

South of Elsinore: Actions that a Man Might Play

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You are about to enter the gloomy halls of Castle Elsinore, an ancient rambling structure perched on cliffs overlooking the sea. A stern Danish king rules this castle, along with his beautiful, arrogant queen...

You are on a narrow stretch of sandy beach. To the west is the icy gray surface of the sea, and to the east there is a sheer cliff. Far above, on top of the cliff, you can see the turrets and towers of [the] huge castle. You can go north or south.

>go south¹

As Charles Crayne's *Castle Elsinore* (1983) begins, the titular castle is inaccessible, on a cliff far above. Unable to enter the promised "ancient halls," rife with "tales of murder and betrayal, love, madness—and treasure," the player trudges off, looking for clues that will allow entry to the promised narrative that stretches out above. Yet such entry is slow to come.

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Rather, much of the game happens outside of both Elsinore and *Hamlet*—as you steal a witch’s broom, awaken a sea monster, and hunt for documents to grant you entrance. What begins in the shadow of *Hamlet* becomes instead an exercise in choosing not to be Hamlet, in turning away from Shakespeare’s text in favor of exploration and adventure.

Castle Elsinore is an early *Hamlet* videogame. More would follow, ranging from big budget artifacts of the Shakespeare industry (such as *Hamlet: A Murder Mystery* [1997], released by Castle Rock Entertainment to accompany the Kenneth Branagh *Hamlet* film) to small independent efforts (such as Benjamin Fan’s unfinished *Ophelia* [2003]). In style, they vary from the gleeful absurdism of Ryan North’s *To Be Or Not To Be* (2013) to Tomasz Pudło’s perverse blend of atmospheric horror and Yiddish myth in *Gamlet* (2004). Yet these unrelated games share the problem of *Castle Elsinore*: to play Hamlet is inevitably to depart from *Hamlet*, to leave behind plot, character, language, and theme and head south into a murkier territory of adaptation, remediation, and transformation. Indeed, these games demand actions from the player that seem antithetical to a play that (in the popular imagination) thematizes inaction and delay: clicking to stab rats on Gertrude’s arras, finding a “medical certificate” to prove your madness to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or punching the evil gravedigger while dodging arrows.² *Hamlet* games, we will argue, represent a limit case of adaptation, setting the player free to do as she wishes in a dim reflection of Shakespeare’s play.

What is challenging here is not the distance between these games and the Shakespearean original. Adaptation studies has turned in recent years from a focus on fidelity to an interest in radical, disruptive, transformative, rhizomatic, or “preposterous” relations.³ Indeed, *Castle Elsinore* may not be farther from *Hamlet* than films like *Last Action Hero* or the *Lion King*. Nor is the difficulty with which these games engage so much about Shakespeare’s cultural capital as the text itself. Critics working on Shakespearean adaptation have long acknowledged that such work must negotiate both the Stratford man and the vast swaths of culture shaped in his name.⁴ As Hubert, Wetmore, and York write, “We no longer have ‘Shakespeare,’ but rather ‘Shakespeares.’”⁵ Videogames—and *Hamlet* games in particular—reconfigure the relation between the Shakespeare user and the Shakespeare network itself. Instead of viewers or readers, who sit outside of a dialogue between two texts, games have *players*: our role in *Castle Elsinore* is fundamentally both interpretive and creative.

Inviting reflection about ‘play,’ these *Hamlet* games return us to a metaphor that runs throughout both their source text and literary studies generally. In critical use, the word often elides its theatrical sense with broader imaginative pleasures (the ‘play’ of meanings, the imagination, or interpretation). Yet, using the word 35 times, more than anywhere else in Shakespeare, *Hamlet* puts it under different denotative strain. To be sure, the word names the play’s ongoing fascination with the dramatic, referring to the play-within-the-play (and other elements of Hamlet’s engagement with its players). But two other moments attract the word: Hamlet’s musical metaphor for attempts to manipulate him (“Will you play upon this pipe?”) and the final duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Rather than weaving together the dramatic, the recreative, and the fanciful (as it might in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*), here the word implicates three ostensibly ludic practices (drama, music, and fencing) in relations of power and control.⁶

The relations that *Hamlet* considers under the sign of ‘play’—genre, the ludic, and relations of power—have become central to thinking about how we use Shakespeare and the Shakespeare network, posing questions of the relationship between interpretive freedom and the vast structures of capital, knowledge, and privilege that limit and shape such freedoms. Contemplating playing Hamlet, this chapter imagines a playful criticism, akin to Eileen A. Joy’s invitation to readers to inhabit and encounter “teeming ... weird worlds, and their figures, that are compressed in books.”⁷ Playful criticism, as we imagine it, takes flight from both *Hamlet* games and a larger conversation in game studies about adaptation, freedom, and choice. What might it mean to think of the *play* of reading and of interpretation not as wholly unconstrained but rather as akin to other types of play in their tension between freedom and rule? In their very invitation to leave Elsinore, to get lost in paratextual forests and wrestle with non-Shakespearean cruces, these games materialize pressing questions shared between game studies and Shakespeare studies.

