

Play the Knave



Teaching Shakespeare through Performance in the 21st Century: *Play the Knave* in the English Language Arts classroom

By

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Introduction

For primary and secondary school teachers, introducing Shakespeare for the first time can be a daunting task.

Long held misperceptions about Shakespeare and his plays make capturing and maintaining students' interest seem like an uphill battle, especially for teachers who are not themselves experts on Shakespeare's plays. The most common complaints, from teachers and students alike, are that (1) Shakespeare's plays are "high culture" entertainment appreciated only by the highly educated; (2) that they are boring and irrelevant; and (3) that the language in which the plays are written makes reading them too difficult a task, especially for younger students (Blockside, 2003; Cohen, 2007; Haddon 2009). These are all concerning complaints, but the third charge—that of **the plays' difficult language**—is perhaps the most pressing and direct impediment to teaching Shakespeare effectively.

Teachers need to find fun, novel, and thoroughly modern ways of presenting Shakespeare's archaic language to students.

This paper will provide an overview of student resistance to Shakespeare's language, examine how educators have tackled this resistance in the past, and introduce the *Play the Knave* videogame as an innovative and successful tool for getting students excited about and in command of Shakespeare's language.

The Problem

There is a conflict between student resistance to Shakespeare and his near-constant presence on the required reading lists for schools.

Setting aside the question of whether or where Shakespeare belongs in the curriculum, tradition as well as national and state standards (e.g., Common Core Standards adopted by many U.S. states) dictate that his plays will continue to hold a position of prominence in English language and literature classrooms (Cohen, 2007; Rokison-Woodall; 2013). Some teachers, however, lack confidence in their ability to effectively facilitate students' understanding of the plays. In a survey conducted by Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi (scholars and educators in Shakespeare studies), American secondary teachers were asked to discuss what "worries them most about teaching Shakespeare," the general consensus being Shakespeare's **language**, which survey participants called "**old timey**," "**wordy, flowery, antiquated**," and "**hard to understand**" while questioning how they could help clarify it for their students (43).

Teachers consistently express anxiety about students' literacy and their ability to comprehend Shakespeare's texts in the original, early modern English (Reynolds 1991).

Popular Approaches

Teachers differ in how they facilitate students' understanding of Shakespeare's language, but popular approaches are:

1. **Using modernized texts**
2. **Theater-based techniques: reading passages aloud & acting out scenes**

Modernization includes the use of a modernized text as a replacement of or supplement to the original or having students modernize passages or scenes from Shakespeare's text themselves. An even more common method is instructing students to **read out loud**. The reasoning is that plays are meant to be heard and engaging students' auditory senses will enable greater comprehension (O'Brien, 1982). Some teachers who include reading aloud in their lesson plans also have their students **act out scenes** from the plays, supplementing the auditory approach to learning with a kinesthetic one.

A leading proponent of theater-based techniques, the Royal Shakespeare Company, advocates for **kinesthetic learning** in secondary-level education classrooms in their *Stand Up for Shakespeare* campaign: "**By engaging directly and physically with the words and rhythms of the text, complex thoughts and language start to make sense to young people and invite instinctive and personal responses**" (Thompson & Turchi 53). Having students act out scenes makes them conscious of both the action taking place within the plays and of the physicality required by actors in Shakespeare performance.

Limitations of Common Approaches

Modernizations receive the most criticism by education theorists, especially when modernizations keep students from experiencing Shakespeare's early modern English. Thompson and Turchi refer to this as a "**reductive instructional design,**" as teachers mistakenly assume that "subtle nuances or perplexing ambiguities in the text need to be simplified for students," which leads to the lamentable result of presenting Shakespeare's plays in a predigested form: the "**language is lost and Shakespeare's text is reduced to plot summaries in 'plain English'**" (45). Having students modernize Shakespeare's text, on the other hand, has some pedagogical value as it requires students to perform some close analysis in the process of translating the language to modern contexts or phrasings, but the resulting modernized text often lacks "the dynamism of Shakespeare's language" (53).

