



## 'Wherefore art thou (zap) Romeo?'

**Shakespeare video game teaches students his tragic love story by having them `shoot down spaceships and stuff'**

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What light through yonder window breaks? It is a video game and Juliet is the star!

On the 443rd anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth, the University of Guelph yesterday launched an interactive adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, using 21st century technology in an attempt to get schoolchildren excited about English literature's most famous writer.

Entitled '*Speare*, the video game requires the player to lead "an elite squadron of spacecraft" to overcome a dangerous enemy, which has plunged the entire Prospearean Galaxy "into an age of dark despair" by capturing the ancient text of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

A successful mission, the narrator says in the game's introduction, will do nothing less than "restore literature, knowledge and peace to the universe – to usher in a new age of compassion and learning."

While such a take on the tragic love story might cause literary scholars to bristle, Shakespeare to turn in his grave and tweens to roll their eyes, those responsible see the game as a logical and powerful way to improve the literacy of kids aged 10 to 15 and interest them in the Bard's works.

"If I write my extremely scholarly article on *Romeo and Juliet* as an anti-war story, how many of the kids out there in grade school and high school are going to pay attention? Zero," said Daniel Fischlin, a Guelph English professor and one of the game's creators.

"But, if I create a game that has much of the same information embedded into it and get it out to thousands of players online in a format that's accessible, then it mobilizes a certain kind of knowledge."

Two years and about \$50,000 in the making, '*Speare* is the latest offering from Guelph's Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project, unique research exploring and documenting how his works have been adapted here and what that says about our culture.

A free demonstration of the game is available at [apollogames.ca](http://apollogames.ca). A downloadable, deluxe version of '*Speare* is also available for a one-time fee of \$20 at the same website.

The game also links with an interactive website of *Romeo and Juliet*, which features everything from the text of the play and scholarly debates about its meaning, to samples of movie adaptations and clips with real actors and Claymation characters. And designers have created a free resource guide and lesson plan for teachers.

The three-part *Speare* package is the first in a series of games – and eventually a Shakespearean Gamebox – the project is developing to promote literacy and Shakespearean study.

"It's all about redefining literacy for the 21st century," said Vince Campolongo, co-ordinator of secondary programs with the Wellington Catholic District School Board in Guelph.

"It's not just about reading a textbook anymore," he said. "It's also about critically evaluating and organizing information and decoding and analyzing text and multimedia images."

In the game, players fire at rival spaceships to get them to release so-called knowledge spheres that contain words from *Romeo and Juliet*. They then string them together to form words, phrases and facts from the play to make them match those displayed across the top of the video screen in a quest to restore peace to the galaxy.

Along the way, players are exposed to – and tested on – Shakespearean trivia and history, which they must complete before moving on to the next of five levels.

It tests them on their literacy, such as homonyms, synonyms and other basic aspects of the English language, as well as their ability to gather knowledge by piecing together video, audio and text clues that come their way.

The reward for making it through all five levels of the game is linking to the interactive *Romeo and Juliet* website.

"It's fun," said Ieva Mikelsons, 12, a Grade 7 student at King George Public School in Guelph, who was in one of the classes that tested the game last year and gave feedback to designers. A visitor to Stratford each year to see a play by Shakespeare, Ieva said the game is interesting because "you see where the words come from and understand the context they're in."

"And I like how it isn't, like, all questions all the time. You get to shoot down spaceships and stuff to find the Shakespeare parts and fight big bad guys."