



# Multisensory Integration in Virtual Reality: Effects of Passive Haptic Stimulation

## Master Thesis

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# 1. Introduction

## **Immersive Virtual Reality evokes psychophysical reactions**

Immersive Virtual Reality (IVR) is a computer-generated environment that simulates real-world interactions through electronic equipment. In IVR, visual, auditory, and tactile signals can be replaced with computer-mediated inputs, enveloping individuals in a virtual environment. In other words, it gives the user a sense of physical presence within a digitally constructed world. Presence, in this context, refers to the sensation of being within the virtual environment rather than the physical space one occupies. It is precisely this 'suspension of reality' that makes immersive experiences able to elicit a range of responses from individuals. They span between emotional, behavioural, and psychophysical reactions (e.g. subjective perceptual response to a stimulus with described physical characteristics) (Sanchez-Vives and Slater 2005). These responses, akin to those elicited by traditional media such as theatre or films, often exhibit heightened intensity within IVR. Thus, making it a compelling tool for investigating human behaviour, cognition, and perception.

One can view IVR as a continuation of a long psychophysical tradition that attempts to interfere with our perception to clarify its underlying mechanism. For example, before similarly lenses or prisms have been used to invert visual perception of orientation to study the visual properties of the cortex (Gelder, Kätsyri, and Borst 2018). Nevertheless, if we are to use IVR as a tool to do psychophysical perception studies, the question of its validity and how it compares to real-life arises. This question, "whether responses in IVR are real or not" is a philosophical question that remains beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, recent empirical research provides insights into this question, by comparing psychophysical and other relevant markers in three different experimental setups.

How comparable is IVR to what we experience in real-life or in current experimental setups? A recent study took on these questions by comparing three experimental set-ups: One in physical reality, another in virtual reality and the last one displayed on a computer screen and keyboard setup. The participants needed to climb up into a firefighter hydraulic platform, while the authors looked at various markers like electrophysiological, physiological, and subjective responses (e.g. ECG, ECG, Surveys). What they found was that our brain and body seem to react similarly in both real-life and virtual situations. Specifically, alpha- and theta-band oscillations, heart rate variability, indexed vigilance, and anxiety were barely indistinguishable between VR and real-life. While they differed significantly from computer screen display setup. Sensory processing, as reflected by beta-band oscillations, exhibits a different pattern for all conditions, indicating further room for improving VR on a haptic level (Schöne et al. 2023). In general for VR, touch perception, or haptics, has been overlooked due to methodological challenges. However, touch provides sensory feedback about temperature, texture and rigidity, and has a crucial role in creating a truly immersive virtual environment ("A touch of virtual reality" 2023).

Not all signals generated in IVR feel entirely authentic to the user, especially when we talk about touch. But to hold this lack of realness as a criticism IVR lead research would assume that IVR is useful for research thanks to its realness. Yet, our understanding of perception reveals that it often transcends mere physical stimuli. Among other causes, realistic representation arises from the interplay of multisensory integration and cognitive processes (Gelder, Kätsyri, and Borst 2018). It is here especially where the abundance of data of IVR and its ability to manipulate cognitive functions through this digitally constructed world can help us close a gap between

psychophysics and cognitive science.

IVR's primary experimental advantage lies in its precision in manipulating sensory input and its capacity to induce presence, despite users being aware of the virtual environment's unreality. This state, known as the 'suspension of disbelief,' allows for a coexistence of awareness of VR's artificiality with a belief in its experiential reality (Slater 2009). Consequently, our reactions in IVR align with behavioural and psychophysiological responses in real-life indicating that similar cognitive and emotional mechanisms are activated in both real-life and virtual scenarios (Vasser and Aru 2020; Gelder, Kätsyri, and Borst 2018). Furthermore, the fact that IVR can quantify stimuli precisely and display an environment rich enough to manipulate cognitive functions allows us to join physical stimuli data, subjective perceptual responses and cognitive behavioural outcomes in one setup. All of this input could allow for computational models that jointly quantify behaviour and neural responses., which could play a fundamental role in closing the gaps between psychophysics and cognitive sciences. (Waskom, Okazawa, and Kiani 2019).

### **Assessing Multisensory Integration in Immersive Virtual Reality: Leveraging Haptic Stimulation**

In the past, virtual reality (VR) consoles relied solely on vision and stereoscopic lenses to create a sense of depth and immersion. Nowadays, with the integration of head tracking, head-mounted displays, and computer-mediated visual information, IVR technology taps into our proprioceptive system, which is our awareness of the position and movement of our body in space. Thus, making IVR a powerful immersive crossmodal stimuli device that can simultaneously engage two or more sensory modalities. Crossmodal stimuli often lead to multisensory integration. The phenomenon of multisensory integration refers to the synergistic interaction and fusion of sensory information (Stein and Stanford 2008).

Assessing multisensory integration typically involves evaluating the effectiveness of cross-modal stimulus combinations compared to their individual components in evoking responses. This evaluation can result in either multisensory enhancement or depression, depending on whether the crossmodal event heightens or diminishes event saliency (Stein and Stanford 2008). This heightened saliency or increased neuronal firing can also lead to faster response times. For instance, a seminal study on assessing multisensory integration discovered that bimodal and tri-modal stimuli, which combine auditory, visual, and tactile cues, produced quicker response times than single-modality stimuli (Diederich and Colonius 2004). On average, bimodal stimuli elicited responses 30 ms faster than the fastest single-modality response (Diederich and Colonius 2004). These findings primarily hinge on the integration of sensory modalities and the synchronicity of the stimuli presented. However, sensory integration relies not only on stimuli and synchronicity but also on congruency.

When we catch a ball with our left hand, we naturally expect to feel the ball in the same hand and not in the right. This seamless congruency of sensory inputs from different modalities is a fundamental aspect of multisensory processing. This process helps us to effectively sort and link information originating from the same event, as contextual or semantic congruence plays a pivotal role in this synthesis. Research has consistently shown that stimuli conveying congruent information across different sensory modalities lead to faster and more accurate task performance compared to incongruent stimuli (Laurienti et al. 2003). This phenomenon underscores the importance of contextual consistency in facilitating efficient multisensory integration.

In investigating multisensory integration, I am particularly interested in a well-known model for assessing it. The Race Model and the Coactivation Model have been proposed to explain the observed speedup in response to redundant signals. The Race Model suggests that redundancy gains stem from "statistical facilitation," while the Coactivation Model posits that signals from different channels contribute to a common pool of activation (Miller 1982). To test these models, Miller introduced the Race Model Inequality (RMI), a mathematical criterion that, if violated, supports the Coactivation Model. The RMI suggests that crossmodal stimuli can elicit faster reaction times than the fastest single stimuli.

