

Games, Play, and Emancipatory Education: Reconceptualizing Shakespeare Literacy for the Twenty-First Century

Navid Jalali, McMaster University

“O Bottom, thou art changed!”: Making Video Games Theatrical

Over the past decades, games have surpassed film and theater in both revenue and global reach, emerging as the dominant entertainment medium of the twenty-first century (Booth, 2020; Ensslin, 2014; Chang, 2019; Wark, 2007). Their cultural and economic prominence and unique interactive affordances have encouraged educators to imagine “gameful” classrooms in which students engage course material not as passive consumers but as active producers of knowledge (Sheldon, 2020). In this pedagogical model, learning and literacy are structured around participation, experimentation, and systems-thinking rather than reception alone (Gee, 2013). Shakespeare education has not remained untouched by this turn. In an era in which games increasingly mediate students’ encounters with reality (Walz & Deterding, 2014; Wark 2007), instructors are turning to games as tools for fostering active¹, agential engagement with Shakespeare’s plays (Kaethler, 2023).

However, a survey of the “marriage between ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘games’” in pedagogical contexts (Roberts-Smith & DeSouza-Coelho, 2021, p. 275)—which, in this article, I broadly categorize as “gamified Shakespeare classrooms” and “game-infused Shakespeare curricula”² — suggests that, despite the optimism surrounding games’ potential to facilitate *emancipatory* Shakespeare learning by reducing students’ dependence on educators and empowering them to explore Shakespeare’s plays on their own terms, such practices have yet to be critically examined for their limitations. Proponents of gamified Shakespeare classrooms often overlook the extent to which these practices inevitably reinforce the consumerist values of the neoliberal institutions they aim to challenge. At the same time, the current discourse around educational Shakespeare games relies so heavily on Shakespeare’s theatricality that it risk overlooking a crucial point: When Shakespeare is taught through video games, he is not simply presented in a different medium but reconstituted as a different object of study, one that necessitates new

¹ In *Critical Pedagogy and Active Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare* (2023), Jennifer Kitchen defines “Active Shakespeare” as “a range of practical, collaborative and drama-based approaches to teaching Shakespeare” (1).

² These are my terms, and I will define them later in this article.

pedagogical approaches and a reconceptualization of Shakespeare literacy for the twenty-first century.

Ever since the “movement from page to the stage” in the 1960s, Shakespeare scholars have repeatedly reminded us of Shakespeare’s status as the “poet of the stage” whose works *require* embodiment to properly yield meaning (Riggio, 1999, p. 4). As Milla Cozart Riggio notes, the aim of this approach to Shakespeare has been not simply to reemphasize the importance of “theatricality” in drama but also to direct Shakespeare scholars’ critical energy toward the “contemporaneity fostered in part by the New Criticism,” with the aim of making Shakespeare relevant to the lives of modern audiences. Accordingly, scholars such as Riggio invite Shakespeare teachers to welcome enactive and embodied practices into their classrooms. Recently, this argument has spilled over into the discussions around educational Shakespeare games. Gina Bloom and Lauren Bates (2020), for example, advocate the classroom use of performance-based digital games, exemplified by Bloom’s motion-capture game *Play the Knave* (ModLab 2020) as a means to “make the plays relevant to lives of students” (p. 18). Jennifer Roberts-Smith and her collaborators (2023) even go a step further, arguing for “a design theory [for educational Shakespeare games] grounded in the adaptation of theatrical principles to electronic media, and perhaps a new aesthetic and even a rhetoric of gameplay only associatively related to Shakespeare” (p. 16). Despite their good intentions, such approaches to designing educational Shakespeare games are at best limiting, as they force the principles of a speech-based medium of expression such as theater onto an inherently text-based medium like video games, while heavily prioritizing the former over the latter by situating themselves in a critical framework that ties Shakespeare’s value mainly to the medium of the stage. An educational game produced through this approach will inevitably resemble *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s Nick Bottom, a human with a donkey’s head. Such a game, in other words, will lack the flexibility and immediacy of performance-based practices without fully realizing the pedagogical affordances of video games. If our intention is to make Shakespeare more accessible to modern students through video games, would it not be more effective to treat the writer, rather than the medium through which we teach his works, as the subject of the metamorphosis?

In *The Shakespeare User* (2017), Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes argue that, unlike traditional Shakespeare “readers”, contemporary Shakespeare “users”, including players of Shakespeare games, possess the agency to dismantle not only Shakespeare’s texts but also the “myth of the man” and, I would add, the myth of the medium itself. Through unpredictable acts of “appropriation,” these users reassemble Shakespeare in ways that often resist inherited forms of cultural authority and hegemony, actively claiming control over what Shakespeare might look like (p. 3). New modes of Shakespeare use, and therefore tend to emerge alongside the development of new media and communication platforms (Fazel & Geddes, 2017; see also Carson & Kirwan, 2014). Geddes et al.’s theory of the Shakespeare “user” thus provides fertile ground for rethinking the role of the student in the Shakespeare classroom and the ways we can employ games in such contexts to make pedagogical practice more deliberately

emancipatory. In *Video Game Shakespeare* (2015), Bloom asks, “What can games do for Shakespearean theater that it cannot do for itself?” (p. 114). Following Bloom, this essay questions what games can do for Shakespeare education that it cannot do for itself. This question, however, cannot be answered without first addressing more foundational concerns, including what constitutes effective Shakespeare education in the twenty-first century, why games are particularly suited to facilitate it, and what kinds of games are best positioned to serve this purpose.

Shakespeare Education’s “Shakespeare Problem”: Emancipatory Education in the Twenty-First Century

In 2019, Laura Estill argued that “digital humanities has a Shakespeare problem,” contending that Shakespeare’s canonical centrality has disproportionately structured early modern digital and archival initiatives. This centrality within digital humanities, Estill argues, reflects Shakespeare’s broader cultural reputation in spheres such as education and the arts (p. 1). Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens also maintain that Shakespeare’s canonical dominance has proven similarly problematic within educational contexts, to the extent that Shakespeare pedagogy itself may be said to have a Shakespeare problem, one that increasingly constrains teachers’ and students’ ability to approach his plays freely and creatively. Nevertheless, focusing on the complex web of historical, cultural, and political factors that have turned Shakespeare into a canon might divert our attention from the pressures put on Shakespeare by the institutional structures within which his works are taught, making us forget that Shakespeare education does not exist in isolation and is subject to the same pressures and constraints that shape contemporary higher education. Any attempt to define effective Shakespeare education in the twenty-first century must therefore begin with a critical examination of modern Shakespeare students’ expectations of—and relationship with—pedagogy in higher education.

As Helen Beetham (2013) observes, the term “pedagogy” derives from the Greek “paidagōgos,” originally referring to “the slave” who escorted children, or “paidia,” to school. Therefore, Beetham argues that “pedagogy” sits uneasily within post-compulsory education, where learning is increasingly conceived as “self-directed” (p. 41). Ian Bogost (2007) extends a similar etymological critique by examining practices of “schooling” in contemporary corporate and institutional contexts, where education is often framed as “training.” He notes that the term “training” derives from the Old French “trahiner,” meaning “to draw out or to cause something, often a plant, to grow into a particular form.” Training, Bogost argues, presupposes an “external agent” who determines both the form and the direction of growth. By contrast, “education” derives from the Latin “educere,” meaning “to lead out.” In its fullest sense, education draws learners beyond the systems that sustain it, equipping them to recognize and critique the very structures within which they are formed (p. 263).

