

Play the Knave *Theatre Videogame in Schools* *From Glitchy Connections to Virtual Collaboration*

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Users of *Play the Knave*, the digital Shakespeare game at the centre of our collaboration, perform dramatic scenes karaoke-style through a motion-capture interface (Figure 16.1–2). While reciting the dialogue that appears on screen, they animate their avatars by moving their bodies (think Xbox’s *Dance Central*, but for dramatic performance, particularly Shakespeare).¹

Although the game, created by the ModLab at the University of California, Davis, was not initially developed to be an educational tool, its classroom applications have become overwhelmingly evident (Bloom, 2019a; Bloom et al., 2021; Bloom and Bates, 2021). Most high school students in the United States are required to read Shakespeare and find the plays difficult to understand and/or irrelevant to them (Blockside, 2003; Haddon, 2009; Thompson and Turchi, 2016; Cohen, 2018;). A motion-capture videogame, particularly one that engages a well-established method of teaching Shakespeare through theatrical performance (Banks, 2014; Edmiston et al., 1987; Edmiston and Mckibben, 2011; Gibson, 1998; Riggio, 1999; Rocklin, 2005; Winston, 2015), meets the needs of learners in secondary and even primary schools – what are called ‘K–12’ schools in the United States. However, bringing the game to K–12 learners initially proved challenging. Gina Bloom, the project director for *Play the Knave*, has had extensive experience teaching with the game in university contexts but the capabilities of K–12 students are very different from those of post-secondary students. Bloom was still trying to figure out

¹ Development and research on *Play the Knave* (Bloom et al., 2020) have been supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, through the ModLab’s affiliation with the Games Institute at the University of Waterloo; and the University of California, Davis, through an Interdisciplinary Funding for the Humanities and Arts grant. The education programme has been supported by the UC Davis English department and by alumna Margaret Bowles. All research on human subjects discussed in this chapter has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).



Figure 16.1 Screenshot of *Play the Knave* showing menu options for Shakespeare's tragedies



Figure 16.2 Students performing *Hamlet* scenes from *Play the Knave*, Epstein School, Atlanta, GA, 4 April 2017. Photograph by Gina Bloom

how to frame the game for K–12 schools when she met Amanda Shores in late 2016. Shores, then a student in one of Bloom's UC Davis classes, was minoring in Education and had worked as a tutor and K–12 teaching assistant. Realising we made a formidable team, we began working together to create the *Play the Knave* education programme.

In what follows, we will describe our collaboration and discuss its impact on beneficiaries, including not only the K–12 students whom we initially intended to reach, but also participants in the programme who began as its beneficiaries and evolved into our collaborators. Among these were the several dozen university students who served as *Play the Knave* teaching 'interns': trainees who, in this case, received course credit for their work. The *Play the Knave* teaching internship enhanced these students' educations and helped prepare them for careers post-graduation. At the same time, the work students produced as part of the internship, including teaching resources and research on the game's classroom impact, helped build the education programme. A similar evolution in roles characterised the K–12 teachers who participated in the programme. We discovered that the game more positively impacted their students when we treated teachers less as beneficiaries than as active partners. Significantly, we found that in-person connection did not predict or correlate with the quality of these various collaborations. Many of our most successful collaborations have been virtual, involving teachers across the United States whom we have never met in person. We suggest that close *connection* is not sufficient or even necessary for *collaboration*, a useful finding for others engaging in educational partnerships, particularly in the wake of a pandemic that has strained in-person connectivity.

Collaborations often begin with individuals from different spheres (whether social, professional or otherwise) connecting with each other in the same place and/or time to share ideas. *Play the Knave* was born out of precisely this kind of real life (RL) connectivity: faculty and doctoral students affiliated with UC Davis's ModLab met weekly, discussing ideas for game design, and the concept for *Play the Knave* emerged out of these conversations. Meeting in person regularly to proffer and negotiate ideas certainly can be productive. Theorist of artistic collaboration R. Keith Sawyer, who applies Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's influential theory of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) to jazz music and theatre improvisation, explains that ideal collaborative dynamics rely on participants achieving a 'group flow' in which (1) participants' 'skills match the challenge of the task' at hand; (2) there is 'constant and immediate feedback'; and (3) participants are 'freed to concentrate fully' on their collaborative tasks. Participants



Figure 16.3 Screenshot of *Play the Knave*, showing menu options of some of the thirty avatars

connecting in the same space at the same time seems critical to achieving ‘group flow’ (Sawyer, 2007: 42–3).

