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PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:
DIGITAL EMBODIMENT IN THE SHEPHERDESE CLASSROOM

GINA BLOOM, NICHOLAS TOTHAMAN AND EVAN BUSWELL

At elementary and secondary school educators increasingly adopt digital games to teach content in a range of subjects, and as education and game design scholars turn their attention to ‘serious games,’ it is worth asking what serious games are teaching, new to Shakespeare classrooms. Non-digital games and playful performance practices have long been influential on programming the teaching of Shakespeare. Indeed, the use of physical, play-based methods of teaching Shakespeare—or what we shall call ‘playful pedagogy’—has become something of an industry in the world of Shakespeare education. Theatrical games and dramatic playsets are central to the teacher-training programmes taught by Education departments in many well-established Shakespeare theatres. The Royal Shakespeare Company call their programme ‘theatrical room pedagogy’, Shakespeare’s Globe has its ‘Globe Strategies’, Chicago Shakespeare has its ‘drama-based strategies’, and there are similar initiatives at other theatres, including the American Shakespeare Center in Virginia and the Folger Shakespeare Library. Education departments of these and other Shakespeare theatres offer special workshops that trains teachers to use playful pedagogy in their classrooms. Some theatres, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare’s Globe—are forums which face greater hurdles in networking with American K–12 schools—have established residency programmes or collaborations with Schools of Education in American universities (The Ohio State University and the University of California, Davis, respectively).

Such an extensive and long-standing investment in playful pedagogy 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. But teachers are especially drawn to playful pedagogy because Shakespeare’s intimacies and/or boredom many students—and sometimes their teachers, too. With Shakespeare being the only named author in the US Common Core English Language Arts curricula and the National Curriculum in the UK, not even mention of national curricula for language arts in most former British colonies across the world, the stakes of student engagement are high. In workshops for teachers and students, and through published texts of all kinds, scholars associated with major Shakespeare theatres lay out the benefits of playful pedagogy for teaching the bard. But playful Shakespeare pedagogy has also been criticised by scholars who argue that its experiential, embodied methodology of learning fails to engender students with the capacity for literary, social and cultural critique, while also fostering ahistorical ideas about Shakespeare’s characters and themes. Put simply, when used in Shakespeare education, playful pedagogy activities often exist in tension with social justice pedagogy, which emphasises critical cultural, theoretical reflection and historical awareness. This presumed tension between social justice pedagogy and experiential, embodied learning is surprising, given that many Education scholars have found playful pedagogy to be an ideal way of addressing social justice issues in both primary and secondary schools. Studies on what is variously called ‘drama based pedagogy’, ‘contextual drama’, ‘narrative theatre’ and ‘drama in education’ have demonstrated that using theatrical techniques to play with ideas and texts—whether dramatic literature or not—spurs students and teachers to recognize and think critically about social inequalities relating to embodied differences, including race and gender. So why is it that these techniques are used to study Shakespeare, social justice concerns are so often diminished or not addressed? The short answer may be that ideas about Shakespeare’s universalism are well-enmeshed in theatres and in schools, and it takes tremendous critical effort to dislodge learners’ and many teachers’ assumptions. But we would argue that the reason playful pedagogy ends up usually reinforcing, instead of critically interrogating, views that have been institutionalised for centuries.
Shakespeare’s universality is because playful pedagogy typically approaches the bodies of learners as tools for facilitating learning, rather than objects themselves to be critically investigated. To begin to understand the limitations of playful Shakespeare pedagogy, we can examine a game called ‘Words as Weapons’, developed by the Globe Shakespeare Education team and described in Fiona Inbanks’ helpful compendium of Globe Teaching Activities, Creative Shakespeare.10 For this activity, students are divided into pairs and asked to imagine a character in Shakespearean costume with an imaginary weapon at the other; the victim of attack responds physically, shortening the response depending on the wounding of the weapon. Students can fraction this like this for a while, but the teacher introduces the text: a Shakespeare scene involving conflict between two characters, such as Katharina and Petruchio from The Taming of the Shrew. Students choose a word in the text that hurts the other character. The students then deliver lines from the dialogue, throw away their pretend weapon at the other player when the hurtful word is spoken. Banks and proponents of similar activities have shown that students, particularly those who are visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners, understand Shakespeare better when their bodies are involved in the learning process. This may be true, but the exercise also illustrates how playful pedagogy techniques might easily overlook social inequities relating to race, gender and other kinds of embodied difference. As explicated in Inbanks’s book at least, ‘Words as Weapons’ does not consider what physical violence might mean for the particular character involved in the scene, let alone the students performing those characters. The exploration of verbal humor between Katherine and Petruchio through imagery of physical violence is deeply troubling, given the play’s dramatization of domestic abuse. Perhaps even more concerning is how the exercise might register for student players enacting these characters. Imagine if the partnership dueling with pretend weapons is comprised of a male student and a female student, a Black student and a White student, a student with an able-bodied student, a quadriplegic student and a straight student? A socially responsible form of playful pedagogy clearly needs to be framed by and provoke explicit classroom discussion about identity and embodied difference. The need to marry social justice and playful pedagogies is particularly pressing at this historical moment, when Shakespeare (like other early canonical authors) is so often co-opted to serve White supremacist aims.

