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Pericles, Prince of Tyre: Transforming a Shakespeare Play for Gamified Experience

Abstract

This paper is rooted in an exploration of an ongoing research project to produce a VR game based on Shakespeare's lesser-known romance Pericles, Prince of Tyre. We argue that the play, a maritime travelogue recounting the story of a family separated at sea and brought together again by fate, is well suited for the demands of gamification, offering rich potential for first-person problem-solving, self-discovery, and world exploration. While its episodic nature, diversity of settings, and unexpected narrative trajectory have challenged those wishing to present the play on the traditional stage, we demonstrate how approaching the text through the lens of immersive gamified media offers the opportunity to re-evaluate and reconsider the "flawed" perception of the text. The paper takes our project as a case study to outline how we approached the process of adapting the original play for gamification, framing our project within the broader context of both game adaptations of Shakespeare's other works and previous creative, experimental adaptations of Pericles. In particular, we highlight how our practice-led research approach and partnership between animators, technical developers, and researchers at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and leading Shakespeare scholars associated with The Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham, UK, brings together creative production, technical development, and academic research to create an experience that is both entertaining and offers an innovative interrogation of Shakespeare's original plot and language. We hope the discussion offers valuable insight into both novel approaches to the adaptation of Shakespeare's works and the gamification of classic texts more broadly.

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1. Introduction

Since the earliest days of the twentieth century, the field of Shakespeare studies has been quick to embrace the potential of emergent technology within the context of both performance and education (Wittek and McInnis 1). More recently, this has manifested itself in a coming together of works of Shakespeare and digital media forms that allow audiences to interact with both the theatrical experience and the characters and stories of the plays themselves (Osborne 51). Of particular interest to our paper is how this has included the development of Shakespeare-based video games and experiences in Virtual Reality (VR) – "the experience furnished by a head-mounted display that immerses users in a simulated world" (Wittek and McInnis 1-2). Although such technology is far from being commonplace in schools and homes, it is possible to observe experimentation with Shakespeare in VR that ranges from small-scale initiatives to bring his works to life for students, such as 360 Shrew and #ItWasGreekToMe developed at the University of Melbourne, to ambitious virtual performances including Tender Claws' Tempest and the Royal Shakespeare Company's Dream which have engaged audiences worldwide (McInnis 24). Drawing on diverse fields, including game studies, English literature, theatre studies and animation, questions have been raised regarding how video game or VR Shakespeare might challenge existing ideas about the relationship between linear narratives and interaction (Bushnell and Ullyot; Novitz; Osborne; Wittek and McInnis).

It is within this framework that we embarked on an interdisciplinary, international project to create an adaptation of Shakespeare's play Pericles, Prince of Tyre for animated VR. Considered the first of Shakespeare's late romances, Pericles follows the eponymous hero as he travels across the classical Mediterranean and faces a series of trials and tribulations along the way. The play's adventurous plot features riddles, tumultuous sea voyages, and perilous escapes, exploring themes of love, loss, and familial relationships. The play is not one of Shakespeare's best-known or most-adapted works. It is not included in the First Folio, and considerable critical attention has been paid to the non-Shakespearean nature of much of the text. All modern versions of the play

are derived from what has been described as “an imperfectly remembered original” (Edwards 26), likely assembled together from fragments. Events are confused, translations are nonsensical, and words and phrases frequently repeated. Stylistic analysis based on language forms, lining, characterization, and verse has identified that a series of hands can be detected in the work, and the most widely held belief is that the play was either composed as a collaboration, with George Wilkins as the most commonly suggested collaborator or that Shakespeare’s role was primarily that of revisor or editor (Massai et al. 318). It is perhaps because of this contentious authorship and its perceived structural flaws that the play is largely absent from the public conscience – Pericles was not included in the seminal 1992-1994 television series Shakespeare, The Animated Tales, and is not commonly found in school curricula. When attempting to stage the play, directors and actors have also faced the challenge of how to handle the unexpected themes and plot elements, particularly its “frank” depiction of incest and prostitution (Skeele 2-3).

