Literary Theory and Theatre Practice: A Comparative Study of Watching the Script and the Simulated Environment for Theatre

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This paper describes the results of our recent work on a 3D prototype called the Simulated Environment for Theatre (SET), which we undertook based on a growing realization that our earlier 2D prototype, called Watching the Script, reified some fundamental biases that would render it less useful for stage directors than we had originally hoped. Having produced the two prototypes, our next step is to carry out a user study to compare their usefulness. We intend to present the results of this user study, combined with a discussion of the meaning of the two designs.

The design of Watching the Script features three different perspectives on the text of a play: a microtext column that gives an overview of the length of sections, combined with coloured lines to indicate each character; a reading pane; and a dynamic playback on a stylized stage, where characters move around and their speeches scroll out underneath them.

While it has a certain naive charm, the Watching the Script prototype has several fundamental features that make it less than optimal for theatre directors. First is the degree of stylization of the stage, which is restricted to a single shape and does not readily lend itself to customization, either through changing the basic stage design or through applying details in the form of a set. Related to this stylization is the overhead perspective, which makes it difficult to imagine the actual lines of sight of people sitting in the audience.

Next is the association between movement and speech. Watching the Script is driven by the XML of the play, which means that character movements are attached to speeches. However, in actual practice, characters are not restricted to moving only when they speak. This emphasis on the speech as the fundamental unit of the play is reinforced through the central role of text in the interface, with each speech occurring simultaneously in three different places. We argue elsewhere (Gabriele et al. 2009) that both of these features make sense from the perspective of English literature, where the central object of study is the text. However, in the staging of a play, we recognize that the text, while still important, is a less central concern. Directors take the text of a play as a starting point, routinely cutting lines, removing entire scenes or characters, and so on.

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Our user study will be carried out early in 2010. We will ask six directors working in industry to try out the two interfaces and provide comments through a thinkaloud protocol. We will also obtain screen captures of these individuals working with the two different systems. Finally, considering pedagogical applications of these interfaces, we will work with a small group of graduate students in theatre education who will consider the affordances of the prototypes for teaching and learning about disciplinary theory and practice. We expect this process to

provide additional insights into the choices of functionality for SET, as well as the features of Watching the Script that might be worth adapting for inclusion in the new system.

References

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