

SLIDE 1 - THEATRE IN VW'S & THE SLSC: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Hello, and welcome to the SL Globe Theatre. This is Ina Centaur, Artistic Director of the SL Shakespeare Company.

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In the next ten minutes or so, I'm going to give a brief overview of Theatre in Virtual Worlds, followed by a case study of The SL Shakespeare Company. This presentation will conclude with a live demo of a play performance, right here in our universally accessible virtual theatre in Second Life.

SLIDE 2 - THEATRE IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

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Virtual theatre (in the context of this presentation) is an umbrella term for theatrical performances (and things relating to theatrical performances) in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are multiuser 'worlds' that exist in computer-simulated reality, more often known as 'virtual reality.'

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Virtual worlds can be as unlike the known reality as possible, or may contain analogues of the real world, such as currency and similar spatial relations. The emulation of three dimensional reality is one popular example. The key thing to note is that virtual worlds are *not* only a simulation of reality, but necessarily social-interactive: the emphasis is on multi-user.

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Current mainstream implementations allow for user interaction inworld as represented by his or her avatar. (An avatar is basically the oft stylized "virtual body" of the

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participant.) Some currently more well-known virtual worlds are ActiveWorlds, World of Kaneva, World of Warcraft, Eve Online, and Second Life.

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While only a few virtual worlds have had mainstream media attention, the fact is that there are many virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are typically software produced commercially, although there are some open source and nonprofit ones. Different virtual worlds have different features. A communication medium of some sort -- whether voice or text chat, for example -- is present in all virtual worlds.

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Virtual Theatre, or theatre in virtual worlds, in its most general form has actors controlling avatars to tell a story, as witnessed by an audience of avatars. The potential of such manifestations of theatre is that one can more easily create immersive settings, and also "customize" the rules of reality. But, what's both philosophically and practically interesting is that theatre in virtual worlds is no longer location-dependent: it becomes globally accessible anywhere with an Internet connection.

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Because actors are represented by their avatars in virtual worlds, the puppetry analogy is perhaps the most elegant way to describe the performance of virtual theatre: Actors control avatars through keyboards or other connective interface, similar to how puppet-actors control puppets through strings.

SLIDE 3- THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF SL, BRIEFLY

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Second Life seems to be where all the mainstream media attention is at, so here's a very brief overview of SL.

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Second Life (SL) is an immersive open-ended virtual world imagined by and created by its users. With over fifteen million registered users as of late 2008, it also has an extensive inworld commerce system, with over \$10 million us dollars exchanged each month. It is global and communal, and it is an effective social networking platform. People from all walks of life and in all economic sectors spend time in it.

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In Second Life, users register for a unique avatar name. From that, they can enter the world and basically do anything, the emphasis is on this virtual world being "open-ended," or not restricted with predetermined missions like game-based worlds. Note, a user need not expend any funds to pursue endeavors in Second Life. However, the more traditional routes of establishment typically require the purchase of land or islands to establish venues in.

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Second Life is often referred to as the "metaverse," referring to a word coined in a Neal Stephenson novel of a virtual world whose reality is based on a metaphor of the real world.

SLIDE 4 - FORMS OF THEATRE IN SL

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Theatre in Second Life involves actors as represented by avatars. Control of this avatar is dependent on the connective interface. The default control would be using keyboard and mouse. But, gamepads and more intuitive interfaces have also become mainstream. Notably, the OCZ nia is a brain-computer interface made mainstream by OCZ, a popular gaming hardware manufacturer.

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The most basic implementation of theatre is also what your typical SL user would consider the most "live," every single recognizable aspect of it is controlled by a real user (via their avatar). Speech is transmitted using text chat, Second Life music media stream, or through SL Voice. (A live demo of this would follow this presentation shortly.)

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On the other end of the scale, there are technology-guided implementations, where artificial intelligence can be used to perform autonomously. The SL Shakespeare Company has tried both extremes, as well as variations in between. The best practice is generally to use a hybrid implementation of both the basic and technology-guided implementations.

SLIDE 5 - CLARIFICATION

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Now that I've attempted to summarize a rather profound medium in about a minute, I have some points of clarification to make about theatre on Second Life.

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Firstly, theatre on Second Life is not a teleplay. Although actors may be physically separated by long distances, the fact of the matter is that the play performance occurs and exists within the virtual world. Second Life is considered by many to be a complete world, not only does it have its own economy (that rivals even real world systems), it also has its own culture and intelligentsia.

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Secondly, Second Life is not a broadcast medium. There are both physical and arbitrary limitations to the number of users who can be present at a single local event.

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Finally, Second Life is not just about computer graphics animations or CGI. It's a realtime medium within a virtual world, that allows for instantaneous interaction between audience and actors. When you have an actor on a virtual stage, it's definitely a live medium, where anything and everything can happen once showtime starts!

SLIDE 6 - LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Second Life is new. The platform and this particular implementation of open-ended highly user-customize-able virtual worlds are experimental. In other words, we don't know if we'll just fall over the edge if we sail to the end of the world. Beware of dragons!

