Shakespeare and
Virtual Reality

#shax2020
Denver, CO

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This seminar will consider issues pertaining to the representation of Shakespearean drama in virtual reality. Paradoxical as may seem, recent experiments with VR bear a striking resemblance to the silent films projected for awestruck audiences in the Nickelodeons of the early 20th century. In both cases, the earliest offerings were short and tended to focus on the novelty of a new technology, but quickly moved to more sophisticated experimentation. Moreover, in film and virtual reality alike, some of the very earliest attempts to develop the expressive capacity of the new medium involved the adaptation of Shakespearean drama, a ready source of familiar stories and cultural prestige. As the 20th Century progressed, film would eventually develop a grammar and storytelling logic of its own, and would radically change the ways people experience and think about Shakespeare. Virtual reality, by comparison, is still in its infancy. Our discussions for this seminar will take full stock of the current state of Shakespearean drama in VR and speculate as to how the medium might impact the production, teaching, and meaning of Shakespeare in years to come. Projects that intersect with performance studies, film studies, and media studies are particularly welcome. Potential areas of focus include: representation of soliloquies and interiority; documentation of theatrical experience; pedagogical application; spatiality; embodiment; production; affect; interactivity; and adaptation.

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SAA 2020 Abstract: Imagination Bodies Forth: Augmenting Shakespeare with AR/VR in the College Classroom

Will VR/AR technology help students read difficult texts? Teaching Chaucer to Swift, I often encounter students who resist complex texts. With the proliferation of technology and abbreviated media, students are gleaning information from multiple sources in a multi-modal way. As Jeffrey Selingo wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, teaching the next generation requires "a mix of virtual and face-to-face learning" (November 9, 2018). Given students' new methods and venues for knowledge acquisition, I am re-thinking the way I ask them to interact with texts. Recent research on the pedagogy of complex texts suggests that "authentic tasks that contextualize literacy skills within purposeful content-driven goals," promote engagement and intensify the reading experience (Ford-Connors et al 2015). Shakespeare's texts always have the benefit of great film and stage adaptations as teaching tools. Performances elucidate the plays, but viewing is often a passive activity, and close attention to the language of the text is not necessarily emphasized. Using VR performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* and "Augmented Annotations" of the *Dream* and the Sonnets, I give students authentic tasks that foreground close-reading and interpretation and invite students to read with augmented (increased) engagement. This essay will describe the journey that my students and I are on to create an intensive reading experience of Shakespeare's works on the order of Harry Potter's visit to the restricted part of Hogwart's Library:
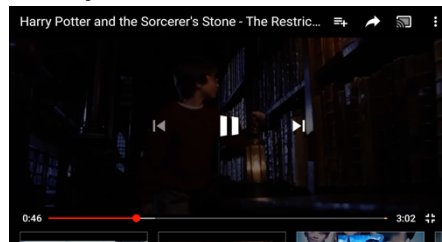
Along the way, we discovered that our imaginations still outrun the technology, and that accessibility, liveness, comprehension, and participation are key aspects of VR/AR pedagogy.

Ford-Connors, Evelyn, et al. "Mediating Complex Texts in the Upper Grades: CONSIDERING MOTIVATION, INSTRUCTIONAL INTENSITY, AND COGNITIVE CHALLENGE." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 58, no. 8, 2015, pp. 650–659., www.jstor.org/stable/44011198.

"Mocked with art": The Shakespearean Imagination in the Age of Virtual Spectatorship

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Shakespeare's authorial voice, like that of Dickens and Austen, has a rarefied "virtuality" even for auditors who have yet to hear a line of his work. While that virtual presence intensifies with exposure and engagement, it preexists any reading, auditing, or screening experience. Through such agents as Rosalind, Hamlet, and Paulina, Shakespeare posited active listening and imagination (our hyperactive sixth sense) as dominant faculties, as essential to god-like apprehension as the olfactory and visual senses to dining.

Removing the illusion of the screen (itself a signifier of audience agency) without actually removing the screen, commercial applications of virtual reality encourage the ultimate self-deception while supplanting imaginative engagement. Current gaming VR requires nearly isolation-tank removal from one's surroundings, engaging no sense above the visual. Thus disengaged, every action resonates as an analog, muscle-memory response to a virtual reflex hammer. For a Shakespeare-attuned audience, the only productive "virtual realities" exist in the spaces between performing and auditing bodies.

