Agency within Analog Shakespearean Games

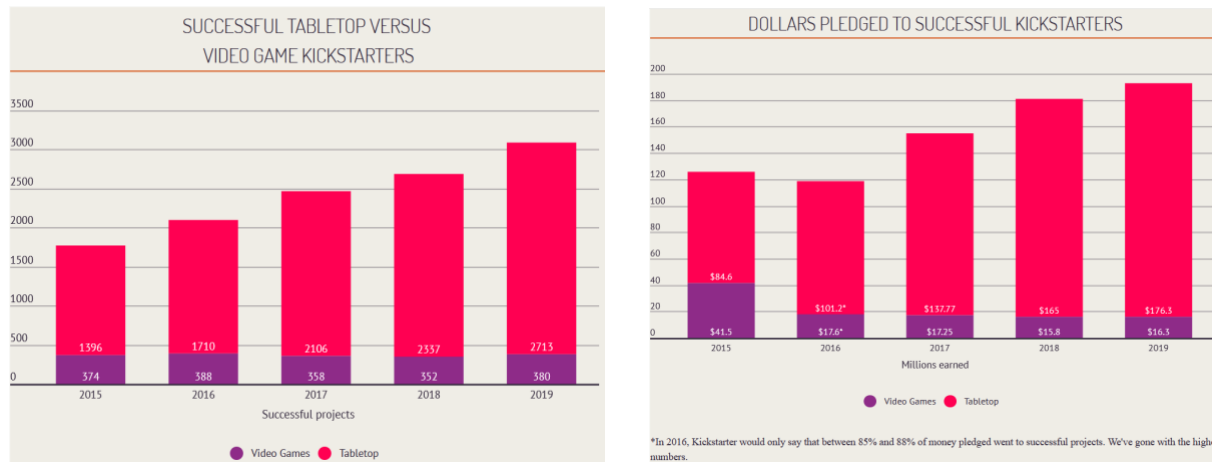Vernon Guy Dickson, Florida International University

Abstract

Analog (board and card) gaming is gaining popularity, partly motivated by the influence of new design principles inspired by eurogames (a name derived from board games from Germany, such as *Settlers of Catan*). This article studies the development of new approaches to affording player agency within three analog games with developed Shakespearean themes: *Kill Shakespeare*, *Council of Verona*, and *Shakespeare*. Using Albert Bandura's social cognitive theories of agency as manifested in playing analog games, this article argues that games offer a meaningful way to see agency within a discrete social space and that games present distinctive sites for varying agentic opportunities for players, which are often as limited as they are freeing due to game and social constraints. These contemporary games use Shakespeare as a thematic center, allowing players to become agents within new Shakespearean game worlds, engaging players in active and dynamic social roles and highly structured play.[1]

Introduction

With the quality and ongoing success of digital gaming, it is perhaps remarkable that analog (board and card) gaming is also on the rise. In 2015, it was hot news that board games had more than doubled digital gaming revenues on Kickstarter. Now those numbers are old news, as analog gaming sales climb, earning up to ten times more than digital gaming on Kickstarter in 2019, with successful projects continuing to increase (see figures 1 & 2). Of course, board games are a strong fit for Kickstarter and digital gaming is still significantly larger than analog gaming in overall revenues. Nonetheless, analog gaming also acts as a driving force within the digital sector and has become an over 2 billion dollar industry (Griepp 2021) (with projections to be a 12 billion dollar industry by 2023 (Research and Markets 2018)). What is perhaps most surprising is that these numbers do not include mass-market analog games (such as *Monopoly* or *Uno*) and that this rise has been sustained for years. As Dan Jolin argues, "Even the early 20th-century games explosion, which gave us such hardy perennials as Monopoly, Cluedo [Clue] and Scrabble, has nothing on the current surge. Market research group NPD, which claims to measure around 70% of the UK toy trade, has recorded a 20% rise during the past year in the sales of tabletop games" (2016). Similarly, Duffy Owen in "Board games' golden age: sociable,

brilliant and driven by the internet" reports "the past four years have seen board game purchases rise by between 25% and 40% annually. Thousands of new titles are released each year, and the top games sell millions of copies" (2014). This growth has only continued. There is unquestionable increasing interest in analog gaming—and new forms of it in particular.

Figures 1 & 2. The increasing growth of tabletop (board game) projects on Kickstarter in comparison to video games. Source: Charlie Hall, "Tabletop gaming dominated Kickstarter in 2019." *Polygon. 22 January 2021.* https://www.polygon.com/2020/1/22/21068797/kickstarter-2019-board-games-video-games-tabletop-data-china-tariffs-trump

In this paper, I will examine three Shakespeare-themed board games—*Kill Shakespeare*, *Council of Verona*, and *Shakespeare*—that strongly embrace aspects of new analog game design, though each in quite different ways, creating distinctive player experiences and roles within Shakespeare-inspired game worlds.[2] Each game embraces what I see, and will develop in this paper, as a new emphasis on agency within analog game design, fueled by the rich worlds generated by Shakespearean influences. After introducing some of the core principles of current analog gaming, I will offer a brief analysis of each game, including an overview of the game; an account of how it uses new designer board game principles and derives from Shakespearean inspirations; and a discussion of the game's link to analog gaming's distinctive development of player agency within face-to-face structured play.

