Virtual Play Creation

digitalresearch.bsu.edu/immersive-learning-showcase-2021/exhibits/show/virtual-play-creation

Students work in groups to write, direct and perform a piece of virtual theatre with the goal to create a set of "best practices" for virtual theatre as a partnership with the Pheonix Theatre. Students are divided into three groups to pitch three unique Zoom play proposals and develop one selected proposal into a 1-3 minute, 3-6 minute, and finally an 8-20 minute play. Each group will present their full play at the end of the semester in a virtual play showcase put on by the class. Throughout the semester, students complete both self-assessments and peer assessments to measure professionalism, problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, and resilience.

Student Participants:

Shelby Brown, Myra Carleton, Paige Demba, William Freeman, Mason Golden, Anthony Hayes, Sarai Heylmun, Lizzie Nguyen, Mario Noto, Liz Patton, Maggie Perisho, Gayle Radwick, Janae Robinson, Becca Schaefer, Jordan Shaw, Chase Strange, Grace Wagner, Nor White, Arianna Zielinski

Credits

Matt Reeder, Tom Horan, André Garner

Research

We started the semester by spending time researching some of the existing virtual theatre in the world, and a discussion about some of the things that we are drawn to about virtual theatre as well as some things that we would like to avoid.

Some Virtual Theatre we Were Inspired By:

Zoom Theatre is a company that produces shows specifically for the Zoom platform. All of their shows are free to watch live.

24-Hour Plays is a company that produces new monologues that are written, rehearsed, and recorded in isolation within 24 hours.

The Neo-Futurists is an experimental theatre company in Chicago. They release a show weekly at a low cost. The Chicago Tribune claims: "The Neo-Futurists have created the most successful online shows of the pandemic"

Some Tips and Tricks we Found from Other Virtual Theatre Creators:

A video compilation of creative ways to perform stunts and stage combat virtually. We were drawn to their use of movement and camera angles.

https://learn.schooltheatre.org/creating-virtual-performances

This is a whole database of helpful information on creating virtual content. It includes a video example, written tips, relevant terms and definitions, example scenarios, and even links to other relevant resources.

An article that gives tips for 'setting the stage' for virtual plays. The article is geared towards directors but has useful tips for everybody.

A video tutorial that includes a guide for using virtual tech elements like greenscreens and camera set-up.

Our Take-Aways:

- Some performances and some are live. Both have technical challenges. The recorded performances, although smoother, feel like they want to be compared to a film instead of a live experience, and can be found lacking.
- Although unconventional, there are many creative opportunities for camera use that Zoom can offer to a live performance (pre-recordings, visual elements, camera angles, etc.), but we should avoid trying to avoid things that feel TOO cinematic.

- Green Screens seem very controversial. Some people can be really turned off by them. Others are interested in their potential.
- Blocking for scenes will need to take in the distance between the actor and the camera as that will affect the scene's intimacy.
- Film and TV and tend to just show us things. Theater tends to engage our imagination. How can we make it more theatrical by not showing things? Maybe only showing a person's hands while they speak.
- Objects and Behaviors that would be boring in a film, become more engaging in Zoom like they would on stage. Imagine cutting an onion. Washing Dishes. Etc.
- Don't ignore that you are on Zoom. Don't try to do a show like you normally would.

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Experimentation →
Research

Virtual Play: Sweet Dreams Inc.

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Play Summary:

Sweet Dreams Inc. is a play about two "Dream Agents" and Jordan, just a normal human, dealing with personal issues that create tension in relationships. Jordan falls asleep after a big argument with his friends and enters a dreamscape where two bickering "Dream Agents", who look like his friends, take over his personal issues of Zoom Fatigue and ADHD in order to try and convince him of the root of his problems. Amidst their constant fighting, Zoom and ADHD drive Jordan mad, and he realizes the mistakes he has made with his friends. After this realization, Jordan apologizes and the friends make up. The "Dream Agents" then find their next victims.

Creation Journey:

The initial pitch of this play was Jordan being stuck in a Zoom Realm after being mean to his friends. He was supposed to be stuck in this realm with his issues, ADHD & Zoom Fatigue until he realized he was wrong for being mean and learned how to fix his mistakes. We were going to have a lighting change and music in the Zoom Realm, but we ended up finding out that the stakes weren't high enough in this plotline. So, we decided to change the plot to a Dream Realm instead, one like the Wizard of Oz, where Jordan dreams until he learns his lesson. However, we wanted to make Zoom & ADHD more dynamic, and thus the Dream Agents were born.

