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Distance Learning Theatre Studies: limitations and perspectives in the emerging era of mixed reality

Ελένη Γεώργιος Τιμπλαλέξη

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Eleni Timplalexi
post doc researcher
Department of Theatre Studies
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
elentimple@theatre.uoa.gr

Abstract
Distance learning is by nature a paradigm of mixed reality, as it encompasses procedures and outcomes manifesting both in the physical as well as the digital world. Despite the mixed reality shift in human experience and culture, distance learning, especially in the case of theatre or performance studies, does not embrace wholeheartedly digital or mixed reality methods of performing for teaching and evaluation. What could be a celebration of the inherent mixed reality nature of distance learning in theatre studies, does not reach its full potential.
In this paper, a discussion of some indicative mixed reality methods of performing is attempted in order to suggest a basic corpus of practices that could be used effectively in theatre studies distance teaching, learning and evaluation. These methods are interactive, maximize participation, are cheap, may create unique conceptual and aesthetic backgrounds for productions and have a low risk. Furthermore, some of the ideological obstacles that may hinder the use of such methods are addressed. With the theatre and technology correlations being rephrased at the current state, distance learning programmes for theatre studies could turn out to be an excellent terrain for the implementation of innovative and cutting edge artistic expression modes and practices.

Keywords: *distance learning; theatre studies; mixed reality; networked performance; internet relay chat; digital role playing games; virtual worlds; presence; embodiment*

Introduction

Education follows the paths shaped by the deep change of our cognitive platforms from a "paper-centered" civilization to the platform of the computer, the digital (Santorinaios, 2007). In fact, recent developments actually pinpoint towards what is now called "mixed reality", the blending of the physical with the digital (Microsoft, 2017), hence a combination of procedures and outcomes manifesting in the physical world and others being realized on a digital platform. In this latest trend, one could trace the biggest challenge for distance learning, where teaching and learning are fabricated in a mixed reality mode anyway.
But, what could be a celebration of the accordance between the inherent mixed reality nature of distance learning and the mixed reality shift in human experience, is not resourced upon to its full potential in the fields of theatre and performance studies. For example, video recordings of live performances are still the main way to evaluate the "practical aspect" of acting and directing in distance learning.

Various limitations and ideological obstacles stand in the way of using specific digital and mixed reality practices and evaluating mediatized performance within the framework of a distance learning theatre studies programme. Such are the lack of training of students and staff in the use of emerging methods on one hand as well as ideological perceptions on the "physicality" and "presence" in theatre practice and the subsequent lack of those in mediatized performance on the other.

Limitations and perspectives in Distance Learning Theatre Studies
Just as the transformations caused by the use of new media are embraced by the private and the public spheres in many instances, theatre and performance are being transformed too in order to incorporate these changes in perception, communication and expression. From "digitally enhanced performance" to "internet theatre" and from "cyberdrama" to "networked performance", digital technology serves already well theatre and performance (Jamieson, 2008). When this modal blending occurs within a framework of a theatrical production, it does not seem το pose a threat upon the physicality of the actor/performer. On the contrary, it may trigger discussions upon the physical and the sensual as absolutely necessary for the realization of a theatre production, or a "juxtaposition" between the "physical" and the "mediated" or "mediatized" (Auslander, 1999, p. 3). But, when digital technology "masks" the actor/performer through the use of avatars or personas and remediates performance, rendering it framed within a digital context, then introspection and "back to the essentials" attitude kicks in.

The dominant practice of delivering a piece of performance for evaluation within a distance learning theatre studies programme is either a physical production to which teaching staff is invited to attend or a video recording of a physical performance. But, some other excellent and much cheaper practices that could contribute in the realization and evaluation of a distance learning undergraduate or postgraduate degree in theatre studies, performance studies and acting/directing are:

I) **networked performance.** (Jamieson, 2008, p. 27). This is "any live event that is network enabled"; Networked performance can be seen as a subset of net art, while also existing outside it, for example work that is networked by means other than the internet, such as mobile phones or a local area network (LAN). The key features of networked performance, as opposed to a video recorded performance, are that it is live, real time and creates a potentially clear feedback loop between performer and audience "experienced at the moment of creation or reception". It becomes evident that an example of networked performance may actually offer a simulation of a rehearsal where performers interact with a theatre director, a trainer or a lecturer, follow directions or give feedback on performance in real time, allowing an elaborate establishment of performative and communication layers such as oral directions, feedback and chat facility dialogue, in order to for a more holistic result of a performance in progress to be achieved.

