Literary Study as Serious Play in Second Life

by

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The study of literature has changed dramatically in the last twenty years, in large part as a result of technological advances that have made research materials more accessible, has led to digitization of texts, and has enabled exhaustive searches of documents of all kinds. These changes have been felt in the literary profession as well. Traditionally a solitary pursuit, literary scholarship is becoming a more collaborative endeavor, with scholars sharing insights and posing questions through listservs or posting their musings and work-in-progress on blogs. Theoretical approaches to texts, such as Cultural Criticism, New Historicism, and Postcolonialism, emphasize the importance of interdisciplinarity and contextuality in literary analysis, modes that are more easily accommodated using the wide variety of resources and tools available online.

Such developments have had a corresponding impact on the teaching of literature, with technologically enhanced instruction, whether this takes the form of a simple PowerPoint presentation or more sophisticated use of multi-media and online materials, and with more courses that are learner-centric as opposed to instructor-centric. No longer residents of the ivory tower, today's teacher-scholars realize that they must provide students with more than just a set of literary terms and the ability to parse a sentence, although these remain important skills. They must also help prepare students for a world in which collaboration is becoming the norm, where the ability to adapt to new technologies is an advantage, and where the practical application of knowledge is

expected. And, in addition to all this, they must find ways to motivate students and engage them in material that can seem dated and even irrelevant. The changes are evident in such things as the use of wikis for whole-class projects, online discussions that extend conversations about literature beyond the class period, and course management systems and word processing tools that facilitate online peer review and collaborative writing assignments. The shift can also be observed in the ongoing stream of books and articles on everything from active learning in the college classroom to cooperative learning to ways to use various forms of technology for college teaching in all disciplines.

Given its collaborative nature and its ability to incorporate other forms of media, Second Life is a natural corollary to the aforementioned tools and one that can be used to enhance the study of literature in ways that are not only creative but also are not easily achieved otherwise. There is already a strong literary presence in Second Life, with such sites as *Literature Alive!* (http://literaturealive.wikispaces.com/ and SLURL: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Eduisland%20II/181/237/23), which, according to its blog, "seeks to provide quality content to SL residents by focusing on the creation, development, and dissemination of literary resources in Second Life (http://literaturealive.blogspot.com/). It features "builds" based on literary texts such as the novel *Mama Day* and the works of Edgar Allan Poe, among others. In addition, one of the most interesting developments in Second Life has been the increasing number of venues where people can share their written work. While this is primarily creative work at the moment, it is only a matter of time before formal literary scholarship also makes an appearance, especially given the increasing obstacles to publishing in the real world. At

sites such as Book Island Publishing Village--which is described on the Second Life site as a space "[f]or books, magazines, publishers, publishing, editors, printers, writers, media, authors, books, writing, thinc, events, literary, political discussion, hangout, discussion, printing and more!" (Second Life n.p.)—members can view a range of exhibits, chat with authors and publishers, and visit a book fair. Publishers like Macmillan and Penguin have an in-world presence, and there are author events, open readings of original work, and other evidence that literature is alive and well in the virtual world. (Second Life itself is supposed to have been inspired by the cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson.) Given these resources, the question then becomes how to harness the unique characteristics of Second Life for the formal study of literature in a way that is meaningful and thoughtful. Lloyd P. Rieber contends that "it can be very difficult to arrange one's own learning environment in order to learn something new at a deep level," and that this is one of the fundamental problems with education as now know it (1). Second Life provides a learning environment that can be shaped both for and by students into a place where deep and engaged learning can occur. It is also a place where the role of instructor is transformed. As Cynthia M. Calongne observes, "In virtual worlds, the instructor's role shifts from being the "sage on the stage" to being the domain expert—the authority who stimulates and supervises exploration while providing structure, guidance, feedback, and assessment" (n.p.). This new perspective also requires preparation, since students expect the instructor to know as much about Second Life as about any other content area for the course.

