



PROJECT MUSE®

"A whole theater of others": Amateur Acting and Immersive
Spectatorship in the Digital Shakespeare Game *Play the Knave*

Gina Bloom, Sawyer Kemp, Nicholas Toothman, Evan Buswell

Shakespeare Quarterly, Volume 67, Number 4, Winter 2016, pp. 408-430 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2016.0054>

SHAKESPEARE
QUARTERLY



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
© The Johns Hopkins University Press

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/663523>

**“A whole theater of others”:
Amateur Acting and Immersive Spectatorship
in the Digital Shakespeare Game
*Play the Knave***

GINA BLOOM, SAWYER KEMP, NICHOLAS TOOTHMAN,
AND EVAN BUSWELL

IN LATE SUMMER 2015, STRATFORD FESTIVAL AUDIENCES IN ONTARIO had a chance to play the first-ever motion-capture Shakespeare game, *Play the Knave*, which was installed for three months in the Festival Theatre lobby. Created by faculty and students in the ModLab at the University of California, Davis, the game offers its users the chance to star in their own digital production of a scene from Shakespeare.¹ A cross between karaoke and machinima, the complete game opens by having players customize their production.² First, they choose a scene to perform, filtering options by genre, play, or themes (such as love, fighting, or madness). After deciding on a difficulty level for the script, players select costumed actors for the scene’s characters (avatars representing a variety of his-

Portions of this essay have been presented by Gina Bloom at the American Shakespeare Center’s Eighth Blackfriars Theatre Conference, Staunton, VA, 30 October 2015; American Society for Theatre Research, Portland, OR, 5 November 2015; Huntington Library, Pasadena, CA, 16 April 2016; Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 28 April 2016; World Shakespeare Congress, London, 6 August 2016; University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, 7 September 2016; and University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, 21 October 2016. Feedback from attendees and colleagues at the University of California, Davis—especially Colin Milburn, Michael Neff, and Amanda Phillips—has been invaluable. Our research is supported by funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, through the ModLab’s affiliation with the Games Institute at the University of Waterloo; the University of California, Davis, through an Interdisciplinary Funding for the Humanities and Arts grant; and from the Stratford Festival, through a grant from the Jenkins Family Foundation. To see figures in color and to access supplemental materials for this essay, visit sq.folger.edu.

¹ The game runs on a platform we designed called Mekanimator. Created in Unity, a game engine developed by Unity Technologies, Mekanimator seamlessly integrates the Microsoft Kinect camera with a universal scene staging system. Although *Play the Knave* is Mekanimator’s first application, the platform has other uses and, when completed, will be released as open-source software. Research on human subjects was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Canadian Research Ethics Board.

² Practitioners of machinima can create cinematic productions by repurposing computer graphics they generated in real-time during gameplay.

torical and fantasy settings), a theater stage to use for the production (three-dimensional background), and musical accompaniment.³ Once the production has been designed, up to six players can perform their scene, karaoke-style, with the lines from Shakespeare’s play appearing on the screen for them to recite.⁴ *Play the Knave* encourages full bodily action on the part of its users, for nothing happens on-screen unless the player participates physically. Not only do players’ own voices provide the key sound, but also players animate their avatars by moving their own bodies: raise an arm and the avatar mimics the action in what feels like real time. Our system records the gameplay session—the action on-screen and the players’ voices—and can provide a video of the production that players can view, edit, and/or share.⁵

Play the Knave is an opportune project for demonstrating how theater studies contributes to the digital humanities, which, as W. B. Worthen persuasively argues, have tended to marginalize theater, viewing it as “so analog.”⁶ Both because the game’s avatars always appear on a model of a theater stage and because the game is usually played in public settings in front of a live audience, *Play the Knave* engages and, in fact, produces theatrical performances of Shakespeare while offering a lens through which to study the relations between analog and digital technologies. Ultimately, the ModLab aims to bring *Play the Knave* into living rooms, schools, and various cultural organizations and to study its uses in these settings. However, our primary research sites to date have been several Shakespeare theaters and theater-related venues.⁷ Installations at these sites have afforded us opportunities to study the game’s reception, which has helped to shed light not only on the game’s meaning as a digital object but also on public perceptions of Shakespeare performance.

³ In the current version, players choose between two script levels, full and abridged. The abridged script still uses Shakespeare’s original language but eliminates some of the more complicated imagery and unfamiliar diction so as to suit users newer to Shakespeare. The current version includes four theater stages and several dozen avatars representing different historical periods (ancient, Elizabethan, modern) as well as fantasy/science fiction settings.

⁴ Like karaoke, the words appear in segments of one to three lines at most. Players have some control over the pacing of the lines, choosing from three different speeds: fast, medium, or slow.

⁵ To see photographs and videos of people playing the game, visit <http://playtheknave.org>.

⁶ W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), 165.

⁷ Since the Stratford installation in 2015, we have done fifteen installations. Among the longer running were the *First Folio! The Book That Gave Us Shakespeare* tour and accompanying exhibit on Shakespeare in deaf culture, Gallaudet University, Washington, DC, 6–30 October 2016; and *Shakespeare in Deaf History* exhibit, the Dyer Arts Center at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester, NY, 27 January–4 March 2017. Other installations include the Utah Shakespeare Festival, Cedar City, UT, 2–3 October 2015; and Shakespeare 400 Chicago, Evanston, IL, 28 April 2016. It was also mounted at several academic conferences, including the Shakespeare Association of America, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 1–4 April 2015; and the American Shakespeare Center’s Eighth Blackfriars Theatre Conference, Staunton, VA, 30–31 October 2015.

