Social Media Narrative:
Issues in Contemporary Practice
hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy
and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:
Lineage and Contemporary Practice
Facebook, November 16 - 21, 2016

Transcript: Judith Adele

Judith Adele

· November 16

Some information about my work: My name is Ada Radius in virtual worlds, and I've been producing live virtual world theater since 2008 with a small, astonishingly talented troupe. Avatar Repertory Theater performs live, as avatars, and our audience is usually watching as avatars themselves, though occasionally watching a live stream or screen capture recording on YouTube or other video platform. You can see examples of some of our work at www.avatartheater.org, and posters on our Facebook page, but the best way to experience our work is to create a free account, choose an avatar, and enter the user-created virtual world where we're performing. You'll see us move our avatars live, while we say our lines, live. You'll be able to move your camera around in 3D virtual space to see the worlds we or other artists have created for us to perform in.

Our troupe consists of voice actors who have virtual world or gamer experience. Most of us also have skills in other areas that we need to do what we do. Script adaptations and directing that understands this medium, sound engineering, programming, 3D modeling, texturing and animating for sets and avatar design, a "house" manager who helps virtual world newbies with the rather steep learning curve, and all of the skills that any theater company needs, such as scheduling, publicity and fund raising.

Sound comes in via several channels; media streaming, that we may use for background SFX, but that has a long delay, inworld sound files, limited to 30-60 seconds each, and Vivox "Talk", with none to a few beats delay, but some limitations on how many people can be in the conversation. We say our lines via the Talk channel, compensating for the lag by speaking our lines earlier than a "real life" theater actor would, with the help of a director in a private text channel who lets us know who is hearing the Talk channel late, and by how much.

We most often perform on a virtual theater stage, and our preference, as we do a lot of Shakespeare, emulates a Renaissance theater. Not the Globe, something simpler that avatars can navigate more easily - a thrust stage with balcony in a 16th century courtyard is our most recent favorite.

Sometimes we've created entire immersive spaces and put the audience directly into the narrative. For example, in performances of Sophocles "Oedipus Rex" in 2010-2011, our set builder created the palace at the top of the Theban hillside, with paths (actor entrances) out in the direction of Corinth, Delphi and through the audience to the town of Thebes. Our audience avatars stood on virtual stones with animations so they danced, knelt, prayed and begged as the Chorus with the Chorus Leader. We gave them costumes if they wanted to blend in, and transformed the world around them from a depiction of modern-day Thebes as they arrived, back to 5th century BC as the play starts.

These immersive experiences take many months to produce, so we've done only a few, such as Shakespeare's "The Tempest", where we put the audience on floating crates and kegs in a steampunk shipwreck and where the boatswain transformed into a flying dragon to become Prospero. Several of our audience arrived as dragons for that one and watched from in the water near the ship. We also produced Howard Barker's "13 Objects" for the Barker 21for21 festival, in a grunge Slum City installation using the artwork of Arcadia Asylum, and adaptations of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass", where the audience found themselves falling down the rabbit hole, swimming in the sea of tears, on overstuffed sofas in a Victorian parlor overrun with tiny talking chess pieces, or sharing a moving train with talking insects and animals.

Our audience is highly intelligent, well educated in sciences, maths, engineering and Information Technologies, often with very little previous exposure to traditional theater arts. Although it doesn't do to underestimate them! I have, over the last five years or so, been working with Shakespeare folios and quartos to create the virtual world adaptations, rather than standard editions and I occasionally get a message in a text channel from an audience member who can hear the difference. That said, one of the most gratifying aspects of this kind of artwork is hearing from audience member who has never heard a Hamlet before, and who is moved and astonished by its narrative and outcome.

Avatar Repertory Theater started out performing in the virtual world Second Life, where we, for a few years, hosted weekly workshops and shows. In the last few years we have gradually moved to the open source virtual worlds – a vast collection of user-created grids using open source simulator software, on a wide assortment of servers run by commercial enterprises, nonprofits, universities, government agencies, artists and hobbyists. Our audience comes from those worlds that are "hypergrid enabled" - whose simulators allow avatars to "teleport" between grids. Our current 'home' is on one of the inexpensive commercial grids, www.kitely.com, where we're using on-demand Amazon cloud servers, and our hosts deal with the unending technical issues so we don't have to. As much.

In 2010 we joined forces with www.antiquepatternlibrary.org, to form our 501(c)(3) nonprofit arts organization, New Media Arts Inc – www.newmediaarts.org. Our objective and mission is to preserve our cultural heritages in new media platforms, and support, develop and preserve new media arts and artists. We've since added projects, such as our virtual world at https://www.kitely.com/virtual-w…/NewMediaArts-CTO/Cookie-II, where we hold classes, events, exhibits, and performances.