II) **Internet relay chat**. The use of internet relay chat in a role playing context belongs to computer-mediated communication, is synchronous, taking place in real time, and could involve communication between two or more users-players. It may follow the linguistic paths shaped by *netspeak, netlish* or *weblish*, a dialect based on English, a morphologically and syntactically multimodal hybrid phenomenon, which combines elements of oral and written speech, graphics and differentiated orthography (Bowman, 2010, p. 30-31). Messages are usually produced within certain limitations, such as the

emerging number of characters within a message. Users-players have to wait for their turn and sometimes messages may overlap.

The text produced in internet relay chat facility tends to phonetically simulate face-to-face oral speech. It is theatromorphic, if not dramatic and theatrical (Timplalexi, 2016, p. 62). Its theatromorphic attributes include character names, dialogical format, sequence of dramatic personas speaking (turn-based), direct speech and combination of text and emotions description through the use of emoticons or within braquets < > or asterisks * *. Whether or not chat text could claim to be a new version of theatrical script requires further research, but it can be used within a dramatic, theatrical and performative context.

Role players within a theatre and performance distance learning programme may get involved in internet relay chat use for two main reasons, to improvise as a character, thus developing actively a biography of a character and/or to generate text in devising theatre or creative writing contexts. So, it is actually a useful tool for actors, directors and playwrights. Two or more actors could improvise from scratch or render familiar within an informal setting a classical, difficult play; a director could lead an actor subtly to a shared and accordingly triggered biography; and a playwright could co-fabricate a text with another person or a chatbot.

III) **Digital role playing games.** These are a popular genre of digital games. They are based on role taking and playing, character control and/or embodiment, through avatarial extensions in gaming fictional worlds. Digital role playing games run on various digital platforms and are classified according to certain criteria, some of them being genre (war, strategy, adventure) or aim (serious games, educational or advert games). The current analysis focuses on MMORPGs.

The most popular form of digital role playing games is Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). In them, players get simultaneously connected to the game system in real time and interconnected through the internet. Players interact with each other, the game system and non player characters. This interaction is enabled through avatars, usually customized according to players' needs and tastes. The navigation through dangerous grounds and the accomplishment of missions cause avatars to "level up", gain experience and eventually defeat the game system.

During gameplay, players may develop written communication between each other, in the form of short text messages known as "chat", as well as oral one, through the use of microphone. Active MMORPGs role players combine "networked performance" instances and internet relay chat use to improvise real time live role play. Acting is accomplished through the use of voice, transmitted by microphones, image, by using PC cameras and avatarial control in the gameplay environment. Role players may also get dressed up as characters for more effective self expression and immersion in their roles, performing various action sequences, such as battle movements (Williams, Kennedy & Moore 2011, p. 171-200).

Through this description of MMORPGs, the potential uses for distance learning in Drama, Theatre and performance tend to emerge. These games invite players to control, navigate and perform through an avatar in a game world. Avatarial embodiment could appeal as a training tool for actors as well as directors. The former could experiment with first and third person

perspective in these games to explore the phenomenology of the body in performance and acquire extensive understanding of how character parameters affect performance, just as in acting systems such as that of Stanislavski (Stanislavski 1986/1936). They can also experiment in voice, text and movement. Directors could even stage a virtual version of a performance, fabricate it from scratch and direct it, experimenting with possibilities with no cost.

Another similar field for possible experimentation with digital gaming in a role playing setting is that of MMOs or MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Simulations or Massively Multiplayer Online Games), such as *The Sims*. Where as gameplay in MMORPGs is rule-based and with a typical quantifiable outcome, MMOs and MMOGs are based on free play and simulation. These environments usually do not belong to the adventure genre. They partially overlap with Virtual Worlds, such as *Second Life* (Reynolds, 2007, p. 24-28).

The rationale for use in this case remains the same as with the case of MMORPGs, but, since MMOs and MMOGs digital environments are platforms in which players interact in between them and with the fictional world and usually lack a quantifiable outcome, they offer different but fruitful terrain for experimentation. Character development in the former develop vertically through level ups, where as in the latter horizontally. So they may be used in different directing techniques and dramatic genres.

IV) **Virtual Worlds.** Networked, cyberspatial, persistent virtual environments, accessible by avatars, that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people (Bell, 2008, p. 2-3), with the ability to engage them in long-term, coordinated conjoined action (Thomas and Brown, 2009, p. 37). A Virtual World may host interactions between participants that may or may not have an impact on the physical world e.g. start up a business or set up a University Department.

