

Richard Reborn: Neo-Early Modern Performance in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009)

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Abstract

Building on the works of scholars who focus on neomedievalism, this article proposes that the 21st century roleplaying videogame, *Dragon Age: Origins*, is a work of neo-early modernism, one that appropriates Shakespeare's history play, *Richard III*. Through the process of roleplaying in the game, the player goes beyond merely being a spectator to being a participant who can influence and alter the "medieval" world around them. Through its gameplay, *Dragon Age: Origins* replicates both the performance of early modern drama and its iterable nature. The most striking way in which *Dragon Age: Origins*'s gameplay proves itself neo-early modern—offering itself both as spectacle and acting opportunity—is how it features unique player character "origin stories" that recontextualize the player's place in the world, and hence the thrust of the overall narrative. Furthermore, the game presents a story and characters that strongly echo elements of *Richard III*. *Dragon Age: Origins* depicts political maneuvering similar to that which appears in the bard's history play through character of Loghain Mac Tir, *Dragon Age*'s own Richard III, and his interactions with the player character. As a roleplaying game, *Dragon Age: Origins* enables the player, like an actor in an Elizabethan performance of Shakespeare's histories, to playfully engage with monarchical political intrigue. That *Dragon Age: Origins* does not simply replicate the plot of the play is what renders it "neo"-early modern, rather than merely an imitation of an early modern work. The tendency of roleplaying fantasy videogames to flirt with the themes and characters from Shakespeare's plays indicates a need to consider not only how these games appropriate the medieval but also how they draw inspiration from Shakespeare and, therefore, appropriate the broader form of early modern drama as well.

Introduction

The second decade of the new millennium witnessed a significant revival of medievalism in the form of popular television entertainment. In 2011, HBO released the first season of its critically acclaimed fantasy drama, *Game of Thrones*, and Starz released *Camelot*, its television adaptation of the Arthurian legend. Building on this momentum, the History Channel aired the first season of *Vikings* in 2013. The above are just a few examples of recent shows featuring medieval-esque settings. The use of the term medieval-esque indicates that the settings of shows such as *Game of Thrones* are not truly medieval but neomedieval, a term Daniel Kline uses to describe texts that "no longer strive for authenticity" by attempting to recreate a realistic

depiction of the Middle Ages but are instead characterized by a kind of “double consciousness” (Kline 2014, 4). In other words, neomedievalism is always in conversation with both the actual medieval past and with an intermediary, fantastical portrayal of the Middle Ages, as is the case for Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or the tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons* (Kline 2014, 4–5).

Though neomedievalism is popular in modern media, it did not originate in the 21st century. In fact, some scholars contend that the genre was frequently explored by William Shakespeare. In his article “Chantry, Chronicle, and Cockpit,” Brian Walsh poses the following question: “How does Shakespeare reconcile the Elizabethan present with the medieval past?” (Walsh 2009, 152). Walsh contends that Shakespeare is preoccupied by the desire to re-imagine or even re-create the Middle Ages (Walsh 2009, 152). His article largely centers on an analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and he makes the following observation concerning this play:

The self-consciousness about the constitution and dissemination of historical knowledge is the central feature of this Shakespearean *ars historia* we can construct from this play. Change is highlighted, in other words, not as an occasion to make moral pronouncements or to convey a general sense of worldly mutability, but to examine the *concept* of history and transformations to how the past is represented and circulated. (Walsh 2009, 153)

Thus, Walsh depicts Shakespeare as a playwright who was fascinated by the late medieval period, and it is due to that fascination, rather than any “moral pronouncements,” that the Bard invented his own synthetic Middle Ages. His history plays are concerned with the societies of the past and with creating connections between the medieval past and the early modern present.

