Desktop Theater is an ongoing series of live theatrical inventions.

Desktop Theater is made whenever intentional theater-like activity wafts through the layers of unintentional drama and surreal banality encountered in online visual chat rooms.

Street theater for the new Downtown.

In this shared cartoon arena, we are simultaneously static, and in motion; hidden, yet pictured; silent, yet speaking; alone, yet crowded into a small space.

What lures Desktop Theater back to this place again and again?

The opportunity to slip between the cracks of belief and disbelief, to pry ourselves off detachment for this short time before All-Knowingness returns with its constant companion Whatever.

—Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brenneis

A random snapshot moment in Desktop Theater reveals a postcard-sized background image animated by a scattered assortment of stamp-sized figures. These heterogeneous figures fill a flat screen-based proscenium with fits and starts and hiccups of movement and speech. Behind some of these images, on the other side of screens attached to networked computers on desks around the globe, are members of a loose troupe of actors, writers, artists, and troublemakers conspiring to create Desktop Theater. Behind others are bored teens, multi-tasking industry professionals, long- and short-distance lovers, procrastinating college students, and no doubt a few FBI agents.

Amidst cartoon balloons containing questions about age, sex, and geographical location—and the occasional software query—“prof,” “farmer,” “Santaman,” and the rest make a scene. In response to farmer’s anguished lament on the state of his crops, an Iowan named “cowboy” sincerely offers some advice he’s gleaned from farm life. The “tree” sagely whispers its simple needs while look-a-like mall-rats swap clothes, hairstyles, and even heads. As a
monotonous computer voice recites fractured poetry, the log window belches out a disturbed dynamic: a counter-textual pattern of looping quips and abbreviated, acronymed in-talk layered with quirky improvisational dialogue that lurches toward momentary dramatic encounters.

Since 1997, Lisa Brenneis and I have adapted, directed, rehearsed, and performed live, in “real-time,” over 25 different Desktop Theater experiments. This article is a first attempt to chronicle these experiments, as well as an inaugural gesture toward answering some of the many questions raised by our activities:

—What constitutes theater?
—How might drama be expressed when separated from the body, the voice, and shared space?
—Can poetic speech and changes in expression or gesture attract and sustain group attention in an arena of constant distraction?
—What new languages exist in this forum?
—How might theatrical play be used to examine the striking shift in consciousness ushered in by ubiquitous computing?

We can only hope to answer these questions in dialogue with others. And so, even though the form and practice of Desktop Theater is in its infancy, we feel compelled to share our work to date and offer it for consideration and further experimentation.

**Beginning with Gaming**

The idea for Desktop Theater began, innocently enough, in dialogues between Brenneis and myself as we ventured onto existing visual chat and game-centered online spaces. Like many other non-gamers, we were intrigued by the communicative potential inherent in these dynamic environments. Having first encountered the 2-D audio-visual chat rooms of the Palace <http://www.palacetools.com> back in 1994, I revisited the application with Brenneis in preparation for our UCLA class in multimedia narrative. Our shared interest in distributed narrative (Brenneis’s lengthy production credits include Nintendo games and museum exhibits, while my most recently completed artwork was the CD-Rom road movie *MAUVE DESERT* [1997]) were further piqued by our discovery of Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming.

We decided to spend some time in both chat and game environments and find out what kind of fun we could have in them and what kind of meanings could be made.

Before discussing successful Desktop Theater experiments, I’d like to relate one rather less fruitful foray into the online wilderness. One afternoon, as “research” (for an as yet unrealized Multi-User Learning Environment) Brenneis and I purchased a copy of Ultima Online at the local Computrends. Ultima Online was at that time (1997) one of the few truly massive gameplayer environments online. It has a complex mythic narrative that explains its formation and the division of its various worlds. Players are self-organized into guilds and villages and fight with each other to gain more possessions, even as they construct their “town” with other players. It is worth noting that all activities within this world are carried out by clicking and dragging and typing, no matter how romantic, bucolic, or physical the activity may sound. Thus “fighting,” “toasting,” “building,” “selling,” etc. are all accomplished through chat interaction coupled with basic mouse movements and keyboard commands.

