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Crowd-Sourcing Shakespeare: Screen Work and Screen Play in Second Life®

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Katherine Rowe

Academic film studies has dedicated many decades to establishing the principle that films are, in a deep intellectual sense, basically like books: richly historically situated, formally complex, inviting critical analysis and theoretical formulations. Understood in these ways, film texts could emerge as objects fitted to the structures of authority, oversight, and cultural value that organize academic practice. This process is contested and continuing, and reflection on its unevenness provokes speculation about the future. What opportunities and challenges to such institutional assimilation do new media offer academics—Shakespeareans in particular? To my mind the most compelling and urgent are those posed by the transformations colloquially known as “Web 2.0,” less a term of technological change than of behavioral change. “Web 2.0” denotes the collaborative, creative, socially networked behaviors of humans interacting with each other through sharable, dynamic content online. The labor and play that take place in this mode in virtual environments constitute an increasingly important kind of public engagement with Shakespeare. For literary scholars, closer attention to such engagements can expand our understanding of the public perceptions of value invested in Shakespeare specifically and the Renaissance generally. As importantly, Shakespeare environments online offer direct encounters with the core conflicts new modes of knowledge-making on the web generate for scholars.

This essay explores those conflicts by focusing on the fictions of ownership governing three Shakespearean locations in Second Life, an online world that combines social networking, gaming, and 3-D design. The platform welcomes a growing number of academics as visitors and residents. Since it was launched, it has hosted five virtual Globe Theaters, one with a regular acting company. In Second Life you may explore historical recreations of sixteenth-century Europe inhabited by intentional communities; and you can enter simulations (“sims”) of numerous literary works, including some remarkable multimedia installations. The client software’s 3D surround creates a powerful sense of proprioception and architectural space, making it attractive as a teaching space for theater studies.¹

Second Life provides a useful exemplum of the opportunities for creative, public engagement with Shakespeare online because its business model is rapidly becoming a dominant one: the drive to leverage user-generated content. Linden Lab created the platform in response to a growing recognition in the gaming industry that a player’s ability to modify game environments is a key index of her enjoyment. Two technical features distinguish such virtual worlds. They are persistent: what you build here lasts when you log off. And they are extensible: designed for open-ended collaborative world-building. Players interact through avatars in environments they build themselves (Figure 1).² Imagine your avatar as a cross between a car, a telephone, a doll, and a puppet, and you will have a good sense of the interface Second Life provides for movement, communication, and self-performance.³

Figure 1

"Second Life® is a 3-D virtual world created by its Residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe.

From the moment you enter the World you'll discover a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity. Once you've explored a bit, perhaps you'll find a perfect parcel of land to build your house or business.

You'll also be surrounded by the Creations of your fellow Residents. Because Residents retain intellectual property rights in their digital creations, they can buy, sell and trade with other Residents."

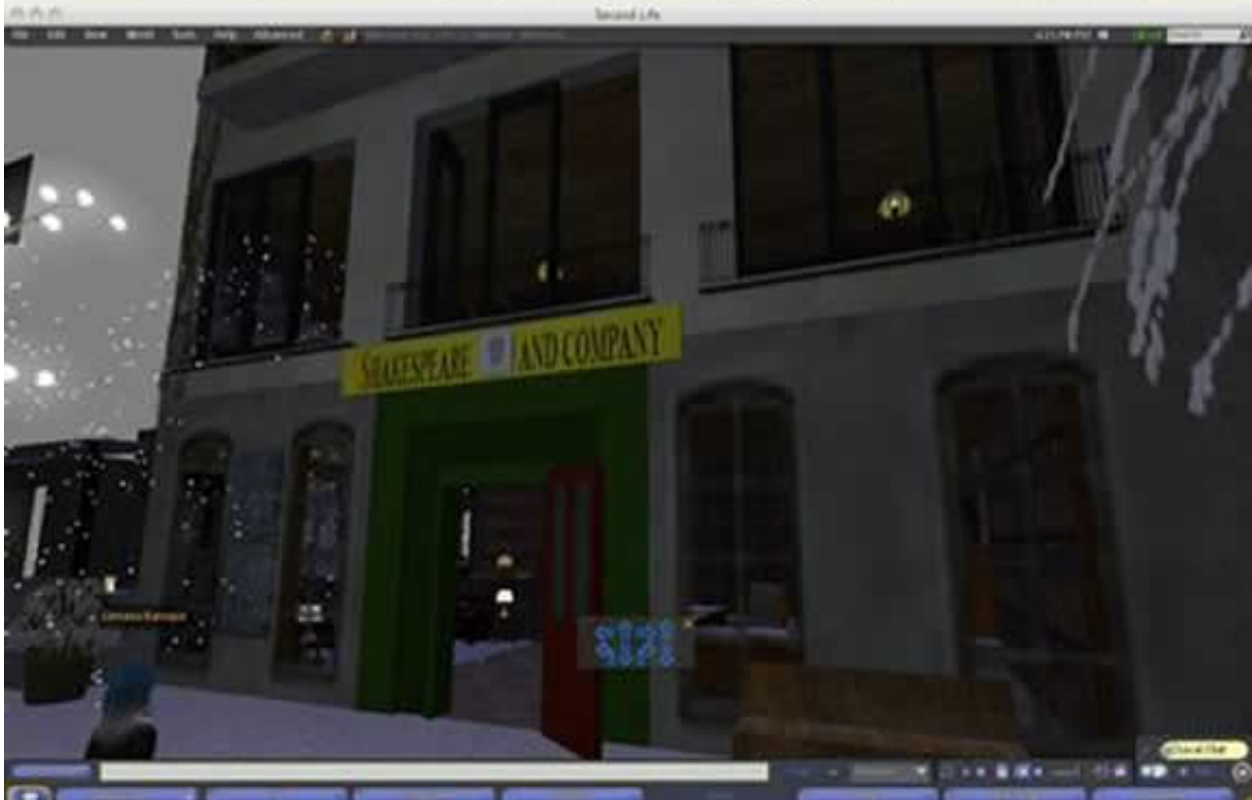
— What is Second Life®?