As the standardization of experimental setups in IVR has become increasingly documented (Vasser and Aru 2020; Gelder, Kätsyri, and Borst 2018; Schöne et al. 2023; Wiesing, Fink, and Weidner 2020), positioning IVR as an advantageous platform for crossmodal studies. IVR devices, such as HTC Vive paired with Unreal Engine and SteamVR, offer low latencies and high precision in stimulus presentation and critical time measurements. Furthermore, IVR enables the manipulation of sensory modalities while maintaining a naturalistic experience. By combining IVR with electrophysiological measurement devices, researchers can gain valuable insights into multisensory integration (Vasser and Aru 2020).

## **Current study and hypothesis**

In this study we set up to answer: Can we use IVR and haptic gloves to study multisensory integration? How would such results compare to existing RMI literature? I use an IVR-memory task that requires participants to memorize for 3 seconds a prompt with the correct position of where to place a ball in a template. As the ball is placed in the participant's hand, the haptic gloves provide passive haptic feedback or not (the haptic feedback can be visually congruent or not). I run an ANOVA to test mistake rates and compare RT between conditions. Additionally, to gain insight into the temporal and contextual nature of multisensory integration I run a well-known RMI analysis and compare results to the literature. For this, I use the cumulative distribution functions for each condition and build a conventional cumulative response time graph (Miller 1982).

In summary, IVR holds immense promise in cognitive neuroscience research, particularly in the domain of multisensory integration. Its ability to closely mimic real-life experiences, coupled with precise control over sensory stimuli and comprehensive data collection capabilities, positions IVR as a powerful tool for unravelling the complexities of touch in multisensory integration. This thesis aims to contribute to the validation of IVR as a valuable instrument for studying multisensory integration, with a specific focus on touch as a computationally mediated signal manipulated using haptic gloves.

## **2. Methods**

### **Participants**

The call for participants targeted healthy, non-smoking German-speaking individuals between 18 and 30 years old. They were contacted and recruited via e-mail, using the database of Max-Planck CBS for registered participants. Participants were required to be righthanded and without neurological or psychiatric illnesses (e.g. epilepsy). When taking part in the experiment participants were paid 9 € the hour. The experimental session took 2.5 hours on average. The participant

came to the laboratory in October 2020 the study was conducted following the declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed written consent.

Initially, 23 individuals answered and participated in the study, but ultimately, only 20 participants were included in the final sample. Among the three excluded individuals, two failed to complete all necessary questionnaires, while the third exceeded the age limit of 30. Notably, a greater number of women (15) responded to the call compared to men (5). The average age across the sample hovered around 25 years, with a slight deviation observed in one participant ( $\mu = 25.1, \sigma = 6.3$ ).

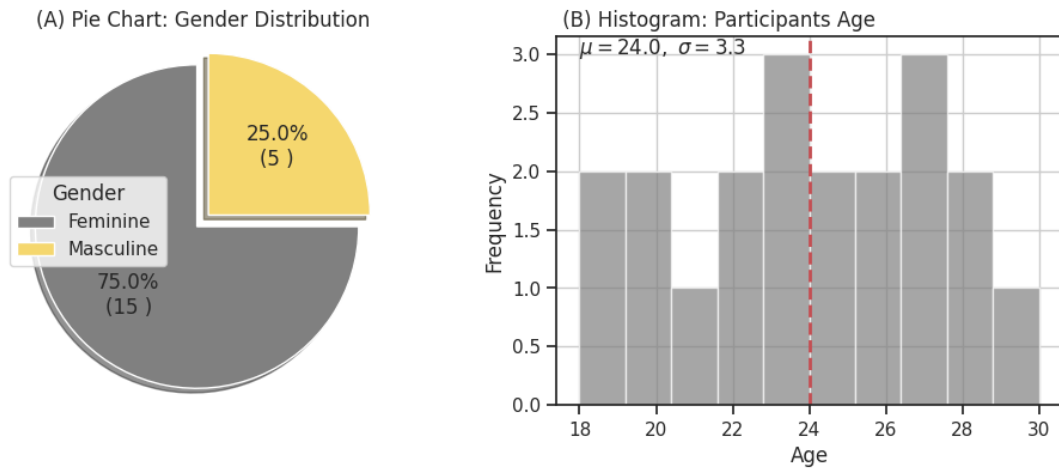


Figure 1: 20 individuals are finally included in the study ( $\mu=24.$  years,  $\sigma = 3.3$ ). As self-reported, all participants had normal vision, no history of hearing loss neither mental nor neurological disorders, as self-reported. Notably, a greater number of women (15) responded to the call compared to men (5).

## Materials

### Electrocardiogram (ECG):

Heart rate data was collected using an Arduino Uno and a SparkFun Single Lead Heart Rate Monitor - AD8232. The data was transferred through a USB 2.0 connection and integrated into the Unity log file at a frequency of 133 Hz. Compared to a clinical ECG, this device entails a serial interface that can send triggers via USB directly to a computer and software (e.g. Unity, Matlab) with minimal delay due to its architecture. Its software and hardware are open-source and publicly available (Möller et al. 2022).

### Head Mounted Display & Lighthouses:

The VR setup included a HTC Vive head-mounted display (HMD) with two lighthouses. The headset specifications included a Dual AMOLED 3.6" diagonal display, with 1080 x 1200 pixels per eye (2160 x 1200 pixels combined), a 90 Hz refresh rate, and a 110-degree field of view. The lighthouses are equipped with SteamVR Tracking, G-sensors, gyroscopes, and proximity sensors. Both the HMD and lighthouses are connected using USB 2.0. For this study, the VR

controllers were not used, and instead, hand tracking was performed using the Leap Motion sensor.

### **Leap Motion Controller:**

This device was used to track the position of the hands. The Leap Motion Controller has a field of view of 150x120 degrees, with a variable range of roughly 80 cm (arm's length). It weighs 32 grams and is mounted on the HMD. The device features two 640x240 infrared cameras with a frame rate of 120 fps.

### **Haptic Data Gloves:**

The data gloves used in the study are equipped with magnetic sensors and connected to Unity using a micro USB connection. These gloves provide haptic feedback through 10 vibrotactile actuators, offering a wide range of tactile sensations with 1,024 levels of intensity. The gloves also incorporate complete finger tracking using six 9-axis Inertial Measurement Units (IMUs). These IMUs enable precise tracking of finger movements, allowing for accurate gesture recognition and enhanced interaction in virtual environments. The datagloves and finger tracking were interfaced from the experimental code using the *UnityDll.Motion* and *C# NeuroDigital* licensed code (NeuroDigital Technologies, 2018).

