

1. Starting Point: From Human–Dog Relationships to Mediated Representations

Dogs have come to occupy an increasingly significant emotional role within contemporary family structures. They are regarded as intimate companions, entrusted with multiple functions such as providing comfort, alleviating loneliness, and sustaining attachment (Veevers, 2016; Walsh, 2009). My research was initially situated in the study of human–dog relationships. Schneider and Bräuer (2024) argue that this bond is constructed through three interrelated elements: *expectations*, *knowledge*, and *empathy*. This model offered a clear conceptual foundation for understanding human–pet relations, and served as the theoretical departure point for this study. Yet such frameworks are increasingly challenged by the dynamics of the contemporary media environment.

Short-form videos on social media platforms have gradually become central to the ways in which people express emotions and form perceptions in everyday life. On platforms such as TikTok, pet-focused videos are often carefully staged to present an idealised vision of human–dog relationships (Jacobson, Hodson and Mittelman, 2022), perpetuating what Ngai (2023), Shamayleh and Arsel (2020), and Yoo et al. (2024) describe as an aesthetic of cuteness. I contend that this aesthetic not only generates light-hearted pleasure but also subtly shapes viewers’ expectations and imaginaries of pet ownership.

1.1 The Gap Between Fantasy and Reality: My Mother’s Experience of Dog Ownership

Yet short videos often mask the complexities and contradictions of everyday life by manufacturing illusions and entertainment effects. My mother, as a devoted viewer of such content, exemplifies this dynamic. Before I left for Britain, in anticipation of her impending retirement and the loneliness brought by her children’s successive

departures, we brought home a Bichon Frise puppy for her. However, within my first month abroad, I received frequent messages from her expressing frustration and confusion about dog ownership. On one occasion, she even suffered an emotional breakdown when the untrained puppy urinated indoors.

I believe her negativity stemmed from the psychological gap between fantasy and reality, which underscores the profound influence of pet-centred short videos—particularly as she is a heavy user of Douyin. Such videos fostered the belief that having a dog would provide immediate companionship and warmth, while in reality the care of a puppy demands sustained time, effort, and emotional labour. For potential dog owners, social media creators typically foreground only the cuteness of dogs and the joy they bring, while obscuring the labour of care and the challenges posed by behavioural differences. In this way, such portrayals risk cultivating unrealistic expectations among viewers.

This observation prompted me to reconsider the function of social media: it is not merely a platform for sharing everyday life but operates as a kind of *stage*, one whose underlying logic requires deeper theoretical interrogation. Consequently, I turned to pet videos on the Chinese platform Xiaohongshu, analysing them from the perspective of content creators. My focus was on the mechanisms of fantasy construction in short videos, asking: How do contemporary pet videos shape users' attitudes towards pets? And how do they provoke emotional projection in viewers? With these questions, I began to engage with Goffman's theory of impression management, thereby moving from personal reflection into the broader terrain of media studies.

1.2 Self-Presentation on Social Media: Goffman's Impression Management

The concept of impression management originates in Goffman's seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), which conceptualises social interaction as performance. Goffman argues that individuals, occupying life's stage, continuously deploy verbal and non-verbal strategies to cultivate favourable impressions, carefully

orchestrating and refining the image presented to others. In recent years, scholars have increasingly drawn on Goffman's framework to interrogate practices of self-presentation in digital contexts.

While some maintain that many of Goffman's insights remain applicable beyond face-to-face encounters (Leeds-Hurwitz & Winkin, 2022; Walsh, 2022), others caution that applying a mid-twentieth-century framework to digital environments presents significant challenges. Davis (2022) identifies self-presentation as a key mechanism of sociality in the digital age, but Li (2023) stresses that the differences in boundaries, accessibility, and temporality between offline and online interaction complicate a direct application of Goffman's theory. Gillespie (2018) further observes that whereas visibility in Goffman's framework is largely controlled by the performer, digital platforms mediate and regulate visibility through algorithmic filtering, rendering self-presentation increasingly automated.

A central element of Goffman's model is the ability to isolate audiences, enabling individuals to perform different selves in different contexts. Yet, as Sawy et al. (2025) argue, digital environments undermine this assumption: online self-presentation is permanent, replicable, and often visible to unintended audiences. This stands in stark contrast to the ephemeral, context-bound nature of offline impressions.

In summary, Goffman's impression management remains an indispensable theoretical foundation for studying digital self-presentation. However, I concur with Sawy et al. (2025) that in digital environments—characterised by transformed interaction patterns, algorithmic intervention, and blurred audience boundaries—we must critically and dialectically revisit, extend, and reconfigure Goffman's insights.

2. Transformation: From Linguistic Misunderstanding to Cross-Species Understanding

The shift in my work emerged following a disagreement with a close friend. We both engaged actively in communication, striving to bridge the divide. Yet throughout this process, I observed that language—though designed to be the most direct and efficient means of expression—often generated fresh misalignments and misunderstandings during the processes of decoding and recoding.

2.1 Misunderstanding and Projection: A Mirror Between Human–Human and Human–Pet Relationships

This experience prompted me to examine ‘misunderstandings between humans and dogs’ through the lens of ‘misunderstandings between humans themselves.’ Even when sharing the same language and cultural background, human interactions frequently fall prey to misinterpretation and misalignment. In human–dog relationships—where language is absent, consensus elusive, and sensory structures vastly different—can the ‘understanding’ we construct be anything more than an illusion? Could it be that we merely project a version of ‘what I want you to be’ through human language and anthropomorphic narratives? Within this fantasy, are we truly observing dogs, or merely encountering the dogs of our imagination? And does social media further amplify this illusion? These questions gradually became central to my research.