Based on the description of Walsh's article above, it initially seems as though Shakespeare's work could be easily categorized as a work of neomedievalism; It is arguable, however, whether Shakespeare's history plays are actually better characterized as simply medievalistic, and I would suggest they attempt to fabricate a synthetic medieval reality, rather than the sort of self-aware simulation such as that presented by *Game of Thrones*. Either way, Shakespeare's history plays are text based, as all plays are. By text-based, I mean the fact that the text of a play is a script that can be performed repeatedly, and each performance can have its own unique features. This iterability of theatrical performance stands in sharp contrast to a neomedieval television program such as *Thrones*, which lacks the possibilities of restaging that characterize drama as a genre. Thus, Shakespeare's plays do not reflect a stable or ahistorical

assemblage of the medieval and the modern each time they are performed; rather, they are reimagined and, through this process, become new with each production. Certainly there are performances of Shakespearean drama that strive toward the neomedieval “double consciousness”—the sense of the medieval being mediated through and to the present—but many may not. Instead, the scriptive nature of the history plays allows them to be enacted repeatedly and multifariously.

Ultimately, the iterative nature of play texts works in tandem with the performers, audience, and material circumstances of a performance to create an original piece of art every time a play is performed. William B. Worthen clearly outlines this idea in an article titled “Drama, Performativity, and Performance”:

The performance [of a play] is not a citation of the text. The ceremony deploys the text—and much else—as part of an elaborate reiteration of a specific vision of social order: the meaning of the performance depends on the citation not of the text but of regimes of heterosexual socialization, on the interplay among a specific text, individual performers, the materiality and historical density of performance and the web of performance practices that constitute the performance as a meaningful citation...performing reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text (Worthen 1998, 1097).

Worthen’s apprehension of the play-text as “part of an elaborate reiteration of a specific vision of social order” underscores how performance will always mirror the prevailing ideologies of the time in which it is produced. Thus, actual productions of drama are not necessarily constrained by the original texts, and every new performance reinvigorates a play with new life.

I have suggested that Shakespeare’s history plays offer synthetic medievalistic experiences that are characterized by significant deviations from the historical events that they depict with regards to material, semiotic, and spatiotemporal modalities. Yet medievalistic depictions of the Middle Ages are not exclusive to text-based literary works—I would like to suggest they have currency in videogames as well. As Gina Bloom highlights the relationship between Shakespeare’s works and videogames:

I submit that Shakespeare is fitting inspiration for game designers not only because of the literary content of the plays, and the biographical game of the author, but because of the theatrical context in which those plays were first and

continue to be performed. Theater is a good model for games because it is one of the earliest media technologies for interactive play. (Bloom 2018, 1)

Using Bloom's argument as a springboard, I suggest that the interactive nature of roleplaying videogames characterizes their relationship to theater and performance—particularly the live performances of Shakespeare's works in Elizabethan England. Of this audience interaction, Bloom notes that “old London theaters used to encourage audience-actor interactions in a way that they now no longer do” (Bloom 2018, 3), with audiences of the time often interacting both with the actors onstage and with one another during a live performance (Bloom 2018, 5). As games, too, not only encourage but require audience-actor interactions to drive the plot forward, they may parallel elements of Elizabethan theater. And in a roleplaying game, the player is always both audience and actor, as the player's choice usually contributes to the progression of the story, and, therefore, each “performance” of a game, like a theatrical production, is an original or at least particular artwork. Because their goal is not simply to recreate an imagined past for a spectator but to explore it through interaction, roleplaying videogames are perhaps more neo-early modern than neomedieval.

That is, in the process of roleplaying, the player goes beyond merely being a spectator to being a participant who can influence and alter the “medieval” world around them (as allowed by the parameters of any particular game). This relationship renders certain roleplaying games neo-early modern in character, I argue, because in their gameplay, they replicate both the performance of Elizabethan drama *and* its interactive nature. To explain further the compelling relationship between drama and roleplaying videogames, I turn to Linda Charnes' argument that drama is a genre that allows one to explore multiplicity in terms of identity in a unique way:

Drama, as written script that is repeatedly performable, embodies a principle of multiplicity, since it takes figures from narrative genres and “translates” them into dramatic figures, who are multiplied again by actors who perform them, and yet again by subsequent performances with different actors. (Charnes 1993, 6)

The nature of drama allows Shakespeare's plays to be indefinitely re-conceptualized and re-created. I argue that roleplaying videogames offer a similar freedom, as all performances do, by virtue of the fact that performances—both Elizabethan and otherwise—are always iterable; this iterability constantly lends them new life. Just as actors onstage can explore different ways of portraying their characters, so too does the player of a game have the freedom to determine both

the personality of their avatar and how that character interacts with other characters in the game; thus, each time players replay a game, they can reconsider previous choices and change their avatars' behavior. But each playthrough, like each performance of a Shakespearean history, also generates a new—or, at the least, slightly different—version of the “medieval” world in which these avatars interact.

