

TEACHING LITERATURE THROUGH THEATRICAL PLAY: EMBODIED DIFFERENCE IN MIXED REALITY GAMES

Embodied Difference in Mixed Reality Games

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Extended Abstract

There has been an explosion of interest over the last decade in the use of digital games in educational contexts (Gee, 2007; Salen, 2008; Schrier, 2014), but games and playful performance practices have long been a standard part of the teaching of literature (Chisolme, 2016; Fennessey, 2006; Grant et al., 2008). In particular, scholars and practitioners have published numerous studies of the effectiveness of what I would term “theater games pedagogy” for the teaching of Shakespeare (Banks, 2014; Cohen, 2007; Edminston & McKibben, 2011; Rocklin, 2005; Winston, 2015). The extensive and longstanding investment in ludic strategies for teaching Shakespeare is not surprising given that Shakespeare’s dramas are, after all, *plays* and thus deeply connected historically and theoretically to ludic culture (Bloom, 2018). But teachers are especially drawn to theater games pedagogy because Shakespeare intimidates and/or bores many students—and sometimes their teachers, too (Blockridge, 2003; Cohen, 2007; Haddon, 2009). With Shakespeare being the only named author in the English Language Arts curriculum for both the Common Core in the U.S. and the National Curriculum in the UK, the stakes of student disengagement are high. But what is gained and what is lost in theater game pedagogy?

Proponents of teaching with theater games maintain that students, particularly those who are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, understand Shakespeare better when their bodies are involved in the learning process (Banks, 2014; Edminston & McKibben, 2011; Winston, 2015). But as it is traditionally used, theater games pedagogy treats the body as a tool and medium of expression, not as an object to be critically investigated. As a result, theater game pedagogy often presumes a neutrality and universality of the playing body, thereby leading teachers and students to overlook complex issues of gender and racial identity in Shakespeare and in the classroom where his plays are taught (Thompson and Turchi, 2016). This paper argues that digitally remediating theater games can address the shortcomings of this pedagogy without abandoning its core goals and premises.

My case in point is *Play the Knave*, a mixed reality game that I co-designed at the University of California, Davis’s ModLab and have integrated into K-12 and university-level teaching, studying its impact. In this Windows-based digital game, one to four players enact speeches or dialogues from dramatic texts. Players design a theater production (choosing from among a range of costumed avatars, theater stage models, and background sounds) and then perform the script they have selected

karaoke-style. The game is preloaded with scripts from Shakespeare's dramas or players can use an online tool to write and upload a script of their own. As players read out their lines, they attempt to move their onscreen avatars with their own bodies: a motion sensing camera captures user-generated skeletal data and maps it onto 3D avatars. This enables the avatars to mirror players' movements in what feels like real time.

I argue that the mixed reality platform of *Play the Knave*—which meshes digital and physical embodiment—is key to its pedagogical effectiveness. By not only bringing digital bodies into the classroom but also *staging* the relationship between these digital bodies and their physical counterparts, mixed reality games like *Play the Knave* draw students organically into conversations about embodied difference.

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