Our observations of installations and informal interviews with selected individuals engaged with the game yielded two interesting insights that we examine in this essay. First, the motion-capture technology we use tends to reward players who use large, histrionic gestures. Although players differ in the quantity and quality of their gestures, expressive players almost inevitably end up using exaggerated movements that interestingly recall the declamatory style developed by ancient rhetoricians like Quintilian and that many theater historians believe was sometimes deployed in early modern theaters (figures 1 and 2). This style of gesturing predominates in the game regardless of the player's experience with acting. Indeed, when professional Shakespeare actors from the American Shakespeare Company tried out the game, they set aside everything they had ever been taught about performing Shakespeare, using the same broad, exaggerated gestures of players without acting training.⁸ The same was true when the game was played at the Utah Shakespeare Festival by groups of students who were attending a Shakespeare performance competition.⁹ Players discover quickly that broad exhibitionism, including momentarily freezing a grand gesture for effect, simply gets a more interesting response from the avatars. Users think of themselves as puppeteers of the avatars, but actually the digital system acts as a puppeteer, provoking a particular acting style.¹⁰ This response by players opens up an intriguing wormhole in the history of early modern acting.¹¹ If a digital game can produce in players something that resembles early declamatory acting, then might there be something *digital* about that acting style? And what might be at stake for theater history and performance studies in recognizing the style's digital components?

The emergence of declamatory gestures in the game is particularly worth investigating in light of the second of our research findings: when people play, they tend to gather a crowd of onlookers who watch the performances both of the digital avatars on screen and of the human bodies in the ambient space

⁸ Rehearsal conducted by Gina Bloom with American Shakespeare Center actors Josh Innerst and Zoe Speas, 30 October 2015, Staunton, VA.

⁹ As per Sawyer Kemp's in-person observations of the installation as well as player-produced gameplay footage recorded by our system.

¹⁰ Puppetry here perhaps most immediately recalls the theorizations of Edward Gordon Craig; his "über-marionette" sought to eradicate the actor's human affective error, which our game engages more playfully. See Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," in *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), 54–94. On the ways animation and robotics relate to puppetry, see essays by Cody Poulton, Colette Searls, and Elizabeth Ann Jochum and Todd Murphey, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. Dasia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014), 280–321.

¹¹ See Linda Charnes, "Reading for the Wormholes: Micro-Periods from the Future," *Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar* 6 (2007), <http://emc.eserver.org/1-6/charnes.html> (accessed 8 January 2017).



Figure 1. Users of *Play the Knave* in the Stratford Festival Theatre lobby. Photo by Scott Wishart, courtesy of *The Stratford Beacon Herald*.



Figure 2. Users of *Play the Knave* in the University of Iowa Libraries. The game was installed in the Main Library Learning Commons on 7 September 2016, coinciding with the UI Libraries' exhibition of the First Folio as part of the Folger Shakespeare Library's national tour, *First Folio! The Book That Gave Us Shakespeare*. Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa Libraries.

where the game is installed. Onlookers, many of whom decide not to play themselves because they claim to lack expertise in gaming or acting, nevertheless become actively involved in the event, even offering critiques and advice to players in an effort to improve their on- and offscreen performances. Consciously or not, these onlookers come to constitute a theatrical audience, one that does not resemble the audiences found in most Shakespeare theaters today. At most public installations, *Play the Knave's* audiences are neither quiet nor passive; regardless of their past experience with Shakespeare, they express themselves as if they are experts on Shakespeare performance as it is produced in the game context. How do these self-professed amateurs develop this expertise and what can their process of gaining this skill tell us about the historical linkage between declamatory acting and amateur Shakespeare performance?

This essay uses the case study of *Play the Knave* to unpack the historical and theoretical value of declamatory acting for Shakespeare performance. Our aim is not only to demonstrate continuities between the material practices of acting and spectatorship in Shakespeare's day and our own, but also to argue for the role that digital games can play today in invigorating public interest in Shakespeare performance at a moment when Shakespeare theaters are perceived as more elitist than they were in the early modern period. *Play the Knave* leverages the affordances of computational media to open up Shakespeare performance to amateur actors at the same time that it prompts forms of audience participation harkening back to those found in the early theater. We argue that just as the declamatory style may have functioned in the early modern theater as a sign of, and a means for, amateur performance, so this style might facilitate and mediate communal, collaborative Shakespeare theater today, developing new pleasures and competencies in Shakespeare performance in a wider public.

THE DIGITALITY OF DECLAMATORY ACTING

In what ways was early modern declamatory acting digital? Using the concept of digitality to describe a material practice from the past is not as strained a claim as it may appear. Although many associate the digital with computational media, the definitions of digitality that media theorists have offered demonstrate its applicability to other objects and processes. McKenzie Wark associates the digital primarily with the cut: the digital involves cutting continuous motion or action to produce discontinuous, discretized abstractions.¹² Matthew G. Kirschenbaum—reminding us that the digital, while abstract, is

¹² McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007). Our understanding of the digital is much indebted to Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Videogames and the Practice of Play* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2016).

not immaterial—offers a useful further definition. In contrast to the “forensic materiality” we might associate with live bodies—which demonstrate “individualization inherent in matter” (no two things are exactly alike)—“a digital environment is an abstract projection supported and sustained by its capacity to propagate the illusion . . . of *immaterial* behavior: identification without ambiguity, transmission without loss, repetition without originality.”¹³ From these perspectives, declamatory acting, at least in theory if not always in practice, can be described as a digital style of acting: fluid, kinetic, ambiguous emotions or character states are rendered through discrete, repeatable gestural equivalents that are abstractions of feelings or states.

The digitality of this acting style can best be appreciated in John Bulwer’s well-known illustrations of gestures for declamatory oratorical performance, versions of which were likely used in some early modern theatrical performances (figure 3).¹⁴ Bulwer’s charts suggest that when actors strike one of these poses, they communicate a particular emotion or state of action, creating what Kirschenbaum might call the “illusion . . . of *immaterial* behavior: identification without ambiguity.” Covering the face communicates shame (figure 3, N. *Pudet.*); holding up a fist conveys pugnaciousness (figure 3, F. *Pugno.*); using the hand to encircle the wrist shows resistance (figure 3, H. *Impedio.*). The relation between declamatory style and the digital is perhaps easier to see in our modern equivalent: emoticons. Most commonly experienced today as emojis (figure 4), emoticons are derived from ANSI text characters—themselves produced through discrete, repeatable “actions,” strokes on the keyboard. Emojis and emoticons simplify subtle, ambiguous expressions as they communicate through a particularly limited digital channel. The result is a set of static, immediately recognizable images, each of which abstractly communicates a more or less complex emotion or state of mind. Bulwer’s chart of gestures functions in much the same way as charts of emojis (figure 5). Whether or not these images prescribe action (onstage or in oratorical performance), Bulwer’s charts certainly present gesture in digital terms.¹⁵ The charts isolate a series of separable

¹³ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁴ Bulwer’s two treatises on gesture, *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia: Or, the Art of Manvall Rhetoricke*, were bound and published together in 1644 (Wing 85:02). On the links between oratory and acting, see B. L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1951). Joseph unfortunately and unnecessarily downplays the links between oratory and acting in the second edition of his book, published in 1964.

