



Vibe coding, virtual scenography, and the ELIZA effect: deciding, choosing, and making *The Nether*

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My recent work as virtual scenographer on *The Nether* offers a practice-based example of how generative AI coding tools can support creative production, while also revealing the continuing importance of expert human judgement. The production was a research collaboration with Dr Zachary McKendrick at the University of Waterloo in Canada, where *The Nether* was staged as a mixed-reality theatre work exploring the ethical, social, and experiential implications of virtual worlds.

For this production, I developed VRChat worlds through a vibe-coding workflow using Claude Code in VS Code. This built on my prior experience with Unity, virtual production, and real-time scenographic environments. The workflow allowed me to move quickly between scenographic intention and technical implementation: designing virtual spaces, testing behaviours, revising interaction possibilities, and bringing playable material into conversation with the rehearsal process.

The production context is important. *The Nether* was created with very limited production resources and within the fixed constraints of a rehearsal and performance schedule. Under those conditions, it would not have been possible for me to devote the time and labour normally required to produce the final virtual scenographic work at the scale and level of responsiveness that the project demanded. This is not to say that vibe coding replaced human collaborators, or that it should be understood as a substitute for a properly resourced creative team. Rather, it increased my capacity as a practitioner. It allowed me to build more in less time, rapidly iterate through creative possibilities, and test versions of the virtual environments in relation to the needs of the production.

This mattered most in the rehearsal room. The value of the AI-assisted process was not simply that it made coding faster. Speed created a wider field of possible choices. I could try an approach, see how it worked scenographically, discard it, adapt it, or use it as the basis for another version. Instead of committing too early to one technical solution, I was able to generate and compare a range of options. Vibe coding therefore did not make the artistic choices for me; it expanded the range of material from which those choices could be made.

