

Where History Meets Imagination: An Interview with Chris Mooney-Singh

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Dr Chris Mooney-Singh is a poet and fiction writer who has used digital technology and user-created virtual worlds to reconstruct a version of Singapore nearly two hundred years ago that merges historical facts with invention to provide a living museum people can visit online for educational and recreational purposes. The *Singapore 1825* build he has created in the virtual world of Kately also provides the setting for his film, *Looking for Mr Gelam* (2021), which blends scenes from present-day Singapore with scenes from the virtual world set in the same locations. In the following interview focusing on *Looking for Mr Gelam*, Chris discusses not only the possibilities for filmmakers, writers, and artists, but also for educators who can use this kind of worldbuilding to offer students an immersive and interactive learning platform using the latest pedagogic practices.



Adele Ward and CMS in avatar form. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

Adele Ward: How does this film, rooted in history, demonstrate the idea of worldbuilding? How accurate is the film and how does the fictional idea of ‘subcreation’ come into play?

Chris Mooney-Singh: Initially, I had to play detective with historical records, scholarly articles, early sketches, paintings, and maps. For example, the Malay precinct Sultan Mosque in the film is not the same as the present-day building executed in the Indo-Saracenic style. Original Malay mosques were made of wood with tiered thatch roofs, reflecting a thousand years of Buddhist and Indian influences. To produce any work in a visual medium, a writer and director must interrogate history yet realise that the individual’s view of the findings will always be a perspective. A film, like any creative work, acts as a prism to refract the narrative. ‘Refraction’ is an apt metaphor here because a script must be interpreted by the camera’s eye. The director, in union with the film editor, determines what is to be highlighted and emphasised. Likewise, light passing through a lens, filtered by camera angle, subsidiary lighting, and other effects, is revealed as waves of starlight from outer space passing through earth’s unstable stratosphere and eventually appears to us as twinkling stars.

Although one deals with factual records and any available images, photographs, paintings and sketches from the period, time itself inevitably becomes the turbulent conductor that transmutes the original source. I was aware of expected ‘distortion’ in the worldbuilding process and embraced it. Thus, my goal for a short project like this was not to find a particular ship name in the maritime records and place it offshore, or to worry whether the sultan’s palace was perfectly placed in its exact position. Such scientific accuracy might be possible with more time, depending on scope and budget. In the same way, a short film, like a short story, limits its narrative options compared with a novel.

I looked broadly at the period and considered the general character of that time and what was likely to have been found there. For example, any palace of the time would have had a gamelan orchestra. Did I find an exact painting or photo of one? No. The process of subcreation relies on factual records but must exercise imagination to create a broad-stroke impression of a time and place. If what the film depicts stimulates interest and leads to more research, discussion, and application, such as virtual educational learning journeys, then a ‘fictional’ purpose aligned with proto-historical worldbuilding has done its job.



Singapore, 1825. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

AW: *Looking for Mr Gelam* combines scenes of present-day Singapore with a vision of the same locations nearly two hundred years ago, using the effective device of a virtual reality headset that lets the actors step into the past. Viewers share the vision through the headset to see the recreation of historic Singapore you have built and filmed on Kitley, a user-created virtual world platform. Why was this theme important to you and how did you develop the storyline and the framework?

CMS: The opportunity for this blended reality film arose from some COVID-19 arts funding and the invitation to participate in an online film festival where each video artist used the backdrop of Kampong Gelam, Singapore's oldest heritage precinct. My arts company, Word Forward, has been located there for several years, as has the film's producer – Writers Centre, Singapore. I love the place with its Malay and Chinese, Indian and Arabic strands of heritage. Kampong Gelam has layers and layers of stories yet to be told. It seemed possible to structure a simple documentary-style, albeit fictional, narrative, with Uncle Sam, a project manager for a virtual design company, giving his niece Ling a guided tour, actual and virtual, of Beach Road. The virtual components created using 3D worldbuilding tech are blended with the real-life narrative, contrasting the present with the past.

AW: Tell us some of the history of Kampong Gelam and its linguistic and cultural sources.

CMS: This small microcosm of Singapore was the first precinct developed by Sir Stamford Raffles, who colonised Singapore in 1819 on behalf of the British East India Company. The original shoreline came up to Beach Road until 1843. While this street remained after the side towards the ocean was expanded through landfill, the sandy thoroughfare ceased to be a coastal road yet remains a busy asphalt artery looking out towards high-rise apartments and luxury hotels. This land reclamation story was easy to visualise through film.