But, if playful pedagogy sometimes fails short, the reason is not we would argue, because these methods are ineffective in twenty-first-century classrooms, as some critics maintain.11 Rather, as this brief example demonstrates, the problem with traditional playful Shakespeare pedagogy is that play-based techniques often treat the body as a transparent tool of expression. Playful pedagogy tends to disguise the student’s self-consciousness about their physical selves, since immersion is presumed to be key to its success; students are encouraged to lose their inhibitions through the agency of the body of an actor who is not and is not focused with that of a student. As such, Play the Knave underscores a friction between the player’s physical and digital bodies. Activating this friction during play encourages learners to think creatively and critically about social and embodied differences within Shakespeare and within the classroom where his plays are taught.

The CASE AGAINST PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY

Before exploring the benefits of digitalizing playful Shakespeare pedagogy, let us examine more closely the case for and against its current use in Shakespeare classrooms. It is worth noting at the outset that the debate about playful Shakespeare pedagogy is centered largely on its suitability for advanced learners—those in high school and beyond. There is widespread consensus that playful pedagogical techniques are ideal for engaging and maintaining student interest in and enthusiasm for Shakespeare. However, as Ayres12 and Thompson and Laura Urso write, engagement is not a sufficient goal in the case of high school and university students, whose critical thinking and close-reading skills need to be developed. In the words of Krii McLuskie, play-based methods of teaching Shakespeare foreground ‘dancing’—by which she means physical, pleasurable, performance-based engagement—over ‘thinking’. She argues that the variety of techniques that I am calling playful pedagogy overlook the complexity of Shakespeare’s language in favour of delivering, through ‘fantasy-based’ lessons, a universal Shakespeare seemingly more accessible to today’s students and teachers.13 Thompson and Turchin worry, moreover, that one visual area of ‘thinking’ that gets set aside in playful Shakespeare pedagogy pertains to embodied difference. They note that, too often, these kinds of techniques lead teachers to overlook complex issues of race and gender in Shakespeare’s plays and in the contemporary classroom where the plays are taught.14 Like McLuskie, Thompson and Turchin accept that playful pedagogy engages otherwise reluctant students in the study of Shakespeare, but warn that advanced learners would be better served by more depersonalized work that draws on the analysis of the experience of Shakespeare.15

What is surprising about these critiques is that playful pedagogy has been shown to be highly effective for activating students’ critical thinking about social justice issues when the focus is non-Shakespearean content. Education scholars have explored playful pedagogy in the teaching of a range of subjects—including not only English Language Arts, but also Social Studies and even...
Math"—and have found these techniques to be especially effective in ensuring that learners grapple with racial, ethnic, and cultural differences and social inequities. Drawing especially on Augusto Boal's "dream of the oppressed" and Paulo Freire's "critical pedagogy," scholars in Education have found that playful pedagogy fosters in pre-service teachers and in students "empathy" and "perspective-taking," reactions that can transform how teachers and students think about those who are different from them. When they take part in workshops and programmes on issues related to the "dream of the oppressed," classroom, teachers discover that "democracy in society and equity are not "given" and that power is distributed unevenly and that people are classified according to race, ethnicity, social class, and gender." When used in high school classrooms, the techniques have been found to "produce" in a way that combats "nihilistic" feelings, leading students to grapple more deeply with gender and racial identity. Clearly, the problem is not with the techniques themselves but with what often happens to playful pedagogy when these techniques are used to teach Shakespeare.

Some of the challenges of integrating playful and social justice pedagogies in teaching Shakespeare become evident in a recent study of one teacher education programme, a partnership between Global Shakespeare Network and the University of London and the School of Education at the institution where we collaborate, the University of California, Davis. The programme offers pre-service teachers, who are pursuing their post-baccalaureate teaching credential, a chance to receive training in playful Shakespeare pedagogy from arts educators at the Globe. Participating pre-service teachers attended workshops and participated in student visits to the Globe; visitors to various performances, as well as opportunities to experience the Globe's pedagogical programmes. The programme that employs a combination of play and other enhanced frameworks, including educational equity issues as part of the "core mission." That is, even pre-service teachers explicitly trained in social justice pedagogy do not naturally form a link between that kind of pedagogy and play-based techniques when they approach their Shakespeare curriculum. This would appear to support the concerns that Thompson and Turchi and others raise about this framework.

