

Article

‘The Time Is out of Joint’: Interactivity and Player Agency in Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

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Abstract: Although Shakespeare and his plays have been a frequent subject of videogame adaptations in the past, these have often been confined to either theatre-making games (which present the staging of Shakespeare plays using the mechanisms of strategy or simulation videogame genres) of education/trivia games that aim to familiarise players with Shakespeare’s texts. While references to Shakespeare abound in videogames, 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. This paper will examine four videogame adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, whose differing approaches to player-agency and interactivity in relation to narrative of the classic play demonstrate the interactive potential of Shakespearean drama. While the player-driven overwriting or rewriting of the classic text may appear irreverent, it is, in each game, dependent on some conception the original play and the past tradition that it represents, which is translated into the contemporary medium of the videogame. This illustrates Jacques Derrida’s contention that the longevity and translatability of Shakespearean texts are due to their ‘spectral’ qualities, in that they allow the past to be re-examined through the lens of the present and vice versa.

Keywords: adaptation; videogames; Shakespeare

1. Introduction: Shakespeare and New Media

In *Specters of Marx* Jacques Derrida (1994) argues that William Shakespeare operates as a uniquely transitional figure in European literature, emerging from the traditions of Old Europe but at a point where ‘time is off its hinges’—i.e., where social, political, philosophical and technological upheavals posed a challenge to established certainties. The receptiveness of Shakespeare’s plays to the turbulence of these unhinged times creates ‘poetic and thinking peepholes’ in the works that allow them to explore and apply a multitude of perspectives to older histories, narratives and themes (Derrida 1994, p. 20). This openness also means that the plays themselves are highly receptive to new interpretations and can be translated into a variety of mediums and contexts. In Derrida’s argument, both the figure of Shakespeare and his plays are ‘spectral’ because they are simultaneously of the past and open to the possibilities of the future.

Is it impossible to gather under a single roof the apparently disordered plurivocity (which is itself “out of joint”) of these interpretations? Is it possible to find a rule of cohabitation under such a roof, it being understood that this house will always be haunted rather than inhabited by the meaning of the original? This is the stroke of genius, the insignia trait of spirit, the signature of the Thing “Shakespeare”: to authorize each one of the translations, to make them possible and intelligible without ever being reducible to them. (Derrida 1994, p. 25)

For Derrida, memory is like a ghost that hovers between past and present and operates as an act of translation. Derrida refers to this process as ‘hauntology’ where the past is reworked in the light of the present and the present is reworked in the light of the past, offering a means of breaking down the binary opposition between these two categories (Derrida 1994, p. 10). Thus ‘the Thing “Shakespeare”’ can be understood as ‘haunting’ the performances and adaptations of the plays rather than ‘inhabiting’ them. It manifests as an ever-shifting set of cultural expectations that surround the idea of Shakespeare as a representative or embodiment of a past literary tradition but does not and cannot command fidelity to any original meaning or interpretation. This ‘Thing “Shakespeare”’ is always irreducible to and in excess of any single production or encounter and therefore it can be argued that any engagement with a Shakespearean text results not in the knowledge of a true, singular, original Shakespeare, but in ‘Shakespeares’—diverse and different texts and performances, which cannot be clearly ordered into a linear sequence of before and after (Calbi 2013, p. 2). From Derrida’s perspective, Shakespearean plays are so frequently performed and adapted because they are ‘spectral’ works: their openness and mutability means that they can be explored through the lens of the contemporary, but this also affords the possibility of re-examining the contemporary through the lens of the past.

As Shakespeare’s ‘spectral’ plays work to translate the past into the present and vice versa, their adaptations are often used to signal the full arrival of new mediums. Opera, radio, film and television have all had their Shakespeare adaptations that demonstrate their potential seriousness within a cultural tradition, and also how their unique innovations and affordances can transform the experience and interpretation of the familiar narratives (Cornfield et al. 2018). As Maurizio Calbi argues in *Spectral Shakespeares*, this now extends in the 21st century to emergent and increasingly interactive screen-based mediums, such as augmented reality performances and social media. For example, the 2011 Royal Shakespeare Company performance of *Romeo and Juliet* on Twitter over the course of three weeks (with actors tweeting, interacting with each other and occasionally posting videos from twitter accounts representing characters from the play) at once showcases the new language and storytelling structures that have emerged with the development and adoption of the platform, while at the same time demonstrating that the established values of classic literature and performance can persist within the new medium (Calbi 2013).

Videogame adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays are not considered in Calbi’s text, most likely due to their very limited visibility within the videogame market. Videogames have tended to look more to action-focused cinema for aesthetic inspiration and sources for adaptation (Picard 2008). Both narratives and individual sequences from films such as *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) and *Aliens* (Cameron et al. 1986) are much more frequently and visibly adapted into videogame formats than any Shakespearean text. Nonetheless, engagement with individual Shakespearean works and ‘the Thing “Shakespeare”’, as Derrida puts it, has been a component of the history of the medium. Like the experimental screen productions surveyed by Calbi, these engagements often highlight the spectrality of Shakespeare, demonstrating the openness of the familiar narratives to radical, disruptive, and transgressive understandings, while simultaneously grounding the emergent media in continuity with the past. This paper will survey videogame approaches to Shakespeare, focusing in particular on four videogame adaptations of the play *Hamlet*, and the differing approaches to ‘the Thing “Shakespeare”’ that they offer through their particular combinations of ludic, representational and narrative elements. First, however, it is necessary to discuss what how videogames may operate as adaptations of older media, so as to better understand the challenges (and instinctual reticence) that come with adapting Shakespeare’s works into videogame formats.