A year or so into operation, Linden Lab added what was then a revolutionary feature to their terms of service, granting players intellectual property rights in their virtual creations (Figure 2). Yet ownership in Second Life remains a fiction in two important ways. In legal and commercial terms, the Lockean discourse of builder-ownership invoked in company slogans obscures far more complex intellectual property relations. Not only is the “extension of the body” in this platform predicated on a technical “interface of extensibility from which the company profits,” but “the ‘medium’ with which game players mix or join their labor ... is neither undifferentiated nor common; Linden ‘land’ is always already code that is owned by the corporation.”⁴ What’s more, within the socially immersive communities of Second Life, a virtual Globe theater can only exist in a real way by consent and participation of other residents.

Figure 2

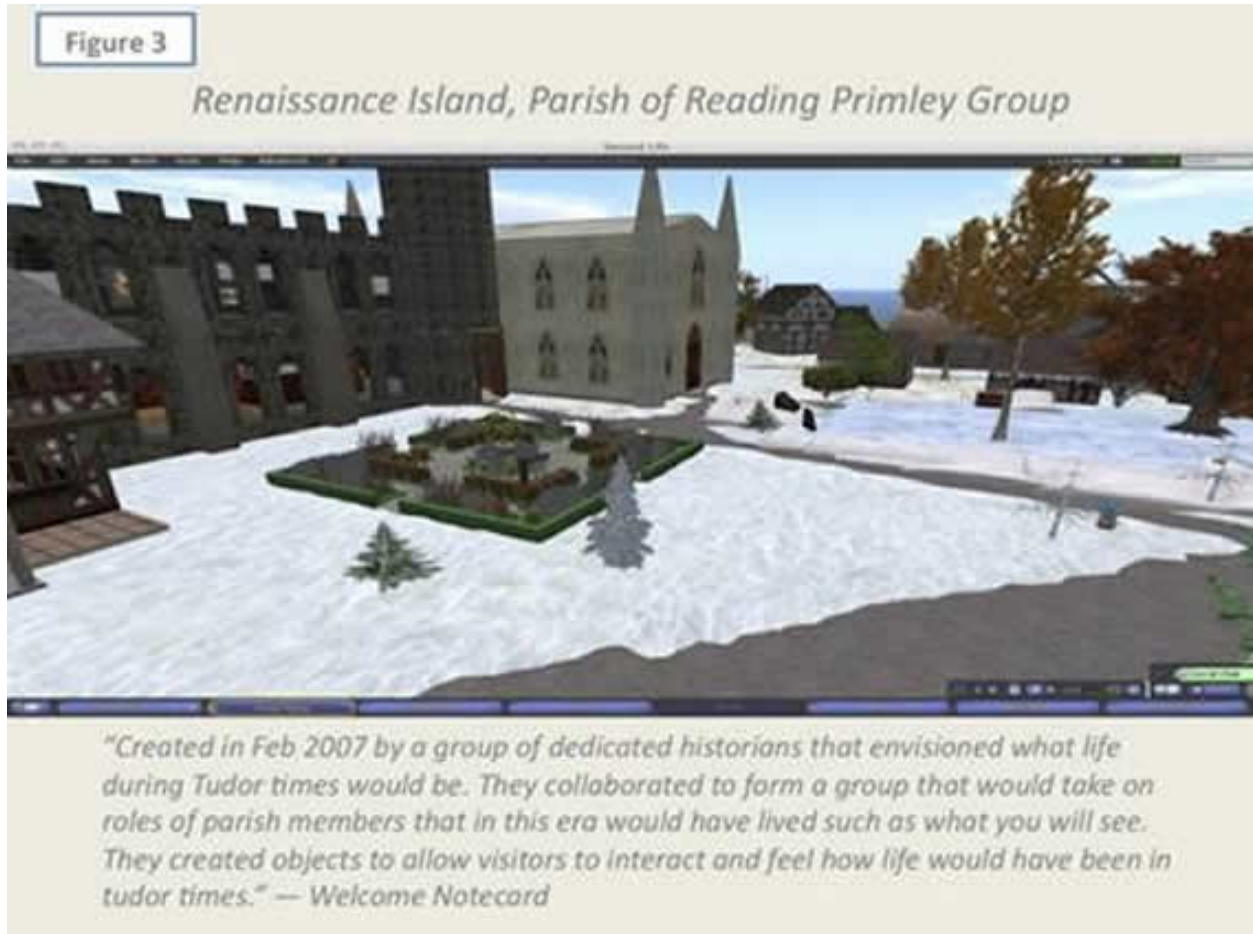
"You'll...be surrounded by the Creations of your fellow Residents"