For critics, too, must wonder what to do when we head south from Elsinore, when we leave behind *Hamlet* for the tangled forest of allusions and adaptation, appropriation and interpretation, that surround it. How do we balance our own interpretive freedom with the ways that Shakespeare—the myth, the industry, the cultural form—is also a structure of constraint? These games ask us to think about the relationship between our freedoms—of action, interpretation,

and self-presentation—and the systems within which they are contained. Indeed, games seize upon Hamlet’s notorious dilemma to raise questions of agency in the face of structuring forces that remain, like the prince’s excursus on prayer in the moment before he chooses *not* to kill Claudius, nebulously understood conditions that inform and sustain any efficacious action. What *Hamlet* games thematize, in their promises of intervention, is that one operates in a world shaped by structures that one can partially—but only partially—comprehend.

Building this argument will require two parts: we begin by outlining the overlapping concerns among game studies, adaptation studies, and *Hamlet* criticism. From there, we turn to a pair of options presented by *Hamlet* games: the effort to short-circuit plot by killing Claudius early, and the attempt to flee the challenges of Elsinore entirely, heading south and away from *Hamlet*. Both, we argue, help us to think through the affordances of interpretative play.

PLAY’S THE THING

Early in 1993’s *Last Action Hero*, Danny Madigan imagines the trailer for a cinematic *Hamlet*, where Arnold Schwarzenegger (or rather action hero Jack Slater) blasts through a black-and-white Denmark, launching Claudius through a window, shooting Polonius, and ultimately exploding all of Elsinore. The scene is emblematic of what Kay Smith calls “Shakespearean sampling,” remixing and reordering elements of older works to new effects: to establish character, to introduce or resolve conflicts, or to draw on the play’s familiarity to introduce certain themes.⁸ Casting Schwarzenegger as Hamlet establishes a “dialogic” relation between play and film that transforms both.

What, then, would it mean to cast us? If you owned a Nintendo in 1993, you might have encountered this scene another way: as the second stage of the *Last Action Hero* videogame, published by Sony Imagesoft. Rather than watching Schwarzenegger-as-Slater-as-Hamlet, with gamepad in hand you become the not-so-sweet prince, punching your way through archers, knights, and bomb-throwing goons in order to battle a knife-wielding Polonius and escape Elsinore through a hail of arrows, presumably of outrageous fortune.

This thematic drift shows the challenge of videogame Hamlets: to allow the player freedom of action is necessarily to deviate from the script. Such deviation operates differently than in the movie:

the *Last Action Hero* film presents a wish-fulfillment fantasy, offering an action hero's composed violence as an imaginative alternative to both Hamlet's paralyzed inaction and Danny's frustrated boredom. But this videogame Hamlet gives over words and thought (even in opposition), becoming all "cause, and will, and strength, and means/To do't" (4.4.44–45), in a Fortinbraslike world where moving across the screen is its own reward. Linda Hutcheon has proposed that videogames excel in adapting the "res extensa" of a text—its world, characters, tone, and themes—while struggling with its "res cogitans," "the space of the mind."⁹ By the time you stab the gravedigger, the *Last Action Hero* game has embraced this lack of a subjective correlative.

Nevertheless, as early as 1983, computer enthusiasts turned to *Hamlet* to imagine the possibilities of their devices. Fred Saberhagen asked readers of *Softline* magazine to imagine themselves as Shakespeare in an alternative history Globe, where the King's Men put on peculiar performances:

In a somewhat more recent show, also very popular, the lead actor climbs about on a crazy scaffolding of planks and ladders, trying to accomplish some rather simple-minded tasks, while others costumed as fantastic creatures try to knock him off by throwing barrels. It's good slapstick fun, and the audiences love it.¹⁰

After reimagining *Donkey Kong* as part of the repertory of Shakespeare's company, Saberhagen reverses the direction of influence: the story ends with you-as-Shakespeare starting to plan *Hamlet*. In early discussions of computer gaming, Shakespeare's play has many roles. In part, it seems to mark the highest possible status for literature. As indisputable classic, it registers both the difference in achievement between literature and the *Zorks* and *Space Invaders* of the emergent medium and the possible status to which games could aspire. But *Hamlet* also repeatedly marks a difference in kind between what games could do and what a book or play might.