Although the group flow and connectedness Sawyer values is useful, we argue that it is not essential to educational collaborations. And this is cause for relief not only in light of pandemic restrictions but because even in the best of conditions, it is difficult for academia-based collaborations to achieve most of the characteristics Sawyer identifies as necessary for group flow. Instead of achieving a flow state, the *Play the Knave* education programme has settled for and now comes to embrace a state of fits and starts, of lags, or what in the digital world might be called ‘glitches’. A glitch is a perceived error, such as when the computer reacts to our keyboard input in an unexpected way, disrupting workflow. The glitch is not, in fact, a system malfunction but rather a moment of something like miscommunication – we ask the computer to carry out a particular task, but for any number of reasons, the command is not clear and the computer does something else. Glitchy connections may frustrate users and disrupt flow, but they need not hinder collaboration between participants. Indeed, we argue that glitchy connections provoke and fuel collaboration.

Play the Knave itself models this seemingly counter-intuitive claim. *Knave’s* players expect that their avatars (Figure 16.3) will mimic their

actions perfectly, but because of the hardware used to run the game (a low-cost motion capture camera) combined with the platform's design (which allows users to control their avatars with their own bodies), the avatars often make movements players don't expect or can't control. These 'glitches' in the animation certainly disrupt the 'flow state' that is the goal for so many game designers, who pour great financial resources into ensuring that their videogame animations are seamless enough to support the player's feeling of flow. However, as Bloom has discussed elsewhere, there are ethical costs to pursuing flow in motion-capture animation, and research on *Play the Knave* has shown that the disruption of flow even leads to better learning (Bloom, 2019b; Bloom et al., 2021). Players who cannot seamlessly connect with their avatars become more aware of their role in the interaction with the machine and thus can take responsibility for their input. Consequently, players cease treating the avatar as a mindless tool or conduit for their intentions and instead come to conceive the avatar as a collaborative partner with limitations and affordances that, once understood and addressed, prompt a richer interaction. We maintain that the glitches so endemic to human interactions with machines – and with *Play the Knave*'s digital interface in particular – provide a model for responding to the practical challenges involved in connecting with partners in collaborative educational projects.

Our chapter's suspicion of the concept of 'connectedness' is ironic given that Bloom brainstormed the structure of our collaboration while participating in a workshop called 'Connecting Faculty, Schools, and Communities through Shakespeare'. Organised by Anne Cunningham and Laura Turchi for the Shakespeare Association of America conference in 2018, the workshop brought together academics wishing to 'forge meaningful connections within our academic institutions and with teachers and arts organizations'. Cunningham and Turchi set out a series of assignments for participants to do in the months leading up to the conference, the completion of which would help each of us make the 'connections' we needed to further our projects. Encouraged by the workshop's supportive structure, Bloom worked with Shores to deepen RL connections with our local community. One of these connections was the Davis Joint Unified School District Bridge Program, an after-school programme that addresses the academic and emotional needs of low-income and high-need students. Shores was a tutor at Bridge and arranged for a pilot project in which *Play the Knave* was incorporated as a daily enrichment activity for the students. A second connection was the Teacher Education programme at the UC Davis School of Education, through which we hoped to find K–12 teachers

willing to try *Play the Knave* in their classrooms. In addition to soliciting from Teacher Education staff the names of programme alumni who might be interested, we presented the game to pre-service teachers enrolled in the credentialing programme. During the academic year that followed, we built on these connections to Bridge and the School of Education. The structure for this was a year-long internship in UC Davis's English Department.

The pedagogy internship had three overlapping goals. First, we aimed to contribute to the education of the interns. We sought out promising and ambitious undergraduates, particularly English majors, who were curious about a career in teaching or deeply invested in Shakespeare studies and/or digital culture. The internship would provide these students an utterly unique educational experience in addition to preparing them for careers after graduation. A second aim was to impact Shakespeare education in our Northern California community. We hoped that by having a larger teaching team, we could reach out to many more K–12 schools. We were especially focused on under-resourced schools, which could not afford the hardware needed to run *Play the Knave*. And finally, we hoped the internship would contribute to the ongoing development of the game's software. Knowing more about how K–12 learners responded to the platform would help *Play the Knave's* development team adjust the software's features, ensuring that the game, once released to the public, would be set up effectively for classroom adoption. In sum, the internship not only structured our collaboration with each other but also facilitated three additional overlapping educational collaborations: (1) among UC Davis undergraduate students and between them and Bloom; (2) between the UC Davis teaching interns and local K–12 teachers; and (3) between the teaching team for *Play the Knave* and the game's development team.