2.2 Intersubjectivity and Bodily Communication: Pathways to Understanding Beyond Language

In discussions with my supervisor Kylie, she suggested exploring the concept of ‘intersubjectivity,’ first introduced by Husserl. Intersubjectivity represents a fundamental quality of human existence, signifying the possibility for individuals to recognise—through the processes of *Platzwechsel* (place-changing) and *Einfühlung*

(empathy)—that they share the same objective world with others. This extends beyond mutual understanding or consensus achieved through communication (Duranti, 2010). I argue that the root cause of relational breakdowns lies not in misunderstandings themselves, but in how we respond to them. Individuals often articulate feelings through habitual modes of expression while interpreting others' intentions through their own cognitive frameworks. More intricately, we may conceal genuine emotions to spare others discomfort. As a result, divergences fail to transform into shared spaces of understanding; instead, the absence of authentic consensus breeds disappointment and deepens rifts.

Merleau-Ponty emphasised the body as a communicative bridge. Through facial expressions, posture, and gestures, we establish 'bodily encounters' with others—constituting non-verbal intersubjectivity. Across species, the body becomes an even more vital bridge for communication. Answers may lie in sensations, emotions, and movements rather than words. Non-verbal gaps mark an inevitable predicament, whereas non-verbal intersubjectivity offers a possible resolution: the former highlights the absence of understanding, while the latter foregrounds its possibility.

Many pet videos fabricate a form of 'pseudo-intersubjectivity.' They persuade viewers that they comprehend a dog's emotions, when in reality it is merely human imagination and projection. Such illusions arise when intersubjectivity fails, with aesthetics and sentiment filling the void. In this sense, the 'understanding' depicted in pet videos is less authentic insight than a repackaging of misunderstanding.

2.3 Short Video Narratives: Classification and Fantasy Generation

Guided by this reasoning, I analysed and categorised 50 pet videos from Xiaohongshu. By narrative intensity, I classified them into three tiers: low, medium, and high. By production intent and mechanisms of emotional projection, I divided them into three types: function-oriented, trait-presentation, and fantasy-construction.

Comparison	Trait-Presenting Videos	Fantasy-Constructed Videos
Narrative Focus	Showcases the dog's observable traits with minimal subjective interpretation	Further interprets the dog's behavior to evoke identification and emotional resonance
Presentation Style	Relatively simple: may include light music or subtitles	Heavily stylized: filters, anthropomorphic captions, imagined inner monologues
Emotional Direction	Attracts attention, elicits reactions like "how cute"	Constructs a fantasy, evokes illusions like "it loves me" or "it understands me"

Characteristics of the Three Video Types

To further explore how narrative elements influence viewers' sense of fantasy, I focused on the following question: How do these videos, by amplifying narrative, trigger fantasy in viewers?

To this end, I selected six videos from the pet content creator 'Wangwang Xuebing' and re-edited them into three versions with varying narrative intensity (weak/medium/strong, each under one minute) using identical source material. These versions differed in visual elements, background music, voice-over narration, subtitles, and filters. I then designed a questionnaire, informed by theories of anthropomorphism, emotional projection, character construction, and fantasy, and invited friends and classmates to provide feedback.

Findings indicate that fantasy is not passively generated but progressively evoked through narrative structure. This process relies heavily on linguistic style, character design, and contextual guidance. Visual imagery alone proves insufficient; language and narrative serve as the core triggering mechanisms. However, excessive narration may prompt viewers to detect 'artificial traces,' disrupting fantasy and inducing detachment.

Yet, at this stage of the research, I found myself stalled. I seemed unable to advance further into deeper territory.

3. Inspiration: Explorations and Encounters Beyond Words

When my research reached an impasse, I sought new inspiration from diverse cultural and artistic experiences. Whether through interviewing and observing dog owners in Swansea, visiting exhibitions, or watching films, I encountered unexpected insights that encouraged me to reconsider concepts such as sensory difference, emotion, narrative, and interspecies understanding.

3.1 Dependence and Sensory Perception: Observations on Dog-Owner Interactions

During fieldwork on Swansea's streets, I engaged in conversations with several dog owners and met Mark, a retired musician with a four-and-a-half-year-old Cocker Spaniel named Millie. We arranged to walk the dogs together, which allowed me to conduct a brief participatory observation. This process generated several key observations and reflections.

Observation 1:

Millie showed little interest in other dogs. When approached by others attempting to express friendliness, she would lower her tail, display unease, and lack enthusiasm in responding. If the encounter lasted too long, she sometimes barked to signal rejection.

Reflection 1:

Conversations with her owner revealed that Millie had rarely been apart from him since puppyhood. Such prolonged proximity fostered a deep attachment to humans but limited her opportunities to develop social bonds with other dogs. This dynamic may explain her reserved attitude toward canine peers.

Observation 2:

Millie enjoyed playing fetch by the sea, especially when the ball was thrown into the water. Yet I noticed that she frequently failed to locate the ball once it entered the waves.

Reflection 2:

This prompted me to reconsider canine colour perception. Research shows that dogs can distinguish only between blue and yellow, and Millie's ball was blue. Given the ocean's similar hue, the overlap likely disrupted her recognition, leading to frequent "lost balls." Her owner, however, had never considered this possibility. Believing he thoroughly understood Millie, he overlooked the limitations of canine vision. This contrast reminded me that humans often assume they "understand" animals, while gaps in knowledge easily generate misunderstandings.



Millie (left) showing unease upon meeting other dogs



Millie searching for a ball in the sea

At our second meeting, I brought Millie a yellow toy ball as thanks for participating in the observation. When we returned to the beach, the yellow ball significantly improved her ability to locate it in the water. This not only confirmed research on canine colour vision but also prompted her owner to reflect on his prior assumptions. In that moment, I felt the true meaning of learning: knowledge transforms from abstract theory into lived understanding when tested in real situations.

At the same time, I realised that sensory acuity does not always equate to emotional preference. On one occasion, while I was wearing a yellow garment, another dog displayed fear and refused to approach. The owner explained that her dog was particularly sensitive to yellow and disliked people dressed in that colour. This suggested that while scientific research establishes blue and yellow as the visible spectrum for dogs, emotional responses to colour vary significantly among individuals.