Theater-based techniques, though a more widely respected pedagogical practice, are far from infallible. Student performances of scenes from the plays hinge on a dynamic pedagogy that promotes understanding through the physical exercise of playacting, and if students are guided by a teacher who has experience leading this type of exercise and can allot the assignment a fair amount of time, this often proves true (Ochse, 2002; Thompson & Turchi, 2016).

There are, however, common problems that arise with incorporating student performance into literature classes, the most prevalent of these being student performance anxiety, or stage fright.

Many students get nervous when performing in front of their classmates, so some might stutter on a few words or accidentally skip lines; for these students, the script can become a crutch during performance exercises, as the temptation to concentrate solely on giving an accurate oral performance gives them an excuse to be looking down to help block out their audience. **Sacrificed are physical interactions with scene partners and the spatial environment**, resulting in a performance that is rather stilted and of little to no visual interest for the classmates who are watching. Furthermore, since students hold a copy of the entire scene as they perform, they are constantly aware of how much they need to read. **The language becomes something to get through or get over with rather than something to interpret in the moment.**

Some teachers grapple with the problem of the in-hand script by having students **memorize** their lines. Since most students, especially those in K–12th grade, have not received any training in acting, the memorization of lines can take a long time (perhaps more time than the teacher allots). Although students' hands are free, allowing for more expressive movement, students are usually so anxious about committing their lines to memory that they devote most of their rehearsal time to this task, not to planning their gestures (Haddon, 2009; Potter, 1999). **For students tasked with reciting their parts from memory, accuracy, not inflection or expression, becomes the aim.** Students master the skill of memorization, but not necessarily the arguably more important skill of comprehension and oral communication.

A Digital Solution

Play the Knave provides teachers and students with all the benefits of performance-based exercises for understanding Shakespeare but addresses many of the limitations of these approaches. **It presents the challenging language of Shakespeare through a medium about which many students are already enthusiastic: video games.** As a karaoke-style videogame that players use to perform scenes from a variety of Shakespeare's plays, *Play the Knave* honors the traditional method of teaching through performance, but it does so with a twenty-first century twist: the game uses the motion-capture technology that many students have experienced via their Xbox entertainment systems. Whereas students might associate Shakespeare and live theater in general as elite entertainment, videogames are hugely popular with young students and movement-oriented videogames have been very well-received by consumers in past years (e.g. the *Just Dance* series, the *Dance Dance Revolution* series). ***Play the Knave* translates a language students don't know and are afraid of speaking into a language that they love – gaming.**

How it works

1. Players select a scene to perform from the play of their choice and then **customize a production of that scene**, choosing a theater stage as their setting; a soundtrack to set the mood; and a costumed actor as their avatar. (See Figures 1 and 2.) **Avatars represent a range of historical and fictional settings**, allowing players to use their choices to begin to communicate their interpretation of their scene. Will Shakespeare's Roman plays be portrayed through actors from an ancient setting, in clothes from Shakespeare's own time, in modern dress, or as science fiction entities from the future?
2. Players choose from among **6 levels of play**, which vary by **language difficulty** (an "abridged" level that edits the text down to its most basic content, without abandoning Shakespeare's language to a "full" text level that includes complex imagery) and by **reading pace** (the speed script lines will scroll).
3. Players then animate their avatars on their virtual theater stage. In whatever way they wish, players express their characters' lines as these appear on screen. **The game utilizes a Kinect camera to track players' bodily movements, so that the avatar appears to mirror the players' movements in real time.**