¹⁵ Although earlier theater historians claimed that these gestures were prescriptions for gestural actions, recent work on gesture has questioned this, pointing out that even Bulwer in *Chirologia* describes the gestures as inspired by actions people actually make when experiencing associated emotions. See Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*,



Figure 3. J[ohn] B[ulwer], *Chirologia: or The naturall language of the hand* (London, 1644), page 155. Folger Shakespeare Library Shelfmark: B5462. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

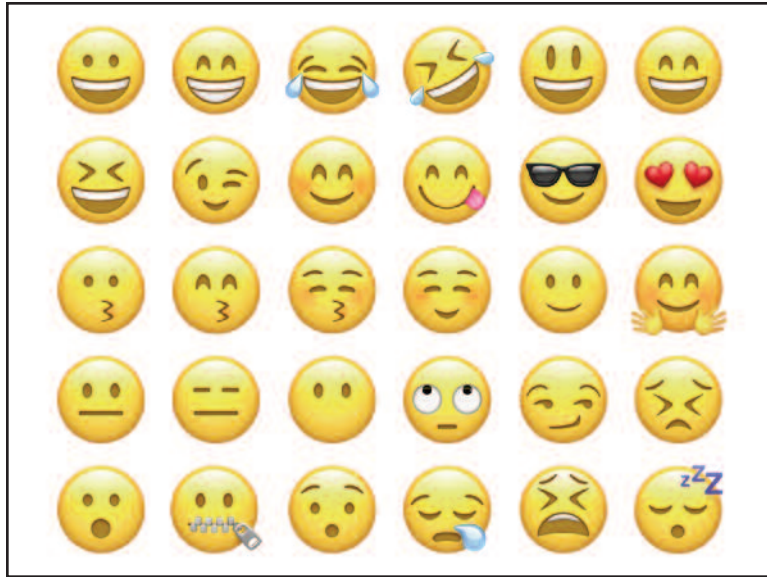


Figure 4. Examples of emojis, provided free by EmojiOne (<http://emojione.com/>) under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License. Design arrangement by Elle Luo.

actions that offer discrete signs of particular emotional states, limiting the body’s channel of communication.

Understanding the digitality of declamatory acting helps us think in more complex ways about this style of theatrical gesture: its aesthetics, its history, and the stakes of its return in *Play the Knave*. Declamatory acting has gotten a bad rap historically. As early as the eighteenth century, even as theorists of acting used frozen attitudes to express heightened emotions, they criticized the gestures of Quintilian for forcing the performer’s body into poses that had no “natural foundation,” in the words of eighteenth-century theater theorist Aaron Hill.¹⁶ However much these reactions reflected a misunderstanding of Bulwer and Quintilian, they had a significant impact on the history of acting. In the centuries following, acting theorists created a variety of systems to help actors express emotions in ways they claimed were more effective and convincing, systems that emphasized stripping away the inhibitions to find “natural expressiveness.”¹⁷ Notably, the very attributes we associate with digital communication

2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993); Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare’s Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Farah Karim-Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch, and the Spectacle of Dismemberment* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016).

¹⁶ See Aaron Hill, *The Prompter*, no. 64 (20 June 1735), 82–83.

¹⁷ Roach, *Player’s Passion*, 218. See n. 15.



Figure 5. Detail from J[ohn] B[ulwer], *Chirologia: or The naturall language of the hand* (London, 1644), sig. F1r. Folger Shakespeare Library Shelfmark: B5462. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Examples of emojis, provided free by EmojiOne (<http://emoji.com/>) under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License. Design arrangement by Elle Luo.

also underlie historical criticism of the declamatory style. In fact, this criticism often mirrors recent concerns about emoticons: both forms of gestural vocabulary are accused of limiting creativity and personal expression, and the stakes of this accusation have been made especially clear in discussions of the inherent racism of emoticons.¹⁸

Looking more closely at the way *Play the Knave* is designed underscores these problems. Although motion-capture technology renders the subtleties of bodily movement better than many other forms of animation, it must still translate a performer’s fluid and complex actions into discrete data points, appearing to filter out or remove many intricacies of personal expression. Understanding this requires some background on how the technology works. The motion-sensor camera used for the game, the Kinect v2, emits infrared pulses and computes their time of flight to create depth images of the performers (figure 6, inset).¹⁹ The Kinect Software Development Kit creates skeletal data that best fits the depth image using object recognition of body parts.²⁰ Our platform transmits a performer’s skeleton data (figure 6, left) to the game so that the skeleton can map onto and then control the avatar (figure 6, right). The Kinect’s ability to read and render the complex motions of the performer’s body is limited in part by its motion-capture technique, which generates significantly weaker data than that of more elaborate and costly motion-capture systems; the latter are able to mirror many more subtleties of performers’ gestures by using multiple cameras and by having users don expensive gear and or body suits.²¹ The latter technology is costly—in terms of time,

¹⁸ Steve Luber, response to Gina Bloom’s presentation “Every Body Can Act: Reclaiming Histrionic Gesture through a Digital Theater Game,” 6 September 2015. Luber’s response was shared as part of a working group for the American Society for Theatre Research conference. On racism and digital icons, see Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007). The racism of emoji has been discussed widely in the press. See, for example, Caitlin Dewey, “Are Apple’s New ‘Yellow Face’ Emoji Racist?,” *Washington Post*, 24 February 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/02/24/are-apples-new-yellow-face-emoji-racist/>.