Pericles VR marks a collaboration between animators, technical developers, and researchers at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and leading Shakespeare scholars working at leading UK academic institutions, in particular Professor Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham. The project is funded by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under the research grant “From Print to Digital Continued: Expanded Research into adapting Shakespeare for VR, AR and AI,” which aims to explore how non-linear, interactive storytelling, within the context of immersive media, might be applied to works of Shakespeare. The experience shifts the play’s original Mediterranean setting to Southeast Asia and recasts its characters as anthropomorphic animals – in keeping with Pericles’ long history of free and radical interpretation (Stone 2). The approach also embraces the belief that “though alien, Shakespeare is malleable” and holds valuable potential to be interrogated from a contemporary Asian perspective (Lei 1). Currently in the production stage, the project aims to both celebrate the work of young Singaporean visual and technical developers, and to produce a VR experience which can be used by secondary school students in Singapore, for whom Shakespeare is “the most frequently-taught author” (Smith 174) in the literature curriculum. Pericles VR hopes to challenge expectations and assumptions about what Shakespeare can and should mean in Asia today and demonstrate how VR can increase engagement with his language and plots. VR has

been described as having “a natural affinity with theatre,” with traditional performance relying on the construction of a bridge between the real and the imaginary which acts to “create a virtual world in which performers and viewers are complicit,” in much the same way that narratives and environments unfold within immersive virtual experiences (Bushnell and Ullyot 29). VR is arguably closer to being immersive cinema than a form of film, being as it is “unbound by a frame or a single point of view … it summons up an illusion of a space that the spectator inhabits beyond the ‘real world’” (Bushnell and Ullyot 29) in which they are physically located, not dissimilar from the traditional stage. Despite the emergence of VR gaming as a medium within broader popular culture, there has been little consideration of how the theoretical and practical implications of bringing together the existing work on “gamified” Shakespeare might intersect with ongoing discussions about the potential of VR and other immersive media.

The potential of games to contribute to increasing student and audience engagement with Shakespeare has long been acknowledged. The benefits of ‘active learning,’ “a pedagogical approach that gets students out of their seats, acting and vocalizing, in order to emphasize the interpretive utility of space, embodiment, and movement” (Wittek and McInnis 1), are widely recognized, helping teachers overcome student perceptions that Shakespeare’s works are narratively and linguistically incomprehensible and inaccessible. While Shakespeare’s plays have always been intended for performance, it has been acknowledged that they possess inherent qualities that make them well-suited to an “active” approach, which takes a step further and integrates playfulness and games into the interpretive experience. Indeed, perhaps the plays themselves can be considered “monumental literary games” and interactive engagement with their narratives through gameplay functioning to “emphasise and explore the ludic nature of the play itself” (Abt 12; Novitz 9).

In this paper, we will use Pericles VR as a case study to explore the potential that VR holds for re-considering the play’s narrative, themes, and characters. By adapting a lesser-known text that falls outside the canon of much-studied works of Shakespeare using an animated, immersive, gamified approach, we are both building upon existing scholarship that has explored how works of Shakespeare might be adapted for the medium and challenging the established approach regarding which plays should be adapted and how they might be interpreted. Kidnie has argued

that cross-media adaptations are not only shaped by the supposed “essence” of the source text which they claim to adapt but also by the history and evolving generic conventions of that particular medium, and as such, understanding our project requires an engagement with elements both of the textual and performance history of Pericles and also an understanding of recent developments within the field of game studies and immersive media (4). In our specific case, we are not seeking to establish the superiority of a fully immersive game over a screen-based experience but to look into the interdependencies between the source text and the potential offered by VR, such as world discovery and gamified narrative combined. We seek to argue how embracing the medium might offer the opportunity to redefine not only scholarly engagement with Pericles but also an approach to Shakespearean narrative more broadly.