If we accept that, like Shakespeare's works, roleplaying videogames are ultimately a kind of theatrical play, then it seems that these games should be classified as works of neo-early modernism rather than neomedievalism. Marina Gerzic and Aidan Norrie have defined early modernism as “the reception, interpretation, or recreation of the early modern period in post-early modern cultures—as a means to address this gap [the gap between the early modern era and our own time] in classification” (Gerzic and Norrie 2019, 3). I argue that, though their content is largely medievalistic, these games' performative aspects put them in conversation with features of early modern theater. Certain roleplaying videogames, being iterable, interactive performances, may therefore be understood as belonging to the genre of neo-early modernism—a genre that takes recognizable aspects of early modern performance, such as the allowance of active audience participation in such performances, and re-imagines them in terms of modern entertainment.

As an example, in the next section I argue that *Dragon Age: Origins*, a roleplaying videogame released in 2009, shortly before the resurgence of popular neomedievalism, models itself on the medievalistic works of Shakespeare. But the game is also neo-early modern, as its iterative nature multiplies interpretive possibilities, just as Shakespeare's textual adaptations of medieval history have vast potential to be reimagined on a theater stage. Like Shakespeare's plays, a roleplaying game such as *Dragon Age* encourages its players to engage in the creation of and performance in their own version of a medievalistic play world.

Shakespearean Politics in *Dragon Age: Origins*

Rob Conkie has used the term “Shakespeare aftershocks” to describe settings, contexts, and themes in fiction that appear to have been influenced by Shakespeare's plays despite never explicitly referencing them. Shakespeare's works, Conkie contends, “provide an earthquake-like impact, the vibrations of which continue to echo through history” (Conkie 2009, 549). I believe that one can see such impacts, vibration, and echoes throughout various characters and situations

in *Dragon Age: Origins*. In this essay, I will specifically argue that *Dragon Age: Origins* depicts political maneuvering similar to that which appears in Shakespeare's history plays, focusing on the character of Loghain Mac Tir, *Dragon Age's* own Richard III, and his interactions with the player character. As a roleplaying game, *Dragon Age* enables the player, like an actor in an Elizabethan performance of Shakespeare's histories, to playfully engage with monarchical political intrigue. But the player is also their own audience, and can enjoy multiple playthroughs of *Dragon Age*, during which their interactions with non-player characters may differ, and divergent decisions make the journey through a familiar tale seem newly intriguing. Perhaps the most strikingly Shakespearean aspect of the world depicted in *Dragon Age: Origins* is its political imbroglio.

To help the unfamiliar reader, I offer a brief summary of the game's central plot: In the fantasy kingdom of Fereldan, Loghain Mac Tir is the nefarious general who leads King Cailan's army. The narrative begins with Ferelden at war with vicious humanoid monsters called Darkspawn, who threaten to destroy the nation and its people. Though Loghain is not of royal blood, he has strong ties to the royal family through his daughter, Anora, who is King Cailan's wife. The idealistic King Cailan believes that the Darkspawn threat can easily be thwarted with the help of the Grey Wardens, knights specifically trained to defeat these monsters. Cailan gathers as many Grey Wardens as he can—this includes the player character, who has just joined the Order—in an attempt to defeat the bulk of the Darkspawn horde in battle near the ruins of an ancient military fort called Ostagar.