Increasingly, today's students enter academia seeking "training" rather than "education," an expectation shaped by the demands of the market, their families, and the institutions they attend. Bogost argues that contemporary academic institutions, pressured by the assumption that their primary duty is to prepare students for the job market, function less as sites of intellectual emancipation than as mechanisms for producing compliant workers. Work, he observes, has become the telos of education, the intended outcome for those who have been "properly schooled" (p. 275). Simultaneously, education in practice is tethered to the logics of discipline and productivity, teaching students to respond to authority, complete decontextualized tasks, and internalize the consequences of questioning the system. Drawing on the work of Marxist sociologist Madan Sarup, Mike Cole (2008) similarly warns that students in contemporary educational institutions are systematically "supervised, hierarchized, rewarded, and punished." In such systems, Sarup observes, the "truth" of the learning materials—be it Shakespeare's texts or not—is often assumed to reside "behind" or "within" them (pp. 43–44), a presumption that forces students to rely on Bogost's "external agent" not only to access that truth but also to have their understanding of it evaluated and verified.

In recent decades, scholars such as Louis Althusser and Jacques Rancière have dedicated extensive attention to the role of the "external agent" in education, problematizing the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in modern educational systems. In his "Student Problems" (1964/2011), for example, Althusser argues that "the pedagogic function has as its object the transmission of a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess it," a relation that presupposes an "inequality" between "knowledge" and "nonknowledge" (p. 14). Rancière radicalizes this argument in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) through his concept of "universal teaching," drawing on the experience of the exiled French educator Joseph Jacotot, a French teacher in exile who successfully taught French to Flemish students with no prior knowledge of the language. According to Rancière, modern institutions operate on a "pedagogical myth" that divides human intelligence into two types, positing a superior intelligence on the part of the schoolmaster and an inferior one on the part of the student (p. 7). This presupposed inferiority renders the student's independent engagement with texts meaningless. By virtue of their presumed superiority, the "schoolmaster" becomes an indispensable component of what Rancière termed the "explicative order," in which "the words of the master must shatter the silence of the taught material." Neither the student nor anyone outside the institution—Rancière often represents the latter through the figure of the "father"—can ever attain the position of the schoolmaster; as a result, all remain perpetually dependent on the master. The logic of explication, therefore, produces a "regression ad infinitum," with the chain of reasoning continuing endlessly unless a schoolmaster intervenes (p. 3). Citing Jacotot, Rancière uses the term "enforced stultification" to describe this structure: a system in which the master assumes intellectual superiority and sustains an "imagined" distance between his intelligence and that of the pupil. For Rancière, this fabricated distance constitutes the very principle of stultification, to the extent that the word "to understand" itself can arrest

the movement of reason by splitting the world of intelligence in two, separating “the groping animal” from “the learned little man” and “common sense” from “science” (pp. 7–9). Crucially, Rancière contends that the explicative order perpetuates student dependency on the master by privileging speech over writing, a hierarchy challenged by Jacques Derrida (1976) in his critique of Western logocentrism. According to Rancière, such an order often demands an oral explanation to clarify written discourse. This oral explication³ is typically needed to “explicate the written explication,” operating under the assumption that reasonings are clearer and “better imprinted on the mind of the student,” when they are conveyed by the speech of the master, which dissipates in an instant, than when conveyed by the book, where they are “inscribed forever in indelible characters” (Rancière, 1991, p. 4).

Against this hierarchical order, Rancière proposes a “method of equality,” grounded not in explication but in “will.” According to Rancière’s theory of universal teaching, the student can learn even without a master explicator when motivated by “desire” or “necessity” (p. 12). Rancière even goes so far as to argue that “one can teach what one doesn’t know” so long as the student is emancipated and “compelled to exercise their own intelligence” (p. 15). To emancipate another, the teacher must interrogate “in the manner of men and not in the manner of scholars,” seeking to be instructed rather than to instruct. Rancière uses the term “ignorant master” to describe such a teacher, “one who claims no prior intellectual voyage over the student” (p. 30). In this new framework, the “materiality of the book” maintains equality between two minds, whereas explication risks the annihilation of one by another (p. 32). Therefore, for Rancière, true emancipation lies in recognizing that there are not two levels of intelligence and that every work of art manifests the same shared intellectual capacity. Drawing on the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras’s concept of *panta en panti*, Rancière contends that, “This is what [‘everything is in everything’] means: the tautology of power. All the power of language is in the totality of a book” (p. 26).

Rancière stresses that teaching without the aim of emancipation will necessarily lead to stultification (p. 18). His theory of universal teaching thus begins with the simple yet radical axiom that all human beings possess equal intelligence, echoing René Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am.” As he explains,

To transform “Know yourself” into the principle of emancipation of any human being, it is necessary to activate, against the Platonic interdiction, one of the fantastic

³ While “explanation” and “explication” might have been used interchangeably throughout the essay, there exists a fine difference between the two. For Rancière, “explication”, is a specific pedagogical practice in which a teacher interprets and clarifies a text or concept for the student, supposedly making it easier to understand with the hidden aim to “stultify” the student. “Explanation” does not have the same ideological weight for Rancière, as it is simply used in a general sense to refer to the act of making something understandable.

etymologies of the *Cratylus*: man, the anthropos, is the being who examines what he sees, who knows himself in so reflecting on his act. (p. 36)

The first principle of Rancière's model of emancipatory teaching, therefore, is that one "learns something and relates everything else to it" through a "presupposition of equality" (20), a value that proves similarly integral to modern critical pedagogy pioneered by Paulo Freire (1970/2000), whose theory of "praxis" constitutes "action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Like Rancière, Freire contends that "liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (p. 79). Therefore, in his theory of education as praxis, the teacher is no longer merely "the-one-who-teaches," but who is "him or herself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught also teach" (p. 80).⁴

To truly emancipate a student, therefore, we must encourage them to use their "will" to engage in a dialogue with the book from a "presupposition of equality." Rancière's emphasis on "excitement" and "will" in emancipatory education is similarly echoed in the works of bell hooks. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), for example, hooks argues that the "crisis" of modern education is that "students often do not want to learn, and teachers do not want to teach" (p. 12). According to hooks, one reason behind this issue is that today's institutions view "excitement" in teaching as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of "seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process." Such contempt for excitement is systematic and, in fact, necessary to secure the institution's role as a factory for producing disciplined workers within the capitalist economy. Hooks contends that genuine excitement cannot arise without acknowledging that "there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices" (p. 7). The teacher's role is therefore not "a spectacle" but rather "a catalyst" that calls everyone "to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning" (p. 11).

Read together, these arguments bring the structural problem of contemporary educational institutions into sharper focus. Schools are increasingly compelled to promise preparation for the capitalist labor market. To deliver such preparation efficiently and at scale, institutions adopt fixed agendas and fixed curricular roadmaps that often come at the expense of collective knowledge production and student excitement. This erosion of excitement perpetuates a regime of enforced stultification that secures the teacher's position as a master explicator, forever "the one-who-teaches" and never the "catalyst" for learning.

This structure can prove doubly problematic in a Shakespeare classroom, as the playwright's canonical status often widens the gap between students and teachers. In Shakespeare studies, the regime of enforced stultification against which Rancière warns is best reflected through what Liam Semler (2016) terms the "SysEd," the "over-systematisation of formal education"

⁴ For a detailed comparative analysis of Rancière's and Freire's theories, see Biesta (2017).

that characterizes professional teaching and learning in the twenty-first century Shakespeare education (p. 1), which has brought about the proliferation of tools such as *No Fear Shakespeare*⁵ and the disappearance of educational methods focusing on slow and close reading⁶. Unemancipated students, who view the classroom as a place of “training” and the teacher as a “trainer”, will feel alienated and miserable in such classrooms, where they are constantly expected to grapple with complex texts and produce “original” ideas. It should not catch us with surprise if the prevalence of generative AI makes this issue only worse in the future. Shakespeare educators who do not wish to stultify must therefore actively seek ways to counter the SysEd by cultivating in their students a genuine desire to exercise their will in grappling with Shakespeare’s works while maintaining the presupposition of equality between the intelligence of the students and that of the playwright, a task that can be achieved with the help of games.

