Steven Fox
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Breaking the Bard

Chapter 1: The Introduction

"We are such stuff / As dreams are made of…" (*The Tempest,* 4.1.173-174)

William Shakespeare is often considered the greatest evoker of human emotion in the

English language, and yet, so very few English-speaking persons understand his language. This

should come as no surprise considering two people speaking the same language from the same

culture often misunderstand each other, but in the case of Shakespeare, his words are over

400-years old and therefore that form of English has been deemed as a different, often called a

foreign, language from contemporary modern English. It's called early modern English and to

the general population it is an inaccessible language; the stories and characters, however, are

seen all over the place today. Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) for instance is inspired by *Hamlet*

and his journey. The character of Stannis Baratheon from "A Song of Ice and Fire" (the Game of

Thrones book series) is greatly influenced by *Macbeth*. There is a movie starring Hugo Weaving

(most know for *The Matrix* (1999)*, Lord of the Rings* films*,* and *V for Vendetta* (2005)) called

Measure for Measure (2020) that is a contemporary adaptation of William Shakespeare's

Measure for Measure. And one of the most famous inspired movies of all time, *10 Things I Hate*

About You (1999), is based on *Taming of the Shrew.* All of these adaptations and translations

are a reflection of our time as much as early modern England. The same stories and characters

created by Shakespeare are just relevant today as they were when he wrote them, but my curiosity is with what life was like in his time that inspired him to write his words and create those stories we still relish today? I also want to make the inaccessible more accessible to a modern audience, because for an archaic language to be divulged to a society (namely American) who generally won't be bothered to read a subtitled movie (I'm guilty of it too) I want the high-brow stigma of Shakespeare's gorgeous words to have meaning to a contemporary audience… But baby-steps. First, I want to create an interactive documentary that allows the users to participate in the storytelling process to discover where these stories come from, and second, I want folks to see how these masterpieces are all over our contemporary media.

There have three primary discernable approaches to learning for human beings: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. When approaching the subject from both a historical and literature standpoint and trying to make it, at the very least, easier to understand, let alone enjoyable, I feel that all three forms of learning should be triggered to maximize impact. As the topic in question is text, to stimulate visual learners with an i-doc I have used photos, video, and graphics to bring to life the context of both story and origin of story for the audience; as well as individual environments have been created for each segment transporting the audience member to a place that should help bring to life the material for them. For the auditory learning, I have interviews with experts, cast members, performances, and graphics rhythmically timed to the pace of music; as the language of Shakespeare is musical, it is essential to feel rhythm when trying to understand the themes and texts. As the name implies, interactive documentary, the kinesthetic form of learning is brought light by having the

audience member choose their own path through the story. There's definitely a structure laid out and a possible linear construct, but an audience member can deviate from the path and one can choose their own course; and thereby forcing the audience member to comprehend the section/sections in question. All three learning styles are activated within this process and are what separates my method from the others in the field of Shakespeare.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review:

"i-docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary" Edited by Judith Aston, etc. al.

My project will be an interactive documentary wherein the user will be required to participate in the creative process, meaning, he/she/they will have to click on things on their computer to access information. If one were to think about, the special features on a DVD is by all intents and purposes an interactive documentary (i-doc). Take any of the *Harry Potter* movies for instances. When one clicks on the special features tab of the main menu, the user is sent to the special features menu which is designed to look like the Room of Requirement (a setting in the films) and there's a bunch of fun objects for the user to click on that will trigger a piece of text to appear or play a video about the process of creating the movie (the magic battles between the Dark Lord and Harry perhaps), and so on. As my method is the i-doc, I felt it necessary to research "what is an i-doc?" And I found "i-docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary", a compilation book from a variety of sources. The first chapter talks about how the i-doc differs from the traditional documentary and its linear form (or can). The purpose behind the i-doc is to provide "new ways of engaging with social issues and opportunities for forms of self-representation" *(Nash).* In the second chapter the book analyzes

the effectiveness and audience retention of i-docs. Some are better than others; however, a major pitfall many i-docs can fall into are the same as any online media: does the method fit the audience? A difficulty anyone can have when creating online content is whether or not the platform one is expecting to engage their audience with is intended for longer periods of time for the users to be engaged or should the method be reconsidered with the social media driven/fast food society we live in now?