¹⁹ It is also possible to run the game using the first version of the Kinect camera; however, that technology works somewhat differently and, in our experience, is less effective than the second version.

²⁰ Jamie Shotton et al., “Real-Time Human Pose Recognition in Parts from a Single Depth Image,” *CVPR ’11 Proceedings of the 2011 IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition* (2011), <http://research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/?id=145347> (accessed 8 January 2017).

²¹ Multiple cameras and more sophisticated costly equipment are used in motion-capture theater experiments discussed in Matt Delbridge, *Motion Capture in Performance: An Introduction* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also the skin deformation system for motion capture developed by Sang Il Park and Jessica K. Hodgins, demonstrated and described at <http://graphics.cs.cmu.edu/projects/muscle/> (accessed 8 January 2017). In our

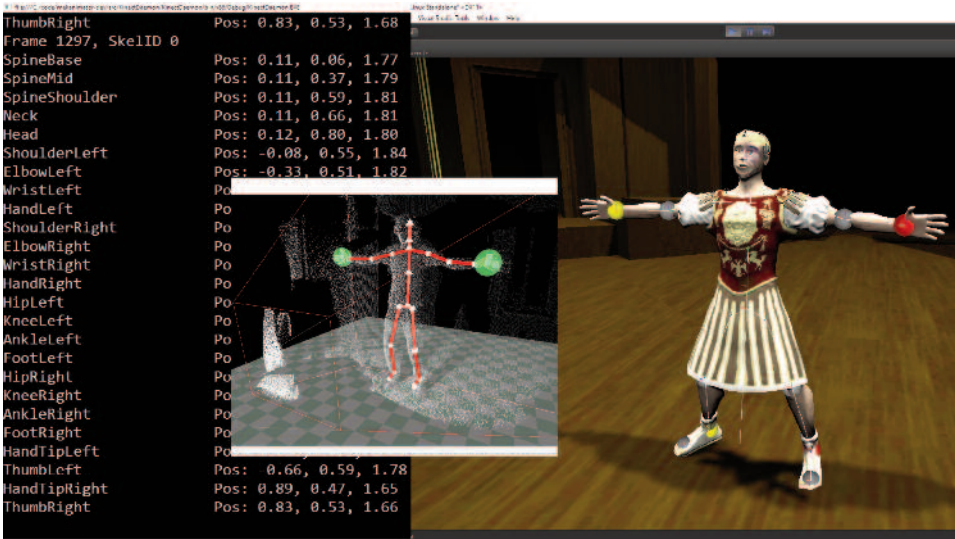


Figure 6. Screenshots from Mekanimator, the platform developed by the UC Davis ModLab to run *Play the Knave*. Screenshots taken by Nicholas Toothman. Design arrangement by Elle Luo.

money, and organization—making it unfeasible for the public contexts where *Play the Knave* would be set up. The Kinect v2 used by our system is a single camera that costs only a few hundred dollars and requires comparatively little calibration. The Kinect computes skeletal data from its depth image in real-time, resulting in skeletons of twenty-five joints each for up to six actors. But the location of each of those joints is known with much less certainty than is true for other motion-capture systems. Rather than an analog cloud of possibility, the Kinect reports the uncertain data precisely and digitally. That is, even if the system is only partially certain that a joint is in a particular position, it has to make a certain decision about that joint's position, giving it a digital value. Uncertainty means that the game “glitches” and a joint rapidly jumps from one position to another. Thus, performers must adapt their movement style to the demands of the digital system. Those who use grander gestures, delivering them more slowly and deliberately, essentially console the digital system's need for explicit truth at every moment. Those who attempt to perform more naturalistically discover a dissonance between their desired avatar movement and the result on screen.

Play the Knave's technology has interesting aesthetic implications for theater history. For one, players' encounters with our technology support recent scholarship on

system, skeletal quality is further constrained by the recognizer's training dataset and the depth image, which can suffer from poor sensor placement and the performer's bodily orientation.

declamatory acting. Drawing on earlier work on gesture by Bertram Joseph and Joseph R. Roach, Evelyn Tribble views Bulwer's gestures not as a "static, mechanical system applied by rote," but as a way of "extending the animation of the language through the actor's body," with actors using gestures that best express through embodied movement the concepts found in the language they verbalize.²² Players of our game confirm Tribble's claim that declamatory gestures need not have been prescriptive add-ons: our players adopt this declamatory acting style, even echoing specific gestures or types of gestures codified by Bulwer and Quintilian, without knowing anything about these authors or the style they described. Players are eager to see their avatars move, and so, without prompting from the game, they seek out and discover cues for gesture that Shakespeare's language provides, underscoring the strong link between speech and gesture in the plays.²³

In addition, our players' spontaneous uses of declamatory gesturing in the game invite consideration of why this style of acting is rarely found in Shakespeare theaters today (outside of some original-practice productions). If declamatory gesturing comes naturally to novices and professionals who play our game, then why did it become a source of mockery and critique historically? What function does such mockery serve? Hamlet's advice to the traveling theater troupe visiting the court provides one answer when he counsels the players to avoid the gestural histrionics associated with the declamatory style: "do not saw the air too much with your hand" (3.2.4).²⁴ In the well-known passage that follows, Hamlet advises the players to use a more subdued acting style, what we might call naturalism but which Paul Menzer nicely terms "passionate suppression."²⁵

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first and now was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theater of others.

(ll. 16–26)

The visiting troupe appears to follow through on its promise, delivering powerful, effective, transformative performances. Other critics have used this passage

²² Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*, 92, 108. See n. 15.

²³ On Shakespeare as a particularly gesture-oriented playwright, see John H. Astington, "Actors and the Body: Meta-Theatrical Rhetoric in Shakespeare," *Gesture* 6.2 (2006): 241–59.

²⁴ Citations from Shakespeare's works are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016).