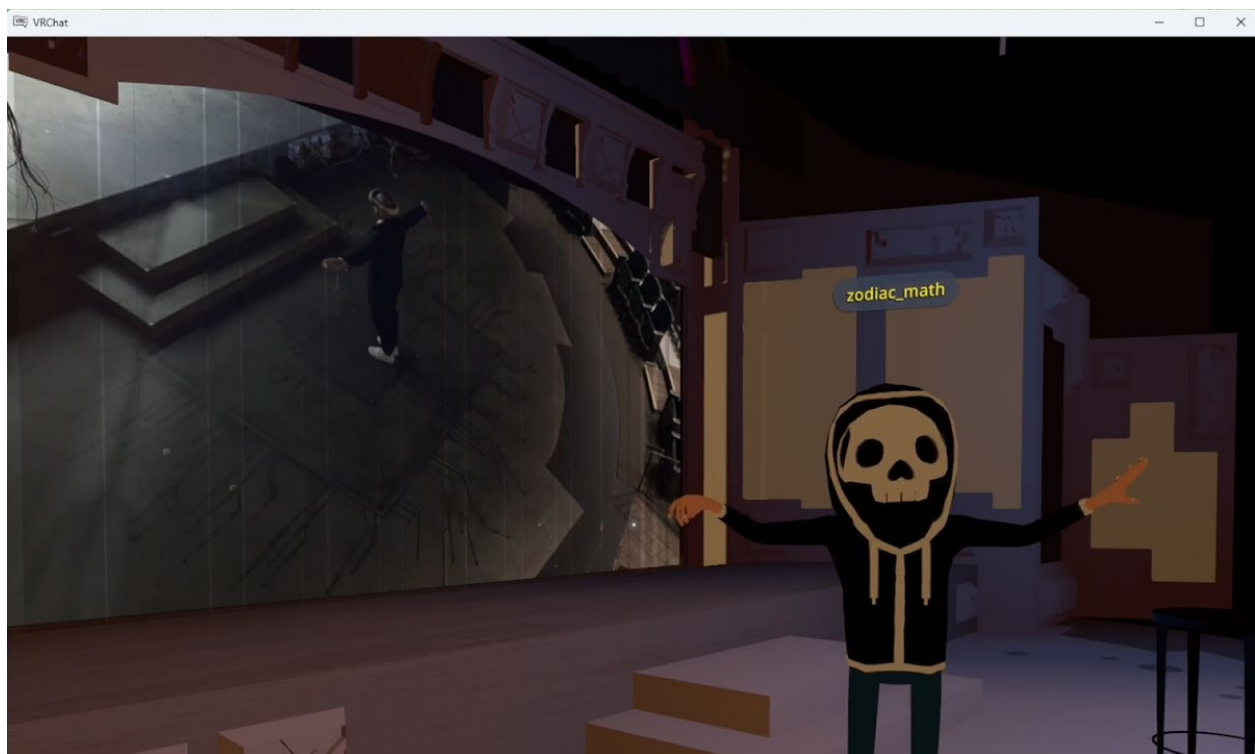


Fig 1 – Magic Moment. Dr Zachary McKendrick, testing the IRL to VR bridge where his physical body is captured via live video feed and viewed in the VR Chat world while simultaneously controlling his VR Chat avatar during rehearsals.

My existing expertise remained central to the process. I had used Unity previously, and that background allowed me to understand what the AI was producing, where its solutions were useful, and where they were becoming unnecessarily complicated. At times, Claude

Code produced fluent and confident outputs that seemed technically plausible but led the project in an unhelpful direction. In those moments, the important skill was not simply prompting the tool more effectively, but recognising when to pause, step back, and take a different angle.

In practice, working with Claude Code felt less like using an automated production pipeline and more like working with a team of junior programmers. They were fast, knowledgeable, and efficient, and they could produce a great deal of useful material quickly. But they also needed direction. They did not always understand the larger creative context, the dramaturgical intention, or the difference between a technically possible solution and a scenographically meaningful one. My role was to guide, evaluate, simplify, redirect, and ultimately choose.