Challenges Encountered:

1. Timing of certain exits/entrances with the music in the Zoom Realm version.

2. Keeping the stakes high in the Zoom Realm.

3. Defining the characters and the differences between Zoom/Nae and ADHD/Mario.

Project Successes:

1. Changing the entire plot to a Dream instead of Zoom.

2. Specifying characters/giving good character arcs.

3. Utilizing green screen effect to show sleeping Jordan & the Dream VOID.

4. General collaboration on script and execution of the script.
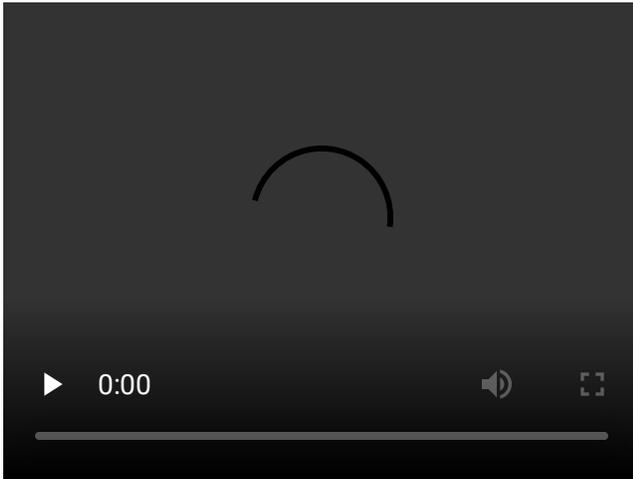
A scene from an early draft of the play.

Playwrite: Myra Carleton

Co-Directors: Anthony Hayes, Maggie Perisho, & Mason Golden

Jordan: Jordan Shaw

Nae/Zoom Fatigue: Janae Robinson

Mario/ADHD: Mario Noto

Virtual Play: Honest Roots

digitalresearch.bsu.edu/immersive-learning-showcase-2021/exhibits/show/virtual-play-creation/virtual-play--honest-roots

Play Summary:

"It's that time of year: YouTube's Fun in Fundraising is looking to raise beaucoup bucks for non-profit organizations. All that wellness guru Nina Bewell wants to do is raise money to fight the meat industry and greenhouse gases, but first, the up-and-coming streamer must deal with a series of strange mistakes tugging on the strings that hold together her live stream. Conceived and written for Zoom in an immersive learning class about virtual theatre, "Honest Roots" is a fully virtual production that will have your eyes flying from chat to screen to see what happens next. As Nina attempts to get to the bottom of things, this interactive virtual production will be sure to keep you guessing on who's in control and who's a pawn in the game."

Creation Journey:

The play Honest Roots is much different than it was when initially pitched. Originally, the focus of the story was going to be horror-based, drawing inspiration from mystery and horror ARGs, Artificial Reality Games. One of the biggest challenges of Zoom theatre is bringing the audience into the world of the show. In regular theatre, there is only one separation between the audience and storyteller, which is known as the fourth wall. In Zoom theatre, you have not only the fourth wall, but you also have a physical separation between the world on the screen and the world on the audience's couch. ARGs work well in bridging this gap as they ask the audience to enter the world and participate in the experience. Although our story has grown from its initial pitch, our primary focus is still the question of "how can we ask our audience to come with us?" We have put a lot of work into the show and we hope you enjoy the performance.

Challenges Encountered:

1. Figuring out how to screen share multiple mediums at the same time.
2. Building suspense within the plot.
3. Figuring out the relationship dynamic between the two characters.

Project Successes:

1. Using manipulation as a storytelling tactic.
2. Incorporating video, image, and sound tech elements into the story.
3. Creative use of the chat function on zoom in order to interact directly with the audience.
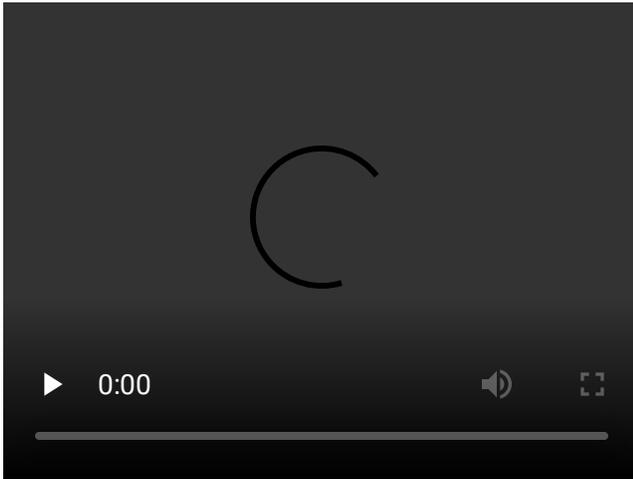
A scene from an early draft.