2. Establishing Narrative Structure

Among existing Shakespeare adaptations, “there have been relatively few attempts to directly adapt one of his plays into the form of an interactive videogame narrative, where the player controls one or more of the principal characters and can affect the outcome of the story” (Novitz 1). Adaptations for VR specifically are either conceived primarily as ‘immersive theatre,’ or offer what can be categorized as ‘theater-making’ experiences – defined as aiming to “turn their players into creators of theater (actors, dramatists, theater managers, or designers)” (Bloom 115). In Commonwealth Shakespeare Company’s VR performance “Hamlet 360: Thy Father’s Spirit,” for example, the audience is positioned as “an omniscient observer, guide and participant,” able to watch events unfold up close and explore the environment but not shape the narrative itself ("Hamlet 360”). Similarly, the aim of McInnis’ teaching device 360 Shrew is to highlight to students how staging choices create critical interpretations, shifting the emphasis away from the field of literary or narrative scholarship towards an approach embedded in theatre studies (McInnis 24).

At the heart of our practice-based research approach and the aim of our research project is a desire to investigate how interactive storytelling might be implemented in a serious game adaptation to VR. This emphasis on ‘storytelling’ forefronts ideas of narrative and characterization in a way that engages differently with the text as compared to the one that sees a VR adaptation primarily as a means through which to construct virtual theatre. As such, our adaptation approach

is better framed as 'drama-making,' being a game experience in which "the player essentially inhabits or controls a Shakespearean character … the gamer does not impersonate the character in the guise of an actor, but rather becomes the character usually to change its outcome" (Bloom 115).

The "ludology versus narrativism controversy" has been a topic of discussion within game studies for decades. Debates over whether the concept of narrative is applicable to computer games, or whether the status of an artifact as a game precludes its status as narrative continue to rage, with the question remaining: how can the concept of narrative be fruitfully invoked in game studies? (Ryan 276). We would argue that exploring the development of an adaptation to VR forefronts the role narrative can play in constructing such a game experience. In 2004, Perlin argued that a fundamental difference when comparing narrative-driven films or novels with games lies in 'agency' (18). The power of the former, he argues, is in that they function by "telling us a story, asks us to set aside our right to make choices … [we are] swept up in observation of his struggle … as through we are some invisible spirit or angel perched upon his shoulder, watching but never interfering," while "a game does not force us to relinquish our agency. In fact, the game depends on it" (14-15). VR as a medium goes far to blur any division between the agency of the players themselves and the agency of an entity or character that seems psychologically present and real by placing the players in a first-person perspective, literally embodying the entity, and physically guiding them through the game experience using their own physical body (Perlin 15-16).

Ryan makes it clear that "for a game to lend itself naturally and effortlessly to retelling, its narrative design must be more developed than the general analogy between competitive games and the rivalry of the hero and the villain in archetypal narratives: it must reside in the concrete surface structure, and not merely in the abstract deep structure" (283). If our game adaptation aims to educate students about the original play on which it is based, then this ability for 'retelling' must be present. As such, the narrative design must be developed to embed Shakespeare's narrative in both the surface and deep structures of its creation. How we attempted this will be explored below.

Grappling with the tension surrounding games as narratives vs. games as open simulations has influenced the structure adopted for Pericles VR. The experience is formed around four game episodes, which present players with challenges based upon original plot points within a fully

immersive environment, separated by cut scenes. These cut scenes take the form of 2D motion comics, with limited animation and a voiceover, drawing on the play's original language, specifically the chorus sections spoken by John Gower. In this way, the structure of our approach balances the potential of VR to create a sense of immersion which facilitates temporal and spatial dissociation and a merging of task and self (Silpasuwanchai and Ren 663) with our desire to allow students to engage with the play's original plot and highlight the universality of Shakespeare's storytelling.

While in a video game adaptation of Macbeth, a lack of narration and text can be justified as "people who already know Shakespeare's text well can envision the text behind the game's design with minimal assistance" (Hunter 8), this is less likely to be the case for the students engaging with our game, who are unlikely to have previously encountered Pericles.



Figure 1. Frames from 2D cut scenes, with stylistic approach drawing on Southeast Asian traditions of map making, relief carving, papercutting, and shadow puppets.