The Rise of Analog Gaming: The Influence of Eurogames

While there are many styles and approaches within current analog gaming and I do not want to generalize, the influence of what are called eurogames (at least in part because of their origin in Germany) is significant. In *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*, Stewart Woods claims eurogames are "characterized by accessible themes, simple rules, constrained playing times and a strong emphasis on comparative performance through non-confrontational interaction" (2012, 211). While gamers might squabble over some of these particulars, this is a good summary of the shift in design principles. Similarly, Dan Jolin claims that these games

> are notable for their relatively gentle themes (farming, landscape-building, dock-working), the fact that they reduce the element of luck and—most importantly—the way they ensure no player is eliminated before the end. The game zero for this revolution is *The Settlers of Catan* (now rebranded *Catan*), created by a German designer, Klaus Teuber. Since its publication in 1995, it's sold more than 22m copies in 30 languages. Players competitively establish settlements on an island and trade resources with the other players, keeping participants fully engaged and sustaining the drama of the narrative right to the conclusion. (2016)

As Leon Neyfakh puts it, these new designer games "require players to make tough choices and develop strategies within an intricately plotted fictional universe" (2012). These choices lend themselves quite well to Shakespearean adaptation, with his rich fictional characters and theatrically-framed worlds. I agree with Gina Bloom that Shakespearean content works particularly well within game contexts because of Shakespeare's pervasiveness and availability, the rich development of his play worlds, and the theatrical (play) origins of the material itself.[3] The theater as a place of performed agency tightly connects to my interest here in agency within (game)play.

Jolin emphasizes the importance and increase in recent years of a particular style of games, cooperative games, where the players can work together against the game (i.e., the rule systems of the game present the challenge or obstacle that the players work together to overcome). In his words, "Gentler designs with an emphasis on teamwork are fueling a boom in board game sales" (2016). "Gentler" in this case also relates to the general trend to remove player elimination from games (think *Risk* or *Monopoly*), allowing all players to remain active participants until the game's end. It is important to note that eurogames, while formative within

the hobby, are not the only new games being developed. Hobby games that follow in the tradition of *Risk* and *Monopoly* are still being made, though even these have embraced new design principles and tend to make player choices more meaningful and to limit player elimination, even if they include more direct and confrontational styles of play.[4]

Understanding Player Agency

What strikes me in this move to rethink analog game design principles is the focus on increasing a sense of player agency. For example, rather than largely luck-based roll-and-move style games (such as those using dice or a spinner), analog games are striving to increase the sense of efficacy within players' choices, including avoiding player elimination (which curtails agency within a given game entirely) and minimizing non-choices (where games offer a limited range of choices and most turns only have one clear option). These kinds of design shifts fit well within the social cognitive theory of agency developed by Albert Bandura in "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective," because they emphasize an increase in the opportunities for player intentionality and forethought as well as feedback loops encouraging and responding to self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. Board and card games offer a meaningful, limited social system in which players can act, learn, respond, and develop.

It is important to note that while I feel that Bandura's perspective offers important insights into understanding analog game play and interactions, I do not feel it offers the only perspective on agency that is relevant or useful in studying games (or Shakespeare).[5] And I will at times gesture to a more general conceptualization of agency, following Janet Murray's influential—and purposefully broad—definition: "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decision and choices" (1997, 126). I recognize that this understanding of agency has been shown to be limited and in important ways illusory, since choices within games are scripted or bounded by the game's rules, construction, and context. And I will explore these points further in this article. Nonetheless, this desire within players to experience choices as leading to recognizable results is significant within new game design, particularly within eurogames, and important to players' experiences with these analog games.

Accordingly, before I begin, I also want to highlight Cole Wehrle's work with affective networks that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the "experiences of players and the emotional dimensions of play." Wehrle adds, "Games allow us to occupy new and strange

positions of affective entanglement" (2016). [6] Player agency shapes player experiences and social interactions in powerful ways, as does the depth and development of the game world in which they take action. The three Shakespeare-related games I will analyze here offer particularly rich and layered experiences, deriving from and adapting their Shakespearean origins to offer players unique positions of choice and play.[7]

Kill Shakespeare: Agents within a New Shakespearean World

Kill Shakespeare captures a design approach reminiscent of Shakespeare's own works—the game is an appropriation of previous work (both thematically and in terms of gameplay) and is innovative, belonging to a newly developing subgenre (see figure 3). *Kill Shakespeare* is a board game based in the world of the *Kill Shakespeare* graphic novel series, translating the ideas of the graphic novels into a semi-cooperative game (more on that in a moment). Thus, it is a game about a story series, which is itself an appropriation and reworking of earlier stories—in this case, the works of Shakespeare (which are themselves, of course, often based on earlier works and stories).
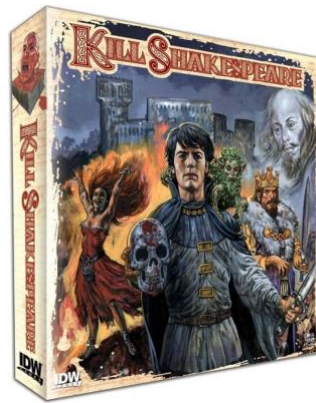

Figure 3. Kill Shakespeare*'s evocative board game box cover, featuring Hamlet, Richard III, Lady Macbeth, and Puck, with the Ghost of Shakespeare looking down on them. Source: https://boardgamegeek.com/image/1942080/kill-shakespeare*

Beyond this, the game mechanisms in *Kill Shakespeare* are based on the cooperative game genre (which include highly successful games such as *Pandemic*, *Forbidden Island,* and *Gloomhaven*), though *Kill Shakespeare* includes an important difference. [8] The game is semi-cooperative, combining newer cooperative playstyles with more traditional competitive play. Cooperative

play means that all players work together to beat the game, which in this case includes a series of cards and events that represent Richard III and Lady Macbeth taking over a fictitious amalgamated world of Shakespearean lands (see figure 4).

