



An Illusion of Liveness: Synthespians in Virtual Production as Hyper-Reality Theatre

XR Research Symposium 2026, Rose Bruford College

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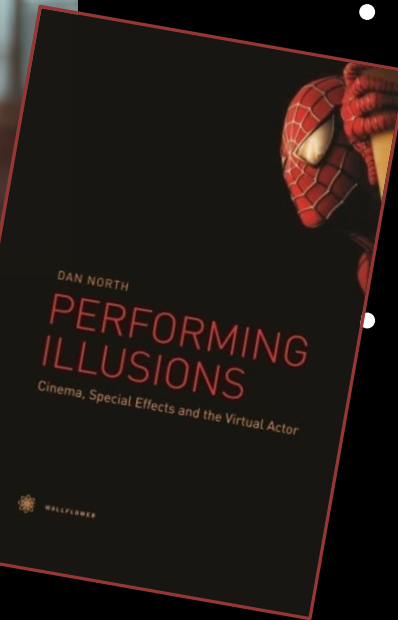
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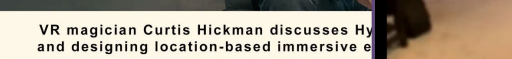
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Virtual Production as Hyper-Reality Theatre



- Virtual production volume functions as a magic theatre for creating impossible experiences.
- North's thesis that cinema VFX is based on illusionism, and synthespians are the ultimate trick.
- Hickman's Hyper-Reality design framework based on stage magic principles applied to a volume.
- Craig's super-puppet concept to design synthespians as real-time playable instruments for actors.



Macbeth Metahuman Interaction Illusions



- Through Livelink motion capture streaming the actor is in two spatial worlds and can manipulate the system as a super-puppet by simply hitting their marks.
- Early demos were like Bunraku puppetry, with the actor seen but ignored.
- Now the actor is in both worlds by misdirection.



Live Metahuman Invisible Switch Illusions



Live Metahuman Switch VFX
Don Giovanni Opera Project
NCSU Virtual Production Lab, 2026

Testing Claire Golder's opera project with actor Li Chen, 2026



Universal Epic Adventure
Wizarding World: Le Cirque Arcanus
Live Show with LED VFX, 2026



- Originally called the Texas or cowboy switch from mid-twentieth century Hollywood westerns using stunt doubles for action scenes.
- Transitioned to digital doubles in the early twenty-first century for blockbuster stunts too dangerous or impossible for humans.
- Used with LED walls in Disney and Universal theme parks for live shows and dark rides.
- Invisible switches blur the lines between the real and the virtual.

Discussion: Tradeoffs of VP vs VR Theatre



- Since an LED volume is like a traditional black-box or magic theatre space, it can be a more comfortable spectator experience, without the syncing, hygiene, and disorientation drawbacks of headsets.
- Economically, VP can handle larger groups than VR, which may be why theme parks use screens over headsets.
- However, there is a tradeoff in immersion and interactive affordances for spect-actors.





Thank You!

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