Protecting Play: Toward an Emancipatory Shakespeare Education

Philosophers of play have long insisted on its importance for the preservation of democracy, cautioning against the harms of institutionalized “seriousness,” which, as bell hooks observed, is regarded as essential to learning in contemporary educational institutions. As McKenzie Wark (2007) has noted, the Dutch Philosopher Juhan Huizinga, writing in the shadow of the Nazis, contended that, “it remained for the theory of ‘total war’ to [...] extinguish the last vestige of the play element” (as cited in Wark, p. 182). Huizinga (1949) warned,

As a civilization becomes more complex, more variegated and more overladen, and as the technique of production and social life itself become more finely organized, the old cultural soil is gradually smothered under a rank layer of ideas, systems of thought and knowledge, doctrines, rules and regulations, moralities and conventions which have all lost touch with play. Civilization, we then say, has grown more serious; it assigns only a secondary place to playing. (p. 75)

Play has thus been historically conceived as a safeguard, protecting the human mind and culture against the mechanization of social and educational practices.⁷

Gina Bloom (2018) argued that in sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Europe, purveyors of educational games such as grammar card decks positioned their products as ideal forms of recreation, defining recreation not merely as “a break from work” but as “a way to occupy oneself productively *during* a break from work” (p. 68; emphasis in the original). With the

⁵ See McCall, J. (2017).

⁶ See Peterson, J. (2017); Lewis, C. (2017); and Cunningham, K. (2017).

⁷ During modern times, the importance of play as an educational practice in creating and preserving democratic societies has been emphasized by many scholars. See Nussbaum, M. C. (2024).

establishment of Game Studies as an academic discipline and the rise of concepts such as “gamification”⁸ and “serious games”⁹ in the past decades, teachers have increasingly turned to games and play to counter the “over-systematization of formal education” (Semler, 2016, p. 1). The author of *The Multiplayer Classroom*,¹⁰ Lee Sheldon, for example, advises educators to seek “‘balanced’ games” that occupy “a middle ground where learning and fun intersect” (as cited in Bloom, 2018, p. 66).

A survey of Shakespeare education’s engagement with games and play in contemporary English classrooms reveals two dominant approaches: gamified Shakespeare curricula and Shakespeare game-infused classrooms. The first trend, exemplified by projects such as “Shakeserendipity”¹¹ (2015, Better Strangers) and Liam Semler’s “Joker Card” assessment task, seeks to *gamify* Shakespeare by integrating discrete game mechanics—points, competition, and rule-based structures—into otherwise conventional curricular frameworks. The second approach turns not to gamification but to Shakespeare-themed video games, tabletop games, and card games, which, as Jennifer Roberts-Smith et al. (2021) note, are typically employed either to facilitate close textual analysis¹² or to cultivate theatrical skills,¹³ including directing, acting, and spectating.

Gamified Shakespeare Curricula

In 2016, Liam Semler coined the term “SysEd” to describe “the state, processes and truths of modern, professionalised education which positions educators and students in an interlocking network of systems that deliver standardisation, measurement and compliance” (p. 3). According to Semler, the “SysEd” names “the educational sector’s actualisation of larger neoliberal impulses that promote economies of competitive productivity and responsabilisation” (p. 3). The operation of the SysEd inevitably creates what Semler terms “ardenspace,” a concept he introduced in 2013 through a pedagogical reading of court and exile in *As You Like It*. For Semler, “ardenspace” designates temporary spaces of experimental teaching and learning established outside the constraints of the SysEd (i.e. the court), spaces intended to afford educators and students more fertile educational experiences (2013, pp. 54–55). In other words, “ardenspaces” function as pedagogical sanctuaries beyond the rigid, exam-driven structures of

⁸ The concept of “Gamification” has been defined differently by different scholars. Patrick Jagoda (2013) defines it broadly as “a condition of seepage through which game mechanics and objectives come to constitute the work, leisure, thought patterns, affects, and social relations of the overdeveloped world” (p. 116).

⁹ The concept of “Serious Games” has also been defined differently by different scholars. Ian Bogost (2011) draws on Clark Abt to define it as “games that can be used ‘outside entertainment’ in education, health care, or corporate training, for example” (p. 5).

¹⁰ Gina Bloom (2018) describes this book as “a book that teaches teachers how to deliver educational content through games” (p. 66).

¹¹ The project features on the *Shakespeare Reloaded* website. <https://shakespearereloaded.edu.au/>

¹² Roberts-Smith et al. introduce E. B. Hunter’s *Something Wicked* and Katherine Acheson et al.’s *Who Killed Romeo and Juliet?* as examples of such games.

¹³ Roberts-Smith et al. introduce Roberts-Smith et al.’s *Staging Shakespeare* and Bloom et al.’s *Play the Knave* (ModLab, 2020) as examples of such games.

the institution, inviting students to exercise creativity and critical thought in less constrained, more exploratory ways.

According to Semler (2016), gamifying the Shakespeare classroom can effectively accelerate the production of “ardenspace” by diminishing the aura of seriousness that surrounds both Shakespeare as a cultural icon and modern academia as a system oriented toward the reproduction of predictable outcomes in service of the neoliberal economy. To substantiate this claim, Semler points to “Shakeserendipity”¹⁴, a project developed by the Better Strangers team¹⁵ in 2015, which places players—whether students in classroom settings or teachers in professional learning contexts—into contact with “an array of open-access resources relating to a specific play.” The project engages players with Shakespeare-related resources through the use of playing cards. Semler believes that such projects offer significant benefits for players because “neither curriculum constraints nor the long tentacles of the SysEd limit the movement of [their] personal discovery.” As a second example, Semler draws on his experience using “Joker Card” assessment tasks in a third-year university literature module. The module, he explains, required students to complete three assessments, all nominally framed as analytical essays, one of which could be designated a “Joker Card,” permitting students to submit a “radically creative response” in place of a conventional essay. Semler compares the use of the “Joker Card” to “legalising marijuana”, noting that the activity was designed to manage the gaming instinct produced by the SysEd by explicitly inviting play. Taken together, these examples suggest that gamifying the Shakespeare classroom enables both students and teachers to engage with Shakespeare more creatively, thereby challenging the consumerist logics that structure neoliberal educational institutions. As its name implies, “Shakeserendipity” privileges serendipitous discovery over “intended learning outcomes”, creating “ardenspaces” by imposing only “minimal structure on the actual process of learning.” The “Joker Card” assessment task operates in a similar register, situating learning “on the edge of chaos”, where it fosters “[unpredictable], personal, and collaborative insights” most likely to emerge in conditions of “fertile disequilibrium” (pp. 4–5).

However, despite their passionate defense of the gamified classroom, such arguments do not fully reckon with the genealogy and limitations of gamification: a term rooted in behavioral economics and originally developed to deploy game elements in the service of productivity and profit maximization. As Gina Bloom (2018) notes, the alignment between play and profit in education is hardly new, observing that “the new wave in educational gaming is, in fact, a very old wave.” As an example, Bloom refers to an early modern “Publisher” of educational games who explicitly advertised his product under the banner of “Pleasure and Profit” (p. 66). Today, Ellen MacKay (2021) draws on game scholars such as Sebastian Deterding, Rilla Khaled, Lennart E. Nacke, and Dan Dixon to define “gamification” as “the use of game mechanics in traditionally

¹⁴ For a detailed explanation of how the project works, see Semler, L. E. (2016).

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the formation of the Better Strangers team, see Hood, A. (2023).

nongame activities” (p. 204). MacKay further explains that gamification operates by affixing “incidental properties” such as “points and leveling” onto non-game practices, like daily exercise, saving money, or learning Shakespeare, to deploy incentive structures that promote, and even automate, fundamentally non-playful tasks (p. 207).