On the other hand, Athanasos and Sanchez’s research reveals that the challenges teachers faced were not a function of playful Shakespeare pedagogy in a method, but rather of how the pre-service teachers had been exposed to the method. In 2010, the Center added a three-day Summer Institute for teachers who had completed the other stages of the programme and finished their first year teaching in their own classrooms. The Institute explicitly focused on addressing social justice concerns through the Globe’s playful pedagogy techniques. Participants engaged in whole group dialogue, small group discussions, and small group activities to address social justice concerns in their Shakespeare units. Taken alone, the ‘Globe Strategies’ did not lead to or connect easily with social justice pedagogy, but teachers could be trained to make those connections. These initial findings suggest that the problems Thompson and Turchi cite are not a function of playful pedagogy techniques themselves but of the methods typically used to distribute these techniques and train teachers to use them in their Shakespeare units.
The question remains about how to ensure that a wide range of teachers can address timely and critical social justice issues when they implement playful pedagogy in their Shakespeare units. Clearly, a programme like the one at UC Davis is the gold standard, but replicating it across America, let alone on a global scale, is next to impossible. A programme so reliant on international travel is unattainable in the long run due to climate change—with air travel having such a high carbon footprint—and even in the shorter term, as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a few American universities have tried the idea of the flaxo to support visiting artists from London, and even fewer can afford to send dozens of pre-service teachers to London for deeper immersion. What’s more, even at UC Davis, the teachers who benefited most from the Globe Academy programme were the small minority who completed the follow-up Summer Institute. Although only effectively, UC Davis’s Pedagogy of the digital theatre took more readily available for classroom use, side artful performance by students, involving them instead to consume and analyze pre-produced, professional digital performances. Instead, when Shakespearean plays are performed by digital means, they are often engaged in fascinating experiments with social media platforms for theatrical production (e.g., the RSC and Madison Theatre Group). Indeed, digital theatre is coming to mean access—sometimes free, usually paid—to filmed theatre productions. To be clear, these filmed performances have great pedagogical value, particularly as they make global performances of Shakespeare more widely available. As, and Eric Sivan has argued, broadcast theatre may even offer spectators certain advantages over traditional live theatre. However, even as filmed productions provide students with access to Shakespeare in performance, they remain not only inter- changeable with playful pedagogy, which is valuable because it engages students kinetically: instead of consuming a performance created by professional actor, playful pedagogy gen students upon their feet, moving their bodies, engaging with each other and speaking Shakespeare’s language, as they create a performance together in no wonder that proponents of playful pedagogy are suspicious of the digital realm.

But the more the fact that ‘digital theatre’ has been more prominent in classroom settings than actual theatrical performances, and although most of these have been used for theatre and performance history research, they have potential in classroom resources. For instance, the Simulated Environment for Theatre project developed by Jennifer Roberts-Thomson, Shawn Deloouze-Coelho, and colleagues offers 3D models of historical and contemporary theatre stages, and allows users to build a block of digital actors/avatars, which take the form of geographic shapes, around the virtual stage. Indeed, Roberts-Thomson and Deloouze-Coelho’s Staging Shakespeare digital game hoped to invite even more playful engagement, as users would create a virtual scene from Romeo and Juliet by choosing and combining digital avatars and settings with transportation and other elements of scene design. It is less clear, however, that digital theatre is any way as productive for the theory and practice of playful pedagogy, though, to be sure, they don’t replicate digitally what Education scholar have found to be the most effective ingredients for this kind of pedagogy. Indeed, Roberts-Thomson and teachers have themselves drawn attention to the limitations of their digital Shakespeare projects in terms of their ability to simulate the experience of theatrical performance. It is less clear, however, that digital theatre and classroom settings are more physically interactive than watching a filmed production, they significantly restrict the kind of kinesthetic movement in which students can engage. As is true with almost all currently available Shakespeare games, the player interacts with the onscreen avatar via a touchscreen, mouse, and/or keyboard, instead of through more full-body expression, and there is little to no interaction or collaboration with others using the system.

One day in which teachers have used digital tools to engage students kinetically in collaborative Shakespeare performance is by asking them to create video adaptations of Shakespeare scenes. This is no wonder that proponents of playful pedagogy are suspicious of the digital realm.


A big version of the game was created but, in the end, not released.


Gina Bloom, NICHOLAS TOOTHMAN AND EVAN BUSWELL

PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The idea of depicting playful Shakespeare pedagogy will likely continue to resonate with students of this method and cause-innovative and possibly sacrilegious. For many practitioners, both within Shakespeare education and in the field of education more generally, playful pedagogy is considered an antidote to the problems of the computer age. As one Education scholar argues, ‘It offers participants a focused approach to humanistic learning in a world which is becoming ever more fragmented from the real world of human relationships, due to increased dependence upon electronic communication media’.

Teaching participating in the UC Davis Summer Institute discussed above also mentioned using the Globe’s playful pedagogical techniques to engage students by offering them with computer games and screens. By getting students up on their feet working collaboratively, learners activities focus students with short attention spans, which usually believe are the result of students’ overuse of screens. Suspection about digital technology is perhaps the most common thread uniting the diverse schools of thought on playful pedagogy. Proponents of these techniques believe strongly in ‘face-to-face social collaboration’ and involve all of the activities associated with this pedagogy involve students’ physical interactions with each other. Digital technology would seem to undermine the privileged status of the physical body in this pedagogy.