Such use of Shakespeare to imagine the potential of videogames anticipates what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "remediation," a "double logic" where media technologies create experiences that oscillate between being "immediate," seemingly real and instantaneous, and "hypermediate," or distanced by the foregrounding of their own mediated qualities.¹¹ We might think here of Hamlet's advice to the players,

which simultaneously distinguishes the present moment from theatre and highlights its status *as* theatre. Indeed, a hallmark of remediation, Bolter and Grusin claim, is “the representation of one medium in another.”¹² Every medium “remediates,” or “appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real.”¹³ It is no surprise, then, that videogames refashion what has become the literary and theatrical ur-text for issues of player agency. Images of the Globe *Donkey Kong* or a videogame *Hamlet* both alienate and naturalize this new medium, casting the cultural capital of the old text against the possibilities of the new.

Yet, in so doing, *Hamlet* videogames do not merely mine Shakespeare for nuggets of legitimacy; they join a long history of adaptive performance that constitutes the popular and academic history of the Shakespeare network.¹⁴ Jesper Juul has proposed that computer gaming makes literal many of our metaphors of interpretation: notions of choice, of the action that is interpretation, and of the free play of the imagination.¹⁵ As such, to *play* Hamlet, we argue, allows one to test such metaphors, to think about what it might mean to perform a criticism that respects the free range of interpretation while also acknowledging that such work is institutionally bounded. Thus, we posit a homology between criticism and play that attends to Bruno Latour’s notion of the network as a set of relations where “[i]nstead of simply transporting effects without transforming them,” the “social” instead becomes a “circulating entity” brought into being by the actions that sustain it.¹⁶ Shakespeare and *Hamlet* are hence products of a network that comes into view only by tracing the work of adaptive remediation. In Latour’s view, every encounter with a node in a network “may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation.”¹⁷ Just as every *Hamlet* game offers us “translations” where things go differently, so does *Hamlet* criticism offer us a “translation” of the text’s vagaries and peculiarities into critical insight.

In a pair of articles published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1953, William Empson set out to explain the achievements of *Hamlet* as Shakespeare’s common-sense solutions to the revision of a “much-laughed at old play.”¹⁸ The challenge Empson sets himself is this: the “Hamlet problem” so delicately unfolded by contemporary critics—our interest in Hamlet’s consciousness and his delay—does not appear to have occurred to audiences for the first two hundred years. But where Margreta de Grazia would propose that the modern sense of an interiorized Hamlet

is essentially misinterpretation, Empson tries to explain how an interiorized Hamlet emerges from a play written for an audience who would understand it fundamentally differently.

Empson imagines a “mediating process” in which Hamlet’s distinctive psychology emerges from the intersection between a new dramatic taste for the “lifelike” and the generic structure of revenge tragedy, in which revenge might only happen at the end of the play. Audiences “demanded revenge tragedy,” Empson imagines, yet “laughed when it was provided.”¹⁹ So, Shakespeare offers a Hamlet who is at odds with the play he inhabits, continually puzzled by his own inability to act. We need not accept Empson’s account to keep its key insight (one shared by de Grazia)²⁰: that Hamlet is simultaneously oddly constrained by plot and oddly free from it. *Hamlet* games refigure the formula—that Hamlet is somehow out of place in the world he inhabits—into one where we, the players, are out of place in the Hamlets we temporarily inhabit. In the terms of Bolter and Grusin, *Hamlet*’s mediatory function renders the play hypermediate, it “acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible.”²¹ Thus, in Empson’s understanding, Shakespeare’s play achieves its historical effect by taking the conventional revenge tragedy plot and disclosing it as a representational apparatus whose theatrical mediation is cast into relief by Hamlet’s quite literal inability to *act*.