As Jagoda (2013) observes, in recent years, many game studies scholars have criticized gamification for privileging “the least artistic dimensions” of contemporary digital games, including “repetitive grinding, achievement-based operant conditioning, and dopamine-fueled goal orientation” (p. 115). Citing Victor Turner, Steffen Walz and Sebastian Deterding (2014) argue that the proponents of gamification predominantly subscribe to “the liminal use of games and play as a conservative perfection of means toward the given goals of the existing social order” (p. 9). Jagoda similarly believes that gamification often reproduces hierarchy under the guise of experiences that are framed as fun, interactive, and productive of extrinsic rewards (p. 143). Extending this critique, queer game studies scholar Bo Ruberg (2019) has introduced the concept of “de-gamification” to describe the deliberate stripping away of ludic structures that enact oppression in everyday life (p. 24). Rooted in economic rationality, gamification thus risks reinstating the very neoliberal and consumerist logics that Semler’s “ardenspace” aims to resist.

Furthermore, as Jagoda notices, gamification is frequently deployed in educational contexts to “make typically boring tasks fun by transforming labor into an action-oriented and interactive game” (p. 120). Echoing this instrumental logic, Ellen MacKay notes that Jane McGonigal celebrates gamification for its capacity to “teach, inspire, and engage” by offering rewards in ways that everyday reality purportedly cannot (p. 205). Similarly, for Semler (2016), gamifying the classroom is a necessary response to the “SysEd,” which he contends “can crush substantive engagement by burdensome application of extrinsic drivers that change the definition of ‘working well’ and undermine morale, quality, and retention” (p. 4). Viewed in this way, however, gamifying the Shakespeare classroom risks implying that Shakespeare and its learning are in essence “boring” or “burdensome,” necessitating the use of gamification techniques to entice students into engaging with the plays.

Jennifer Roberts-Smith et al. (2021) describe a comparable dynamic through Douglas Lanier’s concept of “reciprocal legitimation”, a process they argue is enabled by Shakespeare’s continued presence in standardized curricula, which “drives the market for collisions between Shakespeare and popular aesthetic forms.” As Lanier explains, “by recasting Shakespeare in terms of mass media and genres, producers could at once supply a readymade market (schools), reinforce dominant modes of mass-cultural reception, and minimize the extent to which Shakespeare might actively conflict with or interrogate mass culture” (as cited in Roberts-Smith & DeSouza-Coelho, 2021, p. 281). In contexts such as Semler’s argument, reciprocal legitimation ultimately operates in favor of gamification, reinforcing the assumption that “Shakespeare lacks the cultural capital to be as engaging as games” (Roberts-Smith and DeSouza-Coelho, 2021, p. 280–81).

While scholars like Semler attempt to make Shakespeare relevant to students' lives by incorporating game elements into their pedagogical practices, a more effective approach, one that ensures genuine critical engagement with the plays, would make students' lives relevant to Shakespeare, a goal that Gina Bloom and Lauren Bates (2021) pursue through their Shakespeare game-focused curriculum: *Blood Will Have Blood*.

Game-Infused Classrooms

The field of Shakespeare video games has witnessed an explosion in the past two decades (Bloom, 2015; Way, 2021). Shakespeare's renown as a playwright and video games' interactive capacities and popularity among the youth have made Shakespeare scholars and game designers alike interested in studying the results of the dialogue between the two fields. In *Video Game Shakespeare* (2015), Gina Bloom sorts these games broadly under the two formal categories of "drama-making games", which enable their players to control a Shakespearean character to change the outcome in a dramatic plot, and "theater-making games", which turn the students into directors or actors of Shakespearean plays to give them a sense of "what it is like to put on a play, in all its diverse facets" (p. 115). In "Shakespeare, Game, and Play" (2021), Jennifer Roberts-Smith et al. provide a similar categorization, focusing on pedagogical Shakespeare video games, which they divide into two broad types: "gamified textual analysis", encompassing games that aim "to develop students' analytical skills by setting completion conditions that can only be achieved through detailed engagement with the language, plot, characters, and/or themes of Shakespeare's plays", and "staging games", which position players "as theatre-makers in variations on sandbox games"¹⁶ that simulate the decision-making processes involved in staging a play" (p. 276).

Despite their belief in the usefulness of video games in increasing user engagement with Shakespeare's plays, both scholars remain skeptical of the *pedagogical* value of the games they survey. As Bloom (2015) notes, the "drama-making games" often turn students into consumers of "someone else's fiction or historical data", while the "theater-making games" have had limited success in "[enskill] their users in the experience of theater" (p. 115). Roberts-Smith et al. (2021) similarly assert that "all of the digital Shakespeare games [they] have surveyed implicitly adopt relatively narrow, text-centric understandings of what a play by Shakespeare might be, in comparison to more complex articulations in the broader field of Shakespeare text and performance studies" (p. 278).

Bloom and Roberts-Smith et al. eventually diverge in their arguments, the former attributing the failure of Shakespeare video games to "an incompatibility between the bodily mechanics of theater-making the games represent and their own game-play mechanics" (2015, p. 115), while

¹⁶ These are games that emphasize player freedom, open-ended exploration, and creative interaction with the game world rather than strictly linear objectives and storylines. Roberts-Smith et al.'s prototype game, *Staging Shakespeare (Romeo and Juliet Edition)*, created for the 2013 Stratford Festival, is one such game. See Roberts-Smith, J. et al. (2023).

the latter argue that “literal simulations of Shakespeare’s plays or of Shakespearean theater production may not be the richest way to teach Shakespeare” (2023, p. 16). Nevertheless, both scholars agree that designers of Shakespeare video games must view Shakespeare’s works as theatrical performances rather than playtexts. While Bloom contends that “theater-making” games have so far failed to “enskill their players successfully in the experience of theater”, her vision of a successful Shakespeare video game is that of a motion-capture “theater-making” game, *Play the Knave* (ModLab, 2020)¹⁷, which uses Microsoft Kinect to map players’ movements onto avatars while displaying Shakespeare’s lines in karaoke format (2015, pp. 119–23).

Roberts-Smith et al. (2021) are similarly “struck by the extent to which all of our games—even the theatre games—lean heavily on a conception of Shakespeare’s plays as ontologically more textual than performative,” while, for them, plays are “sites where performance is ontologically prior to text and spectatorship is as active as (though different from) performance.” As they assert, “the spirit of participatory, embodied play that continued to pervade the early modern London theatre industry, [...] seems to [them] to depend, not upon the textuality of the theatre, but upon its performativity and conceptuality” (p. 287, pp. 290–91). According to Roberts-Smith et al., Bloom’s *Play the Knave* is promising since it “argues that textual analysis can be an embodied practice (in speech and gesture) as much as a cognitive one, and also values players’ bodies as instruments of textual knowledge production” (p. 287).

In their emphasis on embodied textual analysis, performance-based games such as *Play the Knave* represent performance-centric pedagogical theories that became popular in the mid-twentieth century with the works of scholars such as Rex Gibson, the writer of *The Cambridge School Shakespeare* series, who insisted that “Shakespeare wrote his plays for performance, and that his scripts are completed by enactment of some kind” (as cited in Kitchen, 2023, p. 10). As Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens (2023) observe, drama aligned naturally with the principles of “New Teaching”, promoted by scholars such as John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, who argued that learning must begin from students’ interests. Inspired by a “gradual” shift from “Shakespeare in print to Shakespeare in performance” (Stevens, 2023, p. 41), twentieth-century scholars and teachers such as Michael O’Neill aimed to “desanctify” Shakespeare by enabling students to develop their own interpretations through performative, skills-based, and interrogative modes of learning (as cited in Riggio, 1999, p. 12). As Steven (2023) notices, Gibson insisted that activities in the Shakespeare classroom must embrace the “experimental ethos of the theatrical rehearsal room” (p. 43). As such, proponents of performance-based learning¹⁸ argue that embodied pedagogies can empower students to mobilize critical frameworks in response to

¹⁷ For a detailed explanation of how the game works, see Bloom, Gina, and Evan Buswell. “Experimenting with Shakespeare: Games and Play in the Laboratory.” www.shakesperiment.tome.press/

¹⁸ See essays in Riggio, M. C. (1999).

