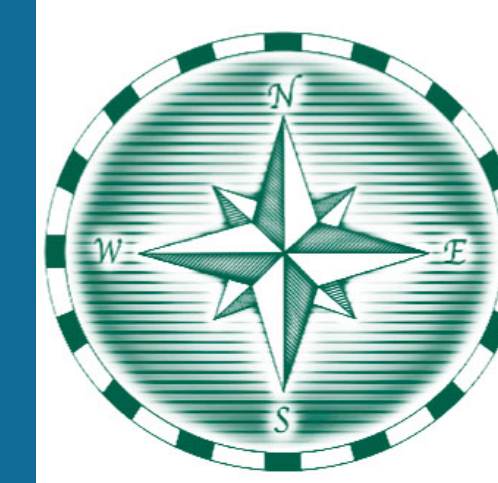




“That Way Goes the Game”: Teaching Shakespeare with Game Design

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Introduction

At my school, and likely at many others, 9th Grade boys are at a point of inflection with their literacy. They have heard about terms like subtext, characterization, and tone, but many struggle to truly understand such concepts, tending instead to fixate upon the plot and other superficial parts of literature. This challenge is heightened in their work with Shakespeare — perhaps ironically, given the sheer depth of Shakespeare's plays. My project attempted Maker-based methods of teaching boys how to uncover characterization and subtext in one of Shakespeare's plays. I hoped that it would help the boys to better appreciate what makes Shakespeare's literature rich and to strengthen their close-reading skills and habits.

The Research Question

How can game design affect comprehension and close reading skills in 9th Grade boys?

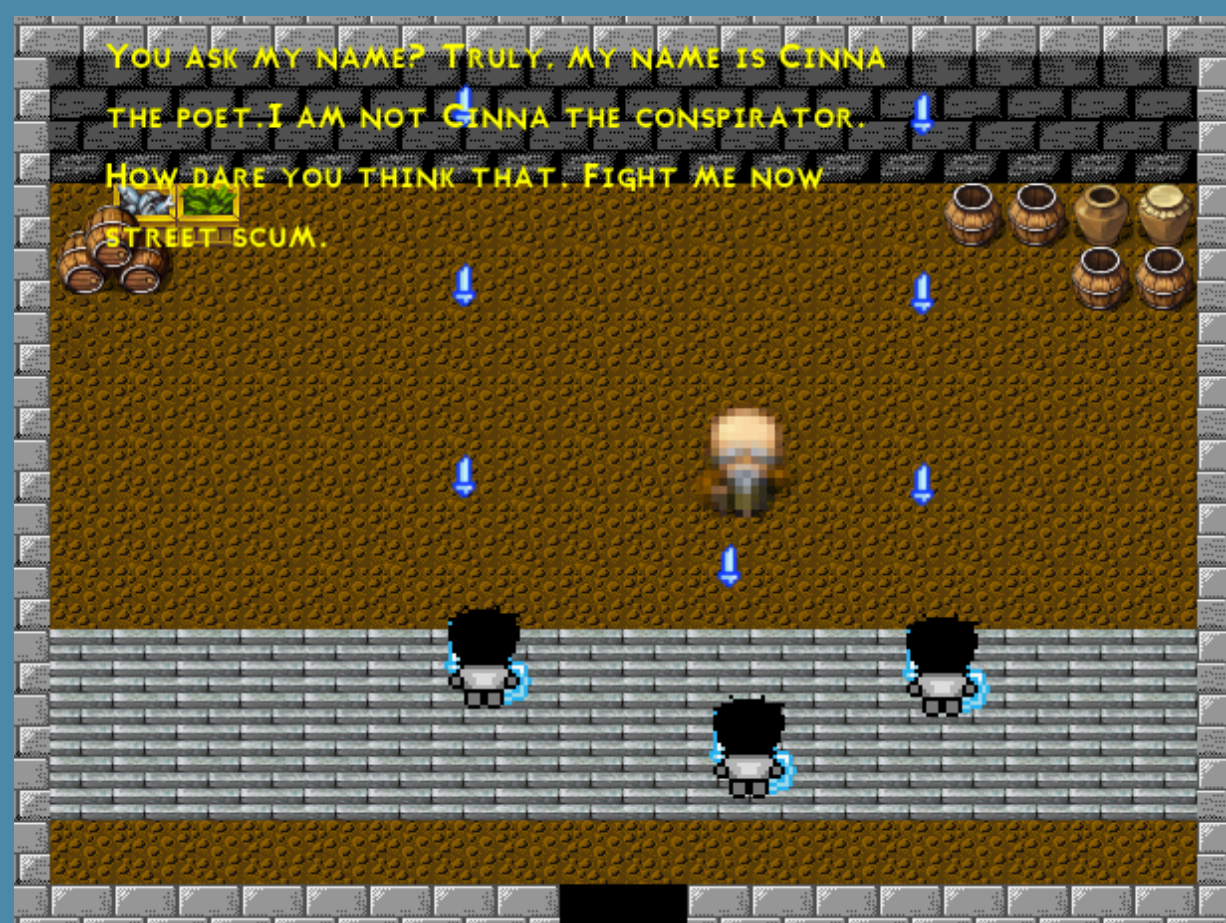
- By “close reading,” I refer to the skill of reading not impressionistically but rather reflectively, formulating questions and developing answers based on the subtleties of the text. In Shakespeare, close reading can help students construct a living scene out of the words on the page, uncovering nuances and subtexts.