Over the course of two years, we have engaged students in three different courses, two undergraduate and one graduate, in projects on Seton Hall University's Pirate Island in

Second Life. What has come to be known as the *House of 7* project began with the graduate class in the fall 2007 semester as a recreation of the Turner-Ingersoll mansion, better known as the House of the Seven Gables made famous by Nathaniel Hawthorne in the novel of that title. The goal for that group was to create a site where students could explore the novel in depth, along with its historical and cultural contexts. It has since expanded to become a site for the exploration of the Gothic and the grotesque. Rather than simply participating in an existing environment, students develop projects that apply critical analysis in practical and creative ways, both in order to learn and to help others understand the texts they have chosen to examine. While the thematic focus of each course—a graduate course on the American Renaissance and material culture, a senior seminar on American Gothic literature and a Women and Literature course with the theme "Woman as Witch"—was slightly different, three elements created a common thread: a cultural approach to literary analysis, specifically material culture; an insistence on student-generated or found objects and learning materials; and an emphasis on close reading and comprehension. The result in all three cases has been a collaborative and creative experience not replicable in a traditional literature class. The *House of 7* in Second Life is an interactive environment in which visitors can understand what it might have been like to be an American woman in the early nineteenth century, or what a garden of the period would have looked like and contained in the way of flowers and plants, or about the prison reform movement in the nineteenth-century and its relation to a text like *The House of the Seven Gables*. It is also an evolving site, one to which students in subsequent classes can continue to add, thus extending and expanding the collaborative nature of the experience.

The *House of 7* is one of several builds on Seton Hall's island, which also includes a virtual marsh, a Welcome Center, and a variety of meeting spaces. The university is an active member of the New Media Consortium, to which over 300 learning-focused organizations belong, and the Seton Hall island is part of that larger space within Second Life. Because NMC space is academic in orientation, having the island and project under that umbrella means the environment is more private and secure than the typical Second Life space, since only members of NMC can gain access. This is especially important when working with students nervous about being in a virtual world for the first time. However, the private nature of the NMC site also means that those projects are not available to the Second Life population at large, either for use or feedback.

The *House of 7* was initially funded by a Faculty Innovation Grant (FIG) from Seton Hall's Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center (TLTC), and the award included the support of two Instructional Designers, one of whom had worked on several projects in Second Life. The primary goal of the project was to determine if a hands-on approach to the analysis of literature, in particular one emphasizing material culture theory, would engage students on a deeper level with texts and literary theory. A scan of other literature sites in Second Life revealed that most of the development had been done by the instructors working with in-world builders. Students entering the site click on objects and receive a notecard with information, are asked to make choices about certain aspects of the text, and then take a quiz or write an essay to assess their understanding of the work. However, students are not the architects of the various projects. The experiences are immersive and interesting, but not student generated. Rather than repeat what had already been done, we decided to take a completely different approach, one that put

students at the center of the process. While the basic site for their work would be developed by us, the students would furnish the house and its environs and create all the projects it contained.

Preparatory work for the course and the site began in the summer of 2007, and even this stage involved extensive collaboration as well as interaction with and interpretation of the Hawthorne novel. First, the house shell had to be designed and built, something that proved much easier said than done given the discrepancies between the house as it appeared in the novel and the actual house in Salem, Massachusetts. Because of time constraints, an independent Second Life "builder," Eloise Pasteur (her SL name), was hired to "construct" the house. Detailed plans were developed to determine cost and feasibility and to ensure the house was constructed as close to its description in the text as possible. This process started with an actual visit to the original house in Salem and a close reading of the text by the Instructional Design staff. Pictures, both present and historical, were taken or obtained, and a paper 3-D model of the house was found and constructed. All this was done to guarantee the correct placement of the gardens, the seven gables, and the house in reference to the street. The design and building of the house was a crucial step in the process because the student projects would be developed in relation to the actual spaces in the novel. Thus, some students would recreate the Cent Shop, others would recreate bedrooms in relation to specific characters, while others would work on the kitchen, the parlor, and the garden.

The first conflict between the real and the virtual surfaced as detailed blueprints for the house were developed and it became apparent that the rooms in the house described in the novel did not match the floor plan of the actual house, causing the designers to

research and compare architectural changes made to the house over time. Another problem was the cost estimate of the initial version of the house, which exceeded what we had budgeted (about $500). In order to simplify the design and save money, the interior walls were removed, with the expectation that the projects themselves would define the spaces. As it turned out, the students became very creative about this, arranging furniture and erecting transparent panels to demarcate their areas. As with most recreations, the resulting House of the Seven Gables that stands on Seton Hall University's Pirate Island (http://slurl.com/secondlife/Seton%20Hall/128/128/25 is a compromise between the fictional representation in the text, historical accuracy, as well as practical, monetary, and in-world limitations. One benefit of this process was that it foreshadowed the kinds of choices the students themselves would have to make as they developed their projects.