Shakespeare's complex texts and to negotiate meaning within diverse, dynamic learning communities.

As children of such performance-based teaching theories, performative video games such as *Play the Knave* can be emancipatory insofar as they increase student agency in exploring Shakespeare's plays through embodied practices, make students interested in the plays by "[making their] lives relevant to Shakespeare" (Bloom & Bates, 2021, p. 20), and reduce the role of the teacher in the Shakespeare classroom to a "catalyst" who guides student learning without directly interpreting or "explicating" the plays for the students. Bloom and Bates (2021) prove this claim through their successful experience of building a whole curriculum, called *Blood Will Have Blood*, based entirely on *Play the Knave*, and using it in their classrooms in Cape Town South African high schools and in a few university-level Shakespeare courses at UC Davis (9).

Nevertheless, performative games such as *Play the Knave* have yet to be critically studied for their limitations, especially with regards to their ability to enable emancipatory pedagogy in the sense discussed in this essay. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks reminds us of the importance of "safety in the classroom", arguing that "it is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement" (p. 39). Bloom and Bates claim that, being a game, *Play the Knave* can effectively build a safe space in the classroom where students can engage with difficult topics in Shakespeare's plays from a distance. "Physical engagement with the game," they argue, "offers students a visceral entry point into difficult subject matters like domestic violence, whilst simultaneously protecting them: it is only a game, after all, and the platform's glitchy avatars inevitably lead to laughter"¹⁹ (p. 15). However, *Play the Knave's* focus on performativity might just as easily prove problematic in other ways. In *Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters* (2023), Emma Whipday notices that "the most significant barrier to incorporating embodied activities in the classroom can be student discomfort, particularly among students who, in choosing a literature module, did not expect to learn through their bodies" (p. 8). Scholars such as Carol Atherton (2023) and Katherine Hennessey (2023) have similarly noted the stress associated with Shakespeare performance and criticism, particularly, in Hennessey's case, for non-English-speaking students (pp. 109–19; pp. 172–80). In their experience of exhibiting the game during the *Stratford Festival* in 2015, Bloom and her team noticed that players sometimes got "particularly nervous about speaking Shakespeare's lines", which made it necessary for a member of the audience to "sometimes [volunteer] to speak the lines from outside the playing space" (2015, p. 232). While Bloom interprets this as an instant of collaborative learning, the experience of scholars such as Whipday, Atherton, and Hennessey reminds us that such performance-based games might also create anxiety for students who

¹⁹ On the question of "Safety," I do not completely agree with Bloom and Bates in saying that games, just because they are games, will protect students from emotional harm. The concept of "Bleed", coined by Emily Care Boss, proves that this is often not the case. See Bowman, S. L. et al. (2025).

might not be as confident or eloquent in speaking Shakespeare's difficult language before the class. Future studies on performance-based video games must also acknowledge the facts that the required equipment for running games such as *Play the Knave* is costly, environmentally unsustainable, and increasingly obsolete with the decline of motion-capture technology.²⁰ Engagement with such games also often remains confined to the classroom, and the format excludes students with disabilities or mobility limitations.²¹

As exemplified by Tom Bishop and Gina Bloom's recent collection, *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England* (2025), many contemporary Shakespeare scholars are writing passionately about the possible ways in which games and gamefulness can offer new ways of approaching Shakespeare. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to how Shakespeare games and gamified Shakespeare curricula enable a Shakespeare learning which is different and more emancipatory than traditional teaching methods. While gamified classrooms have promised to break us free from the limits of academic teaching and learning in the age of neoliberalism, they simultaneously risk reproducing the same consumerist values that they set out to fight. Similarly, the proponents of performance-based games are yet to offer theoretical evidence to support their arguments on why such games are pedagogically effective while, as Sheila Cavanagh and Kevin Quarmby (2014) notice, "many standard studies of teaching Shakespeare through performance, including Milla Cozart Riggio's edited collection of that name, pre-date twenty-first-century investigations into cognition and learning" (p. 96).

The problem, as I have tried to demonstrate so far, stems from the fact that discussions of game design and gameful curriculum design can never precede the question of why we need games and gamification practices to teach Shakespeare in the first place. Accordingly, before designing a game or a gameful curriculum for their Shakespeare classrooms, I believe scholars must first consider how video games facilitate emancipatory learning differently from traditional methods. In other words, they must consider how video games can bridge the fabricated distance between the minds of the writer, the educator, and the student in the framework advocated by Jacques Rancière.

Forming Theory: Why Shakespeare Video Games?

In recent decades, cognitive science and psychology have offered influential accounts of the learning process. Building on these insights, game studies scholars have examined how video games, through their distinctive affordances as what Janet Murray (2004) calls a "pattern-making" medium, can foster meaningful learning. Placing these perspectives in dialogue with the pedagogical theories of thinkers such as Rancière, Freire, and hooks, who more explicitly

²⁰ For the problems caused by the high cost of the equipment see Bloom, G. & Bates, L. (2021, p. 18); for the outdatedness of the equipment see Bloom, G. (2015, p.234); for the unsuitability of the equipment see Chang, A. Y. (2019, pp. 147–50).

²¹ For student engagement with *Play the Knave* outside the classroom see Bloom, G. (2015, p. 232); for the exclusion of students with disabilities see Malone, L. A. et al. (2017, pp. 1–3).

articulate emancipatory models of education, as well as with contemporary Shakespeare scholars such as Geddes and Fazel, who advocate a shift from the Shakespeare “reader” to the Shakespeare “user”, enables a clearer account of how games can help dismantle the “explicative order” in the twenty-first-century Shakespeare classroom.

Drawing on psychologist James Greeno, Sara de Freitas and Terry Mayes (2013) identify three major learning paradigms, each of which they believe is incomplete in isolation: the associationist, the cognitive, and the situative. The associationist theory of learning, built out of the work of behavioral psychologists such as B. F. Skinner and Ivan Pavlov, models learning as the gradual building of “patterns of associations and skill components.” Learning thus occurs through the process of connecting the elementary mental or behavioural units, through “sequences of activity” followed by “feedback of some kind” (p. 71). The “cognitive” theory of learning, developed by cognitive psychologists such as Jean Piaget, further contends that “learning, as well as perception, thinking, language and reasoning”, is the output of an individual’s “attention, memory and concept formation processes.” Knowledge acquisition is therefore viewed as the outcome of an interaction between “new experiences and the structures for understanding that have already been created” (p. 74). Unlike associationism, the cognitive account sees knowledge acquisition as proceeding from a declarative form to a procedural, compiled form. As Harry Fletcher-Wood (2018) argues, the central assumption of cognitive learning theory is that “what students know dictates what they can learn” (p. 6). Finally, the situative theory of learning emphasizes the fact that a learner will always be subjected to influences from “the social and cultural setting in which the learning occurs,” which will also, at least partly, define the learning outcomes (de Freitas & Mayes, p. 77). As de Freitas et al. remind us, when knowledge is seen as situated in the “practices of communities”, then the outcomes of learning involve the abilities of individuals to participate in those practices successfully. Activity, motivation, and learning, therefore, are all related to a need for “a positive sense of identity”, shaped by social forces (pp. 77–78).

In *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy* (2013), James Paul Gee observes that “what we know today about thinking has not been informing our teaching in schools.” According to Gee, “This is so, in part, because the views about thinking current in cognitive science stress the importance of active inquiry and deep conceptual understanding, things that are not politically popular any longer in schools, driven as they are today by standardized tests and skill-and-drill curricula devoted to ‘the basics’” (p. 3). Gee believes that the study of “good video games”²² can effectively “illuminate ways in which learning works when it works best for human beings.” For Gee, good game designers are “practical theoreticians of learning”, since what makes games “deep” is that players exercise their “learning muscles”, often without paying overt attention to the matter (p. 21). He

²²Gee speaks of “good video games” from a pedagogical perspective. For him, “good video games” are not simply entertaining or commercially successful titles but games that embody strong principles of learning and cognition.

therefore argues that the learning that occurs through playing “good video games” reflects how the human mind operates in accordance with associationist, cognitive, and situative learning theories, even when designers are not fully aware of these theoretical frameworks.