Figure 4. A game of Kill Shakespeare *in progress, with several lands of Shakespeare's plays placed in close proximity of each other. Source:* https://entropymag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/IMG_6665.jpg

As in many cooperative games, each turn the forces of evil advance in the game following prescribed rules, then a player has a chance to take their own actions and try to help liberate the land. Cooperative design elements have played a significant part within the new growth of board games, allowing players to work together to beat a game, thereby eliminating inter-player competition, fostering teamwork, and creating what some players find to be a more positive group play experience. *Kill Shakespeare*, however—following the example of successful games such as *Castle Panic*, *Dead of Winter*, and *Legendary*—reincorporates an individual win condition, in this case for the player who best helps the team win (assuming the players win, rather than all losing together). This design element creates an edge to the game's play: players can never fully trust their teammates to do what is best for the team. At a critical moment, a player may selfishly choose to help their own cause and focus on gaining victory points (used to

determine the individual endgame winner), especially if they feel the game is already on its way to victory. Of course, doing so may prompt other players to seek individual points as well and doom the group. *Kill Shakespeare* captures the sense of shifting loyalties and uncertainty that the graphic novel series embraces, deriving from Shakespeare's own use of complex characters and conflicted situations and choices, as well as dramatic turnarounds and unexpected plot twists, generating a tough, slowly developing game. *Kill Shakespeare* takes 2-3 hours to play, potentially creating an extended, tense experience.

  A player in *Kill Shakespeare* has the chance to be one of the series heroes (Falstaff, Hamlet, Juliet, Othello, and Viola; see figure 5) within a single merged Shakespearean world (a world, for example, where Delphos adjoins Messaline, The Forest of Arden, and Cawdor) and to construct a new narrative—within the confines of the game, of course. This creates a particularly interesting dynamic, giving a player a strong sense of agency, but one that is penned in by the game rules and mechanisms, which act as exterior pressures that constantly shape the ability to take action and to make choices.[9] Through careful bidding and allocating of their limited resources, players can experience an evocative battle against Richard III and Lady Macbeth, both in terms of the mechanical processes of the game and in terms of the narrative that the players create as they interpret the gameplay into their own story of saving (or failing to save) the world. Each game will be different, due to the extended playtime and development, random order of cards, and distinct player choices. Players shape their own experiences as they choose which quests to fulfill, which strongholds to take back from Richard, and which lands they will protect. However, there is no freewheeling storytelling here. Players are strongly limited by which cards are available, which actions other players take, and where King Richard's armies amass. The sense of fighting against overwhelming odds is pervasive, as is the sense of not being able to do all you want to do in any given turn or even over the full arc of the game. That larger arc and all the player actions taken together create a strong narrative sense of attempting to liberate a tyrannically controlled land. The world is immersive, richly created in the graphic novels and evocatively brought across into the game.

Figure 5. Player boards for the heroes of Kill Shakespeare*: Hamlet, Juliet, Falstaff, Othello, and Viola. Source:* https://entropymag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/IMG_6686.jpg

Thus, rather than acting as an author of a Shakespearean fanfic piece, in which a player can write most anything they might imagine, players find themselves in the game both enabled by the system—given specific bonuses as a distinctive character within this world, as well as a compelling backstory—but also limited by the same system. Even if a player chooses to disregard the given objectives of the game, they can still only take the actions the game system allows (without abandoning the ruleset altogether, of course). This limited agency maps well onto our sense of social agency as well as onto the sense of agency that Shakespeare develops in his own works—a character like Macbeth feels hemmed in and limited. Even as he plays at gaining power and imagines the ability to do what he wishes, he remains limited by the script, by the world Shakespeare has created, and by the social forces enacted within that world. While it is not as extreme as Hamlet's hypothetical feeling of being bound within a nutshell, there is a constant sense of boundaries and limits within these games that feels reminiscent of many Shakespearean texts.

The act of play is itself a kind of resigning of certain powers and opportunities in order to gain others—play frees us of some of our social limitations, but through rulesets it rebinds us

within new rules and within certain social roles as well (such as proper play etiquette).[10] Players cannot do whatever they want, but gameplay does open up a different set of actions than would otherwise be available. *Kill Shakespeare* builds on this by giving players the distinctive opportunity to play as heroes that die within the plays (Viola is the only exception, but she has been drastically reimagined as the renegade pirate Captain Cesario). These roles allow a tremendous sense of significance to be added to chosen actions. Players operate as well-known agents, freed from their original scripts and given a chance to act again within the game's new stage of play. Beyond that, these characters have backstories in the game's rulebook that build off their Shakespearean origins but also suggest their own conflicting agendas. Hamlet wants to take Shakespeare's magic quill for himself and write his father back to life again and eliminate his killers, while Othello wants Shakespeare to write him out of existence—and into the arms of Desdemona in the afterlife. These agendas will only play into the game itself as far as the players choose to pursue them, but they help explain why the heroes have a selfish interest in trying to be the final singular victor within the otherwise cooperative gameplay.