A recent promotional pseudo-trailer for Sam Mendes' *1917* dismissed audience agency outright, briefing would-be spectators on the film's primary cinematic conceit (the illusion of a single, continuous shot following key characters from Western Front trenches across meticulous re-creations of WWI hellscapes). And then, the insult: The trailer, lacking trust in its audience if not overtly rejecting the Shakespearean imagination, implied that the film begged to be screened by those fully conscious of its technical achievements.

Do the commercial proponents of virtual or "immersive" entertainments trust an audience to do more than react reflexively to intricate constructs? As early cinema (arguably the most fundamental of VR precursors) demonstrates, the more straightforward the relationships among technology and the senses, the less necessary any pedantic footnotes. What was the Lumière train station reel but synchronicity of cinematographer, setting, and camera, echoed by projector, screen, and beholder? Spectators supplied implied sound, wonder, and anxiety, with eyes not yet opened to stimuli we take for granted. Which should we esteem the greater: The spectator's contribution to the illusion, or the illusion itself? A mechanism that presumes to imagine for us cannot ignite the emotions or illuminate our perceptions of the real.

Presence and Absence and VR in the Early Modern Drama

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This paper is concerned with the metacommentary on presence and absence communicated in the use of VR headsets in the barriers scene of the recent Red Bull (NY) production of Webster's *The White Devil*. I discuss the use of new media in the scenic designs created for the production by Kate Noll and Yana Birÿkova and the disorienting use of distancing effects to represent both panoptic and other forms of power. The representation of the fight at barriers as a VR battle translates the contest into both symbolic and metaphorical terms, as the battle becomes an illusory one, based primarily on what the characters believe they see, not on what actually exists. The early modern phenomenon of the fight at barriers is similarly a stylized contest based on courtly ideals; real harm is not intended. Webster's use of the form as an embedded performance is intended to contrast this playful form of battle with the vicious and malicious activities of the competing villains, who actively seek each other's destruction through trickery and poison. VR extends Webster's use of symbolic battle considerably but in practical terms provides a modern-day parallel to the crucial use of (what already was in Webster's time somewhat) anachronistic helmets, the wearing of which poisons the combatants. The Red Bull's use of VR headsets also comments on the production's extensive use of videos and projections to represent offstage events and mimic recently developed phone technology, thereby confounding audience expectations of presence onstage.

'VR in the Classroom'
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The English mountaineer George Mallory famously responded to the question of why he wanted to climb Mount Everest with the glib reply, 'Because it's there'. We live in a period where access to multimedia technologies has never been cheaper or more readily available, but *should* we be using Virtual Reality, 360 filming, and other modes of filming in the Shakespearean classroom simply *because it's there*? How might these modes of engagement with Shakespeare enhance our pedagogical practices? In this paper I reflect on the challenges and limitations of two recent projects in which I used 360 filming to produce multimedia assets for teaching Shakespeare at the University of Melbourne. The first, a 360 video of the final scene of *Shrew*, was produced as part of a suite of resources for a blended-learning approach to teaching, and sits alongside a number of other scenes from Shakespeare filmed by more conventional means. The second is the assassination scene from *Caesar*, produced as part of the trans-media production, *#ItWasGreekToMe*, associated with Major Hack, a humanities Hackathon run by the university in July 2019.

Adapting Shakespeare to VR: Constraint as Affordance

Jennifer Roberts-Smith

Having spent the last two-and-a-half years building a (non-Shakespearean) virtual reality experience, it seems to me that the path of combining Shakespeare and VR has three obvious branches. One is to document Shakespeare in performance (historical or contemporary); the second is to adapt Shakespeare's plays to new works in the new medium; and the third is to use Shakespeare to leverage access to the commercial audience for VR, in order to articulate some form cultural criticism about our current historical moment. These three paths are entirely unoriginal. They've been explored in every emerging communication medium from Shakespeare's time to our own.

