Chapter XXI
Theatre in Second Life® Holds the VR Mirror up to Nature

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ABSTRACT

As creative people inhabit virtual worlds, they bring their ideas for art and performance with them into these brave new worlds. While at first glance, virtual performance may have the outward trappings of theatre, some believe they don’t adhere to the basic traditional definition of theatre: the interaction between an actor and an audience. Detractors suggest that physical presence is required for such an interaction to take place. However, studies have shown that computer mediated communication (CMC) can be as real as face-to-face communication, where emotional response is concerned. Armed with this information, the author can examine how performance in a virtual world such as Second Life may indeed be like “real” theatre, what the possibilities for future virtual performance are, and may require that we redefine theatre for online performance venues.

It’s like a Hall of Mirrors, where you keep bumping into reflection after reflection of things that aren’t there in the first place!

—Melissa Perreault, a resident of Second Life.

Are we avatars or people performing this particular dance?

—Meghamora Woodward, a resident of Second Life.

PROLOGUE

I dance in the middle of a floor that pulsates with lights from below, and am flanked by a half dozen other moving bodies: shirtless, tattooed men with bulging musculature, and scantily-dressed women perched atop impossibly high Frederick’s of Hollywood style shoes. All of us move in synch with choreography copied from Pulp Fiction, dancing to an electronic beat emanating from huge speakers at the front of the room. The floor then changes...
to display a rotating earth so that we seem to be floating in space above it. Colored disco lights flash around us, and suddenly a fog machine by the floor begins pouring out a bluish smoke that engulfs us, and momentarily obscures our view of the surroundings.

We are immersed in the sights and sounds of a disco. But there are no smells or touch sensations here. This is a dance club that exists only as binary information and in our imaginations, one of many in the online virtual world known as Second Life.

**INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS SECOND LIFE?**

Second Life® is, according to *Second Life: The Official Guide*, “a 3D online virtual digital world imagined, created and owned by its residents” (Rymaszewski, et al., 2007, p. 4). Anyone (with the required computing power) can access this world using the Second Life client, available as a free download from the website, secondlife.com. The user creates an avatar, “an interactive representation of a human figure in a games-based three-dimensional interactive graphical environment” (de Freitas, 69), and then moves through the virtual world. The user travels about, either by walking, flying, or—in the case of more distant locations—teleporting. One may tour shopping areas, art galleries, or other “builds” designed and created by Second Life residents.

At first glance, Second Life (SL) appears to be mostly about shoes, shopping and sex. Almost everywhere one travels, there are shoes and clothing available for sale. If so inclined, one can purchase a parcel of land, and drop a pre-designed house on the parcel. One can then furnish the house completely, with everything from living room sets, to detailed kitchens and bathrooms, to beds that have hidden boxes of animations in order to allow your avatar and another’s to engage in simulated sex.

Upon further exploration, however, one finds that the world offers much more. While a casual player or observer may never leave that dance club, the social networking possibilities are widespread. Since there are people connecting from many countries around the world, SL allows for global connectivity. Providing a virtual location for a variety of real world corporations and businesses (such as IBM, Toyota and Coldwell Banker), SL also provides educators with a venue for networking and collaborating with distant colleagues, or for creating a virtual classroom. In-world (inside Second Life) locations such as Edulsland and the New Media Consortium (NMC) offer teaching and learning resources for academics at all levels. For a variety of fields, SL is a rich laboratory, ripe with research topics. Psychologists (Suler, 2007) have analyzed behavior within Second Life; computer scientists (Schweller, 2007) have created virtual interactive objects for student use and experimentation.

For creative artists, there are a variety of small galleries to exhibit works created both in SL and the real world (Real Life, or RL), and numerous venues featuring live music and other, more theatrical, performances. Recently, in increasing ways, theatre practitioners have worked within the SL environment. As performances occur in SL, we learn more about how the virtual environment can or might work as a mirror of RL theatre, and what the possibilities are for future virtual performance. Another question arises: how “real”—meaning how much like RL live theatre—can these performances be?

**THEATRICALITY IN SECOND LIFE**

In an article entitled “Begin with A Single Step: Adding Technology to a Course” (2000), I compared the use of email and electronic or computer-mediated communication to wearing a mask in an acting class: