016:21). Trauma is a defining characteristic of these narratives; therefore, these narratives pose a threat to the Romantic notion of the innocent child.

This romantic notion of the innocent child is also challenged by VR documentaries such as ‘Echoes of IS – #wesharethescars’, which depicts several narratives of radicalisation. This interactive web documentary muddles the divide separating the adult protector or perpetrator and the innocent child victim by depicting several stories from ‘refugees and Dutch people, parents, children, ex-fighters and stay-behinds’ (Nederlands Film Festival, 2017). The interactivity of the documentary comes from the fact that each viewer can choose which story they want to view first in whatever order they choose. Within life writing studies, scholars have both praised and critiqued anthologies. On the one hand, it has been

argued that: 'Anthologies make texts and voices visible through the act of collectivising them and consecrating them as part of a significant cultural text' (Douglas & Poletti, 2016:71). In this light, interactive web documentaries such as this one could be seen as a modern anthology, where the stories are made visible, easily spreadable across social media, and where no one story is prioritised over the other since there is no obvious chronological order. On the other hand: 'Anthologies tend to offer singular identity markers (e.g. in our example: adolescents, innocents, Holocaust victims, brave and forgiving) and thus attribute a singular identity on to a potentially very diverse group' (Douglas & Poletti, 2016:71). While 'Echoes of IS – #wesharethescars', does primarily endow each life practitioner with one identity marker (such as ex-fighter, parent etc.), they also add the caveat that: 'It is not our aim to victimize anyone or to pass judgement on former IS fighters. We are not here to preach. We want to open up a dialogue. And these stories can do just that, because they ultimately affect everyone' (Submarine Channel, 2017). In addition to the web documentary having its own URL, there are also dedicated Instagram and YouTube pages, all of which are free to access, making the potential for an open dialogue even bigger. The title of the documentary also contains a hashtag, which immediately signals the intention for the documentary to be talked about on social media. Again, the emphasis here is on the collective, demonstrating how SNS can be used to spread life narratives as testimony to educate and open up dialogue as a mode of advocacy.

IVR documentaries often also depict lives of extremity; however, the content is not as easily spreadable as SNS life narratives. IVR could also be a somewhat extreme way of accessing a life narrative with the current price of an HMD (head-mounted display). It is also interesting that again age 13 seems to be, at least, the legal marker for accessing these narratives, with both Oculus Rift and ad HTC Vive stipulating that 'their technology is not suitable for children under 12-13 years' (Southgate et al., 2018:3). However, as with SNS, just because 13 acts as a legal age barrier, does not mean that children themselves are not engaging in these media practices. In addition, while the boundary between fantasy and reality is sometimes framed in an empowering light in the case of fantasised futures, allowing young people to come to terms with their sexuality, for example, IVR potentially threatens this boundary in a dangerous sense, with some critical studies indicating that IVR can create false memories in young children (Segovia and Bailenson, 2009), (Stanford, 2015) (cited in Southgate et al., 2018: 3). In the context of life writing, examples of IVR life narratives have begun to be released in recent years. These include the Finnish production 'Siltojen alta tulevaisuuden ihmiselle' (Man Under

Bridge) by Hanna Västinsalo, a biography of Johan Knut Harju (1910-1976) who was a writer and historian who became homeless and struggled with alcoholism (Banis, 2020). There have also been translations of existing life writing texts adapted into IVR experiences, such as the memoir *Je savais qu'en Europe on ne tire pas sur les gens* (2015) by asylum seeker Mortaza Jami, which was adapted into 'Meet Mortaza VR' (Banis, 2020), (La Biennale di Venezia, 2020). Furthermore, there are IVR life narratives that are made up of still images instead of moving ones, such 'Ferenj: A Graphic Memoir in VR' by Ainslee Robson, which explores her mixed-race identity through a series of 3D photographs and images made up of coloured spheres that are designed to destabilise the user's experience of the narrative (IDFA, 2020). There are also a few examples of IVR life narratives that can be accessed for free, such as the BBC production 'Is Anna okay?' and 'The Book of Distance' by Randall Okita. 'Is Anna okay?' focuses on twin sisters, one of whom sustained a traumatic head injury after being hit by a car in 2015. The IVR experience can be played from the point of view of each sister; Anna's perspective is shown from a seating position and Lauren's perspective is shown from a standing position. This difference in perspective emphasises the loss of autonomy Anna experiences as a result of her head injury. 'The Book of Distance' by Randall Okita is a biography of Okita's grandfather, Yonezo Okita, who emigrated from Japan to Canada in 1935, which uses '2D and 3D hand-crafted sets reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints' (Baker, 2020).

IVR life narratives rely on the tension between the user's autonomy and the necessity of their constant involvement. For instance, in 'Is Anna okay?' there are certain actions the user has to complete in order to continue the narrative. These include picking up a photograph, a mobile, a remote control, a lantern, a cup of coffee and a teddy bear. In addition to picking up these objects, the user also has to knock over a domino and take the other twin by the hand. These compulsory actions involve bending down, looking around and lots of hand movements. There are also, however, nearly always objects within rooms that the user does not have to interact with, such as a toy bike and a trainer, that the user can pick up, rotate, throw, place on other surfaces or bring closer to their face to inspect them, but which do not progress the narrative further. The user also has a lot of freedom with how they choose to react to scenes during the IVR experience. In one play-through of this particular IVR experience uploaded to YouTube, the user, playing as Lauren, places her hand on Anna's hand while she lays in a comma, and at another point, kneels down next to Anna to look at her at eye-level instead of looking down at her from a standing position (Nathie, 2018). These gestures of comfort demonstrate that

it is up to the user how physically and emotionally involved in the story they want to become within the IVR experience. At several points during the experience, this same user also stares down at his hands and rotates them, which are either Anna or Lauren's hands, depending on which perspective he is playing from. At one point in the narrative, as Lauren talks about her new tattoo, the user holds out Lauren's arm to have a look at the tattoo itself. All of this creates a tension between the real and the virtual, which can be somewhat compared to entering the 'X-reality' as the user, while playing an IVR experience, moves around in both real and virtual space.