In addition, VR poses challenges to storytelling, as developers are required to address the issue of how to direct and control viewers' attention when traditional filmmaking techniques such as composition and framing are no longer relevant as a result of the medium's ability for self-guided exploration and 360-degree immersion. To this end, cut scenes are used to elucidate the narrative that lures players into the game, as well as to provide the narrative as a reward for the player for the successful completion of an in-game mission (Ryan 289), acting as a counterbalance to the opportunities for immersive world-discovery offered by the immersive episodes in our game. These

immersive episodes were selected through consultation between the scholars and the designers on the project team, aiming to balance conveying information regarding the play's original plot with the potential it offers for creative design and visual development. Structuring our game experience in this way goes some way to mediating the issue frequently encountered by game developers and critics, in which "the player's participation poses a potential threat to the narrative construction, whereas the hard rails of the plotting can overly constrain the 'freedom, power, self-expression' associated with interactivity" (Jenkins 125).

This game structure not only aids our narrative progression but also offers both the player and the research an insight into the character of the source text in line with the overall pedagogical motivation that lies behind the project. In their search for unifying elements in the play's disjointed structure, directors and critics have identified personal journeying and self-discovery on the part of the play's protagonist as the driving factor that advances the story toward its triumphant conclusion (Plough 295). This theme, central to the play, can be mapped directly onto a game structure based upon a narrative of progression, in which players follow a fixed, predominantly linear narrative game script that takes them through discrete levels (Frasca 289).

Pericles has been described as the story of "a family separated at sea and brought together again by fate," in which the protagonist "becomes a refugee at the mercy of sea and strangers" (Royal Shakespeare Company). Timmerman identifies the play's overall theme as the question of whether human life is subject to the mere whim of external events, or whether a pattern directs events to a preordained end (411). Addressing this claim within the context of our adaptation process required us to reflect on how we might incorporate this sense of "whim" and the role of external events in shaping Pericles' journey and thus the player's experience of the game. The plot of the play is characterized by unexpected encounters, and "bizarre twists of plot," historically dismissed as "incoherent" (Maillet 56; Timmerman 411). Notable moments of deus ex machina, including the death of Pericles' adversary, King Antiochus, following a sudden lightning strike, or the chance arrival of Pericles' ship at the very island where his daughter has been living, typify this somewhat illogical narrative. However, interrogating these ideas from the perspective of adaptation to the VR process offers a new insight into the nature of the play. Presenting the bulk of these "bizarre" plot elements as 2D animated cut scenes presents a sense of inevitability and predestination, creating

the impression that the path through the play and the game experience are outside the hands of both the protagonist and the player who is guiding him (Mancewicz). Players observe the narrative unfolding as if watching an animated film, reinforcing the fictionality of the narrative and viewing it for what it is – a story, in which the protagonist's journey to the conclusion is shaped by the hand of the author as "fate." "Suspending disbelief at narrative improbabilities is a skill required to construct narrative coherence" (Karhulahti 1), however, when dealing with a narrative deemed incoherent and absurd, embracing this approach allows us to demonstrate how medium can reinforce thematic and narrative concerns inherent in the text.

However, arguably, the potential of VR lies not in creating limited agency but in providing the player with an opportunity to shape their engagement with the source text and its narrative through immersive, multi-sensory experiences. To overlook this immersive potential and the ability of the medium to create narrative-driven encounters embedded in movement and embodied cognition would be to overlook the fundamental framework of how immersive environments might challenge or enhance the existing approaches to storytelling.

3. Approaching Engagement and Gamification

Pedagogical studies have shown that using immersive simulations to engage with difficult topics results in "significant learning gains, higher levels of engagement" (Lindgren et al. 174) and more positive attitudes towards these topics when compared to more traditional learning methods (Kosmas and Zaphiris 179; Lindgren et al. 174). By literally placing students in the shoes of Pericles and his daughter Marina at varying times in the VR experience, they are better able to understand the characters' journeys throughout the play – the characters' choices become their choices, imbuing users with a sense of immediacy and responsiveness far beyond that present in other media forms (Perlin 14). Hoeniger argues that "the play is unified by its central figure, Pericles, rather than by its plot … [a]ll other characters are strictly subordinate and most of them in fact episodic" (lxxix). VR, as a medium that offers embodiment to the extent that the user has "the same sensations towards a virtual body inside an immersive virtual environment as toward the biological body" (Kilteni et al. 373) that they possess in the real world can thus be seen as well positioned to elucidate this to audiences unfamiliar with the play. This immediacy of experience