Beyond this, the semi-cooperative nature of the game affects the sense of agency the players have as well. Within Albert Bandura's model, agency is grounded in our sense of intentionality and forethought; we plan and act with expectations for what we want to occur as a result. Each of these aspects, though, is frustrated as players simultaneously depend on the actions of their fellow players and also cannot fully trust each player consistently to do what is needed to win the game. It is hard to plan choices with forethought and anticipate specific outcomes given such a level of uncertainty about what other players will choose and how their actions will affect the game. For example, one player can use the turn order to their benefit, taking an action that gains them victory points, while also creating a situation in which the next player must make a play to avoid the team losing, but that does not benefit that player individually at all. The social pressure on that next player to avoid a group loss is intense and disrupts their own plans significantly. The game thus sets up a world that feels evocative of the social pressures, multiple agendas, and cross-purposes that Shakespeare's characters experience within his plays. While it would be unfair to say that no other theme could evoke these pressures, Shakespeare's worlds of choice and betrayal, dramatic interplay and interactions—with years of accretions and experiences—play particularly well into the tensions of the game.

In a fully cooperative game, a player can expect teammates consistently to help move the group toward a shared victory. In a semi-cooperative game, players can delay a needed action—leaving it for a later player to complete—in order to gain points and move themselves toward their individual endgame victory. This is an interesting example of Bandura's proxy agency, whereby agents seek "valued outcomes" through the agency of others: "In this socially mediated mode of agency, people try by one means or another to get those who have access to resources or expertise or who wield influence and power to act at their behest to secure the outcomes they desire" (2001, 13). However, within *Kill Shakespeare*, it is less about whether a player has the means or resources alone, and more about whether a player wishes to expend their own time and energy or push someone else to expend theirs, while the player goes on to achieve other valuable goals—in this case, victory points in the game. Of course, this kind of strategy has implications for the actual players of the game, their relationships, and how they feel about pushing other players to take actions on their behalf (including being "that guy," the one who selfishly seeks individual victory against the desires of the rest of the group). Gaming in this way, seeking an individual victory through pressuring others to act, fits within the sense of proxy agency Bandura articulates: "Successful functioning necessarily involves a blend of reliance on proxy agency in some areas of functioning to free time and effort to manage directly other aspects" (2001, 13). Interestingly, *Kill Shakespeare* uses "energy" as an in-game resource, but one of the designers talks about this resource as "time" when discussing what he calls the "core mechanic" of the game.[11] Thus, the game nicely mirrors our own social practices in real life, our choices about whether to use others' agency to avoid expending our own time and effort. Shakespeare's works offer many examples of (attempted) proxy agency: Oberon with Puck, Orsino's use of Viola as a go-between, Claudius's many uses of agents, or the Macbeths' several examples, to name just a few. Shakespeare's works, often enacting forms and explorations of agency, offer content that ably supports the game's attempt to create a sense of mixed loyalties and intersocial pressures.

Kill Shakespeare, it is important to add, does not just allow for situations where a player may choose a selfish action; it actively sets up situations where in order to win players needs to work together but will receive differing rewards from the action, encouraging players to arrange to gain the most from a given game situation. For example, players usually have to cooperate in order to destroy one of King Richard's strongholds (freeing that land from his tyranny); however, doing so always creates a situation where one player gains more victory points than the

other players. Thus, players may choose not to place their influence tokens in an area if they do not think they can win the most points from the battle, but this jeopardizes the chance to beat King Richard. If all players play this way, they will lose the game as a group. At some point, players must work together, but the game encourages selfish actions by rewarding players with differing amounts of victory points after most successful actions. This aspect of the game adds to the immersion into a rich Shakespearean world of difficult choices.

Cooperative play remains necessary to winning *Kill Shakespeare*. While some selfish actions might be taken in search of an individual victory, the game is designed to be difficult enough that collective work is required through much (if not most) of the game. Bandura addresses cooperative play as collective agency, wherein people "have to work in coordination with others to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own" (2001, 13). This particularly critical form of agency lies at the core of cooperative (and semi-cooperative) games. Players learn that they must work closely together in order to reach their desired goals, requiring careful collective forethought and planning. In this case, the land, through the character agents each player controls, cannot be saved from King Richard III and Lady Macbeth without conscious, thoughtful coordination of player agencies: individual, proxy, and collective. Whatever else *Kill Shakespeare* does, it certainly generates a feeling of conflicting plotlines and characters with differing objectives, all within a world teetering on the edge of tragedy or success, tyranny or positive resolution. The game leaves players feeling like they have spent a few hours within a world linked to those of Shakespeare's construction.

Council of Verona: Adjusting the Angle of Agency

Council of Verona is significantly different from *Kill Shakespeare*, designed instead for quick, highly interactive, and fully competitive play (gameplay is 20-30 minutes, rather than *Kill Shakespeare*'s 120-180 minutes). Unlike in *Kill Shakespeare*, players do not embody Shakespearean characters in *Council of Verona*; rather players are outside the action, shaping the action, playing cards from their hand representing characters from the world of *Romeo and Juliet* (see figures 6 & 7).
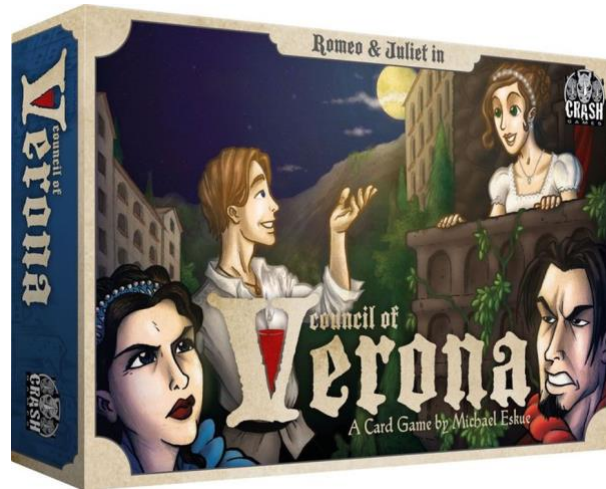
Figure 6. Box cover of Council of Verona, featuring Romeo wooing Juliet on her balcony, while Lady Montague and Tybalt look on in disapproving anger. Source:
https://boardgamegeek.com/image/1727393/council-verona

