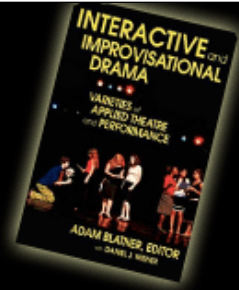


INTERACTIVE and IMPROVISATIONAL DRAMA

VARIETIES of APPLIED THEATRE and PERFORMANCE



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Website Supplementary Article:

The Internet as a Dramatic Medium

[Toni Sant and Kim Flintoff](#)

Updated July 24, 2007

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The internet has become a virtual meta-stage on which millions of people are role playing a variety of characters, interacting with others in adventures! In recent years, numerous internet and virtual processes seem to partake of elements of theatre, role-play games, and collective performance art, so that this kind of interactivity should also be recognized as an extension or category of theatre. (The editor was ambivalent about including this chapter, but wondered if the generation raised on these games might see it as being an obvious and necessary inclusion.)

What kind of drama is involved in the role-playing games available over the Internet? Software has been developed that allows people to interact with others, not only in games, but also in drama-like performances. In this chapter, these applications will be noted, with some emphasis being given to the kinds of processes that seem to be operating in the service of social or personal change.

You are probably familiar with using the Internet to find resources - books, papers, and other contacts for networking. There are also websites and programs that also allow the user to access images, videos or music, prepared off-line previously. Until recently this was little different from using computer-internet connections as if they were fancy radios or television sets but the development of Web 2.0 and its social networking capabilities has significantly changed the way we use these technologies. Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, Google Video, Blogger are examples of the new directions in social networking.

Undoubtedly, you have also heard of some computer games that friends are participating in, generally more like adventures, some competitive, and some interactive. This chapter will note how these evolved, as well as some programs that may be engaged as entertainment or art. The creative challenge is to go beyond merely grafting existing forms of creativity and communication onto new media, and to explore ways of really utilizing the innate potential of the internet as a medium with its own special properties. Can people interact in the service of genuine social action and personal development? This is the special focus of this chapter, after some review of the field is offered in order to see how this technology may be used for different types of online "performances."

Consider that the Internet can be a new environment, and this in turn opens the possibility of new forms of art as well as new ways to engage in more familiar types of interactions. The Internet is de-centralized, and is not readily controlled by a single group. Within this matrix, people can interact one-to-one (e.g., on email, via web-cam, instant messenger services), one-to many (e.g., via egroups, personal websites, blogs), and many-to-many (e.g., chat rooms, online worlds) This last category can be expanded in

interesting ways to generate a new drama medium, online performance.

Current technologies allow online participants to introduce their own elements into the worlds they inhabit. The capacity to build, or to modify the existing environment allows users to take greater control of their online experiences. The user can be seen to become complicit in the process of creation. Thus emerges the “produser” (Bruns, 2006) who engages in a process of redaction – redesigning, recreating, rebuilding and representing the substance of their online world. These are the children of the “rip, mix, burn” generation. The interactivity afforded by such technologies works to empower the user as a co-creator. In social networking environments this can become an incredibly rich collaborative experience. Gamers may be able to “mod”, to generate extension to the basic game as released, citizens of virtual worlds may create new artifacts and functions, even set up businesses and alternative online lives. In all cases, the common element is interactivity. The ease of interactivity in an online environment may be the reason why it so compelling as a collective creative space.

History

The earliest examples of the use of the Internet as a medium for performance appeared in the early 1970s in the form of the fantasy role-playing game called Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). This game evolved out of LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) games played in previous years, a mixture of military war board games and influenced by an upsurge of post science-fiction and fantasy literature such as Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”.

The history becomes complex and can be reviewed in more detail on the webpage supplement to this chapter. First there was the Multi-User Design, or MUD, and during the 1980s this progressed to the Multi-User Object-Oriented or MOO type programs. These offered different permissions to users who could participate in a variety of roles, from a simple Guest spectator to an active Player, a creative Builder or eventually a Wizard who has total administrative control of the environment. The notion of a Resident soon emerged and users began to think of their online participation as an extension or alternative to their real life offline.

This idea was first proposed by MIT Sociologist Sherry Turkle in her book *Life on the Screen*, originally published in 1995. Turkle argues that through MOOs we become producers, directors and stars of our own dramas. These dramas usually start out as private and personal but often develop in a way that draws in other people. Haynes and Holmervik (1998) co-edited *High Wired*, an excellent anthology of articles on the design, use, and theory of educational MOOs.