2. Videogames as Adaptations

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues for a conception of adaptation as a storytelling practice that goes beyond simply questioning or assessing the fidelity of the adaption to the narrative, themes, and style of its source. She notes that the new media landscape and digital culture has shifted the discussion around adaption from its traditional focus on how textual media are translated into

visual mediums (e.g., novels into films) to questions of how static and linear forms may be adapted into more interactive and immersive mediums, particularly videogames. Hutcheon defines an adaptation as an 'announced and extensive transposition of a work or particular works' (Hutcheon 2014, p. 8)—either between distinct forms of media, genre, context, point of view, or ontologies. Hutcheon's definition captures the creative diversity of adaptations, while also distinguishing the adaptation from works that merely allude to or echo older narratives, or the expansion of existing narratives via sequels, prequels, or fan fiction. Hutcheon argues that as adaptations openly announce their relationship with a source text they operate as texts 'in the second degree', as defined by Gerard Genette, in that a reading of the adaptation is not complete without some knowledge of the original. However, this does not make them 'secondary' texts and thus inferior, derivative, or disposable. Rather new meanings and creative commentaries can emerge through the adaptation's inevitable reinterpretation and reimagining of the original. Furthermore, Hutcheon emphasises the intertextual nature of the reception of adaptations, where an audience familiar with the original will inevitably read or respond to the new text through two broad points of comparison. The first of these is the extent to which the narrative of the new work remains consistent with the that of the original. The second is the more nebulous and subjective question of whether the adaptation remains true to the 'spirit' of its source—whether it evokes a similar emotion, despite any changes to the medium or the narrative (Hutcheon 2014). The adaptation's alignment with or departure from the audience's memory and awareness of the original will often shape their response to it. Changes not only result in new interpretations and meanings but may also provide a commentary on the original work and its context. Hutcheon's approach is broad enough to include a wide range of intramedial and intermedial texts under the category of adaptation. What is important in her analysis are the ways in which these texts signal their 'second degree' status and invite comparison with their source as a component of their creative value. This usefully distinguishes adaptation from facsimile, duplication, and plagiarism (Leitch 2012). It also potentially distinguishes Hutcheon's 'adaptation proper' from 'paratextual adaptations', which transpose other 'second degree' texts into new forms and formats (Sherry 2012, p. 375).

Hutcheon notes that emergent interactive media present challenges for both the practice and understanding of adaptation. The traditional emphasis on the transposition of narrative and themes or 'spirit' across different media via adaptations is difficult to maintain when non-interactive media, such as a novel or a film, is adapted into an interactive form, such as a videogame, and vice versa. As a form of 'trans-modal' adaptation, these types of interactivation or deinteractivation potentially necessitate more radical changes to the shape and experience of narratives than intra and intermedial adaptations that transpose narratives between non-interactive mediums (Wolf 2012), Hutcheon argues that the emphasis on player action and interactivity in videogames means that their narratives typically have a very different structure to those of non-interactive media. Where novels, films and television narratives typically follow some version of a three act structure where characters and problems are introduced, developed to the point of crisis and then resolved, videogame narratives typically truncate or compress the first and third acts of their story, using them to simply justify and contextualise the gameplay. In videogames, Hutcheon maintains, the first and third acts of the narrative are peripheral to the long second act of the gameplay itself (Hutcheon 2014). In this regard, she follows Marie-Laure Ryan's early contention that narrative frequently operates as a means of providing the player with a context and motivation for solving challenges and problems presented by gameplay rather than being interesting in its own right (Ryan 2004). This understanding of narrative in videogames as a contextualising wrapper for gameplay can be criticised for overlooking the extent to which narrative and gameplay may meaningfully intersect and support one another (Dansky 2014). Indeed, the idea that narrative is secondary, separable and subordinated to the interactive elements of videogames arguably neglects the importance of narrative in videogame design, presentation and marketing, as well as gameplay systems that allow the player to actively create and manipulate storylines, and the individualised narratives of play that emerge from engagement with videogame systems (Cassidy 2011). While the dialogue in Game Studies as a whole has substantially evolved beyond the

simple opposition of gameplay and narrative, Hutcheon's somewhat regressive conception of the role of narrative in videogame adaptations is understandable, given that many videogame adaptations use a minimised or truncated version of the narrative from their source media to contextualise their gameplay. Indeed, Hutcheon argues that it is often more important for an interactive adaptation to vividly and accurately capture the world or 'heterocicism' that is created or implied by the source than the specific beats of its narrative (Hutcheon 2014, p. 14).

Espen Aarseth makes a similar point in his discussion of film-to-game adaptation, noting that a successful videogame adaptation will feature recognisable characters from its source, capture the visual features and atmosphere of its world, environment or universe, and use a 'concept' from the source as the basis for an enjoyable gameplay mechanic. Aarseth notes that 'What is lacking from this formula, of course, is story. Partly because you do not really need it, if you have these three key ingredients' (Aarseth 2006, p. 209). This approach to trans-modal interactivation is common in licensed film-to-game adaptations. For example, the famous Super Nintendo adaptation of *Star Wars*, *Super Star Wars* (Lucasarts 1992), compresses or erases major plot-beats from the film, but successfully reproduces recognisable versions of its characters, environments and action via gameplay. Similar videogame adaptations such as *The Return of the King* (EA Redwood Shores 2003) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (Eurocom 2007) also use simplified versions of their source narratives to connect and contextualise sequences of gameplay. This common approach to videogame adaptation interactivises the world of the source media, while minimising its narrative.

A more complex approach to the question of adaptation and videogames may be found by considering their systems rather than just their representational content. Gonzalo Frasca contrasts traditional media forms, such as novels and film, which excel at 'representation' through depicting and describing traits and sequences of events, with videogames, which excel at 'simulation', in that they create systems that allow for variable outcomes based on player-input (Frasca 2003, pp. 222–24). Matthew Wiese (2009) argues that simulations can operate as a form of procedural adaptation in videogames, in that the game's systems can effectively reproduce themes, action and atmosphere from non-interactive media without necessarily transposing their narrative. The seminal real-time strategy game *Dune 2* (Westwood Studios 1992) can be understood as a procedural adaptation along these lines, in that it does not replicate the sequential narrative of its source, but rather its systems replicate the types of political, military and economic manoeuvring that occur in the Frank Herbert novel it is based on. Procedural adaptation potentially complicates and expands the category of adaptation as defined by Hutcheon. Alongside licensed videogame adaptations such as *The Thing* (Computer Artworks 2002), Wiese also considers titles such as *Dead Rising* (Capcom 2006), which is not an explicit adaptation of an earlier media work but has procedural systems that are clearly designed to emulate iconic scenes from zombie movies (Wiese 2009). Furthermore, while many games based on film or television properties may frame themselves as prequels or sequels (which Hutcheon specifically excludes) in terms of their narratives, their gameplay may still operate as an adaptation of scenes and sequences from their source material (Stobart 2018). The critically acclaimed survival horror title *Alien Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014), for example, is technically an 'interquel' in terms of its narrative, but its core gameplay operates as an adaptation of a single iconic scene from the end of the first film, where the isolated protagonist attempts to escape from the titular alien creature without being detected. The tension created by this gameplay and the retro-futuristic elements of the game's visual design capture the distinctive effect of the 1979 film (Keogh and Jayemanne 2018). Therefore, despite its status as an expansion of the original narrative, *Alien Isolation* was still received by critics as a successful 'adaptation' of *Alien* (Scott et al. 1979) (Boehm 2019; Keogh 2015). This serves to illustrate how videogames can complicate Hutcheon's definition of the category of adaptation and its principal focus on the intramedia or intermedial transposition of narrative. In videogame adaptations, the narrative of the source media can easily be minimised by being framed as a recognisable but non-interactive wrapper for gameplay, or bypassed entirely through procedural adaptation, which can create thematically similar original narratives through its systems of simulation. This looser intertextual