We also made some early decisions about how work would proceed. During the final weeks of summer, everyone in the class was emailed and told what we would be doing and why. They were encouraged to join Second Life, create an avatar, and do some exploring on their own, although they were also told this was not mandatory (given our awareness that not everyone would have easy home access to SL and that some students would join the course right before the start of the term). One advantage of this approach was that communication between the instructor and students began even prior to the official start of the semester. In addition, most students came to the first class session— scheduled for a computer lab in the university's Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center—already prepared to join us in the virtual environment. The few students who did not have avatars yet were set up in Second Life that first evening. Seton Hall uses the

Blackboard course management system, so we created a Blackboard course site specifically for the *House of 7* project and included a variety of resources to help students get started: links to YouTube videos, an introduction to Second Life skills, links to some sample builds, tutorials, and project proposal guidelines. That first evening students toured the newly constructed house and viewed some of the online resources; they were then to send an email in the next few days identifying the space in the house they most wanted to work on, providing a second and third choice. They were later partnered with someone based on the space in which both were interested. The students had also been asked to read the Hawthorne novel by the first night of class so we could talk about the text and projects in some detail. The full discussion of the novel was scheduled for the second class session, although we spent just half that time on the text itself on the theory that we would actually be discussing the novel throughout the term; the other half was spent discussing project ideas.

The actual assignment for this initial group of projects had three parts: to "furnish" the space appropriately for the period; to decide how the space functioned thematically in the novel and create something that would convey that theme to others; and, finally, to develop an activity of some kind to engage a visitor to the space, preferably one that also made the visitor an active participant. Working with a partner, students submitted formal project proposals to the course wiki, explaining what they were planning to do in their "space" and why, providing an overview of what they would need to do and find, and outlining a possible activity. These proposals evolved in various ways over the course of the semester as students discovered the possibilities and limitations of Second Life and as they became more deeply familiar with their topic. For example, while everyone has the

ability to build in Second Life, it takes time and skill to be able to create more than simple shapes with textures. Some groups also found that the materials they wanted—whether a particular type of plant or piece of furniture—were either not available or were cost prohibitive (even using Lindens). The original plan for the project had each group posting a weekly update in the course wiki; however, it soon became apparent that, given the work load of most graduate students, this would have been seen as an impediment rather than a benefit. Instead, we agreed that each group would schedule three working sessions with the Instructional Designer to whom they had been assigned, either face-to-face or in-world, enabling us to chart and guide their progress. Each class session began with a brief update on the projects, which gave students a chance to hear what others were doing as well as to offer solutions and assistance. The semester ended with in-class presentations in-world; each pair of students showed their completed project, explained the rationale, as well as where they thought they had succeeded and what they had struggled with.

While the projects had been visible while they were under construction, the completed versions were impressive by any standard and exceeded anything we might have anticipated. The students who worked on the Cent Shop decided to use it as venue to explore the rise of industrialism in the early nineteenth century, in particular the emergence of the railroad. Not only did they fill the space with appropriate objects and furnishings but they also included a model railroad, images from the period, and a quiz visitors can take. The kitchen became a site for understanding the Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood, complete with a Thincbook (a Second Life object that looks like an actual book, but can contain text and images, as well as urls to internet sites) that

contains recipes and advice for the housewife of the period, an open fireplace and wood-burning stove, and a table set with late-eighteenth/early nineteenth century utensils and dishware. For their activity, this group included links at the end of the Thincbook to websites with additional information about domestic life. Visitors visit a website, create a notecard with information they would like to add to the book, and leave the notecard in a "drop box."

In Hepzibah Pyncheon's room a visitor is led through a variety of activities that would have made up her early morning routine, including saying her prayers and writing at her desk. A harpsichord plays music, just like the one in the novel. Clifford Pyncheon's room is far less realistic than the others. The pair who developed this space decided they did not want to create yet another bedroom, so they opted for a less representational approach: since Clifford has just been released from prison when the novel opens, his room is designed as a jail cell, complete with torture devices, rats, and information about the prison reform movement in the nineteenth century. An essay assignment asks students to write about how this historical development might have influenced Hawthorne's writing of the novel. The garden behind the house is a space where plants and flowers were chosen for the meanings they convey (loyalty, hope, love), as was true for gardens of the period; this information is delivered on a notecard when a visitor clicks on various plants. There is also a Hawthorne tree, a flock of chickens (which play a small but significant role in the novel), and Maule's Well. A stroll through the garden in period clothing offers an opportunity for the kind of "embodied and perspectival empathy for a system" that Gee argues is an aspect of gaming:

Many games let gamers easily switch between the two perspectives, either seeing

and acting from one place or looking down on the whole world... This dual

perspective, the ability and encouragement to flip between an inside (situated) and

an outside (global) perspective, is potentially an extremely fruitful way to think

about complex systems. People can learn to see what things in a system look like

from a given place in the system and, at the same time, how that place looks from

the perspective of the system as a whole. (7 "21st Century Survival Skills")

Thus, a visitor can begin to understand why Phoebe Pyncheon prefers this space above all

others in the house; reading the materials provided, one can also be introduced to the

garden as female space.

The graduate students took advantage of one of the more unique qualities of Second

Life, the ability to create and have an immersive experience. Ben Salt, Claire Atkins, and

Leigh Blackall address this aspect of virtual worlds in their literature review about

teaching in Second Life, observing that:

The immersiveness of Second Life itself is a rich source of learning activities. The

content and process of engagement boast a wealth of opportunities to construct

knowledge and activities can be embedded across curriculum. Both synchronous and

asynchronous, Second Life has the flexibility to accommodate diverse learning styles

and cultures. Potentially, it gives the learner a great deal of autonomy, which is likely

to increase the all-important motivation to participate, especially if it is seen as fun

and meaningful. (20)

The element of fun or "play" should not be underestimated when considering the value of

Second Life as a forum for teaching and learning. Over the years, numerous studies have

been done examining the value of play and how it can be used to motivate students. As

Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson observe, "Such work is often psychoanalytical in

orientation, and is typically restricted in scope to elementary and, mostly, early childhood education," citing classic studies by Axeline (1947), Winnicott (1971), BrougPre (1999), and Corbeil (1999) (n.p.). In their article about the ways educational games can be developed to be more like the kinds of games students play for fun, such as video games, de Castell and Jenson call for a return to "the classical connection between 'learning' and 'playing'" (n.p.). James Paul Gee develops a similar argument in *Why Video Games Are Good For Your Soul*:

> …good games create deep learning, learning that is better than what we often see in our schools. Pleasure and learning: For most people these two don't seem to go together, but that is a mistruth we have picked up at school, where we have been taught that pleasure is fun and learning is work, and, thus, that work is not fun (Gee 2004). But, in fact, good video games are hard work and deep fun. So is good learning in other contexts. (4)

While Second Life is most definitely not a game, de Castell and Jenson's description of the virtual game environment is also reminiscent of the world of Second Life and why it is so intriguing as a place for learning that is seriously playful:

> Entering an immersive environment means being willingly engulfed, enfolded, contained, and yet at the same time free of familiar worldly, ideological, and even bodily constraints. On entering a virtual place in a virtual body, what becomes important is motion through time and space, rich perceptual possibilities, both auditory and visual, illumination that renders some areas more and less visible, the patterning of zones within the environment, the ways both objects and

activities define the organization of that environment, and the fact that all of these

are navigable, so that player agency is paramount. (n.p.)

The ability to control the environment was something that intrigued the graduate

students, although some of them were also overwhelmed by the considerable possibilities

available to them. Others not only flourished in this environment but also continued to

explore it once the course was over. Their projects appeal to the visual, the auditory, and

even the sensory, whether it is the podcasts, the torture devices in Clifford's room, the

photography equipment in the attic that visitors can use to take pictures of themselves in

front of a backdrop and post them, or the harpsichord that plays a tune in Hepzibah's

room. In an article about their *Literature Alive!* site, Beth Ritter-Guth, Laura Nicosia,

and Eloise Pasteur specifically address the relationship to one's avatar body in Second

Life, where "[t]he sensation of embodiment—of moving around, of bumping into things,

of seeing what is around the next corner—is made more real for most users. Many or all

of the students have the sensation of being there: they get tired if they stand too long, they

feel cold and wet in the rain, and so forth" (Ritter-Guth et al n.p.).