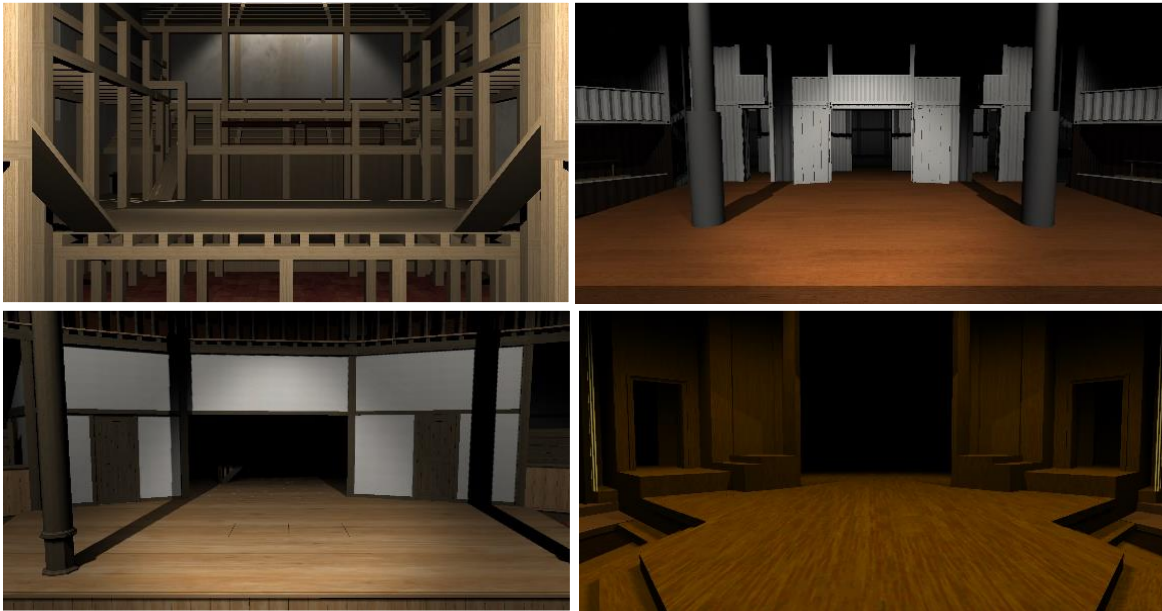


Figure 1: Theater stage options, including the historical Rose in London and the Stratford Festival stage (bottom row).



Figure 2: Sample avatar options.

Feature-based benefits

Karaoke style: In many karaoke games, players are scored for their ability to sing the scripted lyrics at a pace set by the game. *Play the Knave* presents the script to players in a similar, karaoke-esque fashion, lines from the script appearing in sectioned intervals. However, with no score, our players have full reign in determining how individual lines are to be read. **They choose which words to emphasize and when, and thus the game encourages players' creativity and unique interpretations.** A player might even, for example, ad-lib their own lines to foreground an interpretation of a scene.

Script difficulty levels: Although players of the game read Shakespeare's original language, the game presents that language in varying degrees of difficulty, scaffolding students as they gain expertise with comprehension. The game offers two versions of the script for each scene:

1. Abridged

At this novice-friendly level, Shakespeare's text is scaled down to the bare minimum, providing just enough text so that players gain a clear understanding of a scene on a narrative level. The language is still Shakespeare's, but without some of the most complex imagery.

2. Full

This version of the script presents Shakespeare's language in its full complexity, including complex imagery and unfamiliar words. The text is still edited somewhat to make for an enjoyable gameplay experience.

Side-by-Side Comparison of Abridged & Full Level Lines (example from Macbeth)

LADY MACBETH:

We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.
What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan?

LADY MACBETH:

We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep--
his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume. When in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,
What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan? what not put upon
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?

By allowing students to start with the bare minimum, the leveling of *Play the Knave* encourages students to build the scene from the ground up and tackle the language's complexity as they advance. Significantly, **the language is not modernized**. This is valuable as it helps demonstrate to students who are intimidated by the syntactic complexity of early modern English that there are plenty of sections in the text where Shakespeare's language reads as easily as modern English. What is more, for long sections of script that are to be spoken by one player, such as with speeches or monologues, the game splits the lines into smaller sections on screen so that the player never confronts a huge, intimidating block of text.

Visually presenting students with manageable portions of the text allows them to tackle difficult, long speeches bit by bit.

Additional level settings allow players to determine the speed with which the script appears, enabling them to set the pace for their performance and become more comfortable reading the lines as they play through a scene multiple times. Players who run through a scene at each speed and complexity level progressively gain comprehension of the text and comfort with reading it as they play.