During street interviews, a dog exhibited fear and hesitated to approach when I was dressed in yellow

3.2 Solitude and Metaphor: The Paintings of Yoshitomo Nara

I visited London with friends to see the exhibition of Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara. What struck me most initially was the recreation of the artist's personal studio at the exhibition's centre. I was drawn in by the background music – a melody tinged with melancholy yet softened by a hint of lightness, resonating through the cosy space and creating a subtle tension between gloom and warmth. I lingered there for more than ten minutes.



At the exhibition's heart: Yoshitomo Nara's studio

What surprised me was that these familiar little figures no longer appeared as simply “cute,” as I had encountered them in fashion collaborations such as Uniqlo T-shirts. Instead, they bore expressions of indifference, melancholy, and uncertainty. The exhibition notes explained that Nara had spent much of his childhood in solitude, occasionally accompanied only by small animals. Through painting, he has long

engaged in a dialogue with the emotions and memories of his youth. His work is strikingly pure: he embraces his inner loneliness and vulnerability, transforming these abstract feelings into tangible visual forms for the audience.

One piece, *Fire* (2009), left a particularly profound impact: a small house consumed by flames, thick smoke rising overhead, while a little girl stood silently watching, her eyes seemingly reflecting the firelight. For me, this was more than a painting; it became a metaphor for my own inner state, as though some secure place deep within me was burning. The sense of helplessness was overwhelming, and even after leaving the exhibition it lingered for hours. Only later did I recognise that this work mirrored my own insecurity and stirred memories of my most vulnerable aspects.



Yoshitomo Nara, Fire (2009)

This experience deepened my appreciation that art's unique power lies not merely in its visual form, but in its ability to awaken latent emotional layers within viewers, enabling resonance with the artist.

3.3 Narrative and Space: Goro Fujita's VR Painting

Goro Fujita is a Japanese VR painter I have followed since my undergraduate days, known for his ability to create dynamic scenes through VR painting. During a free exploration session with VR equipment in class, I encountered his VR animation *INK TRAILS*. What struck me most was his narrative approach: the constant shifting of the viewer's perspective. Within the VR experience, the audience moves between first-person, third-person, and even omniscient viewpoints, infusing the story with both tension and freshness. His colour choices are strikingly coherent, often limited to two or three dominant hues in a single space, which strengthens both visual memory and emotional resonance. Music further drives the mood, as visual rhythm and sound effects progress in synchrony, producing a deeply immersive effect. Although the visuals avoid hyper-realistic detail, they remain vivid and charged with energy.

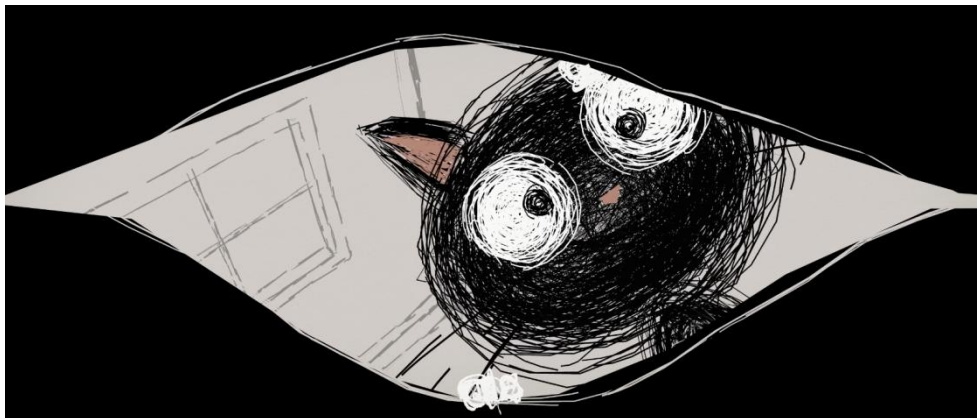




Image from Goro Fujita's work INK TRAILS

In terms of tools, Fujita works primarily with Quill for painting and animation, later refining the output with software such as After Effects. Compared with Open Brush, which I use, Quill is more time-oriented, designed for *telling a complete story*, whereas Open Brush functions as a space-oriented immersive painting environment, aimed at *inviting the audience into a narrative space*.

Fujita's practice deepened my appreciation of VR as a medium that shapes emotional experience not only through narrative structure, but also through the spatial design of its worlds.

3.4 Language and Perspective: The Isle of Dogs

I also watched a dog-themed film, *The Isle of Dogs* (2018). Set in a future Japan, it tells the story of an influenza outbreak blamed on dogs, leading to their exile to a desolate, rubbish-strewn island. A young boy named Atari journeys alone to the Isle of Dogs in search of his beloved companion, Spot, ultimately uncovering the truth and restoring an equal, coexisting relationship between humans and dogs.

What struck me most was the film's use of language. The director employs linguistic choices to shift perspectives and positions: humans speak Japanese (without translation), while dogs speak English, leaving the audience to understand only the canine language. Here, language functions as a marker of boundaries and allegiance,

subverting the conventional logic that “humans are comprehensible while animals are incomprehensible,” thereby compelling the audience to adopt the dogs’ viewpoint. In certain scenes, when dog lovers appear, their speech shifts back to English, once again becoming comprehensible to the audience—signalling a shift in allegiance and a transformation in human–canine relations. This narrative strategy made me realise that language is not merely a medium of communication but also a symbol of perspective and power.