relationship between videogame adaptations and their source media presents some challenges for adapting Shakespeare's plays into a videogame format. From the above analysis, it seems that videogame adaptations often depend on being able to focus on and 'interactivise' a specific element of the source material (e.g., the strategic conflict in Frank Herbert's *Dune* or the combat in Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King*), while minimising or discarding other elements. Given the complex interconnection between character, language, and narrative in Shakespeare's plays, it can be difficult to conceive how a videogame could truncate or simplify the overall narrative of a Shakespearean play into a 'wrapper' and have value as an adaptation, or how the game, as a system of simulation, could provide a meaningful 'procedural adaptation' of the play's themes, action or tensions in the manner explored by Wiese. Videogame attempts to capture, address, or engage with Shakespeare's work, and the ghostly presence of 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself, are therefore complicated by the need to provide meaningful interactivity and player-agency.

3. Shakespeare Games

Though perhaps less visible than in other forms of media, the influence of Shakespeare can be detected across the history of videogames as a medium. This typically takes the form of references and allusions in jokes and Easter eggs, such as the whispered quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* that are heard at various points in *Bioshock Infinite* (2K Marin 2013), or the plays and characters that are clearly modelled on Shakespeare's in *Final Fantasy IX* (Square Co Ltd. 2000). Beyond these explicit references, Shakespeare's influence on videogame narratives and aesthetics can be more broadly detected, just as it can in all forms of Western narrative media. For example, Gregory Wells argues that abject and explicit depictions of violent deaths in videogames can trace their roots back to the cathartic horrors of *Titus Andronicus*, and David Owen contends that the extended narrative structures of Western computer role-playing games owe a debt to Shakespeare's history and tragedy plays, with their convergent and interconnected sub-plots, and frequent manipulation of time and distance (Wells 2016; Owen 2010).

Videogames start to engage with the 'spectral' qualities of Shakespeare's work, as explored by Derrida when these references are more directly incorporated into their ludic elements and/or narratives, bridging and blurring the boundaries between past and present, between the cultural history that is often represented by 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the emergent possibilities of videogames as a medium. Games such as *Silent Hill 3* (Konami 2003) and *Metal Gear Solid 4: the Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions 2008) directly reference Shakespeare's plays in puzzles and dialogue as a means of signalling their narrative and aesthetic maturity (Nae 2019). By contrast, the violent cult title *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar London 2008) takes a more oppositional approach, repeatedly referencing *the Tempest* as a lens for understanding the relationship between the game's protagonist and antagonist, but also engaging in a level of metatextual commentary by having the player destroy the loudspeakers through which the antagonist quotes from the play during one gameplay sequence. The past is evoked through the figure of Shakespeare and simultaneously erased, as the player is encouraged to transgressively reject both the authority of the Prospero-like villain and the residual weight and authority that 'canonical' literature has over emergent videogame media (Nae 2017). Interestingly, the episodic adventure game *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine 2017) takes a similar approach to the same play. A high school production of *the Tempest* is a significant recurring plot point throughout the game and the player has the option of performing scenes in ways that allow the player-controlled character, Chole, to draw parallels between the play and her own life and relationships. Much like *Manhunt 2*, this trajectory culminates in a transgressive yet cathartic rejection of the authority and control of the canonical literary text, though in this case it involves the characters creating an alternative performance that challenges the patriarchal hegemony of Shakespeare as a cultural icon (Kaethler 2020).

Beyond these kinds of references and allusions, Gina Bloom argues that explicitly labelled 'Shakespeare games' can be understood as their own distinct videogame category. Bloom maintains that there are three broad types of Shakespeare game: 'theatre-making' games, which use simulation or strategic gameplay conventions to explore the experience of creating and/or staging an Elizabethan

drama; ‘scholar-making’ games, which centre on trivia and tests in order to improve the players’ knowledge of Shakespeare’s works; and ‘drama-making’ games, where the player takes on the role of one of Shakespeare’s characters or is able to interact with them, either within the established narrative of one of his plays or in some other context (Bloom 2015, p. 115). In addition, Eleni Timplalexi adds (as components of the drama-making category defined by Bloom) digital performances of Shakespeare’s plays that take place within video game engines and environments and existing videogames that are officially or unofficially modified to add Shakespearean content (Timplalexi 2018). These types of games can potentially be understood as paratextual adaptations as defined by Sherry (2012), in that they do not directly transpose the narratives of the plays into a new media format, but focus on more peripheral or secondary elements. Theatre-making and scholar-making games typically aim to educate the player, directing them back to the past. By contrast, ‘drama-making games’ attempt to provide players with some kind of interactive experience and immersion in Shakespeare’s fictive worlds, offering a translation of past into present and the present into the past that has the potential to stray into spectral territory. However, drama-making games often tend to focus on a narrow or singular aspect of a play that can be easily translated into interactivity through the kind of ‘procedural adaptation’ identified by Wiese (Wiese 2009). For example, the feuds and rivalries between Montagues and Capulets from *Romeo and Juliet* are represented in *the Sims 2* (Maxis Redwood Shores 2004) neighbourhood ‘Veronaville’, and the martial and strategic elements of the war against the French in *Henry V* are turned into a campaign for the strategy game *Empire Earth* (Stainless Steel Studios 2001) (Timplalexi 2018). The MMORPG *Arden 1: the World of William Shakespeare* (Castronova 2007) allows players to interact with Shakespearean characters outside the context of their plays (Best 2011) and the experimental art game *Deus Ex Machina* (Automata UK 1984) delivers gameplay and narrative that is based on a single soliloquy, engaging thematically with its source, *Twelfth Night*, rather than through a direct adaptation of its plot (Cornfield et al. 2018).