These questions and discussions have been essential for me to consider moving forward with my project. Considering my subject matter being William Shakespeare is thought to be quite unapproachable by the average citizen without prior training either in literature or theatrical endeavors, my goal has been to make these marvelous texts more accessible and demonstrate how relevant their subject matters are to today's society. As such, I've discovered that for many, reading books, reading the plays, watching a performance, or watching a traditional documentary just hasn't cut the bacon. I want to get people engaged with the material by getting them involved and make it more relatable through a sort of gaming experience. I am also aware that no matter the content or delivery method, even this i-doc won't be for everyone. If these texts are to be made more accessible, then the audience must be assumed to not have prior knowledge of the subject and I must educate the audience.

The next piece of fun advice I found within this book is a brilliant question: how much of the experience will be user controlled and how much will be system controlled; meaning, actions triggered by user clicks vs. automatic actions built into the system? My preference is to give the user as much control of their experience as possible without allowing them to confuse themselves. If a user were to click on segmented that involves the story of *Macbeth,* I feel it is

my responsibility to give the user the opportunity to explore the story and essential characters of the play in question. It doesn't do the user any good to enter a module talking about gender roles with regards to Lady Macbeth and Portia if the users don't know the stories of *Macbeth* or *The Merchant of Venice*.

Enchanted a podcast by Professor Corinne Wieben:

Late 16th and early 17th century England was not at all a great time to live in England. I'm slightly paraphrasing Professor Corinne Wieben, an associate history professor at the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Wieben recently began a podcast, *Enchanted,* that explores the mystical in history. Her first episode, "Toil and Trouble", couldn't be more relevant to my topic of William Shakespeare at the turn of the 17th century. There was a changeover of monarchy from Queen Elizabeth I to King James I England/VI of Scotland who was obsessed with the extermination of witchcraft and punishment of Catholicism, as well as a resurgence of the Black Plague.

The story goes when King James was a younger man, merely king of Scotland at the time, he was held up in Denmark whilst on his honeymoon. A dear friend of his mother's, Jane Kennedy, came to visit when her ferry boat was destroyed; she and sixty others were killed by a tempest (a massive storm at sea). Later it was believed that the storm was created by a witch. James at the time was already obsessed with witches, but this event made it personal, and so began King James' lust for hunting down witches. He also would go on, as justification for his persecution of witches, to write a book called "Daemonologie" which takes the form of a Socratic dialogue. Dr. Wieben's series discusses the use or apparent appearance of magic throughout history, but this episode focuses largely on King James the first (as mentioned

previously) and I am using this as part of my analysis of this period in which Shakespeare wrote. It was a major shift in the kinds of stories Shakespeare began to write, but specifically with regards to his female characters. During Elizabeth's reign the female characters were either victims of circumstance (Ophelia, and to a certain extent Gertrude, from *Hamlet*), the smartest person in the room who was shackled by the times in which she lived (Portia in *The Merchant of Venice)*, or the person tacked onto the men's revenge plots (Desdemona in *Othello*).

That being said, these—minus technically *The Merchant of Venice*—are all tragedies and those characters mentioned above serve more of a function than stated; however, they all meet their demises or are entirely, through one end or another, subject to the gender norms of the society. The real exception in this period of writing is Tamara from *Titus Andronicus* who is the villain prompted to her revenge by the execution of her son; on that same note, one of most set upon female characters in all of Shakespeare is the daughter of Titus, Lavinia, who as a result of the revenge plot is brutally raped and has her tongue removed to keep her from telling anyone who did it. The turn really happens when James takes over as king with characters like the Witches in *Macbeth* and Lady Macbeth, the wife of the title character. Lady Macbeth not only is the smartest person in the room, but also has the fortitude and means to put her goals and will into action. However, most of these powerful female characters fall within the villain classification of their stories which is both a product of the patriarchal society in which they lived and a reflection of how the monarch viewed powerful women.

To analyze and understand our art we must also understand the times in which the artwork was created. Dr. Wieben's work as a historian directly contributes to this conversation by adding to the foundation of the changing of the guards so to speak from Elizabeth to James,

and as she illustrates in our interview session audience will see in the i-doc, Shakespeare's story telling too shifts with the political climate. If one were to observe art today, even for instance *Saturday Night Live*, the show changes with each new political leadership shift. The changing of political and social establishments is essential to this project and understanding how the work is influenced by that shift. When discussing the topic of women in theatre, this material is essential to that discussion.