Like Hamlet himself, players of *Hamlet* games are placed in mediated worlds promising something ‘real’—experiencing Shakespeare, or gaining an understanding of literature, or intervening in a well-known plot—but which do so, usually, only to reveal us as not knowing what we thought we did about Shakespeare and *Hamlet*. Marching endlessly to the right side of the screen in *Last Action Hero* redefines the ways we interact with a supposedly Shakespearean world, erasing the possibility of Hamlet’s inaction and supplanting it with no choice *but* action. It might be tempting to (generously) write this off as satire or (ungenerously) as a failure to fully engage with Shakespeare’s play, but even so, it reveals in its remediation how much *Hamlet* relies on delayed action and impeded agency to mean anything at all. Indeed, the world of *Hamlet*—haunted by ghosts of questionable provenance, prone to serendipitous pirate attacks, and home to a dispossessed prince who is sixteen-going-on-thirty—has never easily reduced to the interplay of legible social agents. Rather, its agents are continually beset by something seemingly *outside*, by the anomalous, by chance, and by failure, even as they are incapable of fully explicating them. The actor-network of *Hamlet* is a tangled one, and so too do

Hamlet games present worlds that promise action in our limited sphere but which, in a hypermediate shift, continually reveal the occasions that inform against us.

Phil Goetz begins a formative article on interactive fiction by imagining a “hypertext version of *Hamlet* on an Apple Macintosh”:

After reading Act II, you might be prompted, ‘Should Hamlet (A) kill his uncle, (B) leave the country, or (C) mope about life and death?’ You type ‘A’, and read a considerably shortened version of *Hamlet*. (This exhibits one problem with interactive fiction — sometimes the action which builds up to more dramatic climax is not the action which a goal-oriented reader would take.)²²

To imagine this question is to take *Hamlet* seriously, to insist on the validity of Hamlet’s predicament and the actions he considers. The untaken paths within a play have their own reality: each night, Hamlet *might* kill Claudius, even though he will not. Games, Goetz suggests, open up that *might* to action as well as to passion, cutting Hamlet loose from the structures of plot and psychology that paralyze him. But, in the process, they eviscerate *Hamlet*, replacing Shakespeare’s action with something of our own.

From here our chapter branches in the way of the games we describe. Assuming that plenty has already been written about Hamlet’s moping over life and death, the final two sections of this study will consider countries underexplored if not undiscovered, using Goetz’s examples (A) and (B) in *Hamlet* games to trace our understanding of what it might mean to play at criticism.

>kill claudius

Hamlet enters the chapel where his stepfather-uncle kneels. “Now might I do it,” says the prince to himself, and adds

But now ‘a is a-praying
And now I’ll do it – and so ‘a goes to heaven,
And so I am revenged! (3.3.73–75)

The prospect of enabling his uncle’s salvation gives him pause—“That would be scanned” (ll.75). And so, the prince forgoes murder, and the rest of the play follows its well-worn course to the mound of “bodies/High on a stage” (5.2.384–85). We all know this to be the case; we know that Hamlet does not kill Claudius during his uncle’s ineffectual prayer and we

know also how Shakespeare's play ends. Indeed, looking over Hamlet's words, it can be hard not to see the latent image of this promised end: 'Now might,' 'but now,' 'and now,' 'and so.' Nested in the prince's first three lines of the scene is the lack of conviction that will follow.

But let's retry, entering the throne room again:

Throne room

This room is designed to make one point - that its occupants are RICH. There are expensive looking chandeliers all over the ceiling, but the centre of attention is (unsurprisingly) the massive throne in the middle of the floor...

Claudius is here.

Exits are north, south and west.

>kill claudius

Just as you are pulling your punch, Gertrude storms into the room.

"Hamlet!" she snaps. "How many times have I told you NOT to murder your relatives! I know it's difficult for a Shakespearian lead, but..."

You grudgingly apologize to both of them. Gertrude leaves, mollified.²³

This time, what fails is not will (or strength or means) but opportunity. The scene, drawn from Robin Johnson's *Hamlet—The Text Adventure* (2003), offers the prospect of early revenge before snatching it away. So doing, it shows the problem Empson attributes to Shakespeare: if revenge comes too soon, then the plot is over before it begins, yet to delay revenge is to refuse the protagonist's agency.

Gertrude's metatextual joke uses the rubble of the fourth wall to obscure Hamlet's original problem: he is not eager *enough*. The player is understood to be more impulsive than the Danish prince, eager to fulfill the grim command the Ghost issued not too long ago. A stop-gap delays revenge until appropriate, highlighting not only a winking fidelity to Shakespeare's original but the game's nature as a designed experience. Presented as a series of 'rooms' with interactable characters and objects, the game asks the player to puzzle out the correct interlocking actions in the appropriate order to dispatch Claudius.

The solution includes finding a carrot, using it to lead a horse onto a boat, taking the boat to England, and trading the horse for a kingdom in the midst of the Battle of Bosworth. Beyond playful allusions, the game's puzzles serve to reproduce Hamlet's original delay while humorously drawing attention to the player's own inability to just *do* what they want, or what they know they will *have* to do eventually.