The precinct's name 'Kampong Gelam' also fascinated me. Places and street names, whether found in a fantasy or historical novel, hold vital clues and are an important component of worldbuilding. Raffles founded a trading settlement at Kampong Gelam and relocated Malay communities from the Southeast Asian region, installing a controversial sultan as a magnet to attract other Malay migrant communities to Singapore to further his own colonial 'worldbuilding' purposes. 'Kampong' means 'village' in Malay and *gelam* is the name of a tree used for boatbuilding. *Gelam* is a Malay word whose Latin equivalents are *Melaleuca quinquenervia* and *Melaleuca leucadendra*. The tree is found in parts of neighbouring coastal Malaysia and Indonesia. When I first saw a *gelam* tree I also recognised it as the paperbark gum, familiar to me from my Australian past, another personal reason for my interest in the Kampong Gelam story.



Visiting the gelam tree grove. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

Singapore began with a Malay prince, Sang Nila Utama, who sailed from Palembang in South Sumatra, the capital of the Srivijaya empire, reaching Singapore in 1299. Earliest records suggest that Temasek, meaning ‘sea-town’, was the earliest name for this tiny island at the tip of the Malay peninsula which grew to be an important regional trading port with ten thousand residents. Later it became a vassal state of Siam. In the fifteenth century the island fell under the influence of the Malay Majapahit empire. By that time it had been renamed ‘Singapura’. What had been a thriving port was burnt to the ground by the Portuguese in 1613 and the island sank into two hundred years of obscurity until Singapura was reborn with a new story through British settlement, anglicising the Sanskrit name to ‘Singapore’. With changes in power come title changes: naming is a key linguistic instrument of colonialisation. Meanwhile, the pre-existing *orang laut* sea nomads, who used Singapore as a base, succumbed. The absence of this indigenous fishing and boat-building community, as well as the *gelam* forests, also prompted me to make an anthropological and environmental tale. As mentioned, this stretch of coastal Singapore attracted Chinese, Arabic, and Indian traders, and artisans who settled and built their communities. Subsequently, they also brought their own cultures and linguistic influences to bear on the place. Kampong Gelam is a microcosm of multicultural heritage in Singapore’s lexicographical story. By 2009, the tiny yet influential trading island had become an international entrepôt and the largest container terminal in the world, until Shanghai eclipsed it. I find it fascinating to look at history for examples of worldbuilding and to trace the pageantry of blended languages and adopted names. Fantasy novels derive linguistic sources from known traditions — for example, Frank Herbert’s *Dune* with its names and concepts from Arab, Hebrew, and other Middle Eastern influences.

AW: What were the advantages to you of filming in the virtual world in order to bring the past to life? Are there also limitations to what is possible, in terms of costumes, the physical appearance of avatars, and the range of movements that can be used to animate them and make them interact with the objects and world around them?

CMS: My years of interest and participation in user-created virtual worlds taught me that I could tell the Kampong Gelam story as a before-and-after tale, although we only had sufficient budget for a three-to-six-minute film, limiting its fictional scope. *Looking for Mr Gelam* visualises a present-day Beach Road and Kampong Gelam, contrasted with a virtual world built to represent what might have been historically. Digital sets are much cheaper to build than physical ones: in Hollywood, green or blue screen technology has become the norm. Think of *Lord of the Rings*, *Avatar*, the digital tiger in *Life of Pi*, the *Star Wars* prequel *The Mandalorian* and the recent Netflix zombie film *Army of the Dead*. They all show how much big budget films rely on 3D tech and CGI to build their worlds.

What was once only possible to imagine in words can now be realised through virtual design. The filmmaker's job is to realise the author's vision through a combination of special effects and chroma key backdrops, where two images or video streams are composited or layered, one in front of the other, to create scenes for character acting. Now cameras can be combined directly with game engines to create backdrops for actors or avatars. These can be viewed on monitors, adjusted, and then filmed. Elaborate sets, impossible for the indie filmmaker to fund in a physical way, can now be produced in a bedroom studio.

AW: Presumably a major benefit of filming in the virtual world is the cost, as it would take a high budget to create and film a historical piece in a real-world setting. What was your budget for *Looking for Mr Gelam*, and how much should potential filmmakers expect to invest in making their own films in Second Life and Kitley?