Loghain is to lead the army into battle. Cailan's optimism proves ill-advised when Loghain betrays him by ordering his troops to withdraw, leaving only the king and a small group of Grey Wardens to fight the Darkspawn. Given their limited numbers, the Grey Wardens prove no match for the monsters and are swiftly defeated. Only the player character and a fellow Grey Warden named Alistair survive. Following the Battle at Ostagar, Loghain then appoints himself king regent, as his daughter and Cailan have no heir. The country is divided over Loghain's actions: Some believe his account of the events (namely, that he and his men fought valiantly in the battle until it became apparent that it was lost), while the majority appear to suspect that Loghain is power-mad and used the battle as an opportunity to murder the young king and usurp his throne. For the remainder of the game, the player character has two objectives: to gather an army to replace the one lost at Ostagar and to put an end to Loghain's treachery.



Figure 1: Loghain Sounds the Retreat

Based on the above summary alone, Loghain initially seems similar to many characters in *Games of Thrones*: a scheming, ruthless individual determined to seize and hold the throne at all costs. As the player observes Loghain's tactics, however, it becomes clear that his story vibrates with "aftershocks" of Shakespeare's history plays, particularly *Richard III*. Through Loghain, *Dragon Age: Origins* engages with the legacy of Richard III, employing its version of this character in much the way Shakespeare uses Richard to explore anxieties of Renaissance England's political landscape.

Throughout *Dragon Age: Origins*, the majority of the decisions that the player—known as "the Warden"—must make are political ones, and many relate specifically to the tyranny of the power-mad general Loghain, but all of them eventually come to bear on the question of his usurpation. Each time the Warden enters a new section of the campaign, their help is requested by inhabitants of the kingdom in various matters, as the political tumult has left Ferelden in disarray. While the player travels the kingdom and solves these issues, they eventually learn that their fellow Grey Warden, Alistair, is actually a royal bastard and therefore arguably has a stronger claim to the throne than Loghain.

In light of this discovery, the player can openly support Alistair's accession to the crown. After traveling the kingdom, solving problems, and amassing allies, the player may approach Loghain and contest his right to rule. With the help Arl Eamon, a noble who opposes Loghain,

the Warden is able to call a Landsmeet, a meeting during which all the nobility gathers to discuss major political issues. It is ultimately the player's duty to impress the nobles at the Landsmeet so that they will support Alistair's claim and oust Loghain. If the player-Warden has gathered enough allies during the game prior to the Landsmeet, the nobles will support the player-warden. Otherwise, they may vote in favor of Loghain's rule, in which case the player will have to defeat Loghain in combat before Alistair can be crowned.

Thus, throughout the game, the player is encouraged to make decisions that will earn them future political support, which should result in the Landsmeet voting against Loghain. One example of such a decision occurs when the player-Warden encounters a young man on a torture rack in one of the many dungeons you can explore throughout the game. After rescuing the young man, the player gains an opportunity to engage in a conversation with him, during which they learn the source of Loghain's authority.