## **Task**

In the following, I describe all tasks performed by participants. It's important to note that I didn't utilize all tasks from the original study. Nevertheless, considering that all included participants completed all questionnaires and tasks, the following description encompasses all tasks for transparency.

**Questionnaires:** Before the IVR experience, participants completed the Edinburgh Handedness Questionnaire to determine their handedness. The PRE-Cybersickness Questionnaire and POST-Cybersickness Questionnaire were administered before and after the IVR task to assess sickness symptoms in participants. Following the IVR experience, participants filled out the Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation Questionnaire, designed to gather their perceptions of immersion, particularly considering tactile stimuli.

**Heartbeat Count Task (HCT):** Participants performed a one-minute heartbeat count task before and after the IVR task.<sup>1</sup>

**IVR Memory-Motor Task:** After completing the initial questionnaires and HCT, participants moved to another room where the IVR equipment was set up. As mentioned this included a head-mounted display, data gloves, and an ECG device. For the implementation of the experiment, we used the Unity software (v2018.3.11; Unity Technologies, San Francisco, United States) in combination with the SteamVR Unity plugin (Valve Corporation, Bellevue, United States). To synchronize the data streams (i.e., behavioural reports, hand positions, finger positions, ECG), we used custom C# scripts and network-based communication (i.e., timestamps).

The tactile stimuli was an activation of 10 vibrotactile actuators for 100 ms. The intensity of a vibrotactile pulse used in haptic feedback ranges from 0.0 to 1.0. The set intensity for the

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<sup>1</sup>Note that this task is not considered within this thesis due to being outside the scope of this secondary study.

program was 0,2 as coded in Unity Game Engine. All levels had a maximal time of 2 minutes but all participants finished levels before the cap time by placing the ball before. The parameters, types, and spatial aspects of haptic feedback are configurable, allowing for a versatile setup suitable for psychophysical studies.

The virtual environment simulated a rectangular office with a window. Participants appeared sitting in front of a table. Just over the table, there is an initial prompt indicating them to place their hands over the table.

In Figure 2 are two panels. On the left side of the figure (Panel I), we observe the external view of a participant wearing the head device, ready to commence the IVR Memory-Motor Task. Panel II on the right side of the figure showcases four out of the five steps participants undergo when initiating a trial set. The steps are outlined below:

- a. Participants stand in front of a virtual table, allowing ample time to acclimate to the virtual environment, as depicted in Figure 2. When they feel prepared, the session commences as they calibrate by placing their hands on the virtual table.
- b. Before each trial within every set, a new calibration process begins. Participants place their palms facing up within the shadowed hands, ensuring standardized positioning. Refer to Figure 2b for the calibration setup.
- c. Once the calibration is complete, a two-dimensional sketch appears in front of them (Figure 2c), prompting them to memorize the red ball's position. Participants then observe a template on the table, resembling the initial sketch they memorized. Their task is to place the ball swiftly and accurately in the correct location on the template. In the memory sketch, the relevant position of the ball is denoted by the red circle. During this phase, participants keep their virtual hands open with palms facing up.
- d. As soon as the memory sketch disappears, a red ball appears in either the left or right hand of the participants. Simultaneously, a vibration could start in the glove. The vibration may or may not match the visual location of the red ball. If the vibrating hand matches the visual location of the ball, the visual condition matches the tactile condition ( $V = T$ ) and therefore the trial is congruent. If the vibrating hand does not match the visual location of the ball, then the visual condition does not match the tactile condition and the trial is incongruent ( $V \neq T$ ). If there is no vibration at all, the trial condition is purely visual ( $V$ ).
- e. After placing the ball on the template, the ball and template disappear. The whole process from (b) to (e) repeats.

In a sequence of 105 trials, three conditions—congruent ( $V = T$ ), incongruent ( $V \neq T$ ), and visual-only ( $V$ )—were presented randomly and rapidly, each occurring 35 times. Each trial commenced upon positioning the ball in a hand, concluding only upon its precise placement on the designated template (refer to Figure 2).

Given that an IVR task inherently involves proprioceptive signals, all conditions in the experiment integrate these signals and are thus multimodal. Consequently, the 'visual only' condition doesn't align with the unimodal classification commonly used in psychophysics literature. Nonetheless, for the sake of easier comparison to this literature in this thesis, I will refer to it as unimodal, and the congruent and incongruent conditions as bimodal.



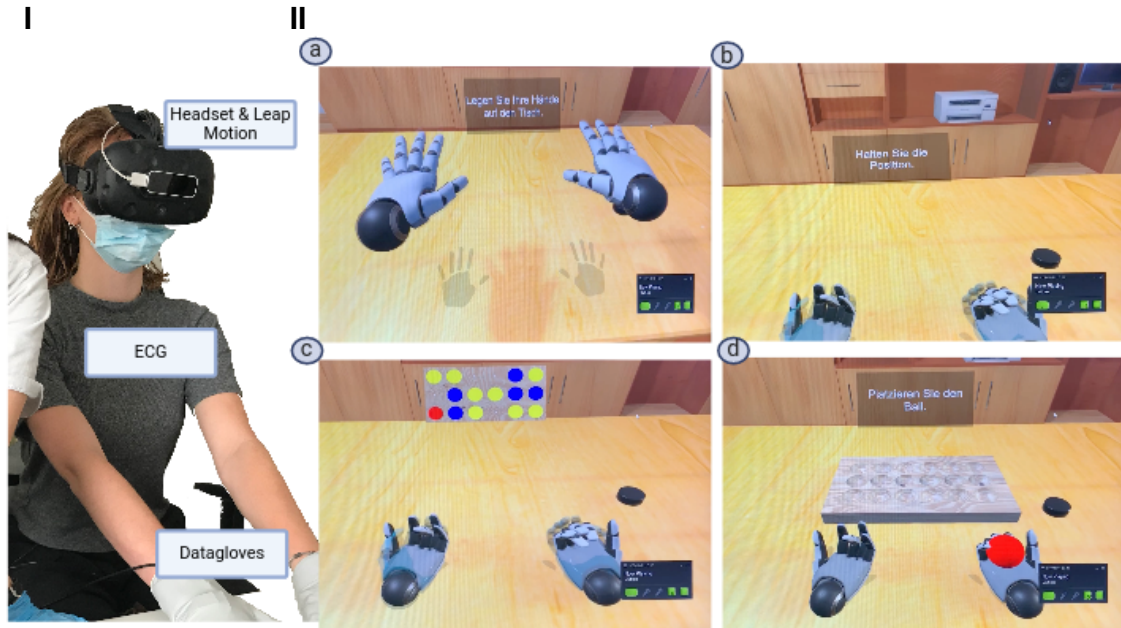


Figure 2: IVR Memory-Motor Task: Panel I shows a participant wearing equipment. Panel II shows the different stages of one trial. (a) participants first view. Here they are asked to place the hands in the virtual table to start the calibration process. 2 seconds after placed the screen changes; (b) the second calibration phase adjusts wrists and fingers. 2 seconds after successfully superposing the hands in the signaled position the screen changes (c) while holding this position, participants are presented with a display of a 2D sketch for memorizing ball position; (d) red ball is introduced and the 3D template for ball placement, marking the beginning of each trial.