Figures 7. Cards from Council of Verona, *featuring just a few of the many characters available as cards within the game. Source:* *https://boardgamegeek.com/image/1692715/council-verona*

Cards played affect cards previously played, as players try to win by gaining influence within the Council of Verona (including by exiling other characters from Verona) or, with careful play, to win through the use and control of exiled cards. Gameplay is simple. Each turn a player plays a single card from their hand. After playing a card, they may place a chip (with a secret value) on any card in play, allowing them to try to gain points or—through low or even 0 value chips—bluff their opponents (see figure 8). This is a quick-paced game about pretended

motives, sudden turns of events, and surprise victories, certainly resonating well with Shakespearean storytelling, though in no way an enactment of the story of the play it is based on. As Harrison and Lutz put it, "to allow the player freedom of action is necessarily to deviate from the script" (2017, 26). *Council of Verona* sets the script aside, allowing players the chance to control the fate of characters from the world of *Romeo and Juliet* (even including Rosaline and the Apothecary).

Figure 8. Sample game of Council of Verona *in progress, with cards in the Council, in Exile, and marked with differing player tokens. Source:*

https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2574336/council-verona

Thus, rather than attempt to recreate *Romeo and Juliet*, *Council of Verona* allows players a chance to create their own strategies and outcomes in a game world that feels reminiscent of Shakespeare's play, especially the sense of antagonism, ambition, divided loyalties, and sometimes subtle, sometimes overt power plays. The text from the game box quickly creates the scene in which the players will assert their agency in a new version of the drama:

> The citizens of Verona have grown tired of the constant quarrel between the houses of Capulet and Montague. As ruler of the region, Prince Escalus has formed a council to help mediate the conflict and bring lasting peace to Verona.

In Council of Verona players take on the role of citizens of Verona and have the opportunity to steer the story of Romeo & Juliet and determine who will rule Verona once and for all! (2013)

Players are thus promised a chance to revise the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, to change the outcome through their own strategic actions. *Council of Verona* allows players a significant sense of agency and power, as they decide who to exile, which characters to use in order to win the game, and even whether to bring the lovers together or keep them apart (though, in this game world, the play's titular lovers are often quite secondary to a player's focus). The developed characterizations and world of *Romeo and Juliet* provide the game a rich cast and fertile dramatic space in which to create this distinctive play experience.

While the play of a game is fairly brief, usually less than half an hour, the sense of empowerment during that time is striking. Many options are available (not just which character card to play, but which of the many places to put tokens and which token to use to assert influence, or bluff, the best), and there is a significant sense of being able, through a push and pull with fellow (though opposing) players, to rewrite this famous story to match new ends and goals. There is a clear evocation of being able, actively and intentionally, to rewrite the roles of each character within the play and to generate a new storyline. Each player stands outside the story, acting like a competing director or writer, rather than being limited to a single character, such as in *Kill Shakespeare*, thereby significantly changing the kind of agency the players experience. In *Council of Verona*, players are working against the other players to reach their own ends, shaped by which cards they have in their hands and how they (and the other players) play their cards.

Council of Verona captures the constant quarrelling, and the seeking for power over peace, that *Romeo and Juliet* enacts. The "peace" promised on the box cover is one that only comes through one player gaining control—represented through influence points—and winning the game, in order to "rule Verona once and for all!" (Or at least until players play again a few minutes later.) "Peace" here is about power and specifically about locking the concept of power into a "one wins and everyone else loses" equation. Clearly, the game is meant to be fun—the art and style are light-hearted and the game is part of a "Pub Series," meant to be played in casual social settings—but it captures more than just light play. *Council of Verona* evokes the

machinations of Verona and the world of *Romeo and Juliet* and, like the Shakespeare's plays, embodies more than a simple, light playing (or reading) reveals. Players seemingly have tremendous agency within the world of the game, but in the end, the cards limit their options and the game determines the general objective. The sense of agency is heightened, since players can shape the macro-world of Verona dramatically, but the illusion of agency is still firmly in effect. Further, there is no way around the win-lose narrative the game offers. Even within a seemingly simple and lightweight game, at the center of play is power—who wins and who loses.[12]

The players' agency in *Council of Verona* is sharply tied up in the choices that others make and what cards and tokens they have available to them. While the scope of the agency feels much more liberating and empowered than that experienced in *Kill Shakespeare*, the player's sense of agency is tempered since the same agency is wielded by each opponent. Each player simultaneously strives to shape the entire game world to meet their own ends. Each player has significant in-game leverage, but because each player can enact global level changes, the struggle between players feels decidedly limited. Where *Kill Shakespeare* creates a sense of desperately being outnumbered and trying to work with questionable allies against an oppressive opponent, *Council of Verona* creates a sense of dramatic ability running up against an equal sense of significant opposing agency. Players are like competing writers, each trying to write the story to meet their own desired outcome, but unable to control more than a few elements of the larger story at any given time. The overall effect is lightened by the brevity of the game, but there is a clear and constant sense of trying to shape events, only to have another player significantly alter the game world. The game system thus can allow for a tremendous degree of agency for each player, because that power is balanced by each player possessing a similar level of agency.