One of the most emblematic cases of virtual worlds is *Second Life*, developed by Linden Lab and firstly launched in 2003. Accessible freely through the internet, *Second Life* affords its residents abundant possibilities for interaction by using customized avatars that achieve daily activities, such as socializing, taking part in public or private events and offer services.

Virtual Worlds offer the option of creation of a whole setting, building or area. So they may serve better when used for programmes of costume and set designing, or for directing avatarial, situated performances.

Apart from the potential for excessive role play through avatarial control, voice impro and chat box facility, virtual worlds may actually host virtual rehearsal spaces or even theatres. Theatre-making and watching is not an unusual activity for avatars in *Second Life*. Numerous theatrical ensembles such as the *SL Shakespeare Company*, which developed a replica of the Globe Theatre, perform live or even organise virtual auditions. *Second Life Shakespeare Company* has virtually staged for example *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*. Theoretically, every theatre, drama and performance distance learning programme could set up a branch in *Second Life*, build their own rehearsal space and perform live through avatars. This could contribute greatly to the teaching and evaluation of a theatre studies distance learning programme.

V) **Mixed-reality technologies.** These often embed physical performance in digital environments and fabricate a mixed-reality experience. Such

technologies as *Wii, Machinima* and *Kinect* can be used for delivering somewhere a physical performance which is exported to a digital virtual space. An example of this suggestion is University of California *Play the knave,* a *Kinect*-enabled game for Windows, which offers users an immersive, embodied experience of staging a scene from a Shakespeare play. "The screen shows a threedimensional image of the theater stage the players have chosen...each player's avatar (i.e., the costumed actor) appears on the stage ready to perform. Shakespeare's script lines scroll at the bottom of the screen, and in a kind of theater karaoke, the players perform, their gestures and voices mapped onto their avatars" (Bloom, 2015, p. 120).

The interesting potential in using such a technology within the framework of a theatre studies distance learning programme arises both from the embedded notion of distance between the physical world and the digital virtual environment as well as the inscription of gesture and voice onto avatars. A trainer or evaluator could watch from a distance a live performance delivered by an actor as projected in real time on an avatar.

The common ground for using these technologies as tools for the delivery of training and evaluation within the framework of a theatre studies distance learning programme is that they are interactive, maximize participation, are cheap, may create unique conceptual and aesthetic backgrounds for productions and have a low risk in experimenting implementation. The main drawback is the need for training trainers how to use them as well as students and some ideological obstacles standing on the way and hindering innovation, which are discussed below.

Although this has been a rather theoretical approach, it is clear enough that digital technologies may have a considerable impact on performing, rehearsing and evaluating practices in distance learning for drama, theatre and performance. But, in order to attempt and experiment with these digital technologies, some prejudices also need to be addressed and revised. These involve possible perceptions and attitudes of trainers and trainees about presence, liveness, in other words the centrality of human physical tangibility and role as embodiment vs. character control.

Let us now examine briefly some of the ideological obstacles and limitations that could be overcome to welcome alternate digital or mixed reality practices in "performing" or "directing" for a drama, theatre and performance distance learning programme:

i) **presence, liveness, centrality of human physical tangibility.** There are two main opposite positions with regards to the notion of presence, liveness or the centrality of human physical tangibility.

The extrovert position claims that technology and theatre are bound together, be it the theatrical building itself, *deus ex machina, ekkyklema* (Salter, 2010, p. xxii), masks (Auslander, 2002, p. 17) or even the human body (Brown, 2008, p. 183). According to McLuhan, even if the body cannot be considered a medium, the phonetic alphabet and clothing, common extensions of man diachronically in dramatic expression, clearly are media (McLuhan, 2001, p. 38–9, 44). This mediatization necessity and physical human presence co-exist in theatre and performance.

The introvert position of theatre studies, on the other hand, holds that it is presence and the centrality of the human physicality that make theatre so unique, with Phelan highlighting that performance's only life is in the present (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Performance becomes what it is through its evaporation, its immaterial traces, leaving an impact. Every repetition is unique and is meterialized through the presence of human live bodies.

The extrovert position may lack clear definitions in an ever changing technoligical landscape, but is ontologically flat. Human and machine are at a first glance ontologically approached as equals and then may or may not differentiate in milder nuances. The introvert position gives the human being as the sole performer an ontological advantage. It is difficult to ponder technology as embodiment, even metaphorically. This may be motivated by veiled notions of the 'aura' of the work of art (Timplalexi, 2016, p. 61).