A fly through three Renaissance sims in Second Life illustrates the different permutations this conundrum of property takes and the challenges they pose for scholars. Read together, these sims foreground the ideological divisions between our academic practices and what Michael Warner has labeled “uncritical reading,” non-scholarly modes of textual encounter that lack the analytic distance and independent agency we prize. Broaching his critique of critical reading, Warner traces its roots in immersive and affective textual practices that academics usually figure as the opposite of independent thought. The experience of a modern Western literature classroom, as Warner observes, all too often sounds like admonishment—“don’t read like vacation readers on the beach, like escapists, like fundamentalists, like nationalists, like antiquarians, like consumers, like ideologues, like sexists, like tourists, like yourselves.”⁵ Noting that critical reading has always been one among many competing frameworks, Warner historicizes these counter-distinctions, suggesting we use them to forget our disciplinary origins in just such amateur practices. A parallel, more difficult critique might be pursued by challenging the counter-distinctions themselves. How might we approach immersive, affective, and practical modes of interpretation as equal, perhaps competing frameworks for thinking, not as the opposites of thinking? My pursuit of this question in Second Life began as fieldwork with students and colleagues. I owe a special debt to Alice Dailey, whose voice may be heard several times in the discussion that follows.

I. Renaissance Island: The Parish of Reading Primley Group

We begin in Renaissance Island, an elaborate sixteenth-century build created “by a group of dedicated historians” who make up The Parish of Reading Primley Group (Figure 3). The modes of property in the historical Renaissance that operate here are vexed and various: property imagined in terms of estate and labor (as rights to specific social roles); as propriety (community standards of decorum); and property in expertise.



Teleporting in, you resolve at a beautiful Tudor library, with elaborately carved wood panels and a book collection (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Parish Library, Renaissance Island



A scan of the shelves shows the latest biographies of Renaissance celebrities, a First Folio facsimile of *Love's Labour's Lost*, and various how-to's.⁶ The bibliophilic historicism performed here turns out to be in some tension with a competing dedication to fantasy role-playing in *Renaissance Island* — a blend of Renaissance Faire with Plimoth Plantation. Residents (those who pay to join the Group) play the landed class of course; tourists are offered free clothing and invited to join in as “peasant lass” or “peasant lad.” Social encounters involve faux Tudor English and titles — “Milady”, “Milord.” If you don't join in, you are likely to be politely ignored.

For all their play at Tudor rank, members of the Group make what is essentially a populist claim on the sixteenth century—one that is in some tension with book learning as Shakespeareans claim it. An exchange between a colleague known as “Barbary” in SL, and the resident tourguide illustrates this tension. When they first meet, Barbary's guide asks her about her name and she explains its source: a character in *Othello* mentions a “maid called Barbary” (3.3.393). As they tour the parish — jousting ring, gallows and rack, Globe theater, thatch cottages with perennial borders, crenellated castle — her guide observes that he hasn't read Shakespeare and reels off a number of inaccurate claims about life in the period. Barbary is cautious with her own expertise. Any new relationship in SL can easily fizzle, constructed as it is through the narrow bandwidth of text chat. Becoming “the one who knows more” can flip the polarities of authority and disintegrate social relationship with remarkable speed. Aside from building things, social relationship is the main reason to be in SL, so Barbary is thinking “how do I hold this together so the other person doesn't flee, so I can find things out and get oriented?” Meanwhile, 16th Century Guy is still puzzled by her name. So she explains again: “Barbary” is a name

from a Shakespeare play, not a character in the play; that leaves me room to invent myself. He writes back: “You’re in the play now.”

His reply assumes (and affirms) a shared desire for unscripted access to the Renaissance. In this sim, that access unfolds in a dramatic now that, while deeply preoccupied with the sixteenth century, is expressly unlike the knowledge represented by a playtext in that it is emergent and dynamic. 16th Century Guy invokes a governing metaphor for play in SL, that of populist theater. In the words of Linden Lab’s VP of Product Development, “People want to be perceived as creative by customizing their surroundings, to have their moments on the stage.”⁷ The subject of performance is the build, and the authority that matters in Second Life is the authority of those who build — who have, in Lockean terms, made the Renaissance their property by mixing their labor with it.⁸ Barbary observes, in Renaissance Island, this mode of propriety makes her academic training “not only superfluous, but potentially threatening to him; at the least it’s socially disabling to me.” And yet such fan relationships with the Renaissance legitimate (and as Warner would remind us animate) every aspect of our field.