Many *Hamlet* games work thus, promising to solve Hamlet's delay while thwarting the player's desire to cut to the chase. Such delays are fundamental to the gaming experience. Nick Montfort explains a primary difference between interactive fiction, such as Johnson's game, and traditional board games: in the former both the "rules" of the gameworld and "state of the game" are unknown to the player.²⁴ One promise of play in a narrative world is the pleasure of discovery—of figuring out, for example, that the carrot lures the horse onto the boat in order to gain the crown of England. In the case of *Hamlet*, this is also the pleasure of rediscovery, as the familiar and the unfamiliar collide in novel ways. These games therefore also abut a more recent strain of game criticism in that they oppose what Lana Polansky identifies as a critical tendency to assume "the player is the center of attention": that "[a]ll flows from the player's will, their agency is paramount, and their accomplishments are the result of a force of will persevering against a hostile environment."²⁵ As Polansky argues, a fantasy of radical freedom in gameplay is always already undercut by the very nature of games as designed experiences: "Games ... ask you to accept the forfeiture of a certain degree of control in order to guide experience. There's a dynamic at work, a relationship emerging, between the player and the game, an outward expression of a creator."²⁶ Hence, Johnson's game assumes a wry and somewhat combative narratorial voice, one that needles the player overeager to act, and overeagerly responds only when unhelpful. For instance, in the first room of the game one can type "Not to be" for an immediate end message ("Okay then") and a score of 0 points. The game is readier to let Hamlet resolve himself into a dew than it is to let his revenge come too early.

Another design tactic is to delay Hamlet's revenge by removing him entirely. Artist and designer mif2000's *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* adopts the mechanics of a 'point-and-click' adventure game, casting the player as a time-traveler who has accidentally crushed Hamlet with his time machine and must step into his place to stop Claudius and keep 'history' from being rewritten.²⁷ A series of interactive illustrations offer a bright, cartoonish

rendition of a comically ahistorical Denmark. Players solve puzzles, manipulating elements of the screens in order to progress to the next challenge. Yet in setting right this time out of joint, the player may question some of its divergences from Shakespeare—Claudius, here a bachelor, kidnaps Ophelia with the hope of marrying her, while Laertes (inexplicably) is a monstrous giant and Polonius (also inexplicably) a goblin in a spacesuit. The game's title posits adapting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a return to simplicity—facetiously eschewing the frills and embellishments of larger games—but in practice it rewrites Hamlet himself as a valiant videogame hero ready to defeat the monsters and save the princess, until a time machine lands on his head. Luckily, since this *is* a videogame, the character who emerges from the time machine is more than willing to solve the multitude of puzzles that delay Claudius' eventual death at the hands of the player.

What neither game allows, though, is the promise with which we began: that Hamlet might kill Claudius *before* the proper end of Shakespeare's play. What if, instead of Hamlet backing away at the last second, he follows through with his plot of vengeance in Act 3, sneaking up behind Claudius to plunge a sword directly into his brain: "The sword goes right through his head and it's super gross. His eyes pop out and roll under a pew. Oh gosh, it just got grosser!!"²⁸ Such is one possible outcome in this scene when narrated by Ryan North's 2013 "chooseable-path adventure" novelization of Shakespeare's play, *To Be or Not To Be*, which contains a multitude of branching paths (the introduction informs us that there are over three quadrillion unique ways to read through the book—poem unlimited, indeed).

North's narrator, characteristically flippant even when grimacing over flying eyeballs, informs the reader that "[y]ou have beaten this book, and also murdered an alive person. Your final score is, oh, let's say ... 423 out of 1000."²⁹ The reader/player propels the plot forward where Hamlet himself falters. And what has intervening in one of the most well-worn plots in English literature achieved? Nothing more, it would seem, than a messy chapel floor and, apparently, 423 points. But why delay this long? We can even do what Johnson's game would not allow, dispensing with the business of conscience catching entirely to kill Claudius immediately after the Ghost informs us of his treachery. With shades of *Macbeth* intruding, the narrator explains that Hamlet easily murders the drunken, sleeping Claudius and, that night, "[c]ontent in the knowledge that you were right to murder a dude and that you even had supernatural forces

on your side, your dreams are generally peaceful.” In this ending, the newly empowered Hamlet finally succeeds to the throne and institutes a wise and fair economic policy that “literally [makes] the world a better place ... [A]ll you had to do was kill a human being!”³⁰

Yet Hamlet, the inveterate melancholic and temporizer of English literature, so easily turning his life around to rule wisely and well seems more than a bit hollow. The narrator’s sanguine assurance that committing murder will make things right confirms the hunch of *Hamlet*’s most frustrated readers, while introducing a niggling doubt about how satisfying such expedience really is. In a postscript, the ending doubles down on its overabundance of positivity:

P.S. Oh, I meant to mention it sooner, but one day you step on a butterfly that has the cascade effect of preventing not one but TWO worldwide wars from occurring, centuries down the line! So, good job all around, I’d say! Keep on killing everyone who interferes with your preferred version of history, I’d say!³¹

The condescending narration belabors the point that this is too good to be true: the divergence from *Hamlet*’s story becomes a divergence from all known history, a utopian dream that is nice to imagine but impossible to enact.

