

TV and On-line collides in TimeGate

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Televirtual – the TV and Virtual Reality production company – has unveiled a next generation computerised TV adventure game-show, featuring interactive drama and the prospect of people who journey through a fantasy world as virtual humans or avatars.

The TimeGate project has been jointly developed by Televirtual and Fremantle-Thames Media.

TimeGate has been devised by Televirtual's founder, Tim Child, who devised the award winning Knightmare fantasy game-show for Children's ITV, and Cyberzone, the world's first Virtual Reality TV show, for BBC2.

Described by its inventor, as 'a coming-of-age for VR in Television', TimeGate is also the first cross-media 'shared environment' as it's complex, populated world called Underland, is planned to feature both as a TV programme, and as an On-Line computer gaming experience.

The core task, for explorers of Underland is to survive 60 minutes in a hostile world of wizards, goblins and warring elvish tribes. 'Virtual treasure' looted from Underland may be converted to real cash on exit.

To cater for reality elements, each competitor is partnered by a sort of permanent 'phone-a-friend' in the form of a studio-based collaborator whose allowed to look down into Underland and warn and guide the VR-bound adventurer or 'dungeoneer'.

As for the TimeGate of title? It's the mysterious shifting portal everyone must track down during the course of the game, in order to escape from Underland with the loot.

Behind the wizards, warlocks, elves, orcs, thieves and merchants who populate Underland are a hidden cast of professional actors, whose performances translate into virtual characters via the latest gesture recognition and natural language speech technologies. So if a real actor speaks off-camera; its virtual counterpart responds synchronously, echoing both speech and expression.

These technologies reflect a six year research programme by Televirtual, but stem most recently from CHARISMATIC: a major EU funded collaborative project to allow people to explore history via a series of complex hi-fidelity simulation-based experiences. This Anglo-German-Greek consortium also features three European universities, Germany's largest private research institute, and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

'History and heroic fantasy are never far apart,' said Child. 'In most people's minds it's only a short step from the Middle Ages into Middle Earth, and through CHARISMATIC, not a difficult one for us to take.' Underland however, owes no more to Tolkein than any other swords-and-sorcery style dungeon-land. Ironically it owes most to recent huge advances in the processing and image-generating power of modern, PC workstations, and a powerful suite of in-house software programmes which Televirtual describes as RAP – or 'a Real-time Animation Pipeline'.

Through a valued developer relationship with both AMD and NVidia, Televirtual has been able to close-match its software development with the latest hardware advances in these fields, to the extent that TimeGate should out-perform any conventional computer game yet conceived. As a combined fantasy drama soap and game, TimeGate can afford a real human cast of inter-actors, where videogame counterparts must settle for a recorded character database. 'Think of real performing arts meets virtual world,' said Child, 'and you're getting the picture'.

Fremantle-Thames executives are quick to point out that TimeGate is only one expression of this new media production potential, for as computers reveal their ability to operate believable virtual scenarios, only human imagination is needed to grasp the opportunities.

Production stills on request from steve@televirtual.com

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