When first registering as a “player” of Ultima Online, ($9.95/month playing charge in addition to an initial $30 software package) we were greeted by
an interface asking us to build a character (a.k.a. avatar) that would represent us in the Ultima Online virtual world. Entering the world—as all beginning players do—at the very bottom of the game hierarchy, we had limited choices of clothing and weaponry, rigidly delineated by profession. We took some time and, by ticking off a menu-list of desired physical traits and skills, crafted a bald, dark-complexioned, magician-type character with a number of gender ambiguities. We named him “Nurse Nancy.” This was our type of fun. After familiarizing ourselves with the operational basics of the gaming world (via a third-party Ultima Online “tip” book), we launched ourselves into the fray.

Armed with a PC laptop with a touchpad, control over our “body” was extremely crude and we found ourselves constantly bumping into walls and cows and even other characters. Perhaps this was why no one spoke to us. We felt shunned since no one would answer even our most basic questions. The only responses we got were the canned responses of Non-Player Characters (NPC). Though discouraged, we continued trying to improve our navigation skills and add “objects” to our “sack” (thus increasing our “wealth” and position within the game). Quickly bored with the silent townsfolk, we decided to try navigating through as much of the Ultima Online world as our time that afternoon permitted.

We had strayed a bit outside of the confines of the “town” and were strolling through the woods when a traveling monk (presumably another player) stopped us with a question. Suddenly, we were somehow disrobed and stripped of many of our wares! In desperation, now running through the forest naked, we soon came upon a knife. Unfortunately, we were so unskilled we couldn’t figure out how to stow the weapon in our sack, and so we proceeded, still naked, through the forest wielding the newly acquired knife. Next, we stalked a buck we spotted in the corner of our screen, thinking it an easy kill that would guarantee our passage back to town. However, the buck ’bot proved quite an opponent for Nurse Nancy (who possessed the talents of a magi, not a hunter). In record time, we were bludgeoned by the deer and transformed into a ghost, stripped even of our ability to communicate.

Since many of these games are fashioned by strict codes of genre and interaction—which take weeks, months, and even years to learn and master—Brenneis and I felt doomed to inhabit a perpetual ghost world. Neither of us was seduced enough by this or similar gaming scenarios to commit to mastering the software environment and keystroke defense systems. These are rich social environments that merit continued study and experimentation, but because of their overuse of the Renaissance England swordplay genre, and the learning curve needed to master their arcane commands and social etiquette, we felt our own creativity restricted rather than enlarged. We were, however, attracted to the relatively benign and accessible nature of another public online environment.

Waiting for Godot to Connect

In our next, more sustained and successful experiment with Desktop Theater, Brenneis and I adapted Samuel Beckett’s classic modernist drama Waiting for Godot for performance in an online visual chat room. In a feature article in the webzine Salon <www.salon.com>, critic Scott Rosenberg provides an accurate setup:

“A country road. A tree. Evening.” Two guys in hats—Didi and Gogo, as they call each other—are stranded in a desolate void, awaiting someone named Godot. Finally, one of them cries out: “It’s Godot! At last! Gogo! It’s Godot! We’re saved!”
It’s a false alarm, as Samuel Beckett wrote the line. But wait! In this performance, there is somebody there—some dude named Muscleman, a recumbent beefcake model straight out of a men’s underwear ad. He pops in and asks, “Why are you waiting for him, anyway? I forgot.” (1997:1)

waitingfor godot.com was performed using the Palace visual chat software, a freely accessible chat application that has since become the venue for most Desktop Theater productions. The Palace is a software application that provides access to a network of servers that host individual “palaces.” These palaces are in turn made up of linked “rooms” designated by 512 x 384 pixel (approx. 6 x 4.5 inch) background images that represent a room, a place, a planet, or dimension. Each of the live connected chatters is visible through a small representative image or avatar (maximum size is 132 x 132 pixels, though most palacians don avatars that are quite a bit smaller). Avatars can be borrowed or collected from the myriad palaces built for this purpose, or can be constructed and designed by the user from scratch. In fact, the preoccupation with avatars is a central topic for many chatters.

Palace culture is dynamic, ever-changing, and during the time period covered in this article, largely heterogeneous. There are popular “social” palaces, which consistently host more than 200 chatters at a time, as well as adult pal-

1. Lisa Brenneis and Adriene Jenik play the roles of gogo and didi among live connected chatters in waiting for godot.com. (Digital capture by Adriene Jenik)
aces and palaces hosted by celebrities, rock groups, TV shows, and films. There are also hundreds of personal and educational palaces that owners thoughtfully host and customize for their particular interests. There are palaces erected by and for foreign-language speakers (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Japanese, etc.), Manga fanatics, friends of a guy named “Skeezer,” and enemies of Britney Spears. You get the idea.

