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'Play'ing Shakespeare: Use of Boardgames in Shakespearian Pedagogy

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Abstract

Since Gauri Viswanathan's Masks of Conquest, the teaching of Shakespeare in India has been seen as a hangover of British colonization serving to export the English worldview; and, over the years, academia has advocated either replacing him with indigenous and/or global narratives, or utilizing his text as allegories of critical theories. The teacher of Shakespeare, thus, faces a double challenge: the preconceived notions that students commence with – that Shakespeare is intractable and archaic or too philosophically 'high' culture to be enjoyable, as well as the 'postcolonial' stance of modern academia that he is irrelevant to life, culture and the academic career of students. The teaching of Shakespeare as a literary text that can be creatively and culturally engaging as well as socially and politically resonant becomes challenging in the face of student apathy – students are no longer motivated to learn or enjoy the plays or appreciate the nuances of the language. Therefore, to make Shakespeare more accessible and 'fun' for undergraduate students of literature, a board game was conceptualised employing the 'active method' pedagogy. The game, which included text-based questions and performance, dramatization and analysis, tested and reinforced the student's knowledge of the text, as also her interpretive, dramatic and improvisation skills. This paper is a discussion of the gamification of a Shakespearian play, the kinds of questions it poses and challenges it addresses in the Shakespeare classroom.

Keywords: shakespeare, pedagogy, gamification, active learning

Introduction

The inclusion of Shakespeare in the syllabus is currently viewed by much of the academic establishment as an instrument of colonial ideology, a symbol of the colonial hangover, and an elitist imposition irrelevant to the reality of life and culture in countries other than his native land. The presence and status of Shakespeare in the academic curriculum is seen as ideological – a means to assert the cultural hegemony of Great Britain onto the colonized native – and a remnant of the classical humanist traditions that predominated the education system in the beginning of the 20th century. This view that literature is constituted by value judgements which are historically variable, and these value judgements are closely connected to ideologies since they "... refer not simply to private taste, but to assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others" was propounded by Eagleton (1983, p16). The current trend of thought is, therefore, to dismantle this hegemony by confining Shakespeare to a representative text within a module of a course on Elizabethan or Renaissance literature, a far cry from when undergraduate students of literature studied an entire paper on Shakespeare in addition to the texts that were prescribed for general English study. The reading of Shakespeare is deemed relevant only from a deconstructive angle with a post-colonial, gendered, or racial analysis, with little regard to the nuances of language and the scope for performance of Shakespeare's dramatic scripts. A teacher of Shakespeare faced with the establishmentarian view that Shakespeare's works should be replaced by indigenous or global narratives, coupled with the usual apprehensions students have when beginning Shakespeare – that he is too hard or intractable or boring, that he is too philosophical

and 'high culture' to be enjoyable, and too white, too male and too English to be inclusive or relevant to the current situation – faces a double challenge. S/he is compelled to motive the students to both tackle and enjoy the nuances of the play as well as convince them that studying the Bard is relevant to their academic growth as future teachers, writers or thinkers.

The question of the relevance of studying Shakespeare is required has a primarily three-fold answer – it builds a knowledge of literature, language, and theatre and performance. According to Stanley Wells (2008), the study of Shakespeare brings a sensitivity to language and thus, the capacity to express oneself; increased moral sensitivity due to familiarity with ethical dilemmas of characters; enlarged imaginative experiences due to entry into psychological states different from our own; a sense of shared humanity; and delight in the verbal dexterity and virtuosity. In addition to these, he adds there are the added distinct set of advantages peculiar to Shakespeare – the range of human experiences he presents; the different categories of characters within the plays; the differing and divergent interpretations that can be placed on a the motivations and actions of a single character; and the pervasive influence of the plays into Western and global cultural currency, so much so that a familiarity with his places has become a necessary part of the cultural equipment of an educated English speaker.

Literature Review

While the teaching of Shakespeare has remained an important component of English curricula, the modes and methods of teaching have undergone paradigm shifts across the years – from a purely text-based approach to a performance-intensive study to employing the text as an illustration or allegory of critical theories. While all these approaches have their own relevance, in a classroom setting student stimulation, interest and comprehension is of paramount significance in pursuit of which pedagogues have advocated varied methods. Scholars such as Rex Gibson advocate flexible, student-centred approaches focusing on performance, imagination and creative interpretation. His Teaching Shakespeare (1988), with practical ideas for implementation, became a standard for teaching Shakespeare in schools in England. In contrast, Jonathan Bate (2008) continued the canonical and philological approach to Shakespeare studies, arguing for a text-based, context-oriented, language-intensive analysis of the Bard. Later Shakespeare scholars, such as Deborah Appleman (2009) and Ayanna Thompson (2016) emphasise the importance of representation and intersectionality in Shakespeare scholarship reiterating the necessity of a personal cultural engagement of the student with the text.