takes traditional ‘active learning’ models to the next level, supporting the long-held view that performing works of Shakespeare in the classroom helps to remove the impression that its linguistic complexities or historical origins render it unintelligible. In addition, studies have demonstrated that successful games are often defined as those that require the player to have a relatively high level of influence on the course of the game, and we have taken an approach that balances this with our overall aim of allowing players to learn about and engage with Shakespeare’s original plot and language (Kramer 85). Again, this experience is further enhanced by the first-person perspective offered by VR, in which players feel as if they are personally facing the challenges faced by the play’s characters and are thus invested in their outcomes.

While traditional video games played on a flat screen can also offer opportunities for immersion and identification, the interactive experience offered by VR technology and its ability to facilitate the occupation of a character’s ‘subject position’ “can motivate learning and enable users to understand spatial relationships in a way that two dimensional representations cannot” (Hunter 5; Wang et al.). VR comes closer to creating a “sensory perception of the ‘real’ world” than any other medium, ensuring that “participants are physically and mentally fully immersed within a computer-generated 3D world and experience it directly” (Weber et al.). Sanford et al. outline the “potential of video games to form a critical space to engage students in meaning making” (109), not only shifting them from the perspective of passive audience members to active participants in the action but also vesting them with the power to make their own meanings, shaping both how they act within the virtual environment and how they interpret the play in the “real world.” VR arguably takes this a step further as a result of its immersive spatial qualities. This is fundamental if we are to attempt to ultimately bring our intended audience of secondary school students back to Shakespeare’s works themselves.

Pericles features many elements that lend themselves to in-game engagement – defined in terms of maintaining the player’s commitment and focus to the activity at hand (Oksanen et al. 45). “The combination of story with frustrations, dilemmas, decision making, and multiple paths enables players to experience a deep level of emotional engagement and purpose” (Silpasuwanchai and Ren 662) in the creation of a game, and many of these narrative elements can be found within the text itself. Examples of such elements include the dilemma faced by Pericles in act 3, scene 1,

where he must choose whether to throw his wife's body overboard in an attempt to save himself and his newborn daughter from a storm and the frustrations and emotional turmoil that emerge from the serious of misunderstandings surrounding Marina's apparent "death" in act 4. Kelly Hunter's production of the play for Flute Theatre demonstrates a small but significant strand of the play's performance history, which has recognized the inherent playfulness in the text. Aimed at children with autistic spectrum disorders and their families, Hunter's production incorporates twelve games, including a fisherman-inspired rocking game, an eye-contact game that accompanies the moment at which Pericles falls in love, and a game where the audience members help Cerimon bring Pericles' wife Thaisa to life by rubbing their hands and throwing their fingertips at the screen to "release magic" (Gillinson). This example demonstrates both our overall approach to the play and the decision to use it as the basis of an immersive game experience, as well as the untapped potential that VR holds to further expand on this game-led adaptation.

An example of how an interactive game element has been drawn out directly from the text comes from the first game level in our experience, which is close to completion. The level directly draws upon act 1, scene 1 of the original play, relocating Antioch to a setting that resembles the temples at Angkor Wat in Cambodia and recasting its royal family as tigers.

In an attempt to win the hand of the beautiful princess, Pericles is presented with a riddle.



Figure 2. Screengrab of the latest VR prototype showing King and Princess within partially modelled immersive environment.

Over the course of the scene, Pericles comes to the realization that he has been tricked – in order to solve the riddle, he must reveal the incestuous relationship between a father and a daughter and face the wrath of the king, but failure to give the correct answer also results in him being condemned to death. Drawing out the riddle represents an element in the text already rooted in the idea of problem-solving and risk-taking with the possibility of both reward and failure, in line with Bond and Beale's view that good gameplay should include scenarios involving "various possible solutions," storytelling should offer moments of engrossing tension embedded in this gameplay, as well as the need for variety rooted in "non linearity" and "choice" (420).