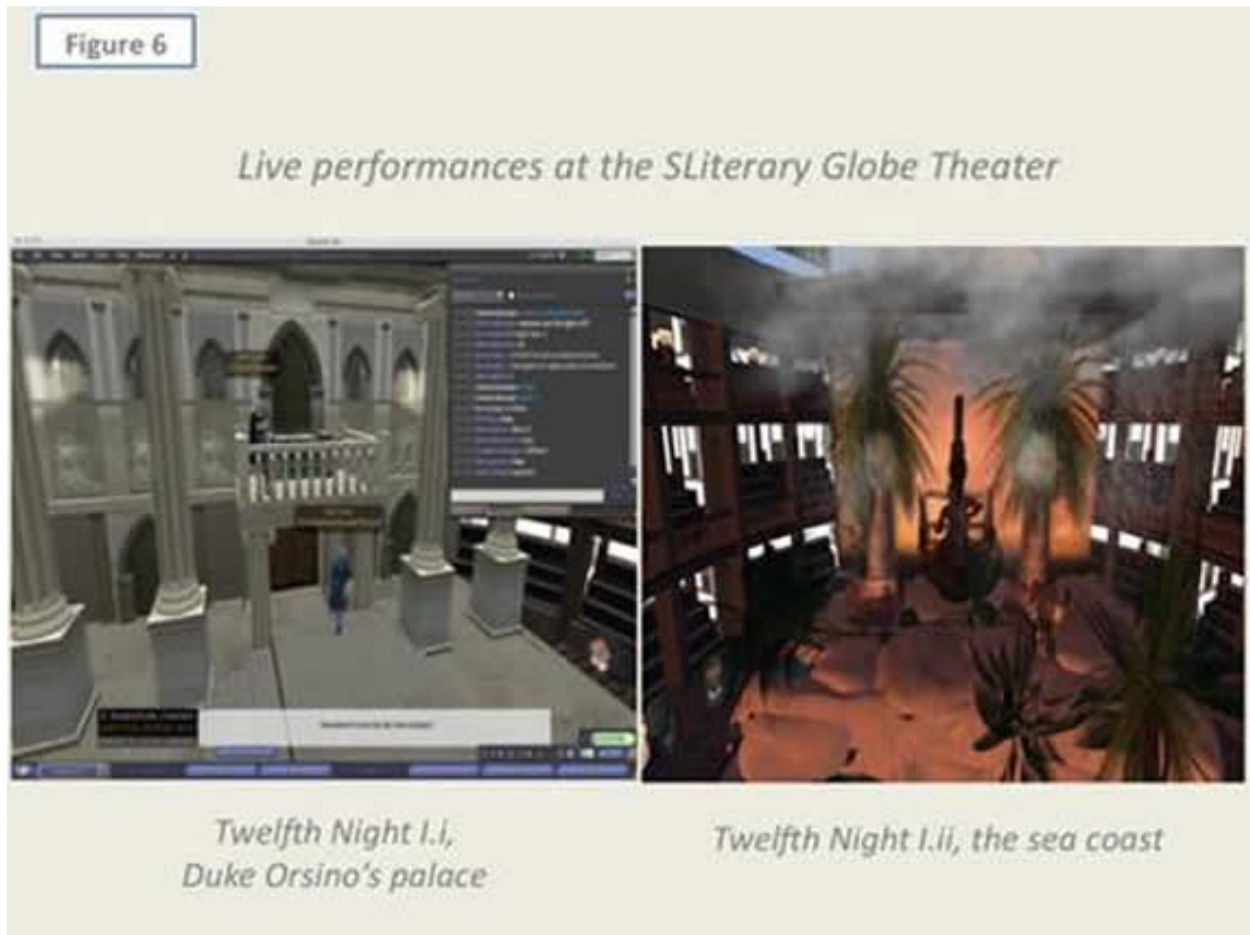
II. The SLiterary Virtual Globe Theater



The SLiterary Shakespeare Company sponsors a more traditional invitation to “be in the play,” but one that shows similar tensions between a populist ideal of a Shakespeare available to all, and the propriety that results when you build what’s felt to be an authentic Shakespearean space. This Globe (Figure 5) hosts non-interpretive, non-conceptually complex Shakespeare similar to what one would find

at the London Globe. At first glance, performances so conventional seem to miss the point of Second Life as an unscripted medium. Yet as in Renaissance Island, the subject of performance here is the build, as much as the players. The theater is based on C. Walter Hodge's conjectural diagrams, but scaled to fit avatars on stage and in the stalls. A recent production of *Twelfth Night* began to explore the possibilities of the medium, featuring moving sets with virtual weather and a cinematic director's camera that zooms your avatar's view around the stage.