In India, this approach has been reframed by pedagogues like Shormishtha Panja and K. Satchidanandan, who encourage a comparative study of Indian texts by critically re-reading Shakespeare through local and regional texts and practices. This will make interpretation relevant to the student as well as ensure the social and political relevance of the text. Contemporary teaching and research also focus on multimedia approaches, using film adaptations, such as Omkara and Maqbool, theatre workshops, vernacular re-tellings to bridge the gap between 16th century English customs and culture and the contemporary Indian scenario.

However, despite indigenizing content or moving to a contextualised and multimodal study, unless the student is willing to engage with the text, classes on Shakespeare will remain either a pedantic discussion of imagery, theme and iambic pentameter or a discussion of socio-political issues devoid of the subtlities of the language of the text. To be relevant, Shakespearian poetry must first be converted into its theatrical content and the fear of obscurity erased through familiarising the student with the text. In his book Shakesfear and How to Cure It: The Complete Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare Ralph Alan Cohen observes how Shakespeare's speeches are more theatre than poetry and how the 'theatrical context of the lines' more than focus on the poetic elements keeps students interested in the play (6). According to him, the panacea for the 'ShakeFearers' (those that find Shakespeare's language intimidating) and the 'ShakeJeerers' (those who find Shakespeare boring and irrelevant – a more difficult set – because they have already dismissed the possibility of enjoying Shakespeare) is to "Stage it, stage it, stage it." (66). Rex Gibson had dismissed the term 'text' since it was associated with "authority, reverence, certainty" whereas "a script declares that it is to be played with, explored actively and imaginatively brought to life" in a collaborative

way (Irish, 2011, p. 12). To highlight the narrative and linguistic prowess of Shakespeare, it will need to be restored to the original site of entertainment – as theatre – with the students grappling with the play.

However, it is important not to disregard the poetic and philosophical profundity of Shakespeare "whose writings give as much pleasure on the page as on the stage" (Wells 2023, 121). It is important that the students are familiarized with the intricacies of language and provided scope for deeper learning which can be facilitated by familiarity and easing of inhibitions. As Wells (2023) points out on the fallacy of giving children acting roles without previous preparation: Shakespeare's "language at times requires deep study rather than simply to be rattled off with more concern for immediacy of effect than for depth of understanding" and the overemphasis on performance leads to "a populist approach which stresses superficiality over depth" (121). What is necessary is a balance between the study of the subtilties of the text, the language, and intertextual elements while exploiting the latitude for creative interpretation and performance.

Game Based Learning

In 1938, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga referred to human beings as Homo Ludens or "Man, the Player." It is the play element that enables curiosity, enquiry, and intellectual stimulation in human beings. According to the Constructivist Learning Theory by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, learning becomes active only when students interact constructively with the text, rather than when they passively absorb information. Grounded in these constructivist principles is the concept of Game Based Learning (GBL) where games are used as educational tools to engage the students in an interactive and immersive learning experience. This provides a dynamic environment where learners explore, experiment and innovate in meaningful ways, constructing their own knowledge of the text by engaging with it in a flexible, adaptable environment where they employ their own experiences and interpretations. James Paul Gee calls for the application on the principles of video games to classroom pedagogy in his book What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. Particularly with Gen Z and Gen Alpha, both digital natives and with pandemic-affected childhoods, these sets of students demand motivation and immersive interaction to build their own knowledge to engage with a text. Gee's first principle –Active, Critical Learning Principle – demands a learning environment that fosters critical thinking and activity rather than the traditional lecture-oriented passive-listener model. Edmiston and McKibbon (2011) assert that engaging with a critical frame distracts students' minds from the fears of difficulty around a text and diverts them to finding solutions to engaging universal problems. A research paper by Leah Sutton asserts how this practice promotes a complexity of meaning as students "explore questions and engage in literary practices that allow them to analyse and synthesize multiple views and conflicting perspectives" (25). Gee notes how when the learner engages with the text and has the leeway to make changes and innovate, there is greater understanding of the domain. An increasingly challenging or more complex level of difficulty which can be overcome makes the game compelling, thereby substantiating it's learning potential.

