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"SOMNIUM" VR Demo

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Abstract– Driven by a desire to overcome challenges from COVID-19 and to explore theatre in a new direction, the fall production of SOMNIUM at the Rochester Institute of Technology took on a completely new concept. Instead of a more traditional, physical theatre piece as it was originally envisioned, the SOMNIUM RIT Team decided to leap into the unknown, and explore a unique blend of devised theatre, film, and 3D game design. This demo allowed audiences to view a short trailer of the production and speak with members of the design team.

Keywords– digital theatre, virtual environments, VR, interactivity, HTC Vive, Oculus

This demo will be paired with the accepted conference talk “Into the Unknown! Digital Theatre and Boldly Going Forward with SOMNIUM” (#9).

Driven by a desire to overcome challenges presented by the rapid onset of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, the fall production of *SOMNIUM* at RIT took on a completely new concept. Instead of a more traditional, physical theatre piece as it was originally envisioned, the *SOMNIUM* RIT Team decided to leap into the unknown, and explore a unique blend of devised theatre, film, and 3D game design.

The performance was re-envisioned as an asynchronous experience in which the audience member plays an integral role. Built in Epic’s Unreal 4 engine, *SOMNIUM*’s new

direction turned the stage into a three-dimensional environment for the audience/player to explore.

In this new direction, *SOMNIUM* was first built-out as a virtual performance for the desktop, meant to be downloaded as a stand-alone “game” for individual players. This allowed the team to focus on the purely logistical questions of student/faculty workflows for such a large team, methods of incorporating videos of actors, and optimization.

This *SOMNIUM* VR Demo will be a two-pronged experience:

The first prong will be a modification of the original desktop version of the “game”. A new, 5-minute VR “trailer” of *SOMNIUM* will be distributed via Steam VR and will be playable

by any audience member with a head-mounted display such as an HTC Vive or Oculus. Players will also be provided a link to play through the full *SOMNIUM* VR experience. The team hopes that this experience will be made more accessible to audiences and that there can be several headsets made available in a VR lab at RIT's MAGIC Spell Studios.

The second prong will be a live-streamed director's cut of *SOMNIUM*, in which the director and a panel of several key members of the VR production team will walk audiences through the experience and discuss in detail how and why specific choices were made for designing and developing the virtual world of the story. The live-stream will be made available via Twitch.

Overall, this project incorporates various educational stakeholders and students: classes in computing, liberal arts, and theatre arts all joined together to create the new, digital *SOMNIUM* production, while also incorporating new approaches in pedagogy and re-thinking what theatre is in the digital age, particularly with regards to theatre and the virtual experience.



Fig. 1 & 2 Early concept renderings of the virtual Dream Sections