Theatre in Cyberspace (1999) is another collection of essays by various scholars and practitioners exploring the relationship between theatre and the Internet. In a chapter called “Acting in Cyberspace” Nina LeNoir treats early examples of digital performance, where performers and audience are present to each other only through telecommunication, as extensions of established performance forms. LeNoir’s doctoral dissertation, upon which this essay is based, examines differences between acting through digital media and stage acting. Her central question revolves around how the lack of physical presence in online interaction can be seen as performance. There are several possible answers to this question. For LeNoir, early experiments in online theatre are based on historically established performance forms like Greek and Elizabethan drama with their dependence on verbal scenery, Medieval pageants which relied on role-playing where performers and audience intermingled in the same space, and *Commedia dell’Arte* with its emphasis on improvisation. Verbal scenery and improvisation are key components of online performances, which depend in large part, if not entirely, on text.

While most MUD and MOO environments can easily be viewed as sites for performance, they are not necessarily always presented as such by the people taking part in them. This distinction is emphasized by the attempts of others who use the Internet for the purpose of presenting dramatic performances.

An interesting example emerged early in 2006 when an online funeral service being held to honour the real life death of a game player. *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is a huge and well-known massive multi-player online (MMO) game based on fantasy warfare scenarios. To summarise, what occurred was that a group of WoW players decided to honour the real-life death of one of their number in the online world of WoW. Their virtual ceremony was gatecrashed - “griefed” or “pwned” - by a another group of game players who play against players rather than against the game. To cut a long story short - the funeral

party was devastated by the attack - in game terms and in real life. Many of the characters were the result of hundreds of hours of game play and hundreds of dollars of subscription fees to the game. The perpetrators of the attack were intent on using the drama of the event to create a promotional machinima video of the event, while the mourners were intending to produce a video to present to the dead girl's family. (Newsweek, September 18, 2006, pp. 48-50.)

First Online Performances Presented As Theatre

The precursors for this mode of drama was the "chat room," developed back in 1988 by Jarkko Oikarinen in Finland. Actually, the technology was called IRC, "Internet Relay Chat", an arena for synchronous online interaction. Discussions on IRC are organized in channels hosted over several servers connected to the Internet. Until the development of Instant Messaging systems these chat rooms were the main arena for real time interactions.

Taking it into theatre, using a chat-room-like technology (and IRC), Stuart Harris created an experimental theatre troupe: the Hamnet Players. After more than a year of preparation and experimentation, in December 1993, an international cast led by Harris performed an IRC adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The production appeared on computer screens around the world through an IRC channel coordinated from San Diego, California, and was repeated in February with Ian Taylor of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the title role. The second performance was enlivened by a bot, an automated program written to behave like a real user, which accidentally killed Hamlet halfway through the production. The inherent script-like quality of IRC and the use of direct speech as the main mode of communication are features which enhance the dramatic potential of text-based online communication. IRC shares the first of these features with MUDs and MOOs.

IRC, MUDs and MOOs are perfect for performers and audiences to mingle; the creation of the environment is a co-production between all who come to participate. The possibility to create text-based sets and objects that remain on the server for later use is what made MUDs and MOOs even more interesting than IRC as a venue for organized online performance.

After the work of Stuart Harris and his Hamnet Players, the most significant use of an online text environment for the purpose of presenting experimental drama started in June 1995 at the University of Hawaii for the Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). ATHEMOO was mainly intended for use by theatre scholars, teachers and artists. ATHEMOO has also served as a virtual theatre for online performances such as Karen Wheatley's Scheherazade's Daughters (nominated for the British National Review of Live Art in 2000) and an Austrian theatre project entitled Oudeis based on Homer's Odyssey.

The following excerpt from the performance log of Scaffolding Downs, an ATHEMOO performance in May 1999 attended by one of the authors, might suggest how an online text-based performance differs significantly from the more familiar traditional forms. You'll see that the roles of performer and audience often become confused and intermingled. The text does not however capture the timing or the experience of participation in the event as it evolves; it is most definitely a case of having to be there. Scaffolding Dawns: So you're in Chicago . . .

Over the opening strains of Doris day's "Tea for Two" , a Montage: a mixture of headlines, a newsreel footage, and live action. Gangland Hits! Bugsy Siegel Dead!

Chicago: The City of Death! You see A Large Movie Screen, Old Film Projector, Bryan Carlino's Bar, PLAYBILL, and old bum here.

Obvious exits: [northeast] to Socrates' intern's Office, [east] to ACT II JULES AND ANNIES OFFICE Annie teleports in; MelanieB materializes out of thin air.

Annie [to all]: my name is annie.MelanieB says, "Hi Annie!" I'm yor narrator today

MaryA teleports in.Annie says, "please fell free to look at the Playbill"

A full list of performance logs is available at <http://moo.hawaii.edu:7000/2966/> and four of these productions are described in Burk's essay "The Play's the Thing: Theatricality and the MOO Environment" in High Wired.