Statement of Problem

The Undergraduate Programme in Literature of the Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala includes the teaching of a mandatory four-hour per week one semester course on King Lear to a class of Gen Z students with little/ no familiarity with Shakespeare other than two excerpts from The Merchant of Venice taught during their freshman year. This demanded teaching strategies that enabled both comprehension of and interest in the text. The course is introduced in two segments – the first is an introduction on Shakespeare – his life and works and the socio-political-cultural aspects of the Elizabethan times, with a special focus on theatre. The second segment is a close reading of Shakespeare's play, with both a traditional teacher-centric lecture provided – with line-by-line explanations and glossary – as well as more interactive student-centric activities – with students deciphering the meanings of easier lines, debating on the theme and presenting seminars on assigned topics. The students also watch a cinematic version of the play after each act was completed. This is the usual method to cater to the various learning styles of the students, but while it engages the high learners and made the text more comprehensible to the first- or second-generation learners of English, it does not seem to generate a sense of familiarity

and comfort with the text – Shakespeare is still regarded as incomprehensible and alien. It was deemed necessary, therefore, to build activities that enable the exploration of the text in a judgement-free environment.

One of the barriers to teaching Shakespeare, according to Gibson (2000), is the intimidation factor. It is necessary to reduce the sense of being daunted by a Shakespearian text which directly affects a student's ability and enthusiasm to learn. Further, in the Indian classroom the divergence of culture and ethnicity from an English audience sets up a barrier to appreciating the thematic concerns of the play, unless the learners can identify similarities of concerns.

One of the means of engaging with the text in a hands-on way is through designing games around Shakespeare's works. The games created to develop critical thinking and the comprehension of King Lear for undergraduate students combined both role-play and strategy.

Materials and Methods

A board game was prepared featuring a large board divided into 50 squares. Each of these squares consist of a picture of one of these characters: of Lear, the two evil daughters (Goneril and Regan), Cordelia, the good princess (represented as an angel), Kent, the Fool, Blind Gloucester, the good son, the illegitimate son and sons-in-law. There is also a square with Shakespeare's picture which represents the 'wildcard' square. The game has sets of cards with the same pictures on one side, and with the reverse side posing a question.

The cards are divided into eight sets with different kinds of questions. One kind of questions is factual – these help students better understand complex language, themes, and plot by actively exploring in the narrative. The second kind of question includes role-play and open-ended questions which help promote flexibility, criticality and diversity in interpretations.

Students are divided into groups of three or four and the game continues with each group raking up points and answering the questions of the cards with the same picture as the square they land on. Each question carries a specific set of marks. If a student is unable to answer, she can draw a wild card which carries a performance activity.

Factual Question Type Cards

Four sets of cards test and thus familiarize students to the text plotline, Shakespeare's vocabulary, and poetic devices.

Cards with the picture of the king will have factual questions on plot lines – for instance: Who are Cordelia's suitors and why does she reject one of them? This is especially useful for slow learners, particularly those who are either first-generation learners of English or those who have attended schools where the mode of instruction was in the native tongue.

Cards featuring the wicked sisters has vocabulary questions and frequently used words and phrases from Shakespeare (the words or phrases will be italicised within a sentence and may be explained in context). For example: words like 'yonder', 'meet', 'in sooth', 'prithee', 'anon', 'belike', 'fain', 'forsooth' etc. – all of which are frequently used in Shakespeare, and which makes the text seem inaccessible in terms of language. Some words or phrases from the text which imparts a knowledge of Elizabethan English include words like "moonshines" to mean 'months.'

Similarly, cards with the picture of Cordelia or Edmund (the good son) have questions on dramatic devices such as asides and soliloquys, and questions on imagery – sight and insight, clothing, nakedness; symbolism – animals, crown, blindness, storm; or themes of the play.

Explain with reference to context: Cards featuring the illegitimate son and son-in-law have lines quoted from the text which the student will identify – in terms of who the speaker is and the context of the speech – and explain its import. For example: "Nothing will come from nothing. Speak again." This ensures that the student is familiarized with the lines of the text, the overall plot line through a game and hearing a variety of explanations imprints it well into the memory. Further there are a variety of interpretations possible which makes Shakespeare seem accessible, not a closed text with a final meaning provided by the teacher. These cards provide the student opportunities to play with the essentials of the text and textual analysis as well as familiarizing her with Shakespearian language and phraseology.

Role-Play and Open-Ended Question Type Cards

Cards with the picture of the Fool, Kent, or Blind Gloucester are open-ended or performance-based cards.

Cards with the image of Kent deal with characterization – the student will answer a question on the character (such as Why does it say about Albany's character when he declares that he will not hurt his wife?), or recite a line spoken by the character and mime/ act it out.