Because they were created by experienced and overall more intellectually advanced

students, the projects in this first group have a sophisticated level of content that was

generally not seen in the work of the subsequent groups. There was evidence of the

success of this first iteration of the project besides the actual quality of the work. For

example, several of the students chose to write their research papers about the same topic

as their Second Life project, and the weekly written analyses and class discussions

exhibited an increasingly nuanced understanding of the importance of material culture in

the study of literature. There was also a deeper understanding of the ideas and events that

inform both Hawthorne's novel and the period, such as Transcendentalism, the Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood and the emergence of an urban and industrial economy.

There were challenges as well, as with any new tool. The graduate students struggled with the technology more than we had anticipated, primarily because they did not have equal access to up-to-date equipment. While Seton Hall has committed to ubiquitous computing, this is not extended to graduate students. Many of the students in this group were teaching assistants in the English department and thus had university-distributed laptops; however, those using their own computers sometimes found that they were unable to accommodate Second Life, which requires a great deal of bandwidth, memory, and a powerful video card. We had tried to anticipate and compensate for this by making lab time available, but graduate students generally have less time to spend on campus than undergraduates, and not being able to work easily from home was frustrating for some. In addition, this first group was less comfortable with the collaborative nature of the work, and they were more inclined to say, both in conferences and in the end-of-course evaluations they completed, that they would have preferred a traditional approach to the class presentation, which this had replaced.

Despite these difficulties, most of the students indicated that they enjoyed working in this new way and saw the potential of virtual worlds to change the way one interprets and engages with works of literature. They observed that the project considered different types of learners, while the multimedia aspect reinforced key concepts in the course. Others acknowledged that doing the necessary research gave them greater familiarity with the material culture of the period. Finally, the students enjoyed being able to see the

work in progress and knowing that the completed projects would remain available to others. Their observations and the challenges they encountered while doing the projects provided us with the feedback we needed to improve our approach in the next iteration.

Based on our experiences with the graduate class, we made a number of modifications to our work in Second Life with the next group, senior English majors taking a required seminar class. The topic for the course was American Gothic Literature, chosen specifically for its links to the existing work at the *House of 7*. Whereas we had required the graduate students to work with a partner, partly to provide support and partly to limit the number of projects we would have to supervise, the seminar students were given the choice of whether to work alone or in groups. We had discovered that some students simply prefer to work on their own on a project (partly the result of years of bad group-work experiences) while others had difficult schedules and other obstacles with which to contend. Since there were plenty of opportunities for collaboration in the labs and with the Instructional Designer, we decided this was a preference we could afford to indulge. It also generated good will early on, something not to be underestimated when asking students to do something so different from their normal learning routine.

Another change we instituted was a more detailed project proposal template that asked students to provide an overview of the project and a clear objective, to identify the purpose and significance of the project, to explain what they thought they would need to complete the project, and a literature review of articles, sites, and other materials they had examined. Prior to this, we provided them with a list of possible project ideas and several examples of each as a way to present the myriad possibilities of Second Life, as well as to try to vary the types of projects contained in the site. The options included interviews

with an expert in Second Life that would then be recorded and posted, a panel session on Gothic literature, a book discussion group, a role play or dramatization, an interactive exhibit, a video, a digital story, a Second Life webquest, and an in-world blog. Students were also invited to look at the existing projects in the *House of 7* and propose changes, additions, and further developments. Finally, this group had the option to develop a project based on any of the texts we were reading or on American Gothic literature in general.

The students received detailed feedback on their proposals, with an eye toward what could reasonably be accomplished in the time allotted. For this group we also returned to our original concept of having three updates posted to the course wiki, since there were more projects to oversee; we gave feedback on these as well. We established a clear set of deadlines and scheduled several working sessions throughout the semester in a computer lab. Two graduate students from the previous class agreed to serve as assistants to the project, and they worked with students both in-world and at the lab sessions. Since just one Instructional Designer was now assigned to the project, this additional assistance was crucial. Based on our experience with the graduate students, the seminar students were actively encouraged to connect their Second Life projects to their research papers, and nearly half did so. In general, the process was much more focused and controlled in this iteration, while still allowing for student creativity. One example of this was our decision to have the second group of students use avatars that had been created by the graduate students. At the end of that first course, anticipating this need, we had asked the students to "donate" their avatars to the project (which meant providing their SL name and password). Not only did this give us access to everything

that had been purchased or created by those avatars, but it also cut down on prep time before the course. Students were still able to change the appearance of their avatars (although not their name), and many of them already had Lindens associated with the avatar they received, as well as a well-stocked SL inventory of objects, landmarks, and scripts.