Research Context

St. Mark's School of Texas has 852 students from Grades 1 through 12, taught by 124 faculty members. The school places a high value on character education and leadership skills, aiming to foster a culture in which the older boys connect with the younger ones on a daily basis. Although many students prioritize grades and structured activities, they also tend to appreciate that the school's culture encourages them to be creative, expressive, and individual.

Participants

Twelve 9th Grade boys (ages 14-15) who met daily from 1:30 to 2:15. The boys had widely varying personalities and academic ability. Despite their differences, they had a good rapport with each other. Between the class's positive culture and the breadth of proficiency, this action research project exposed some surprises in how the boys work with Shakespeare.



The Research Action

After reading *Julius Caesar*, students were tasked with designing games that were adapted from or inspired by the play. Students were free to choose the format of their games, e.g. card, board, computer, role-playing, etc. Each game had to meet three requirements:

1. To incorporate Shakespeare's language from the play in meaningful ways, such as by linking particular lines to game instructions or events.
2. To faithfully represent at least six characters from the play, perhaps as playable characters or as elements within the game.
3. To be playable.

Data Collection

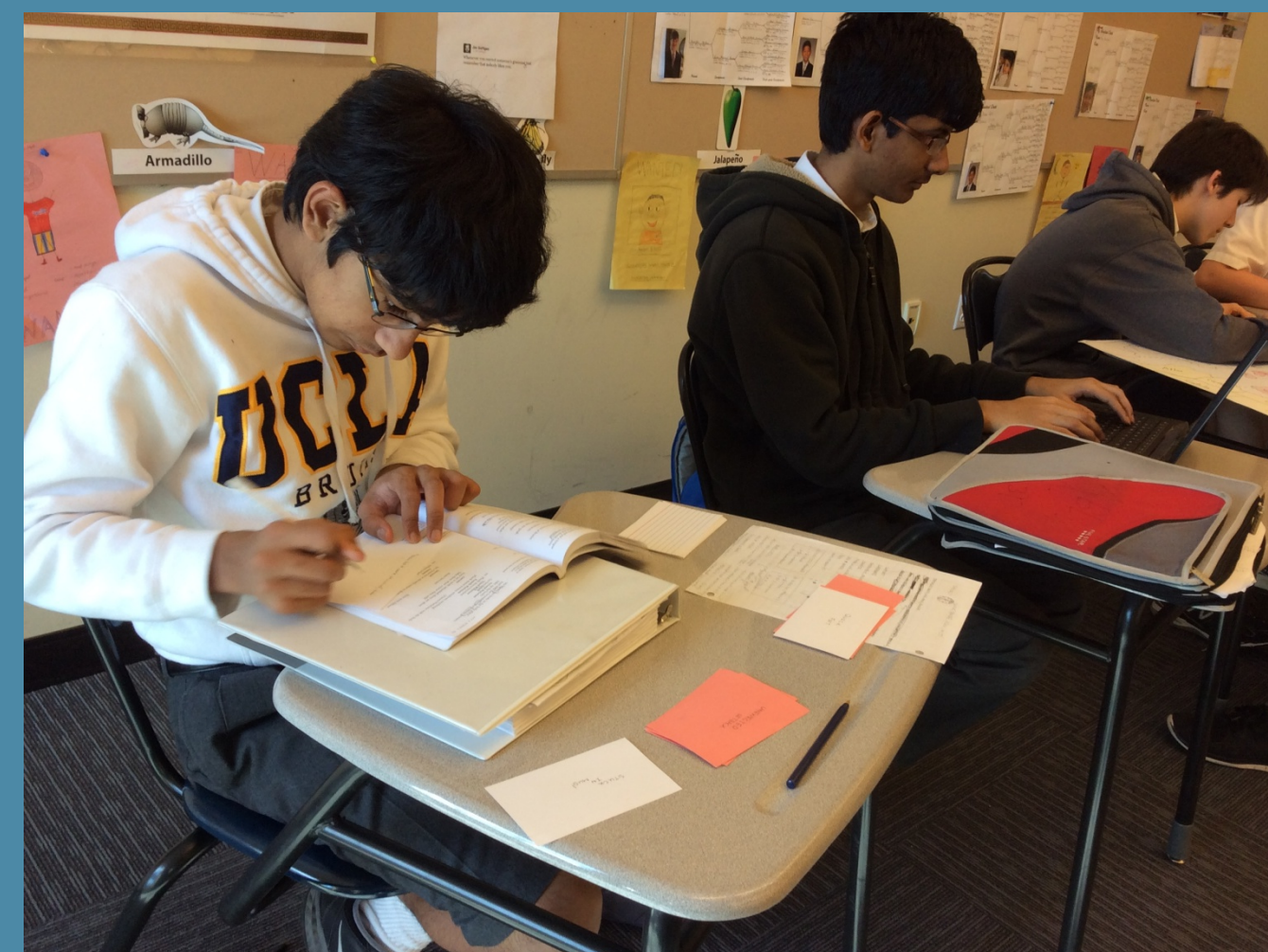
- Prior to the action, the boys journaled frequently on their experiences of reading *Julius Caesar*.
- Concurrently with the action, three online surveys evaluated the boys' maker-learning experiences and their evolving understanding of Shakespeare. Questions were both qualitative and quantitative.
- Photo and video recording chronicled the boys' work during classroom game-making sessions.
- Occasionally, boys answered interview questions on video while working on their games.
- Following the action, boys wrote reflections upon the process and the outcome.