The cards featuring the Fool focus on improvisation by indicating the tone in which the dialogue is to be read out – for instance, Cordelia's speech to be read either angrily or sorrowfully. Characters are to be acted out as if they were fearful, drunk, sleepy, amused etc. For e.g. presenting Lear as drunk in Act I scene i where he divides the kingdom, Goneril and Regan amused as if they know how to manipulate their father; Oswald pretending to be afraid of Kent etc.

Blind Gloucester cards are 'turntable' cards – the given section in the play is to be subverted by acting out a different outcome, or a character presented with the opposite traits he is deemed to have in the play, with a justification for the action. For e.g., presenting Edgar as virtuous and unfairly treated. This not only brings out the analytical skills in the students but also creates counter-texts by unravelling and problematising the ideology of the play. This approach also helps students to focus on characters and themes without being intimidated by the complexity of language and phraseology. Similarly, the analysis of the situations in the texts promote intersectional readings with questions on gender, class, kingship etc. Neshkovska points out how students learn "when they bring their cultural backgrounds, experiences, interests, and questions to shared activities that centre on explorations of the meaning and significance of texts" (51). Finally, this method demonstrates the importance of performance since a change in the tone and manner of speech creates an immediate alteration in character.

Wild cards either asks a student to perform a role or contains a fun fact such as the modern-day adaptations of Shakespeare's plays or the technical aspects of performance in Shakespeare's time. One of the cards details how the average theatregoer in Elizabethan England had less access to language than the native English speakers of today, because there were no dictionaries and language was constantly in a stage of flux. Therefore, Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists were inventing new words or finding new usages for old words, due to which Elizabethans would eagerly anticipate the latest coinage from their playwrights. (Cohen 12). This fact serves to impress on the students that a few archaic words and uncommon usage should not deter them from enjoying Shakespeare. These cards which are performance-based and fun-fact filled enable students who are unable to answer a question the chance to continue the game without feeling disheartened and interests students in facts about Shakespeare making him seem more relevant and contemporary, rather than archaic and academic. This board game also incorporates the learning principles that effective games embrace: identity development, active exploration, variable challenges, and student agency.

The game can be played by about 15-20 students at a time, consisting of three or four teams with each team having four or five participants. Each team gets one throw of dice each and they draw cards based on which square they land on. Each member of the team draws a card in turn and the game continues with each team raking up points. The winner is not necessarily the team that gets to the final square first, but the team with the maximum points when the points are calculated at the predetermined time or date. This enables the game to continue over days until everyone has had a chance to participate.

Finding and Results

In a class of 49 students this game served to hold the interest and attention of Gen Z learners who are used to video or online games where they rack up points or rewards and the game can be picked up at a later point. Further the performance based or open-ended or theme-based questions for discussion was of interest for the slow learners. Advanced learners used it to test the knowledge of the text and seemed to derive an advantage from the revision of the texual components. The current game seems to fill the gap of entertainment and gives the student scope for innovation in characterisation, dialogue delivery, and improvisation. This ensures that the student learns both the historical and textual material through play and sees meaning as contingent and changing when provided the freedom of interpretation.

A quantitative study of the benefits of the game has not been carried out. There is scope for carrying out a quantitative analysis of the level of comprehension of students and student satisfaction before and after playing the game as compared to the control group that has received only classroom-based lectures or flipped classroom teaching of Shakespeare. The game is easily prepared with a chart of fifty squares and the pictures may be printed on a sheet and cut and stuck on each square. Questions can be prepared by printing cards after each act or scene in the various categories of questions, so that the teacher or students do not need to wait till the end of the play to start playing. It also enables students to enter the spirit of performance at the very beginning of the play.

Students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged and can relate their learning to real-world contexts. Games naturally incorporate these elements, making them a powerful tool for teaching Shakespeare, a subject that students often find challenging due to its language and historical context. Many educational games encourage collaboration, which can mirror the collaborative nature of theatre and enhance students' understanding through shared experiences and discussions. Moreover, it helps students become more comfortable making errors in comprehension and brainstorm on themes and interpretation rather than seeking the views of critics in texts. It creates a dynamic interface which can be reflective, flexible and seek a reading pedagogy that encourages active readers who create meaning, readers whose voices, experiences, reflections and experiences become a part of the diversity of perspective in decoding the text. Gen Z and Gen Alpha learners demand teaching practices that foster inquisitiveness, innovation and critical thinking, enable plurality of meaning and possibility of diverse interpretation, rather than those which simply transmit textual explication and observations of researchers and scholars.

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