Such play with the build itself is the main attraction (Figure 6).



Actors working in this Globe agree the architecture has a “special” feel. The conceits that gloss this specialness echo Linden Lab's claims for Second Life as a populist performance medium. Like the promotional clips for the Globe at Renaissance Island, the default position for the director's camera at the SLiterary Globe quotes the opening shots of Olivier's *Henry V*: with a “thatch zoom” that pulls the viewer from a panoramic long shot down into the center of the circling roof, to the stage (Figure 7).⁹

Figure 7

Henry V (Olivier, 1944)

*Virtual
Globes:
echoes of
Olivier's
"thatch zoom"*



*Renaissance Island, the Globe Grand
Opening, machinma movie, 2007*



*SLiterary Globe: default camera
position, before performance, 2008*



Audience experience is similarly characterized, by rotating pans of the stalls that stress our interaction and collectivity in this space. Notably, the same “stall pan” motif predominates in tourist footage of the New Globe in London (Figure 8). Typically, the camera (video or cell phone) is positioned above the groundlings and pans across them, past the stage, circling around the bustling stalls.¹⁰ As Peter Donaldson has observed, this rotational pan is a signature of first person gaming, where it conveys autonomous player agency and choice.¹¹ For both actual and virtual Globe theaters, the motif embeds first person agency in collective audition. As in the eighteenth century, one chooses to go to the theater here to see oneself and be seen with everyone else.

Figure 8

Virtual Globes: stall pan

Olivier's Globe, Henry V



New Globe: tourist mobile (YouTube)



New Globe: tourist video (YouTube)



SLiterary Globe: Flickr snapshot



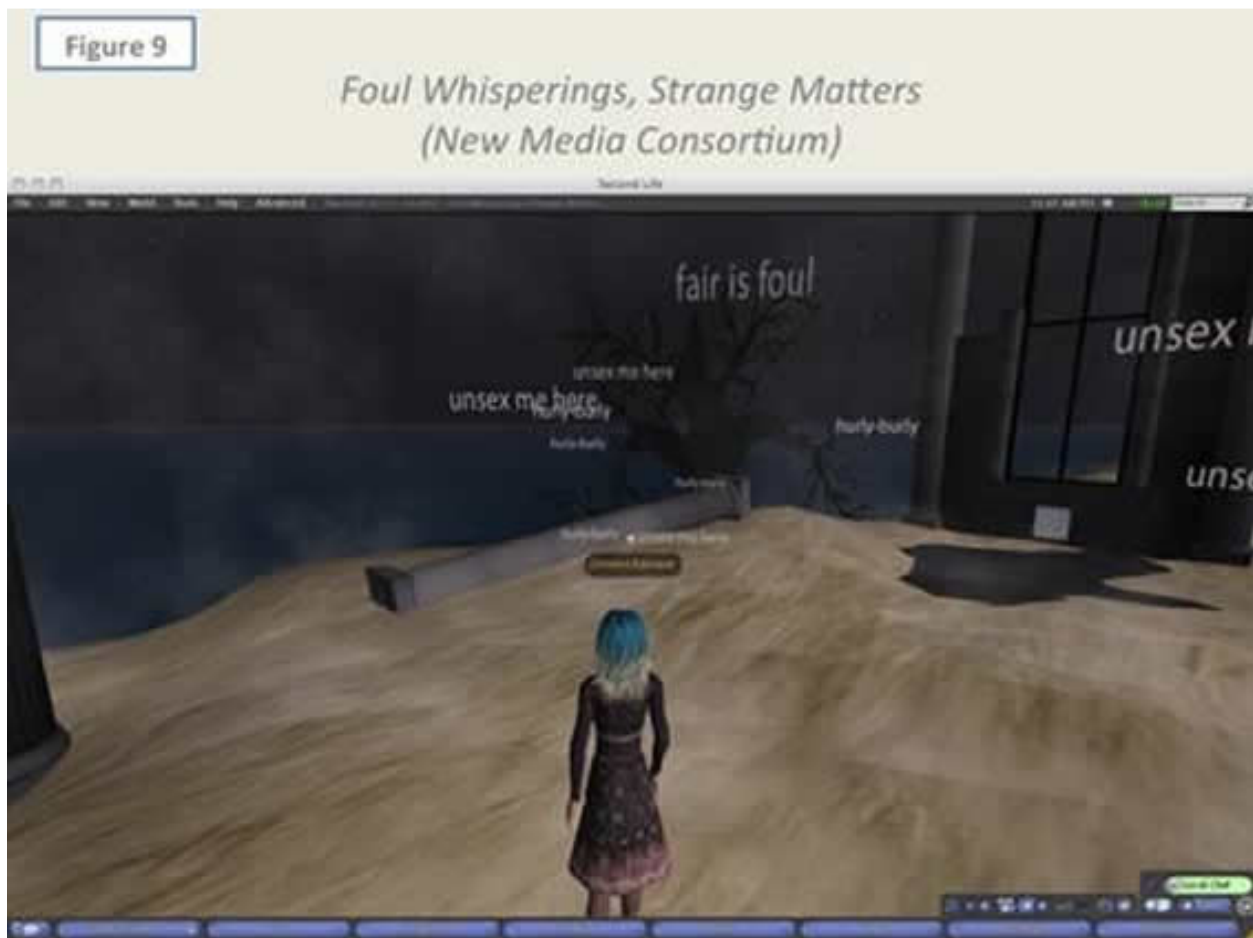
Despite this insistence on popular access and audience agency, a dominant feature of any sim is that it is owned—in the case of the SLiterary Globe, owned by the designer, by virtue of the Lockean fictions that govern property relations here. This became clear in late 2008 when, like many brick and mortar playing companies, the SLiterary Shakespeare company fell into conflict over resources. The cost of renting the four sims on which the Globe is built is not inconsiderable, and financial pressures triggered a debate over ownership, described by the designer as a “coup”. Her sense of propriety in the build was so strong at the time that she preferred Globe broken down to constitutive bits, rather than sold to the company.