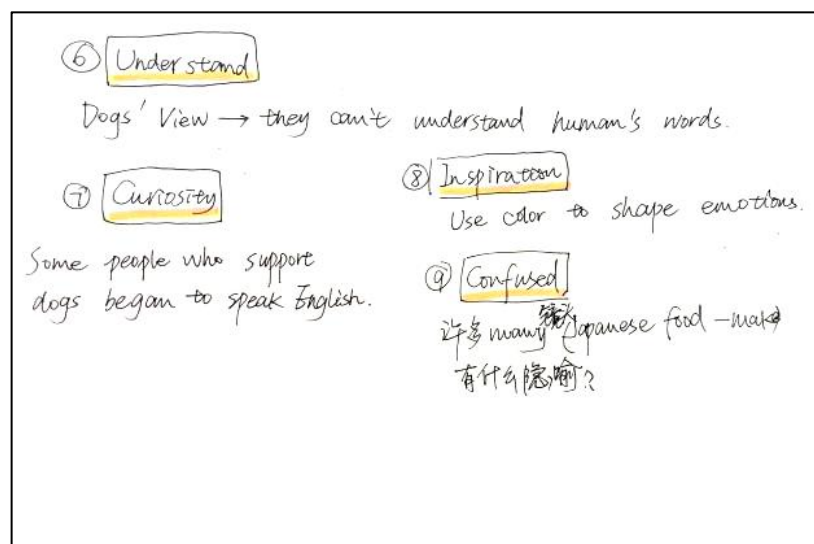
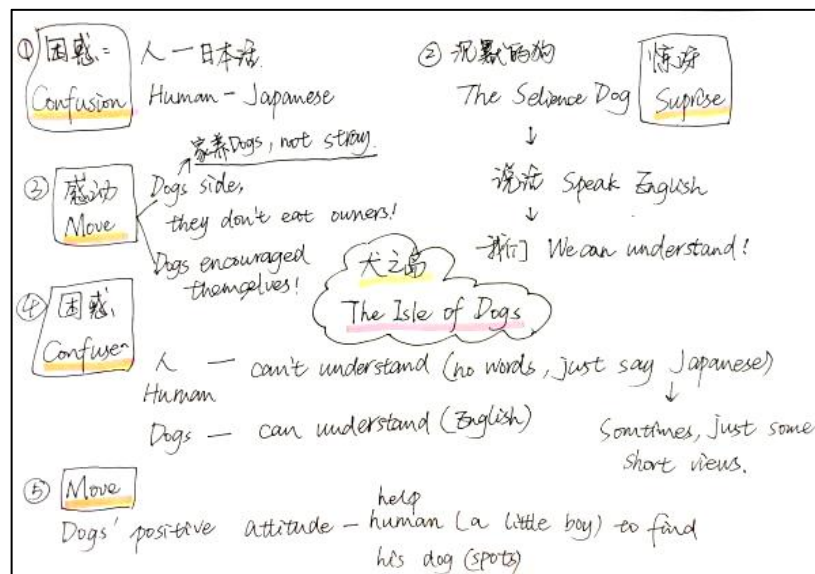


Figure: Notes on viewing the film *The Isle of Dogs*

4. Shift: Practising Entry into Virtual Spaces

Building on the observations and inspirations of the preceding phase, I began to consider whether a new mode of design expression could be explored. Drawing on my prior knowledge and experience in VR painting, I conceived of creating a space themed around *waiting*. Viewers would don a headset and, in a “passive” way, enter into a dog’s perspective to experience its world. Similar approaches have already appeared in the field of animal welfare: Pimentel and Kalyanaraman (2022) employed VR to allow the public to experience sea turtle life from a first-person perspective. Their study concluded that embodying non-human animals in VR can effectively counteract the phenomenon of compassion fatigue when faced with large-scale non-human casualties. This effect was especially strong when the victimised species bore similarities to the participant’s own, and in some cases even reversed desensitisation, fostering greater willingness to donate towards multiple similar victims.

4.1 Empathy Mechanisms: Emotion and Cognition in VR

I wished to understand more precisely which factors within VR experiences foster such profound empathy. In their article *Measurement of Empathy in Virtual Reality with Head-Mounted Displays: A Systematic Review*, Lee, Shin, and Gil (2024) comprehensively surveyed existing research on how empathy is measured in VR environments, and specifically assessed whether and how VR with head-mounted displays cultivates empathy. They distinguished two types of empathy: affective empathy, the capacity to *feel* another’s emotions or state, and cognitive empathy, the ability to *understand* them. Affective empathy is more strongly shaped by genetic influences, whereas cognitive empathy is largely dependent on environmental factors and can be enhanced through learning and training. Their findings suggest that VR can temporarily elevate affective empathy, but this effect fades over time, while cognitive empathy shows more sustained improvement. Put differently, VR most

effectively fosters cognitive empathy by immersing individuals in another's perspective.

What I found surprising was their conclusion that the structural elements of virtual scenarios showed no significant effect on empathy enhancement, nor did immersion or interactivity display strong correlations. Instead, narrative structure and individual traits appeared more decisive in shaping the empathic experience. I argue, however, that this reflects the limitations of the research design and measurement tools, rather than proving that immersion and interaction are ineffective for empathy generation. The core of empathy lies in the ability to shift into another's perspective. Empathy is not merely an outcome—whether or not one feels or understands another—but also a *process*. Immersive experiences are key to enabling this perspective shift. Presence and embodiment serve as almost indispensable conditions, providing the sensory foundation for “placing one's body into another's situation.” To deny the link between immersion and empathy is therefore to sever the very psychological process through which empathy emerges.

4.2 The Power of Narrative: Generating Empathy in VR

Recognising the centrality of narrative in VR empathy, I turned to examine its mechanisms for fostering empathic engagement within virtual environments. Hadjipanayi et al. (2024) stress that the value of narrative lies in the *holistic experience* rather than in isolated components. Kim and Khajavi (2024), in their analysis of character activation strategies in narrative-driven VR, highlight that interactive features—such as opportunities for user interaction and decision-making—can strengthen autonomy and immersion. In addition, visible and fully functional virtual bodies, the strategic positioning of viewers, and narrator guidance all contribute to shaping how audiences interpret and experience a story. Crucially, they argue that balancing guided viewing with audience autonomy determines whether a narrative experience becomes both compelling and satisfying. This suggests that narrative is not only a matter of organising story content, but also

of defining the audience's role and agency within it. It further raises a practical question: how might these narrative mechanisms be translated into concrete affordances capable of sustaining immersion and empathy?