The player finds themselves placed in the virtual environment. They are drawn to the thrones in the center of the palace complex and, upon entering the zone, encounter a pop-up billboard on which the riddle is written. We maintain the play's original language:

I am no viper, yet I feed
On mother's flesh which did me breed.
I sought a husband, in which labor
I found that kindness in a father.
He's father, son, and husband mild;
I mother, wife, and yet his child.
How they may be, and yet in two,
As you will live resolve it you. (Shakespeare, 1.1.66-73)

The player is aware of the incestuous context thanks to the game's introduction scene based on Gower's prologue and must choose how to respond to the questions presented on the billboard user interface. Do they try to avoid providing a response or choose to reveal the truth?

This process echoes the flow of the original play, in which audiences observe Pericles as he struggles to decide what to do with the information he has gained regarding the relationship between the king and his daughter.

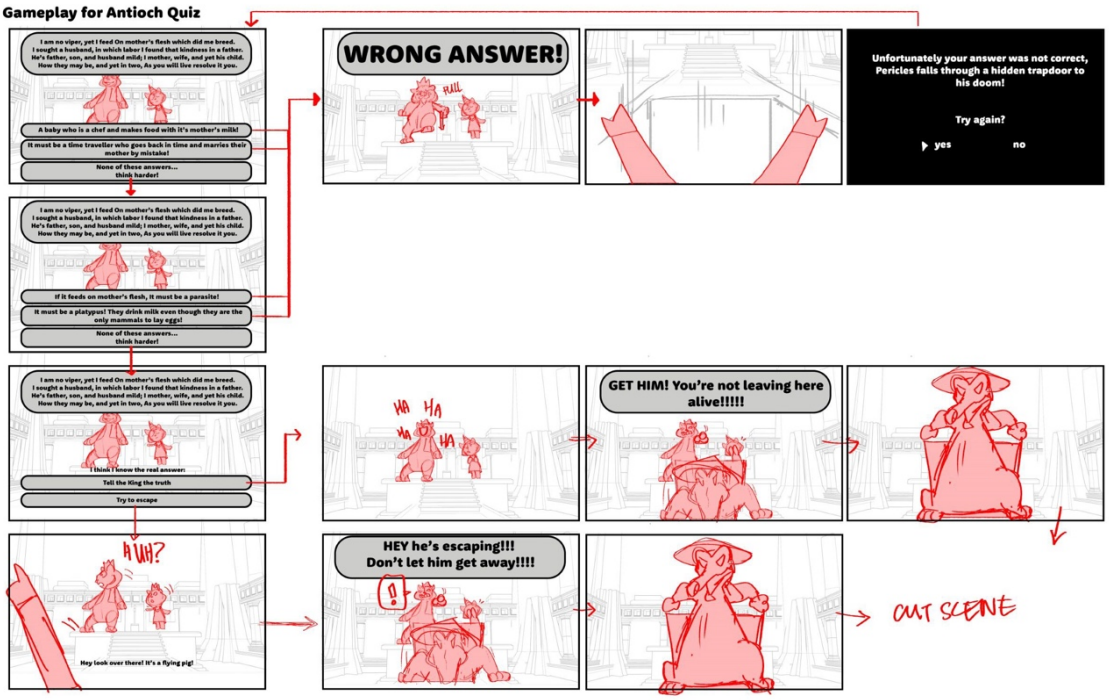


Figure 3. Storyboard for interface in the game's first immersive level, demonstrating how the riddle from the original play has been reinterpreted as gameplay.

Ultimately, regardless of what selection they make, they reach a point at which they must face the wrath of the king and escape his executioner, thus merging immersive interactivity with an adherence to Shakespeare's original plot. In line with our intention to advance the play's linear narrative after this episode of immersion and decision-making, the VR environment is modeled so that the player has only one way to escape, guiding them to the temple surface on which they will observe the next cut scene to progress through the narrative.