By choosing this software application (as opposed to a more graphically sophisticated 3D environment) we’ve made a commitment to using a free cross-platform application that works well within the constraints of limited bandwidth. No special cards, unusually large amounts of RAM, or massive hard drive allotments are needed to be part of Palace culture. All one needs is a Mac or PC (even an old one will do) with at least a 14.4 connection to the Internet to be able to be “seen” and “heard” in this densely populated online social space. Since chatting on the Palace is extremely easy to learn, it seemed like a perfect arena for experimenting with distributed narrative, especially since we wanted to work with writers and performers with histories (read: older) in other theatrical and literary communities.

After both observing and participating in conversations with palacians in this environment, we were struck by the inherent expressive potential found in the software, but were dismayed by the level of dialogue and activity we found within the arena. Nothing was happening! Of course, things were happening, but interesting moments were so brief and unpredictable that we often left the chatroom hungry for more sustained encounters. Thinking that introducing an external narrative or drama might provoke more interesting exchange, we began to develop our version of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.

We chose Godot for several reasons. First of all, the anticipation of the characters Vladimir and Estragon matched the anticipatory space of the chatroom. We were also thrilled that the concentrated dialogue between two principle parties could be replicated keyboard-to-keyboard. Finally, the sparseness of the country road in evening matched an existing, somewhat gloomy graphical background of one of our favorite public rooms, “The Moor.”

As we began to work with the text, it proved eerily well-suited to chatroom delivery. In producing waitingforgodot.com, our first task was to read and discuss the text, and then edit or “compress” it into a format suitable for our venue. In doing so, we tried to remain true to Beckett’s overall rhythm and dramatic arc even as we cut and reformed whole sections of the text. We then fashioned simple “everyman” avatars from the basic Palace character known as the “roundhead.” We called Vladimir and Estragon by their nicknames “didi” and “gogo,” gave them each a small hat, and proceeded to rehearse the play and observe the effect of our presence.

Besides being the first Desktop Theater piece developed within the Palace, waitingforgodot.com was also the first in a series of “doubly-live” Desktop Theater performances. With waitingforgodot.com we began our experiments with performing live in an immersive public chat space, while a seated theater audience viewed the projected and amplified performance as it occurred. In this public theatrical premiere we demonstrated a much greater degree of control and influence over our environment than could be displayed within a gaming environment like Ultima Online. We concentrated our efforts on the production values of a virtuosic cut-and-paste performance, literally copying the text from a text document, and quickly pasting it into the chat input window. Once input, the text appeared as if “spoken” from a speech bubble attached to the characters onscreen and was simultaneously “spoken” out loud, through the computer’s text-to-speech capabilities. Other chatters in the room would alternately comment on our presence, leave in confusion, or join in the piece by trying to help us locate “godot” on the server.
This tightly scripted experiment was substantially dependent upon the rhetorical power of Beckett’s text. We coupled this exquisite rhythm with the performatively subtle range available to all palacians). Movement in the Palace is initiated through clicking your cursor at a spot where you want your avatar to “stand.” For the performance we roughly blocked our movements around the postcard-size space. We mapped out a broad idea of where our characters would move, though this was adjusted in performance to adapt to other people in the room.

The pace and tone of waitingfortgodot.com compounded with the primary online activity of waiting provoked a deeply empathetic response in its viewers. Since we had no idea if these crude tools would work to express ambivalence, joy, or pathos, we were gratified to see our live audience—many of whom were performers and theatregoers—entranced by this strange version of a play they’d seen too many times. Though we felt the experiment was valuable, we were left with questions of how to better integrate and exploit the “interruptions” made by fellow chatters. Even so, we were challenged and enchanted by our first dramatic production in this chat space where the barrier between artist and audience has not yet been built.

Crossing Time Zones for Santaman’s Harvest

In another, more ambitious experiment, INVISIBLE INTERLUDES I: Santaman’s Harvest, we expanded beyond the two main actors of waitingfortgodot.com and added additional cast members and improvisational elements to a cautionary tale about genetically modified agriculture. Development commenced in February 1999 when I translated research on both the subject of the drama and various theatrical models into an eight-scene treatment. For its premiere, we chose to perform only three of the eight scenes—numbers 1, 2, and 5. Each scene was conceived for a particular “room” or series of “rooms” in the palace and each had a loosely defined narrative arc.