One of the significant changes in this second stage of the project was the degree of cooperation and collaboration on the part of the students, who more obviously became a community of learners over the course of the semester. While the seminar students had university laptops and better technology skills overall, most of them regularly attended the labs as well, which became active collaboration sessions as more advanced students helped those who were struggling and students shared information and resources with one another. This sense of community carried over into class sessions, where we again had weekly updates. What was different this time, however, was the spirit of camaraderie and peer support that prevailed. One reason for this may have been that a number of the students knew one another already and were in other classes together; they also simply had more time to work together than the graduate students. Finally, we believe the more relaxed and cooperative atmosphere was a result of our own growing confidence. Rather than representing the Second Life project as something exceptional, it was introduced as a useful and meaningful substitute for the typical in-class presentation, as a project that could provide the students with new and important skills and knowledge, and as an item they could include on their resumes to demonstrate their experience with technology, whether they were planning to go on to teach or to enter the business world (see "A Second Look at Second Life" on using virtual worlds in a business environment).

As had the graduate students, some of the seminar students created immersive experiences for the *House of 7*: one group built a graveyard, complete with podcast "interviews" with both living and dead authors, while another pair developed a horse and carriage murder mystery that carries participants around the island to gather clues at each stop; they also learn about Gothic literature along the way. A scavenger hunt leads visitors throughout the house and grounds as they answer questions about American Gothic literature, and a group of crows perched across the fence in the back of the garden are the triggers for a Jeopardy-like trivia game on American Gothic texts. Other students exploited some of the other unique features of Second Life: one coordinated a panel discussion that took place in-world, contacting several experts who agreed to talk about literature in Second Life, including the builder of the house, Eloise Pasteur. Another student created a role-play of Temple Drake, one of the characters in William Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*, for which he wrote the script, then acted in and filmed. Another student recreated a scene from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, in which Miss Jessell seems to appear and disappear, depending on the angle of vision. This set of projects more fully exploits the playful aspects of Second Life, asking visitors to participate in games and using humor more often.

The seminar students were generally more open to and excited about the Second Life experience. They appreciated that it replaced the in-class presentation and that they were able to work with someone else. Students also commented on the variety of projects available and that it was relatively easy to find one that met their technology skill level. The student who created the project blog had initially struggled to find a project she felt

she could complete, and the blog proved to be a perfect vehicle for her. She was able to report on the activities of other groups and make resources more widely available.

The third group of students who have worked to date in Second Life, those in the Women and Literature: Woman as Witch course, pursued a few new project forms and went beyond the course texts in ways the earlier groups had not. For example, one team of students created an activity based on fairy tales featuring witches from cultures we had not studied; another group created a "Witches in the Media" image gallery, which also contains links to audio and video clips from various shows and movies. One student created a menagerie containing animals that typically serve as familiars; she included podcasts she had recorded for several of the animals in which she explained both their historical role and their function in the texts we had studied. The students in this course again submitted project proposals, had the opportunity to work with others or alone, and were expected to provide three wiki updates during the semester. They also had the option to work with any texts from the course or something more broadly about the course theme. One of the most significant differences between the third class and the first two was the number of students who chose to expand their Second Life project into full-length research papers, an integration that was quite common with the traditional in-class presentation format. This meant that the project had become an integral part of the course work, generating enough research and ideas about a topic to continue to engage students for the duration of an eight- to ten-page formal paper. Face to face meetings with each student about the proposal, as opposed to just written comments, also provided an opportunity to help them develop project ideas that were complex enough to provide the foundation for a full-length paper.

By the start of the third course, we were able to anticipate many of the difficulties we might face, but we were also encouraging students to incorporate other forms of technology into their projects, such as digital storytelling and the creation of external web sites. This group showed the greatest creativity in the development of their avatars (which were again those created for the first course), several of them choosing to reflect the theme of the course, "Woman as Witch," in their appearance. (One student even came to the final presentation dressed as Elphaba, the main character in Gregory Maguire's novel, *Wicked*.) These students were also the most confident in their approach to Second Life. One reason for this may have been the variety of projects they were able to see before they began. On the first evening of class we took them through the *House of 7* as well as the rest of the Seton Hall island, showing them the variety of works both completed and in progress. They also had access to a "sandbox" where they could practice building small objects, as well as a rich store of resources, such as links, scripts, and video and textual materials stored in the Blackboard course. We also received help from another Seton Hall instructor, who has been working to develop the Seton Hall island, and her SL colleague, an experienced Second Life builder. Finally, the very specific theme of the course led to a more focused as well a more interconnected set of projects.

