

Percipitopia: An Educational and Research Tool Utilizing Digital Content Creation and Textual Reappropriation in *Second Life*

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper presents and examines *Percipitopia* (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Bifrost/89/128/33>) in order to provide a case study in the application of digital content creation and textual reappropriation. The main sources of inspiration for *Percipitopia* are the philosophy of Irish clergyman-philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) and the open-access virtual universe known as *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com), where *Percipitopia* is located on the virtually real campus of the University of Southern Denmark. *Percipitopia* partly utilizes campus facilities and functionalities, and it partly consists of a facility modeled on "Whitehall," Berkeley's American home 1729-1731. *Percipitopia* is also directly inspired by Grund's sojourns as Scholar in Residence at Whitehall in Middletown, Rhode Island, during July 2007 and 2008.

2. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is a presentation and examination of *Percipitopia* (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Bifrost/89/128/33>) from the perspective of a case study in the application of digital content creation involving creative processes and textual reappropriation in virtual reality.¹

The main sources of inspiration for *Percipitopia* are the philosophy of Irish clergyman-philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753)² and the open-access virtual universe known as *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com), where *Percipitopia* is located on the virtually real campus of the University of Southern Denmark in *Second Life* (SDU-SL). *Percipitopia* partly utilizes campus facilities and functionalities, and it partly consists of a specially built facility modeled on "Whitehall," Berkeley's American home 1729-1731.

Grund has had the privilege of being Scholar in Residence at Whitehall in Middletown, Rhode Island, USA during July 2007 and July 2008, and has participated in SDU-SL since the spring of 2007, when the original virtual campus was under development. Pilegaard developed the present campus of SDU-SL during the spring of 2008. Grund and Pilegaard have worked together during the spring and summer of 2008 on *Percipitopia*, an experiment that draws upon Grund's experiences at Whitehall and the 3-D design knowledge amassed by Pilegaard during more than a year of design work in *Second Life* as well as during many years spent studying virtual worlds.

One of the important roles played by the Scholar in Residence at Whitehall is that of *docent*, a teacher-guide who takes knowledge tourists³ through the house and around the premises. As a docent, one soon discovers that the house and environs quickly turn into props for teaching the visitors about Berkeley, his philosophy, local history, and the Enlightenment. In addition, it is difficult not to become enthused as one begins to appreciate that guests ranging from the simply curious to those with academic backgrounds in history and philosophy linger for up to two hours listening to accounts that often involve complex and subtle metaphysical theories as well as the relations these have to each other and to the rest of philosophy.⁴ As much as one would like to congratulate oneself on ones spellbinding ability to communicate this sort of material in an entertainingly pedagogical sort of way, even a modicum of situational sensitivity brings with it the nagging suspicion that the environment is a very important, even decisive, partner here.

What is going on? It is apparent to Grund that many of the issues at hand are interestingly similar to those encountered when reflecting upon one of the sub-themes of this DREAM conference⁵, namely, *Digital Content Creation: Creative Processes and Textual Reappropriations*. The infusion of a docent-led knowledge tour of the sort that Grund has given these past two summers at Whitehall with engaging, informative content is notably similar to creating a 3D-environment in which visitors feel that they would like to spend some time and which they feel stimulated to explore. The present paper will thus examine the similarities and differences between live knowledge tours of Whitehall and its surroundings in "first life" and the "live" knowledge tours given by host avatars to avatars visiting *Percipitopia* in *Second Life* in order to raise and discuss some issues relevant to the conference sub-theme *Digital Content Creation: Creative Processes and Textual Reappropriations*.

3. THE KNOWLEDGE TOUR IN FIRST LIFE'S WHITEHALL

3.1 The tour in first life

A typical Whitehall knowledge tour in first life is heralded by the audible crunching of gravel as a group of visitors makes it way down the carriage path to the front door.



Image 1: Whitehall Museum House, July 31, 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

Thus alerted, the Scholar in Residence - often steeped in thought in the second-floor study - then proceeds downstairs to welcome the guests and initiate the knowledge tour. After introductory remarks on the front lawn about Berkeley and the architecture of the house, the tour then proceeds inside the house, stopping in front of a reproduction of the John Smibert portrait entitled *The Bermuda Group*. Among others, Berkeley, his wife, Anne, and their first son, Henry, are pictured, together with others who played a role in the never-to-be-realized venture of starting a college on Bermuda. Guests are then regaled with the fascinating tale of Berkeley's Bermuda dream before being taken into the first of four rooms on the first floor of the house. These four rooms constitute the rest of the indoor part of a standard tour.