To some extent, this concern about what happens to the physical body when digital tools are incorporated into Shakespeare teaching can be traced back to the premise that digital theatres cannot adequately convey the experience of the digital age. But the more fact that ‘digital theatre’ has been more prominent in classroom settings than actual theatrical performances, and although most of these have been used for theatre and performance history research, they have potential in classroom resources. For instance, the Simulated Environment for Theatre project developed by Jennifer Roberts-Thomson, Shawn Delouze-Coelho, and colleagues offers 3D models of historical and contemporary theatre stages, and allows users to build a block of digital actors/avatars, which take the form of geographic shapes, around the virtual stage. Indeed, Roberts-Thomson and Delouze-Coelho’s Staging Shakespeare digital game hoped to invite even more playful engagement, as users would create a virtual scene from Romeo and Juliet by choosing and combining digital avatars that represent props, costumes and other elements of scene design. It is less clear, however, that digital theatre is any way as productive for the theory and practice of playful pedagogy, though, to be sure, they don’t replicate digitally what Education scholar have found to be the most effective ingredients for this kind of pedagogy. Indeed, Roberts-Thomson and teachers have themselves drawn attention to the limitations of their digital Shakespeare projects in terms of their ability to simulate the experience of theatrical performance. It is less clear, however, that digital theatre and classroom settings are more physically interactive than watching a filmed production, they significantly restrict the kind of kinesthetic movement in which students can engage. As is true with almost all currently available Shakespeare games, the player interacts with the onscreen avatar via a touchscreen, mouse and/or keyboard, instead of through more full-body expression, and there is little to no interaction or collaboration with others using the system.

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A big version of the game was created but, in the end, not released.


Burke, Carrie. p. 21.

As further evidence of how ‘digital theatre’ has become central to ways of thinking about filmed theatre productions, note that the concept of Digital Theatre has been largely entirely filmed productions.
PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

models and background soundtracks. Players then perform with their selected avatars. If players choose a script, it will appear in chunks in karaoke-style on screen so that players can recite lines aloud as they move their avatars around the virtual stage. Significantly, nothing happens on screen without the player's physical input. To make an avatar speak, the player must voice its lines, reading them from the karaoke interface or improvising as they wish. To make an avatar move, the player must move themselves. As the software processes the actor's movements, the avatar on screen mirrors the player's movements in what feels like real time. Each player's sound and avatar movement are recorded, resulting in an animated short film that can be viewed, shared or edited. In effect, players create for themselves - and most often for an audience, as well - two performances simultaneously: the one virtual on screen, and one in the physical space of real life. The Play the Knaves also includes a suite of mini-games designed by scholar and theatre practitioner Sawyer Kemp, and adapted from well-known theatrical improvisation and character-building activities. Through these mini-games, players practice speaking, movement, analytical and/or collaboration skills, all the while learning to navigate performance via the digital interface. The activities in which players engage through the Play the Knaves platform are very similar to those undertaken in playthrough pedagogical programmes run by Shakespeare organizations. It is the digital interface that is the primary and crucial difference with Play the Knaves. Research thus far has shown that Play the Knaves engages students in all of the ways in which traditional theatrical Shakespeare pedagogy does. But the digital platform also helps to support teaching about embodied differences - including, especially, race, gender and size. Although Bloom's current study of Play the Knaves' use in secondary schools in the United States and in South Africa is too early in its development to offer overarching conclusions, we have some evidence of Play the Knaves' impact gathering. And with its potential to reach primary and secondary school classrooms in the United States and from Bloom's extensive use of the game in her own university teaching, in addition, we will discuss lesson plans Bloom has developed in partnership with secondary school teachers, since these demonstrate the game's potential and imagined uses. Our aim in the analysis that follows is less to argue for and demonstrate the pedagogical effectiveness of Play the Knaves per se than to use the game as a case study for thinking about how and why evaluative concerns can be addressed successfully by digerizing playful pedagogy.