I sent out a call for actors, and began casting the show. There were more than 10 roles to be cast, and given that everyone was a beginner, the casting process involved matching each potential actor’s interests, demeanor, and time schedule with those required of each character. Some actors were able to play more than one role, even in the same scene. As rehearsals began in earnest in the late summer and fall of 1999, rehearsal logs, which could be saved within the Palace software, were analyzed and incorporated into a more refined script that still left room for improvisation by some characters. I drew the initial dramatic arcs with an alternating pattern of control/chaos, scripting/improvisation, and passivity/aggression, and with an eye toward what might be engaging in this forum. In the largest and most tightly scripted of the scenes, there were a total of 11 actors performing at once—in four time zones!

Characters and Players

Scene 1 of Santaman’s Harvest takes place in the public arena of the Palace mansion, a palace with nightly traffic of between 200 and 300 people. In our internet street theatre, people come upon us and we come upon them, moving awkwardly in strange purposeful groups. Scene 1 was scripted—with allowances for interruptions—as a brief exchange between two farmers about the state of the agricultural business. A tree whispers in the background. The farmers are crudely drawn pink-and-brown overall-wearing avatars. The tree is a “prop” we’ve made ourselves and placed into the background. Our names identify us as “farmer #1,” “farmer #2,” and “tree,” and we have chosen “The Moor” as our “room” for this scene because it has a gloomy mood and attracts interesting chatters, but usually is not overcrowded.
The farmer’s scripted dialogue is open-ended and therefore blended easily with the light banter about work and school offered by fellow chatters. In one rehearsal we were joined by a farmboy from Iowa who questioned our crop choices. Scene 1 ended with the entrance of Santaman (a character meant to represent Monsanto Corporation, the life sciences giant), a charming shape-shifting corporate head (represented by a large hyper-expressive floating head) who befriends the farmer in order to sell him genetically enhanced seed. Note that in the chat log a double colon (::) preceding a phrase indicates that the speech was contained in a thought balloon and not spoken aloud. An exclamation point (!) preceding a phrase indicates excited or shouted speech, represented by picturing the text on screen in a spiky balloon.

sman: friend

farmer #1: friend?
sman: have you thought about the
sman: future
sman: friend?

farmer #1: huh?
sman:: future

farmer #1: future?
farmer #1: my future?
sman: your future
sman: friend?

farmer #1: sure

farmer #1: I guess I’ll be farming

sman: because I WANT YOU TO THINK ABOUT IT

farmer #1: yeah?

farmer #1: why
sman: THINK BIG

farmer #1: big?

sman: !THINK BIO!!!!!

farmer #1: why?

sman: BIO

farmer #1: Bio?

sman: buy o tek no log y

farmer #1: I’ve heard about that

sman: !GOOD

(Performance log 10/30/99; Jenik and Brenneis 1999)

It is important to note that besides delivering our lines and responding to other characters’ speeches, we also quickly change our character’s expressions to indicate direction of focus or mood, or to reveal underlying motives. Additionally, we can “layer” ourselves behind or in front of one another onscreen, and can move close to or far away from each other quickly or slowly to ex-
press affection, repulsion, or fear. We also freely employ symbolism and historical reference—for example, the scientist Hubris is represented by a flashing mushroom cloud—in a range of subtle and more didactic narrative details.

Character-related expressive potential is greatly increased with the use of character-specific speech. As in waitingforgodot.com, we used a text-to-speech plug-in for the Palace application that makes it possible to have the computer “speak” words typed in the chat input box. In Santaman’s Harvest we went a step further and mapped the characters’ names to different computer “voices,” defined by parameters of pitch and speed, enabling greater differentiation among the characters. As a result, the farmers spoke in the same mid-range monotone, Santaman’s voice was deeper, the prof sounded “thoughtful,” and the foreign correspondent spoke quickly in a higher pitch. When combined with the effects of “whispering” and “thinking”—the Palace visual chat application offers a raspy whispered voice as well as a thought balloon that can replace the default cartoon—a multilayered language experiment unfolded.

Scenography, Sound, Music, and Choreography

Scene 2 follows corporate head Santaman on a cacophonous tour of his headquarters, the Genetically Enhanced Palace (GEP). While the GEP is open to the public, it is not directly linked from the Palace Mansion, and so has a
more limited public audience. This scene and location change enabled us to have more control of our stage, to focus on more complex “acting” and even add simple “choreography” to scene 2. Since we create the graphical backgrounds, hidden links to other rooms, and other visual, sonic, and scripting elements, we use these scenic elements to help shape the drama.