CMS: Yes, budget is certainly the first consideration that will determine the scale of a production. It is also more practical, especially for a new indie writer and filmmaker like myself. The budget, around US \$5,500, allowed us to contract professional actors, a cinematographer, audio recordist, a film editor, and assistants to carry equipment and set up the shoot. This was necessary because half of the film is shot in present-day Kampong Gelam. For those working solely with a virtual game engine platform, there are enough free tools available online to offset production costs, except one's own time and that of the cadre of volunteers and supporters. All you need is a computer with a reasonable graphics card and 4-16 GB of RAM to capture and render the footage.

In our case there were additional costs for designing and maintaining a virtual world, as well as building customised assets like 3D sailing ships and Asian-themed musical instruments including a gamelan orchestra. The Malay palace architecture also needed to be sourced and modified. Avatar characters with Asian skin tones and ethnic Malay dress were required, along with a knowledge of how to animate them as non-player characters. Most of this was done as a voluntary arts project, and I am deeply grateful to my partners. Before starting a project like this one must find available designers with the necessary skills. The slow production of virtual Malay clothing was a temporary roadblock but fortunately we were able to get the film into the festival on time.



Gamelan player. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

AW: There is a wide range of software available for filming and editing in the virtual world, along with audio equipment, background music, and graphic design for the titles and credits. How did you make your choices and which systems did you use?

CMS: Game-engine capture for any virtual world is free and can be executed by anyone with even a basic computer. Programmes like OBS Studio are open-source and what I relied on for screen capture, video, and audio. We purchased some royalty-free music tracks. My film editor also sourced original gamelan music and used industry-standard Adobe Premier to compile and edit everything, including titles and credits. There are a lot of film-editing suite options available if you are willing to learn how to use them. Several are free or come at a low cost.

AW: How accessible are virtual worlds and the filmmaking software and equipment, particularly for people who are newcomers to machinima? Is the level of difficulty daunting and are there ways to learn, including advice from experienced filmmakers in the virtual worlds you use?

CMS: For filmmaking one needs to customise the avatars' looks and clothing, which can be done at relatively minimal cost through the Second Life Marketplace or Kately Marketplace. Only when filmmakers start to develop their own virtual environment is cost a factor and there are cheaper options in OpenSim than in Second Life. If

you are a Mac user, then Garageband and iMovie come free. If on a PC you can download DaVinci Resolve, Blender, Shotcut or Openshot. For audio, Audacity is a sophisticated free digital audio station. There are online machinima editing tutorials as well as groups in virtual worlds with experienced individuals who can mentor newcomers. Everything can be learned through your computer and I, for one, still consider myself a beginner.

AW: Do you have filmmaking advice for others interested in worldbuilding on Second Life and Kitley, perhaps some main techniques to take into consideration?

CMS: If you are the conceptual creative, consider teaming up with a technical partner. When making a machinima, the same filmmaking rules apply when framing a shot as would apply in general cinematography. My basic rule of thumb is to let the character move in the scene rather than moving the camera. I use a digital 3D Connexion Space Mouse for certain panning shots, but sparingly.

The visual narrative is based on pre-production planning: a shot list of scenes that can be eventually edited using the 3-second rule where there must be a minimum of golden footage per shot. You can capture longer shots, but a professional editor would edit each shot so that there is no camera shake anywhere, no distracting elements such as another person or object coming into frame. This way the narrative will have visual variety to engage the viewer. Of course, this is a guideline and much depends on the style of the film. Working with the rhythm of a music clip is also an excellent way to time the cuts.

AW: Do you need to have a studio, and if not, how do you manage the challenges of soundproofing, having professional audio on your films, and lighting for real-life shots?

CMS: If people are making game-engine machinimas, they only need a desk in a bedroom. Simple soundproofing with inexpensive acoustic foam panels will block out a lot of bouncing room echo. Clothes cabinets are great sound insulators. One can also create a soundbox booth for the microphone, placed on the desk to inhibit sound spill and to damp outside noise. When voicing as an avatar in a live virtual world film shoot you still need to be able to see the computer screen, so sound panels or moveable frames like a Japanese screen draped with blankets can create a barrier for echo behind you.