Beyond whatever else it offers students, the *House of 7* project is focused primarily on literary study and improving students' analytical and critical thinking skills. In order to create the projects, whether a role play between various characters or an interview with a real or fictional author, students must choose a specific issue, do the appropriate research, distill information to its most salient points, and convey that information in a

way that is accessible and interesting. In addition, the Second Life projects demand that the abstract be made concrete, which has had the ancillary result of making the writing and thinking students do for the course more concrete.

Gary Stager's elements of a good project--"purpose and relevance, time, complexity, intensity, connected, access, shareable, and novelty" (1)—provide a template for analyzing the results of the *House of 7* projects:

Purpose and Relevance

Students in advanced English courses are generally responsible for an in-class presentation, which is intended to show their knowledge of a topic or text. The Second Life projects have the same purpose and relevance to the coursework, but they are interactive and permanent. Since the students designed their own projects, they chose subjects meaningful to them as opposed to being assigned a topic, which is what often happens with presentations.

Time

Students were given a full semester to do the work, although there was a clear schedule of deadlines for various steps. Some class time was given over to Second Life work, both at the very start of the semester and at the start of class once each week.

Complexity

Students had to draw on whatever prior knowledge of technology they had, as well as writing and research skills, close reading skills, their knowledge of various literary theories, and what they learned in class about the period, the topic, and the texts.

Intensity

Students spoke frequently about the projects in ways that suggested the intensity of the experience: they frequently mentioned going in-world to work on something for an hour or so and being so engaged that they soon found they were there for several hours. This phenomenon, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as "flow," "a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself" (600). The students also showed an interest in the work beyond their own projects, volunteering for the mock interviews, attending the panel discussion even though it was outside of class time, and attending the workshops, most of which happened in the evenings. The pair of students who created the murder mystery programmed a horse and carriage they purchased to make various stops on their "mystery tour." This type of engagement is a perfect example of the concept of "grit" Gee refers to in "Games, Learning, and 21st Century Survival Skills":

> To achieve mastery and high respect on in these communities requires "grit" Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). "Grit" means a passion shared with others around which the Pro-Am [professional-amateur] community is, in fact, organized and perseverance or persistence to put in the many hours of practice (with failure and feedback) required for mastery in any worthwhile endeavor. (12)

The greatest challenge in many cases was to make sure the Second Life project did not detract from their other course work, especially the research paper; this is one reason later groups of students were strongly encouraged to think about a project that could then be turned into a paper.

Connected

The atmosphere in the workshops, the willingness to assist one another and share resources, all testify to the enhanced sense of collaboration in these classes. Friendships developed between students who had not known one another before and students worked together who would never have had any reason to do so otherwise. The projects became a common topic of conversation both in and out of class, with students from other courses also showing an interest in what we were doing.

<div align="center">**Access**</div>

Beyond technological access, the value of Second Life is that it gives students access to materials and resources that would be difficult to have in the real world. These projects could not have been done as easily or as well outside of Second Life, and many would not have been possible at all in the same way. Students do not typically have access to experts in their field or the wherewithal to get them together for one hour on a college campus to talk about literature. Similarly, the student who created the Temple Drake film would have needed access to expensive equipment, some experience with filming and editing, and a real person to play the part. The taped interviews with authors could have been done using a digital recorder and then played for the class at some point (these recordings are podcasts, hosted online and accessed through the graveyard at the *House of 7*), but they would not have been readily available again, as they are in Second Life. (Not to mention that the podcasts are launched from the headstone for each author, a touch of the macabre that is in keeping with the *House of 7* itself.) Similarly, they could have been done using tools such as Audacity or Skype and made available as podcasts, but then they would not have had the context of the other projects, nor would visitors have been able to comment on them as they can through the notecard feature in Second

Life. And while one could create a "book" showing various visual images of the House

of the Seven Gables, this would have required resources for printing and copying that

Second Life mitigates.   In-world events can also be accessed by students in other courses

at Seton Hall or other universities, allowing for course to course access and university to

university access.