These are but two of the many ways Claudius can die in *To Be or Not To Be* (one demands using his corpse as a skateboard; in a few, Ophelia has the honor of doing him in), but all of them prompt a curious sense of not being much of an ending at all. No end is a ‘win’ condition in the sense that, say, Johnson’s game or mif2000’s have an endpoint where all the puzzles have been solved and the game is ‘over.’ North’s interactive fiction is to be explored rather than solved: each ending pats the reader on the back for accomplishing something while also suggesting that something else could have been done, that still something else is left to do. The unknowability of the full text, which Montfort sees as an accommodation to the player’s desire to explore and eventually master, in North’s adaptation underscores how even at the moment of intervention, there is something that will not quite scan in our attempt to wrest control from Hamlet and hence take control of *Hamlet*. There is no mastery in *To Be or Not To Be*—even following Shakespeare’s plot to the letter results in the narrator urging us to go outside and do something other than read.

What does it mean to *play* (as opposed to stage) Shakespeare well? Adaptation studies may be the field of literary studies most invested in authorial action: whether we use the language of ‘remediation,’ ‘collaboration,’ and/or ‘appropriation,’ or speak of ‘social’ or ‘cultural capital.’ Significance tends to be found in an authorial figure who either transforms the original or deploys its resources for his, her, or its (as in the case of corporate Shakespeare) own ends. We might distinguish between a post-Bloomian critical line that emphasizes authorial moves within the matrices of meaning created by the two texts and a more culturally inflected one that analyzes social structures of meaning. Yet even cynical accounts, such as Ivo Kamps’ representation of Shakespeare criticism as truthless convening around a culturally significant figure as an occasion for social and political move-making, emphasize what adaptation *does*.³² This is not to accuse these readings of theoretical naiveté, just to point out that even when they are most attentive to the structures that shape our tastes, desires, and experience, they imagine operating successfully on and within those structures.

When we ourselves play as Hamlet, we sense the appeal of such reparative imagination. The fiction of these games is that *Hamlet* is a puzzle that can be solved, albeit at the cost of jettisoning plot and psychology alike, disabling the affective machinery of Shakespeare’s drama in favor of something else altogether. Yet as North’s condescending narrator reminds us, to ‘win’ the game is to escape neither the confining structures of genre (puzzle game or text adventure) nor the larger social structures that create and maintain them. Rather, Hamlet himself emerges (as Empson argued) as a genre-effect, a result of the mismatch between an individual’s sense of agency and the shaping structures that simultaneously limit it and allow it to make sense.

We find a version of this argument made explicitly in *The Adventures of Reynaldo*, where you play Polonius’ servant, tasked with heading to England to supervise Laertes. Yet no matter what choices the player makes, Reynaldo dies. The game’s creator writes:

The purpose of *The Adventures of Reynaldo* is to simulate the discomfort caused by lack of control by making the player literally a piece in the game. They are placed under the illusion that they are playing by making decisions and choosing paths but in reality, they are being played by the story because no matter what they do, Reynaldo dies. When the player realizes this, I hope they experience a bit of the desperation and unease Hamlet feels.³³

Hamlet, here, becomes an experience of play, seemingly free and yet constantly frustrated. To read playfully is to acknowledge that the critical mode of ‘resolving’ the questions of *Hamlet* (as any other text) is at least partially a power fantasy, one that traces out the operations of larger structures of constraint and deferral.

>go south

But let us try again. Rather than leaping to the end, let us linger in the present. What if Hamlet, rather than stabbing Claudius early—Goetz’s option (A)—and thereby making a too-early end of king and plot alike, instead abandons Elsinore and heads off for parts unknown—Goetz’s option (B)? Such a path offers a fantasy of escape rather than repair. What might it mean to play *Hamlet* in this manner, to flee the obligations of plot entirely? What would it mean for a playful criticism to head south from Elsinore?