## Measures

### Immersive Virtual Reality (VR):

Movement data from 3 devices was recorded (data gloves, Leap Motion device, and the HMD was collected). For movement analysis, only the wrist movements tracked by the Leap Motion device were considered, excluding the fingertips' magnetic tracking sensor data. All movements were recorded in an Euclidean coordinate system (X, Y, Z) with the original calibrating point set at (0, 0, 0). As each device had three coordinates, this provided a total of nine streaming sources of data (e.g., Headset X, Headset Y, Headset Z, and so on). Additionally, rotational data was recorded. Both sources are not included in the analysis since at the moment it does not help to compare with the race inequality model.

Additionally, in the game output data, there are flags that signal if a button was pressed, if the ball is placed in the holder, and when the trial started. Trials where the error button was pressed were excluded from the analysis.

## Questionnaires:

Both of the described questionnaires are included in the appendix of this thesis for further reference. Questionnaire validation is outside the scope of this thesis:

- (i) **Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation Questionnaire:** This self-designed questionnaire comprises 26 items aimed at assessing the sense of reality experienced during the VR session. It explores factors like engagement level, hand movement, task difficulty, and other controlling aspects. Participants responded using a Likert scale rating them on a scale from 1 (Does Not Apply) to 7 (Totally Applies). The questions were organized in groups and inverted to confirm participants' responses. Both questionnaires can be found in the Appendix section.
- (ii) **PRE/POST-Cybersickness Questionnaire:** This study employs a shortened version of the simulator sickness questionnaire (Kennedy et al. 1993). It utilizes a Likert scale ranging from one to four, featuring labels such as "not present," "somewhat," "clearly," and "very strongly." The questionnaire consists of 16 items, gauging symptoms like "fatigue" and "general discomfort," among others.

## Data Analysis

### Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation

The analysis of the questionnaire responses aimed to explore the impact of haptic gloves on reported immersion and related perceptions. Initially, raw questionnaire data were collected from 20 respondents, consisting of 27 questions rated on a scale from 1 to 7. Some participants did not answer all questions, thus creating specific missing values that were omitted. Statistical analysis included the calculation of descriptive statistics such as median (Mdn), mean ( $\mu$ ), and standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) for each question. These statistics were instrumental in understanding the central tendencies and variability in respondents' perceptions. A full view of all answers can be found in the Supplements section.

### Response Time

All response times from the ball's entry into the scene until its disappearance were measured. Trials, where the error button was pressed, were excluded from the analysis. Before analysis, outliers were corrected by eliminating data points deviating more than 3 times the median absolute deviation (MAD), which is equivalent to 3 standard deviations assuming a normal distribution (Innes and Otto 2019). Responses were not eliminated for being too fast; however, 13% of trials were excluded due to excessive slowness. The final sample comprised 1826 response times (approximately 24 per condition per participant). After the removal of outliers, the response times for each condition were transformed into rates ( $1/RT$ ).

The transformation method entails the inversion of the RT and aligns with prior studies (Innes and Otto 2019). However, this transformation method is not exempt from criticism (Lo and Andrews 2015). This study prioritizes normality in error distribution over other factors such as property scale or interacting effects. This prioritization allowed for the direct application of repeated

measures ANOVA within subjects. Yet, when the ANOVA results were ambiguous, a General Linear Mixed-Effect Model (GLMM) was additionally applied, as recommended by Lo and Andrews (2015). By using GLMM, instead of imposing normality and eliminating error deviation, we allow the use of distributions that match the properties of the measured RT (Lo and Andrews 2015). I utilized the *statsmodels* statistical package in Python, specifically the *mixedlm* function, similar to other studies (Swinkels, Veling, and Schie 2021). Although this analysis is not present in the reference study, the utilization of GLMM aims to provide clarity regarding the significance of the conditions and the study's power.

## Redundancy Signal Effect and Race Model Inequality

The Race Model statement is simple. It suggests that two different unimodal stimuli (e.g., vision, and touch) undergo processing in distinct sensory channels and race to trigger detection. If these two stimuli were presented simultaneously, then we would expect the fastest one to elicit the response (essentially, the one "winning the race"). Therefore, we would be right to expect inequalities (1) and (2) to be held:

$$F_y(t) \leq F_x(t), \quad t > 0, \quad (1)$$

$$F_z(t) \leq F_x(t), \quad t > 0, \quad (2)$$

A violation of the inequalities would require that two modalities presented at the same time have a faster response time than one of these modalities presented alone. This would indicate that the two modalities interacted in some way, thus explaining the faster response than a single modality on its own. Accurate knowledge of this is basic for understanding multisensory integration better.

Here,  $F_x$  represents the cumulative density functions (CDFs) of reaction times (RT) in the individual stimulus conditions visual-only ( $V$ ), respectively, while  $F_y$  and  $F_z$  denote the CDF of RT in the redundant-stimulus conditions congruent ( $V = T$ ) and incongruent ( $V \neq T$ ). According to race models, there's a possibility for  $F_z(t)$  or  $F_y(t)$  to closely approach  $F_x(t)$  for small values of  $t$ , particularly in scenarios with strongly negative correlations in detection times (Ulrich, Miller, and Schröter 2007). However, even under these circumstances, the inequality must still hold as per the race models.

It is important to mention here that IVR does not allow the same experimental methodology as traditionally held in race model inequality studies. For example, a constant proprioceptive signal is inherent in the IVR design across all conditions, thus making absolute single modality impossible. Additionally, having only one single unimodal stimulus (vision) available prevents us from constructing the complete set of cases (single touch, single vision). Nevertheless, I make comparisons between the congruent and incongruent conditions with the single modality condition ( $V$ ) based on the fact that they all have proprioceptive modality included, thus cancelling the effect out. Furthermore, constructing cumulative distribution functions allows for testing the statistical significance of these differences.