First, Gee argues that “the purpose of games as learning (and other game-like forms of learning) should be to make every learner a proactive, collaborative, reflective, critical, creative, and innovative problem solver” (p. 1). Games, he believes, “are well-designed problem-solving spaces with feedback and clear outcomes” (p. 3). In solving problems, Gee believes that video game players constantly build patterns of associations between what they know and what they aim to learn, a process that de Freitas et al. (2013) believe is necessary to the development of students’ skill components. In *Shakespeare Studies*, Jennifer Kitchen (2023) similarly argues that “authentic” and “active” Shakespeare teaching should draw on the learners’ existing knowledge (p. 11). In practice, this logic is echoed by Edward Rocklin (2019), who believes we must teach the students “to read as talented interpreters of Shakespeare do”, guiding them to ask: “what does X do? (and to what purpose), where X is ‘any element of a Shakespearean play from the title to the actions’” (p. 52).

Gee (2003) also believes that “we humans often think in terms of patterns”, which he believes allows us “to think and reason by using the experiences we have had in life” and “to make guesses (predictions) about the world that go beyond our actual experiences” (p. 178). According to him, humans think and understand best when they can “imagine an experience in such a way that the simulation prepares them for actions they need and want to take in order to achieve their goals.” Video games, he argues, are the “perfect metaphor” for this function of the mind since, as Janet Murray argues, “the computer is the most powerful pattern-making medium we have available to us” (Gee, 2013, pp. 16–17; Murray, 2004).

Further, in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), Gee argues that “literacy and thinking are primarily social (and not mental) achievements.” According to Gee, “it is society, and not the brain, that determines how you read or think about some particular thing” (pp. 1–2). For him, “all learning in all semiotic domains requires identity work”, a process that, as de Freitas et al. suggest, is closely bound up with social forces (pp. 77–78). This “identity work”, Gee explains, more specifically entails “taking on a new identity and forming bridges from one’s old identities to the new one” (p. 51). Thus, “a child in a science classroom engaged in real inquiry, and not passive learning, must be willing to take on an identity as a certain type of scientific thinker, problem solver, and doer.” The child must also see and make connections between this new identity and other identities that they have already formed (p. 51). Similarly, a student in a Shakespeare classroom must be willing to take on new identities as a theater director, a choreographer, an actor, and even a literary critic²³, all the

²³ This is not to say that every Shakespeare classroom must enable students to take on all these identities.

while making connections between these new identities and the identities the student has already formed and brings with them to the classroom.

Focusing on role-playing games, Gee (2003) argues that players simultaneously negotiate three distinct yet related identities: the virtual character's identity as controlled by the real person, the real person's identity as they control the character, and the projective identity, which emerges both from the character as a "project" for the player and from the player's projection of their own identity onto the virtual character. Gee contends that this tripartite interplay of identities is more powerful than identification with characters in novels or films because it is both "active", in that the player performs actions within the game, and "reflexive", since "once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do" (pp. 55, 58).

Moreover, Gee (2003) argues that video games create excitement in learners by giving them a sense of achievement in a number of ways. First, they work based on the "amplification of input principle", meaning that "they give, for a little input, a lot of output." As Gee explains, "in a video game, you press some buttons in the real world and a whole interactive virtual world comes to life." Secondly, video games encourage new ways of learning and thinking through discovering new powers, which allows students to *feel* "the dawning of new valued identities." According to Gee, the new valued identities created through gameplay can empower students in new ways (p. 64).

Gee (2003) views learning as a "practice effect," which means "we should give students space and time to practice what they are learning" (p. 67). Citing Colin Beard and John Wilson, Sheila Cavanagh and Kevin Quarmby (2014) argue that experiential learning is, "the underpinning process to all forms of learning" as it represents "the transformation of most new and significant experiences and incorporates them into a broader conceptual framework" (as cited in Cavanagh & Quarmby, 2014, p. 94). In literary studies, Anne Bruder (2020) cautions against the diminishing space for experimental learning, arguing that today "teachers of all stripes face increasing challenges to student engagement, comprehension, and community-building", as students increasingly read "less slowly and less critically" (p. 47). In Shakespeare education specifically, Rex Gibson likewise observes that "all students should have opportunities through practical experience to make up their own minds about what Shakespeare might hold for them" (as cited in Kitchen, 2023, p. 49).

Video games can offer students a platform for gaining “practical experience” through exploration of the game world. Drawing on ecology, game studies scholar Alenda Y. Chang (2019) compares video games to “mesocosms”²⁴, or “mini-ecosystems”, arguing that “best games, like the most successful ecological experiments, tread a fine line between bounded tidiness and inclusive reality, heightening our awareness of mechanisms while providing ample outlets for our energy and curiosity” (p. 21). Further, as Astrid Ensslin (2014) suggests, practical experience can be gained through “slow gaming”. According to Ensslin, “slow games”, games that cannot be played at the high speed normally expected by players, “force players to proceed at an extremely slow pace, thus evoking a meditative mood” (p. 184).

The effects of slow gaming are, to a certain extent, akin to the Situationist²⁵ principle of “dérive”, developed by philosophers such as Guy Debord. As Ensslin explains, *dérive* refers to “a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances” (as cited in Ensslin, 2014, p. 185). Spatial and temporal free play and exploration are therefore enabled by “drifting through space without any intention of following a certain direction or path.” Ensslin applies “dérive” to videogame play, considering it “an antiludic concept” because in mainstream game culture even exploration tends to be purpose-and progress-driven, whereas in subversive indie projects this utilitarianism is suspended. “The main purpose of this design feature,” says Enssling, is to give players “breathing space and further exploratory options, to make them reflect on their actions and other aspects of videogame culture, and to force their attention to elements of the gameworld they would normally ignore and therefore fail to appreciate” (pp. 184–85). Primarily associated with city experiences and “the close connections between cities’ architectural and social morphologies”, for Debord, “dérive” describes “a conscious, reflected type of spatial behavior that takes into account and muses on spaces and their inhabitants” (Enssling, 2014, pp. 186).

Given the fast-paced, goal-driven nature of learning in today’s institutions and the challenges it poses, Gee argues that games can effectively intervene by slowing the learning process and creating space for creative exploration of educational material. Drawing on Stan Goto, Gee

²⁴ The term “mesocosm” is derived from the Greek words “meso-” meaning “middle” or “intermediate,” and “cosm” from “kosmos” meaning “world” or “universe.” In *Playing Nature* (2019), Chang explains that “in ecology, mesocosms are experimental enclosures intermediate in size and complexity between small, highly controlled lab experiments and large, often unpredictable real-world environments” (p. 17). According to Chang, mesocosm studies have the advantage compared to laboratory approaches of maintaining “a natural community under close to natural conditions, taking into account relevant aspects from ‘the real world’ such as indirect effects, biological compensation and recovery, and ecosystem resilience” (p. 18).

²⁵ The Situationist International was an international political and artistic movement of the 1950s and 60s, drawing inspiration from Marxism and early twentieth-century European avant-gardes. Two of their key aesthetic methods were *dérive* (explained in this essay) and *détournement* (the exploration of new ways of using commodity goods and the values attached to them). The Situationists argued that play should infuse all areas of life, transforming not only game elements but also broader concepts and ideas by assigning them new properties and meanings. See Chapters 2 and 8 of Ensslin’s *Literary Gaming* (2014).