In teaching with Play the Knaves, and planning lessons centred on the game, Bloom has found that one of the key concerns is to separate conversations about social justice and embodied differences is because the cast of avatars is extremely diverse, including characters that are capable as male, female and non-binary gender, as well as characters representing people of colour and of varying age and size, not to mention species (see Figure 3). Choosing an avatar from a range of miniature avatars from many videogames, of course, but the significance of this choice is quite particular in the case of a game that is about performing Shakespeare, given that students, like the general public, tend to default to traditional ideas about casting when they think about Shakespeare performance. In his

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justice issues. YouTube is hardly a proactive platform for teaching. The compulsion to receive 'likes' when a user takes up the 'broadcast yourself' mantra skews videos towards the lowest common denominator of banter, often perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes. Ayana Thompson's survey of classroom-inspired YouTube adaptations of Shakespeare produced by Asian-American students found, for instance, that the videos resort to gangster/gangsta stereotypes when representing Black characters in Shakespeare. Student-generated videos' production also suggests, in accord to the same problems as traditional playful pedagogy: student performers identify uncritically with the characters they impersonate; for instance, one reason for the playful pedagogical assignment was effective, whereas the assignments that prompt many YouTube student-generated videos are not, is that Espinosa explicitly directed her students to 'find a way to open up to contemporary/regional social issues' through their video performances. His assignment cued and played with the tension between students' embodied personal experiences - as Chicano living at the borderlands - and the 'white monopoly on Shakespeare on the stage and in film.' Rather than immersing themselves into Shakespeare's predominantly White characters, Espinosa's students were, in effect, being asked to interrogate the differences between these characters and their own ethnic and cultural identities. When student-generated video adaptations work to support social justice pedagogy, it is because students are explicitly asked to think about issues of embodied difference and the tension between their own embodied experiences and those of Shakespeare's characters.

In the remainder of this article, we want to think about how we think about in the digital realm and, particularly, mixed-reality platforms, such as the one we co-designed, are well suited to highlighting the friction between students' embodied identities and Shakespeare's text. Digital tools that can activate this friction are especially important in the Shakespeare classroom, where embodied differences between students can disappear beneath the weight of Shakespeare's complex, historically distant and overly mythologized text. If playful pedagogy is to be practiced by teachers less experienced than Espinosa in social justice pedagogy, and/or in the absence of a well-crafted lesson plan that explicitly draws attention to students' own embodied experiences, then we need platforms that keep the body in play (figuratively and literally) while simultaneously abstracting it. In the analysis that follows, we show how the Play the Knaves game we designed highlighted the body at both performing subject and object of performance. By not only bringing digital bodies into the classroom, but also stages the relationship between these digital bodies and their physical IRL counterparts, Play the Knaves encourages players to abstract themselves from their embodied performances without forgetting their bodies. At such, the game prompts critical inquiry around embodied differences.

Play the Koane is a Windows-based game played via the Kinect motion-sensing camera, wherein one to four players engage their voices and physical movements to animate avatars in a digital theatre production. Although there are a range of ways the game can be used, it was initially designed for performing scenes from Shakespeare in ways that are akin to traditional playful pedagogical assignments. In this case, however, much of the labour of production is offloaded to the digital system. The platform is supplemented with hundreds of excerpts of scenes from Shakespeare's drama, or players can use an online tool we developed, Mekanimator ScripMaster, to write and upload a script of their own making. Alternatively, players can skip the script entirely, choosing the 'free play' option. Players then navigate a menu system to design their virtual theatre production by choosing from among a range of costumed avatars, theatre stage
experience of teaching racially progressive and experimental Shakespeare performance adaptations to South African university students, Chris Thurman found that, even in a class that had significant racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, students were often suspicious of, or unable to make sense of, non-traditional casting and the cross-cultural settings for the plays that tend to allow for these non-traditional casting options. In Bloom's experience of teaching Shakespeare in American universities, she also has observed that some of her best students are 'stickerlier' for "authenticity", questioning productions that set Shakespeare in modern times or global locales.44

In short, students assume that Caesar should be a White man in a toga. And yet, as Thurman also found, when he exposed his students to traditionally cast performances alongside less traditional ones and deconstructed assumptions about 'authentic' Shakespeare, his students, including the most reluctant, could be 'freed from fealty to a false authenticity' and were able to both appreciate and thoughtfully critique film adaptations that set Shakespeare plays in Africa.43

To be sure, many teachers committed to social justice pedagogy turn to film adaptations, and, thanks to projects such as Thurman's Shakespeare In, Global Shakespeare at MIT, and Globe to Globe, there are a wealth of resources out there for visualizing and discussing the plays of diverse bodies in Shakespeare performance.45 But, as we have begun to suggest above, there is a difference between seeing Shakespeare performed by different kinds of bodies and having learners embody that performance themselves: the core principle at the centre of playful pedagogy. It is only when students are truly making the casting decisions made by other directors, student-generated performances put students into the position of making casting decisions themselves. Indeed, choosing an avatar directly engages students in the kind of racial justice work that theatres are reluctant or unable to do.46 Avoidance around the semiotics of race, as well as other aspects of embedded identity, is far less likely in classrooms where Play the Kraae is used, however. In typical student-generated productions of scenes, the logic theatres often use to avoid discussion of the semiotics of race can persist, e.g. a particular student may be chosen for a part because she is the most talented or the only one willing to perform; or one cannot cast Black actors for a part if the clan is made up entirely of White students. With Play the Kraae's wide range of avatars, none of which is any more talented than the next, availability of particular kinds of bodies is not a factor in casting the virtual production. A teacher need only ask students to explain their choice of avatar in order to lay bare assumptions about casting. Most of the lessons plans that Bloom and collaborators design prompt students to explain their avatar choices in advance or analyze the impact of those decisions afterward. Both ensure that students think carefully through the semiotics of casting.