Current public discourses (both popular and scholarly) about VR tend - as do all public discourses about new communication media - to express either a kind of technological determinism masked either as utopianism (in the case of VR, the easy example is the notion of the "empathy machine"), or as an apocalyptic nihilism (in which the new technology diminishes human intellectual, creative, and social capacities to the point of social collapse). Both these positions express a desperate fear of the power of the machine. In vulnerable historical moments such as these, we tend to reach to the canon to make us feel better about whatever is happening anyway. If Shakespeare can be VR, and VR can be Shakespeare, it's probably all ok: VR is not going to change everything after all. (I just did that in the paragraph above.)

One of the things that strikes me about this discourse is its deep investment in a binary opposition between affordance (resulting in utopian technological determinism) and constraint (resulting in social apocalypse). But in aesthetic media (of which VR, despite its STEM-dominated pedigree, is one), constraint *is* affordance and affordance *is* constraint. The things VR wants to be really good at (simulation of the real world, for example) are also the things VR is really worst at (what happened to 99% of reality?) What seems to me to be lacking is a language for talking about how *not* being able to do what we're used to doing, or intend to do, in this particular medium, allows us to do things that we didn't know we could do - even (or especially?) when we designed the new technology that apparently offers us new affordances. So, at this early stage in the development of VR as a medium, if one of the three banal path-branches I list above has a greater potential than the others to help us shift the discourse, it seems to me it's path 2: try to adapt Shakespeare to the new medium. Find out what's impossible, and make a virtue of that. If we can do that, the machine will not be the manipulator of the artist; the artist (as in all aesthetic media) will be the manipulator of the machine.

As a result, my submission to the Shakespeare and Virtual Reality seminar will be an attempt to articulate what I currently think of as the constraints that VR would impose upon my attempts to make "Shakespeare", understood as making

performances of plays attributed to Shakespeare, informed by what I know of the early modern theatre, and my own training as a theatre and digital media artist. My hope is that in articulating those constraints, I might direct our attention to a potentially newly expressive aesthetic vocabulary. This vocabulary will likely be indebted to silent film Shakespeare, but it will not focus on the shared interest in photo-realism manifest in the documentary impulses of such footage as the 1899 Beerbohm Tree *King John* and in recent 360-degree video journalism. Rather, it will explore silent film's negotiation of the impossibility of sounded dialogue through non-dialogic textual gestures like making words functional on a meta-level (relegating them to an existence outside the fictional world), translating them to supportive gestures within the fictional world (in extreme cases, mouthed but not sounded), or giving them exceptional structural salience (worthy of entirely disrupting the visual experience in intertitles). My core argument is that, just as silent film asked us to think differently about Shakespeare's words, VR may offer us an opportunity to think differently about any number of other elements we currently think of as defining "Shakespeare".

Infinite Space, from Theatre to Film to Virtual Reality

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Wearing a VR headset makes you feel like Hamlet, "bounded in a nutshell" yet "the king of infinite space." The screen is a mere inch from your eye, yet the virtual space feels boundless. There is the illusion of depth, of movement, of perspective. Andrei Tarkovsky described film as "expressing the course of time within the frame"; VR removes that frame, and expresses time through space. This paper extends film and media theories of represented space (mise-en-scène, composition, sound, and movement) into the frameless space of virtual performances. It explores how VR directors are arranging cameras around performances, and offering audiences multiple vantages onto scenes. It describes how VR's edits and interactions owe more to games than to film. It analyzes how Hamlet's film directors (including Olivier, Kosintsev, Branagh, Almereyda, and Doran) used techniques to create the illusion of infinite space -- a problem that VR directors now need to solve. And it concludes that VR directors and production designers can learn from theatre to frame performances in more natural ways than a rectangular box.

Notes on Shakespeare-VR
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Shakespeare-VR is an educational project based around virtual reality media shot in the ASC Blackfriars Playhouse, a historical recreation of the indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company. In this paper, I will take a look back on my experiences as director of the project over the past year or-so and share some reflections on the state of VR technology as it pertains to Shakespeare, theater, and humanities education. With arrival of affordable mass-market headsets and new Shakespeare-related VR projects popping up all over the globe, it now seems clear that a new chapter in the 400 year-old history of Shakespeare production has begun to unfold. What is less clear, however, is whether the new medium will have genuine staying power, or if it will turn out to be a passing novelty. In order to address this question, I will address issues including interactivity, embodiment, and the relation between virtuality and imagination.