The Second Life of Daniel Defoe

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“In his classic book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson showed how the invention of a newspaper made it possible, for the first time, for persons to imagine themselves as members of modern nation-states….Without wishing to engage in hyperbole, we may be on the verge of another massive transformation linked to technology, the creation of societies on the Internet: ‘for the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live’ (Castronova 2005:70). This could involve new forms of culture and selfhood, ones shaped in unpredictable ways by actual world sociality.”

Over the past few decades, scholars in the humanities have been quick to embrace the potential of the World Wide Web, making available a wide range of primary texts online, developing online journals and disseminating bibliographical, biographical, and historical information to scholars, students, and a more general intellectually curious audience. Scholars such as George Landow, Janet H. Murray, Alan Liu, Jay Clayton, and Raymond Siemens, to name only a few, have been particularly interested in exploring and assessing the influence and potential of the digital humanities. It has become evident from their work that the new media has
transformed both research and pedagogy. Listserves that host discussions within a variety of scholarly specialties are now the norm and allow for increased collaboration in humanities research. Online reading practices themselves have become an object of study amongst literary scholars. Alan Liu’s website *Transliteracies* at http://transliteracies.english.ucsb.edu/category/research-project conducts research in this area. The classroom has also been responsive to changing technologies. Students increasingly produce web projects as part of their course work and use scholarly web-based research tools for academic assignments. Indeed a number of institutions have developed divisions which specialize in generating online educational tools. The website for the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (Kings College, London) http://www.cch.kcl.ac.uk/research/projects/, for example, can be browsed for a list of current humanities projects under development.

Given Defoe’s own participation in the relatively new medium of journalism in his own time, it is perhaps unsurprising that Defoe scholars have shown a keen interest in digital possibilities to disseminate the works of Defoe more widely and to reevaluate his canon. The work of Irving Rothman on Stylometrics played an important role in highlighting the potential of new technologies in studying eighteenth-century authorship. In the last few years, Christopher Flynn has energetically taken on the important task of putting Defoe’s Review online at http://www.defoereview.org/, a project he discusses in this issue of *Digital Defoe* Other Defoe scholars have used the web to simultaneously circulate information relevant to Defoe studies and provide valuable projects for graduate students. Paul Wilson and Michael Eck, graduate students at Rutgers University, created a web exhibit under the supervision of Geoffrey Sill which provides a wide range of illustrations from a variety of editions of *Robinson Crusoe* (http://www.camden.rutgers.edu/Camden/Crusoe/Pages/crusoe.html). The Defoe Society website and the birth of this peer-reviewed journal, *Digital Defoe*, then, have been preceded by a series of projects that seek to reenergize Defoe studies digitally.

Immersive worlds might initially appear to be a less useful technology for Defoe studies, since the humanities are primarily text centered. Associated with video games rather than with academia, such worlds can be seen, along with social software such as Facebook and Twitter, to compete with scholarship and classroom instruction in the humanities rather than as supplementing it. Thus immersive worlds have received far less attention than other new technologies from scholarship in the humanities, although with the emergence of *Second Life* in 2003 (created by Linden Lab) this may be starting to change. Many colleges and universities have now developed a presence on *Second Life* (SL), including Princeton University, University of Texas, University of Richmond, Georgia State University and others. The sciences and social sciences have taken the initiative in
exploring the potential of a three-dimensional, participatory world, conducting experiments on cybersociality and building such spaces as virtual hospitals in which students can practice diagnosing medical conditions. Yet, the arts are also beginning to develop a presence on SL. SL hosts, for example, a replica of the Globe Theater, which can be used for virtual performances. A sample of an SL performance of Act I, Scene I of Hamlet can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sdsKf3KkPE. While the digital characters may still seem stilted and the smoothness of the connection between actor avatars and the voice of performers is somewhat dissonant, it must be remembered that we are viewing a technology that is still in its infancy, but that demonstrates significant potential for the digital humanities.

Second Life is a virtual world comprised of a mainland and many islands. Cynthia Calongne recently describes it as “an online virtual world that is populated with content created and owned by its residents. Users from around the world create an avatar to represent themselves while they shop, take classes, hear live music, create content and participate in social and cultural activities. Due to the diverse population and wealth of user-created content, educators have access to free resources and tools as well as a strong community where they can exchange ideas.” One of the most innovative new projects on SL is Island 18, designed by Katherine Ellison and a team of colleagues. It is a space that is relevant both to Defoe studies and to eighteenth-century scholarship and pedagogy more generally. Island 18 is a space designed to resemble the streets of eighteenth-century London. My avatar, Arbuthnot Hobble, dressed appropriately in eighteenth-century garb, spent several pleasant afternoons visiting Samuel Johnson’s house, lingering in his garret, and strolling around the noisy London streets alive with the sounds of horses, church bells, conversation, and clinking glasses. Coffee shops, pubs, a variety of private houses, and classroom spaces currently people the island and there are promising plans for future development.