For most 'avatar acting' a low-impedance cardioid dynamic mic will be more than adequate, along with a stand and audio interface that ensures a clean audio input. There are USB dynamic mic options. Real-life broadcasting needs more tools and skills but there are many semi and pro options available at manageable costs. Again, it

depends on the budget. Werner Herzog is a great advocate for small scale, cinematographer-directed movies. The main thing is not the tech but the vision of the writer-director, committed to worldbuilding in film form.

AW: Some videographers say they enjoy the control they have when filming in the virtual world, as they can write, direct, film, edit and take one or more parts in their own work. Others collaborate with sizeable teams, where each person provides specialist knowledge. How many people worked with you on *Looking for Mr Gelam*, and what did they each contribute?

CMS: My team comprised nine people because we needed real-life cinematography and audio recording for the actors' dialogue. I co-wrote the script with Savinder Kaur and she doubled as its producer, while I directed the Kampong Gelam half-day shoot. On the digital front, I researched, conceptualised, and directed the building of the *Singapore 1825* world in collaboration with my long-term build partner, Dr Scott Grant, from Monash University's Virtually Enhanced Learning (VEL) project, who did a tremendous job. He was aided by expert 3D modellers: Modee Parlez, from Belgium, and virtual clothing designer Ada Radius from the USA.



Malay perahu payang fishing boats. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

One of the unique pleasures when collaborating in the virtual space is meeting and discussing in avatar form each stage of the building process. One can move around and adjust each component of the work – placing trees,

animals, birds, and boats, right down to the smallest butterfly on a bush or lovebird bathing in the palace fountains. In short, *Looking for Mr Gelam* was a passion project for our virtual team.

AW: The film was launched on YouTube rather than Vimeo. Could you explain why YouTube was your first choice, and how to choose background music so that it passes the high level of scrutiny this website employs in order to avoid breaches of copyright?

CMS: Aliwal Arts Centre commissioned the film. They chose YouTube as the sole platform because of its massive reach. While Vimeo is often favoured by solo artists as a video host, YouTube has two billion users per day and is also the second largest search engine in the world. I was careful not to use material that would breach copyright law. Up to June 2021, social media views have climbed to approximately 15,000 on Facebook and YouTube combined. As a small indie team, we are pleased with the past four months of online engagement.

AW: You have been a familiar figure on Second Life for more than 13 years, regularly presenting your work and contributing to the writing community by helping others in ways that are similar to your real-life work. Yet for this project you chose to film on Kitley. Could you explain the ways in which Kitley offered you opportunities to film that were not available on Second Life?

CMS: Second Life I think of as the ‘mothership’ of user-created virtual worlds and always will be. We all take great inspiration from it; however, while free to enter as a user, ‘buying’ and maintaining digital land can be challenging to sustain on a long-term basis for an independent artist unless they ‘sub-let’ digital parcels to other residents or find other ways to recuperate the investment. The owner, Linden Labs, developed Second Life with Linden Scripting Language (LSL), based on open-source code which they customised for commercial purposes. Indie scripters have adapted LSL for their own virtual worlds, a commonwealth of independent digital platforms known as OpenSim.

Kitley, one of the more prominent OpenSims, maintains its platform with high-quality services. As of 2021, a private region in Second Life costs US\$349, with further monthly tier payments of US\$229. The same landmass in Kitley costs \$19.95 a month. I am a resident of both Second Life and Kitley, but because my intention from the outset was to retain *Singapore 1825* for new film projects, virtual tourism, and educational learning journeys, I have found working on Kitley very practical. Another advantage of using OpenSim is the ability to deploy non-player characters (NPCs) not available in Second Life. They are bot avatars and a practical way for filmmakers to include digital extras for non-speaking parts in any production.

Using rigged mesh and animated actions, they are assigned specific tasks in *Singapore 1825*, such as chopping wood, carrying baskets of fish or pineapples, and working in the rice paddy. By contrast, Second Life machinima filmmakers generally need to deploy human-operated avatars in machinima shoots. There is nothing wrong with this but there are advantages to using bots for some roles. NPCs do their digital tasks twenty-four hours a day, making a virtual visitor's experience much more dynamic. Otherwise, a SIM can look like a ghost-town. NPCs can be programmed for education as teaching bots, or welcomers who provide information to SIM visitors.