The process involved generating empirical cumulative density functions (CDFs) for three conditions—Bimodal pairs and Single Signal—and followed the steps outlined in literature (Ulrich, Miller, and Schröter 2007). The first steps were followed for every participant and every stimulus condition. Specifically, let  $G_x$  be the individual CDF estimate of the visual-only condition, and  $F_y$  and  $F_z$  denote the redundant CDF for the incongruent and congruent conditions.

Consider a scenario where a set  $\{x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n\}$  of  $n$  reaction times (RTs) has been recorded within condition  $V$  for a specific participant. Arranging this sample in ascending order, from the smallest value to the largest— $x_1 \leq x_2 \leq \dots \leq x_n$ —one creates a step function. The second step involves using a step function to generate a cumulative frequency polygon. The final step is the estimation of percentiles and aggregation across participants. For a comprehensive breakdown and reference code, consult Ulrich, Miller, and Schröter 2007. Additionally, the code for this thesis is shared on GitHub.

To mimic the results from our reference paper Saltafossi et al. 2023, I conducted a series of t-tests using individual participant data for the  $F_x$ ,  $F_y$ , and  $F_z$  values at each percentile level. Rather than examining areas under the curve, I focused on the raw values of  $F_x$ ,  $F_y$ , and  $F_z$ . Furthermore, instead of emphasizing time bins, I opted to discuss percentile levels, given the differing time ranges compared to traditional RMI literature are longer because of answering times in IVR task.

## 3.Results

### Cybersickness Questionnaire

We performed a paired-sample t-test to assess the cybersickness levels before (Pre) and after (Post) the Virtual Reality Experience. There was a significant difference in the scores between the Pre ( $M=1.10$ ,  $SD=0.12$ ) and Post ( $M=1.18$ ,  $SD=0.19$ ) conditions;  $t(21) = -2.65$ ,  $p = 0.015$ . On average, the symptoms moved from "not present" to "somewhat present".

### Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation Questionnaire

Nineteen respondents answered 27 questions, rating them on a scale from 1 (Does Not Apply) to 7 (Totally Applies). The key facts from the Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation Questionnaire are as follows:

The gloves seem to enrich the reported experience as in question number 24 of the questionnaire, the reported score on the perceived immersion due to the haptic gloves was "Applies" ( $Mdn = 6$ ,  $\mu = 6$ ,  $\sigma = 0.76$ ). Furthermore, question 19 over whether the task was considered enjoyable at least some of the time was also answered as "Applies" ( $Mdn = 6$ ,  $\mu = 5.4$ ,  $\sigma = 1.04$ ).

Although then enriched experience does not translate into perceived improved performance. Question 26 revealed that haptic feedback was perceived as either not significantly improving performance or having a "Neutral" effect ( $Mdn = 3$ ,  $\mu = 3.6$ ,  $\sigma = 1.49$ ). Similarly, in question 12, the perception of haptic feedback improving response time was generally rated as "Neutral" ( $Mdn = 3$ ,  $\mu = 3.7$ ,  $\sigma = 1.74$ ). In question 7, when asked about the impact on results, haptic feedback was perceived as "Not applicable" as well ( $Mdn = 6$ ,  $\mu = 6$ ,  $\sigma = 0.76$ ).

Overall the memory task is perceived as not difficult. Notably, the assertion that it was very challenging to remember the position of the red ball ( $Mdn = 2$ ,  $\mu = 2.9$ ,  $\sigma = 1.45$ ) was generally disagreed upon. Conversely, question 8, which asked the inverse question about the ease of remembering the location of the red ball ( $Mdn = 5$ ,  $\mu = 5.1$ ,  $\sigma = 1.37$ ) aligns with its counterfactual and it is reported as highly easy.

I suspect that questions about the easiness of the action are not clearly made. Relative to all other questions the highest variance was observed in question 13 ( $Mdn = 5$ ,  $\mu = 4.2$ ,  $\sigma = 1.79$ ),

indicating that haptic feedback made it easier to place the ball. Similarly, question 18, which inquired about the ease of counting heartbeats at the beginning of the experiment, also showed significant variance ( $Mdn = 4$ ,  $\mu = 4$ ,  $\sigma = 1.79$ ).

Overall, participants reported increased immersion and enjoyment as a result of the added gloves. However, there was no perceived enhancement in response attributed to the presence of the gloves and the IVR ball placing task was considered easy. Furthermore, the significant variation noted in participants' responses to the last two questions may suggest that some individuals are unsure about how easy it is to perform the specific task mentioned. For a more detailed breakdown, please refer to the supplementary section.

## Influence of Touch Stimuli on Response Time

### General Performance

Initially, I assessed the mistake rates in ball placement (balls placed in a different position than the one qued in the prompter) across different conditions to ensure their negligible impact on the experiment. The mistake rates were as follows: in the visual-only condition ( $V$ ), it was 6.35% ( $\pm 0.99\%$ , SEM); in the visual incongruent touch condition ( $V \neq T$ ), it was 5.79%. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA indicated no significant effects ( $F \leq 0.08$ ,  $p \geq 0.91$ ) between all three experimental conditions (congruent, incongruent and visual-only). This task is considerably more complex than a simple yes-no detection task. Therefore, to some extent, we anticipate a higher mistake rate. Nevertheless, these rates remain notably low and were not subjected to further analysis.

To investigate whether the experimental manipulations successfully affected the RT, I conducted a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA. The test revealed a significant main effect for the stimulus ( $F(2, 38) = 3.4$ ,  $p \leq 0.043$ ,  $\eta p^2 = 0.15$ ). The median response time for the 'Congruent' condition ( $V = T$ ) was the fastest (3236 ms  $\pm 456$  ms), followed by the 'Incongruent' ( $V \neq T$ ) condition (3268 ms  $\pm 470$ ), while the slowest was observed in the absence of haptic stimuli 'None' ( $V$ ) (3284 ms  $\pm 463$ ). Thus, the experimental conditions significantly influenced response times, as illustrated in Figure 3. However, post hoc Tukey HSD tests did not reveal any specific pairwise differences. While an overall difference among conditions was observed, specific pairwise differences were not identified.