III. Foul Whisperings

In both Renaissance Island and The SLiterary Globe, a perspective that sees Shakespearean texts and environments in terms of a history of debates over authority and propriety — as our field has learned to do over the last several decades — puts one in direct conflict with their governing fictions. Worse, to enter these locales in the subject position of “the one who knows the history better” and who reads these claims critically is merely to introduce variations in the contest over what counts as authentically Renaissance or Shakespearean. This may be why both Barbary and I feel such relief and excitement when we discover “Foul Whisperings,” a Macbeth installation that successfully breaks down oppositions between critical distance and immersive enthusiasm, fan and scholar, player and designer.¹² This sim was built collaboratively by a professor of digital media and education, a director, and a multi-media artist and producer, and funded by the New Media Consortium. Allusively rich, its associations range from Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* to Janet Adelman. The sim is “dedicated to the

exploration, adaptation and performance” of the play in ways that feel free of propriety and authorial presence.¹³ No one resides here; all are invited in teach and learn. In other words: this is fandom for an academic Shakespearean. In *Foul Whisperings*, one moves through a half-dozen linked theatrical spaces, anchored in the playtext and structured thematically: different scenes explore the uncanny agency of language, the play of light and dark, deception, human violence, horror. As with any good multimedia installation, meaning in these scenes is constituted immersively, by the person passing through them. That person is addressed variously: as student, scholar, fan, historian, player, tourist, museum-goer, director, designer.

In several scenes, the sim uses the technical possibilities of Second Life to challenge our sense of control over meaning. Fragments of playtext float unfixed through the landscape and audioscape, the lines unsexed – delivered in both male and female voices (Figure 9).



Scale, distance, and direction dilate and contract in ways that are genuinely disorienting and spooky. In a series of tour puzzles, one walks down a telescoping pathway into entrapping darkness, or loses one’s head. Or one wanders into a concrete Cobweb Forest, marked by the ghosts of Hiroshima, only to discover that returning were as tedious as going oe’r (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Foul Whisperings, The Maze
restoring Hiroshima to Kurosawa's Cobweb Forest



"...A tour puzzle in the form of a complex branching passage.."

— Notecard

In a chamber surrounded by scenes of modern torture and holocaust, reminiscent of Taymor's *Titus*, one finds oneself locked in a phantom battle (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Chamber of Blood, with Holocaust surround



Follow a rose arbor, and the avenue gradually reveals itself to be governed by Lady Macbeth's command to "look like the innocent flower, yet be the serpent under it." As the roses resolve into ghostly hands, her words double and redouble, hissing around ones virtual feet (Figure 12).

Figure 13

Foul Whisperings, Path of Temptation
Macbeth I.v

"Look like the innocent flower..."