Although students' decisions about avatar casting can organically open up conversations about social justice issues, a teacher can push these conversations to the surface by insisting on the use of particular avatars as part of the lesson. For instance, Bloom has collaborated with Cape Town actor and teacher

44 Thurman, Shakespeare In, p. 16.
46 Ayana Thompson, Passing Strange: Shakerare, Race, and Contemporary America (Durham, 2015). Thompson notes that although non-traditional casting is now the norm in much Shakespeare performance, choices commonly simply implicitly address and help audiences to understand the semiotics of casting decisions. Thompson argues for the importance of stripping out not only colorblind casting (where actors are purposely selected with no attention to their race) and "two-conscious" casting (where the production consciously assigns some semantic meaning to the actor's race), but also between the range of forms of the latter. Noting these significantly different forms of race-conscious casting set out by the Non-traditional Casting Project (social, transformative and cross-cultural), she observes that actors and audiences rarely understand which model of non-traditional casting is at work in a production.

Lauren Bates to develop a curriculum of Play the Kraae-based lessons for South African schools that focus on violence in Shakespeare plays and in South African history and contemporary society. One lesson plan focuses on Act 4, Scene 1, of Macbeth, where Macbeth learns of the massacre of his family.
The lesson uses well-established playful pedagogy techniques—such as asking students to create avatars to represent concepts in the text—to address gender stereotypes around the expression of grief. But the lesson also helps students to think about the violence of civil war in the context of South Africa, and how that violence impacts Black bodies in particular. To push this contemporary resonance, the lesson plan immerses teachers to choose a Black avatar for Macduff’s role, and to imagine that Macduff’s marred family is Black. One of the writing assignments Bloom and Bax developed to accompany
PLAYFUL PEAGADY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

GINA BLOOM, NICHOLAS TOOTHMAN AND EVAN BUSWELL

this lesson then asks students to recollect the Apartheid police’s 1976 massacre of Black school students in Soweto township, a turning point in the fight against Apartheid, to encourage students to think about why, as is the case in Madikwe, depiction of massacred children provoke rebellion against tyrannical governments.64 Madick’s family’s blackness, conveyed through the choice of avatar, helps to introduces into modern-day Madick a discussion about systemic racism and violence against Black bodies in South Africa’s history. Such an assignment could easily be adapted to the American context of Black Lives Matter and similar issues around racial injustice in other countries.

Another lesson plan for South African school focused on the web comic of Desdemona and her race-conscious avatar calculating to help students think about the intersections between race and gender in dominant culture — as provocative contemporary South African that it has been called a second epide. The lesson plan is designed to be used for students who have not yet read Othello and are being introduced to the play for the first time through a selection of the play’s climactic final scene. Students use Play the Knife to perform four versions of the murder scene (created using Meerkatoom Snap Movie), progressed to imagine an entirely different version. In the first performance, the parts of Othello and Desdemona are played by science-fiction avatars who lack clear gender markers, ‘warrior’, the character speaking Othello’s lines, is larger and more imposing than ‘Cyborg’, who has Desdemona’s lines. Students perform the scene and then are asked to think about why ‘Warrior’ has power over ‘Cyborg’ and is, thus, in a position to turn the latter physically; the power dynamic between characters is found to be a function largely of size and apparent strength differences. The second version switches avatars legitimate at female and male humans, ‘innate’ and ‘Diem’, both Black and in contemporary dress. Discussion after the performance focuses why ‘Diem’, whose powers over Innate, invites the students to begin thinking about gender differences and male privilege, and how does she have domestic violence. In a third per- formance, Othello’s lines are spoken by ‘Kal’, a White male avatar, with Innate still in Desdemona’s part. This leads to discussion about racial difference in a figure in domestic violence, the complexities of intercultural relations, and potentially the lasting impact of South Africa’s earliest history of sexual violence: the abuse of Black female slaves by White European settlers. Only in the final performance does the scene set the scene in sixteenth-century Cyprus, with a White Othello and a White Desdemona, both wearing Elizabethan-style clothing. Having addressed intersections of race, gender and power in contemporary contexts, students are prepared to think about how these variables signify in the historical moments represented by the play. As these lessons denaturalizes, the digital embodiment of Shakespeare characters allows students to experience, and thereby to play with embodied identity, race, class, and historical, etc. in a way that would be difficult in traditional student- generated performances, and impossible if using pre-made film production. The computer game medium enables students to visualize concretely and to embody physically the semiotics of race and gender in Shakespeare performance, regardless of the racial and gender composition of the students in the classroom. This is not to say, however, that students’ own embodied identities will or can be subverted. In fact, because of the mixed-reality interface — which insists that a physical body in RL move the virtual avatar — the game encourages teachers and students to think about race, gender and other variables, such as size, not just on screen but in the classroom itself. Even if in less nuanced lessons than those we discuss above — such as situations where modern choose their own avatar — the choice of avatar tends to open up conversations about embodied identity and its semiotic meaning because the digital avatar and the human actor perform simultaneously. So, ‘play with identity, allowing for a kind of learning that games and education schoolers argue videogames facilitate especially well.65 One could imagine how such an identification could work in terms of social policy, pedagogy, though it is just as easy to see the reverse. A White student who chooses and then identifies with a Black avatar has the opportunity to feel what it is like to be in a Black body, and thus potentially to understand better and empathize with the experiences of people of colour. But, as so much research on the performance traditions of blackface and minstrelsy shows, such identification bleeds easily into exploitation.66 Given these dangers, it seems less important to have students identify with their avatars than it is to establish, but then drop, that identification. Ultimately, the goal is not to see oneself in the avatar, but to think critically about the process of identification. Education scholars call this ‘critical games literacy’67 but we might also recognize it as Berlitz Brecht’s ‘Theaterensemble’ (the alienation effect).68