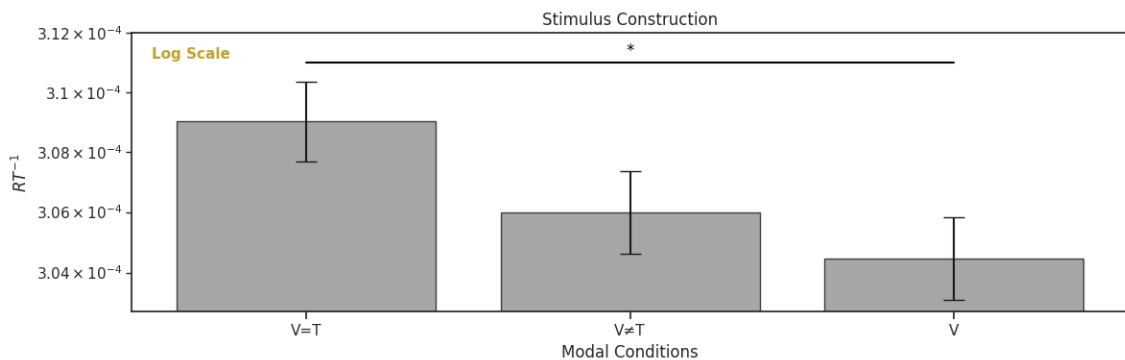


Figure 3: One-way repeated-measures ANOVA using  $RT^{-1}$ . The test revealed a significant main effect for the conditions ( $F(2, 38) = 3.4$ ,  $p \leq 0.043$ ,  $\eta p^2 = 0.15$ )

Given the absence of identified specific pairwise differences in the post hoc analysis, I conducted a more comprehensive investigation using a Generalized Linear Mixed Model (GLMM). The linear mixed model analysis aimed to assess the impact of conditions ( $(V = T)$ ,  $(V \neq T)$ ,  $(V)$ ) on response times. The model included condition as a fixed effect and participant as a random effect, with the 'Congruent' condition serving as the reference category.

Although this specific analysis method was not employed in the referenced paper (Saltafossi et al. 2023), it offers numerous advantages for multilevel research designs. It addresses, for example, the issue of the linear relationship between the standard deviation of RT and mean RT, characterized by an increasing spread in residuals for longer predicted RT (Lo and Andrews 2015).

The model coefficient for the 'None' ( $V$ ) condition ( $\beta = 45.726, SE = 22.594, p = 0.043$ ) reached statistical significance at the conventional level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) when compared to the 'Congruent' ( $V = T$ ) condition. This suggests a significant difference in response times between the 'None' and 'Congruent' conditions. The coefficient for the 'Incongruent' condition ( $\beta = 32.975, SE = 22.686, p = 0.146$ ) did not reach conventional levels of significance.

Thus, the 'Congruent' condition demonstrated significantly faster performance compared to the visual-only condition. This outcome aligns with the expected results according to the RSE. However, the findings present a mixed perspective. Despite this significant contrast, the more stringent post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed no notable differences between pairwise conditions. Additionally, the GLMM indicated significance solely between the 'Congruent' ( $V = T$ ) and visual-only ( $V$ ) conditions and not between the 'Congruent' ( $V = T$ ) and 'Incongruent' ( $V \neq T$ ) conditions. We should consider that median time differences between conditions range between 30 to 50 milliseconds. Now that we have validated the condition. To gain a deeper understanding of the results and nest them in the literature the next section of RMI and CDF analysis will aim to achieve this.

## Race Model Inequality

In this section, I utilize the Cumulative Distribution Function (CDF) from the Race Model Inequality (RMI) model to evaluate the significance of differences between conditions at different time points ( $t$ ). The t-test conducted between the three experimental conditions revealed significant differences between the 'Congruent' and visual-only ( $V = T ; V$ ) conditions, but no significant differences emerged between the 'Congruent' and 'Incongruent' conditions ( $V = T ; V \neq T$ ). The results between  $F_x$  and  $F_z$  ( $V ; V = T$ ) are presented in Table 1, which illustrates the results for all time frames and percentiles. Notably, significant differences emerged between  $F_x$  and  $F_y$  from the 16th percentile onwards. Interestingly, for this percentile (as depicted in Figure 4), the single modality visual ( $V$ ) appears to be faster than the bimodal incongruent condition ( $V \neq T$ ), suggesting a potential violation of the RMI principle. Conversely, from the 40th percentile onwards, both redundant signals consistently demonstrate faster response times compared to the unimodal signal, aligning with our expectations based on the RSE. It's important to note that when considering the distribution of all response times, the highest density is observed between 3100 and 3200 ms, accounting for 33% of all response times.

Percentile Estimation	$F_z$ Time Range (ms)	$F_z$ Min Max Diff (ms)	$F_z$ T-value	$F_z$ p-value	$F_y$ Time Range (ms)	$F_y$ Min Max Diff (ms)	$F_y$ T-value	$F_y$ p-value
10	(3070, 3621)	551	1.19	0.12	(3121, 3907)	786	1.1	0.14
13	(3078, 3626)	548	1.31	0.1	(3123, 3969)	846	0.79	0.22
16	(3084, 3648)	564	1.88	0.04*	(3130, 4171)	1041	0.92	0.18
19	(3086, 3687)	600	2.04	0.03*	(3141, 4352)	1211	0.96	0.18
20	(3087, 3708)	621	2.01	0.03*	(3153, 4645)	1492	0.96	0.17
23	(3092, 3748)	656	1.97	0.03*	(3176, 4948)	1772	0.99	0.17
26	(3094, 3760)	665	2.06	0.03*	(3202, 5060)	1857	1.04	0.16
29	(3098, 3766)	668	2.03	0.03*	(3221, 5184)	1963	1.33	0.1
30	(3099, 3768)	668	2.02	0.03*	(3241, 5290)	2049	1.34	0.1
33	(3104, 3814)	709	2.11	0.02*	(3264, 5391)	2127	1.02	0.16
36	(3106, 3838)	732	2.08	0.03*	(3287, 5558)	2271	0.95	0.18
39	(3111, 3846)	735	1.83	0.04*	(3311, 5739)	2427	1.13	0.14
40	(3114, 3848)	734	1.79	0.04*	(3336, 5884)	2548	1.19	0.12
43	(3119, 3861)	741	1.74	0.05*	(3361, 6067)	2706	1.16	0.13
46	(3121, 3907)	786	1.55	0.07	(3396, 6271)	2946	0.85	0.2
49	(3123, 3969)	846	1.36	0.09	(3431, 6503)	3181	0.48	0.32
50	(3124, 3978)	855	1.33	0.1	(3466, 6723)	3421	0.29	0.39
60	(3130, 4171)	1041	1.25	0.11	(3499, 6989)	3680	0.91	0.19
70	(3141, 4352)	1211	1.21	0.12	(3530, 7310)	3939	0.4	0.35
80	(3153, 4645)	1492	1.47	0.08	(3560, 7674)	4253	-0.54	0.7
90	(3176, 4948)	1772	0.53	0.3	(3589, 8081)	4632	-0.27	0.61

Table 1: Table in which each row represents a percentile in the commulative distribution (CDF) estimate of RT for  $F_y$  and  $F_z$ . The column "Time Range (ms)" shows the min and max RT at a participant level. The column "difference" indicates the between the minimal and maximal reponse time at a participant level. The T-values and p-values presented test the difference between  $G_x$  against  $F_y$  and  $F_z$  respectively. \* indicates significant p-values.