For our background graphics, at Brennise’s suggestion, I began to look at a number of “outsider” artists: artists with creative and/or spiritual obsessions that in some cases unleash paranoid visual fantasies. I was startled at how often the apocalyptic visions of these marginalized artists have prefigured the celebrated goals and feared effects of bioengineering. Paul Laffoley’s prescient architectural model *Der Urpflanze Haus II* (1996) proclaims: “The Past: Architecture is the Imitation of Plant Forms, The Future: Architecture will become plant-forms” (in Manley 1998:78). Laffoley’s external elevation of “the Ovule Syconium” was scanned, isolated, colored, and “enhanced” before making its appearance as the 512 x 384 pixel entrance portal to Santaman’s Corporate Headquarters. The “outsider” art of Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez, Victor Joseph Gatto, and Arnold Hendrickson likewise provided visual inspiration for the graphics that represent the heterogeneous fields and laboratories of the Genetically Enhanced Palace.

Basic sound effects offered in the Palace software application were used with varying degrees of success. We triggered an applause sound to punctuate

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3. The characters of Santaman’s Harvest shed their usual avatars and don skulls to perform “The Dance of Death,” Desktop Theater’s first musical number. (Digital capture by Steve Ausbury)
speeches by both Santaman and the CEO. When end-of-scene lines were improvised, the applause sound also served as a signal to the geographically dispersed actors that the scene or play was completed.

In Santaman’s Harvest, we even made our first attempt at a musical number. I scripted a button that launched a MIDI\textsuperscript{4} version of Radiohead’s song, “Fake Plastic Trees,” from within a room that was adorned with a dividing-cell structure graphic. The treakly anthem served as musical accompaniment for scene 2’s climax: “The Dance of Death.” This was a highly ambitious, choreographed, “Busby Berkeley” number that immediately followed the death of the butterflies (see below). For the “Dance of Death,” all of the actors shed their avatars and donned small skulls as they slowly moved in a circle around the central cartoon cell structure. As they circled, Santaman and the farmer changed into larger skulls and spun figure-8s around each other in the center of the screen image. This odd, halting dance was both a haunting evocation of the overall move toward monocultural existence and a poignant intimation of dimensions existing just beyond this “flat” screen-based forum.

**DIRECTING THE “ACTION”**

Scene 5 of Santaman’s Harvest returns the unfolding drama to the public space of the Palace Mansion. In “Robin’s Garden” (a room with a background graphic of an LSD-laced backyard garden), the farmer “plants” Bt Corn\textsuperscript{5} props, randomly spreading pictures of an upright corncob prop via a programming script. Just as he is expressing his happiness over how nicely the crops are growing, the Cropatistas, pictured as a large “group avatar,” shout, “FREE THE SEEDS” and trample the corn (trash the farmer’s corn props and replace them with trampled looking sideways corncobs). Cleo, the foreign correspondent, enters with her camera, DSX-2000, and interviews any chatters present, soliciting their descriptions of what they witnessed, raising issues regarding gen-tech, and provoking commentary and debate. Cleo and girly are Desktop Theater actors, the rest of the comments are from Palacians:

Cleo: What do you think when scientists
Ken: thank you
Quistis: Character in FF8
Cleo: manipulate genes in crops and animals?
girly: 0
girly: yeah
Cleo: Hey, girly
Quistis: What? U talkin to me?
Cleo: Yup.
Cleo: I’m a reporter.
Quistis: ooooh.
Cleo: I want opinions.
Quistis: ok. lemme check the log for the question.
girly: about genes
Cleo: Hey, girly
girly: yeah
Cleo: do you have any opinions?
girly: yeah
girly: lots
Cleo: About what I was talking about?
Quistis: on manipulating genes in crops and animals?
girly: genes
Cleo: Yes, that’s right.
girly: splicing
girly: dicing
Quistis: It can be good or bad. Depends on the situation.
Cleo: exactly
girly: like fish to grow fatter
Quistis: That’s my opinion at least.
Cleo: You’re right.
girly: trees to grow faster