Council of Verona plays off the sense of Shakespeare readers hoping for an alternative ending, but then complicates that by embedding player actions within a system that frustrates action. This pull and tug reminds players of the experience of the play itself, of characters trying to reach their objective, but running up against the complicating actions of others within the play. Thus a strong motivation for the game, being able to revise the story of the play, reembeds itself within the play's evocation of frustrated action. Nonetheless, one strong element of the game (and the fun for many players) is attempting to enact macro changes within the world of *Romeo and Juliet*, generating a strong sense of (conflicted) storytelling within Shakespeare's play world.

This is global level narrative revision within one of Shakespeare's most popular texts—a powerful draw—which also manages to reflect some of core affective values of the play.

Shakespeare: Agents in the Theater Business

Among the Shakespeare-themed analog games, *Shakespeare* ranks highest on popular lists and perhaps embodies best the core values of new game design, specifically those of eurogames (see figure 9).[13] As mentioned earlier, eurogames (often just called *euros*) focus on non-confrontational interaction between players and encourage thoughtful, strategic play. Quite unlike *Council of Verona* or *Kill Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare* is about the early modern English theater business (loosely conceived), rather than a specific vision of or play by Shakespeare.

Figure 9. Shakespeare *box cover depicting a pensive Shakespeare, standing away from his desk with quill in hand, and a portrait of Queen Elizabeth in the background. Source:*
https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583222/shakespeare

Many euros (like *Shakespeare*) are about acquiring needed resources (usually scarce and often at the expense of other players who need those same resources) and making the best strategic use of those resources to accomplish the game's win conditions (usually earning the most points or being the first to a specific game objective or point total). In *Shakespeare*, players have a limited number of actions they can take on their turn. They can use those actions to acquire cards (that

represent either actors or artisans, such as costume makers or set designers; see figures 10 & 11) or activate their currently available cards to take resources (such as cloth or set pieces) or to curry favor with the queen. Players pull from a common line-up of cards and resources, meaning that each acquisition is another player's lost opportunity (this indirect conflict is common and significant within eurogames). This is not a light game and is designed primarily for a hobby game audience, interested in gameplay complexity and meaningful in-game decisions, in which every choice matters and there is very little left to luck.

Figures 10 & 11. A sample of cards representing actors and artisans in Shakespeare. *Source:* [*https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583218/shakespeare*](https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583218/shakespeare) *and* [*https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583219/shakespeare*](https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583219/shakespeare)

Shakespeare creates a strong sense of competition within the game world, using a limited market and a healthy dose of what feels like warring player companies. Players each begin with their own player boards, with spaces representing Shakespeare, Falstaff, a handyman, and the queen, as well as a stage on which to put set design elements (see figure 12). Throughout the game, these elements can be used to improve future actions and choices, such as through gaining more actors and crew (see figure 13 for a complete game set up). The actors gained from a central line-up are based on Shakespearean characters (not actors), so that a player may, on any

given turn, be choosing between Lady Macbeth, Viola, and Hamlet (and not between Richard Burbage and Will Kempe). Each character offers gameplay values and uses reminiscent of that character, but it is important to add that the game's deepest level is its game play. This is not an attempt at an historical simulation, but rather a smart use of the early modern theater world to create a distinctive new eurogame.
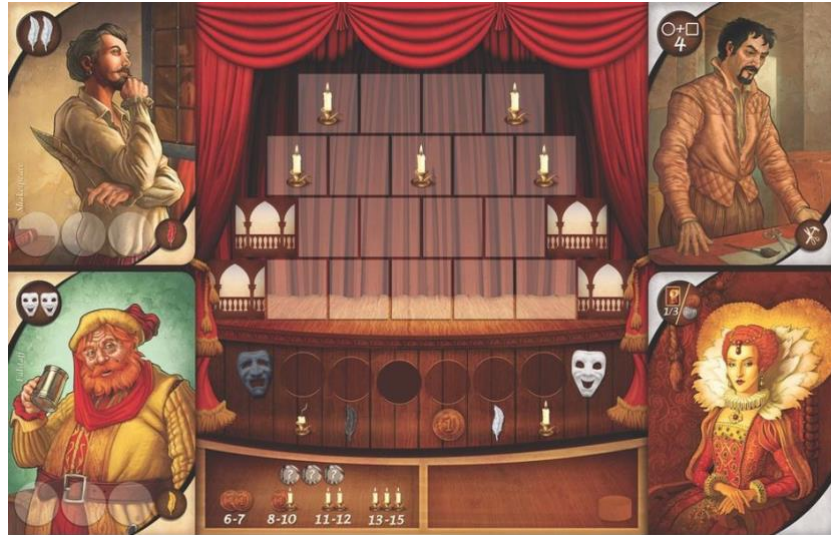

Figure 12. Player board in Shakespeare, *with the stage centered and Shakespeare, Falstaff, a handyman, and Queen Elizabeth action spaces on the edges. Source:*
https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583221/shakespeare

Figure 13. A sample game of Shakespeare *in play. Source:*
https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2583220/shakespeare