## 4. Discussion

In this study, I examined whether an experimental setup using IVR and haptic gloves could reproduce established practices in multisensory integration, drawing from previous research data. Specifically, I focused on psychophysical experimental configurations that evaluate Miller's inequality. Additionally, I capitalized on the discrepancy between haptic gloves and real-life experiences to investigate the impact of congruency on multisensory integration. The findings not only confirm the utility of IVR in studying multisensory integration but also offer a pathway to merging insights from psychophysics and cognitive research into a unified framework. Furthermore, preliminary results prompt inquiry into the role of higher-order congruency, such as "feeling touch where we see it," in early integration processes extending beyond temporal and spatial congruencies.

To validate the construction of stimuli, I analyzed and modeled the reaction times across congruent, incongruent, and visual-only conditions. In total, more than a third of the trials yielded responses within the narrow timeframe of 3100 to 3200 milliseconds from the onset. While the ANOVA results unveiled a significant overall difference among all conditions, attempts to pinpoint specific pairwise distinctions using a Tukey HSD test yielded no significant findings. However, a GLMM analysis revealed a notable disparity between the visual-only ( $V$ ) and visual-touch congruent ( $V = T$ ) conditions. Interestingly, no significant differences were discerned between the incongruent ( $V \neq T$ ) and visual-only ( $V$ ) conditions.

When conducting a t-test, the RMI analysis reveals a significant discrepancy in the cumulative distribution functions (CDF) between the unimodal visual-only condition ( $G_x$ ) and the bimodal congruent condition ( $F_y$ ). Specifically, for  $F_y$ , this t-test identified a significant difference compared to the visual-only condition within the narrow time frame of 3100 to 3200 milliseconds (the initial 100 milliseconds), representing the period of highest response density. Notably, no

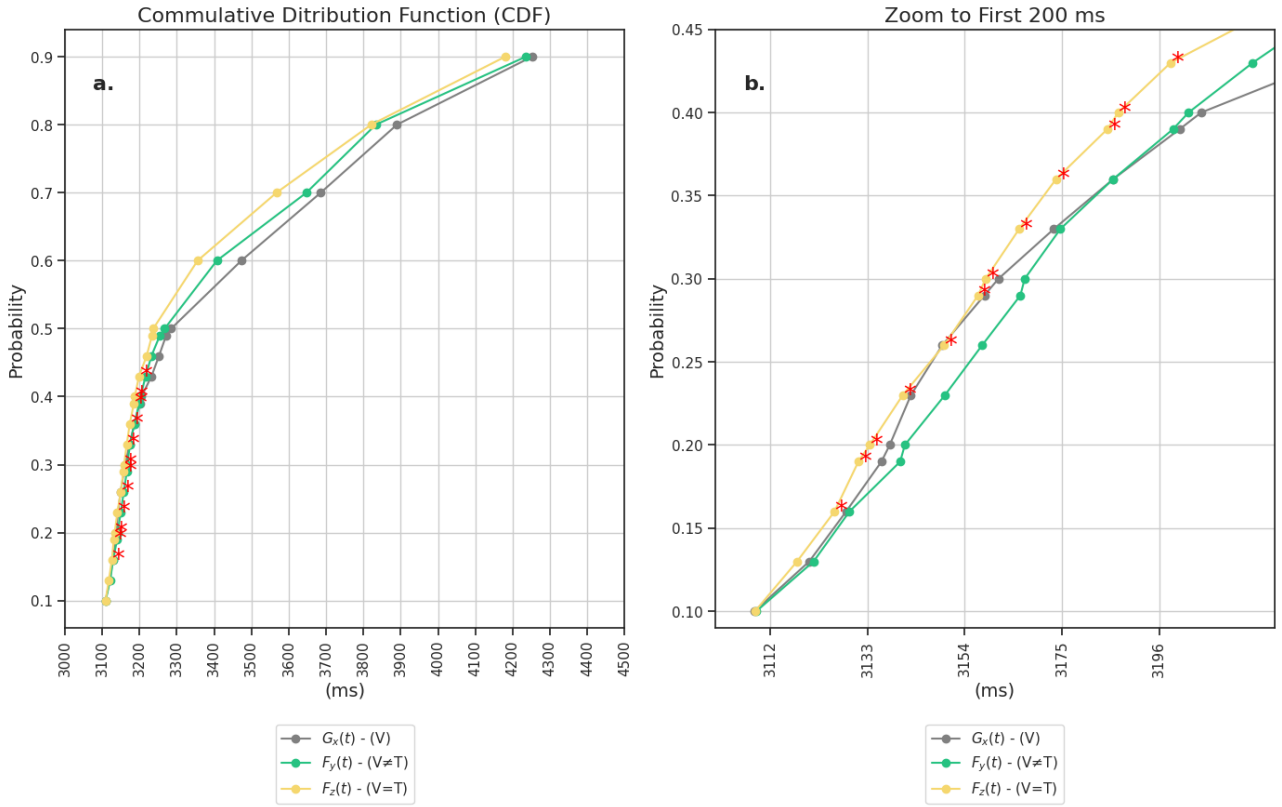


Figure 4: Cumulative distribution functions  $F(t)$  of RTs for auditory, visual, and auditory-visual stimuli, as well as the sum of the distributions for A and V ( $F_A + F_V$ ). (a.) Displays the estimated percentile points for each of the three functions of interest:  $G_x$ ,  $F_y$ ,  $F_z$ , considering all participants. (b.) Is a zoom in the first 100 ms of the entire RT range. According to the RSE, the CDF  $G_x$  of the visual-only ( $V$ ) condition should be under  $F_y$ ,  $F_z$  at all moments. Our data shows that is not the case for the first 100 ms of the entire RT range.

significant differences were observed for the incongruent condition across any time period.

