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

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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 shareable, 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 important, 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,

Editor’s note: *To read a version of this essay with illustrations and hyperlinks, go to Katherine Rowe’s home page. http://www.brynmawr.edu/english/Faculty_andStaff/rowe/research.html
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 re-creations 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 3-D 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. 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.²

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. 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."³ 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.

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
forefront the ideological divisions between our academic practices and what Michael Warner has labeled “uncritical reading,” nonscholarly 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 escapist, like fundamentalists, like nationalists, like antiquarians, like consumers, like ideologues, like sexists, like tourists, like yourselves.”¹⁴ Noting that critical reading has always been one among many competing frameworks, Warner historicizes these counterdistinctions, 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 counterdistinctions 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. 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. A scan of the shelves shows the latest biographies of Renaissance celebrities, a First Folio facsimile of Love’s Labor’s Lost, and various how-tos.⁵ 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 Second Life, and the resident tour guide 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 Second Life 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 Second Life, 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, Sixteenth-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 play text in that it is emergent and dynamic. Sixteenth-Century Guy invokes a governing metaphor for play in Second Life, that of populist theater. In the words of Linden Lab’s vice president of product development, “People want to be perceived as creative by customizing their surroundings, to have their moments on the stage.”6 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.7 As Barbary observes, in Renaissance Island, this mode of propriety makes her academic training “not only super-
fluorous, 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 (SLSC) 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 hosts noninterpretive, nonconceptually 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, scaled to fit avatars onstage and in the stalls.

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.8 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: typically, the camera (video or cell phone) is positioned above the groundlings and pans across them, past the stage, circling around the bustling stalls.9 As Peter Donaldson has observed, this rotational pan is a signature of first-person gaming, where it conveys autonomous player agency and choice.10 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.

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
SLiteral 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 SLiteral 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 that the Globe be broken down to constitutive bits rather than sold to the company.

III. Foul Whisperings

In both Renaissance Island and the SLiteral 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.11 This sim was built collaboratively by a professor of digital media and education, a director, and a multimedia 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.12 No one resides here; all are invited to 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 play text 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 play text float unfixed through the landscape and audioscape, the lines unsexed—delivered in both male and female voices. 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. In a chamber surrounded by scenes of modern torture and holocaust, reminiscent of Taymor’s Titus, one finds oneself locked in a phantom battle. 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 one’s virtual feet.

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, and 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.

Over a semester, a good course could do this work: arraying different ways of using, consuming, and re-creating 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 trade-offs 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.\(^\text{14}\) 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"?\(^\text{14}\) 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"?\(^\text{15}\) 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 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."

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 long-standing 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 still have 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 now need to be pursuing as a field.

Notes


5. 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.


8. Compare the credit sequence in Laurence Olivier, dir., *Henry V* (1944) with the thatch zoom in “Renaissance Island Globe Grand Opening” (2007) USA.


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