

IPAC Activity Description



Name of Activity

Waiting for Godot: A Robot Thespians Performance

Contributor

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Brief Description of the Activity

According to John Gassner, theatre is a form of literature which incorporates acting and stagecraft elements with text. The effectiveness of the theatre (which when conducted may be considered a play or drama, according to actual type) is based on the delivery of text through the actors and how the audience observing the performance responds. Gassner argues that the importance of the theatre is that it provides a sensually different atmosphere than what is provided while merely reading a play script¹. This project has attempted to push the boundaries of what is traditionally defined as theatre; providing a sterile environment where (relatively) emotionless mecha thespians perform on a stage, robotically reciting the lines -- allowing an interesting re-examination of the 'sensual atmosphere' of theatre as defined by Glasser.

The initial play chosen for this robot experimentation was a relatively recent example of tragicomedy, Samuel Beckett's 'En Attendant Godot', rewritten and translated as Waiting for Godot. Beckett's version of tragicomedy doesn't strictly follow the classic definition, but it does provide plenty of tension between comedy and tragedy, without completely submitting to either.

¹ See John Gassner, "Forms of Modern Drama", Comparative Literature 7(2)(1955): 129 - 143.

Interdisciplinary Nature of the Activity

This robot theatre project provides a novel form of engagement with technology, reflecting the way the symbiotic relationship of arts and technology has shifted over time. The project reveals and examines not only conceptual forms that expose technological encroachment, but also to demonstrate the embracement of 'new' technologies within the concept and form of classical theatre. The simultaneous co-presence of robotic thespians and traditional performance elements on stage forces a re-interpretation of the integration of performance with technologies.

The research questions challenged in this project draw from investigations about technology and its relationship with more traditional art forms. Aspects of gender, emotion and humanity are entwined within this enquiry.

Relationship to Interdisciplinarity at Oswego

Initial work by students at Oswego involved the initial production of the theatre and movie performances using the robot thespian. These were analysed from two different theoretic approaches.

- Firstly as a technical study correlating live (human) performances of the same scenes performed by the robot thespians and comparing the physical aspects of both performances.
- Secondly, the robot performance was examined critically with respect to the aesthetics and artistic aspects of the project and the context of this performance within the body of teatrology and the academic study of theatre.

IPAC Support

Meeting space for international collaborators and visitors.

Assistance generating grant funding and reaching out to local theatre groups.

Assistance disseminating results of research work.

Assistance organising workshops for academics in similar fields.

Relevant Dates

This work will continue as long as HCI students and faculty remain interested in the project. Two papers are currently being produced based on this work:

- Young, D. and Schofield, D., Robot Thespians: Assessing and Evaluating a Robot Theatre Production Journal of Engineering, Computers & Applied Sciences, In Preparation.
- Waiting for Robot Godot: Creating a Theatre Production with Mechanical Actors, The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, In Preparation.