In 2018 Linden Labs developed a similar system of 'Animesh' bot code for Second Life, allowing the autonomous programming of wild pets, vehicles, humanoid, and zombie avatars controlled by the SIM owner. Was there an economic reason for holding back this coding development for more than fifteen years? Perhaps to maximise paid human avatar engagement on the platform. This is one of the reasons why many migrate from Second Life to set up independent projects, although the main advantage of OpenSim is the low cost of maintaining large tracts of digital land compared with Second Life.

AW: You mentioned education. How can a virtual world be used by schools and educators?

CMS: As technology develops, schools begin using the latest gadgets and software programmes. I try to practise the 'flipped classroom' approach, where students can participate in the process of education through individual interactive learning. Of course, a whole class of students can enter a traditional building and interact with the teacher and other peers, but a 3D space allows them to self-pace their study as well as giving opportunities for practical work on building, solving 3D puzzles, and going on quests for task-based learning. For example, geography and social studies students visiting *Singapore 1825* can interact with NPCs in period costume, or with 3D objects such as the mangrove foreshore to study salinity in a tidal ecosystem. Such lessons can become truly interactive, especially when students roleplay as a sultan, a farmer, a stall owner, or a fisherman.

Botany students can digitally lift a mangrove tree out of the water to study its root system. A 3D model can be inspected from every angle. Digital learning like this at the very least supplements what is read passively in a textbook. One of the best examples of immersive education is the Museum Alive downloadable app where Sir David Attenborough demonstrates how augmented reality tech can animate prehistoric creatures for teaching purposes.

Another way students can enjoy experiential learning at Singapore, 1825 is by sailing a traditional Malay *payang* across the foreshore, disembarking at the boatbuilding workshop to see which tools and techniques were originally used; or they can walk through the *gelam* tree on their way to the rice paddy and pineapple farm. User-created

virtual worlds employ the same tech as computer games, but for educational and social purposes, not to tally gunplay scores. Minecraft is one of the most popular platforms used for education. Roblox is another. These are geared towards primary students, whereas our world can serve all ages.



Pineapple farm. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

Students can dress their avatar in traditional costumes, hear a story while sitting around a virtual campfire, use dance animations, listen to a poetry recital in the *gelam* forest, or act out a narrative in roleplay form. These days, due to the pandemic, blended learning has increased exponentially. The challenge is to keep students engaged and active, not turning off their webcams in a Zoom class. ‘Avatar education’ opens new possibilities and can solve issues that have arisen for some students at home, providing more privacy and anonymity for those who might be embarrassed to show their household environments. Virtual language classes provide avatar anonymity that can also free students who might be shy about speaking before others in a Zoom workshop.

These are just some of the ways a virtual environment can provide powerful immersive tools for educators. As we build worlds, we can also help inspire creativity and the desire to learn through gameplay. Again, my colleague Dr Grant has been doing just this with his first and second-year undergraduates from Monash University at [Chinese Island](#) in Second Life, where students learn Chinese through roleplay. Long gone are the days of ‘chalk

and talk' teaching. However, for the virtual world classroom to succeed, the institution, the school or university, must be prepared to invest in, develop and support the virtual education process.

AW: Are virtual worlds secure or can there be safeguarding issues for younger people?

CMS: In short, yes, they are secure. Some more so than others. Second Life is less secure for school-age children because the digital space is a non-gated adult playground. I chose Kately because it provides customised options for private access. We can limit access to other adjoining worlds so that students do not get distracted from their lessons and tasks. Kately also provides an admin dashboard to customise group logins, a class at a time, as well as the ability to pre-customise avatar accounts. Easing the newcomer into a virtual environment is crucial.

AW: Along with filming, you have also streamed events from the virtual world into the real world and vice versa, so that people in both spheres can share writing and educational experiences with each other. This has included a workshop with your MA students at Lasalle College of the Arts, in which they met in a Zoom call and were able to watch authors reading from their work in Second Life then take part in a question-and-answer session. You also organised an international performance event where you invited authors in the real and virtual worlds to read their work and watch each other. Could you tell me more about this and what kind of equipment and software you need to stream events or to share a simpler meeting?

CMS: The present film is part of a long-standing project on Kately, as well as earlier iterations located at Monash University in Second Life. Dr Grant and I have also created a virtual Silk Road caravanserai in the desert to organise cross-arts fundraiser events for a school in Kenya. Spoken word artists and musicians perform live from the Writers Centre in Singapore and can be viewed by Second Life audiences and, in turn, Second Life residents share poetry readings, theatre productions, musical performances, film screenings, and even stand-up comedy. These are viewed by audiences at our Singapore venue as well as live on social media.