"Shakespeare's Restless World" by Neil MacGregor

So much of Shakespeare's early work was looped in and around the History plays, or as the recent BBC miniseries has dubbed them, *The Hollow Crown* (2012). By in large because the history plays were hugely popular with audiences, but they can also be viewed as a justification or legitimation of the Tudor line to the throne. The validation of Queen Elizabeth I's lineage was capitol at that time, whereas with King James it was the validation of his beliefs, i.e., demonization of witchcraft and the solidification of Protestant belief. "Shakespeare's Restless World" by Neil MacGregor covers most of Shakespeare's history and the time in which he operated; however, my two primary resources to be used from this book are two chapters.

"Chapter 10: Toil and Trouble" discusses largely the same issues involving King James and the Scottish play as *Enchanted.* In "Chapter 4: Life Without Elizabeth," MacGregor makes the comparisons of the end of Elizabeth's reign due to her age and diminishing health to Edward VIII of England and his abdication of the throne in 1936. As Elizabeth's era drew nearer and nearer to a close, the English subjects become more and more worried as to who the new boss was to be since the queen had no heirs nor had she named a successor, largely for political reasons and to maintain her power. With Edward VIII the concern for his crown leaned greatly

on his relations with Wallace Simpson, an American divorcee, and as the head (albeit mostly

ceremonial) of the Church of England, the king was not allowed to marry a divorced woman. In

chapter four, MacGregor goes on to discuss how the turmoil around Elizabeth's pending death

is what led to the likely popularity of the history plays, especially considering there were many

audience members old enough to remember the Wars of the Roses which are the primary

subject of the plays. This book coupled with the interviews performed, help to create a

narrative that drives the audience of the i-doc from one monarch to the other and thereby

exhibiting how the change in political influence shifted the storytelling of William Shakespeare.

Chapter 3: The Creative Project Overview

Interactive is defined as involving the actions or input of a user (*Meriam-Webster)*. By

that definition virtually any engagement on one's mobile device, computer, tablet, etc.; utilizing

the internet is an interactive media. Over 4.5 billion people use the internet as of January 2020,

with over 3.8 billion engaging in some form of social media. To say interactive media is popular

would be quite the understatement. Because of the internet, our society has become so

massively participatory, whether it be online gaming, posting photos to Instagram or Facebook,

or simply commenting on an article or post, the interactivity in cyberspace has become the

fabric of our society. I preface with the nature and definition of the word interactive and how it

pertains to our society because my method for this project, an interactive documentary,

requires the users to participate or to interact with the experience of information. Since the

dawn of books, whereby readers physically needed to turn the page to consume the next piece

of information, people have become conditioned to interact with their media. The same

mechanics applied with the television until the advent of the remote control and then the TV guide where people had to scroll through to find what they wanted. Nowadays we use search engines, social media, and it would be safe to assume that most people have encountered some form of digital gaming (even Solitaire) whereby the gamer has to use his/her/their gaming device to achieve the goals of the given games.

So, interactive media is not by any stretch of the imagination new; however, the technology behind modern interactive gaming and documentaries relatively is. I will focus on i-docs (interactive documentaries), but the principles behind both are generally the same. An example of an i-doc that has been met with great success is *Hollow* which explores the video, photos, and audio pieces in a narrative whilst the user is meant to scroll through a timeline and learn how the small-town communities, specifically McDowell County, West Virginia, have been impacted by the drop in population over the course of the last century. Though, probably the greatest example I can propose is *Highrise* (2009-2017). The subject of this i-doc is the living conditions within various high-rises around the world and the challenges therein. It is a remarkable creation whereby the user is plunged into an outer space setting with three digital figures that appear as "fictional guides" for the non-fiction experience. The characters deliver a brief monologue followed by presenting the user with a selection of clickable options to progress to a new plane of the experience. This not too dissimilar to my project.