4.3 Affordance Implementation: From Technical Details to Immersive Experience

In response, I directed my focus toward the role of affordances and usability in VR design. Khanna, Lee, and Kalantari (2025) examine Virtual Reality Perspective Taking (VRPT) environments, offering a series of practical guidelines for designers and researchers:

1. Employ immersive and realistic avatars;
2. Provide extensive avatar customisation when VRPT does not prescribe specific roles;
3. Increase engagement through interactive, game-like formats;
4. Simulate familiar real-world scenarios to heighten spatial presence;
5. Harness positive emotions to stimulate prosocial outcomes;
6. Incorporate multi-user and team-based experiences;
7. Ensure the technical reliability of hardware and controllers.

Their emphasis on photorealistic realism as a means of enhancing spatial presence, however, raises critical concerns. From my own practice, I have found that virtual environments striving for hyper-realism often provoke perceptual dissonance at the moment of entry, precisely because virtual worlds can never perfectly replicate reality. This clash between the real and the simulated foregrounds the medium's limits rather than concealing them. Rather than insisting on realism, I argue it is more productive to design immersive spaces that enable viewers to *forget their virtuality*, encouraging natural engagement within the environment and opening possibilities for experiential tension and emotional resonance. This perspective has become a crucial point of inspiration for my subsequent design practice.

5. Research Refocusing: From Theoretical Exploration to VR

Practice

Building on the preceding phase of theoretical exploration, I have now refocused my design practice on immersive VR painting, employing *Open Brush* as the primary creative tool. At a theoretical level, I adopt narrative and affordance as my analytical pivots, with particular attention to *spatial narrative* as distinct from traditional *linear narratives* structured around a temporal axis. The central research question becomes: when VR painting is freed from conventional temporal sequencing, how can affordance mechanisms guide viewers' perception and construction of narrative?

To explore this, I consider three dimensions: first, how affordances such as dynamic brushes, colour, and spatial composition can construct visually suggestive narrative cues; second, how varying degrees of openness in affordance design might test different levels of narrative guidance; and third, how audiences identify and organise their own narrative interpretations when engaging with these affordance structures.

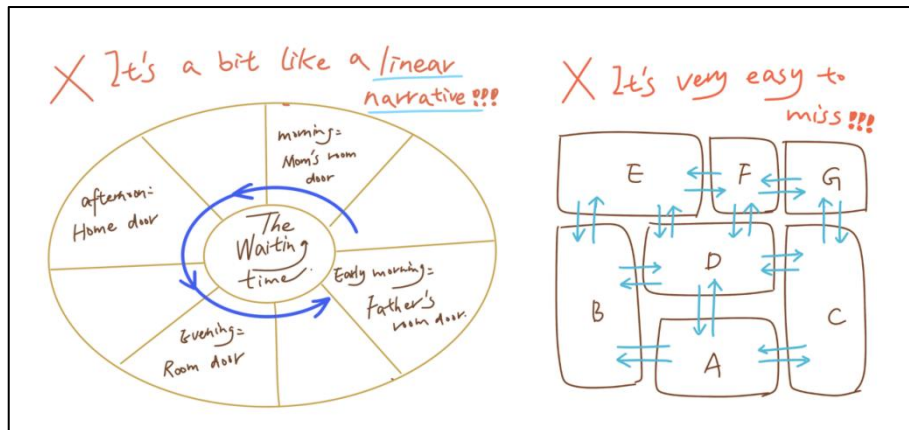
5.1 Design Theme: Waiting as the Core Narrative

The design theme I have chosen is *Waiting*. For dogs, life is structured almost entirely around waiting—waiting for food, waiting for their owner to return, waiting for companionship. Their existence is profoundly bound to human rhythms and will. My intention is to invite audiences into this canine perspective, allowing them to experience the pervasive yet enduring presence of waiting. Spatially, I envisage multiple intimate corners within a “home” environment, each evoking this atmosphere of suspended anticipation.

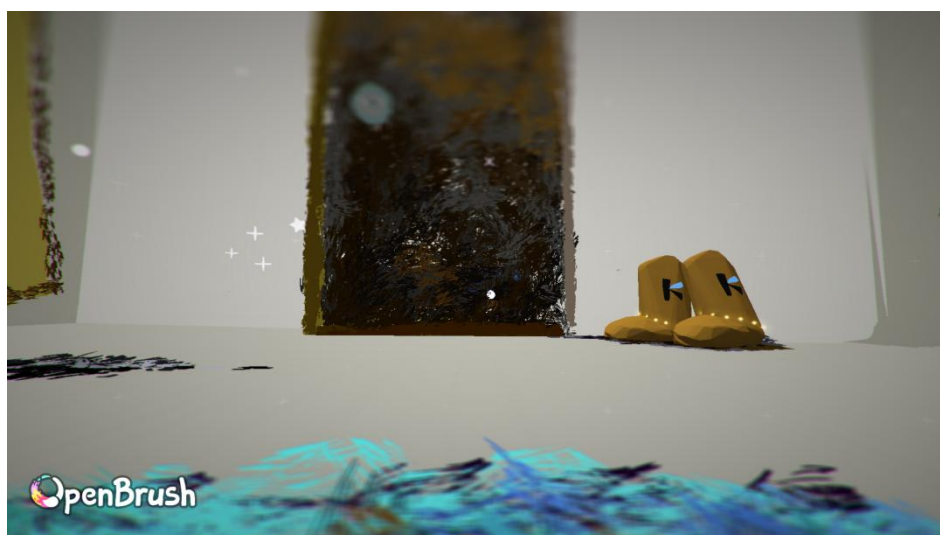
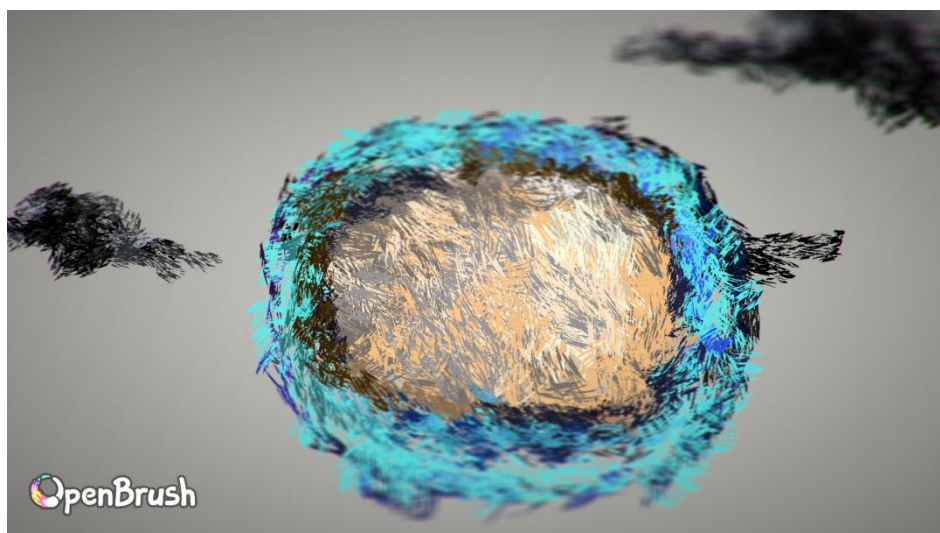
5.2 Narrative Strategies: Affordance and Spatial Cues