Playwrite: Gayle Radwick

Co-Directors: Nor White & Sarai Heylmun

Stage Manager: Liz Patton

Nina: Paige Demba

Peyton: Shelby Brown

Virtual Play: Secret Admirer

Play Summary:

Computers are complicated, more so than we realize. They give us a chance to connect with others and communicate with them online. But they also show us that people are not always who they portray themselves. And high school math teacher, Mark Vanhausen has learned this the hard way. Mark is about to be found "not guilty" for his crimes. But there is more to the story, a lot more. And there is one witness who hasn't been given the chance to tell her side. Who is she, you ask? Don't worry. Just sit back and listen to Anonymous tell the story of her journey with Mark in "Secret Admirer."

Creation Journey:

When we started our process, we worked to find a way that we could create a virtual play that would still be engaging for viewers, even after working on Zoom all day long. We wrestled with different ideas across different genres and ultimately settled on doing a creepy thriller about a hacker. After observing many different virtual theatre productions we learned that part of keeping an audience engaged included utilizing the different technological elements that make digital theatre unique. We worked to And from there, we worked to create a story that utilized strong structural elements as well as intriguing spectacle moments. This included deciding what our timeline and sequence of events looked like, whose story it was, what elements should live or prerecorded, and many more. As we worked through our investigative, editing, and reframing process, we have created a thrilling piece of theatre that keeps audiences on their toes, even through a Zoom screen.

Challenges Encountered:

1. Figuring out screen sharing.
2. Navigating feedback from professors versus our own perceptions.
3. Wanting to do things that the platform does not allow (I.E. screen sharing and sound sharing at the same time, hiding non-video participants).
4. Narrowing down all of our awesome ideas.

Project Successes:

1. Created a specific tone and theatrically on an online platform.
2. Making this piece while being in other shows and being full-time students.
3. Really good communication and collaboration with the group.

A scene from an early draft of the play, "Secret Admirer."

A scene from an early draft of the play, "Secret Admirer."

Playwrite: Arianna Zielinkski

Co-Directors: Becca Schaefer, Grace Wagner, & William Freeman

Mark Vanhausen: Chase Strange

Anonymous: Lizzie Nguyen

Conclusion

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Some class consensus on successful virtual theatre experiences:

- Must attempt to create a community
- Must have some kind of engagement, audience Interactivity. Resist passive viewing.
- Resist simply doing "table readings" or "screen readings" of plays
- The work must embrace the awareness of itself as existing in technology
- the work must know its target Audience
- Acting for virtual requires reconciliation with self-consciousness, as the camera requires you to face yourself.

Group Thoughts On Best Practices:

1. All zoom plays should consider the presence and perspective of the audience. Make a choice between whether the play acknowledges being virtual or if it doesn't. Here's a tip for a writer, director, and or performer on zoom: Enlist your collaborators on the plot of the story. (Playwright) Ask as many questions as possible (Director) Come with bold choices (Actor) and don't be afraid to fail hard.
2. All zoom plays should consider the importance of plot and an engaging story. All zoom plays need to make a choice between audience participation being active or passive-- some do not like participating, does it have to be mandatory? tip for writer/director/performer: always think about the view of the audience—what is their perspective? You need more energy, exaggeration, and attention in a zoom show. performers need to understand how the camera mirrors the image. what is your mindset on the format? the work is only achievable if you believe it is possible. the technology will allow you to do more than you think
3. All zoom plays should consider specific audience interaction and the role of the camera and extreme clarity in the rules of its world. All zoom plays should choose between ambition and practicality. Here's a tip for a writer/director/performer on zoom: consider if show/story is appropriate in virtual theatre - what aspects can be elevated/benefit from zoom, and which aspects are additionally challenging? Subvert your expectations during the creation & collaborative process: zoom will change how you usually function. Do your best to create an environment where actors can react/engage actively with scene partners; actors' focus should be intentional to engage with a partner.

← Virtual Play: Secret Admirer
Conclusion