My intent is to create an immersive environment in digital space that symbolizes the story of the play, the content being covered as per its modern-day applications, as well as a setting the user may relate to. For example, on a segment about the varied witch trials brought about by King James' inquisitions and the subsequent persecutions throughout the ages and

similar events, the setting in the i-doc will be set around a campfire, perhaps with a bubbling cauldron and magic flying through the air while the user is being presented with a variety of options to click on that will move them toward to the next multimedia piece of the doc. Like *Highrise* or *Hollow*, the user will have an opportunity to choose his/her/their journey, but they will have to complete a series of tasks in order to do so, such as complete quiz games, watch videos, etc. The idea behind this project is to allow the audience to get involved with Shakespeare's works and discover how they are relevant through the ages and today, and to also to make the wonderful language and storytelling of William Shakespeare more accessible to a modern audience even if they haven't had much of experience the works previously.

My key ingredient to this immersive experience will be performance renditions of both actual Shakespeare texts *Macbeth, Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Richard III* as a representation of the History Plays, as well as creating a variety of scenes to engage and educate the audience of this work. An example of a similar format would be the *Roman Empire* (2016) series on Netflix. I have found with Shakespeare that people have a far more difficult time understanding his words when one is merely trying to read them off the page, and it's to be expected as it's an archaic language by the typical modern English dialect. As well as these works are plays, we are meant to experience them, not just read them.

The interactive portion of the experience would be kicked off with a 101 of how the site is to function via a video wherein using texting and physical examples of the user will encounter on the site, the video will describe the functionality of the site and the user will be able to receive help as the travers forward. Within each segment there will also be a Shakespeare 101 video that lasts roughly thirty-seconds to give an abbreviated 101 of the functionalities.

Following this 101, users will find portraits of characters they will learn about and if they click on the portrait the user will find objects that they may click on to learn new things. Once all items in the scene have been clicked on (or if the user simply wishes to leave that segment), the may click one of the arrows on the screen.

For the big question in play: what am I bringing to research of my area of choice? My method, being the interactive documentary. Most of the information about William Shakespeare's works has been examined through articles, books, movies, etc.; all mediums of information divulgences; however, what I'm proposing is information discovery. I come from an actor's background, it's what led me to film and media making, it's what drives me today; and as such, I have found information that sticks the best, the "learnt" information, is the stuff I have had to explore and discover. Being told or divulged to does not always work in my experience. *Breaking the Bard* is meant to be an exploratory exercise for both people who've never experienced the works of William Shakespeare as well as to the fans who've enjoyed his plays for as long as he/she/they can remember. But I would also like for both sides of the isle to be able to see the parables from these now ancient texts and they are still relevant today. To re-illustrate my point from earlier: my hope is to create a fun learning experience while trying to make the works of William Shakespeare more accessible to a modern audience as well as also using this as platform for people explore how art reflects society in which the work has been created.

Chapter 4: Reflection

The work is completed…for now. The endeavor that was a yearlong pursuit (it's been quite longer than that to be sure) to bring Shakespeare to a potentially greater contemporary consciousness has completed another stage in its evolution, for which I believe this will be a lifelong project for myself, but for now I shall stick to the present. My aspirations are always greater than my means and my efforts hopefully will always express the capability to squeeze ten-pounds of content into that three-pound bag and still have some sense come from it all. I tend to produce a feature film's worth of content and attempt to condense it into a short film timeline.

The initial design of the page was to be much more elaborate and intricate with games, quizzes, and sequence to compliment the style elements and research information divulged; however, such thing didn't fully come to pass. With probably another year or two such segments would most likely be possible to accompany the current product. As a tool for learning and entertainment, I do believe this site as it exists now could be useful, baring the technical specificities that I'll get into momentarily. The dream was and still is to finish a site that allows the user on any monitor (mobile included) to perform the essential functions of the i-doc. My knowledge of web design quite frankly is the primary flaw in the construct of *Breaking the Bard*. The strengths in the design are from much formed out of my filmmaking and audio creative background. I feel the creation of each media chamber (places wherein the audience finds the content) and the videos themselves do create a more immersive and representational experience of what a modern audiences' potential sensibilities could attract to and understand.