While these approaches have their merits, the general absence of more extensive narrative adaptations—Hutcheon’s ‘adaptation proper’ (Hutcheon 2014, p. 171)—indicates a curious timidity in drama-making games. Videogame adaptations of classic literary texts—such as the adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *the Great Gatsby* as a side-scroller and the notorious reimagining of Dante’s *Inferno* as a gory third person adventure game (Vogt 2013)—tend to intentionally or unintentionally emphasise the absurdity of representing essentially introspective and reflective literary narratives through the action-focused mechanics of videogame play. The looser intertextual relationship with the source material in videogame adaptations is difficult to reconcile with the reverence and cultural centrality that has been afforded to ‘the Thing “Shakespeare”’ from the late nineteenth century onwards. Direct videogame adaptations of Shakespeare’s narratives therefore risk appearing derisive or irreverent due to the emphasis that games typically place on interactivity and player-agency over fidelity to the source narrative. Indeed, the relatively few videogame adaptations of Shakespeare’s narratives are generally short and slight parodic outliers, such as *Romeo Wherefore Art Thou?* (Shakespeare Country 2010) which offers a side-scrolling, action-focused adventure based very loosely on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. While entertaining, these types of games do not generally engage with the familiar narrative deeply enough to access what Derrida identifies as their hauntological’ capacity to translate the past into the present and the present into the past (Derrida 1994).

On the other hand, Andrei Nae argues that the idea of more serious and thoughtful videogame adaptations of Shakespeare’s narratives should no longer be seen as absurd, as the developing technology of game design now allows for more sophisticated forms of representation, characterisation and storytelling (Nae 2019). Just as the spectral qualities of Shakespeare’s plays made them open to adaptation and remediation into radio, cinema and television, new meanings and insights can be generated by approaching their openness and complexity with the radical interactivity of game design. This potential can be demonstrated through an examination of some rare expectations to general lack of extensive narrative adaptations of Shakespeare into videogames: the four commercial *Hamlet* games that have been produced since 1997. Each of these adaptations, though differing in style

and complexity, substantially alters the familiar narrative of *Hamlet* to provide the expected sense of interactivity and player agency. This seemingly irreverent approach to the play and its classic narrative is modified by the different ways in which each game positions itself in relation to 'original' narrative of *Hamlet* and the past tradition that the play embodies or represents. These varying approaches demonstrate the unique possibilities of engagement with the spectrality of both the play *Hamlet* and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself with videogame mediums.

4. Haunted by the Past: Linear Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

In a field notable for the general absence of extensive narrative adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, it is possibly surprising that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been adapted with such relative frequency. On the surface, the play's deeply introspective qualities and its focus on the indecisiveness of its protagonist might not seem like an intuitive choice for a ludic adaptation. As game developer and playwright Simon Peacock humorously observes, *Hamlet* is 'the worst show Shakespeare wrote to turn into a videogame because it's four hours of dialogue and five minutes of action' (Rudin 2015). As a way of emphasising this point, Peacock himself staged a parodic theatre production *Hamlet: the Video Game (the Stage Show)* (Peacock 2015), which reimagines the narrative of *Hamlet* through the lens of videogame conventions, presenting the character of *Hamlet* as journeying through 'levels' and fighting 'bosses' (Rudin 2015). In this sense, the high seriousness and psychological complexity that is associated with *Hamlet*'s narrative is presented as comically out of step with the straightforward player-agency and empowerment that is associated with conventional gameplay.

Despite this, it is possible to speculate as to why *Hamlet*, of all of Shakespeare's plays, has been the most frequent subject of videogame adaptations. The simplest reason may be that it is arguably Shakespeare's most iconic and recognisable work. The play is valuable not just in and of itself, but also because it is emblematic of Shakespeare and the cultural values attributed to him as figure. Adapting *Hamlet* then potentially allows for an engagement with 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' that signals the arrival and maturity of videogames as a medium, either bringing them in continuity with the past tradition it represents or asserting their independent value through transgressive mockery. Furthermore, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most 'spectral' play, as Derrida notes, where the binary distinctions between past, present and future are frequently broken down or eroded through the action, inaction, reflections and performances of the protagonist and other characters (Derrida 1994). This quality may make its narrative particularly suitable as a meeting point between the past literary tradition represented by both the play and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself, and the emergent possibilities of videogames as a medium. Interestingly, the first two notable videogame adaptations of *Hamlet*—*William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* (Pantheon Productions, Inc. 1997) and *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*. (Galanin 2010)—both address this potential by largely separating the familiar narrative elements of *Hamlet* from the interactive elements of their gameplay. In doing so, these adaptations both work—albeit in different ways—to emphasise the primary importance of the past tradition within this essentially spectral encounter.

The first 'announced and extensive' commercially released video game adaptation of *Hamlet* is *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* (Pantheon Productions, Inc. 1997). Though largely forgotten now, this title was a tie-in or cross-promotion with the more famous film adaptation of the play, *Hamlet* (Branagh 1996) and includes 40 min of video footage from that production as gameplay rewards and cut scenes. In many respects, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* is the most conventional of the four adaptations, both in terms of its gameplay and the traditional reverence with which it treats the text and narrative of the play, even as the player creates an alternative version of its events through the successful completion of the game's challenges. It reconciles these contradictory elements by encouraging the player to shift between two distinct but connected game modes. In the first, titled 'To Be': puts the player in control of Prince *Hamlet* in a three-dimensional first-person perspective, with occasional shifts to video footage from the feature film. The player is challenged to solve the murder of *Hamlet*'s father and restore the prince's faculties by completing a series of largely

self-contained puzzles and minigames. In this sense, the game narrative serves to contextualise and motivate the player's engagement with largely discrete gameplay activities, in a manner that is similar to other full-motion video games of the period, such as *the 7th Guest* (Trilobyte 1993) and *the 11th Hour* (Trilobyte 1995). Successful completion is rewarded with snippets of film footage and occasionally the aversion of a character's tragic fate; Gertrude is rescued from Claudius, Polonius's death is prevented and Ophelia is saved from drowning. The final task is a climatic duel with King Claudius before the player achieves the game's happy ending. The emphasis on player agency and progress towards a victory state could be taken as a simplistic reshaping of a classic narrative to fit with familiar videogame conventions, but this is complicated by the presence of the second game mode, 'Not to Be'. In this mode, the player is reframed as a reader and a passive audience. In the 'Not to Be' mode they have access to the full script of the play, which is supplemented by extensive scholarly commentary, and additional texts on a variety of Renaissance subjects such as archery, alchemy, heraldry, herbology, etc. Both the play script, commentary and supplementary texts contain clues and information that will be helpful for solving puzzles and completing gameplay challenges and so the player is encouraged to move between the two modes frequently. In this sense, *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* combines a drama-making game with a scholar-making game by Bloom's definitions, and also permits itself to deviate from the classic narrative by ensuring that the source text is constantly present for the player to reference. Success and progression in the gameplay are dependent on the player's regular consultation of Shakespeare's play script and are rewarded with clips from Kenneth Branagh's textually faithful film adaptation, which emphasises that the alternative narrative the player is experiencing through gameplay is not the most important or authentic version. In this sense, *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery's* adaptation of *Hamlet* into gameplay is both haunted and inhabited by the idea of the 'original' play. The gameplay and the reshaped Shakespearean narrative that results from it is not intended to be appreciated independently, but constantly refers the player back to the culturally accepted and prioritised version of the story. In this sense, we can see 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' translating the past into the present in a clear and literal way. The present, real-time gameplay and interactivity obliges the player to access the past of the narrative—the textual form of the play—and through successive encounters come to value and prioritise it over the simplified version of it that is used to contextualise the gameplay. This results in a videogame adaptation that operates in an unusually close and subservient intertextual relationship with its source, one that justifies itself by embracing and highlighting its secondary status.