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But, the thing to note is that Second Life allows for an unprecedented high degree of customization in avatars, set designs, and other inworld

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creations. With sufficient
resources, it's possible to emulate
RL productions recognizably.

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Many innovative possibilities are
possible with Second Life.
Using custom client software, it
is potentially possible to induce
transparent interfaces. This
basically means that we could throw
the keyboard and mouse away, as the
connective interface becomes just
input from a realtime motion
capture system.

SLIDE 7 - CASE STUDY: SLSC

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And now, the moment you've all been
waiting for. I'm going to attempt
to present a lightning fast case
study summary of the SL Shakespeare
Company, and then shrew you the
heart of the message through a live
demo.

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The SL Shakespeare Company (SLSC)
is primarily known as the only
professional theatre company based
in SL. Along with the Virtual
Shakespeare Consortium, it is also
curator of the most historically
accurate theatres and architecture
relating to William Shakespeare in
virtual worlds (and, some say, the
Internet).

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The SLSC is an independent
organization. It is fiscally
sponsored by sLiterary, Inc., a
nonprofit organization dedicated to
furthering the arts in virtual
worlds. It is not affiliated with
Linden Lab, the creators of Second
Life. It is not affiliated with any
one institution, though many have
participated, and all are welcome
to participate.

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The SL Shakespeare Company was founded in 2007 by Ina Centaur. It is composed entirely of staff recruited from the user communities of Second Life, and the Internet.

SLIDE 8 - SLSC ORG STRUCTURE

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Our main Performance Environment are historically-accurate replica's of both Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and also the Bard's indoor theatre, the Blackfriars Theatre.

Picture: Globe Theatre

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The SL Globe Theatre is set in the midst of an arts mecca in virtual worlds, neighbor to prominent art galleries and other historic replicas.

Picture: Blackfriars Theatre

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The Blackfriars Theatre in Shakespeare, Second Life, is the world's only complete replica of Shakespeare's indoor theatre. It's perfect for Elizabethan-style black box theatre.

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The SLSC is headed by an artistic director, currently Ina Centaur. We have experimented with fundraising completely based in Second Life, but the funds raised are only barely sufficient to cover virtual land ownership fees to Linden Lab.

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We utilize the talented network of the merchants of Second Life, who help create its significant inworld economy. These are high-caliber artists and creators, many considered the elite of Second Life. (It's interesting that status

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in Second Life is like that of an artistic meritocracy. Our tendency to select only the best material for use in our production has consistently put us at the top of that hierarchy.) Our publicity is grassroots-based, which is actually one of the most effective means of communication on Second Life, from the typical use-case perspective.

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Also, SL is wonderful for outreach, especially to an audience who would not get to see live theatrical shows in their lifetime. SL reaches to all economic sectors, around the world. Many saw their first Shakespearean play on SL through us.

SLIDE 9 - SLSC PRODUCTIONS

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As our name betrays, our main repertoire is Shakespearean. We generally focus on creating a single Shakespearean play per year. But, we also pursue smaller productions, and productions of modern and new plays.

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In 2007, our pilot year, the emphasis was more on the showcase of technology than on the acting. We continue to innovate and create new technologies in this medium with each new production. In 2008, we have started applying scansion and analysis, age-old traditions from the Royal Shakespeare Company to rigorous rehearsal sets.

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We hold open auditions, and recruit all of our actors from Second Life and the Internet. Most actors have never met before in RL. Our rehearsals are done using Skype and Second Life.

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Picture: Hamlet Playbills

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In 2007, our pilot year, we performed several scenes from Hamlet. (Here are some playbills and mug shots of actor avatars.)

Picture: Hamlet Sets

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The emphasis was on a historically accurate Elizabethan-era production, which required the creation of several new outfits and props. Due to the ease of creating content like scenery, we also created sets that were structured to fit the Globe Theatre's two-column thrust stage.

Picture: Actor Faces

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We created photorealistic avatars based on actor faces. Here are some examples.

SLIDE 10 - SLSC 2009 TWELFTH NIGHT

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Twelfth Night is our main Shakespearean play for 2009. Early work for this production started in 2008, as a full-costumed tag-team staged reading series of the entire play.

Picture: Twelfth Night Playbills

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You might raise an eyebrow when I say this, but Twelfth Night, Act 1 is currently playing in an open-ended run! Yup, we've managed to put on an open-ended run of an unabridged Shakespearean play!

Picture: Twelfth Night Sets 2

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Unlike our previous production, Twelfth Night is set in the "generic past." This avoids extraneous implications that often come with modernity.

Picture: Twelfth Night Sets 1

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The challenge in wardrobe was to create in each avatar the look of an archetypal character from the play.

Picture: Twelfth Night Orsino

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In conclusion, what's interesting to note about theatre in Second Life is that the world itself is a constantly evolving medium -- changing and progressing based on what its users do and create.

Final Picture: Twelfth Night Act 1 Scene 2 Loading

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And now, we will give you a live demo of a scene from Twelfth Night: Act 1, Scene 2--the shipwrecking storm from the coast of Illyria will be transported instantly here to the SL Globe Theatre.