²⁵ Paul Menzer, "The Actor's Inhibition: Early Modern Acting and the Rhetoric of Restraint," *Renaissance Drama* 35 (2006): 83–111, esp. 86.

as evidence of what the declamatory style might or might not have looked like, but Hamlet's critique offers something more than evidence of early theater practices: it helps illustrate what is at stake in the historical rejection of declamatory acting. Hamlet admits that "overdone" acting is enjoyable to watch—"it makes the unskillful laugh"—but he urges the players to weigh the reactions of "the judicious" above "a whole theater of others." Hamlet's appraisal metatheatrically shores up Shakespeare's view of his theater's professionalism.

Indeed, Hamlet's dismissive comments about misuse of the declamatory style resonate with Rosencrantz's mockery earlier in the Folio *Hamlet* of the "little eyases" (2.2.292.3), the boy acting companies popular in 1580s London that were seen—like the declamatory acting style with which they were often associated—as a throwback to a less professional theater scene. The declamatory style developed out of oratory training, which boy actors would have received in elementary school. Tribble may be right that early modern professionals and novices alike used this style of acting; as well, Farah Karim-Cooper's recent work on gesture in original-practice productions at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre has shown how skilled actors can effectively deploy declamatory gestures.²⁶ Nevertheless, the style was undoubtedly convenient for novices, less because the gestures are a prescriptive code to be followed by rote than because they can successfully deliver the meaning of a line even in the absence of an actor's planning, care, or subtlety. To be sure, actors well trained in declamatory gesture deliver their movements with more skill than novices (a case in point is the success of Hidden Room Theater's 2015 production of Nahum Tate's *Lear* in which actors were trained in the use of declamatory gesture).²⁷ But the declamatory style, we argue, is actually more forgiving of the novice than are other more subdued or naturalistic styles. Declamatory gestures, even and perhaps especially if overdone, can carry meaning in a Shakespeare line that the untrained voice alone may fail to communicate. If actors can arrive at a gesture whose meaning the audience can decipher easily, then how they got to that gesture—through training or happenstance—matters less than that they did.

There is nothing essentially shallow, uncreative, unserious, or ineffective about the declamatory style, but the history of acting has conditioned us to perceive it that way. Hamlet's advice to the players suggests that what is significant in this dismissal is the emergence of acting as a skilled profession. That pursuit of professionalism began in Shakespeare's day and has continued to drive critiques of

²⁶ Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*; Karim-Cooper, *Hand on the Shakespearean Stage* (see n. 15).

²⁷ Hidden Room Theatre premiered scenes from Nahum Tate's *History of King Lear*, directed by Beth Burns, at the Blackfriars conference, 1 November 2015, attended by Bloom. The full show ran 6–29 November 2015 at the York Rite Masonic Temple in Austin, TX.

histrionic gesture throughout theater history. Whenever a new acting school has presented itself, further legitimizing acting as something that people needed to be trained to do, it has begun by dismissing prior acting styles as ineffective because they are not "natural" enough. Stanislavski's method, Meyerhold's biomechanics, F. M. Alexander's Alexander technique, Grotowski's methodical exploration, and the Meisner technique have all stressed that the more spontaneous, natural, and subtle actors want to appear, the more rehearsal and training they require.

The rise of professional theater and well-trained actors is something to celebrate, but it has had its downside. Unlike many of the performing arts—singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument—acting is now generally seen as something best and only left to professionals or at least organized groups dedicated to the task of putting on a play. This is especially true in the case of Shakespeare. As Michael Dobson has shown, there is a long and still-vibrant tradition of amateur Shakespeare performance, but Shakespearean theater is rarely something adults do for fun in their living rooms.²⁸ The status of television talent shows underscores the point. Shows like *American Idol* and *So You Think You Can Dance* have been sensational hits in part because they bring to the living room television screen the spectacle of amateur performers who claim to have nurtured their talents in their own homes. To our knowledge, there is no similar hit reality show about theater actors, Shakespearean or other.²⁹ The status of motion-capture video games further underscores the notable absence of amateur theatrical performance in mass media entertainment. Dancing, singing, and playing an instrument have all been turned into popular motion-capture games that people play both privately and before groups of friends.³⁰ Whatever their limits as channels for artistic expression, these games encourage participation in the arts, which is important given the state of public arts funding today. Theater, however, has yet to benefit from this increased public interest.

If gaming companies haven't developed a theater game to add to the mix, it may be partly because there is a widespread public perception that acting cannot be done without training. Even if there is plenty of amateur theater, the

²⁸ For the tradition of amateur Shakespeare performance, see Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

²⁹ The absence is perhaps especially notable in light of the success of nonreality television shows about theatrical production, the most famous Shakespeare-related one being *Slings and Arrows* (which aired in Canada for three seasons on Movie Central and the Movie Network, 2003, 2005, and 2006). Networks seem to assume that the public will watch professional actors pretend to be actors, but not self-professed amateurs visibly demonstrating the work of trying to become professional actors.

³⁰ Among the titles are dance games like *Just Dance*, *Dance Central*, and *Dance Dance Revolution*; singing games like *Disney Sing It*, *SingStar*, and *Karaoke Revolution*; and musical instrument games like *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, and *Rocksmith*.

success of amateurs is a function of their capacity to refine their craft through exclusive training. What that training tends to emphasize today—however diverse the theories and approaches—is a naturalistic style marked by subtle bodily gestures. In our experience putting *Play the Knave* before the public, that public may well be ready to take on Shakespeare acting as a form of informal, impromptu, personal entertainment, something they might do casually with friends and without any training, in public or at home.³¹ Not surprisingly, something that resembles the declamatory style is once again a reliable tool for these amateur Shakespeare performers.