Where *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* attempts to resolve the anxieties presented by videogame adaptations of Shakespeare by consistently redirecting the player's attention back to the play, *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* (Galanin 2010) attempts to avoid them entirely by embracing the traditionally loose intertextual relationship that videogame adaptations often have with their source. The 2010 videogame *Hamlet*, created and published by Denis Galanin, uses the title and key characters from the classic play to contextualise its gameplay, but discards almost every other element of its narrative. Rather than being a conflicted and introspective prince, Hamlet is presented as a straightforward swashbuckling young hero, though he is taken out of action early in the game when the player character's time machine lands on him. The player, as an unnamed time traveller, must then accomplish what the now incapacitated Hamlet cannot—rescue Hamlet's love interest Ophelia from his evil uncle Claudius. Numerous science fiction elements are introduced into the narrative and familiar characters are encountered along the way, though in very different forms. Polonius is reimaged as a malevolent alien, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the captains of a giant space octopus and Laertes is a brutal giant who guards the entrance to Claudius's secret lair. The gameplay largely consists of the player solving a linear sequence of single screen puzzles, punctuated by the occasional 'boss fight' against one or more of the key characters.

In contrast to *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery*, the narrative of the 2010 *Hamlet* does not reference or pay homage to the source text in any particular way, nor does it make an attempt to interactivise any iconic scenes or moments from the play. In fact, it has so little in common with the play's structure, characterisation, or themes that it would be difficult to argue that it even operates as an absurdist

parody or satire. By creating its own, almost entirely distinct narrative, the game largely avoids engaging with the cultural weight and expectations typically applied to adaptations of *Hamlet*, but this lack of a substantial relationship with its source raises the question of why it is framed as adaptation of the play at all. The answer can possibly be found in the videogame's subtitle: *or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*. This tongue-in-cheek subtitle indicates a connection to an older model of gaming—a throw-back to the slow-paced, humorous, puzzle-focused adventure games that were popular in the 1990s. In both its style of gameplay, visuals and title, the game seeks to connect itself to the past, to a classic gaming tradition that is implied to be superior to contemporary design and trends. The title *Hamlet* then, and the use of familiar Shakespearean characters, is not so much an evocation of the specific play and its narrative as it is an evocation of the idea of Shakespeare as a symbol or exemplar of an older (usually superior) tradition of storytelling. *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* offers another example of how 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' can be used to translate the present into the past.

5. Narrative Interactivity in Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

In contrast to the largely linear structures of *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* and *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*, in which the player moves between non-interactive narrative segments and interactive gameplay, the two more recent videogame adaptations of *Hamlet* employ what might be broadly defined as 'branching' narrative structures. A branching narrative structure allows players to directly shape the videogame's narrative by choosing between different options for its direction or development, or by funnelling them into different pathways when they succeed or fail at gameplay tasks. This in turn may create further narrative branches until the player arrives at a conclusion (Rouse III 2001). In the branching structures of *To Be or Not to Be* (North 2015) and *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch Studios 2019), the player is positioned as making choices that actively construct their own individualised version of a *Hamlet* narrative. The structure of both games encourages the player to repeatedly return to the beginning or checkpoints to explore other options and branches, rather than being content with any single conclusion. Rather than discrete and separable gameplay tasks, such as the puzzles and fights from the 1997 and 2010 videogame *Hamlets*, these adaptations aim to interactivise the narrative structure of the play itself. Because these games require the player to be an active party in repeated reconstructions and rewritings of the narrative of the classic play, they present more complex and potentially transgressive models of the intertextual relationship between source and adaptation than found in the first two examples. At one level, the idea of the player constructing their own version of the narrative, which may be potentially framed as superior within the videogame context, is at odds with the reverence that is typically afforded to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' even in experimental and oppositional adaptations. Derrida argues that the narratives of Shakespeare's plays are their essential spectral quality, as their complexity and openness to a multitude of perspectives allows them to speak across different time periods and contexts (Derrida 1994). Therefore performances and adaptations of Shakespearean plays tend to preserve the structure of their narratives, with new commentaries being typically introduced through their recontextualization, rather through any essential changes to their progression and outcome (Calbi 2013). Indeed, while both the 1997 and 2010 videogame adaptations of *Hamlet* provide the player with alternative versions of the iconic narrative, they do so in ways that preserve the primacy and importance of the original—as they do not require the player to actively choose (and therefore potentially prefer) the alternative. At another level, however, both *To Be or Not to Be* and *Elsinore* expand upon the complexity of the original play by demanding that the player interactively engage with its narrative as the primary gameplay mechanic. This allows them to emphasise and explore the ludic nature of the play itself, with its multiple layers of commentary and performance and convergences of characters and plotlines. Furthermore, the focus on rewinding and replaying the 'time' of the *Hamlet* story potentially allows for a more explicit engagement with the particular spectral

quality that Derrida identifies in the play, where the boundaries between past, present and future are blurred and intertwined.