Data Analysis

Following the action, I spent time reviewing all of the journal entries, surveys, photo and video documentation, and other data. Gradually, patterns emerged and a proverbial big picture began to form of the action's effects.

In addition to this holistic analysis, I compared survey data from different points in time in order to cross-reference the students' self-assessments with the quality of their work, examining their progress both as makers and as Shakespeare readers. For example, I compared reflections on the literature to the corresponding strengths and weaknesses of their games.

I categorized data based on certain components of the action. To clarify, data collection often asked the boys to indicate the ratio of their efforts towards game design vs. engagement with Shakespeare, as well as their attention to the characters vs. their attention to the language. Examining these ratios proved helpful.



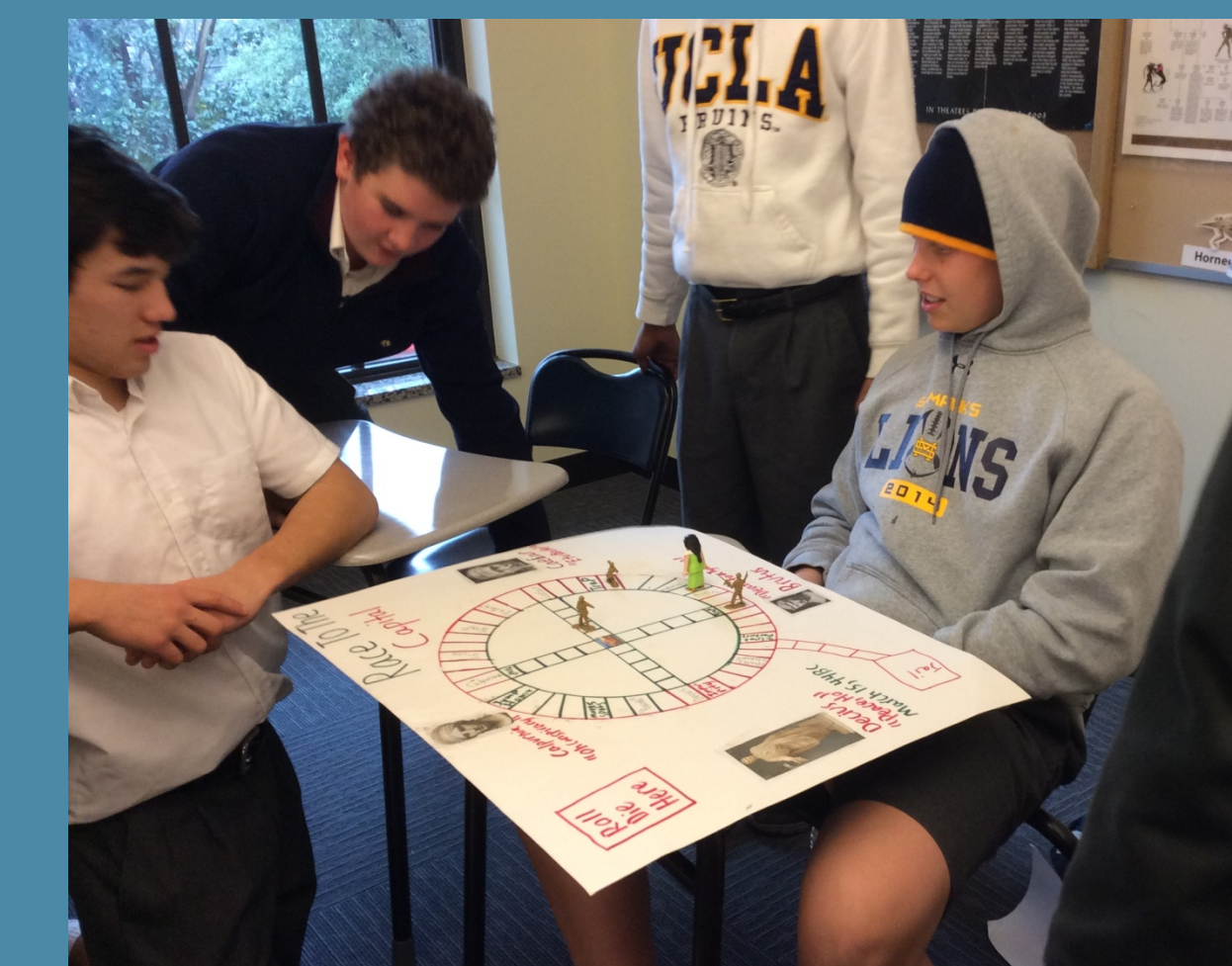
Key Findings and Discussion

- One-half of the class devoted more attention to game design than to Shakespeare. Only one-sixth of the class focused more on Shakespeare than on game design.
- Cited challenges often focused on game design:
 - “None of us knew how to make a video game. We spent many games on tutorials”
 - “[A]ctually creating the game was very difficult. [T]he brainstorming part was the hardest for me”
- However, 11 students said nonetheless that they came out feeling stronger with Shakespeare:
 - “I had to make the language relevant and meaningful to the game, so, instead of just looking at the language, I actually had to find instances where the phrase would work, making me dissect the language and look at it closely”
- The one student who reported no improvement with Shakespeare did, in fact, indicate some practice with reading Shakespeare:
 - “I manipulated his language to match what I needed [for the game]”
- Students' purported growth with Shakespeare was corroborated by post-action literary analysis:
 - “I realized that Brutus was the only conspirator who killed Caesar for the love of Rome, and that the other conspirators only wanted power”
 - “Before, I thought that Caesar hated Brutus to begin with but upon looking at the objectives for Caesar and finding text, found it to be untrue”
- The style of each student's game corresponded to his respective sense of what the play is ultimately about:
 - After making a fight-based computer game, one boy wrote of the play that “might makes right.”
 - Another boy made a two-player strategy game that relies on poker faces, and later concluded that the play teaches “that no one is loyal to each other.”
 - Could these differences suggest that game-making *influences* rather than *informs* the reader? Or could they simply reflect the fact that Shakespeare's work is so multifaceted?

Conclusions

By and large, the Making benefited students who tend to work hard, and it was less effective for students who tend not to perform as well. For example, when reflecting upon what the Making taught them about *Julius Caesar*, a student who averages a C+ deferred to a hypothetical claim: “I knew [Calpurnia] was a pivotal character but the realization that if her husband had just listened to her he would have not been killed [sic].” In contrast, a student who earns A's was more connected to the text: “When making my video game, I realized that, behind [Brutus's] stoic nature, there must be some emotional side.”

However, even my strongest students' games tended not to indicate growth directly; rather, their improvement with Shakespeare was evident primarily in their survey and interview responses. Although the game-design element seems to have been an engine for improving boys' literacy, I believe that future iterations of this project would need modified rules so that whatever growth occurs would be more evident within the games.



Key Readings

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Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>.

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