

REVIEW OF *PLAY THE KNAVE*

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Abstract: Created by students and professors at the University of California, Davis, *Play the Knave* offers students a chance to use motion capture to find themselves acting out Shakespeare's plays. In a classroom setting, students' bodies engage in a kind of digital puppetry, while tools for script-writing enable them to explore the consequences of potential cuts and revisions. If the software's "glitchiness" interferes with the fantasy of immersion imagined by many forms of Shakespeare remediation, it also enables careful thought about Shakespeare's difficulty.



Many new digital projects imagine a Shakespeare that is *easy*: immersive, relatable, and experiential. Through iPhone apps and virtual reality productions, digital study guides, and video games, a host of Shakespeare entrepreneurs sell fantasies of immediate access and direct experience. One recent Shakespeare Kickstarter thus brazenly promises "to reinvent the way children learn about literary art by immersing them within the literary world itself" (Fleming 2015). The difficult work of textual interpretation is replaced by an imagined immersive Shakespeare that is natural, satisfying, accommodating, pleasurable, as if his value could be disentangled from the difficulty of his words and meaning.

Not so for *Play the Knave*, a collaborative and interdisciplinary motion-capture project born at the University of California, Davis. When Gina Bloom, professor of English and the project director, describes this augmented-reality teaching tool for Shakespeare, she emphasizes the limitations of using low-cost, consumer-grade technology for motion capture. In a lecture at the Folger Shakespeare Library, she declares (somewhat exaggeratedly) that "glitchiness is the predominant experience of play," proposing that student frustrations with the system might elucidate Prospero's frustrated efforts to control his own nonhuman tools.¹ In other words, if one goal of this project is to make Shakespeare gameable, a second is to call at-

¹ I am grateful to Gina Bloom for providing me with an early transcript of this lecture. Lecture text and audio is now available online at https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Shakespeare%27s_Birthday_Lecture:_%22Rough_Magic:_Performing_Shakespeare_through_Gaming_Technology%22.

tention to the tremendous labor of mediation, interpretation, and representation. Rather than promising a cheat code for Shakespeare, *Play the Knave* offers instructors and students a simultaneously hilarious and alienating engagement with the challenges of performance and the difficulties of making meaning.

Led by a group of five UC, Davis, professors and graduate students, *Play the Knave* draws on contributions from a team of nearly a hundred students, faculty, and staff, in areas ranging from design and animation to publicity and teaching outreach. The result is less a computer game than an environment for exploring theater and motion capture: users can upload scripts or use the provided (adapted) Shakespearean ones. A model for the potential of the digital humanities to provoke interdisciplinary encounters and to reach beyond the university, the resulting project has become a platform for research (in pedagogy, literary criticism, character design, media literacy, and other fields), for community outreach, and for teaching. At the same time, *Play the Knave* reflects the real monetary and practical constraints governing academic research. Where the Royal Shakespeare Company's recent experiments with motion capture (funded by Intel) and the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company's VR *Hamlet* (funded by Google) can draw on bottomless corporate resources to throw high-end computational and visual equipment at any problems, *Play the Knave* relies on a now outdated consumer product: the Xbox Kinect, launched in 2010 and discontinued in 2017. As such, its version of a virtual Shakespeare is less concerned with awe-inspiring technological miracles — though quite a bit of clever programming is happening under the hood — than with inviting audiences to inhabit the world of Shakespeare's play creatively and independently.

I borrowed a *Play the Knave* kit through a pilot program aimed at making the software available to educators, while the game itself is free to download through the project's website for those with a Windows computer and an Xbox Kinect. A small case containing a laptop, the Xbox Kinect, and the set of meticulously labeled cables necessary to hook everything up was shipped to me, along with clear and well-written instructions. A small software issue, particular to my college's computer setup, was quickly debugged with the help of my college IT and the *Play the Knave* staff. Once installed, the Kinect camera tracks the movements of players' bodies, rendering them as movements of the characters on-screen. Users of the software select animated avatars to be their representative, ranging from expected inhabitants of Shakespeare's London and Rome to comical aliens and robots. They then deliver lines, displayed karaoke-style on the bottom of the screen, while moving their bodies to control their on-screen avatars. Users can select their preferred delivery speed and how far the script is simplified from Shakespeare's language. By default, performers are offered a few key moments from each play, seemingly selected for their variety of tone and number of actors as well as their importance. The software also offers more advanced users a chance to write and upload their own scripts. A contact email for participating in this pilot program is available through *Play the Knave's* website (Play the Knave, n.d.).