There are a number of features on Island 18 that are particularly conducive to innovative teaching practices and that would be useful for situating Defoe’s work in its historical context. As the avatar enters each building it is handed notecards that can be accepted or declined. These notecards provide
important historical context to supplement the visual and auditory experience of what an eighteenth-century home or business might have been like. For example, on entering coffee shops, my avatar was provided with notecards that covered such topics as the price of coffee in the period, background on popular newspapers of the time, information on particular coffee shops and their political and professional affiliations, and biographical information on some of the more famous clientele. Significant paintings of the period hang on the wall with notecards that give background on the artist or painting styles used. Direct commentary from various eighteenth-century primary sources on coffee shops, cultural practices, and architecture is provided, along with bibliographical details. These experiences help to supplement the texts with which students engage in the classroom. Reading passages from the *Tatler* or the *Spectator* after visiting several of these SL coffee shops would be a different experience as the reader would have a more intimate understanding of how the periodicals were disseminated and consumed in their time. One can also stage events in these spaces. Imagine, for example, having students visit a bookshop to discuss book-buying practices with a bookseller, whose avatar is played by a scholar who specializes in print culture, or visit an eighteenth-century hospital and watch or participate in contemporary medical treatment. Scholars who learn to use such spaces will be able to virtually demonstrate eighteenth-century practices as well as discuss them, making the literature of the period even more enticing to students by increasing their ability to understand the cultural practices that produced the literature of the eighteenth century and to obtain a better sense of the imagined world of literary characters.

*SL* is able to provide links to other web sources and at times my avatar was provided with information that took me outside the virtual world. At Tyburn, for example, a link is provided that connects to a YouTube video, a movie clip of a Tyburn execution. At other points, links are provided for various text-based sources. There were links to rules for Whist and other card games and links were also provided to the online edition of Pepys Diary. At times links were provided to relevant scholarly books in Google Books, taking the viewer to a particular page that gave background material relevant to the space they were in. As scholars
become more familiar with uploading videos to YouTube, it seems entirely possible to link to a series of lectures by experts on eighteenth-century literature or Defoe in particular, or even to a video performance of an eighteenth-century play. Of course, drama can also take part inside SL, and it would certainly be possible for a class or even a group of international student players, who never need to meet in person, to stage an eighteenth-century play. This possibility highlights the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of the immersive world. Set designers from theater departments can work with students in the digital humanities and arts to create a creative space in which literary students perform.

There are also several classroom spaces on Island 18. These spaces can be set up as student study spaces for specific projects. For example, one large room I entered had benches in it on which avatars could sit as they discussed a series of questions and quotations regarding *Tristram Shandy* that were mounted on the wall. Clearly student groups could meet here outside classroom time to complete assigned tasks. Classes can also be taught online in such virtual classrooms, and Ellison has actually held classes in eighteenth-century literature on Island 18. Since one can sign on to the island from anywhere one has access to the Internet, it might be a particularly useful (and inexpensive) way to host guest speakers. The avatars of scholarly experts in Defoe Studies could engage with groups of students for short periods of time about their area of expertise, creating a greater sense of engagement with a wider scholarly community.

Ellison notes that Island 18 is still a work in process and her vision for the future is clearly evident in some of the promising and ambitious forthcoming projects she is still working to complete. A number of them are advertised on the Island, accompanied with images of what the finished work will look like and background material on the significance of the building. For example, Ellison and her colleagues hope to build the Court of Common Pleas, St. Bride’s Church, and John Dryden’s house on Fetter Lane. The promise of more public spaces is particularly intriguing, given the possibility of staging an actual eighteenth-century trial in the court and perhaps a service in the church that includes the preaching of a sermon published in the period. Students could attend such events (virtually) or
even create them. For all such events, you can limit those in attendance to a particular class or classes or open them up to the larger SL community.

Ellison has opened her island up to all participants, and although at times this has led to odd problems, such experiences can be used fruitfully to create interest in similar difficulties in the past. For example, at one point she noted in an interview that interlopers had been “persistently building in the sky” and using up the number of building units (prims) that the island is allowed to contain. Ellison handled this problem gracefully, using it to inspire “interesting conversations in [the] classroom about eighteenth-century city planning, immigration, and trade.” Students encounter a growing realization, then, that the issues Defoe grappled with in his writings are relevant and significant in a postmodern world.

I would encourage Defoe scholars to become acquainted with Second Life and with the many pioneering possibilities that the fascinating Island 18 offers as it gives students a new medium through which to approach eighteenth-century studies in general and the rich and engaging writings of Defoe in particular. It is apt that an author who is best known for a work about creative adventures that take place on an island be approached through the innovative and imaginative possibilities of another isle, albeit one that is somewhat more populated.

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