64 Due to the色调 of Bloom’s Internet Research Board expressed position, we receive the complete anarchy of the students, whose work we see.
Play the Kowre’s mixed-reality interface prompts critical thinking about identification, laying bare the artificiality of performance, because the game stages so explicitly the distinction between the player and the ‘mask’ of the avatar. Instead of naturalizing gender, race and other aspects of identity, the game’s mixed-reality interface consistently asks players to consider where in the body coauthors of identity reside. This was especially apparent when Bloom used the game to teach the cross-dressing commodity. Bloom arranged students into small groups so that they could form the ‘You Like It, where Rosaline, cross-dressed as Ganymede, firm with Orlando. Groups had a character, a mask, of which avatar to use, but in which students would exact these parts physically.

The sex of the student controlling an avatar’s movement and voice its lines could mask the sex of Shakespeare’s actors historically (male youths), Shakespeare’s characters (Rosalind and Orlando), or the fictional characters in the wooing scene (Ganymede and Orlando). More interestingly, those options were also equally available for the avatars selected. The assignment thus taught students a way to graphically in material ways with the difference between gender and expression in one scene. Would performances show Orlando flirting with a male youth Ganymede, or with the female Rosalind?

With very little prompting, students arrived at complex insights about how gender is embodied. One group, which argued for a homoerotic reading of the scene, selected two avatars that, they said, were clearly male. Yet the physical presence of their actors constricted their interpretation: whether by design or by necessity, use of the student actors was Ganymede female. To solve this problem for their interpretation, the group decided to have the female student ‘affect a male voice during her performance’. This resulted in fascinating conversations about where gender is located in the body and what makes gender legible.

Another group tried to recalculate the coauthorship of gender performance by choosing a Rosalind Ganymede avatar that they argued was clearly male but had ‘feminine clothing’, making this avatar more gender ambiguous. They also switched the predicted gender of the actors, having Rosalind’s Ganymede played by a cinderge male student and Orlando by a cinderge female student.

What generated some of the most exciting conversations and some of the deepest reflections were two groups (hailing from different sections, thus not aware of the similarities in their production decisions) that chose the ‘Roboto’ avatar to play both Rosalind/Ganymede and Orlando in the scene. Whether they selected the gender of Roboto at random or asked only whether they did ‘You Like It, where Rosaline, cross-dressed as Ganymede, firm with Orlando. Groups had a character, a mask, of which avatar to use, but in which students would exact these parts physically.

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is also portable, allowing it to be set up by anyone, anywhere in minutes, instead of taking weeks and a trained construction crew. Finally, it doesn’t require the actor to wear any special clothing or need the system to calibrate the actor’s body before each performance. This means that, in the course of an hour, multiple groups of players can engage with the technology, and a technologist is not required on site. The downside of using a low-quality motion-capture camera, however, is that it more often fails to read the player’s movement data. In effect, the single camera we use, the Kinect V2, sends out infrared pulses that search for the playing body using depth sensors. The software loaded on the computer (Microsoft Software Development Kit) looks for twenty-seven joints on the body that the camera’s sensor finds, and tries to match these to a skeleton in its library (see Figures 4, 5 and 6). The animation is, then, only as good as the library, but also only as good as the player. For if a player crosses a hand in front of another hand, the computer cannot tell which joints have moved. Receiving imprecise data, the machine effectively makes its best guess, and the animation usually suffers, sometimes producing hilarious effects.43

Bloom has discussed elsewhere how the glitchy presentation of avatars presents opportunities for students to think about their relationship to digital technology, and the ethics around engaging with those that are different from them.44 For the purposes of this article, however, we want to reflect on the ways the glitchy interface draws attention to the player’s body as a performing object, which, as we have suggested, is crucial to the game’s pedagogical effectiveness, especially its capacity to shape students thinking about embodied difference. To keep their avatars from looking ‘glitchy’, players must learn to move in ways that the system can understand. For instance, once they realize that crossing an arm in front of the body makes their avatar’s arm contort sideways, players may learn that, if they want to produce a more malevolent animation, they must face the camera directly and not cross limbs in front of each other. Players are thus learning through play that their physical bodies are being objectified by the camera, as it tries to read them.