We activated our local connections through two phases of the internship. First, over the course of three months, interns offered lessons with *Play the Knave* almost daily at Bridge, which not only gave the interns hands-on teaching experience but also benefitted Bridge students. To take just one example, a sixth-grade student who suffered from extreme anxiety around reading greatly improved his literacy skills as a consequence of working with the game. The motion-capture interface – which incorporates bodily movement and exciting visual stimulation – encouraged him to engage with the texts on screen; these more positive experiences with reading shifted his attitude such that he read with less trepidation in other contexts. The Bridge visits continued during the second phase of the internship, when interns (including Shores) also took a quarter-long

seminar for credit in the English department with Bloom. Unlike in a typical course, interns shifted between being beneficiaries of Bloom's instruction and being collaborators with Bloom, Shores and the *Knave* software development team. In addition to reading scholarship in the fields of education, Shakespeare, media studies and digital humanities, interns worked in teams to apply this theory by designing lesson plans that they would teach in actual K–12 classrooms. The classroom visits, in turn, informed ongoing research into and development of the game's design.

The class fulfilled one of the practical challenges of collaborations situated in academia: carving out time for the project from the busy schedules of students and faculty. We assumed that by providing a dedicated space and time for the group to connect in RL, we would meet the multiple aims of the project. In certain ways, the class structure was ideal. Readings and discussions provided the critical intellectual foundation for the project; assignments with set deadlines forced us to make consistent progress; and the regular meeting time/place offered a convenient setting for interns to talk through the difficulties they encountered while working with local teachers and leading lessons with the game. That said, the university classroom has its limitations as a structural mechanism for collaborative work because it is surprisingly rigid and hierarchical. Even though interns took the class as 'Pass/Fail', needing only to complete the assignments in order to pass, many of them were nervous about their performance. Whenever Bloom commented on interns' work, they couldn't help but interpret this as 'instructor feedback', feeling that they were being (for better or for worse) judged. Although Bloom tried constantly to position herself as the leader of a collaboration and not as the authoritative master, the hierarchy was difficult to dissolve.

Another form of rigidity that interfered with the collaborative dynamic stemmed from the narrow definition of 'learning' inherited from our time in a university. Because this was an official class for credit, Bloom – perhaps out of habit and a sense of student expectation more than any top-down requirement – felt the course needed to resemble other courses in the department: a syllabus set in advance with required readings and pre-determined assignments with fixed deadlines. And since the course was in an English department, those assignments needed to emphasise close-reading, research and writing skills. The expectations of an English class, however, often came into conflict with the requirements of a great collaborative project. For instance, one assignment – designed to enhance the interns' education as well as to support the collaboration between our teaching team and the game's development team – involved having each

group of interns develop a research question relating to *Play the Knave's* impact on learning and use their visit to a local school to gather data for answering this question. The syllabus was designed to scaffold this research, gently guiding the interns through each phase of their projects. However, collaborations do not proceed in a straight line and along a predictable course that can be laid out in advance on paper: they are much more like jazz jam sessions than like orchestral performances (Savage and Symonds, 2018: 61). As we put our syllabus into practice, we realised that some of the deadlines and even some of the assignments were unreasonable. Our collaboration as a team was strained by our efforts to impose on it an inorganic timetable and structure.