Here, game designers face the opposite problem: if killing Claudius early threatens to derail the game, to reveal the mismatch between ostensible freedom of action and the constraints of plot, to flee Elsinore threatens running out of illusion, hitting the boundaries of the game’s environment. The representational conventions that bound and create theatrical space—curtain, fourth wall, perspective scenery, wings—do not govern game environments; rather, comparable conventions must be created. Once again, the fantasy of free play is bounded by the constraints of the created environment that makes it possible.

In *Castle Elsinore*, for instance, if you continue to head south, away from Hamlet’s destiny, you encounter first the town of Elsinore, then a church, and at last a tangle of forest: “You are wandering through the dim trails of the pine forest.”³⁴ In this forest, there is nothing to ‘>look’ at or ‘>get,’ no one to ‘>talk’ to and no direction to ‘>go.’ Non-Euclidean and contentless, the forest only admits returning from whence you came. In *Hamlet: The Text Adventure*, the sea marks a similar boundary, forcing a player either to wander aimlessly or return to engage in the game’s puzzles.

Another boundary is occasioned by the program’s ability to convert a player’s input into meaningful actions. Action games, such as *Last Action Hero*, rely on a limited set of homologies between character and player; hidden object games only make certain pieces of an image clickable; text adventures are limited by the ability of the ‘parser’ to turn what a player types into meaningful activity within the game world. When these protocols fail, the game may not reply at all, may ask for new input, or act

contrary to expectations. Playing Shakespeare in this way, one learns that the many possible moves are given meaning only in relation to an already existing game. Here, too, games literalize what we know about interpretation—that it always already assumes the constraints of a given language game. Even as the Shakespeare network offers a map of possibilities linking endlessly out from Elsinore, to traverse it is to confront the limitations of our own obstinate parsers. What will my position in the world allow me to say? What will you understand?

Most games present the limits of their parsers as a failing of interpersonal communication: “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean” or “Sorry, I didn’t understand that.” Tomasz Pudlo’s *Gamlet*, by contrast, sometimes offers the following message:

>sit

You feel an urge to sit, but seem unable to express it intelligibly. Language, that spills from your mouth naturally as saliva, turns out to be almost as resistant to analysis as the seemingly endless permutations of the Torah.³⁵

Here, again, the game makes literal the challenge of interpretation: infinite permutations, infinite actions, whirled into sense only by the operation of the limited and opaque machinery of play. And so too, when we decide to head south from Elsinore as interpreters, moving away from Shakespeare’s original along the network of users and misusers, we confront both a vision of infinite possibilities and the limits of our own perspectives. To play Hamlet is to gain not unlimited freedom but rather a limited perspective on the rulesets that sustain our activities.

And yet *Gamlet* offers another hope as well. In the midst of that game’s strange puzzles, one may choose to look out the window and see that the moon looks “close enough to touch.” If one tries, one receives the following message:

>touch moon

You hoist yourself up by your side-curls and reach the moon. For many days you wander about. Not a soul is to be seen anywhere and no matter how hard you look for a beaten track, there is none. One day, however, rambling aimlessly along, you notice what seem to be human footprints. Overjoyed, you walk on for several more days until you reach a city. Yet, at its gate are guards who refuse to admit you without papers, and since you have none, you are seized and deported back to earth.³⁶

As in *Hamlet* itself, the “moon” is the outer boundary of the game’s imaginative world: in Shakespeare, the ghost’s return is to within “glimpses of the moon” (1.4.53); passing time becomes “journeys of the sun and moon” (3.2.163); both virtues and plots extend almost to the moon. If so, Hamlet’s much-debated “lunacy” (2.2.49, 3.1.4) reflects the Empsonian mismatch between him and this insistently sublunary world. *Gamlet* cannot extend forever: players cannot endlessly head south or north or up from Elsinore. But rather than trying to contain the player while maintaining the pretense of total freedom, it holds out the possibility of another interpretive community, governed by other rules, just beyond the reach of the fiction.

We learned, trying to kill Claudius, that to play the Shakespeare network is not to escape our constraints—of capital, of institutions, of what is legible and what can be parsed. The exhilarating freedoms of Shakespearean circulation bring us face to face with new frustrations; the urge to engage the original—to resolve, absolve, or explain—always falls short even as it motivates new discoveries. So, too, we cannot escape Elsinore while still playing *Hamlet*: our transversal of the Shakespeare network remains bounded by the particular games we choose to play. Yet, *Gamlet* suggests, we might understand these boundaries differently, as glimpses of other worlds, other games. For us, as for Hamlet, these countries are undiscovered, perhaps undiscoverable, but we always have the option to retry and see where the next path takes us.