We've more recently gotten interested in influencing the development of open sim software development itself, which is going through profound changes in technology and organization. Our aim and philosophy is to encourage the direction of virtual world development to benefit arts, education and creative collaboration.

Comments

Judy Malloy Welcome to:
Judith Adele (Ada Radius) - Avatar Repertory Theater!

Her bio in the Panel Program is at http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#avatar

Image: MadameThespian Underhill in Second Life is sitting at her work table, manipulating her avatar and speaking her lines as Rosalinde/Ganymede in As You Like It -- in a live show A.R.T. performed in Second Life a few years ago as a part of Shakespeare at the Pavilion.

November 16 at 12:00pm

Victoria Pagan-Perez Wow this is so interesting,and I love theatre... I'd love to participate! I'm also a very good writer, if you need one of course
November 16 at 1:36pm

Judith Adele Thank you! Do you have an avatar in a virtual world?
November 16 at 1:46pm

Victoria Pagan-Perez Yes I do. I actually have multiple, I am an avid gamer and I love to make different characters!
November 16 at 2:02pm

Judith Adele That is excellent! Let's meet up! I am Ada Radius in the OS grids, current home at Kitely, though I have avatars at Second Life and Inworldz, Also at osgrid and Metropolis, though I usually hypergrid to those worlds with my Kitely avatar. Same avatar name in all.
November 16 at 2:08pm

Judy Malloy Hi Judith! Thank you for taking the time to write this outstanding statement on the work of the Avatar Repertory Theater. One thing that stands out in your documentation is the level of knowledge and skill required to create your productions.

This was somewhat more common in early social media narrative. I'm thinking of the level of technical skill that the Electronic Cafe developed and the equipment and collaboration needed in1977 for the Satellite Arts Project and Send/Receive projects. As pioneer Canadian telematic artist, Hank Bull, observes in Social Media Archeology and Poetics: "To hear a voice, read a message, or see a face on the screen, beamed in from afar, seemed like some kind of miracle. To have both sound and picture at once was exhilarating. And an event involving several points on a global network, all in touch with each other at the same time, with simultaneous sound, image and text, was a complex, relatively rare phenomenon that took a great deal of planning and preparation."

But this level of prep is not required for the most part to create on contemporary social media. There is not a problem with this because it allows more voices to participate, but at the same time what you are doing in Second Life is extraordinary. I note that you have a house manager to help newbies with the learning curve. And you also have a very useful toolbox in the Resources section of your website -- http://www.avatarrepertorytheater.org

Now for the big question:

Have you considered writing a book?
November 20, 2016 at 6:10pm

Judith Adele Hi Judy! Yes, I am working on a small book, at that awful phase where I've scrapped everything and am back to rewriting the outline, emerging occasionally to realize that I need to figure out what we'll be performing next year and that I bear no no resemblance to Stanislavski. In other words, having fun 🙂

·November 21 at 9:22am

Judy Malloy I'm very happy to hear this!

November 21 at 9:23am

Judy Malloy Judith Adele Thank you so much for bringing the innovative work of Avatar Repertory Theater to this panel!

We have explored contemporary social media platforms in our Social Media Narrative Class but have not looked at the open source virtual worlds. So it is of particular interest to read about Avatar Repertory Theater's work with the OpenSim technology-based www.kitely.com -- especially as used within your philosophy of encouraging virtual world development that benefits the arts, education, and creative collaboration.

As you point out, for those who have not experienced virtual worlds, it is not that difficult to get an account (they are usually free), create an avatar, go to the Hypergrid address, and experience how an Avatar Repertory Theater production immerses the audience in creative virtual worlds. For instance, in your words, in the production of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass", "...the audience found themselves falling down the rabbit hole, swimming in the sea of tears, on overstuffed sofas in a Victorian parlor overrun with tiny talking chess pieces, or sharing a moving train with talking insects and animals."

Current Avatar Repertory Theater performances have included this October's production: Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona".

In addition to their home page at

http://www.avatarrepertorytheater.org/home/ where events are listed,

visit the Have A.R.T. Will Travel Guide

at http://www.avatarrepertorytheater.org/.../join-virtual.../

Thanks, Judith and everyone at A.R.T.!

Get Your Own Virtual World | Kitely

Get your own virtual worlds for training, education, collaboration or fun. Create a free account and start…
kitely.com

November 24 at 2:49pm

Judith Adele Thank you for asking me to participate! I really enjoyed it.

November 25 at 2:52pm