4. Scene 5 of Santaman’s Harvest finds the evil Santaman at odds with the Cropatistas, a group avatar, while Palacian chatters death and Pooky join the fray. (Digital capture by Steve Ausbury)
Cleo: When do you think it would be bad?
girly: hmmm
Cleo: Can you think of the consequences?
Quistis: Well, I think we should leave things to go naturally.
* realistic outsider *: nice
girly: yeah
girly: me to Q
Ken: hi maria
Cleo: Yes, many people believe that.
girly: naturally
Quistis: yeah.
Maria: hi
Cleo: Naturally.
girly: if the trees grow too fast
Ken: im ken
Quistis: that all you wanted to ask?
Ken: lol
Maria: i know
girly: they’ll take up all the water
Cleo: What do you think
girly: block out the sun
Maria: i use to beleive in others right away
Cleo: about cloning?
Maria: and then something happend
Quistis: cloning.
Cleo: Yea.
girly: hey Ru
Maria: slowly i’m recapturing what i use to have
Maria: faith
Cleo: another you.
Cleo: your replica.
Cleo: That’s what scientists are
Cleo: trying to do.
Quistis: I think it’s good and bad also. good because it could help endangered species, but bad because we don’t want too many of one species;
SNAKE: gay
Ken: faith is everything
Quistis: we already got too many humans. don’t need to clone more!!
(Rehearsal log 10/16/99; Jenik and Brenneis 1999)

The silent, influential presence in this scene is, of course, the camera, which hops around and changes angles in order to “focus” attention on individual palacians. Palacians expressed both excitement and consternation at being the focus of attention and questioning. Since we rehearse in the same shifting cultural space in which we perform, we can’t overstay our welcome or push palacians too hard, since part of any Desktop Theater production’s success depends on our interaction with informal chatters. Directing most often involves helping actors understand their character and purpose within the plot, and then letting them loose. Directing so many actors at once in this form essentially means taking responsibility for having an overview of the chaos that ensues. Steering people’s activities “in the moment” is extremely difficult; more often we analyze the log after a rehearsal and then make suggestions. We usually set simple cues in advance to move a scene along.

**Masking and Reality in Desktop Theater**

With our avatars (even the crudely rendered 2D images we encounter on the Palace) we enter a psychic space in which we become our masks. Anyone who spends time in these parallel worlds understands, perhaps implicitly, that one makes accommodations to one’s avatar. In *Masked Performance*, John Emigh describes the relationship of a Topeng performer to his masks in very similar terms: “[Topeng character] masks themselves make their own, very specific demands, and work with a new mask begins with a respect for a mask’s separate ‘life’ as an objective other” (1996:116).

In recent Desktop Theater productions, we’ve wondered how the capabilities and power of a masked actor change when performing from the third-person perspective of the 2D chatroom avatar. No longer “hidden” behind our mask, we are also positioned in front of it, watching ourselves in action. And, like death by fragging—the temporary death of an opponent in shooter games like Quake and Doom—masked personae can come to no bodily harm. As Roger Caillois has pointed out, masking permits “moral invisibility” (1964:87). For many, this liminal space represents freedom from prejudice. But when does this sense of freedom turn to moral complacency, and must it always? How might we compel someone to consider challenging concepts like “biopiracy” (Shiva 1997) when the consequences of one’s actions are only virtual?

We tried to answer this for ourselves in scene 2 of *Santaman’s Harvest* with the dramatic death of the butterflies. This scene, which took place at the Genetically Enhanced Palace’s “corn room,” was our Desktop Theater re-enactment of a scientific study from Cornell in which it was found that monarch butterflies were endangered by Bt Corn through the unexpected pollination of the corn with a neighboring milkweed plant (Losey 1999). The three butterflies, performed by real-life actors Elia Arce, Erwin Veytia, and John Rouse, were a lively, though nonverbal, presence throughout Santaman’s tour of the GEP. This “lively” presence was achieved by combining an animated cyclical wing-flapping .gif avatar with a type of pixel-by-pixel movement assigned to the butterfly characters alone. The playfulness of the actors as they enlivened these fragile characters increased the sense of sadness and loss when they fluttered one by one to the bottom of the screen and stopped moving, signaling their demise.

The history of masked performance reveals that masks are often used to emphasize the artificiality of the theatrical environment or gesture. But since
in the chatroom masking is the shared mode of representation of all chatters, masks/avatars seem to encourage the opposite: belief in an “authentic” self. Despite the distance from a body that denies any reduction to a “real” or “authentic” self, in experiment after experiment we witness in chatters a very powerful desire to believe in the authenticity of the traits implied by the figu- retive mask, even while wearing one. In Desktop Theater we called attention to this odd effect when, at the end of scene 5 of Santaman’s Harvest, the actors retreated and “unmasked” in the greenroom. Getting “naked” (stripped to one’s core roundhead), we donned relaxation props (drinks, cigarettes, party hats, etc.) and chatted informally about the production. Here, though still masked and still operating within media culture, many of us experienced a ca-thartic state of relaxation. This shared feeling points to just one example of the complex layers of perspective and pleasure available in Desktop Theater.