SPECTATORS AS PLAYERS

Perhaps the strongest evidence for a public desiring access to amateur Shakespeare comes not from the players themselves, but from the range of eager spectators that gather around gamers whenever *Play the Knave* is installed in public spaces (figure 7). The game appeals most to a player who is extroverted, comfortable with Shakespeare's language, and willing to be a little bit silly in public. However, in our study of public installations of the game, we have found that it is equally appealing to those who prefer only to watch others play.³² When researchers invited one young woman at the Stratford Festival installation to play, she responded by presenting spectatorship as the logical alternative to playing: "I don't like those movement games . . . but I'd like to watch *other* people play," she said, and she did, in fact, wait around for the next game session to start.³³

Certainly the novelty of the technology has some role in its appeal to spectators, but their reactions to it suggest more than idle curiosity. Despite declining the spotlight, spectators are not passive or shy when they watch: they lean over the ropes sometimes used to demarcate the playable area; they heckle their friends for being boring or quiet; they correct players' mispronounced words; they encourage players to move around the space and use larger gestures. In short, they direct. The directions, once shouted to the players, are sometimes repeated to other spectators, generating lively conversations about the game session underway. During one Stratford session, a group of four boys and their grandmother took turns, the grandmother playing once and then declaring she preferred to "leave it to the new generation." She didn't quite leave it, however. As

³¹ Indeed, many players who experience the game at an installation ask how they can access *Play the Knave* for home use.

³² Sometimes observers who had previously declined the chance to play changed their minds or were persuaded by someone in their party who *did* want to play. However, even people who consistently maintained a desire not to play expressed pleasure and interest in participating as audiences for others.

³³ Interview conducted by Sawyer Kemp at the Stratford Festival Theatre lobby, 16 August 2015. All interviewees gave oral consent but remain anonymous, per IRB rules (see n. 1).



Figure 7. Users of *Play the Knave* at the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s Shakespeare Competition, where the game was installed, 2–3 October 2015. Photo courtesy of Michael Bahr.

her grandsons played, she repeated lines back to them to correct their emphasis, remarking with annoyance that one of her grandsons wasn’t even saying most of the lines. When she realized the quiet boy was determined to ignore her, she looked to other spectators for validation as she waved her hands, gesturing to signal the most important words.³⁴ Directions can be generated by the player’s family or friends (siblings who want their brother to do a handstand, friends encouraging each other to make the avatars fight, or parents who want their children to perform the scene particularly well). At Stratford, lobby patrons at tables or benches nearby sat through multiple performances by strangers, offering more points of critique the longer they watched. This, from the self-selecting group who chose not to play, because they said they were not “actors” or “gamers.”

Anyone who has attended an exciting sports match will have observed a similar dynamic between fans and players, with spectators leaning their bodies in the direction they wish players to move or shouting out strategies they want players to follow (throwing a ball, staying on base). But the theatrical content and context for *Play the Knave* indicate something more than overeager spectators swept up in the action. In our observations, we have found that most game spectators

³⁴ Observations by Sawyer Kemp, Stratford Festival Theatre lobby, 11 August 2015.

focused their attention less on the physical bodies of the players than on their screen avatars. When spectators did watch the players, it was to see how their actions were being translated on-screen. Spectators are motivated to direct the players because of a desire to see a more interesting performance from the avatars, and they view the players' bodies primarily as a mediator of the digital image on-screen. In installations where players had ongoing access to the game for an extended duration, such as at the Utah Shakespeare Festival and at Chicago's Shakespeare 400 installation, we saw a high rate of participants replaying the game in order to tweak their experience and of audiences involving themselves in this process.³⁵ After watching players alter their movements to better manipulate the avatars—to achieve bolder, clearer movements or to push the avatar to do funny things—audiences suggested further extensions. They challenged players to swap roles to make casting funnier (a big, burly teen voicing a female avatar, for instance). They even volunteered to speak the lines so that the players could concentrate on moving their avatars around, a strategy popular in cases where the player is especially uncomfortable with Shakespeare's language (e.g., children and English as a second language speakers).³⁶

These installations of *Play the Knave* demonstrate fruitful collaborations between spectators, actors, and technology, underscoring feedback loops between all available digital and analog bodies. Scholars in performance studies such as Gay McAuley, Susan Bennett, and Erika Fischer-Lichte have discussed such feedback loops as integral parts of participatory or "immersive" theater. These sorts of theatrical experiments are even conceptualized as games by some avant-garde practitioners, such as Richard Schechner.³⁷ However, this kind of cooperative or ecological performance environment was a feature of early modern theatrical performance even in Shakespeare's day, not because these techniques were risky or experimental, but because amateur performers needed support to ensure a skilled performance.³⁸ And it took a village. Tribble argues that distributing cognitive and creative labor among early modern theater players was a collaborative process that had two crucial effects. One, it promoted the acquisition of skills among peers and fellow actors (as opposed to a hierarchy of director or stage

³⁵ Observations by Gina Bloom, Shakespeare 400 Chicago installation, 28 April 2016; and observations by Sawyer Kemp, Utah Shakespeare Festival, 2–3 October 2015.

³⁶ Observations by Gina Bloom, Shakespeare 400 Chicago installation, 28 April 2016.

³⁷ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008); and Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Schechner's experimental applications are discussed in Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003).

³⁸ Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*, esp. 111–50. See n. 15.

manager). Two, as it anticipated error, it helped actors avoid embarrassing mistakes. What we might call *Play the Knave's* cooperative function operates in much the same way, although it goes further to invite audiences into the theater's ecosystem. The game protects the user from too much embarrassing error, facilitating the low-pressure peer critique so crucial to amateur performance.

Protection of the amateur actor-user is a function, in part, of the audience's spatial positioning during installations. Because of the allure of the digital screen, spectators of gameplay simply aren't *watching* the players, or, if they are, they are watching their backs move in front of the screen, as a kind of live picture-in-picture. Installations of the game literally and figuratively encourage spectators to *get behind* the players. Spectator and player are united in the task of gazing at the on-screen avatar, which in turn changes players' perspectives on their own bodies. Indeed, every time we have installed the game in public spaces, as well as in classrooms, players tell us that the game alleviates the pressure that usually attends Shakespeare performance. Even if surrounded by a sizeable audience of strangers, players don't experience themselves as performing for a crowd, because they aren't the primary objects of the spectator gaze.

