

Chapter 13

Staging *Second Life* in Real and Virtual Spaces

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ABSTRACT

*Over a four-week period students enrolled in a second-year visual theatre course at the University of South Australia attempted to stage the online virtual world *Second Life* in a conventional proscenium arch theatre. The *Staging Second Life* project played upon the liminal space between 'real' and digital, and gave the students the opportunity to transpose a virtual world into a theatrical setting. The students actively played between these two media in turn becoming intermedialists. Within the hypermedium of the theatre they were able to remediate the conventions of *Second Life* via their bodies and manipulation of objects. The project reflects a growing trend in performance pedagogy where technology and new ways of thinking about its applications are increasingly integrated into the curriculum. This chapter describes the practical aspects of the course as well as the emergent theory of intermediality underpinning the *Staging Second Life* project.*

INTRODUCTION

Theatre studies as a discipline is said to be undergoing a significant paradigm shift in response to media changes and technological innovation, which as Chapple and Kattenbelt argue, have led to 'new principles of structuring and staging words, images and sounds [and] new ways of

positioning bodies in time and space (Chapple and Kattenbelt, 2006, p. 11).

This chapter describes the *Staging of Second Life* which reflects such a paradigm change in a second-year visual theatre course conducted at the University of South Australia. Students enrolled in the visual theatre course attempted to stage the online virtual world *Second Life* in a conventional proscenium arch theatre, playing on the liminal space between 'real' and digital.

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Through this experience students were introduced to the interplay of the arts and technology and given the opportunity to both practice and research the co-relations between different media.

The *Staging of Second Life* reflects a growing trend in performance pedagogy where technology and new ways of thinking about its applications are increasingly integrated into the curriculum. This chapter describes the practical aspects of the course as well as the emergent theory of intermediality underpinning the *Staging of Second Life*.

BACKGROUND

Virtual reality, according to Giannachi (2004), is in a paradoxical relationship with the real since it is both part of the real and separate from it. A viewer is therefore at the one time immersed within the virtual as well as interacting with it. It is through this juxtaposition of the real and the virtual that the viewer is exposed to the paradoxes evident in our everyday life experiences. For this reason Giannachi (2004) asserts that the virtual is both a space for aesthetic and technological innovation as well as the site of politics and ethics.

Traditional conceptualisations of space and place are challenged by the virtual. As Wyeld, Prasolova-Førland and Viller (2007) suggest, cyberspace—the term coined by Gibson (1984) in his sci-fi novel *Neuromancer*, has no volume yet provides a sense of presence for individuals in the virtual places within which they meet and interact. They suggest further that presence, the feeling that we are really ‘there’, and immersion, the feeling that transports us to another place, are preconditions of place in 3D virtual environments. Virtual theatre parallels traditional theatre in that it provides a place for the staging of performances by actors in the presence of audience. However, as Wyeld, Prasolova-Førland and Viller (2007) assert, while theatre in a 3D virtual environment can be experienced as a passive representation of a particular conception of space, it also allows

participants to enter a space beyond representation and immersion. Actors and audience are both ‘present’ in the embodiment of their avatar in the virtual environment as well as located in a ‘real’ space in which they subjectively view their avatar projected on the screen. In this sense, virtual theatre can be described as ‘liminal’ (from the Latin word ‘limen’, meaning threshold), a term Victor Turner adapted from the work of Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep to explain the ‘in-between state of mind, in between fact and fiction... and in between statuses’ (Bigger, 2009). One of Turner’s great legacies was his recognition of the potential for liminoid performance to be transformative. Virtual theatre, as the space for aesthetic and technological innovation and a site of politics and ethics (Giannachi, 2004), can exploit this potential in contesting the hyperreality of mediated culture (Auslander, 1999).

Thus far we have focused our attention on performance within a 3D virtual environment, whereby actors and audience represented by their avatars controlled via a computer perform in real-time within a shared place in a 3D virtual world such as *Second Life*. Examples of virtual theatre in *Second Life* include performances that are played out in recreations of physical theatre spaces constructed in *Second Life*¹ and more contemporary performances such as the choreographed aerial acrobatics and dance performed by the ZeroG SkyDancers², which aim to break with conventions in exploring the native potential of the virtual

Joff Chafer, the third author of this chapter, was one of the performers in the 2008 production of *Hamlet in Second Life* (Figure 1). As he explains, in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* the audience are free to move their camera around at will thus watching a performance can be more akin to doing a live edit of a film. Such freedom contrasts with traditional theatre in which the Director seeks to direct the audience’s attention and can result in the audience missing important parts of the performance. Various performing companies in

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