The Future of Desktop Theater

Since the ambitious production Santaman’s Harvest, Brenneis and I have focused our energies on weekly meetings to try out new scripts and ideas. This ferocious period of experimentation has led to the refinement of two additional modes of performance: avatar-based improvisations and dream-play activities. In the improvisations, an initial idea is born and followed quickly by a
high-speed avatar production session that culminates in an “outing” in the public arena, an analysis of what occurred, and often a second documented outing. We could be found stumping for votes as George W. and Al Gore during primary season, playing a “mom” attempting to discipline her wayward daughter “larki” over the internet, or taking excursions into popular preppie and sk8ter\(^{11}\) avatar trading rooms as size-14 girls named Patti and Trudi. At times Brenneis and I are both in on the concept behind the improvisation. At other times, one of us initiates a scenario and the other follows along. In several instances our presence has provoked passionate discussions of online performativity, identity, and ethics among online chatters.

The most recent examples of Desktop Theater practice are activities that represent alternative models of online play. Inspired in equal parts by the crude, yet wondrously luminous Palace painting tools and our mutual enjoyment of poetry, symbolism, and ritual, we have begun to perform a series of “dream-plays.” The practice, which can be seen as a globally experienced hybrid of sand-play therapy, charades, and surrealist games, takes place in our own “dream-room” in the GEP as well as in the public palaces with dreamers from all over the world. As we solicit dreams from passersby and act them out using available props, improvisational acting, and painting tools, we meet each other in a true exchange of deeply felt desires and fears, and share the transformative power of collective creativity.

6. In ThighDream, Jenik, Brenneis, and Nancy Reilly-McVittie solicit dreams from passersby and act them out using available props, improvisational acting, and painting tools. (Digital capture by Lisa Brenneis)
A large number of our experiments in Desktop Theater are outlined and archived at our website <http://www.desktoptheater.org>. The website contains images, logs, scripts, and even streaming video documents of many of the performances discussed here, as well as how-to information on making Desktop Theater.

As one might expect, the special parameters of the net demand their own forms of theatrical engagement. Many digital tools and methods (and much of the rhetoric of liberation that introduces them) hinge on the democratization of creative practice: Everyone can be an artist! Creativity is rightly seen and promoted as an important component of any move beyond the prevailing alienation of consumer-based culture. At the same time, these new creative tools derive from paradigms that confer their own assumptions and limitations. Rather than dismiss these assumptions or lament these limitations holding out for “total immersion,” the Desktop Theater troupe is instead seizing this moment to make virtual theater within the online public sphere. In doing so we are both rehearsing for the future and critically reflecting upon it.

Come join us.

Notes

1. Desktop Theater is both the name of our troupe and the performance genre I am describing.
2. Desktop Theater is supported through a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation for Film/Television/New Media, a Hellman Fellowship, and research and travel grants from the University of California, San Diego, Academic Senate. Look for the Desktop Theater Festival in September 2001 as part of the Franklin Furnace “Future of the Present” residency program.
3. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games are computer-based games played live on the Internet simultaneously with thousands of other players, at all times of the day and night. Some of the most popular games are Ultima Online (fashioned after a lengthy disc-based game series called Ultima), Diablo, and most recently Everquest. Players develop characters through menu-driven options and are catapulted into extensive “worlds” in which they encounter other players in their quest to become dominant within the rules of the shared fantasy.
4. Preprogrammed software agents also known as “‘bots.”
5. In an email message following this afternoon activity, Brenneis reframes our “failure” to succeed in the world of Ultima Online:

   Anyway, we did buy and play a big online Role-playing game called Ultima, which was chilling and very illuminating. And reminded me why I don’t like role-playing on the computer. All of these so-called “skills” you are developing seem to rely on learning the rules of this particular world, which are very close to arbitrary and make Voodoo look like the Enlightenment. When you are actually “playing” it all seems to come down to constant acquisition, by trading and shopping, weapons and ingredients of magic potions. Outcome of combat is determined by the computer comparing your various ratings and points and weapons and stuff vs. your opponent, and making a probability calculation. Then it informs you of the result. Everything you do, all your “skills,” all your “combat” ultimately, is clickin’ and draggin’. Just clickin’ and draggin’. (Brenneis 1997)