In these rooms, portraits (paintings, copper etchings and mezzotints), maps, documents, furniture and household objects are pedagogically placed and serve as excellent lecturing props. They function as mnemonic aids for the docent and as prompts for questions from the visitors. After the entry hall, the tour proceeds on through the Red Room, which is furnished as a map-and-document-lined receiving room, continues through a hall displaying a reproduction of a map from 1777 showing important local sites, including Whitehall, and then moves on into the Bishop's Bedroom. In this bedroom hang many informative portraits. The next room shown is the kitchen, replete with a large fireplace and many accoutrements of everyday colonial life. The next and last room is the Green Drawing Room, a lovely large room which would have been suitable for meetings and entertainment. Here, as in the other rooms, are furnishings that help to advance the tour.

The next stop in Grund's version of this knowledge tour is the herb garden.



Image 2: Herb garden, Whitehall Museum House, June 29, 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

Although strictly speaking not a requisite part of the philosopher's repertoire, Grund has found that knowledge of the herb garden has proven useful in providing the visitor with some concrete knowledge of the scientific mindset as well as the culinary proclivities of the period, since it was essentially both drugstore and spice garden for the house. After the herb garden, the tour continues around the back of the house, where some interesting aspects of colonial architecture are evident as well as a nice view of some of the expanse belonging to the original property.⁶

The tour winds up upon returning to the expansive, tree-covered front lawn. Here - depending upon the interests and fortitude of the guests - is the spot where the heavy-duty philosophy lecture often takes place. It can be short, but it also can develop into something quite academic and extensive. As the tour concludes, Grund usually mentions other sites in the area of relevance to Berkeley's 33-month sojourn in Rhode Island, the closest of which is Hanging Rock, a large stone formation a few kilometers away by the shore, and - according to local legend - the spot at which Berkeley wrote *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, the book which he authored while in Rhode Island.

A concluding remark for this section: It is crucial to note that Whitehall is not open for visits unaccompanied by a docent! The fact that visitors are accompanied by a guide is an ineliminable part of the Whitehall knowledge tour in first life.

3.2 A Case of Analog Content Creation: Creative Processes and Textual Reappropriations in the Context of the Knowledge Tour in First Life

What, one might ask, is *creative* in the process sketched in the above, and what texts are reappropriated? Are we not in a real-world setting, where authentic, physical objects set the agenda? Are we not dealing with textual material that simply needs to be - at most - appropriated, but not reappropriated?

To begin with, none of the present inventory - save perhaps for some tiles around a fireplace or two - was in place when the Berkeleys lived there. They took their possessions with them upon returning to England in 1731. The house has subsequently been equipped with accoutrements that approximate to a high degree what *might* have been in the house. Not only that, the house itself had reached a state of rather alarming decay and was in use as a place for hay storage when it was rescued and restored near the end of the nineteenth century by three ladies, Mrs. Livingston Mason, Mrs. Theodore Kane Gibbs and Mrs. William Binney. These then presented it to the National Society of The Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA). The house was inaugurated as a memorial to George Berkeley under the auspices of the Colonial Dames, who now fully own the over 900-year title to the property.⁷ Needless to say, the condition of the house as seen in Image 1 is a far cry from what it was during its hay-storage period.

The herb garden has had various incarnations after the restoration. Today's garden has been planted and designed after careful attention to practices surrounding the cultivation of eighteenth-century colonial herb gardens.

In short: It is not authenticity as such which is experienced by the knowledge tourist at Whitehall; it is an atmosphere or frame of mind induced by carefully constructed and reconstructed surroundings in a location which, it needs to be said, is authentic.

As far as textual materials are concerned, it has been important to make decisions regarding their appropriation and even reappropriation in the context of knowledge tours of the house. The documents that have been chosen for display are relevant and not distracting. Moreover, most pertinent documents hanging on walls in various rooms cannot be read in their entirety in the time during which it makes sense to conduct a tour; they must be summarized by the docent, as must any of the aspects of Berkeley's philosophy which are discussed. These latter must also be integrated into the context of the visual and other aspects of the tour, which is not always all that difficult, given that some of Berkeley's important work concerns vision.