NOTES

1. Charles Crayne, *Castle Elsinore* (Manhattan Beach, CA: Temple Software, 1983). Throughout, text typed in by the player is bolded and prefaced with the angle bracket “>” to follow the conventions of text-input parsing game engines.
2. Examples are drawn from *Hamlet: A Murder Mystery* (CastleRock Entertainment/EEME Interactive, 1997); Robin Johnson, *Hamlet: the Most Lamentable and Excellent Text Adventure* (self-published, 2003); and *Last Action Hero* (Teeny Weeny Games, 1993).
3. For the Shakespearean preposterous, see Pascale Aebischer in *Screening Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatic theory of Shakespearean adaptation see Douglas Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value,” in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21–40. Lanier’s approach most closely

anticipates our own in his bid to understand adaptation as engagement not so much with original texts but with a “more inchoate and complex web of intervening adaptations or, just as important, with the protocols – formal and ideological – of genres and media that have little to do with the Shakespearean text” (23).

4. See, for instance, Desmet and Sawyer on “big-time” and “small-time Shakespeare” in *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2; Pascale Aebischer on the tension between “Hollywood Shakespeare” and the Jacobean preposterous; and Graham Holderness on “SHAKESPEARE,” the “Shakespeare industry” or “institution,” and the Shakespeare myth in *Cultural Shakespeare* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002).
5. Hulbert, Wetmore, and York, *Shakespeare and Youth Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.
6. For the ludic in Hamlet, see Philip McGuire, “‘Bearing a Wary Eye’: Ludic Vengeance and Doubtful Suicide in *Hamlet*,” in *From Page to Performance: Essays in Early English Drama*, ed. John Alford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 235–253.
7. Eileen Joy, “Weird Reading,” *Speculations* 4 (2013): 31.
8. Kay Smith, “‘Hamlet, Part Eight, The Revenge,’ or Sampling Shakespeare in a Postmodern World,” *College Literature* 31.4 (2004): 136. See also Eric Mallin, “‘You Kilt My Foddah,’ Or, Arnold, Prince of Denmark,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.2 (1999): 129.
9. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 14.
10. Fred Saberhagen, “Okay, Cue the Genius,” *Softline* 3 (Sept–Oct 1983): 30.
11. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 6.
12. *Ibid.*, 45.
13. *Ibid.*, 98.
14. See also Lanier’s idea of a “post-fidelity” adaptation studies that shifts attention “from Shakespeare the text to ‘Shakespeare’ the adaptation – that is, to the aggregated web of cultural forces and productions that in some fashion lay claim to the label ‘Shakespearean’ but that has long exceeded the canon of plays and poems we have come to attribute to the pen of William Shakespeare” (27).
15. See Jesper Juul, “A Clash Between Game and Narrative,” (master’s thesis, Institute of Nordic Language and Literature, University of Copenhagen, 1999): 42.
16. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 128.
17. *Ibid.*

18. William Empson, "Hamlet When New," *Sewanee Review* 61.1–2 (Winter 1953; Spring 1953): 16.
19. *Ibid.*, 17, 21.
20. Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
21. Bolter and Grusin, 34.
22. Phil Goetz, "Interactive Fiction and Computers," *Interactive Fantasy* 1, 98–115. Crashing Boar Books, 1994. Available online at <http://mud.co.uk/richard/ifan194.htm>.
23. Johnson.
24. Nick Montfort, "Towards a Theory of Interactive Fiction," in *The Interactive Fiction Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robinson Wheeler (Boston, MA: Transcript On press, 2011): 48.
25. Lana Polansky, "The Customer is Often Wrong (FUCK THE PLAYER)," *Sufficiently Human*, 2015, <http://sufficientlyhuman.com/archives/599>.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (Big Fish Games, 2010). The game *Elsinore*, still in development as we write, similarly equips Ophelia with a time machine, though it makes more thematic use of it in gameplay.
28. Ryan North, *To Be or Not To Be: A Chooseable Path Adventure* (Brooklyn, NY: Breadpig, 2013): 205.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 195.
31. *Ibid.*, 367.
32. Ivo Kamps, "Alas, Poor Shakespeare! I Knew Him Well," in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, ed. Desmet and Sayer (London: Routledge, 1999): 15–32.
33. User "aanabansal," writing on *The Interactive Fiction Database*, 2013. <http://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=8518g9cagbl0qhoc>.
34. Crayne.
35. Pudlo, Tomasz, *Gamlet*, self-published, 2004. <http://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=ce8v9rp8yovsh5ys>.
36. Pudlo.

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