The collaboration of spectator and player is further facilitated by the game's point of view and its interface, which create a level of remove between the avatar and the players and spectators who watch it. Unlike a first-person shooter game, where the screen represents the viewing perspective of the player, *Play the Knave* presents a third-person perspective, where the in-game “stage” is a fixed perspective projection. First-person shooter games aim to be more immersive for players, providing them a privileged viewing perspective. This effect is even more potent in virtual reality games in which players don headsets, such as the Oculus Rift, meant to make players feel as if they are inside the game scene. By contrast, players of our game inhabit the same perspective as game spectators and do not experience the game as entirely immersive, despite the embodied system of avatar control. Indeed, although the motion-capture technology encourages players to identify with their avatars—which could conceivably underscore differences between player and spectator—the level of identification is less than one might expect. The multisensory integration that encourages projection onto inanimate objects (also called the rubber-hand illusion) is dependent on verisimilitude.³⁹ However, the lower-cost technology we use leads players to feel disconnected from their avatars, who are supposed to mirror the players but, as discussed above, do not do so precisely. The result is that *Play the Knave* complicates what game theorists call “presence,” “the feeling of being

³⁹ Findings from the Brain Imaging Lab at Dartmouth College are discussed in Kel Smith, *Digital Outcasts: Moving Technology Forward without Leaving People Behind* (Waltham, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2013), 171–72.

there."⁴⁰ The player's body is imbricated in the production and gameplay, but the player and spectators witness the avatar not as identical with but as a prosthesis of the player's body. Although the player has more control over the avatar than the spectator does, that control is not seamless or complete, creating a somewhat surprising bond between player and game spectator, neither of whom has total command over the avatar.

Because of this bond, the game relaxes and even dismantles the power dynamics typical in commercial Shakespeare theaters today. Ordinarily, the theater poses an inverted hierarchy where, even though audiences (those wielders of the almighty dollar and the damning review) hold some power over the actor exposed before them, the actor possesses the revered craft—a craft all the more admirable when the actor speaks Shakespeare's challenging language. This, along with an array of social and institutional norms, keeps the audience mostly stationary and usually complacent for several hours. Early modern audiences, as a number of scholars have shown, had greater mobility and tended to be less complacent, and in this they anticipate the audiences in modern experimental and immersive theaters that engage spectators physically or vocally in the theatrical action.⁴¹ But even these more collaborative theatrical spaces cannot get away from the fact that when performers have expertise, they will always be in a position of knowing *more* than their spectators. *Play the Knave* can foster greater collaboration between Shakespeare actors and their audiences because the game makes every player look like an amateur, putting actors and spectators on an even playing field.

To be sure, the result, as Hamlet fears, is that we get a whole theater of others, audiences that appreciate and reward bad performances. Yet the representation of incompetent, amateur performers serves an important pedagogical function for audiences, something early modern dramatists well understood. Most representations of acting in the plays of Shakespeare and contemporaries show amateur performers, rather than polished professionals

⁴⁰ Used somewhat interchangeably with "immersiveness," the term "presence" refers to the environmental integration of a player, specifically in virtual reality environments. See Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 68–70.

⁴¹ On the many ways that early modern audiences asserted themselves in the theater, see Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007), esp. 151–59; Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill, eds., *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558–1642* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Allison P. Hobgood, *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014); and Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014). On modern immersive theaters, see Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

like the *Hamlet* players, probably because audiences are better able to understand what acting *is*—how the actor is distinguished from the character being represented—when the acting is obvious, declamatory, even faulty. Amateur actors function as avatars for the audience (sometimes, literally, as with Rafe in Beaumont’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle*) to imagine themselves on the stage. While early modern plays use the amateur performer to invite the audience’s fantasies of participation, the plays also caution the unskilled, would-be performer in a way that *Play the Knave* does not. Amateur actors, like the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the eager participants in the pageant of the Nine Worthies at the end of *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, are beset with snide and critical commentary from their onstage audiences, causing the unskilled actors to drop a line or be put out of their parts. Indeed, the salient difference between novice and seasoned actors may have been the latter’s ability to cope with audience interruption.⁴² William N. West has suggested that in early modern drama, the outed actor reifies the divide between actor and audience, as the audience either laughs at the actor’s mistakes or condescendingly puts up with them.⁴³ In *Play the Knave*, actor-players are constantly in jeopardy of being put out of their parts and suffering the potential ridicule of spectators: the Shakespearean language, even though it doesn’t need to be memorized, is challenging to articulate, and when players inevitably fail to control their avatars completely, the avatars move in odd, highly unnatural ways (e.g., a leg jitters, an arm folds backward, the head drops into the shoulder). Yet when the game’s players are put out of their parts, the game itself tends to take most of the blame: players and spectators deride Shakespeare’s language for being too difficult or the game script for moving along too quickly on the screen, and they complain that the motion-capture system isn’t working well enough, making their avatars perform in unpredictable ways. The boundaries between player and spectator collapse instead of widening, for both players and spectators enjoy witnessing mistakes and glitches. When one spectator was asked what she enjoyed about watching, she sheepishly admitted, “Well, they might make a mistake!”⁴⁴ A similar pleasure is often expressed by our game’s players. Two women preparing for a session of the game at Stratford were trying out their avatar movements when one of them announced, “This is going to be terrible,” to which the other replied, “I’m hoping it is!”⁴⁵

⁴² Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*, esp. 117–50. See n. 15.

⁴³ William N. West, “The Player Whip’t: Corpsing, Dying, Being Out,” panel presentation, Shakespeare Association of America, Vancouver, BC, 1–4 April 2015. We thank West for sharing his unpublished work.

⁴⁴ Interview by Sawyer Kemp, Stratford Festival Theatre lobby, 7 August 2015.

⁴⁵ Observation by Sawyer Kemp, Stratford Festival Theatre lobby, 9 August 2015.