[Motion-capture technology](#): *Play the Knave* takes advantage of motion-capture technology to reinforce the physicality inherent in Shakespeare's plays, which were written to be performed by actors, not simply to be read. With the use of a Kinect camera, the game tracks each player's movements and translates them to the player's corresponding on-screen avatar so that it appears as if the avatars are mirroring the players in real time. In contrast to most kinesthetic videogames—such as dance-themed, instructional games for the Xbox—that prescribe specific movements for players to follow and allow the machine to be the authority, *Play the Knave* gives its players free reign to determine their movements.

Players can experiment and get creative with the motion-capture technology, using their actual and virtual bodies to express their understanding of the text. (See Figure 3.)

Some might be concerned that the game's digital interface allows students to forget their physical bodies and fixate on the screen, but the opposite turns out to be true. Because the Kinect is an inexpensive and low-tech form of motion capture, the digital avatar does not perfectly represent accurately players' movements, and thus students become *critical* consumers of technology, realizing its limits as well as its benefits.



Figure 3: Students at an installation at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts (Davis, CA)

Play the Knave's motion capture technology enhances the benefits of teaching Shakespeare through performance. Whereas students performing scenes in the conventional way can become so preoccupied with reading or reciting their lines that they neglect to fully develop their physical performance through movement and gesture, users of *Play the Knave* have expressed greater awareness of their physicality after playing the game:

“I learned I am not as physical an actor as I perceive myself to be.”

“One of the best features of *Play the Knave* is seeing the avatar move in tandem with yourself. It makes for good fun and heightened engagement.”

The presence of an avatar and the ability to control it encourages players to mine Shakespeare's texts for cues to possible movements, improving their literacy as they play. Shakespeare's texts are full of gestural cues that inform a play's enactment (Karim-Cooper, 79). As players try to figure out how they should move, they close-read Shakespeare's language in search of types of movements that are entertaining and that also best express their interpretation of their scene.

Players of the game confirm that their desire to move their avatars in interesting ways lead them to interpret Shakespeare's text to find cues for movement. For example, when asked to reflect on her experience with the game after playing the “Out, out damned spot” scene from *Macbeth*, one student admitted not being “initially sure how to physically perform the scene” as

she had never read or seen *Macbeth* before; however, she also pointed out how the text became a source of guidance for movement:

“When the Doctor comments that she wrings her hands, I started doing just that, and as I read through Lady Macbeth’s lines, which convey her urgent need to clean her hands, I started to frantically scrub my hands to mime washing them.”

This student’s experience demonstrates how *Play the Knave* simulates an acting experience to instill players with greater comprehension of Shakespeare’s plays, even without any rehearsal time. Despite no prior knowledge of or preparation for the scene, the player was able to concentrate on the best method of performance as the game forced her to do what English teachers everywhere endeavor to get their students to do: close read the text. With the motion-capture technology encouraging players to focus on their physicality in performance, close reading lines for gestural cues becomes a natural response that aids the development of student’s individual interpretations, which then inform their oral performances as they decide, for instance, which lines to deliver with sarcasm and which with sincere emotion.

Conclusion

Having students perform a scene from a play not only enables them to use their own judgement on the best method of performing their parts, but also gives them an understanding of what it would take to provide an entertaining performance of the particular play they are enacting. However, for the majority of young students in Language and Literature classes who are not receiving training in acting, performance anxiety and preoccupations with accuracy in recitation can undermine the success of performance-oriented assignments. At the very least, many students resent their teachers for forcing them to perform and resent Shakespeare’s texts for being too difficult to enjoy.

With the gaming technology of *Play the Knave*, the best-case scenario of student performance is made more achievable and simply more enjoyable for students.

The scrolling script relieves students of the pressures of memorization; the differing levels of Shakespeare’s text enable students to develop comprehension while they play, encouraging them to level-up until they reach mastery of the language; and the experience of moving an avatar turns an educational exercise into a fun exploration of digital media.

If you think *Play the Knave* would be an interesting resource for teachers and/or the general public, please visit [ADD STEAM WEBSITE], and vote for the project to be released on Steam. If you’re curious about our work and would like to know more, we invite you to visit our website (<http://playtheknave.org/>), like our Facebook page, and follow us on Twitter @PlayTheKnave.

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