4. THE KNOWLEDGE TOUR IN *SECOND LIFE'S PERCIPITOPIA*

4.1 The tour in *Second Life*

Upon arriving at Bifrost/89/128/33, the knowledge-tourist avatars find themselves inside one of the entrances to SDU-SL. What is unique about this entrance is that it is connected by a footbridge with *Second Life's* Whitehall. It is here that the visiting avatar meets the docent avatar who will be

giving the tour of Whitehall and environs in *Second Life*. These have been dubbed *Percipitopia*. At this point there are two docents who give the guided tours: Gunhild Soderstrom (a.k.a. Cynthia M. Grund in first life) and Bitterleaf Menges (a.k.a. Jesper Pilegaard in first life).



Image 3: Leaving SDU-SL on the way to *Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

We set out down the carriage path - albeit without its crunching first-life gravel - and proceed onto a lawn which is very reminiscent of the one in front of Whitehall in first life.



Image 4: Gunhild and Bitterleaf on the way to Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

Stepping up to the windows at the left of the door, we can see exactly how the room inside is furnished in first life:



Image 5: Gunhild and Bitterleaf in front of Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

This is the case with all of the windows; the view from the outside is as it would be in first life.

The observant guest notices something, however, which is not part of the front-lawn scenario in the case of first-life Whitehall, namely, a large, cedar-shingled billboard with self-advancing slides of plants from first-life's herb garden (more on this later).



Image 6: Gunhild and Bitterleaf in front of self-advancing billboard at Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

On the backside of the billboard is a self-advancing 16-page young person's guide to first life's Whitehall (Ipgrave, 2004). Continuing around the house, we come into the garden, which contains 3D renderings of many of the flowers found in the actual garden, but is also supplemented with some others which are not found there. This is simply a question of what is and is not available in *Second Life* plant nurseries at the time of writing.

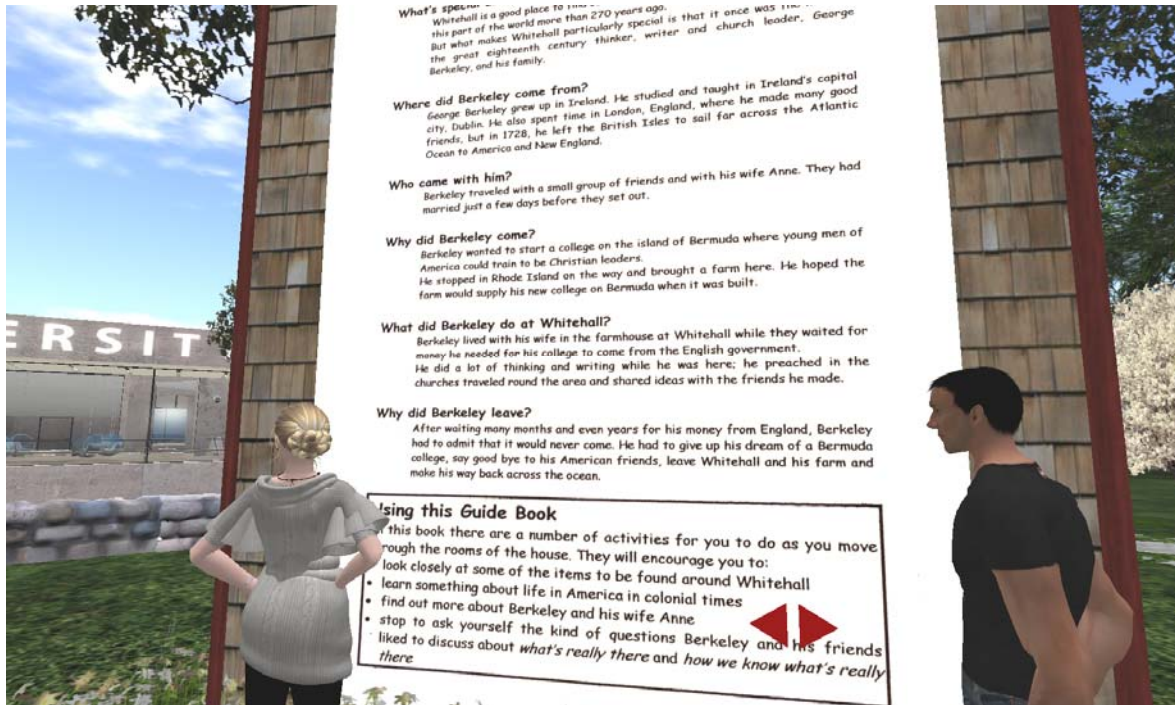


Image 7: Gunhild and Bitterleaf read the Ipgrave booklet about Berkeley on the self-advancing billboard at Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