(2013) argues that “good video games” allow “horizontal learning”, that is, learning which gives the learner enough time to “...‘play around,’ to explore the area they are about to learn, to see what is there and what the lay of the land is, before they are forced up the vertical learning ladder of ever new skills” (as cited in Gee, 2013, p. 33). This echoes Jasper Juul’s concept of “emergent gameplay”, which, as Roberts-Smith et al. (2023) explain, describes the effect of player exploration of the gameworld and its rules²⁶ in ways not initially intended or foreseen by the game designers (p. 9).

As Gee (2013) argues, a good video game operates within the learner’s “regime of competence.” The game, in other words, “often operates within, but at the outer edge of, the learner’s resources, so that at many points the game is felt as challenging but not ‘undoable’” (p. 70). This echoes Lev Vygotsky’s theory of “zone of proximal development”, which Gee (2003), drawing on Ann Brown and Joseph Campione, defines as “the distance between [an individual’s] current levels of comprehension and levels that can be accomplished in collaboration with people or powerful artifacts” (as cited Gee, p. 190). Gee (2013) observes that in today’s schools, “many so-called advantaged learners rarely get to operate at the edge of their regime of competence [...]. At the same time, less advantaged learners are repeatedly asked to operate outside their regime of competence” (p. 70).

In Shakespeare education, Malcolm Hebron (2023) emphasizes the importance of giving learners breathing space for creative exploration of Shakespeare’s works and supporting them in operating at “the edge of their regime of competence.” To meaningfully read and understand Shakespeare’s sonnets, Hebron likewise argues that students need “space to reflect”, which Bickley et al. (2023) describe as time to cultivate an “affective and creative response” to the sonnet (p. 99). Drawing on poet and critic Don Paterson, Hebron further distinguishes between two types of reading. According to Hebron, in “primary reading”, students read a poem, feel something, but do not “comb through” it from the beginning to the end. Unlike primary reading, secondary reading is “the construction of a second text based on the first”, which Hebron views as “an exercise of critical analysis.” For Hebron, the reason why Shakespeare’s works are difficult for young readers is that “they are forced to start at the second level” (pp. 101–2).

Finally, Gee (2003) argues that “the really important knowledge” is in the “network” which, to him, is “the people, their texts, tools, and technologies and, crucially, the ways in which they are interconnected, and not in any one ‘node’” (p. 185). During the past decades, digital humanities²⁷ scholars have paid ample attention to reading and teaching literary texts in and

²⁶ In *Playing Nature*, Chang challenges Juul’s view of game rules, arguing that “rather than [seeing] games as real rules embedded in fictional worlds, as Juul does, we could make the case that games blend real worlds and fictional rules” (20).

²⁷ Some scholars argue in favor of bringing digital humanities to pedagogy and research (see Kharmawlong, A. et al. (2024) and Mullin, M. (1999)). On the other hand, some scholars believe bringing digital humanities to pedagogy and research might be problematic (see Casey, J (2019)).

through networks. As Katherine Bode (2012) argues, in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, the book historian Franco Moretti draws on economics, historical cartography, and evolutionary biology to offer a paradigm of “distant reading” that “deliberately abstracts both the material and textual features of literary works to provide new accounts of literary history based on ‘a specific form of knowledge: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models’” (as cited in Bode, p. 9). Built on Moretti’s ideas, Alan Gayle and Ray Siemens (2008) argue that the field of Digital Humanities encompasses “the broader context of disciplinary interactions that look to digital culture and technology to prompt new modes of humanities scholarship and, in turn, to reassert the humanities’ value in those traditionally science-and business-dominated domains” (p. 204).

As mentioned before, any method or technology used to teach Shakespeare must be mindful of the fact that Shakespeare is now showing itself to us in networks (Weinberger, 2015, p. 399). Shakespeare video games, as Digital Humanities projects, can effectively link the separate Shakespearean “nodes”, such as essays or film adaptations, through tools like hyperlinks and Dynamic Table of Contexts (DToC),²⁸ enabling players to access a network of Shakespearean texts and supporting both close and distant reading.

As Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan (2014) argue, however, the field of Shakespeare pedagogy has thus far been reluctant to engage with the Digital Humanities, focusing primarily “on the enactive.” According to them, “The focus on physical bodies, proximity and movement tends to gloss over the integration of new technologies, except when that new technology reinforces the live classroom” (p. 59). At the same time, citing W. B. Worthen, Gina Bloom et al. (2016) contend that the Digital Humanities have marginalized theater for being “so analogue” (as cited in Bloom et al., p. 409). Drawing on John Lavagnino, Laura Estill (2019) observes that today all humanists conduct research with digital tools, whether or not they identify as digital humanists (p. 12). It is therefore crucial for Shakespeare education to engage with the Digital Humanities, with video games representing a promising entry point.

Conclusion: The User-Student is the Future of Shakespeare Education

In *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture* (2017), Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes argue that Shakespeare’s value lies in its “usability”: through acts of “appropriation”, both Shakespeare’s texts and his cultural image can be dismantled and reassembled by a community of “users” whose engagements are “unpredictable” and often “resistant to inherited forms of cultural authority and hegemony” (p. 3). For Fazel and Geddes, attending to the user allows all acts of interpretation to be understood as acts of appropriation

²⁸ See Galey, A., & Siemens, R (2008) and part three of Jenstad, J. et al. (2018).

and invites scholars and enthusiasts alike to embrace the dialogic possibilities Shakespeare offers. “To call a Shakespearean a user,” they argue, “is to assert a claim about reader agency” (p. 4). It is, therefore, the user who can truly experience “the pleasure of Shakespeare exploration” (p. 14).

Following the arguments in this essay, the Shakespeare user emerges through an emancipatory model of Shakespeare education, one that offers a response to the Shakespeare problem itself. Video games can facilitate this model by fostering horizontal rather than hierarchical forms of knowledge production and collaborative rather than individual modes of learning within communities of actively engaged learners. In doing so, they generate excitement for Shakespeare by giving learners the space and agency to explore the plays on their own terms, gradually building upon their existing knowledge and lived experiences.

While contemporary Shakespeare video games may not always succeed in transforming students into Shakespeare users, what remains clear is that imposing consumerist gamification models or a traditional understanding of Shakespeare as exclusively a playwright of the stage onto the design of pedagogical Shakespeare video games risks stripping away the pedagogical possibilities unique to video games as a distinct medium with its own rhetoric and affordances. Rather than forcing games to conform to older pedagogical and aesthetic models, educators and designers must trust the capacities of the medium itself and continue developing games that work through, rather than against, its formal strengths. Such an approach is especially important because video games constitute a medium with which contemporary and future students possess an increasing degree of familiarity, fluency, and cultural investment. In this essay, I have sought not only to emphasize the need for an emancipatory Shakespeare education but also to foreground the emancipatory potential of video games as a pedagogical medium. The future designers of educational digital Shakespeare games must therefore confront a series of fundamental questions: If not theatricality, what other principles connect Shakespeare to video games? How can we best turn Shakespeare students into Shakespeare users using video games? And how can we employ video games to emancipate our students by bridging the gap between them and the playwright?