Burk maintains that such organized performances in MOO environments "expand contemporary and historical notions of theatricality, adding to the existing diversity of world theatre rather than seeking to literally reproduce or replace it" (1999: 130). For Burk, as for LeNoir, online productions were an extension of existing theatrical forms, building on and extending established forms of performance.

ATHEMOO demonstrated that the Internet is a remarkably interesting venue for scripted online performance. These early experiments were punctuated by lost connections (dropouts), loss of synchronization (lag) and various other computer malfunctions. The technical difficulties experienced by everyone who used MOOs in the 1990s highlighted the infancy of the medium, and yet also became defining features, enhancing the immediacy and risk of live mediated performances.

Beyond Text-based Performance

On MUDs, MOOs, and IRC everything happens through words. These text-based applications on the Internet are no longer as dominant as they once were, before faster computers and connectivity became as widespread as they are now. In spite of this, text-based interaction remains a major aspect of online communication, even if still or moving images of the interactors are now increasingly exchanged through high-speed Internet connections. We are fully aware that the use of streamed audio and video, especially over broadband Internet connections, broaden the ways the Internet can be used as a venue for performance, however, we emphasize the text aspect of online communication here, because text-based communication remains an essential element of online performance.

Developments in computer technology and Internet connection speeds have made the use of graphic-enhanced online chat applications with various multimedia features possible. In online graphical chat environments, the basics of interactivity and identity play are still present, but visual representations are used instead of words to depict environments, objects and characters. The graphical representations for the users/players are called avatars, a term taken from the Hindu tradition referring to deities descending to earth in human form. In multi-user chat environments, each avatar is an electronic representation of a real or fictional entity. These avatars are fully customizable and make for a wide range of self-expression that is not found in text-only chat rooms or other online environments, for example, users can use actual pictures to represent themselves online although many choose to use more creative representations.

By the mid- to late 1990's the development of more effective web browsers, increased processing capacity and greater bandwidth paved the way for an increased use of visually rich online environments. One of the popular early graphical environments was called The Palace, essentially a 2D interactive slideshow where static avatars moved about on a background image with the text appearing in small cartoon style bubbles. This approach has been modified and refined over a variety of applications with each offering new features and levels of customization.

The Sims, is another interesting phenomenon that exemplifies the performative nature of online engagement. In this 3-D graphic environment, first you create a Sim (short for "simulation"), by picking out a body avatar, dressing it, and assigning it personality traits. The Sim then lives out its life on the screen guided by your interventions and an underlying artificial intelligence. The Sims can thrive and prosper or they may also succumb to depression and boredom depending upon the choices made by the game player.

The Sims gained popularity through online interaction between software owners who create online worlds and relationships together, often performing simulated lives similar to other role-playing games. The Sims Online, The Palace and other avatar-enhanced chat environments contain their own extemporized performances within the same parameters as MUDs and MOOs, adding graphic representation to online chat making the performative aspects of online masks and masquerades somewhat more noticeable. It also makes the puppetry characteristic of such online performance more pronounced since it is fairly easy to imagine the 2-dimensional graphic representations as sophisticated cardboard cutouts like those made for toy theatres.

Second Life, developed by Linden Labs (<http://secondlife.com>), is one of the most sophisticated online 3D avatar environments available at the time of writing and provides a more socially constructed experience as virtually every action of an avatar is player controlled. While there is a strong sexual presence in this world there is equally a rich artistic and creative community who are pushing the boundaries of online performance.

The Palace served as a host for specific experiments with planned performances. Foremost among these

was the work by Adrienne Jenik and Lisa Brenneis known as Desktop Theater. Jenik proposed Desktop Theater not only as the name of her performance troupe but also as the name for this new performance genre, which she also described as “Internet street performance”, because it was performed in readily accessible online spaces where virtually anyone could pass by and comment on what was going on. The official Desktop Theater website at www.desktoptheater.com contains good archival documentation about most of the collaborative work of Jenik and Brenneis.

Between 1997 and 2001 Brenneis and Jenik performed about thirty live Desktop Theater experiments ranging from an online version of Becket’s *Waiting for Godot* at The Palace (an online graphic chat environment) during the Third Annual Digital Storytelling Festival, to *collaborating on water(wars)*, an elaborate original online performance in front of an audience sitting in a theatre space at Odin Teatret’s Holstebro center in Denmark for the Transit III Festival of Women in Theatre. In *Waiting for Godot*, the audience was made up of Internet users logged on to The Palace as well as festival attendees who watched the online action on a projection screen but also watched the background work foregrounded as part of the performance. In *water[war]s* (which was part of the [water\[war\]s performance installation project](#) directed by Jill Greenhalgh from 2000-2006), the audience consisted solely of theatre festival attendees who watched the projected online action and one of the players at their laptop on stage.