Networked performance, internet relay chat and mixed reality technologies may be said to suffer from an inherent trauma with regards to their liveness and presence. However, Dixon's position that live presence does not depend on the medium form (video-recorded or telematic performance) but on the spectator's sense of being present, there, of watching, offers a valid argument (Dixon, 2007, p. 127-129). Besides, telepresence has for a while been a valid, enjoyable and useful form of presence for many of us in our every day lives (e.g. telephone, teleconferencing). So, it is not presence that suffers, nor liveness. Physical, analog theatrical performance may boast about its uniqueness but in terms of vulnerability, not necessarily of presence.

Furthermore, a recorded performance, even in real time, should not pose an ontological threat to a "live" one (Auslander, 1999, p. 54). Any live performance can be potentially recorded and any recorded performance has been live at some stage, *in order* to be recorded. Live and physical presence do not by all means guarantee the ultimate sense of presence, as there are numerous examples of very boring theatre performances where a dozen of bodies move and make gestures on stage (Dixon, 2007, p. 133). Fried (Dixon, 2007, p. 134) defines presence as the special complicity that a performance requires from its spectator, this focus of attention, and Dixon concludes that presence may be more time-realted than embodiment-related (Dixon, 2007, p. 127).

ii) **role as embodiment vs. character control.** Digital role playing games and Virtual Worlds, on the other hand, may be claimed to suffer from lack of physical embodiment. The mode of dramatic expression in theatre differs from that in digital role playing games. The actor/performer pretends to be a character or an indexical version of herself, she "incarnates" the character, the role. In digital role playing games, it is character control, as opposed to strictly speaking physical embodiment of the actor, that facilitates pretense and role playing. This character control is illustrated via two main visual and perceptive as well as cognitive strategies: the control of an avatar as if one was embodied *in* the avatar, looking out to the game world through a first person perspective *and* the control of an avatar from a distance, a third person point of view, or, in other words, by seeing one's avatar acting and reacting within the game world. When talking about first person perspective, it is analog physical embodiment that is attempted to be simulated, by making the point of view of the player and the point of view of the character coincide. In the third person perspective case, the performer moves another body, as if one was a puppet player in analog theatre.

The opposition between embodiment and personification (animation of a third body) and the ontological priviledge of the former is not the sole approach for the effective contemplation and the theorizing of theatre and performance. Even in analog embodied performance, it is not just the Stanislavskian approach that shaped the avant garde (Stanislavski, 1986/1936), but also the man-marionnette debate as expressed through the works of Meyerhold, Craig and Kantor (Olf, 1974) or more oriental traditions such as Noh Theatre, where the heart of the actor is supposed to control the

whole body (Plowright, 2005, p. 277). Through this very brief mentioning, it becomes evident that emoobied theatre/performance and character control are not in conflict. The puppet, the avatar and role are all "gates" for the cognitive "entrance" into worlds of fiction or performance. According to Winnicott, roles and dolls/puppets are both transitional objects (Silvio, 2010, p. 426).

But, avatarial performance has to overcome another obstacle in order to achieve its acceptence as a possible way to tele-perform. It is not strictly speaking recorded performance, it is a performance fabricated from scratch, a synthetical performance, not a document of an original human physical performance that once took place in the physical world. Although it may have elements of performance in the physical world (e.g. voice and movement impro through camera and speakers) for players controlling their avatars, it does not depict human performance. This is a fallacy, since of course the controller of an avatar is a performer making decisions for actions and reactions within the game world. Human performativity is not erased, it is only masked and partially moved to a meta-position.

Discussion

The need to revise theatricality and performativity in the age of digital and mixed media becomes clear. So does the need to revise teaching and evaluation methods in theatre studies both in an analog as well as mixed reality context, as within the framework of a distance learning programme in theatre studies.

Not only will these good practices contribute in the overall educational profile of Open Universities but expand the horizons of future theatre professionals, teachers and academics and lead to the close attendance of the transformations of theatre and performance in the digital/mixed reality era.

Turning disadvantages into advantages requires intention, effort and close evaluation at initial stages, so that the proposed practices as not discarded as irrelevant. The training of both trainers and trainees is absolutely essential to overcome obstacles such as analyzed above and use the suggested techiniques/practices conceptually and creatively to provide outcomes of artistic quality. Surely, a period of experimentation would smooth away any compulsiveness to impose failure on such methods, which would result in their prompt discarding.

With the theatre and technology correlations being rephrased at the current state, distance learning programmes for theatre studies could turn out to be an excellent terrain for the implementation of innovative and cutting edge artistic expression modes and practices.

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