4. Maintaining Detachment and Abstraction

While in the previous section, VR's ability to emulate real-world experiences was celebrated for the opportunities it presents to create immersion and engagement and thus facilitate learning outcomes, this ability requires an alternative form of mediation when we turn to the darker themes and plot elements featured in Pericles. The play has been described as "Shakespeare as his most graphically sexual," and productions historically turned to expunging characters, themes, and plotlines in an attempt to "sanitize" the text for performance (Skeele 3, 75). The frank depiction of incest in the opening scene and the sections of the play featuring Marina's time in the brothel were

the most common targets of these revisions. As such, considering how to translate these elements into a VR experience became an important element of our approach to the text.

The plot of Pericles is framed by narration delivered by the medieval poet John Gower. Gower acts as the chorus, providing exposition and commentary as the action unfolds. At the beginning of each act, Gower delivers a prologue that sets the scene and provides context for the audience and also provides the play's epilogue, drawing together the various storylines and reflecting upon the events that have just been observed. Ue has stated that Gower's inclusion in the play would have evoked a "folkloric atmosphere" when presented on the seventeenth-century stage, an idea that has important implications for his role in our VR experience (85). The idea of Gower as rooted in folklore creates a sense of fictionality and an awareness on the part of an audience that what they are viewing is not, in fact, the historical account of the classical Mediterranean but a story composed to entertain. Bardzell et al. have stressed the importance of tutorials and guides for the game experience, describing them as scaffolds that allow players to understand the game interface and how to interact successfully in virtual environments (1). Tutorials are required to identify and impart "the different kinds of knowledge the player should have as an outcome of playing the tutorial" (11). To this end, we maintained Gower as both a narrator and a tutorial guide at the start of the play, providing both practical awareness of how to move and interact within a VR environment and of knowledge of the context of the original play required to understand the game and the progression of the narrative in line with our aims outlined above.

Gower's presence at the start of the play also reminds players that what they are experiencing can be considered a 'story within a story,' which creates a framework that establishes the constructed fictitiousness of the experience to the extent that players do not fear the consequences of the actions made within the game and can thus fully embrace the potential of VR as an immersive experience. As a guide and storyteller, Gower does not only provide the "narrative glue" but also inhabits the role of an all-knowing entity that performs a "meta-function" within the game. Therefore, we implemented a deliberate design decision to differentiate him clearly from the anthropomorphized animal cast of the play. Retaining his human form signals not only his context within English literary history but also places him above and not within the narrative itself. This reflects an approach present in the several existing Shakespeare-inspired games – by reminding

students that what they are observing is an interpretation and that they too are placed in an active position as interpreters, "empowering students to explore Shakespeare for themselves," a crucial requirement of literary education that "VR is well-equipped to facilitate" (McInnis 30).

This approach can also be drawn out from Shakespeare's original language.



Figure 4. Character design for John Gower and the tomb from which he rises in the game's introductory sequence. Both assets are firmly rooted in historical reality, closely resembling the poet's tomb and effigy in London's Southwark Cathedral.

Gower's introductory lines – "To sing a song that old was sung, / From ashes ancient Gower is come," (1.Chorus.1-2) – make it clear to the player that they are encountering a fictional, historical narrative in which they will encounter the surreal and perhaps the magical, setting the tone for the experience that awaits them in the game. This is important when we consider the fact that the play incorporates fantastical anthropomorphized animal characters alongside somewhat shocking themes and narrative elements, ensuring a detachment from these on the part of the user despite the immersive qualities of VR.

The designs of these animal characters, too, can serve as an example of how digital animation, specifically within VR, offers a new way to overcome these old challenges. The character designs aimed to balance an entertaining stylization with a desire to hint at the unsavory behavior of the King and the adult role being assigned to his daughter in a way that was suitable both for an

immersive, interactive media form and an audience of teenagers. The approach to character design is rooted in a desire to establish a sense of emotional detachment between the player and the character, allowing our adaptation to engage with the themes of incest and prostitution. Hunter has convincingly argued in her discussion of her Macbeth video game Something Wicked that "especially when thematic urgency collides with staging practicalities … using digital media to adapt a dramatic work can productively illuminate dramaturgical concerns" (12), an idea that can similarly be applied to the case of Pericles VR.