In other Desktop Theater performances, such as *The World of Park* (a reworking of Yoko Ono’s 1961 performance text from Grapefruit), the audience is made up of Internet users only. Helen Varley Jamieson, who wrote and facilitated the *water[war]s* collaboration with Brenneis and Jenik and participated in other Desktop Theater events, subsequently developed her own dramatic work in The Palace and other chat applications.

These experiments include one known as *the[abc]experiment (2001-02)*. The “A” in this experiment stands for avatar, “B” stands for body, and the “C” is for collision. Four of the artists involved in the[abc]experiment---Helen Varley Jamieson, Karla Ptacek, Leena Saarinen and Vicki Smit---then formed Avatar Body Collision as a globally distributed cyberformance troupe in April 2002.. They work across various time zones and create performances which can be witnessed both online and in offline presentations projected onto a screen for a seated audience in a more conventional theatre setting or in a gallery installation setting. [The Avatar Body Collision website is at <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org>]. Helen Varley Jamieson coined the word cyberformance -- and its variations cyberformer and cyberforming-- in 2000 in an attempt to give a name to this new art form that uses internet technologies to bring geographically dispersed performers together in live theatrical events.

On March 3, 2003 the ABC troupe participated in the *Lysistrata Project*, an international theatrical protest against war, with their own anti-war online performance at The Palace. This anti-war position was carried forward to their work away from The Palace in 2004 when they launched a new custom-built web interface designed for “online performance, theatre and storytelling” called UpStage (see <http://www.upstage.org.nz>). Yet this was hardly the only online performance with social activism as its driving force in the ten years or so since the Hamnet Players first brought theatrical performance to the Internet. UpStage has continued to develop and is now available as open source software, allowing new users to develop, modify and repurpose the technology to their own ends.

Educational Drama

Many involved in drama in education also think this should include, a variable degree of social activism, in the form of “critical pedagogy.” (Some of this is alluded to in Chapter 9 on Process Drama and its associated [webpage](#).)

Paul Sutton and CandT, a drama-in-education group in the UK, conducted similar experiments in the use of mediated performance to devise online interactions that combined process drama forms, Forum Theatre and social criticism to explore a range of issues. One significant project, *Cambat*, relates well to the examples discussed as it used the notion of taking control of CCTV cameras. Students were invited to a website where they could ostensibly, but fictionally, become intruders into the computer files of a fictitious security firm contracted to manage community CCTV cameras. The students were guided through a scenario that saw a company employee caught misusing a CCTV camera and having that camera turned back on himself. A case of “who watches the watchmen” was played out and students

were encouraged to consider the implications of CCTV intrusion into public places, which often served as social meeting places for young people.

Similarly, in 2002, The Project Woomera conducted by Brad Haseman and Kim Flintoff utilized a MOO environment at Queensland University of Technology to engage 94 students in an online role-playing scenario played out over 4 weeks that drew upon Forum Theatre and Process Drama to explore issues relating to environmental awareness and mandatory detention. This project was one of the first to identify the fractured and partial nature of such online engagement. The role-playing occurred within a structured environment but due to the simultaneous and dispersed interaction, no one had a complete experience of the entire drama. This begins to mark out some of the emerging differences that are becoming evident as the sophistication and diversity of online performances sees an evolution away from the traditional theatrical forms.

“To the Spice Islands” (<http://www.csu.edu.au/newmedia/batavia>), was conducted by John Carroll and David Cameron. This online project drew upon Interactive Drama and Process Drama to explore the plight of the survivors of the Dutch ship Batavia wrecked on the Western Australian coast in 1629. Students participating in this drama initially took on the role of trainee marine archaeologists who used online tools such as a TimeScope (essentially a streaming video player framed as a window into the past) to enrich the dramatic experience and the learning experience of the students. Like many of the other forms discussed in this chapter the emphasis in online performance was focused upon the experience of the participant. As John Carroll wrote, “As the drama is concerned with the participant's involvement, learning and change of outlook, to the outside spectator the outcome may appear undramatic. However as demonstrated in the project the internal experience of the drama can be profound for the participants.” (http://msstate.edu/Fineart_Online/Backissues/Vol_17/faf_v17_n08/reviews/carroll.html)

Conclusion

In 2001 when she initiated the[abc]experiment, Helen Varley Jamieson framed the project with the questions: how is technology changing our definitions of theatre? And what place does cyberformance have within theatre? These are still among the most pertinent questions raised by looking at the Internet as a medium for drama or as a venue for performance. There are no definite answers for such questions, as yet. The Internet is still a new medium compared to other media through which aesthetic performances are produced and presented to audiences accustomed to conventions and acquired concept references. Meanwhile, pioneers of online performance continue to explore ways to create applied and interactive performances through the Internet.

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