

Poetry and Theatre Performance in Second Life
Presented at the New Media Consortium Symposium on Creativity
14 August 2007 at 12noon SL Time

- I. Welcome
- II. Introductions
 - A. Phorkyad Acropolis
 - 1. Dr. Stephen Schrum
 - 2. University of Pittsburgh @ Greensburg
 - 3. Planning to offer a course in Theatre Technology in SL SP 08
 - B. Meghamora Woodward
 - 1. Meghan Moran
 - 2. Master's student at San Jose State University (any day now)
 - 3. Interested in...?
 - C. Persephone Phoenix (Could not be here)
 - 1. Could not be here today; co-presenters' fee a problem
- III. Introduction to Session

PHORKYAD

As we extend our selves into our Second Lives, we of course infuse this Second Life with Creativity, which is a natural part of being human. This is why we see artistically created landscapes and inventive objects. Artworks, created in SL or imported from RL are also found everywhere. So it should come as no surprise that poetry and theatre also make appearances in Second Life.

This session today is about Poetry and Theatre Performance in Second Life. Along with some general remarks about such performance, with some personal historical context, we'll be involving you, the audience, in some demonstrations and poetry writing, and also premiering a new theatrical work created for this symposium.

Before the implementation of voice chat, poetry was the easiest and most accessible literary art form for Second Life. While storytelling or verbal improv did not work well when typed or copied and pasted into the chat box—since one easily becomes confused or lost, and has to scroll back, reread, then hurry back and catch up—the short form of poetry allows anyone to easily read along. Let me demonstrate:

PHORKYAD COPIES/PASTES HIS POEM: "My Muse" INTO CHAT WINDOW

This textual presentation allows others present to experience the poem as *readers*. If, when the poet is finished, the audience wishes to review the poem, they need only click on history, scroll up, and reread. By presenting a poem as a traditionally reading piece. Second Life allows the poem to be presented and enjoyed in real time; also, feedback is possible: audiences may clap, critique or compliment.

While this may seem somewhat artificial I recall having intense stage fright when I read my first poem in late summer 2006 at Shakespeare and Company Books in Mill Pond. The immediacy of the poetry “reading” with people seeing the poem, and reading it synchronously with my typing, added that level of—dare we call it—“reality.” Since that time, I have attended numerous poetry readings in SL, and often newcomers to a poetry venue will express their nervousness at the prospect of revealing their art and sharing their feelings and creative works to the audience present.

Because it works so well in Second Life, many poetry venues have sprung up. They include

- The aforementioned Shakespeare and Company
- The Blue Angel Poets' Dive, run by Persephone Phoenix
- Cruiz Control's Cruizin' Neo-Soul Def Poetry Jam
- Zephyr's Aire Poetry Contest

There have been others that seem to spring up and disappear as quickly as lawn mushrooms in the rain. They have also continued to evolve, as different venues offer different experiences. For example, Persephone Phoenix at the Blue Angel reserves the first half of the evening for people to present their poems. This is then followed by the Poetry Challenge. It consists of different types of poems that must be written on the spot, and then presented to the rest of the audience. The challenges vary in number of words, the number of lines—and even some where the poem can be read either forward or backward. Megh will now lead you through a couple of poetry challenges.

MEGHAMORA

The Dozen: A poem with only twelve words. Any form.

The Pyramid Poem: a poem that has ten lines; the first line has only 1 syllable; the second has 2, the third 3, and so on until the tenth line with 10 syllables.

Example: The Pyramid by Phorkyad (a literal version!)

AH!

How grand!

All that work--

Magnificent!

All single-minded

A single goal in mind (6)

A dwelling place for a god... (7)

A doorway to the afterlife (8)

Ah, how grand the pyramids still stand...

Eternal monuments to a belief

WE THEN GET THE AUDIENCE MEMBERS TO VOLUNTEER TO PRESENT

PHORKYAD

Some of us attending poetry readings in this way have of course been hoping for voice for quite some time. I wrote an epic poem called “There Be Dragons!” that takes a lot of effort to type or copy/paste, and would not “sound” the same in the reader’s head as it does if I had a chance to read it.

Before the official implementation of voice chat, some of us have experimented with using audio as a means of reading poetry aloud. sLiterary has used a phone system, where you call a number and connect to the land’s audio stream. Poet Secundo Dharma has often read others’ poems that they submitted on notecards for him to read. The major drawback to this is that the poet is not reading his or her own works; someone else is reading and interpreting them, and that may be different from how the poet intends the work to sound.

[PHORKYAD SWITCHES INPUTS TO SEND “LIKE A GHOST.”]

MEGHAMORA

Cruiz Control, at his Cruizin’ Neo Soul Poetry Jam, began using audio for “Spoken Word Poetry.” Poets would submit mp3s via email, then at Cruiz’s Cotton Club, the host would introduce a poet who would come to the microphone. Cruiz would then play the mp3 through the audio stream, and some poets—with shorter works—would type or copy/paste the poem at the same time into the chat window. This allowed the audience to hear the poets themselves, sometimes with musical accompaniment behind the words.

As an example, Phorkyad submitted one of his poems, “Like A Ghost,” to Cruiz. He had earlier recorded this for the release party of *The Absence of Shadows*, an anthology of poems by SL poets Phorkyad had edited and published in-world. Let’s hear “Like A Ghost” by Phorkyad Acropolis.