What is more, the structure and aims of our research sometimes conflicted with our outreach to local teachers. Again, one challenge was timing. The university system and the K–12 system have vastly different daily timetables and academic schedules, and the lead-time teachers needed to plan lessons was much shorter than the lead-time we needed to organise classroom visits. More than once, a teacher would request to have the classroom visit within a week, and we would scramble to respond as interns juggled paper deadlines, exams and classes. Divergent temporalities rendered our connections with local teachers 'glitchy'. These glitchy connections made the research assignment at the centre of the course especially challenging to execute, since the availability of K–12 school research sites could not be neatly coordinated with the course's research assignment deadlines. This put pressure not only on the educational experience of the interns but also the teaching team's collaboration with the game's development team. Because it was difficult to connect with K–12 teachers in RL, our visits to classrooms and our research on those visits took on a structure that did not always yield the most robust data. The process for implementing *Play the Knave* in classrooms was essentially this: an intern would briefly correspond, usually via email, with the teacher to settle on a date and time for the visit and to find out which play was being taught: in the best circumstances, interns would ascertain what the teacher hoped students could learn from the activity. Then a group of interns would arrive at the arranged time and teach the lesson plan the group had designed. These conditions were not ideal for researching the game's impact. Some teachers hadn't seen the digital tool in advance, so they couldn't inform interns fully about how the platform could best serve their particular students. Moreover, since interns were limited to one or two class visits, with little room to assess students before, during and after these visits, it was difficult for them to draw inferences from data collected.

This is not to say that the visits were fruitless. It was clear to us and to the teachers who filled out our post-visit questionnaire that students who otherwise resisted Shakespeare were intrinsically motivated to participate in lessons involving the game. Because the game presents Shakespeare's drama simultaneously through multiple learning modes – kinaesthetic, visual, auditory – it helps students with different learning styles connect with Shakespeare's language (Azevedo et al., 2018). Moreover, as has been the case in research on *Play the Knave* in university classrooms, the game prompted high school students' critical thinking around racial and gender identity in Shakespeare, deepening their understanding of the difference between actor and character in drama and putting pressure on their assumptions about traditional casting (Bloom et al., 2021). But we realised that our research would have been more productive if the teachers involved could have taken a more expansive role in the lessons we taught their students. A contrasting case of successful collaboration with one particular teacher confirms this point. Before the formal internship programme got underway, Bloom and Shores helped organise a lesson for one of the pre-service teachers from UCD's School of Education, Brendan Ward. Ward wanted his ninth-grade students to use *Play the Knave* to rehearse assigned scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* so as to prepare them for a summative assessment centred on performance. Ward reported back that the platform's motion capture interface encouraged students who were typically very still when they performed to move around, and as they became more conscious of how they used their bodies to communicate, their comprehension of the text improved. Ward found that student performers' ability to identify and make arguable claims about the text, as well as their ability to justify those claims with evidence, became more refined as a result of the activity (Shores, 2017; Ward, 2017). We believe that a major reason for the success of this lesson was the nature of Ward's involvement in it. Unlike the classroom visits that took place during the internship, Ward was not simply a beneficiary of our programme, but our collaborator as well. Although we shared our expertise and sample lesson plans with Ward, ultimately he developed the lesson plan, took primary responsibility for teaching it and assessed the game's impact on his students.

In retrospect we realised that in our visits to local schools, we had been treating our host teachers not as collaborators, but as conduits: the teachers supplied the connection to the students we wanted to study. Our failure to truly collaborate with teachers was not an ideological or conceptual shortcoming as much as it was a practical fallout of the glitchy connections that are unavoidable when university students try to connect in RL with

K–12 teachers. One way to remedy that problem would be to insist on repeated RL meetings with teachers who want to use the game to ensure they are empowered as collaborators. But this is an impractical solution that cannot be executed on a broad scale. Few K–12 teachers have the time to experiment with new software and hardware, let alone to meet repeatedly with our teaching team to develop the perfect lesson plan, as was the case with Ward.

How, we were led to wonder, can we truly collaborate with teachers if our RL connections to them are bound to be glitchy? What might such collaboration look like? In the years since Shores graduated and our official collaboration ended, Bloom has experimented with new programme formats to address these questions. When Bloom ran the teaching internship for a second time in 2018–19, collaborating that year with a different undergraduate student, Rachel Cowen, the focus of the English department seminar for interns was developing pedagogical resources for *Play the Knave*. Interns worked collaboratively to create an online archive of lesson plans that could later be accessed virtually by teachers wanting to use the game in their classrooms but unable to connect with us or our interns in person. In this context, interns' classroom visits provided opportunities to playtest the lessons and to educate interns about K–12 students' learning needs. The team collectively created more than fifty lesson plans grounded in research from scholarship in Shakespeare Studies and Education: lessons are tagged to enable teachers to search by topic, play or grade level. The teaching resource archive is temporarily housed on a Google Drive folder, though our plan is to migrate the lesson plans to a public website with search capabilities.