Play the Knave differs in certain key ways from more familiar forms of classroom performance. First and foremost, karaoke-style line prompting reorients both audience and participant attention towards what

is happening on screen rather than bodies in space. Though one of my most accomplished performers regretted that she could not engage as directly with the audience, shyer students appreciated feeling like they were playing a video game rather than being put on display. Similarly, UC, Davis students in the *Play the Knave* teaching internship program report that middle school students were far more comfortable with “cross-gender casting” after seeing it played out digitally (Day 2018). At the very least, the humorous glitchiness of the avatars’ motion relieved student nerves and brought the class together. The affordances of the software make costuming and set selection much easier, while restricting the use of props. Ultimately, performance becomes a kind of digital puppetry, requiring exaggerated motions to convey emotion.

As in karaoke, the seemingly casual format demands not only confidence but mastery of certain skills and conventions of performance. But unlike karaoke, few of us have spent hours practicing manipulating a glitchy mo-cap system in our cars. There is a substantial learning curve to getting on-screen avatars to move in ways that are compelling, particularly while also trying to deliver Shakespearean lines. Our initial experiments with the system were marked with comic frustration. Part of the challenge, I suspect, is that *Play the Knave* is not quite a video game, though its presentation, from the opening menu to the character select screen, invokes their visual rhetoric. Where karaoke-style video games like *Rock Band* provide the pleasurable effect of a successful show as long as one follows the on-screen directions, *Play the Knave* simply renders what it can detect of its players’ actions. Trained by video games to trust in the logic of following on-screen directions, some students’ initial tendency was just to read the lines while standing still, merely doing what they were told. The system becomes fun only once we surround it in a set of extrinsic goals—entertaining the audience, experimenting with movements, trying out an approach or idea. Where commercial video games are carefully designed to produce the illusion of mastery and development from even an amateur effort, *Play the Knave* is closer to a karaoke machine or in-class performance. The task of the instructor, then, becomes creating a dynamic environment around the software. Lesson plans for using the system need to incorporate both explicit instructions around movement and activity as well as plenty of time for learners to experiment.

In *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe new media adaptations as alternating between an “immediate” experience—seemingly real—and a “hypermediate” one: calling attention to their own mediated qualities (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 6). Where the public rhetoric of virtual Shakespeares tends to imagine their visceral immediateness as a kind of ultimate digital enargia, the classroom experience of *Play the Knave* instead tends toward the hypermediate. Rather than effortless immersion, *Play the Knave* calls attention to the thickness of mediation, to the material skills, limits, and choices that undergird Shakespearean performances. For many, this in itself is a useful realization, decentering Shakespeare’s text in favor of the many ways directors, performers, adaptors, and, yes, readers make meaning within it and out of it. (In my own class, I paired *Play the Knave* with *Hamlet* paper dolls, finger puppets, and video games so that we might reflect on theater, remediation, and play.)

The many lesson plans made available by the *Play the Knave* team sketch out other potential ways of using this system in the classroom. Those written for K-12 teachers were particularly well-developed, ranging from an exercise on friendship in *As You Like It* targeted at fourth through sixth graders to a detailed unit on humor in *Romeo and Juliet* aimed at high school seniors. Usefully, these exercises are explicitly linked to common core grade standards. The units designed for college students each used four class periods in order to investigate a particular question at a particular moment in a play: whether Lavinia has a voice in *Titus*, whether Falstaff should be read as “Vice,” “Clown,” or “Carnival” in *1 Henry IV* 5.3, and so forth. Each unit asks small groups of students to design a performance that supports one specific interpretation. What is most useful about these assignments, I believe, is that they focus students on the myriad decisions that go into performance. As they choose avatars and settings, cut the script and plan their performance, they must reflect on how these choices advance their assigned interpretation.

The chaotic pleasure of glitchy karaoke Shakespeare is in itself enough to recommend *Play the Knave*: acting out *Hamlet* and the *Tempest*, my class was often moved to fits of giggles. Of course, to teach with this disobedient device demands careful preparation, like other types of in-class play and performance. The steep learning curve makes it important to focus students on particular questions, whether the performative and interpretive ones modeled in the provided lesson plans or the ethical and technological ones asked in Bloom’s Folger lecture. Rather than easy answers or immersive experiences, *Play the Knave* offers alternative structures of affect and attention, new ways of engaging with Shakespeare’s difficulty, his constant refusal to do what we want him to do.

References

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