The virtual Silk Road project's other Second Life venue, Merlion Island, has at its centre a virtual art gallery inside a huge virtual lionfish, the Merlion, Singapore's icon. The four-gallery tour unpacks Singapore's most famous poem by Edwin Thumboo, "Ulysses by the Merlion". One of my first film projects uses Merlion Island as a backdrop [for the poet's audio reading](#). When visiting the gallery in avatar form one can listen to an audio tour explaining some of Singapore's history and the multimedia galleries. That is one of the great things about virtual realms: not only can one simulate visual environments from history, they are also places where you can facilitate the learning journey using interactive audio-visual media.

I have screenshared these environments during my online classes as this kind of resource is useful for students, providing a live visual prompt during a writing session. Recently I collaborated with the US performance poet Gary Glazner and founding executive director of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project during an online Zoom workshop with patients, family, and staff at a Wisconsin facility. Dementia patients viewed *Singapore 1825* on the screen of a movable 'poetry robot', watching my avatar moving around the SIM while Glazner led the group in a poetry writing and performance exercise.

Live events like these are not inherently complicated. OBS Studio is again an excellent free streaming software choice. The facilitator screen-captures the virtual world from his or her computer monitor and broadcasts it live within a Zoom workshop or live to social media. Recently in Second Life I delivered a paper at the thirteenth annual Virtual World Best Practices in Education 2021. Academics and educators log in around the world and watch their colleagues deliver papers using inworld slide projectors or demonstrate a point by building a 3D object before the audience. Members of the audience can respond in voice or text chat.

We are all familiar with Zoom, Teams, Webex, and Google Meet for online workshops and webinars. A virtual world takes this to another level, with maximum interactivity and engagement while sitting at home in your pyjamas drinking ice-tea or coffee. Recently I presented a live session on the Chinese Classic *Journey to the West* using a slideshow as well as a live audio reading from the classic novel, popularly known as "Monkey", along with a programme of my own audio-scape micro fiction stories. All the while, I wore an avatar depicting Sun Wukong, the monkey king. Doing this as a real-life event would be novel but costly and difficult to bring off.

AW: Over the 14 years I have been using Second Life for literary events I have seen many universities and other academic organisations trying out the platform, giving up and now gradually coming back again. Do you feel there is potential for academic projects in virtual worlds like Second Life and Kately that have not yet been fully realised, and have there been recent changes that make it easier and more financially viable to try again?

CMS: In the early days, many universities and other types of schools established themselves with virtual campuses in Second Life but most did not know how to utilise them. It's not enough to say 'build it and they will come' to quote the famous movie *Field of Dreams*. Virtual education requires knowledge of one's subject as well as some basic virtual tech know-how and strategy. Over the years, many teachers and lecturers have picked up these skills but host institutions have not understood the need to provide training or technical support. Thus, most of these projects' lifespans depend on the enthusiasm and skill level of their facilitators. Think of the average university and its online portal: this is set up and maintained by paid IT staff. Virtual worlds need similar support

if they are going to deliver educational value in the long term, rather than exist as the pet projects of individual teachers. Perhaps more than ever before, due to the coronavirus pandemic, institutions have a duty of care to take virtual education more seriously. Interestingly, platforms like Second Life have seen an upsurge of interest, with old users returning and new users joining for social interaction. This trend looks likely to continue even beyond COVID-19.

AW: Do you have any tips for writers interested in worldbuilding and what can virtual worlds offer them?

CMS: Writers have been worldbuilding from the beginning. Setting, place, and time are the old terms and are still in service. Charles Dickens's novels of industrial squalor in nineteenth-century London follow the same fictional principles as Franz Kafka's dark worlds or *A Games of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin. In the virtual world we still get to pick genres, list the rules and laws governing the world, describe the environment, define its culture and language, source or create a history for it and then develop characters and tell their stories. Logging into Second Life is like a virtual film company studio lot with thousands of separate movie sets. There are 26,843 user-created worlds, according to Tyche Shepherd's [grid survey](#), as of 23 May 2021.