Descriptively, the relationship between the visual-only ( $V$ ) and congruent condition ( $V = T$ ) remains consistent across the entire range of reaction times (RT), aligning with the Race Model inequality (RMI). However, this pattern doesn't hold for the RT relation between the incongruent condition ( $V \neq T$ ) and the visual-only condition ( $V$ ), where within the first 100 ms of the complete RT range, the unimodal condition displays faster responses than the bi-modal incongruent condition ( $V \neq T$ ), potentially breaching the expected inequality. In later response times, the incongruent condition is faster than the unimodal visual-only condition, as anticipated. This, like in previous literature, again raises the question of a possible violation of the RMI model. Particularly as a bimodal condition ( $V \neq T$ ) demonstrates faster responses compared to an unimodal condition ( $V$ ).

However, as the statistical significance is a border value and the effects are relatively minor, I want to be cautious about the implications. Another study by Swinkels, Veling, and Schie 2021 investigating embodiment illusion (the reported feeling of seeing one body where it is not) yielded similar results concerning the irrelevance of stimuli for reaction times (RT). Their hypothesis sug-



gests that the absence of a difference in the Race Model Inequality (RMI) between congruent and incongruent conditions could be due to the simultaneous occurrence of visual and vibrotactile stimuli. This simultaneous presence might suffice for multisensory integration, regardless of whether this crossmodal stimulus is functionally linked at a higher level (e.g., touch in the hand holding the ball) (Swinkels, Veling, and Schie 2021). Also, another relevant study looking to measure the effect of multisensory integration in VR by increasing performance (e.g. hitting targets and duration) found that for the visual-touch condition only there is an increase in performance nonetheless not reflected in P300 response.

I believe my data shows that the incongruent effect is outweighed by the time integration caused by synchronicity of stimuli and being sharing the same receptive field. In both conditions the source is likely to be the same since they are within the space that is registered by their overlapping receptive fields.

#### HERE MORE PARALLELS BETWEEN EXISTING LITERATURE AND THIS RESULTS.

Some of this study's limitations come from the integration of different devices. The latencies between them are not the same, thus possibly creating data loss or duplicate repeated values for every  $t$  in time. This could affect the results in the analysis, especially for psychophysical experimental design. Other considerations need to be held as experiments using IVR will include proprioceptive cues which must be considered when establishing parallels between current and past studies. Finally, each trial in our IVR study spans a longer time frame compared to traditional psychophysics experiments (with a mean duration of 3400 ms versus the typical 200 ms). This extended duration contributes to increased variance and skewness in reaction times (RT) which needs to be addressed as I did in this thesis. Nonetheless, this makes it harder to compare to other psychophysics experiments.

A new design should pay attention to the latencies between all interfaces (e.g., ECG, Gloves, HMD) and integrate them accordingly, considering that the mean differences between somatosensory conditions might be as small as 20 ms. Thus latency integration issues over 7 ms might hinder the results. The experimental design should also measure RT between the trial start and the initiation of movement so the mean RT and variance shorten, thus avoiding the skewness problem and increasing the significance of the results. Additionally, increasing the sample of future research, involving, for instance, 60 participants to be able to come to more definite conclusions regarding the central hypotheses investigated here (RSE, RMI). A further interesting question to investigate is whether the heart cycle has an effect on RMI violations during multisensory integration.

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## **Additional Material**

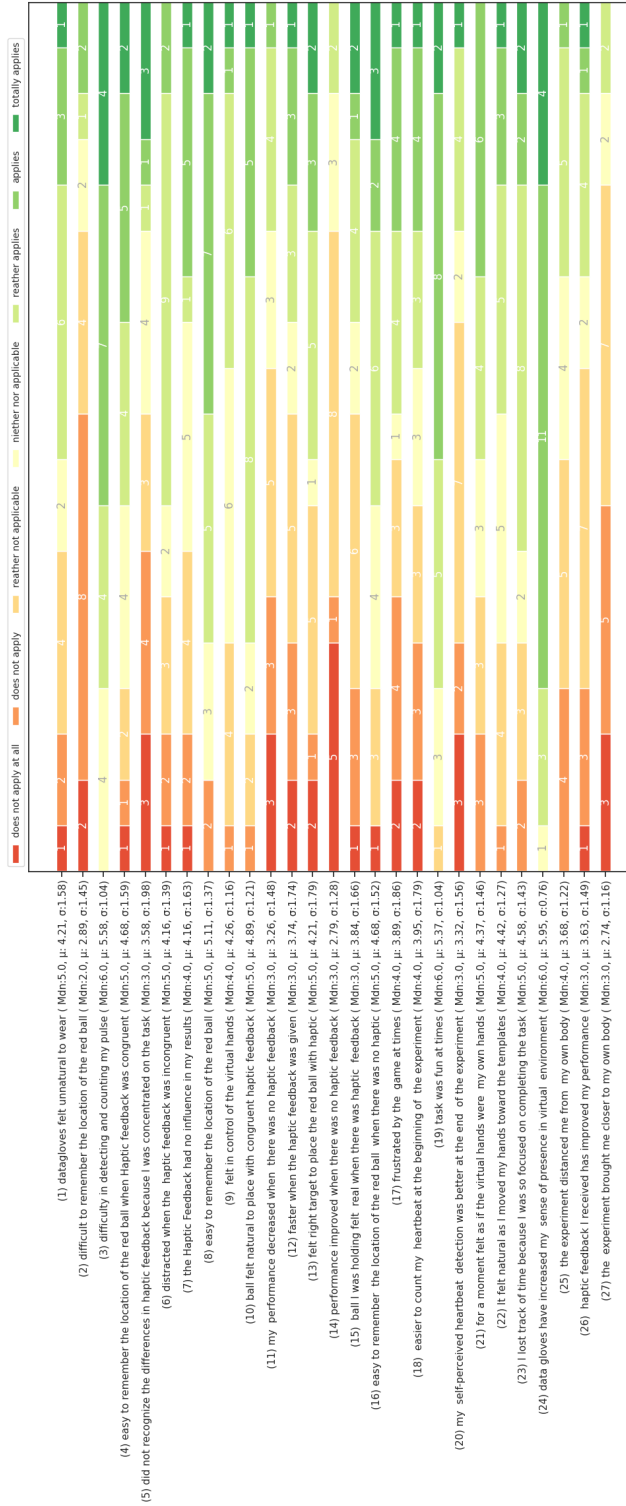


Figure 5: Results: Virtual Reality Subjective Evaluation Questionnaire