CyPosium Presentation Outline:
"ATHEMOO and NetSeduction: Censorship and The Art of Sexting Before Cell Phones"
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I have an overview of the topic in something I've written for today. So I will read that. It's a bit brief because I am really most interested in sparking a discussion on the questions I'll be asking at the very end, and I hop there will be a lively give and take at the end.

Before I begin, I just wanted to display the link to the text of the play in question

So imagine my surprise about a year ago when someone contacts me and asks if I would mind if portions of the text of *NetSeduction* be used for a new performance. I wrote the play 16 years ago, and for me it was an experiment, and a bit of a throwaway; I didn't expect it to have any longevity. Yet even a casual Google search turns up a variety of academic references and, as it turns out, it sowed the seeds of one of my current research questions into the "Perception of Presence in Virtual Worlds." We are still talking about a short play written in the 20th Century— and it is still having an impact today.

This presentation will involve examining at *NetSeduction* from two perspectives. First, I'll be looking at it from an historical angle, the performances and the censorship that surrounded those first presentations. I will then turn to the larger question of the efficacy of text-based performance in light of more recent developments in both society and technology. Does this work still have power today, and if so, why? And has the power of words been supplanted or usurped by a graphical world?

We begin in the early world of 'net performances with what we might call "IRC, MUDs and MOOs, oh my!" The Hamnet players' 1993 production of *Hamnet* conducted on Internet Relay Chat was the starting point for online performance. MUDs, or Multi-User Dimensions or Dungeons, and MOOs (MUDs utilizing object-oriented programming), while having been around for a few years with D&D type games on university mainframes, began to break through the public consciousness. More "famous" MOOs, such as MIT's MediaMOO created by Amy Bruckman in 1993, and the Association of Theatre in Higher Education's ATHEMOO, created at the request of Juli Burk, appeared at this time. The latter hosted several performances in the 1990s, including the recreation of the Samsa house in "MetaMOOphosis," Twyla Mitchell-

Shiner's *A Place for Souls*, and my own *NetSeduction* in 1996.

NetSeduction began with my own experience with a site called BananaChat, where you could go to a private "room" for a one-on-one conversation, or hang out on the Balcony and listen in on all conversations, including all those in private rooms. As you might imagine, some of these conversations could become quite spicy. My thoughts about the perception of presence in virtual worlds began here, as I encountered people who accepted the idea of talking to real people in an online chat environment.

In BananaChat, while being constantly aware of people in public or intimate conversations, it occurred to me that online chat was a form of theatre. The adoption of handles or character names, the use of emotes (such as one woman responding with "bubbling laughter"), and engaging in intense dialogues with others—all of these aspects served as parts of a constant, large-scale performance. Coupled with the realization that none of these people might necessarily be who they say they were, I found this brave new online world a fertile ground in which to germinate a new play.

Rather than go into any great details on *NetSeduction*, I will just give a general overview. Visitors would enter "The Adult Arena," and receive a warning: `"If you are offended by sexually explicit material, or are under the age of 18, please disconnect now. Otherwise, choose enter."` The chatroom itself, named NetSeduction, led to other "private rooms," such as The SexFree Café, The Dungeon, The Men's Room, and women Only Chat Room. The performance featured the Actors of the piece, who would copy and paste their lines of dialogue. There were also Supers, chatbots (such as Lola, inspired by the Kinks' song) who would respond to certain typed phrases, and Lurkers, the audience members who would watch the performance. As it played out, two of our lurkers became actors when they decided to slip off to one of the private rooms for some "interaction" of their own. The programming supplied various atmospherics, such as "The driving music from NetSeduction changes to the Village people's Greatest Hits."

The "plot" of *NetSeduction* revolves around the sexual escapades of several characters. Allan and Jane are checking the place out, and are new visitors to the new landscape. A recurring figure is Dick, clearly a teenaged boy who is desperate to participate in adult fun and games. He eventually succeeds with a woman named Beth, who we can guess from the context is really John, who is a regular in the chatroom.

I recruited the actors, and we met in ATHEMOO to rehearse, mostly tech and timing issues. We then scheduled two public performances. However, at this time, what I would term censorship entered the picture. The administrator of ATHEMOO feared that the frank and explicit language of the piece might worry higher-ups in the organization. (More likely, they would not have noticed, since ATHEMOO had always been largely ignored by the majority of ATHE—and in fact, technology has only become an issue for the organization over the last several years.) In any case, the performances were by invitation only, and audience members needed to be approved prior to each performance, to avoid any moral fallout. The two performances occurred with no moral outrage, and seemed to vanish into the annals of theatre history.

We now flash forward to the present, which one might describe as "The Web Gone Wild." Of course, there has always been pornography on the internet, but in recent years, with the widespread adoption of cellphones, we have seen what might be termed "user-generated porn." On websites such as Myspace and Facebook we see very revealing photographs of people that they themselves take and display. Over the last several years, the topic of sexting, sending sexually-oriented texts, has come in to the public's awareness. Of course, sexting is merely the contemporary equivalent of what was happening via webchat in the mid 1990s.

So imagine if I approached staging *NetSeduction* today. Having been in Second Life for six years and having staged four theatrical productions within that 3D graphical environment, I would likely choose to do the play in Second Life. NetSeduction would be a club venue, with actual rooms off from a main room. A disco ball would hang from the ceiling and visitors would hear actual music, not just read song titles to suggest what they would be hearing. The actors would not type or copy and paste but rather use voice to communicate. (And hearing some of the *NetSeduction* lines rather than simply reading them: what a difference that would make!) And we would not read a description of the characters—we would see them in all their muscled and tattooed male or gravity-defying bosomy female shapes, with appropriate (or perhaps inappropriate) attire. Lurkers' avatars could dance as they watch, or become involved themselves in ball-hopping and pixel-bonking.

In doing so, I wonder what we would gain, and what we would lose. Rather than using charged terms and four (and five) letter words for genitalia, they genitalia would be on display for all to see. Is seeing a Second Life virtual penis mightier than seeing the word appear on a

screen in the context of a sext? Have we become jaded to words, and do they no longer have the power they had when confined to books? And with so much available in the virtual world, does the ubiquity of it all diminish its power?

I would now like to turn this over to a discussion with the audience, looking at these questions, which I will post in a moment. They are:

1) Which has primacy: the brain and imagination, and willing suspension of disbelief? Or a parade of blatant images?
2) Is text more powerful? Can we say: "The Penis mightier than the sword"?
3) Or are visual representations and animations of everything more effective?

I look forward to your responses and discussion.