Continuing through the garden and to the back of the house, a truncated version of the meadow in back of first life's Whitehall comes into view. We are already at the shoreline, since Bifrost is significantly smaller than Aquidneck Island, the island on which first life's Whitehall is located. As we walk through the high grass, we come to the well and to the picnic table placed under the trees as is the picnic table in first life's Whitehall. If we then proceed to the front of the house once again, on our right we pass grapevines located in the same manner as the ones in first life. Once again, all of the windows reveal true views of the inside of the house in first life. The sides and back of the house have been shingled in *Percipitopia*, however, rather than covered with clapboards, as is the case in first life. This manner of presenting Whitehall-*Percipitopia* is also consistent with the way in which many colonial homes were surfaced, and serves to demonstrate one of the manifest virtues of house construction in virtual reality; it is easy to present alternative treatments of first-life buildings.



Image 8: Gunhild and Bitterleaf in the herb garden at Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

As we enter the front door, we encounter *The Bermuda Group*. Note the book which is lying on the chest. It is Berkeley's *An Essay towards A New Theory of Vision* and its pages may be turned by clicking on the outer edge of each page.



Image 9: At the entrance to Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

A turn to the right (or left) discloses something which we would not expect in a first-life context: Rather than the Red Room (or the Green Drawing Room), we find ourselves in a "white room of visual disorientation" furnished only with one red chair (more on that later). This room encompasses the entire first floor.



Image 10: In the white room of visual disorientation at Whitehall-*Percipitopia*, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

Upon successful location of the door, we leave the house and proceed down the carriage path back to the university, where there is an exhibition on *Percipitopia*. The exhibition is near the entrance to SDU-SL located at the end of the carriage path. Notice that there is a sign immediately to the left of the bulletin board at the beginning of the exhibition. The sign states: "Tours available by appointment. Send an IM to Gunhild Soderstrom or Bitterleaf Menges." (An "IM" is an "instant message.")

We then proceed to the right, passing boards, most of which show self-advancing slides. These tell about the background of the project, give a nuts-and-bolts presentation of Berkeley and his philosophy, and show where first life's Whitehall is located (on maps in the public domain taken from the Internet; print versions of these maps hang in the "real" Whitehall). The boards also show Whitehall in its various states of disrepair before its apotheosis at the end of the nineteenth century, explain *The Bermuda Group*, and show a number of views of Hanging Rock. The observant avatar will then notice that something is looming off to the right through the windows of SDU-SL; it is none other than Hanging Rock-SL, now conveniently located within easy walking distance from both Whitehall-SL and the exhibition. It is covered with plants, most of whose first-life counterparts actually grow in Rhode Island. After climbing it, there is a resting place that simulates the one where Berkeley supposedly wrote *Alciphron*, and various relaxed seated poses are available to the weary avatar, who can access the pose of choice by activating the appropriate poseball (see also Image 15). This, by the way, is an excellent spot for presentation and discussion of the metaphysical subtleties of Berkeley's philosophy. After descending, the avatar may return to the university to immerse him/her/itself in an extension of the exhibition dealing with *Percipitopia*. Here there are seven self-advancing bulletin boards, each of which shows two pages of a fourteen-page paper on the *Percipitopia* project, namely, Grund et al (2008).



Image 11: Gunhild and Bitterleaf attend the *Percipitopia* exhibition at SDU-SL, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

When finished with this, the visiting avatar may choose to bid *Percipitopia* and Bifrost farewell, or perhaps he/she/it may choose to explore other aspects of SDU-SL, such as its lecture hall,



Image 12: Gunhild and Bitterleaf in front of the lecture hall at SDU-SL, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

or to try to build something in *Second Life* at the local "sandbox" provided for this purpose,



Image 13: Gunhild and Bitterleaf hang suspended in front of the “sandbox” on Bifrost, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

or to discuss the events just experienced while watching the sun rise over *Percipitopia's* Hanging Rock.