By adopting a caricatured style for the design of our characters, we aimed to diminish the effect of 'suspension of disbelief' by adding a level of abstraction. Stanton argues that "the amount of harm an animal character experiences, and how much sympathy the narrative offers that animal, depends largely on how anthropomorphised that character is" (xxi), and rejecting humans and a photorealistic design style in favor of stylized, caricatured animals goes some way to creating a sense of detachment that avoids graphic, visually sexual connotations when encountering Pericles' mature themes in immersive VR. Scholarly discussions of animated animals have highlighted how they are able to "dilute the implications of meaning" (Wells 3), removing taboo topics from their real-world context and consequences and placing them within the "surreal realms of the fairytale" (4), which is in keeping with our broader desire to highlight the fictionality of the story the user is encountering.

Our particular style of animal design employs a non-graphic depiction that deliberately moves away from any anatomical detail and stresses the metaphorical quality of the animal characters as a whole: the tiger as the king (Antioch), the mouse deer as the improbable hero (Pericles), and the tapir as an innocent victim, a bystander, and a rather hapless antagonist at times. In doing so, we seek to emphasize the larger strands of meaning over the overtly "sensationalist" aspects that could be read into the play by a more literal visual interpretation.

Furthermore, the animal characters within the narrative proper contrast with the human form of Gower – as the only human character in the experience, he thus acts as a frame, a mediating step between the real world of the observer and the imagined virtual world of the story proper that once again reiterates the fictional nature of the text and places the viewer in a position in which they are not expected to engage with a suspension of belief.



Figure 4. Full character lineup for Pericles VR.

Audiences are not required to believe that the events unfolding must operate within a contemporary or fictional reality and are instead prompted to adopt something resembling Brecht's 'alienation' or 'distancing' effect – that is, rather than simply subconsciously identifying themselves with the characters in the play, consciously accepting or rejecting the actions and themes they observe within the virtual environment.

5. Conclusion

Novitz has argued that "new meanings and creative commentaries can emerge through the adaptation's inevitable reinterpretation and reimagination of the original" (3), and we hope the above discussion of our ongoing project from the perspective of both research and practice has shown how immersive media forms offer an opportunity for revisiting classic texts which fall outside the performance canon. We also hope the discussion presented here raises valuable points that demonstrate how a gamified, animated approach to VR offers a new way to interrogate the text of Pericles while also providing insight into future directions for narrative storytelling within immersive environments. Our approach to gamification demonstrates how it is possible to retain Shakespeare's original language, themes, narrative, and tone while also embracing modern technology and the opportunities offered by immersive media to increase immersion and embodiment. Working predominantly with Shakespeare's original text provides the necessary connection to the past and preserves the authenticity of the author's carefully constructed linguistic, structural, and thematic approach. Pairing it with the modern form of mediation offered by VR is, in our opinion, highly attractive, creating a striking and surprising contrast to traditional stagings of the play yet also respectfully acknowledging that the works of Shakespeare were created to be delivered through experimental, entertaining performances.

In summary, our paper has unpacked the complex challenges arising from the need to balance an original text featuring sensitive and complex content with the necessary transformation and affordances required when realizing it as a fully immersive game experience. Case studies of the game elements crafted for our adaptation have demonstrated how we have implemented these ideas in practice during the development of our virtual experience, offering detailed insights into the interdependencies between the narrative requirements and the iterative design and asset creation process. Our discussion has further demonstrated the process of integrating academic research, interdisciplinary scholarly collaboration, and visual development that emerges from our practice-based research approach.

Looking beyond the example of Shakespeare's Pericles, Prince of Tyre, our effort should be seen as pars pro toto, providing guidance to be applied elsewhere. We would posit that our approach acts as a helpful method towards reinvigorating younger generations' interest in seemingly underappreciated texts of other classic authors by demonstrating that even much-studied authors can reveal unexpected and unfamiliar opportunities for innovative and engaging contemporary adaptation. In conclusion, we have aimed to contribute to the ongoing conversations surrounding the best practices for gamified animation and provided an example of how scholarly research and creative production can be combined to a mutually beneficial effect.

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