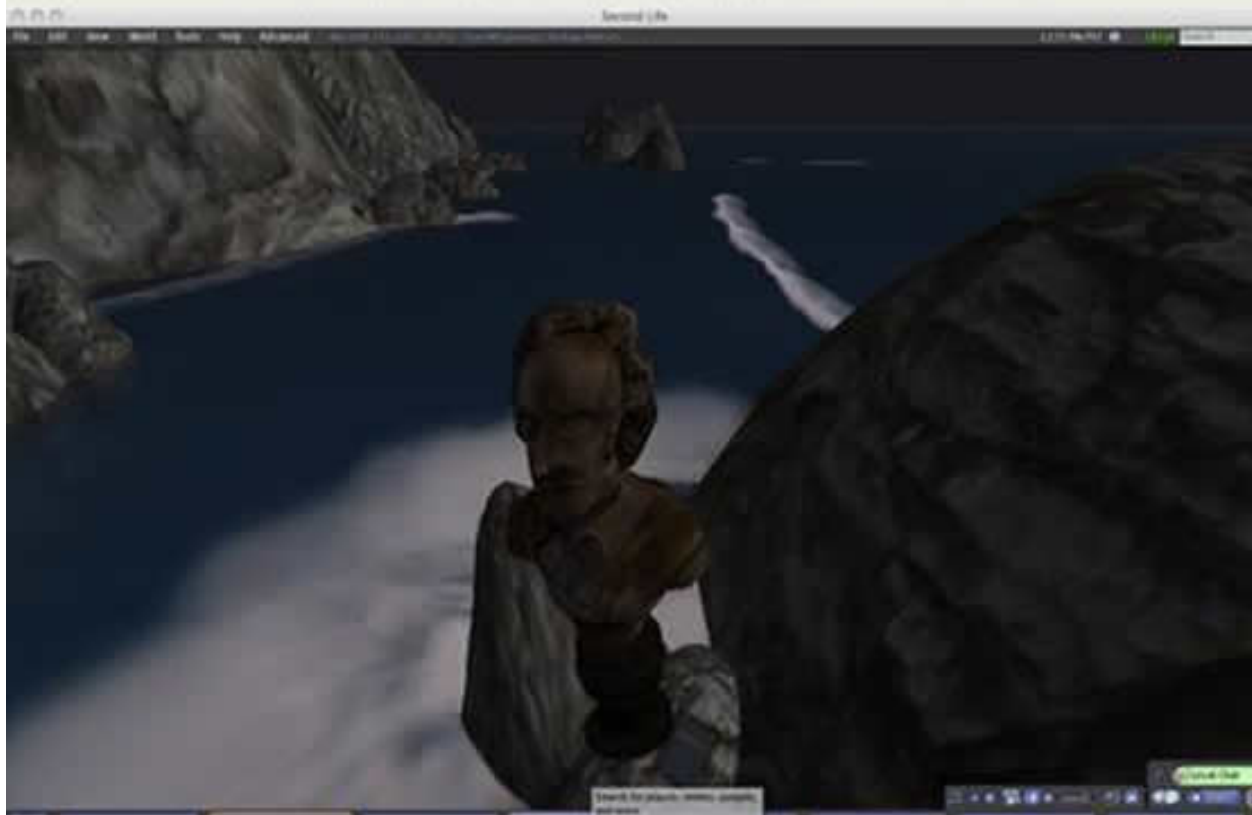


"...but be the serpent under't."

In each scene, objects that look like the codex of Macbeth contain notecards, offering teacherly “provocations” to close-read passages of text, investigate historical contexts, and generate new material through writing or performance. The cards array multiple opportunities for engagement—formalist, aesthetic, historicist, theatrical, analytic, immersive—in ways that mutually reinforce rather than contest each other. In this symbolically rich environment, what is between the covers of a codex is revealed as dynamic, emergent, constituted anew in each engagement by a reader/performer. There is even a place for iconic authorship here. Represented as such and tucked away at the edge of the surf so it will not affect your encounter with Macbeth before you approach the text in other ways (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Foul Whisperings, bust of Shakespeare at the shore



Over a semester, a good course could do this work: arraying different ways of using, consuming, and recreating Shakespeare's works, helping students explore and compare the different frameworks for thinking invested in each approach. With its distributed, user-generated builds, Second Life accelerates such a comparatist view and formalizes it—making this one of the better media we have now for surveying different modes of engagement with Shakespeare. In the process, it offers new opportunities for reading more expansively, finding ourselves in an array of subject positions from fan to expert.

IV. Small-node Shakespeare

Whether or not Shakespeareans embrace such virtual environments, we should internalize two cautions from them. The first is that what makes "Foul Whisperings" compelling to me, as a Shakespeare scholar, may be precisely that it offers what I already know and care about. When it unbalances me or reveals something new about Macbeth, it does so in ways that are consistent with modes of authority (historiography, performance, close reading, appropriation) that I already embrace. *Foul Whisperings* exists on the same platform as the other two sims explored here, but as of this writing no structures link them or bridge their disparate modes of knowing Shakespeare. Indeed, my relative comfort in this spooky sim invokes a concern at the heart of debates in new media studies about the tradeoffs between extensibility, on the one hand, and audience fragmentation on the other. The phenomenon of building and inviting others into an elaborate literary simulation is a subset of a larger culture of participatory fandom and interactive audiences emerging online.¹⁴ Does this proliferation of small-node formats enable "a range of social actors that would once have been excluded" from mass media, and offer "an

opportunity for previously silenced voices to be heard”?¹⁵ Or as Dana Polan has worried, does the proliferation of multiple channels and platforms mean that “such voices simply disappear into their niche and resonate only lightly beyond their increasingly fragmented target audience”?¹⁶ In this context, “Foul Whisperings” parses as a very small content niche (Shakespeare scholar-fans) the comfort of which is in direct proportion to its emptiness. For Polan, the proliferation of niches catering to individual desires and experiences threatens to destroy any possibility of a Gramscian “national-popular — a folk culture that would speak to citizens in a common or shared fashion.” He concludes with the speculation that, “This might be the function of ideology today: not so much to offer a collective imaginary that everyone can be sutured into [pause] so much as to provide no sharing of positions and thereby push potential social actors back toward private passions that serve as little more than hobbies.”¹⁶