6. Until fall 2000, server software licenses were sold (and offered free to education groups). Smaller servers (six person limit) were also available at no cost for personal use. This decentralized hosting system meant that even though Communitites.com, the company that distributed the software, has recently decided to no longer support the software, a thriving “underground” chat community remains in Palaces around the world.
7. The Palace software was originally designed and programmed by artist/engineer Jim Bumgarden. “The Moor” was one of several background graphics from the original set of backgrounds designed by Bumgarden.

9. A face avatar is an avatar that consists entirely of a “face” with no additional body parts. The non-member state of being in the palace application allows for a basic “roundhead” avatar with an expression, color, and prop palette. These avatars are seen as “common” and as such are shunned by chatters. We wore these avatars to emphasize didi and gogo’s status as “everymen.”

10. When research and development of the piece began in March 1999, information about GM foods and Terminator seeds had not yet entered the mainstream media. During the rehearsals and performances we witnessed a marked increase in awareness of the subject among Palacians (as seen in live interviews conducted by the Foreign Correspondent and the Camera in scene 5).


13. In addition to figures like Laffoley and Henry Darger (who receive widespread critical attention within the contemporary art world), artists Martin Ramirez, Victor Joseph Gatto, and Arnold Hendrickson are defined as “outsider” artists because they make their work separate from art institutions. Their work, which can often be characterized by their representation of fantastic worlds, is woven through with elaborate philosophies. In many cases the work is created with easily obtained media: ballpoint pens (Hendrickson), oil paints on store-bought canvases (Gatto), catalog cut-outs (Darger), and pastels (Ramirez).

14. Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) is a technical protocol used to trigger sounds from remote locations.

15. Bt is an abbreviation for Bacillus thuringiensis, an organically existing bacteria found in soil that emits a toxin which kills insects. Organic farmers have used it for decades as an occasional organic pesticide. Bt Corn is a type of corn that has had the Bt toxic gene inserted into it in the interest of killing insects that might eat the corn plant. The corn (along with Bt Cotton, Bt Potatoes, and other crops) has been patented by the Monsanto Corporation.

16. Thanks to Rebecca Schneider for this reference.

17. A distinction should be made between this third-person perspective of 2D environments and the first-person point of view (POV) of many 3D games and worlds that more closely resemble the earlier relationship of protagonists to their masks.

18. Researchers at Cornell University published a study in *Nature* which found that pollen from GM Bt Corn could have lethal effects on the larvae of monarch butterflies if it lands on milkweed, the plant upon which they feed. Forty-four percent of the larvae were killed after four days, whereas no mortality occurred in larvae fed non-transgenic pollen. The Cornell University researchers say their results “have potentially profound implications for the conservation of monarch butterflies” and recommend that more research on the environmental risks of biotechnology in agriculture be undertaken.

19. .gif is an image compression format widely used on the web.

20. As borne out in troupe members’ written evaluations and informal conversations held after each performance.

21. Preppie avatars are cartoon representations of nicely dressed, upwardly mobile teens. Sk8ter avatars are cartoon representations of members of teen skateboard culture.

**References**

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Shiva, Vendana

Adriene Jenik is a telecommunications media artist who has been working for over 12 years as a hybrid artist, educator, programmer, engineer, and community media activist. Her multiply mediated productions include the short video What’s the Difference Between a Yam & a Sweet Potato? (1992), the live satellite broadcast of EL NAFTAZTECA: Cyber-Aztec-TV for 2000 A.D. (with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 1995), and the interactive CD-Rom road-movie MAUVE DESERT (1997). Her current project, Desktop Theater (made with Lisa Brenneis), is an ongoing series of live theatrical interventions into online visual chatrooms. Desktop Theater works have been presented at the Third Annual Digital Storytelling Festival; Digital Arts & Culture ’99; FutureScreen ’99 in Sydney, Australia; and the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. She is currently Assistant Professor of Computer and Media Arts at the University of California, San Diego.

Credits and Acknowledgments

Desktop Theater is made by Adriene Jenik, Lisa Brenneis, and the ever-expanding Desktop Theater troupe:


For more information on Desktop Theater, including access to an extensive performance archive, and how-to instructions, see <http://www.desktoptheater.org>.