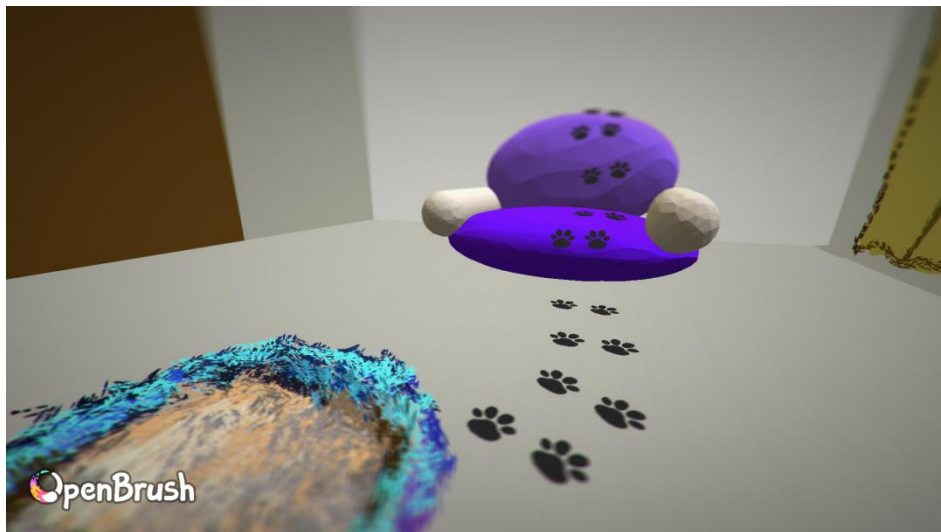
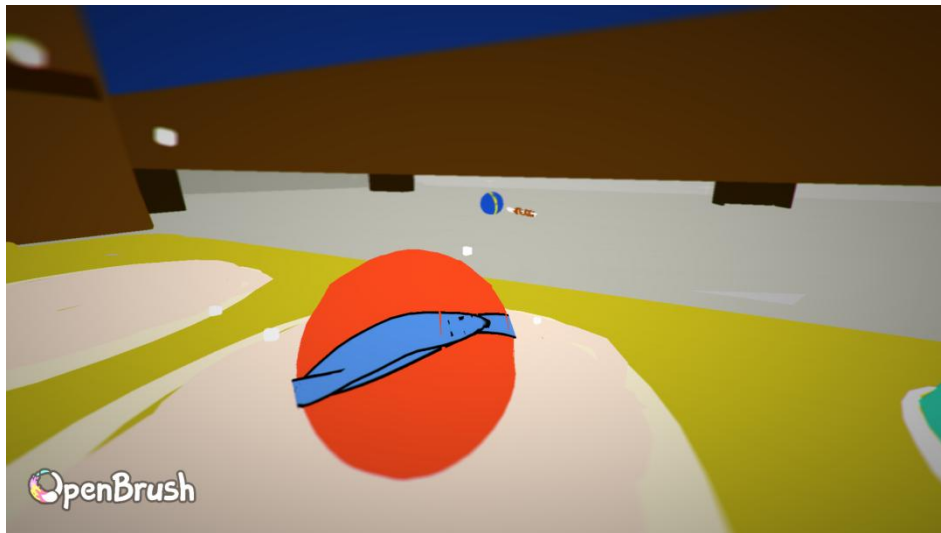
To achieve this, I adopt two narrative strategies: first, defining clear entry and exit points while leaving the middle phase open for exploration; and second, introducing repetitive yet subtly varied elements to activate viewers' psychological narratives.

Within this framework, affordance itself becomes the narrative thread: a luminous door or a locked door signals entry or exclusion, while a trail of paw prints invites audiences to imagine an ‘invisible presence.’ Atmospheric elements further enrich the interpretive field—grey light may symbolise solitude, whereas highly saturated colours might evoke a dreamlike state.



Spatial Sketches





Phase One of VR Painting Practice: Waiting

5.3 Critical Reflection: Limits of Perspective and Anthropocentrism

In practice, I discovered that merely simulating a dog's low vantage point was insufficient to genuinely "enter" the canine world. My VR creative endeavours, while allowing viewers to perceive the world through a so-called 'canine perspective,' remain inevitably constrained by human knowledge, perception, and experiential frameworks. The environments, colours, and spatial structures I constructed, and even decisions about what the dog 'fixes its gaze upon,' are all fundamentally derived from a human standpoint—after all, I operate with human tools, human language, and human imagination.