The second caution is that the excellence of this sim depends, finally, on scholarly expertise, not on crowd-sourcing or open collaboration. It is a teaching sim, after all, as well as an appreciation and a new media installation. In this respect its structures of authority are no different than those animating a good critical essay. By contrast, Renaissance Island is a far more collaborative build and at the same time a far less rich experience, though it is closer to a Web 2.0 vision of crowd-sourced content. Rich in collaborators and yet impoverished in the intellectual payoffs and aesthetic insights their engagement offers—the sim reads, in Polan’s context, like the work of private hobbyists. It may be more populated than “Foul Whisperings;” it may also be as closed to new ideas and growth.

The news that Shakespearean materials activate questions of ownership in an emerging media platform may be unsurprising, since appropriation and cultural property are longstanding concerns for Shakespeareans. Most of us are all too familiar with the weird, often antagonistic relationship between Shakespeare as the property of mass culture and academic Shakespeare. Yet Polan reminds us that for better and worse, niche cultures will not function as mass culture does. The deep but fragmented engagements offered by platforms like Second Life put keen pressure on the subject position familiar to our field: enemy of cultural capital, positioned to critique its invidious structures, yet professionally secured by their mass distribution of cultural values. Some of our works make it onto the virtual shelves in Second Life. Yet we have still to learn how Shakespeare scholarship can compete in the distributed arenas of cultural value fostered by user-generated environments. To plant deep roots in these content fields, we must grapple with multiple tasks: recognizing critical thinking in unfamiliar modes and locations; internalizing Polan’s cautions; and developing practices that engage crowd-sourcing, investing expertise in each user who builds the collaborative resources he or she will want to keep returning to. What those practices should look like is the conversation we need now to be pursuing as a field.

Notes

1 A good example is the King’s College Visualisation Lab project, Theatron 3 (www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech23.php), discussed in Joff Chafer and Mark Childs, “The Impact of the Characteristics of a Virtual Environment on Performance: Concepts, Constraints and Complications.” Paper delivered at ReLIVE08: Researching Learning in Virtual Environments, The Open University, 19-20 November 2008. <http://coventry.academia.edu/JOFFCHAFER/Talks>.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, illustrations in this essay are screenshots taken by Katherine Rowe, between December 2008 and June 2009.

3 Tom Boellstorff surveys these different social modes in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

4 Andrew Herman, Rosemary J. Coombe, and Lewis Kaye, "Your Second Life®?" *Cultural Studies* 20 (2006): 201, 202.

5 Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading." In *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical* ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

6 At latest visit these included Stanley Wells, Shakespeare & Co (2007), a host of biographies of monarchs and nobles, David Crystal's *Glossary* (2002), Duffin's songbook collection, and a homegrown manual on fencing.

7 C. R. Ondrejka, "Escaping the Gilded Cage: User Created Content and Building the Metaverse." *New York Law School Law Review*, 49 (2005), 86.

8 John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 11.5.27.

9 Clockwise from the top: Laurence Olivier, dir., *Henry V* (1944) [DVD]. Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 1999; SLiterary Globe screenshot, Katherine Rowe, April 2009; Swanson, Bernadette (HVX Silverstar, at the Machinima Institute in Second Life®), creator. 'Renaissance Island Globe Grand Opening.' (2007) USA. Machinima movie www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIXaL4RncFw (reproduced by permission of the artist).

10 Clockwise from the top: Laurence Olivier, dir., *Henry V* (1944); "Shakespeare's Globe Theater, London", a "pan-around" posted by Joey Leake (aelfwine14), February 11, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bv5uN-dzizI>; Remi Kiranov. "The Globe" (2008) USA, screenshot posted December 19, www.flickr.com/photos/remikiranov/3120461228/; Kirk Rutter, "The Globe Theater," video posted July 30, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWdTylRemcE>.

11 Peter Donaldson, "Game Space / Tragic Space: Julie Taymor's *Titus*," in Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen, eds. *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2005), 457.

12 <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Macbeth/44/54/54>.

13 Virtual Macbeth, home page, <http://virtualmacbeth.wikispaces.com/>.

14 Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence,

and Participatory Culture." In D. Thorburn & H. Jenkins, eds. *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2003), 211-230.

15 John Sinclair, *Contemporary World Television* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 5.

16 Dana Polan, "I Got Plenty of Nothing (and Nothing's Plenty for Me)': Television's Politics of Abundance." *Flow* 2.05:2 May 27th (2005). <http://flowtv.org/?p=578>.