Image 14: Gunhild and Bitterleaf relax as the sun rises over Hanging Rock, visible through a window at SDU-SL, August 2008. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

4.2 A CASE OF DIGITAL CONTENT CREATION: CREATIVE PROCESSES AND TEXTUAL REAPPROPRIATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KNOWLEDGE TOUR IN *SECOND LIFE*

We begin this section with the companion remark to the one with which section 3.1 concluded: Unlike first life's Whitehall, *Percipitopia* is open for visits unaccompanied by a docent or guide. It is therefore crucial that there be provided enough self-contained information-bearing inventory to inform the visitor as to what it is he, she or it is experiencing. There is therefore more explicitly evident textual appropriation and reappropriation in *Percipitopia* than in Whitehall and its environs in first life. The cedar-shingled billboard has one side devoted to self-advancing labeled slides with perspective shots as well as close-up shots of the various plants in the first-life herb garden. This serves more than mere informational purposes; although the 3D artistry with which plants and flowers may be rendered in *Second Life* is most impressive, there is still a discrepancy between the detail revealed in the first-life version of a plant - or a color photograph of it taken at good resolution - and a *Second Life* rendering. The plants in first life provide both atmosphere and detail; at this point in time it is still necessary to divide this labor in *Second Life*.

The self-advancing slides that present the young person's guide (Ipgrave, 2004) on the backside of the cedar-shingled billboard demonstrate that scanned-in text information may be gracefully inserted into the milieu. The impressive capabilities of *Second Life*'s camera functions are clearly demonstrated here, as the text remains legible from just about any angle and at just about arbitrarily close distance.

Perhaps the most state-of-the-art inclusion of text in the milieu is the book on vision by Berkeley resting on the chest in the entry hall. Each page loads almost instantaneously, and the book may be read as if it were a real book by the avatar. This is as good a place as any to note that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel each time one wants to introduce some technical pyrotechnics into ones *Second Life* scenario: The *THiNC Printing Press* used for making this book is available for purchase on the SL Exchange (www.slexchange.com) and enables the user to create any book he or she pleases.



Image 15: Gunhild and Bitterleaf start the day at Hanging Rock-SL with some book production together with a THiNC Printing Press. (Photo: C. M. Grund)

The adjoining white room of visual disorientation is perhaps an even more radical example of textual appropriation, since it seeks to exemplify points made by Berkeley in connection with his

thoughts on the context-dependent nature of vision. The sort of experienced exemplification afforded to avatars in a virtual room such as this one is only available through the mediation of tools from the toolbox of 3D virtual reality. We hope to design more examples of this sort and to include them in *Percipitopia*.

5. CONCLUSION

We have considered the roles played by creative processes and textual reappropriations in both analog and digital content creation. The sort of modeling experiment represented by *Percipitopia* is, however, unique to an online interactive virtually real environment - such as *Second Life* - when compared with what otherwise can be achieved in the context of a more conventional homepage, even though "virtual tours" have been a feature of these for some time. *Percipitopia* is designed for personally guided tours, as is the "real" first-life Whitehall in Middletown, Rhode Island. Knowledge tourists who arrive in Middletown cannot enter the house without a guide, but due to the nature of the property, they can walk around the premises and even visit the herb garden without a guide. The only aids afforded this sort of visitor, however, are small metal signs next to each plant in the herb garden. (Some of the magnificent trees on the front lawn are also labeled with informative commemorative plaques.) In *Percipitopia*, whispering cards, self-advancing slide shows and signs of various sorts are in place to orient the visiting avatar who just drops in and explores the site on his, her or its own. The unguided visit is only a next-best thing to the intended guided experience, but the very availability of such unguided visits in *Percipitopia* in contrast with their unavailability in Middletown is, of course, a benefit of the virtual environment.