I continue to find enormous inspiration on Second Life as well as in OpenSim. If you are a digital builder, you can use your skills to realise the description of your imagined world. Normally writers work the other way around, but there is no reason why one cannot take inspiration from an existing 3D environment to plan a story. I am part of a group of novelists and poets who have met in Second Life on a weekly basis to workshop our writing since 2014 and I am certain that virtual experience has helped us be better artists. Many writers do character research in the virtual world by role-playing various sides of the gender equation. Those who enjoy fantasy might become dragons or little avatars known as 'tinies', sometimes building strange cities, while others prefer mimetic history rather than speculative worlds. History enthusiasts can meet their virtual communities in Victorian-themed worlds or visit 1920s Berlin, their avatars dressed in period clothing. My OpenSim colleague Modee Parlez has created an incredible role play region called Loose Canon Shipyard where she invites others to participate in weekly races and sea battles from the days of tall ships. In the past, Ada Radius headed the Avatar Repertory Theatre staging a host of real-time productions, including Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, many Shakespearean plays and digital versions of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

Of course, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* roleplay has been in Second Life for years. These are real ways that writers can use virtual worldbuilding to spark creativity. I have written extensively inspired by in-world tours and avatar interaction, although the poems, stories, and plays usually have nothing to do with Second Life or

OpenSim. In the field of literature, virtual worlds have unlimited scope to visualise literary works in 3D, like the Singaporean poem mentioned before or complete novels developed by the Seanchai Library regions in Kitley. Their American novel project has built key environments like Jay Gatsby's mansion from *The Great Gatsby*, as well as fictional worlds from John Steinbeck's novels. This is a visceral way to bring students inside a literary work. I have also created a series of Shakespeare monologues, performed by Singaporean actors against a green screen background. This has enabled me to shoot sequences in Second Life, such as castle scenes for *Macbeth*, the garden backdrop for the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, virtual Venice for *The Merchant of Venice*, and an underwater shipwreck for 'Ariel's Song' from *The Tempest*.

One of the most impacting builds I have seen in Second Life is a depiction of trench warfare from World War One. This project has enormous educational value because of its focus on the World War One poets as well as for history students. I am still waiting for someone to recreate Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso from *La Divina Commedia*. What a monumental project that would be.

AW: Do you have any last thoughts about building worlds through writing and indie filmmaking in an Asian context?

CMS: I am an Australian-born writer, a new filmmaker, and a Sikh by choice who has always believed the burnished land that bore me is a very new country on the cusp of becoming a conscious part of the Asian narrative rather than retaining its Anglo-European outpost mentality. For that reason, I choose to live in Singapore, midway between Australia and India, to which I am also strongly connected. The Asian region is a vast treasure trove for a writer or creative artist interested in any genre of writing and filmmaking. Its stories, languages, philosophies, and narrative traditions are ripe for worldbuilding. Western fantasy and speculative fiction genres already draw heavily upon martial arts, monster myths, and folklore. So far, the most popular Asian cultures are Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, and Indian-themed worlds. These are produced by westerners fascinated with Asian cultures and tend to be homages to history rather than to contemporary Asia. For example, there is a plethora of Japanese gardens with samurais wielding katanas and geishas in teahouses; there are also ancient Chinese temples and palaces galore.

Southeast Asia is a new frontier that I am particularly committed to. *Looking for Mr Gelam* is an unabashed celebration of a lesser-known part of Southeast Asia — Singapore, one of the urban wonders of the world that has an underbelly of multicultural history, myths, and ghosts. This part of the world is still visually exhilarating for virtual filmmakers. Personally, the worlds I am interested in building through books, films, and multimedia

products are both contemporary and traditional. Emphasising the old and forgetting what is here and now can be reductive, distorting, and ultimately sentimental.

As geo-political and economic dominance shifts more and more towards rising Asia, so will the world's interest in its stories reflect this, without Caucasian heroes and heroines front and centre. Meanwhile, I am highly conscious of my Anglo-Irish Australian genealogy but am one who has chosen to live in Asia for more than thirty years, following its traditions with love and respect while trying to blend the best of the experience I bring to it. *Looking for Mr Gelam* is a modest mile marker on the virtual Silk Road that leads to the Self.



At the boat building workshop. Image by Chris Mooney-Singh

Further Information:

View *Looking for Mr Gelam* as part of the free eBook *Singapore 1825, the Story* and visit the virtual world itself here: <https://linktr.ee/chrismooneysingh>