References

- Althusser, L. (1964/2011). Student problems. *Radical Philosophy*, 170, 11–15.
- Atherton, C. (2023). Teaching Shakespeare and social media: How many facebook friends had Lady Macbeth? In P. Bickley & J. Stevens (Eds.), *Shakespeare, Education and Pedagogy* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 109–119). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188704-16>
- Beetham, H. (2013). *Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: Designing for 21st century learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Bickley, P., & Stevens, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Shakespeare, education and pedagogy: Representations, interactions and adaptations*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188704>
- Biesta, G. (2017). Don't be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: On the role of the teacher in emancipatory education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 15(1), 52–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316681202>
- Bishop, T., & Bloom, G. (2025). Games and theatre in Shakespeare's England. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463723251>
- Bloom, G., & Bates, L. (2021). Play to learn: Shakespeare games as decolonial praxis in South African schools. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 34 (1), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v34i1.2>
- Bloom, G., Kemp, S., Toothman, N., & Buswell, E. (2016). "A whole theater of others": Amateur acting and immersive spectatorship in the digital Shakespeare game "Play the Knave." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 67(4), 408–430. <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2016.0054>
- Bloom, G. (2015). Videogame Shakespeare: enskilling audiences through theater-making games. *Shakespeare Studies*, 43, 114–119.
- Bloom, G. (2018). *Gaming the stage: Playable media and the rise of english commercial theater*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bode, K. (2012). *Literary studies in the digital age*. In *Reading by Numbers* (pp. 7–26). Anthem Press. <https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9780857284563.002>
- Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames* (1st ed.). MIT Press.
- Bogost, I. (2011). *How to do things with videogames* (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Booth, P. (2020). *Board games as media* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501357206>
- Bowman, S. L. et al. *Transformative role-playing game design*. Uppsala Universitet, 2025.

- Bruder, A. (2020). *Slowing down and speaking up: Collective close reading in the digital age. Transformations*, 30 (1), 47–56.
- Carson, C., & Kirwan, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Shakespeare and the digital world: Redefining scholarship and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Casey, J. (2019). Digital Shakespeare is neither good nor bad, but teaching makes it so. *Humanities*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8020112>
- Cavanagh, S. T., & Quarmby, K. A. (2014). 'All great Neptune's ocean: iShakespeare and play in a transatlantic context. In *Shakespeare and the Digital World* (pp. 87–99). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107587526.010>
- Chang, A. Y. (2019). *Playing nature: ecology in video games*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Cole, M. (2008). *Marxism and educational theory origins and issues*. Routledge.
- Coronado, J. (2021). On entrenched inequalities in the research university: Activism and teaching for tenured faculty members. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 136(3), 441–446. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000262>
- Cunningham, K. (2017). Missing Shakespeare's law: Some writing about some reading about close reading. *Early Modern Culture*, 12, 5–14, <https://open.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/2>
- de Freitas, S., & Mayes, T. (2013). Technology-enhanced learning: The role of theory. In H. Beetham (ed.), *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age: Designing for 21st Century Learning* (2nd ed., pp. 67–93).
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (1st ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ensslin, A. (2014). *Literary gaming*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9450.001.0001>
- Estill, L. (2019). Digital humanities' Shakespeare problem. *Humanities*, 8(1), 45. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010045>
- Fazel, V. M., & Geddes, L. (Eds.). (2017). *The Shakespeare user: Critical and creative appropriations in a networked culture* (1st ed.). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61015-3>
- Fletcher-Wood, H. (2018). *Responsive teaching: Cognitive science and formative assessment in practice*. Taylor and Francis.
- Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th anniversary edition.)*. Bloomsbury.
- Galey, A., & Siemens, R. (2008). Introduction: Reinventing Shakespeare in the digital humanities. *Shakespeare*, 4(3), 201–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450910802295062>

- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, J. P. (2013). *Good video games + good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning and literacy* (2nd ed.). Peter Lang.
- Hebron, M. (2023). Shakespeare and close reading: A call for sincerity. In P. Bickley & J. Stevens (Eds.), *Shakespeare, Education and Pedagogy* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 101–108). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188704-15>
- Hennessey, K. (2023). Shakespeare, university education, and anti-racism in Kuwait: A drop of water in the breaking gulf. In P. Bickley & J. Stevens (Eds.), *Shakespeare, Education and Pedagogy* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 172–180). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188704-23>
- Hood, A. (2023). The Better Strangers/Shakespeare Reloaded project: Seeking educational ardenspaces. In *Reimagining Shakespeare Education* (pp. 69–84).
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108778510.007>
- hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Routledge & K. Paul.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315824161>
- Jagoda, P. (2013). Gamification and other forms of play. *Boundar*, 40(2), 113–144.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2151821>
- Jenstad, J., Kaethler, M., & Roberts-Smith, J. (Eds.). (2018). *Shakespeare's language in digital media: old words, new tools* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315608747>
- Kaethler, M. (2023). All the game is a stage: The controller and interface in Shakespearean videogames. In C. Werier & P. Budra (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Interface* (1st ed., pp. 44–57). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367821722-5>
- Kharmawlong, A. et al. (2024). Shakespeare, digital libraries and media: A literature review. *Library Progress International*, 4(3), 21078–88.
- Kitchen, J. (2023). *Critical pedagogy and active approaches to teaching Shakespeare* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, C. (2017). Emphasis added: reading Shakespeare's language clearly. *Early Modern Culture*, 12, 2017, 40–46. <https://open.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/5>
- MacKay, E. (2021). The Moods of gamification in *The Tempest*. In T. Bishop, G. Bloom, & E. T. Lin (Eds.), *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England* (1st ed., pp. 203–227). Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463723251_CH08

- Malone, L. A., Padalabalanarayanan, S., McCroskey, J., & Thirumalai, M. (2017). Assessment of active video gaming using adapted controllers by individuals with physical disabilities: A protocol. *JMIR Research Protocols*, 6(6), e116. <https://doi.org/10.2196/resprot.7621>
- McCall, J. (2017). Close reading: The theory which is not one. *Early Modern Culture*, 12, 54–70. <https://open.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/7>
- ModLab. (2020). *Play the Knave*.
- Mullin, M. (1999). Digital Shakespeare: A retrospective and update. In M. C. Riggio (ed.), *Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance*. Modern Language Association of America, 373–90.
- Murray, J. (2004). From game-story to cyberdrama. *Electronic Book Review*. <https://electronicbookreview.com/publications/from-game-story-to-cyberdrama/>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2024). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities* (1st ed.). Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691264417>
- Peterson, J. (2017) The future of (close) reading.” *Early Modern Culture*, 12, 47–53, <https://open.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/6>
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford University Press.
- Riggio, M. C. (1999). *Teaching Shakespeare through performance*. Modern Language Association of America.
- Roberts-Smith, J., & DeSouza-Coelho, S. (2021). Shakespeare, game, and play in digital pedagogical shakespeare games. In T. Bishop, G. Bloom, & E. T. Lin (Eds.), *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare’s England* (1st ed., pp. 275–302). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048553525-014>
- Roberts-Smith, J., DeSouza-Coelho, S., & Malone, T. (2023). Staging Shakespeare in social games: Towards a theory of theatrical game design. *Borrowers and Lenders*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.18274/ZARB5225>
- Rocklin, E. L. (1999). Performance is more than an approach to Shakespeare. In M. C. Riggio (ed.), *Teaching Shakespeare through performance*. Modern Language Association of America.
- Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video games have always been queer*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479893904.001.0001>
- Semler, L. E. (2013). *Teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe: Learning versus the system*. Bloomsbury.

- Semler, L. E. (2016). Prosperous teaching and the thing of darkness: Raising a tempest in the classroom. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 3(1), 1235862.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1235862>
- Sheldon, L. (2020). *The multiplayer classroom: Designing coursework as a game* (2nd ed.). CRC Press.
- Stevens, J. (2023). Lifting Shakespeare off the page in twentieth-century classrooms. In P. Bickley & J. Stevens (Eds.), *Shakespeare, Education and Pedagogy* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 41–49). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188704-7>
- Walz, S. P., & Deterding, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications*. The MIT Press.
- Wark, M. (2007). *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press.
- Way, G. (2021). Shakespeare videogames, adaptation/appropriation, and collaborative reception. In T. Bishop, G. Bloom, & E. T. Lin (Eds.), *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England* (1st ed., pp. 255–273). Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463723251_CH10
- Weinberger, D. (2015). Shakespeare as network. In *Shakespeare and Textual Studies* (pp. 398–414). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152259.026>
- Whipday, E. (2023). *Teaching Shakespeare and his sisters: An embodied approach* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108975650>