Thus, *Shakespeare* offers a playful (pun intended) look into a slant version of Shakespeare and his theater, in which actors are already predetermined characters (with abilities related to their characters as Shakespeare conceived them—and the game designers reimagined

them) and Shakespeare is merely one more within a gallery of his own best-known characters. Set next to the very work-a-day world of the costume and set design aspects, as well as the limited and quite tight financial world of the game (where one copper coin can mean success or failure), this actor-and-playwright-as-character approach creates both a fanciful and challenging world with a knowing nod to Shakespeare fans. While a tight and well-constructed euro game, there is a kind of whimsy as well. Cleopatra, Prospero, Puck, and Viola can come together within a single play and fire the imagination of the player—what is this play I've just created?—while still working seamlessly within the competitive, working world created within *Shakespeare*. The play is abstract, so the narrative building is largely in the players' own minds (if they wish), but the game mechanisms support the possibility of significant and surprising outcomes, though in a way that also allows a non-Shakespeare fan to enjoy and do well in the game. No prior knowledge is needed, since the mechanisms are about smart decision making and do not rely on theme. However, a Shakespeare fan will likely enjoy the theme more.

In the world of *Shakespeare*, players feel the crush of needing to have everything queued up and paid for, while competing with each other for scant resources and within a limited timeframe. There is a strong sense of agency and opportunity: I can recruit Lady Macbeth, just when another player needs her most, and I can watch my resources grow, turn after turn, as I acquire more actors and staff. Because the gameplay is built so tightly, each successful player choice feels quite significant. Each action matters, and the feedback loop is quick and rewarding. There is also a tremendous feeling of disempowerment, however, as resources vanish quickly and the game's turns move forward leaving every game played feeling incomplete and even impoverished (for example, it is rare to complete full costumes and sets, and money is in short supply). There is simply not enough to go around. This game does not attempt to immerse players within Shakespeare's worlds like the *Kill Shakespeare* or *Council of Verona*. Instead, it focuses on offering each player a role as an agent within a world like his own, though more concerned with coins than with plotlines, with stage plays as business more than imaginative works.

The way each choice in *Shakespeare* matters and careful gameplay is rewarded reflects the core principles of agency Bandura posits, perhaps in the clearest way of all three of these games. Simply, the gameplay of *Shakespeare* allows for visible knowledge, forethought and careful planning, and clear feedback from choices. As agents, players feel a direct link between

their strategic choices. While they may enjoy the fun of entering this world of early modern theater, it is secondary to the role they enact as managers and planners, players in a very different way in the theater business.

Representing Agency in Shakespearean Play

Analyzing these games side by side, I am struck by the distinctive and yet overlapping representations of agency within them. Players are empowered by game mechanics that allow them to do remarkable and memorable things. They feel as if they are controlling major events, representing or using popular characters, and changing long determined plot lines—or making up entirely new plots and stories. Throughout all of these games, though, players constantly struggle against the limits the games set—whether limits to what they are allowed to do in a single turn (play one card, choose one action) or limits to what they cannot do within the parameters of the game or limits created by the other players' actions and social influence. Within the world of each game, players are empowered and limited, carefully balanced agents who constantly run up against their own limitations, always wishing they could do just a bit more, but (hopefully) enjoying the opportunity to engage actively within the game world, rewarded for clever choices and plays. In each case, the agency of the players is linked closely to the emotional experiences the games produce. These games generate a visceral sense of agency, reflecting in a distinct microcosm the sense of the many choices all agents face and limits that are clearly reflected within Shakespeare's plays and the theater business. His worlds and characters add depth to the game play experiences, adding additional resonance to player experiences.

In his study of agency, Bandura claims "Human functioning is rooted in social systems" (2001, 14). Games, particularly face-to-face analog games, with their embedded physical and social qualities, offer a remarkable glimpse into agency within defined human social structures. Bandura states, "Social structures represent authorized systems of rules, social practices, and sanctions designed to regulate human affairs" and "personal agency operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences" (2001, 14). Games use defined rules and practices that shape human interactions, allowing for what might be considered simplified interactions or, perhaps better, carefully managed interactions. Agency manifests and is practiced within these game structures. In fact, all aspects of agency within Bandura's social cognitive theory are manifest, making games a unique way to explore his model of agency. Players engage with

games (especially the new designer games that minimize luck) using intentionality and forethought within narrowly defined rulesets to plan and strategize within social structures that encourage and reward that planning. The goals underlying self-reactiveness, our ability as agents to self-regulate, are made simpler than in real life, allowing players to maintain, over the limited time of a game, a strong sense of motivation and self-regulation. Finally, the interactions within games and the clear framing of win conditions allow for players to readily self-reflect, "judg[ing] the correctness of their predictive and operative thinking against the outcomes of their actions [and] the effects that other people's [player's] actions produce" (Bandura 2001, 10). Games function as a kind of microcosm of social cognitive agency at play, a chance for players to practice social behavior and agency, a chance to explore roles, agency, and power, within a generally safe space.

Beyond this, I note the broader sense of play, positions, and agency within these games created through new understandings and iterations of Shakespeare. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* will play out differently (usually quite differently) in *Council of Verona* and the rich world of characters Shakespeare created becomes a kind of writers' tug of war, a fertile sandbox in which players compete to shape and design a new story. In diverging from the original script, players enact agency and shape their own Verona. Similarly, the world of Shakespeare is built upon and altered in the graphic novel's amalgamation of characters and stories in *Kill Shakespeare* and reimagined even further within the board game. The layered world—already freed from Shakespeare's original scripts—allows for rich new player interactions and choices, with each immersive game encouraging players to imagine themselves within a new Shakespearean world, fighting against some of Shakespeare's most famous villains, creating their own Shakespearean experience. Finally, historical reality itself is played with in *Shakespeare*, where the sense of managing competing playing companies registers as seemingly realistic and requires careful attention to details and the game's economy. All the while, the fiction of actors who are Shakespearean characters (working side by side with each player's own Shakespeare character) overturns any sense of loyalty to history or Shakespeare's works. History itself is revised, with Shakespeare—and the players' choices—at the center of the action.