'The Book of Distance' similarly involves a lot of compulsory participation. For instance, the user is required to pick up at least one rock and put it into a wheelbarrow to help clear farming land. They also have to pick up a plank of wood and then hammer it down into the ground to help build a fence, as well as pick up a handful of seeds and throw them out across the land. These activities all involve the reader in the manual labour required to build a farm and family home from scratch. In addition, the user is also required to pack Yonezo Okita's suitcase as he leaves Hiroshima and emigrates to Canada, and then again when he is sent to a Japanese internment camp, except this time, as the user tries to pack the camera and the radio, they are repelled out of the suitcase, with the voiceover stating that these items were forbidden in the camps (AltVR, 2021). Thus, the user's actions themselves are rejected, which reinforces the harsh limitations of what Okita's family could bring with them to the camps. In contrast with 'Is Anna Okay?', this narrative is played from a third-person perspective; however, the user is still directly addressed by the narrator. For instance, the narrator tells the user at one point to throw a horseshoe to the left, and at another point, to step back behind a white line. At the immigration office, the user is handed a passport, which they must hand to an immigration officer, who stamps it and hands it back to them, before they are allowed to step past the white line and enter into Canada. This puts the user into the position of the immigrant without the mediation of a character's avatar. These IVR life narratives are very interesting within the context of the 'return to the body' field of research, since there is a huge emphasis on the real and virtual body. The physical involvement of the consumer is used to both access the narrative and to heighten their emotional response.

Slice of Life Webtoons

In stark contrast to narratives of extremity are the life narratives often depicted in Webtoons. Originating from South Korea, Webtoons are digital comics that take advantage of the ubiquity of smartphones and the practice of infinite scrolling. They are episodic narratives that 'are published as long vertical strips with zooming and scrolling interface technologies that provide a whole new "viewing" experience, making them closer to McCloud's (2009) notion of the "Infinite Canvas"' (Cathy Shin, 2016: 106). These properties make Webtoons a dynamic, accessible and interactive mode of storytelling. 'Slice of Life' narratives are a popular genre on Webtoon websites. They include life narratives such as 'My Giant Nerd Boyfriend', created by a freelance artist based in Malaysia in 2017 under the pseudonym 'fishball', which has two million subscribers at the time of writing. Another example is 'As Per Usual' by Dami Lee, which has been running since 2016 and has 470K subscribers, and 'Murrz' by Murrz which has 735.9K subscribers and has also been running since 2016. These life narratives are all updated multiple times a week with episodes that can be read within a couple of minutes. This creates a sense of ongoingness in contrast to the IVR life narratives that come to an ending. Rak writes that: 'If we disaggregate the idea of life as living from the idea of life as a finished text or product, as Lauren Berlant has suggested that we try to do, it is possible to think of online life not as a narrative, or even as representation, but as a series of scenes, where the possibilities of one scene make a "bridge" to another way of thinking, and perhaps to another scene' (Rak, 2015:156). Within this context, the structure of Webtoon narratives seem to reflect the construction of online life as a series of scenes. Furthermore, the everyday device of a mobile phone matches the content of these life narratives, which commonly depict unspectacular events in daily life and everyday musings. This marks a shift away from the shock of narratives of extremity to the relatability and often humorous nature of these narratives. The aforementioned examples also depict the trend of many creators of Webtoons remaining anonymous, and the consumers of these Webtoons also primarily comment below the episodes with anonymised usernames. Here, the dialogue is integrated into the same platform that hosts the life narrative, thereby creating an online bubble consisting exclusively of readers of each episode of the life narrative in question.

Conclusion

From fantasised futures to digital self-assemblages, VR life writing encourages self-proliferation on a vast scale. These life narratives are tied up with everyday media practice through the use of the internet and mobile phones. This creates an emphasis on the present which is heightened through the speed of access and the ability to frequently update narratives online. Thereby, VR life narratives are often continuous rather than a finished textual product. IVR life narratives, which by contrast are complete in the sense that there is an ending, hinge on the tension between autonomy and constant participatory interaction. Testimonial life narratives encourage dialogue that the amplification of SNS can provide, while fantasised futures are often kept private and secretive. Webtoon websites can create separate reading communities where dialogue is integrated into the same platform as the life narrative away from SNS. VR life practitioners and consumers are often anonymous, which signals both the danger of having an online presence, but also the ability of online avatars to reflect an uncertain identity. Broadly speaking, fantasised futures focus on what's to come next and slice-of-life narratives focus on what has recently happened. This means that formats that can be constantly updated rather than a finished textual product may be particularly suited to these narrative types (such as life simulator games and Webtoons). By contrast, narratives of extremity can be focused on a trauma of the past or an ongoing trauma, which means that both fixed (such as IVR) and unfixed (such as SNS) formats can be effectively used to depict these narratives. In addition, the visceral nature of IVR documentaries may be better suited to depicting a traumatic event rather than an everyday occurrence, which by contrast may benefit from the condensed nature of a Webtoon. These VR modes are also active forms of storytelling; the interactivity of the narratives requires the user's involvement to varying degrees (from scrolling through a phone to moving around in an immersive environment). VR life narratives can, therefore, help young people to better formulate the direction of their lives, open up a space for them to engage in discussions about politics and daily life, as well as the possibility of inhabiting another life through immersion. On the other hand, there are still ethical problems surrounding the datafication of children's online lives and the agency of young people as life writing practitioners and consumers.

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