In their comments after they play, students often remark on how the game’s mixed-reality mechanics lead to self-consciousness about embodiment. For some, this experience is uncomfortable. One student writes, ‘I’ll be honest and say that playing the game was pretty awkward and weird. I really don’t like playing video games with a lot of body movements because I’m really conscious on how I move.’ The student goes on to explain that the game makes players ‘think about everything’ relating to their bodies. ‘You have to think about your tone, your attitude, your body movements, your projections, and even where you move on stage. You can’t really just stand there and read the lines because then it comes out really plain and extremely monotonous.’ For other students, this emphasis on the player’s body was a highlight of their engagement with the game. ‘One of the unique strengths of Play the Knife is that it promotes player awareness of both what is on the screen and how the player fits into the game as an actor rather than simply a gamer.’ Another student comments even more explicitly connects this self-consciousness of the body to the apparent glitchiness of the avatar: ‘I was acutely aware of my own body as I watched the avatar flail about on the screen as it tried to correspond to my movements. My stance seemed very unnatural.’ The value of this insight was that it helped the student to discover firsthand how complex acting could be and how crucial performance is to the interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays, a realization that appears to have had a lasting impact: the student who made this comment went on to get her teacher education endorsement and to pursue an MA in Education that focused on playful pedagogy, on which she is now an authority.

Whether or not students take what they have learned about their bodies beyond the classroom, this kind of self-consciousness about embodiment is an ideal stepping-stone towards thinking about issues of bodily difference. The perceived ‘glitchiness’ of Play the Knife objectifies the bodies in the room in a way that traditional playful pedagogy does not. The latter treats the body as, and trains the body...
to be a tool for the actor’s expression or for communication of something to an audience. But if our aim in playful pedagogy is not to train actors to produce meaningful performances so much as to use playful activities to encourage critical thinking about Shakespeare and the myriad issues the plays raise, playful pedagogy must do more than teach students to express and communicate with their bodies. It needs to teach them to think about how different bodies signify—how markers of bodily difference carry meaning in and out of the classroom. As Play the Kosar stages digital mediation of players’ bodies, it prompts students to analyze embodied identity not just in Shakespeare or in digital games, but in the classrooms where the plays are studied.

In the summer of 2020, libraries were closed and the universities in the UK were in chaos, in the wake of decisions being made by the government about student results and social distancing. Writing about Shakespeare pedagogy under lockdown conditions sharpens one’s focus in terms of the resources that are available, physically, digitally and intellectually. In addition to the loss of access to the libraries in person, having recently given up my position at Rye Hollisway University of London, I found myself in digital isolation, in terms of access to resources that were formerly at my fingertips. The cancellation of the 2020 International Shakespeare Conference on Shakespeare and Education in Stratford intensified this isolation in thinking about pedagogic practice in my study, rather than in the classroom or in a conference seminar room. However, what remained available to me was my international network of colleagues, with whom I have been discussing for many years the possibilities that the digital world opens up for supporting the teaching of Shakespeare in performance. In addition, I had the resources of my own library, materials that I have collected in the pursuit of expanding my understanding of the way in which Shakespeare is taught locally, nationally and globally. As a result of this very particular set of circumstances, this article is more personal and relies on fewer sources than might otherwise have been the case. The pandemic lockdown both encouraged and allowed for individual reflection, but collective discussions during this time were largely dominated by the rush to move to online learning in preparation for the autumn term. This concentrated look at my own experience highlights for me the importance of reflecting on the ongoing international debate about pedagogic theory, and hopefully provides for others a context to help with understanding the current shifts in teaching practice.

This article presents an overview of the discussions about the role of digital technology in teaching over a period of enormous change. While the pandemic has accelerated the speed of transition, the movement towards online learning and an international educational market were well underway before the virus hit the world economy. Like many other industries, the worldwide market in educational ‘products’ has been forced into rapid change. My own departure from the academic world is part of that revolution and I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on what it means to remove myself from the institution to which I was attached for nearly a quarter of a century. So, this article has several aims. First, I would like to provide an overview of two parallel processes: the development of digital resources for teaching Shakespeare (particularly in performance), and the evolution of teaching in the digital environment (in real life and online). I want to make a clear distinction between digital resource creation and online learning. While the former has been my aim and area of work since 1996, the latter is relatively new to me and to many colleagues working in Shakespeare studies. Second, I would like to illustrate, through my own experience, the extent to which teaching has become of interest to governments and businesses, as never before. The international ‘market’