Each of these games is derived thoughtfully to increase player enjoyment by allowing players the opportunity to experience, engage with, and act within richly reconceived Shakespearean worlds, building on his works, but freed to explore and act without being tied to

the script. In each case, players act within a carefully constructed (limited) sense of agency, but are allowed to experience new subject positions, new interrelations, new entanglements, built through productive (though illusory) opportunities for creative agency. The layers already available in Shakespeare's works, including those that have come in the years after—accretions of adaptations and appropriations—give these analog games a particularly rich and resonant world in which to enact new experiences of agency.

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[1] My thanks to Melissa Texidor, who helped in the research and revisions of this article, through a research internship provided by FIU's The Humanities Edge program funded by The Andrew W. Mellon foundation.

[2] I will italicize board game names to mark them as discrete texts and for clarity, such as to distinguish the person Shakespeare from the game *Shakespeare*.

[3] Gina Bloom has claimed, "Shakespeare is fitting inspiration for game designers not only because of the literary content of the plays and the biographical fame of the author, but because of the theatrical context in which those plays were first and continue to be performed" (2018, 1). While Bloom focuses on extant games during Shakespeare's period, I will focus in this piece on how his works are used in analog games today.

[4] Even newer versions of *Risk* offer players the chance to play to specific objectives, rather than total world conquest, significantly shortening play times and lessening the need for player elimination. Many confrontational games either avoid the possibility of a player being fully eliminated or end when a single player is eliminated. In this case, the player who is furthest ahead (in whatever scoring process is used) is generally the winner.

[5] For example, Stephen O'Neill suggests another useful definition of agency: "the capacity to discursively intervene in, repurpose, or shape one's understanding of oneself in relation to socio-cultural structures" (2017, 129). Games allow for players, both within the world of the game and within broader social and cultural moments to interact and intervene, engaging in playful and yet significant acts of choice and interaction.

I note this important comment from Alec Charles, who in setting up his own significant work into agency and digital gaming states: "This paper takes as its basis approaches derived from European cultural theory; but, in exploring the applicability of such theoretical perspectives, it

does not purport to advance a position which might exclude other modes of analysis" (2009, 281).

[6] Cole Wehrle in "Affective Networks at Play: Catan, COIN, and The Quiet Year" effectively develops the social and affective roles that games play (and enable).

[7] My discussion of *Kill Shakespeare* runs a bit longer as it also develops the links between Bandura's work and analog gaming that I continue to develop throughout this article.

[8] *Gloomhaven* is one of the most successful board games on Kickstarter and the most lucrative in Spring 2018, while *Pandemic* remains 3rd on this list, even more than 10 years after its release in 2008 (ICv2 2018).

[9] This limited agency can be understood in relation to work in videogame studies that explore the illusion of agency that is created within videogames. Alec Charles argues that videogames' "illusion of interactivity sponsors a sense of agency—but this agency has been externally predetermined or pre-designed" (2009, 286). Analog gaming often has less prescribed paths of game play than digital gaming, but both are systems within which players have limited agency predetermined by designers of the games. Analog gaming certainly involves illusions of agency, similar to how Charles explains that digital gaming can give a "user the illusion of meaning, power, and active participation," but adds, "in appearing to satisfy its audience's desire for agency, in fact sublimates and dilutes that desire" (2009, 289). Choices are always confined by the game and its prescribed systems of action. Sarah Stang, in "'This Action Will Have Consequences': Interactivity and Player Agency," offers an important study of player agency that includes a useful review of the illusion of agency and of interactivity within digital gaming, much of which is applicable to analog gaming.

While analog games often have different physical and social modes of delivery (for example, note that Charles' title, "Playing with one's self" suggests an important difference between digital gaming, often practiced alone, versus analog gaming, often practiced in a social group), they too suffer from an illusion of agency. Choices do matter within the game and most iterations of an analog games will be different from any other iteration of that game played because of these choices, the near infinite physical board states of a game, and the interactions between players. However, all choices are still circumscribed within the rules of the game and social expectations of gameplay.

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[10] Matthew Harrison and Michael Lutz explore the significance of *play* as a term that embraces and informs Shakespeare's concerns, particularly in *Hamlet*, and carries multiple "ludic practices . . . in relations to power and control" (2017, 25). Their work also points to the limits of a player within a game. While new actions can be taken, all play is limited by the game's own limits (whether practical or planned).

[11] Thomas Vande Ginste and his co-designer, Wolf Plancke, are from Belgium and so part of this concept and its representation within the game may have also been lost in translation of the game into English.

[12] This paper is too short to explore this further, but Brian Sutton-Smith is among several theorists who have written about power within games and play. In *The Ambiguity of Play,* he argues, "The rhetoric of play as power is about the use of play as the representation of conflict and as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes" (1997, 10). There is much more work to be done here still.

[13] At the time of writing this article, *Shakespeare* ranks 536 overall and 310 in strategy games on the popular site boardgamegeek.com, the largest and most complete online board game information source (https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/180511/shakespeare). (Note: there were 21051 ranked games on the site, with *Tic-Tac-Toe* being last.)

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