Shareable

Unlike traditional projects, in Second Life students have access to anyone's project at any

time, both during and after the process. This will be true for future cohorts, who can see

what their predecessors did and create projects that complement or build on existing ones.

Novelty

No one in any of the classes had ever been in Second Life before, although one or two

had heard of it. Having to recreate a space so that it is as true as possible to an early

nineteenth century kitchen in a house dating back to the late seventeenth century is a

hands-on experience with material culture. Short of creating dioramas in grade school,

which is not the kind of activity students expect to find themselves doing again for a

college class, and especially in a graduate seminar, they had not had an analogous

educational experience. Part of the excitement, in fact, seemed to be that they were doing

something they were not doing in all their other classes. In addition, each project was

unique and the result of an individual or group learning process. No project has been

repeated, although some of the tools have been used again (the Thincbook, for example),

and since the creativity is coming from the students, the instructor does not have to

rethink the project each time.

There are numerous advantages to having students create projects in Second Life besides those already mentioned. These include the ability to meet and talk with the instructor and their partners about their work in-world, as well as having easy access to experts from every walk of life. Given the growing development of the Seton Hall island and its membership in NMC, the students find themselves part of a broader community engaged in similar activities. They like the fact that their work is part of a larger whole and something that will endure (at least as long as Second Life does). While they were skeptical about their ability to be creative, the final projects testify to hidden skills and potential, and their satisfaction and pride was palpable during the presentations.

There are also, of course, practical considerations that should be addressed by anyone planning to undertake a similar project in Second Life. It is important for the instructor to spend time in Second Life, getting comfortable moving around and even making simple objects. Students are far more comfortable with technology than most of their instructors, and that knowledge can be useful. It is also important, especially for the more skeptical students, to establish clear learning objectives and reasons for using Second Life as opposed to another approach. For all three groups of students, many of whom were either Education majors or teachers already, we stressed the acquisition of technical skills their own students will expect them to have and the pedagogical value of the activity they were asked to develop. Providing lab time and making technical experts available gives students the support they need, even if they don't use either extensively (although many will). This is especially important at the outset. As students become more comfortable in Second Life, they can also reach out to experts in the Second Life community, who are almost always happy to participate. While there is a monetary

system in Second Life (Lindens, which are purchased with actual currency), and many objects are for sale, there are also enough free items for students to get what they need in most cases. Some Second Life residents will even donate an item or sell it at a discount if they know it is being used for educational purposes. As happened in the building of the house, the students also become very creative in their search for solutions.

Ultimately, the benefits of taking on such a project far outweigh the drawbacks. For example, it is not necessary to construct an actual building or site, as we did; the recreations and other materials students create can be part of an open space, with visitors moving freely between them. In addition, these can be as simple or as sophisticated as the instructor and students decide. For all the time and effort involved, the occasional technological glitches, the initial student resistance, and the limitations of Second Life, there now exists a simulated, primarily student-generated environment that not only can be used again and again but can also inspire and engage others. Future students who visit the site will also be able to bring their own perspective to bear on the project. The current guideline is that students can change an existing scenario if they can demonstrate that it is flawed or incomplete. In addition, they can add those items they believe are important to understanding a particular text, period, or genre. This is certainly better than presentations that fade from memory and research papers that end up in desk drawers.

Working both face-to-face and in-world, all of those involved in the *House of 7* had to find new ways to think, talk, and write about literature. This struggle was part of the learning process. As with the educational game de Castell and Jenson created and describe in their article "Serious Play" ("Ludus Vitae"), we were interested in developing "a resource in which centralized and dispersed design and development, face-to-face and

computer-mediated interaction are interwoven in lived cultural practices,…what Illich

(1973) called a 'tool for conviviality', a place to meet and work and imagine and create"

(n.p.). As instructors, one of our responsibilities is to try new things: new texts, new

pedagogical approaches, and new ideas. It is also our responsibility to prepare our

students for the workplace and for the significant changes happening in English and other

disciplines. Second Life will not be for everyone, and whether it improves learning is

still a matter for debate since there is little hard data so far. However, our experience in

three English classes is that it is a rich environment for facilitating student collaboration

and fostering creative engagement with ideas, problems, and issues. It is certainly a

space that merits further exploration by those interested in improving student engagement

and extending learning beyond the walls of the traditional classroom.

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