Of the four adaptations, Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be* takes the most overtly parodic approach towards *Hamlet*, humorously emphasising throughout almost every narrative choice and branch, the implausibility of the play's plot, the seemingly irrational actions of its characters, and the sexism and misogyny directed towards the only named female characters: Ophelia and Gertrude. In its introduction, *To Be or Not to Be* comically displaces the source play, with the opening narration claiming that it is in fact the original text rather than an adaptation and that Shakespeare had plagiarised it in order to write *Hamlet*. While this is tongue-in-cheek, it offers an interesting inversion of the typical hierarchy or binary that is supposed to exist between adaptation and source (Hutcheon 2014), claiming primacy for the adaptation and regulating the source work to a dependent category. While obviously part of the videogame's humour, this also provides an imaginative space in which to assert the pleasures and values of its particular mode of gameplay—the choices made by the player and their construction of an entertaining narrative—while still maintaining a strong intertextual relationship with the original work. Furthermore, it emphasises the creative value of adaptation as a practice by noting that Shakespeare's now iconic plays draw upon, remix or even outrightly plagiarise older plays, poems, and histories. This displacement of the assumed primacy of the 'original' text, underscores Calbi's argument that Shakespearean adaptations cannot be approached as straightforward re-representations of 'fixed and stable entity' (Calbi 2013, p. 7). Adaptations inevitably shape and inform the approaches to their sources and may periodically or permanently displace them: it is impossible to entirely distinguish a work from its adaptation (Kidnie 2009). As Calbi puts it, 'the Thing "Shakespeare" ... cannot be entirely separated from its afterlife' (Calbi 2013, p. 18). Shakespeare's works, as often disputed textual reproductions of performances that were themselves adaptations and remediations of older narratives, are governed by a logic of iterability. '... a phantom's return is, each time, another different return on a different stage' (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, p. 24). The humorous way in which *To Be or Not to Be* frames itself as the primary and original text works to underscore the spectrality of reproduction, which cannot be reduced to a 'linear succession of before and after' (Derrida 1994, p. 48), but where each iteration is inevitably intertwined with the iterations that precede and succeed it.

Within its branching story structure, which allows the player to experience and fluidly move between multiple alternative 'performances' or iterations of *Hamlet*, *To Be or Not to Be* preserves and identifies the familiar story-beats of Shakespeare's narrative as a potential path for the player to follow. It does so using the pretence that the choices in the game which align with Prince Hamlet's actions in the play were the choices that Shakespeare chose to adapt from the 'original' choose-your-own-adventure novel, once again underscoring the inverted relationship that the game presents between adaptation and source. The *Hamlet* of Shakespeare is presented as a reduced and diluted adaptation rather than as a revered original text. Furthermore, this pathway through the game is frequently derided as a sub-optimal and inefficient form of play, rather than a true or ideal approach. The player is constantly mocked for making these choices, which the narration variously characterises as irrational, selfish, misogynistic, or simply stupid. Hamlet's poor decisions throughout the narrative are repeatedly pointed out: from the convoluted plan to entrap Claudius, to the senseless murder of Polonius, to the decision to enter a duel with Laertes. There is a metatextual edge to much of this derisive commentary, with the player being told to kill Hamlet's uncle quickly 'or otherwise people might think your tragic flaw is indecisiveness', or being told that the narrator will just assume that the player controlling Hamlet is opting to feign madness during one sequence in the narrative 'because that's the only way any of this makes sense'. The player is often implored to explore other options as they progress, which generally revolve around telling other characters what is going on, taking various forms of direct action against Claudius, abandoning the pursuit of revenge, or abandoning the role of Hamlet entirely and choosing to explore the narrative from the perspective of another character, such as Ophelia or the ghost of Hamlet senior. Many of these result in seemingly absurd developments, such as Hamlet recruiting Ophelia to train as a ninja to assassinate Claudius, Hamlet senior becoming a ghost marine

biologist after failing to communicate with his son, or Horatio rendezvousing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's commandeered pirate ship to dispatch Fortinbras's invading army with a barrage of cannon-fire. The tone of the narration, however, indicates that none of these outcomes are necessarily any more absurd, convoluted, or outlandish than the familiar plot of the play. Transposing the events of *Hamlet* into the traditionally wry and detached second person voice of the choose-your-own-adventure narrative provides the player with a different, ironic appreciation of the play's complexity, emphasising the bizarre behaviour of the characters, the coincidences, the outlandish developments and oversights that lead to its tragic denouement.

In addition to the shift in perspective that is encouraged by the interactive narrative, much of the humour of the game is derived from understanding or filtering the events and characters of *Hamlet* through the conventions of videogame design, particularly through the ways in which the emotional or psychological substance of the play is represented using points and statistics. When the player experiences the scene in which Hamlet learns that his father was murdered by his uncle and receives the quest to 'Kill Claudius', what is emphasised is the straight-forward promise that the quest is worth 3500 experience points (which the player is assured is a lot) rather than the dramatic horror of Hamlet's discovery. Similarly, if the player follows the familiar narrative and chooses to be cruel to Ophelia then they are told that her love has taken '-1 damage'. These elements of gameplay and narration operate as a form of 'counter-signing' where the remnants of Shakespeare's language and narrative are remixed with the languages of other media (Burt 2008). While this is simply amusing when first encountered, this counter-signing eventually creates a disorienting effect, when the old media uncannily overlays with new media and is reappraised through it. Repeated play of *To Be or Not to Be* provides the sense that the absurdity is generated not simply through the application of videogame conventions and concepts to *Hamlet*, but through the ways in which the familiar and iconic narrative of *Hamlet* fails to function as a 'good' videogame narrative. The faults in its storytelling logic that would likely frustrate a player are repeatedly pointed out, as is the lack of expected player-character agency and direct problem-solving. At almost every major juncture in the narrative, the player is presented with the option of simply killing Claudius (which is usually easily accomplished and rewarded with a happy ending), and the tone of the narration becomes increasingly frustrated if the act is repeatedly deferred. Within the framework of the game, the multiplicity of options available to the player and their ability to expand and redirect the scope of various character arcs and storylines are used to humorously critique the familiar narrative of *Hamlet* as limited, inconsistent and occasionally incoherent by videogame standards. Through its engagement with 'the Thing "Shakespeare"'—its translation of the past into the contemporary medium of the videogame—*To Be or Not to Be* rejects the assumed superiority of older traditions of storytelling and canonical texts. Its counter-signing parody of *Hamlet* can be read as an assertion of the value of the interactive structures of videogames and their ability to afford the player agency within their narratives. Within the structure of *To Be or Not to Be*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is framed as a wan spectre that haunts the more vibrant interactive production. Rather than operating as an authorising original text, it is constructed as a secondary work which reduces the complex multitude of potential 'Hamlets' down to a singular and unsatisfying storyline. At one level, this displacement of the original can be taken as an indication of the general remedial promise that new media is often invested in. At another, it also embraces the creative potential of adaptations that deliberately distance themselves from their sources, avoiding the authority that is typically conferred through the appearance of fidelity. Jamie Sherry argues that this can lead to more multifarious and innovative works and a richer dialogue around literary adaptations in film (Sherry 2012). *To Be or Not to Be* potentially expands this approach to videogame adaptations as well, by playfully rejecting the primary status of its source.