[“LIKE A GHOST” PLAYS]

Again, we hear the poet read the poem as he wants it to be heard, and possibly with music chosen by the poet himself. We believe that this approach allows for greater creativity and a better opportunity for self-expression.

PHORKYAD

Another type of “performance” is of course the poetry book. One example of this is *The Absence of Shadows* Megh just mentioned. I have also done an anthology of my own poems, entitled *The Future’s Passed*. Another anthology of SL poets, *Imagining Desire*, is due out September 8. (The earlier advertised release date of September 1 has been changed due to a real life wedding I must attend!) Of course, we expect poetry to flourish in SL as voice chat becomes more ubiquitous. While we acknowledge that some people will choose not to use it for legitimate reasons we welcome voice for its performance potential.

MEGHAMORA

And speaking of performance potential, let us briefly look at Theatre in SL.

PHORKYAD

There seems to be a strong drive to present theatre in Second Life. This is especially interesting when we step back and realize that we are ALWAYS performing in Second Life. Phorkyad Acropolis is very much like the human puppeteer behind this avatar, but the very nature of this form of communication suggests constant role-playing and performance.

I recently chaired a session at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education entitled “Interactive Media in Immersive Performance.” My own part of the presentation was proposing a taxonomy of digital performance, which is available online at: <http://www.musofyr.com/taxonomy/taxonomy.pdf>.

The rest of the session dealt with other immersive performances, and two of the panelists, Sweeney Sartre and Genu Insoo (their avatar names) presented a brief history of theatre performance in Second Life, covering the MillionsofUs production of *From the Shadows* and *virtual theatre performance in second life (live)*, both available on youtube. A search of “Second Life Theatre” on youtube will allow you to find those. For me, of more significance are two more recent theatrical productions. The first was presented by a group in SL called ACT UP. Megh was involved with the production in rehearsal, and has some observations.

MEGHAMORA

[Observations on ACT UP]

PHORKYAD

The ACT UP performance featured avatars moving to a pre-recorded soundtrack, with dialog and music. When I prepared to direct THE PERM, a play by SL resident Zayante Hegel, I was determined to use live audio, hoping that voice would come to SL before we opened.

In the end, we used a Skype conference call into a NiceCast stream, which had a built-in 17-second lag. This created a problem for the two actors, Misty Taira and Ludo Merit, who had difficulty synchronizing their movements to their words; obviously it is difficult to act and to listen to your performance and move to it with a 17-second delay. However, as a director, I minimized the movement so it would not be too distracting.

One of the decisions I consciously made was to have the blocking provided by visible pose balls. The balls were an obvious choice; in RL we have actors move to specific places on the stage, and the pose balls would allow this. Also, since the performance was taking place in SL and not RL, I didn't see the point of trying to hide them—one of the ways any production of this type is successful is when we use the characteristics and limitations of the medium to our advantage. (As a side note, I once dropped into a rehearsal for one of the ACT UP one acts. The director of the play said, "I know all about theatre; I don't know much about Second Life." And that is a problem; as I said, SL is NOT RL, and we must use different techniques.)

While THE PERM was not perfect, I think it was a positive step in the evolution of theatrical performance in SL. Having the live audio created an excitement between actors and audience—similar to that excitement and nervousness I experienced with that first poetry reading I had attended nearly a year ago.

As the first postscript to this presentation, one of the issues I raised in my proposed taxonomy of digital performance regarded our commonly-held definitions of theatre and performance. I tend to think of what happens in SL as performance and not theatre, since we don't have true interactivity between actor and audience. However, with the greater frequency of computer-mediated performance, and the changing perception of the audience, perhaps we need to revise our definition of theatre. I say this because, as I have traveled in SL, and checked out people's profiles, I have seen a large number of them saying, "Be careful of your emotions. Second Life can get very real very quickly." People rapidly attach themselves to others, as friends and as lovers, to other avatars because they perceive them in particular way—and these attachments sometimes result in very real heartbreak.

If the virtual performance created by the interaction between performer and the audience can be as real as these online relationships (given the imagination and willing suspension of disbelief of the spectator), perhaps we need to expand out traditional definition of theatre, and can then create theatre (more than simply performance) in online and cyberspace venues.

Now, having said all that intellectual stuff: for the second postscript, Megh and I would now like to perform a brief work-in-progress entitled GUSTUS, which I hope you will find amusing, and which embodies my idea of using the characteristics of this particular medium. I will also be using a variation in my RL Advanced acting class this fall. Afterwards we will be happy to answer questions and discuss the issues raised here today. Ladies and gentlemen GUSTUS.

[MEGH AND PHORKYAD PERFORM *GUSTUS*.]

The poem “Like A Ghost” is available in *The Absence of Shadows*, published in-world and at www.cafepress.com/musofyr

More info:

Info on Poetry and Theatre Performance in SL:

<http://www.musofyr.com/Phorkyad/SLPerformance/SLPerformance.html>

Taxonomy of Digital Performance:

<http://www.musofyr.com/taxonomy/taxonomy.pdf>

Article on Poets and The Absence of Shadows in SL:

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/entertainment/books/20070701_Online__Second_Life_avatars_are_prosing_and_poetizing.html

Perm Photos:

http://picasaweb.google.com/laundra/SL_Play

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