This realisation prompted me to ask: does such practice still fall into anthropocentrism? Even when striving to decentre humanity, am I in fact reasserting human centrality through another lens? Donna Haraway's companion species theory reminds us that the human–animal relationship is not one of unilateral domination or representation, but a process of co-constitution. As she observes: '*We are not a collection of humans and animals, but become ourselves in the relationships between humans and animals.*' I therefore argue that the crux does not lie in the impossible task of 'perfectly recreating the dog's world,' but rather in designing a mediating space that provokes cross-species reflection, enabling audiences to critically re-examine the relational dynamics between humans and dogs.

6. A Pivotal Shift: From Human–Dog to Human–Human to the Self

Following a conversation with Professor Timi during a lecture, it suddenly dawned on me: perhaps in my research, dogs are not the ultimate endpoint, but rather an “intermediary.” The human–dog relationship, in fact, mirrors human-to-human relationships on another level. For me, this was a profoundly significant shift, as I had never previously recognised it. As I continued reflecting, I even began to sense that what I had truly been circling around all along was not just dogs, but the question of how humans relate to the “self.”

6.1 Emotional Projection: Dogs as Mirrors of Human Relationships

Dogs function like mirrors. As owners, we project profoundly complex human emotions onto them: driven by high expectations, we demand perfect obedience and impose strict constraints; lacking sufficient knowledge, we misinterpret their behaviour, labelling or blaming them; yet when empathy awakens, we suddenly soften, offering unconditional love.

Beginning with the question of *how humans form bonds with dogs*, I gradually turned to our own expectations and projections within interpersonal relationships. The emotions invested, the trust established, and the companionship sought in dog–human bonds may reflect latent expectations in human interactions—even desires that remain unfulfilled within us. This tender projection onto dogs may thus serve as a kind of idealised rehearsal for human relationships.

6.2 Narrative Experiment: Three Rooms of Expectation, Misunderstanding, and Love

Inspired by Schneider and Bräuer’s (2024) triad of *expectations*, *knowledge*, and *empathy*, I translated these concepts into spatial metaphors, designing three immersive rooms that invite visitors to step into the dynamics of these relational patterns.

Room One: Expectation → Stringency (Owner) → Stifling (Dog)

When owners fixate on the image of an ‘ideal well-behaved dog,’ they become demanding and critical. Within this atmosphere, the dog experiences only tension and oppression. Thus emerges the *House of Pressure*, symbolising the mounting strain created by cycles of rigour and high expectations.

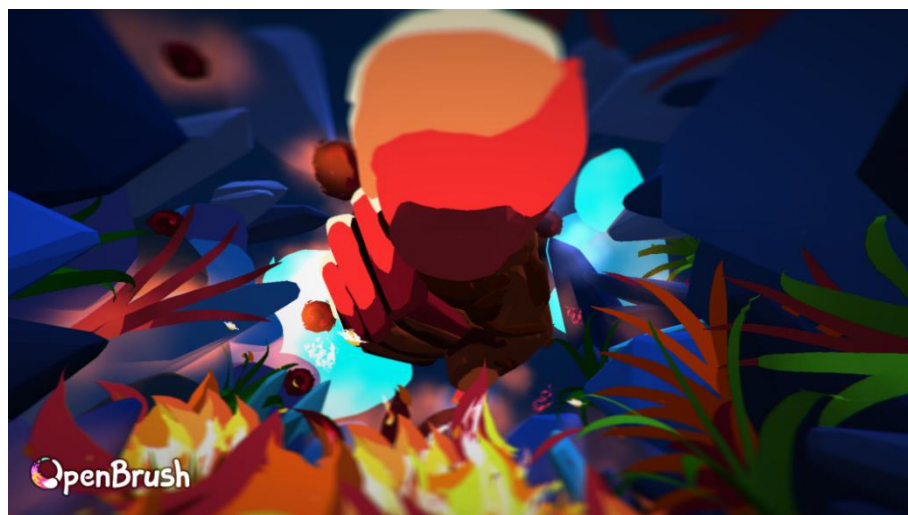
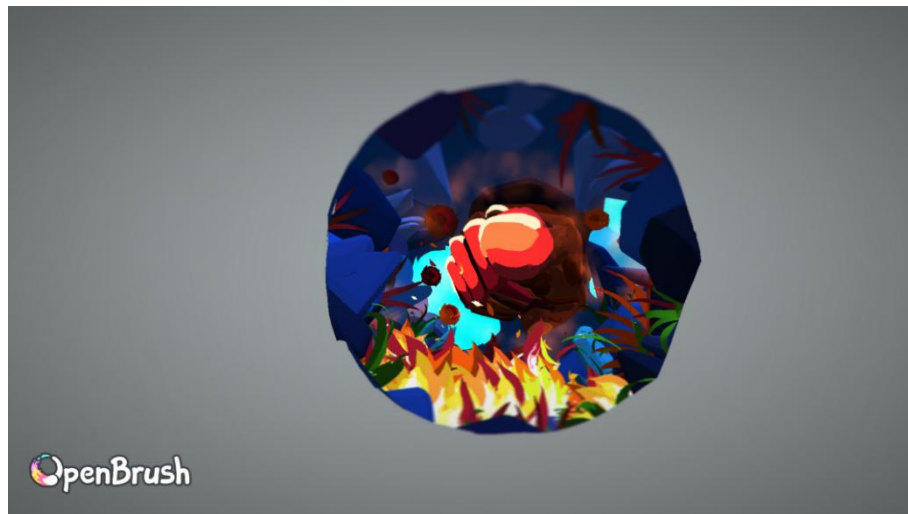


Room One: House of Pressure

Room Two: Knowledge → Misunderstanding (Owner) → Confusion (Dog)

When owners ‘believe they know,’ they often misinterpret the dog’s motives and assign misplaced labels. The dog, in turn, gradually descends into confusion,