Where *To Be or Not to Be* uses its interactive narrative structure to satirise *Hamlet* and dispute the play's assumed superiority as a text, the isometric adventure game *Elsinore* by Golden Glitch Studios provides a multi-faceted consideration of how a branching narrative might reframe perspectives on the classic play. In *Elsinore*, players take control of the character Ophelia and explore the setting—the castle

Elsinore and its surroundings—from her perspective, interacting with major and minor characters with the option to either observe or participate in events as they unfold. However, the player's participation in the narrative is abruptly cut short at the point in the narrative where Ophelia traditionally exits the play. After Polonius is murdered by Hamlet, Ophelia is assassinated by an unknown assailant and her death is staged to look like a suicide by drowning. At this point the game's central conceit is introduced—Ophelia wakes up several days before her murder and the player may attempt to prevent it and the tragic outcome of the original narrative by directing Ophelia's interactions with the other characters in the castle. This proves to be harder than it initially appears—simply telling characters about their futures will cause them to believe that Ophelia is mad and return the player to their starting point. Similarly, pre-emptively confirming to Hamlet that Claudius has murdered Hamlet's father will see him take his vengeance earlier, but this will also leave the castle open to invasion by Fortinbras. Attempting to find better outcomes involves exploration and experimentation. Based on the player's choices, certain events from the narrative will or will not occur in any given playthrough, and their presence or absence will result in unforeseen consequences at a later stage. Informing Laertes that Claudius had murdered the former king means that he will remain in the castle to protect Ophelia from assassination, but this option will also afford him the opportunity to murder Hamlet. Convincing Polonius that the royal family have no respect for him means that he will decline to spy on Hamlet for Claudius but also eventually results in his suicide. Knowledge that is gained in one playthrough can then be applied to affect different outcomes when the timeline is reset.

In basing its principal gameplay mechanic around the manipulation of time, *Elsinore* provides the most overt and thoughtful engagement with the spectral qualities of *Hamlet* as identified by Derrida. *Hamlet* is a play where the present is infected by the past in the form of the spectre that puts the narrative in motion, where the indecisive protagonist suspends and repeats time to forestall an inevitably tragic future. It is a play in which 'the time is out of joint' (Act 1, Scene 5), where, as Helen Cixous observes, characters and events come 'too early, too late, never at the right time' (Cixous 1997, p. 56). In *Elsinore*, the ability to repeat, rewind and alter the flow of time allows the player to unpackage the cause-and-effect relationships between characters and events that result in the tragic outcome of the classic narrative, and explore the multitude of alternative timelines that might be created through their various interventions. Understanding how different timelines can be created requires the player to expand their focus beyond the figure of Hamlet himself, who is framed as one causal element among many within the structure of *Elsinore's* narrative. Alongside Hamlet's existential crisis, other characters are presented as dealing with issues that arise from their ethnic, gender and sexual identities, or histories of familial abuse and neglect. While the choices and the commentary in *To Be or Not to Be* are presented in a way that simply mocks Hamlet's indecisiveness and myopia, *Elsinore* frames his crisis as a component of a larger mystery. Hamlet can still act cruelly, insensitively or murderously at various points in the narrative, but the player's investigations may also help to create parallels and points of connection with the turmoil of other characters in ways that lead him to make amends or to develop maturity. Rather than rejecting or deriding the themes of the original narrative, the interactive elements of *Elsinore* allow them to be applied more broadly, as the player uncovers the internal conflict and uncertainty that also permeates the lives of the surrounding characters. By exerting their agency to link the storylines and experiences of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, Bernardo and others, the player creates new possibilities within the narrative. In this sense, the game expands beyond the basic narrative of the play and its focus on the prince's dilemma to create a vivid sense of the larger world around it, a movement that Hutcheon identifies as an important feature in videogame adaptations (Hutcheon 2014).

As the player explores the different possible timelines, it becomes clear that, much like the original play, this is a narrative that is about the difficulty of determining a course of action. Where Hamlet is stalled as a character due to his uncertainty and trepidation, both Ophelia and the player themselves become trapped by the ever-expanding multitude of interdependent choices available to them, where each playthrough is haunted by their awareness of alternative timelines—the possible future

outcomes that they have experienced in past play. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is dominated by a sense of 'imminence' from its very first Act, with the guardsmen on the battlements waiting for the return of the spectral king, and this continues throughout (Wilson 2007). Hamlet prevaricates in the face of the awful future he is moving towards, and the structure of the play anticipates Fortinbras' climatic arrival in Act Five. Similarly, in *Elsinore*, the player's choices are increasingly dominated and constricted by their awareness of what is coming. Each repetition further populates their timeline with future events that may occur because of their action or inaction. As the player is repeatedly returned to their starting position, their condition is explicitly compared to the ghost of Hamlet senior, who is trapped in Limbo and condemned to return to haunt the castle each night. The looping, repetitious gameplay of *Elsinore* mirrors the ways in which the past repeatedly returns to inflect the present in *Hamlet*, from the spectral presence of the late king and the re-enactment of his murder, to Fortinbras's invasion to avenge his own father's death, to the conclusion of the play that sees Horatio preparing to retell its narrative as Hamlet's body is born to the stage. Of all the videogame adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Elsinore* is the one that most explicitly addresses the spectrality of the play, exploring the 'out-of-jointness' of its time through gameplay.

As the game continues through repeated variations on the familiar *Hamlet* narrative, the player is gradually made aware that there is no ideal or optimal outcome for them to discover. Every potential ending will result in death or unhappiness for at least some of the characters they have come to know at Elsinore. The player eventually discovers that Ophelia has been trapped in a time-loop by the performer that Hamlet had invited to the castle. This figure is reminiscent of the Player King in Tom Stoppard's (1967) postmodern deconstruction of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—a supernatural director or puppet-master who is determined to ensure every potential outcome of the narrative is tragic or bloody in some way. Deprived of the expected videogame ability to definitively solve or 'win' in a scenario, the player is left to decide what kind of tragedy they are willing to accept as a conclusion to the narrative. This ghostly playmaster, who refuses to allow the characters to escape the structure of the narrative and insists upon some variation of an unhappy ending, could be taken as a literalisation of 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the power and influence it wields over the various permutations and performances of Shakespeare's plays. Like the Player King in Stoppard's play, the playmaster in *Elsinore* explicitly demands a bloody outcome because that is what is expected from a Shakespearean tragedy. However, unlike the protagonists of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, neither the player nor Ophelia is constructed as being helpless or passive in the face of Shakespeare's narrative. Rather they are challenged to apply their own ethical judgement in arriving at an ending of their choosing. The various possible endings of *Elsinore* present players with a 'wicked problem' as defined by Miguel Sicart. According to Sicart, a wicked problem in a videogame is one where there is no clearly preferable outcome or obvious reward. Sicart argues that these types of problems are valuable because they potentially provide players with the opportunity for growth and self-knowledge (Sicart 2013). The player in *Elsinore* then is afforded the modern interactivity and agency expected in a videogame, but unlike the player in *To Be or Not to Be*, they are not free to entirely shake off or reject 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and weight of the literary tradition that it embodies. The translation of past into present still demands they face a wicked problem like the one that torments Hamlet in the classic narrative, and which may result in a similar kind of indecisiveness and prevarication in the player, until they are ready to decide on an outcome. Allowing the player a level of interactive agency within the narrative of *Hamlet* does not result in simplification or parody in this game, but rather it is used to demonstrate how the themes, emotive experience and subject of the play can persist across a range of scenarios, even when basic structure of the story is changed. *Elsinore's* engagement with the spectral qualities of Shakespeare emerges through the ways in which it manages the need for interactivity in a videogame format—via the player's ability to manipulate and alter the 'out of joint' time of the narrative—against the expectations that surround Shakespeare's work and *Hamlet* in particular.