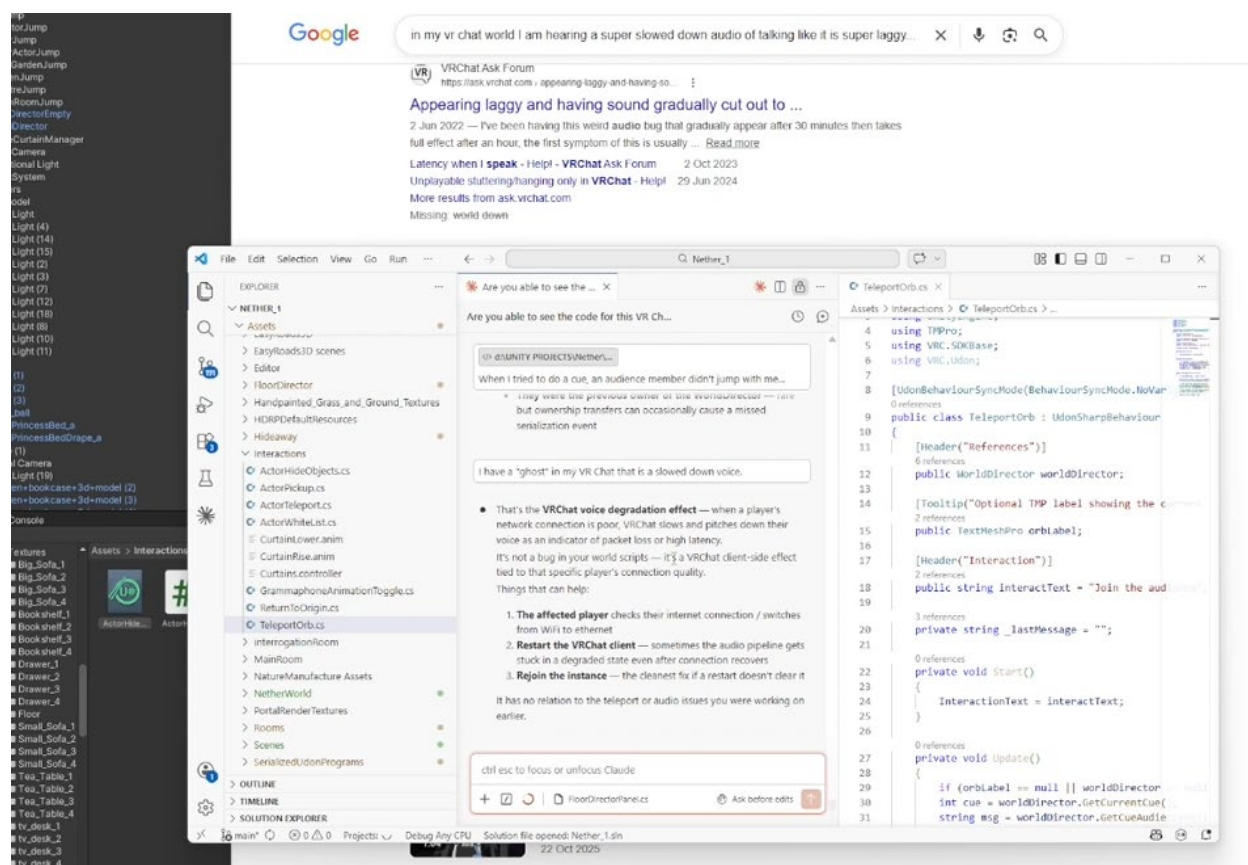


Fig. 1 – Much of my time was spent moving between VS Code + Claude Code, Google Search, and Unity 3D.

This experience connects productively to the legacy of Joseph Weizenbaum, the creator of ELIZA, one of the earliest chatbot systems. ELIZA was developed at MIT in the 1960s as a program for studying natural language communication between humans and machines. Its most famous script, DOCTOR, simulated a form of therapeutic conversation by identifying keywords, transforming user statements, and returning responses that appeared

conversational. ELIZA did not understand what was being said, yet users could experience the interaction as meaningful, responsive, or even empathetic. This tendency to attribute understanding or human qualities to a computational system became known as the ELIZA Effect.

Weizenbaum's later critique of artificial intelligence remains highly relevant to contemporary generative AI practice. In *Computer Power and Human Reason*, he distinguishes between deciding and choosing. Deciding can be understood as a computational activity: a system follows procedures, evaluates available options within a formal structure, and proceeds according to the path that has been established. Choosing, by contrast, involves judgement. It requires context, responsibility, value, ambiguity, and the capacity to decide that a course of action should not be pursued, even when it remains technically available.

This distinction helps me understand what was happening in the making of *The Nether*. Tools such as Claude Code can make many rapid decisions: selecting a likely implementation, generating a script, refactoring a function, or proposing a workflow. But these decisions are not the same as creative, ethical, or scenographic choices. They emerge from the prompt, the available context, and the system's learned patterns. When the direction becomes flawed, the tool may continue confidently along that path, producing code or explanations that are plausible but wrong, overcomplicated, or disconnected from the actual artistic problem.

This is also a useful way of thinking about hallucination. Hallucination is not only an occasional technical error; it can be understood as a consequence of systems that decide without choosing. The AI does not pause in the human sense to ask whether its direction is appropriate, meaningful, responsible, or useful. It continues to generate according to the path it has entered. The practitioner therefore has to provide the capacity to choose: to stop, redirect, reject, simplify, or reframe the task.

In *The Nether*, that capacity to choose was especially important because the production itself was concerned with questions of action, consequence, embodiment, identity, and harm across physical and virtual space. The virtual environments could not simply be technically impressive. They had to serve the dramaturgy, support the performers, and contribute to the audience's understanding of the relationship between live bodies and virtual worlds. The AI could help generate technical possibilities, but it could not determine what those possibilities meant within the production.

The lesson from this project is therefore not that AI replaces creative or technical expertise, or that it substitutes for human collaborators. Instead, it shows how AI can amplify expert practice under constrained conditions. Vibe coding increased my capacity to build, test, and revise within the timescale of production. It accelerated the production of possible decisions, while leaving the responsibility for choice with the practitioner.

For creative education and research, this distinction matters. If we treat AI systems as autonomous creators, we risk mistaking fluency for understanding and productivity for

judgement. But if we understand them as responsive, imperfect, high-speed collaborators, we can make better use of their strengths while remaining alert to their limitations. In my work on *The Nether*, Claude Code was most useful when treated as a junior collaborator: capable of generating material quickly, but dependent on human direction, domain knowledge, rehearsal feedback, and critical awareness.

For a second Kingston University AI Compendium, this case study contributes a perspective from scenography, virtual production, and creative coding. It shows how generative AI can support rapid prototyping and experimentation, while also demonstrating why human expertise remains central. Weizenbaum's legacy is valuable here because it reminds us not to mistake computational decision-making for human choice. In creative practice, the most important question is not simply what the AI can generate, but how the practitioner chooses what to do with it.

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