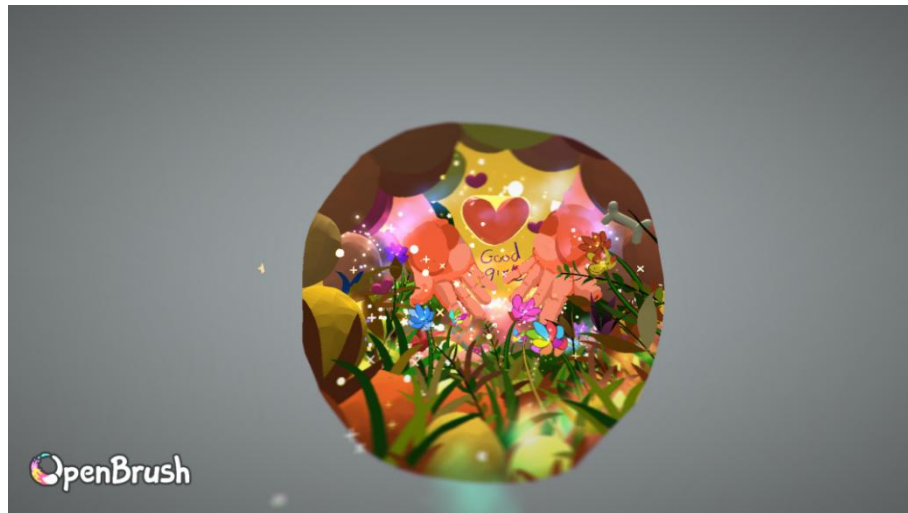
disorientation, and helplessness. This becomes the *House of Blame*, revealing not the dog's reality but human projection and misunderstanding.



Room Two: House of Blame

Room Three: Empathy → Love (Owner) → Attachment (Dog)

When empathy genuinely awakens, a tender and authentic emotional bond can form. The dog responds with complete trust, dependence, and companionship. This is the *House of Closeness*, symbolising the most idealised state of empathy within a cross-species relationship.



Room Three: House of Closeness

Through constructing these three spaces from a canine perspective, my design invites visitors to encounter the complexities of *being the other*: demanded to be perfect, misinterpreted and blamed, yet also embraced with tenderness.

7. Exhibition Reflection: Masks and Shadows

On the exhibition day, I printed posters inviting visitors to enter and experience my design through VR equipment. The process combined visitors' independent exploration with my on-site operational guidance and commentary, with each experience lasting approximately three to five minutes.

7.1 Visitor Feedback: Experiences of Oppression, Fear, and Warmth

Feedback proved remarkably consistent: visitors felt intense oppression in the first room and fear in the second, spending the least time in these spaces as these emotions prompted them to leave swiftly. The third room, by contrast, proved the most popular section. Here they experienced profound love and warmth, often lingering far longer.



Audience Experience at the Exhibition Site 1



Audience Experience at the Exhibition Site 2

7.2 The Creator's Mask: Reluctant Acknowledgement of Personal Experience

Yet I became aware of a contradiction in myself on-site. When explaining the work's themes to visitors, I tended to frame the three rooms—Expectation, Understanding, and Empathy—as universal social phenomena, rather than acknowledging their roots in my own lived experience. Exposing my vulnerability filled me with dread, compelling me to wear a metaphorical “mask” throughout the exhibition.

7.3 Shadow Reflections: Jungian Inspiration

I sought to understand this mindset through Jungian psychology. (Although Jung's original writings stem from the early 20th century, this study cites from modern Chinese translations published in 2016 and 2024.) In his discourse on the “shadow,” Jung emphasised that confronting oneself begins with confronting one's shadow. He observed that the individual shadow forms as we strive to conform to norms and expectations, and that this shadow inevitably interacts with other shadows—those of the family, the group, or the nation. Jung also highlighted the manifold benefits of

embracing the shadow: inner peace, the ability to face limitations with equanimity, the cultivation of profound empathy, and the opening up of new possibilities in life.

My creative process is, in essence, an ongoing confrontation with this “individual shadow.” When depicting scenes of owners projecting high expectations onto their dogs, the image that repeatedly surfaced in my mind was my mother’s strictness during my childhood—her arms wrapped around me, her expression both affectionate and stern. Yet when explaining this to others at the exhibition, I felt myself retreat and evade, unwilling to admit this truth. This internal tension became the source of my pain and showed me that I remain at the earliest stage of “discovering the shadow.”

When the three-day exhibition concluded, I found myself repeatedly asking: *What is my true self like?* This past year has been extraordinarily difficult. Before turning 26, I was constantly searching for meaning, convinced that everything must have value and direction. But after 26, I suddenly felt engulfed by a vortex of meaninglessness. I had long been striving to meet the expectations of others, but now I no longer wished to do so. Yet this shift left me adrift—like a balloon suddenly deflated. Jung once wrote: *“If you walk towards your soul, you will first lose meaning.”* These words brought me great solace. Perhaps the “meaninglessness” I felt was not an endpoint, but the beginning of a new journey that emerges after confronting one’s true self.

8. An Unfinished Exploration: Towards Self and the Unknown

I must confess, this is not a perfect design. It is closer to a journey of self-discovery—a process of glimpsing my own emotional structures through the eyes of the “other.” From social media short videos to media narratives, from interrogating media mechanisms to exploring empathy in VR, from narrative and affordances to concrete VR design practice—this series of explorations has not clarified my research direction. Instead, it has unsettled my assumptions, raising new doubts about my original path: is this truly the subject to which I wish to dedicate myself in the long term? At the same time, it has revealed that some of my earlier choices may have been shaped not by conviction, but by avoidance.

After the exhibition concluded, I felt as though I once again stood at the threshold of research, searching for the door that might be meant for me. Jung wrote in *The Red Book*. “*To live one’s own life means to take on one’s own task. Never say that living one’s own life is a joyful thing; living one’s own life will bring no more joy, but rather a long struggle, for you must become your own creator.*”

I realise that confronting oneself is difficult, and discovering true passion is equally demanding. Yet all of this remains worth my utmost effort. By giving myself this time, I have chosen a path of growth. It is the very reason I came to Britain: to keep exploring both research and the self.

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