On a final note, the writer and game designer Jane Jensen suggests that one of the problems of branching narratives with multiple endings is that players will almost inevitably decide that one of

the endings is 'best' (typically one that results from skillful or exhaustive forms of play) and will focus on the path towards it in a way that can overlook the multi-linear experience offered by the game (Jensen 2000). *Elsinore* subverts this expectation, however, in a way that fully embraces the spectral qualities of its source material. The secret (but not necessarily desirable) ending to *Elsinore* is revealed if the player unlocks but ultimately elects to reject all the game's tragic endings. This final ending, which results from the player's refusal to commit to one of the distinct end-game states, results in Ophelia choosing to sacrifice herself and remain trapped in the playmaster's time-loop forever, condemned to perpetually repeat the events of the *Hamlet* narrative. In this sense, the game acknowledges and replicates the looping structure of its source, where the ghost king's exhortation to 'remember me' in Act One is mirrored in Hamlet's plea for Horatio to live on and preserve his memory in Act Five, and the play ends on the cusp of its own retelling (Wilson 2007). That the play should end with the anticipation of its own reperformance and adaptation encapsulates its spectral quality as identified by Derrida. Its iconic status and longevity are the result of its capacity for perpetual recontextualization (Derrida 1994). Like the ghost that sets its narrative in motion, the play is eternally recurring and unstuck in time. This secret 'ending' of *Elsinore* then, offers a ludic acknowledgement of the hauntological nature of *Hamlet*, using the infinite replayability of videogames to capture the reproducibility and iterability that are the defining features of the play.

6. Conclusions

The various adaptations of *Hamlet* discussed in this paper offer a range of potential approaches to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the weight of its spectral influence through the videogame medium. *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* combines the scholar-making and drama-making categories of Shakespeare game identified by Bloom to subordinate itself to the past, using its gameplay to redirect the player to the original text. *Hamlet or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* eschews a deep or sophisticated engagement with its source narrative, but rather evokes 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' as a representation of the past and a revered storytelling tradition. *To Be or Not to Be* uses its interactive narrative structure to playfully dispute the assumed primacy of the classic play and invert the conventional hierarchy between source and adaptation. *Elsinore* uses the gameplay conventions of rewinding and replaying time to explore the nature and experience of choice and explicitly address the play's spectral nature. Though they vary in their approach and sophistication, all of these games engage at some level with the hauntological qualities that Derrida identifies in both the play itself and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' more generally—the capacity to translate the past into the present and the present into the past. While aspects of this movement may seem counterintuitive, irreverent, or untrue to common understandings of the essential spirit of Shakespearean texts, it may be important to their continued relevance and longevity. As Mark Thornton Burnett argues Shakespeare can only be kept alive 'beyond the parameters of elite culture' (Burnett 2007, p. 112) in 'environments of disorientation and displacement' (p. 113). The interactive structures of videogames, as demonstrated by *To Be or Not to Be* and *Elsinore* in particular, may provide this necessary 'disorientation and displacement', particularly with regard to the ability that they can afford to their players to explore, revise and expand upon the classic narratives.

While there is already a small but significant literary tradition of revisionist approaches to Shakespeare—such as the play *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (Betts 1994), a feminist rewriting of *Hamlet*, and the novel *the Tragedy of Arthur* (Phillips 2011), which constructs a family drama around an (invented) apocryphal history play—the interactive nature of videogames potentially offers a means for more radical interventions in these narratives. As the character Chole observes when she and her friend break away from the established text of the *Tempest* and create their own performance in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*:

We ended up creating a new story together on stage. A much better story, because this one ends with the two of us escaping the island and sailing off into the sunset together. Take that, Shakespeare.

It is a ‘better story’ in this instance because it helps the characters to resist the patriarchal authority represented by Shakespeare as a ‘dead white man’ in the game, and also because the player takes an active role in developing it, via the performance choices that they make for Chloe. Similarly, every ending in *To Be or Not to Be* congratulates the player for creating a ‘better story than Shakespeare’ implying that any story they create via their agency is the ‘better’ story, because it offers something original and new rather than simply repeating the static source narrative. The secret ending of *Elsinore* results in Ophelia being trapped in an endless succession of adaptations of the classic *Hamlet*, and this can be read as a rebuke for the player’s failure to determine their own solution to the narrative’s ‘wicked problem’ and take ownership of it by choosing the ending that they personally believe to be best. The narrative and language of Shakespeare’s works are often reverentially preserved in adaptation because, as Derrida observes, they are ‘spectrally’ open to recontextualisation (Derrida 1994). There is also, however, a transgressive and cathartic pleasure to be found in rewriting these canonical literary texts. Rejecting the authority of the original narratives can lead to the development of individualised meanings and commentaries for both players and characters. Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, that new media ‘spectralises’—it does not work to banish or erase the past but creates new forms of dialogue with it (Derrida 1994, p. 51). Following from this, Calbi argues that experimental and oppositional adaptations in emergent screen media often demonstrate and explore the spectrality of the plays, disrupting the expectations and reverence associated with ‘the Thing “Shakespeare”’ as a way of blurring or disputing the expected hierarchy between original and adaptation, past and present. Therefore, this movement towards interactivity and player agency in videogame adaptations of Shakespearean plays should not be taken as a simple rejection or mockery of the past tradition represented by Shakespeare. It rather offers new ways of recontextualising Shakespearean narratives and exploring their contemporary relevance. The videogame titles considered in this paper offer new modes of commentary on both *Hamlet* and ‘the Thing Shakespeare’ itself through their challenging and occasionally transgressive remediations of the classic play into interactive formats.

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