The internet, we have come to realise, is an ideal medium for the revised and still evolving education programme because, as *Play the Knave* itself demonstrates, in the virtual realm glitchy connections do not obviate, but rather can provoke, collaboration. Users of *Play the Knave* respond to the game's glitchy interface by working harder to understand their avatars' affordances and then adjusting their style of performance accordingly. The glitchy interface between human and technology spurs the need for human players to treat the avatar not as a cipher, but as a collaborator: not as a separate entity, but as a virtual playmate (Bloom, 2019b). In our education programme, we have found similarly that shifting the focus to virtual connections – however glitchy they may be – encourages richer collaboration. In its current instantiation, the programme works like this: teachers from anywhere in the country discover *Play the Knave*, often through internet browsing. Having looked over our website videos and resources

and deciding they are interested in using the game, teachers email us to borrow a 'Knave Kit', which includes all the hardware they need to run the game, detailed instructions for set-up and access to our online archive of lesson plans. The teacher or school simply pays for shipping and agrees to share feedback about their and their students' experience with the game.

One advantage of the Knave Kit loan programme is that it makes the game available to teachers far beyond our local community, but of greater interest for this volume, it has improved the quality of our education programme's various collaborations. Ironically, by attenuating our RL connection to teachers, we have improved our ability to collaborate in meaningful ways with them. Instead of having a lesson delivered in person by one of our interns – which sets up the teacher as a conduit rather than a partner – teachers use the Knave Kits more independently. They adapt our resources to fit the particular needs of their students and of their school curriculum, going on to teach these lessons themselves, as did Ward. Because the teachers know their students so well, they can make informed selections from and emendations of our lesson plans, and they can collect more precise data on student learning outcomes. Participating teachers report a range of different ways the game has facilitated learning. Some tell us that the game has been especially helpful for engaging their shy students, enabling them to benefit from reading Shakespeare aloud. One writes, 'The more timid students had less anxiety about getting up and performing.' And another says, 'Because of the format, the students didn't seem to suffer from any of the usual hesitation of reading difficult text aloud.' Many teachers observe that performing via the motion-capture interface was not only fun for students, giving them 'an early positive experience with Shakespeare', but also helped them understand how actors' movements could convey a particular interpretation of the characters and the scene as a whole. One teacher reports that students 'amplified the choices they were making about characters to make them clear on the screen'. Another writes in a similar vein: 'Students demonstrated in pairs that they could expressively physicalise the text to show different interpretations of the scene.'² As these thoughtful comments from teachers demonstrate, the game's impact on students can be studied without our needing to be present in the room when the game is used, thereby bolstering our teaching team's collaboration with the game's development team. In addition to gathering surveys from teachers and their students, the returned Knave Kits are full of useful data. As players are

² Feedback from teachers at River City High School in California, Waldron Mercy Academy in Pennsylvania and City of Hialeah Educational Academy in Florida, respectively.

informed before each game session, *Knave* automatically records game sessions, and the animated videos players create as they perform (featuring player voices and the movement of their avatars) are available not only for the teacher and students but also for our research team. The videos tell us quite a bit about student engagement with the game.

Removing ourselves physically from schools has allowed another sphere of collaboration to flourish, among teachers themselves. In one case, when an enterprising teacher at Neptune High School in New Jersey wanted to borrow a Knave Kit from us but was concerned about the shipping cost, she found other teachers at her school who would be interested in using the game in their classes. Following the model of the cooperative (a well-known form of collaboration), each teacher contributed a small sum to pay the shipping fee. The teachers then worked together to time-share the equipment and to develop lesson plans that would work for their very different classes. The teacher then gathered, collated and passed along feedback from her colleagues. This incident has inspired us to explore ways digital tools might facilitate collaboration between teachers who are not connected in RL. We hope to allow teachers who develop classroom resources for *Play the Knave* to upload these to our online archive, so that they are available to other educators who can use or adapt these lessons, going on to upload their own materials.

The current *Play the Knave* education programme takes advantage of the vast and unpredictable connections of digital networks not to supplant biopower, but to build on it. Without question, there is something special about connecting in RL. The flow often experienced during live, in-person meetings can be magical, and the work enormously productive. But for academics wishing to have meaningful interactions with elementary and secondary schools, not to mention with their own university students, RL connections can be glitchy and sometimes impossible. As we hope to have shown, glitchy connections need not shut down educational collaborations of these sorts but can instead push us to adapt to collaborators whose lives may differ considerably from our own.

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