The guilty pleasure of catching a mistake inspires many Shakespeare enthusiasts, especially in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of the Shakespeare plays most frequently performed by high school and amateur companies, *Midsummer* is perhaps even more dependent on its farcical representation of unskilled acting in the mechanicals' plot than on the professionalism of the skilled actors playing other characters. The show-stealing mechanicals produce an "interlude [that] is rowdy enough to delight portions of almost any audience and, as is not often noted, can be played with aplomb by tyros and professionals alike," but they show us something more than just a passion for the underdog.⁴⁶ The spectacle of amateur acting generates a particular kind of pleasure in amateur audiences, welcoming them into the theater experience and enabling them to project themselves onto the stage. If *Play the Knave* taps into this delight at amateur rendering of a great work, the acquisition of skill in a group and the collaborative dialogue it generates foster a situation in which the mistake functions quite differently than it does in a patronizing relationship like that of Theseus and the mechanicals. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus preaches toleration:

I will hear that play.
 For never anything can be amiss
 When simpleness and duty tender it.

 The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
 Our sport shall be to take what they mistake.
 And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
 Takes it in might, not merit.

(5.1.81–83, 89–92)

Although he would foster an environment that gives the mechanicals space to perform, he writes off the errors to their "simpleness" and takes most of his delight in the fact that they do it out of a "duty" that reinscribes his own power and majesty: "Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity / In least speak most, to my capacity" (ll. 104–5). In contrast, viewers of *Play the Knave* gain no honor or position by watching others struggle. Rather, they join with the players as spectators of the avatar and coproducers of the scene, everyone laughing as everyone fails.

The viability and desirability of failure have been powerfully argued by scholars in game studies, some of whom draw on queer theory to think about the pleasures of failure, stalling, or nonproductivity.⁴⁷ Video games such as

⁴⁶ Nancy Carolyn Michael, "Amateur Theatricals and Professional Playwriting: The Relationship between *Peter Squentz* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 23.3 (1986): 195–204, esp. 198.

⁴⁷ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Queer gaming perspectives include Bonnie Ruberg, "No Fun: The

Proteus, *The Stanley Parable*, and *The Plan* explore nonteleological narrative and structure, making progression and success secondary to aesthetic appreciation or intellectual reflection. These games exhibit what Miguel Sicart would term "playfulness," as well as "play." Play, he maintains, is an informal and contextual mode of being in the world with its own rules and autotelic function. Playfulness occurs when play encroaches on situations where it was not specifically invited. Since it is disruptive but not autotelic, playfulness preserves the purpose of the activity to which it is applied while appropriating it toward additional goals.⁴⁸

Such playfulness is under threat of erasure not only in many video games, as game scholars and theorists of digital media have suggested, but also in the contemporary professional Shakespeare theater. The theater has come to resemble what McKenzie Wark calls a "gamespace," characterized by a digital logic of distinction and agon.⁴⁹ Once theater became a business—as it began to be in Shakespeare's London and continues to be today—there was little room for mistakes and amateurs. Throughout theater's history, certain forms of theatrical performance have been labors of love with room for error.⁵⁰ But when theater is a business, it tends to be serious business. One remedy for reinstating the playfulness in plays is to follow Wark's recommendation concerning games: to interrogate the relationship between the digital and the analog, blurring the distinction between them. That distinction, Wark reminds us, is in and of itself *digital*, insofar as it relies on a clear boundary:

The digital rules a line between analog and digital, making a slippery difference into a clear distinction. But perhaps, having made the distinction appear, the perspective can be reversed, and the digital can be perceived from the point of view of its analog residue. What might emerge is rather the play between the analog and the digital. The digital might become again the threshold that turns a movement into a break, rather than imposing the break on movement. The gamer as theorist might look toward a transformation of what matters

Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2.2 (2015): 108–24; and Amanda Phillips, "Shooting to Kill: Headshots, Twitch Reflexes, and the Mechropolitics of Video Games," *Games and Culture*, 27 October 2015, <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/10/27/1555412015612611> (accessed 8 January 2017). This work builds on queer theorizations of failure by Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004); and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011).

⁴⁸ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 26–28.

⁴⁹ Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 80.

⁵⁰ On the revolutionary possibilities of amateur theater, see Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theater, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2013). Katherine Steele Brokaw addresses related concerns in relation to amateur Shakespeare performance in her work-in-progress on Merced Shakespearefest.

within gamespace, a style of play that edges away from agon, distinction, decision, the fatal either/or.⁵¹

Play the Knave showcases precisely this slippage between analog and digital, underscoring the ways Shakespeare performance can model the kind of utopian gamespace Wark describes, where play doesn't have to depend on agon, where analog is not subsumed by digital. Where the professional theater since Shakespeare's time has been plagued by a competitive ethos, *Play the Knave* intentionally resists a formal mechanics of competition. With no scoreboard and no standard for what counts as a winning performance, the game generates only qualitative, subjective, and user-generated measures of perfection or success. There is no intrinsic penalty for missing a line, bungling a word, or failing to suit the action to the word.⁵² This by no means prevents players and spectators from pointing out when one player *does* make one of those errors, but the consequences of failure are negligible. Even as the game creates a digital style of performance, eliciting declamatory gestures from everyone who plays it, it contextualizes the digital within a truly analog theatrical scene.

If professional Shakespeare theater, however analog it may seem, has been overtaken by a digital logic, then perhaps it is not surprising that a digital game can have the capacity to restore the important analog potentialities of Shakespeare performance. We have argued that *Play the Knave* accomplishes this feat by blurring the lines between the analog and the digital, between what Kirschenbaum calls forensic and formal materiality. The declamatory style comes about when performers' bodies become extensions of the game's formal material features, themselves an effect of the player's movements. Gameplay turns everyone who plays and watches into an amateur, without apologies. As it once may have done on early modern stages, the declamatory acting style mediates and promotes this amateurism, encouraging audiences and players alike to work together, or rather to play together, to develop mastery over the game—a mastery that ultimately does not matter in the moment and thus may matter deeply to the future of Shakespearean theater.

⁵¹ Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 97.

⁵² Although some players have requested these features in future versions of the game, our team has maintained a noncompetitive vision for the system in order to keep open creative channels and to resist the reductive qualities of games like *Guitar Hero* or *Just Dance*, where a complicated skill is rendered as just mashing a few buttons or hitting a few poses.