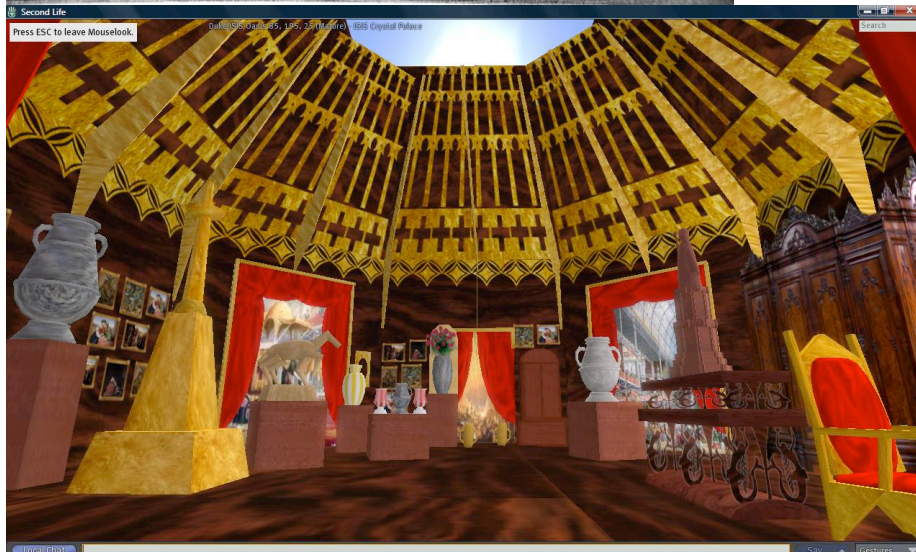
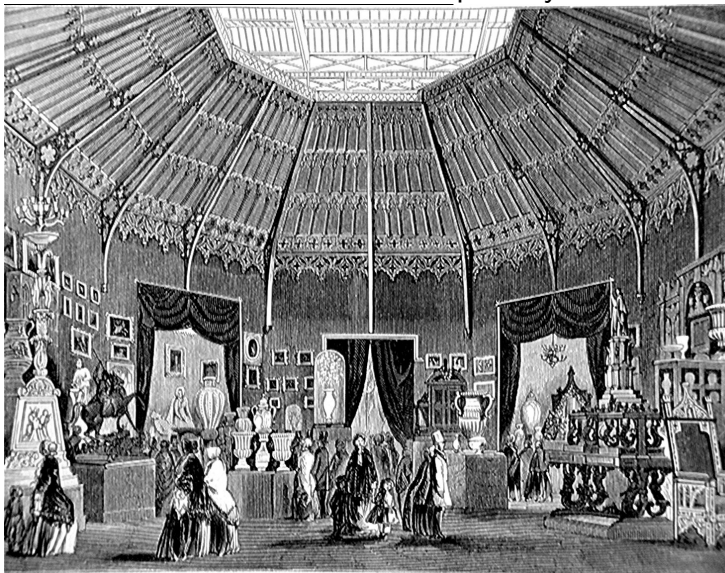


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### **“Virtual World Building as Collaborative Knowledge Production: The Online Crystal Palace”**

As part of an interdisciplinary four-course Freshman Focus Cluster around the theme of Virtual Realities, students in 'Authoring Digital Media: The Online Crystal Place' explored the Great Exhibition of 1851 as an example of world-building and cultural exhibition whose lessons pertain to 21st century virtual world building in complex and sometimes surprising ways. Their interventions consisted primarily of web-site and virtual world development in Second Life, combining critical analysis and historical research with work with primary source materials.



Rather than attempt to develop a purely referential virtual space in all cases, which would have been far beyond the scope of the class both technically and thematically, students used Second Life as a place to explore ideas of non-linear narrative space, proximity, circulation, social mixing, and cultural control through imaginative re-interpretations of specific exhibit areas and themes shown at the time period.

Students worked with digitized original catalogs, image archives, secondary essays, and their own creative energies to create exhibits that conveyed a flavor of what the original exhibits accomplished, while at the same time speculating about how virtual exhibition practices might both draw, and depart, from historical precedents through the use of foundational hypermedia authorship tools and concepts.



The goals of the class were both to establish a starting point for future virtual explorations of the historical Exhibition in Second Life and other virtual reality tools, and to consider how digital media authorship itself can become a means of scholarly knowledge-production. Because this was a frosh class, the emphasis was on core ideas and themes more than advanced production practices; however, this is just a starting point for an emerging research area and pedagogical practice. I anticipate continuing the project in an advanced course on 'Constructing the Metaverse' and combining it with some multimedia-mapping work I am doing in another context in order to tease out further how digital media authorship can contribute to collaborative knowledge-production in the humanities.



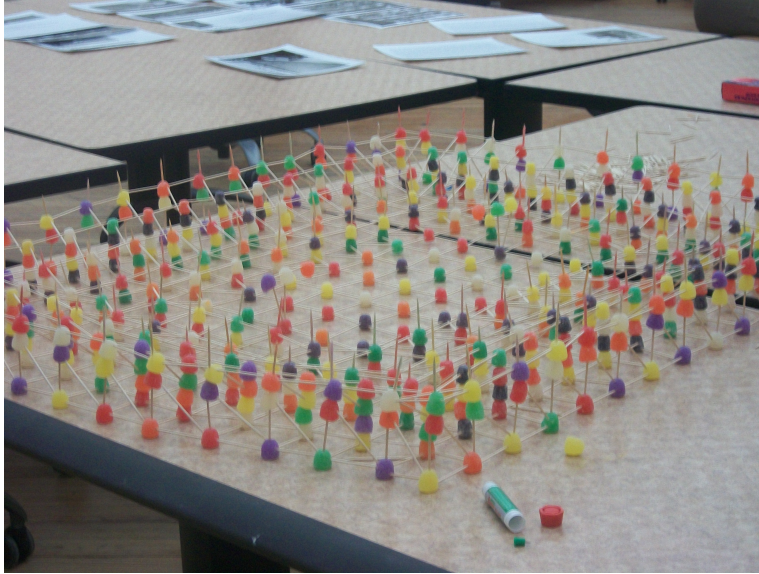


Together with the other courses in the cluster, we are moving towards ongoing digital media projects into which individuals and groups can dip at various points and with various objects. For example, our course also partnered with the 3D modeling course in our cluster to create Crystal Palace models to put in the immersive Cave environment at Duke, and with the team developing the OpenCobalt peer-to-peer virtual world development environment to port our content into a more experimental authoring space.



These efforts are part of the larger Visual Studies Initiative at Duke, where we are facilitating methodological interdisciplinarity through visual and digital media theory

and practices. For literary and historical authors and audiences focused on textual practices, these complementary modalities provide a way to deepen understanding of cultural and critical contexts, and to model structures of thought that tie back into the literary and critical milieux we explore.



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