At the end of the day, however, one might still feel prompted to ask: Why go to all this effort to build a virtual environment within which users can have experiences via their avatars? Why not just go and read a book by or about Berkeley? The foregoing discussion in which analog first-life knowledge tourism is compared and contrasted with digital *Second Life* knowledge tourism suggests that this skepticism is just as appropriate for the analog first-life case as it is for the digital *Second Life* case: Why go to Whitehall at all instead of just staying home and reading a book? The beneficial contributions of on-site learning and experience in the analog first-world case are, however, more or less explicitly recognized in our educational culture; aspects of on-site learning are routinely employed in contexts ranging from opportunities for students of primary school age to visit local museums to opportunities for foreign excursions involving students of high school age or older. Given that these experiences are regarded as being of worth, there are several reasons to recommend and road test projects such as *Percipitopia*. Here are a few of them:

- Such projects in virtual reality permit the adjustment of various parameters in order to gain insights into the roles played by the diverse aspects inherent in an on-site learning experience. Models are usually far more amenable to variation and substitution than the reality which is being modeled.
- Accessibility to a much broader audience is afforded; relatively speaking, only a very privileged few of the world's students can ever visit the physical Whitehall in first life. In addition, a virtual venue such as that provided by *Percipitopia* is free from the vicissitudes imposed by time of day, weather and seasons of the year. For example, the first-life Whitehall is only open on a daily basis (10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Tuesday - Sunday) in July and August.
- Virtual travel is very "green" (ecologically sound) with regard to the protection and preservation of physical sites; even if it were somehow possible for thousands or tens of thousands of students to visit first-life's Whitehall every year, would this be desirable from the point of view of wear and tear on the physical site?

We heartily invite the reader to join us for a tour of *Percipitopia*, so that he or she can have a better basis on which to form an opinion as to the merits of this and related projects. Just send an IM to Gunhild Soderstrom and/or Bitterleaf Menges, and we will meet you on the carriage path!

6. NOTES AND REFERENCES

6.1 NOTES

¹ Our thanks to Rasmus Blok, E-learning Coordinator, SDU, for valuable comments and criticism.

² See Grund et al. (2008) for more details on the philosophical context for *Percipitopia*.

³ For “knowledge tourist” see p. 3,10, and 12 in Grund et al (2008). I rather blithely coined this term while writing the article Grund et al (2008), and was surprised to find during a Google check of Internet sites and a JSTOR-search of academic journals that this term does not seem to have acquired any particularly widespread use. It is usefully pertinent in describing the sort of tourist who most often comes to Whitehall, and, I suspect, the sort of tourist who visits any number of the world’s restored houses, castles, palaces, churches and - of course - museums. Here are the few sites on the Internet that I have found where it is currently being utilized explicitly: A site sponsored by the Uzbeki embassy in Israel - <http://www.embuzisr.mfa.uz/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1663>; a site intended for pilgrims seeking mystical insight within Hinduism: <http://www.ruinsofkumari.com/>; and a conference announcement, which - although somewhat relevant - does not appear to make much use of the specific concept of *knowledge tourism*: <http://knowledgemanagement.wordpress.com/2008/07/25/conference-call-for-papers-knowledge-infrastructure-management-for-tourism-november-2008-penang-malaysia/>. Again, it surprises me that the notion of knowledge tourism does not seem to have gained more evident mainstream currency.

⁴ The reader who wishes to provide him or herself with an introduction to Berkeley, his thought and his times can profit from reading Strathorn (2008) or Berkeley’s own *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* or *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. (See links to Online Texts at Trinity College, Dublin, below.)

⁵ *Digital Content Creation: Creativity, Competence, Critique*. The second international DREAM conference 18-20, September 2008, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark, www.dream.dk.

⁶ Although now reduced to only a few acres, the original Whitehall property encompassed 96 acres.

⁷ This title had been in the hands of Yale University after Berkeley’s son, George Berkeley, Jr., had negotiated it in 1762, years after his father, upon the family’s return to England, had deeded Whitehall to Yale as a source of revenue for scholarships. (This information and most of the information about Whitehall’s history which it supplements in the body of the paper stem from the - to the best of Grund’s knowledge - unpublished document “Highlights of Whitehall’s History,” part of the excellent compilation of docent materials provided by NSCDA-member Nancy Preston Bredbeck.)

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Texts by George Berkeley

[An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision](#)

[A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge](#)

[Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous](#)

[The Analyst](#)

[A Defence of Free-Thinking in Mathematics](#)

[Reasons for not replying to Mr. Walton's Full Answer](#)

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