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## Vaudeville project lands grant Computers will enhance study

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The University of Georgia drama and theater department has explored a correlation between digital technology and live performances for the past eight years, and is now the leader in the nationwide "Virtual Vaudeville" project, simulated 19th century performances viewers can watch on their computer screens.



University of Georgia professor David Saltz and the UGA department of drama and theatre are working to develop a "virtual vaudeville," to allow study of the 19th-century performance style on computers. The work is being funded with a \$900,000 grant from the National Science Foundation.

Cameron Swartz/Staff

The project, made possible by a \$900,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, is a cooperative effort among colleges throughout the United States to set up 19th-century vaudeville-style performances via the Internet and allow viewers to interact with the audience as if they were there.

"It will look like a really good computer game," said David Saltz, drama professor and principal investigator in the Virtual Vaudeville project. "It's basically using computer game technology for an artistic and scholarly purpose."

Vaudeville performances, which included actors like the





Marx Brothers, were the 19th-century version of the modern-day variety show. Professional actors will be hired to act the parts of vaudeville performers and their bodies will be substituted by an animated figure.

"We build 3-D animated characters, but bring in a live performer, record their movement and map those movements on the animation we've created," Saltz said Friday.

The shows will include ventriloquists, acrobats, gymnasts, musclemen and other common characters in a vaudeville show. But the significance of the Virtual Vaudeville project is that it allows viewers to study the history of 19th century performances and get a sense of what it was like to be there, Saltz said.

Viewers will be able to click onto a person in the audience and view the show as would be seen by that person.

"You pick that person and see the performance from that perspective," Saltz said. "You can interact with people around you and hear what they're talking about. That social perspective with the audience is a big part of the performance."

Drama instructors will play the role of historians, studying vaudeville performances and incorporating them as accurately as possible into the shows. The shows will also provide clicking options, where viewers can learn about the history of vaudeville shows and view historical evidence to explain why situations in a show are set up a certain way.

"It's not like going to Disney World," Saltz said. "It becomes a sophisticated way for scholars to share research and also for students to get a sense of what historians do."

The drama and theater department has experimented in mixing animation with acting for around eight years. The department has performed Shakespeare's "Tempest" with real actors and an animated actor displayed on a projection screen to play the role of the spirit Ariel.

Saltz said his department is placing a high emphasis on animation because of its crucial role in modern day theater.

The \$900,000 grant for the vaudeville project will be matched by a state lottery-funded equipment grant of \$132,300.

Researchers at six other universities are contributing to the project.

Two primary participants are Bruce McConachie of the University of Pittsburgh, a nationally recognized expert in 19th-century American popular theater, and Susan Kattwinkel of the College of Charleston, whose research focuses specifically on early vaudeville stage performances.

Other scholars involved in the project include Larry Worster of Metropolitan State College of Denver, a musicologist specializing in American folk music traditions; Daniel Zellner, artistic director of Studio Z in Chicago, who will write the dialogue for the interactive characters backstage and in the audience; Frank Mohler of Appalachian State University, who will design the virtual

stage scenery; Michael Zyda, professor of computer science at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, who will provide interactive system design and programming; and Edward Price and Maribeth Gandy of the Interactive Media Technology Center at Georgia Tech, who will assume responsibility for the project's final software implementation.

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