As for some of the difficulties I came across in this project, to reiterate my technical lack of expertise in web design, I first experimented Racontr and had nearly completed a fully functioning site when an issue arose with the platform and before I had been able to finish my project in the fall semester of 2020, I was locked out of the platform. In manner of three days, I was able to semi recreate the site using Wix.com; however, I would later discover the functionality issues of that platform far, far too late into the process. I had chosen to stick with Wix because the platform had been reliable to the best of my knowledge at that time, but even then, I understood it had its limitations, chief among them is that there is absolutely new way to auto play audio on the site. This posed a challenge as one of my intents was to have various elements playing in the background, whether it was an audio scene from a Shakespeare play performance, or when the idea of the site was much grander, I had intended to have the *Macbeth* page take place in a dark forest and we would be able to hear the sounds of the forest, witches conjuring their spells and uttering prophecies, but more specifically giving clues as to how to complete the games I had intended to create for the site. As this flaw was greatly disappointing, I decided to streamline the content and carry on in a different fashion until I discovered the near fatal flaw in the platform which I had not anticipated at all: it is not a responsive website.

Wix.com has defined themselves as being responsive; however, what they are meaning is they a way for creators to make a mobile friendly version of their website, but there are no measures built into the site (that I have been made aware of) for a change in screen size. As I was working to finalize the site, I realized I hadn't thought to test the site up until that point on my laptop, a 16" MacBook Pro, and when I did so I then discovered the functionality was nearly

nil. I had designed the site using at 27" monitor and needless to say I learned that the elements on the page did not resize with change in screen size and thus the proportions were way off and again the site was practically unusable. In fact, the only element that resized proportionately was the background video on the page. Which then sparked another potentially creative solution: what if I were to create another version of the site, I would cut together a full movie and had time sequences in which at certain points in the movie an interactive element would appear and allow the user to participate with that action, and once the user completed that action or decided they simply wanted to return to the movie, they could and continue the film.

I had already completed an assembly version of the film over the summer of 2020 which clocked in at a runtime around 20-minutes, so I thought I would give that a go. Unfortunately, in this scenario it is impossible (to my knowledge and research) for background videos to play audio elements at all with Wix.com. So, I decided to test my plan on Racontr and again I was met with a disappointing result because the file size of the film was too large. When I tried to use the version of the film that is on Vimeo, the created button I had devised for the whole experience to begin wouldn't trigger the video and that's when that version of the i-doc was discontinued. My intent at that point was to try and revert everything back over to Racontr and complete the experience using that platform, but alas there simply wasn't enough time to get the site to standard for I would have been proud of and thus I decided to stick with Wix and try to reenforce the point to potential audience members to use the full screen of their laptops to operate the site for maximum effect. There were also many creative elements as well that had to be abandoned along the way in lieu functionality corrections,

I am very proud of the current state of the project, so please do not mistake my rant as being disappointed with the present end result. I simply had a different idea for how I wanted to the project to be and how I wanted it to function and didn't expect the unexpected at that time. In pursuing the project, or others like, further my first step would be to A: learn the basics about coding, though it is not of great interest to me, I believe at least that basic knowledge would help me in understanding more fully what it is that I'm wanting to accomplish and more importantly how to go about in the most efficient way possible; and B: try to find a coder/web designer to partner with. I believe one of my greatest strengths as a filmmaker is being able to be totally self-reliant and yet it can also be my greatest weakness. I have had bad experiences in the past putting trust into some of my collaborators and the tasks have not been accomplished up to my standard, but admittedly I have a very high standard that I feel I rarely ever meet.

This project has been an amazing learning experience and the support I have received from my faculty advisor, Professor Kathleen Ryan, as well as the actors and interviewees I worked with, and the community whom I've had testing my site for functionality issues and content throughout the process have been invaluable. Even in the end result I feel I crammed as much content as I could that would be valuable to the experience of *Breaking the Bard* and I feel it still the tip of the iceberg with regards to where I believe it could be taken into the future. My interest in going forward would be to incorporate more of the aforementioned content as well as I also believe a VR experience whereby the user could enter an Elizabethan London street leading up to the Globe theatre as well as possibly have a function that would take the user on a trip with a touring Elizabethan Shakespeare company to see the ins and outs of how a company like that would have worked and to fully immersive the user in the period

and presentation of such a company. Again, my current aspirations are far beyond my reach;

however, I do believe such an experience is attainable and would be of interest to many.

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