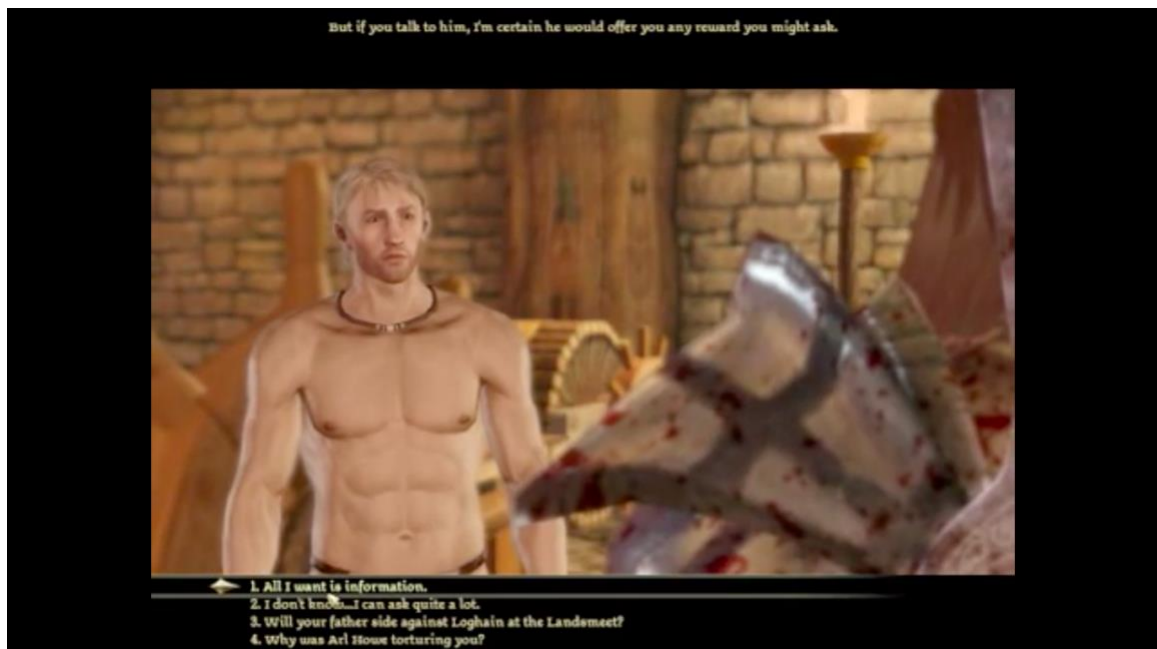


Figure 2: Torture at Loghain's Hands

It happens that the young man is the son of a prominent nobleman who dared to speak out against Loghain's usurpation. In response, Loghain ordered his followers to torture the nobleman's son in the hope of breaking his will. If the player character speaks with the prisoner at length, they can convince him to return home and encourage his father to stand against Loghain despite the ordeal that the prisoner has undergone. The young noble will tentatively

agree to do so. Thus, players learn how Loghain, as a usurper, gains support through inspiring fear and silencing opponents.

Loghain's oppressive and fear-based tactics register, as a Shakespearean aftershock, the exchange between Buckingham and Richard in *Richard III*, when Richard asks the former about the people of England's reaction to the news that Richard is to become king. When Richard inquires as to whether the populace rejoiced over his ascension to the throne, Buckingham replies, "No. So God help me, they spake not a word / But like dumb statues or breathing stones / Stared on each other and looked deathly pale" (Shakespeare 2009 3.7. 24–26). These are not happy subjects, but fearful ones. Yet since no one openly protests against him, Richard's position as king is secure. Likewise, the people of Ferelden are too intimidated to oppose Loghain and will only do so if the Warden rallies the nobles at the Landsmeet.

Notably, *Dragon Age's* similarities to *Richard III* do not end with the frightened citizens. The game soon reveals Loghain to be a monarch who does not hesitate to destroy members of his own family should they prove a threat to his throne. Loghain's daughter, Anora, was married to King Cailan before Loghain's betrayal, and is much beloved by the people of Ferelden. And, therefore, Loghain sees her as a potential threat. In one of the game's key quests, the player is required to rescue Anora from Loghain's righthand man, Howe, who has kidnapped her and imprisoned her in his castle on Loghain's orders.



Figure 3: Rescuing Anora

Upon being rescued, Anora expresses her fear that her father intended to hold her hostage until he could decide on a discreet way of disposing of her (Figure 3). Loghain's willingness to murder his own daughter is reminiscent of Richard III's murder of his own family members—his brothers and nephews—as it is through these murders that Richard is able to seize and secure the throne for himself.

Beyond the apparent relationship of content between Shakespeare's history play and this game, however, I have also claimed that the roleplaying videogame is a kind of dramatic performance, specifically, a neo-early modern production that requires its audience to both watch and interact with the action unfolding before them. I am also not the first to argue that games and Shakespearean theater resemble one another; Rebecca Bushnell, for example, argues that “while still constrained by the game's overall plot and program, [players] are both actors and collaborators in writing the story as well as the audience of their own performance” (Bushnell 2020, X). Bushnell makes two critical points: The first is that the player becomes both an actor and a spectator while playing a roleplaying videogame, and the second is that the player is always constrained by a game's overall plot and gameplay. Thus, despite the fact that the events that take place within a game's narrative are always designed and in some sense pre-determined, what makes the game intriguing is how the player-actor may recreate those events during each playthrough, making alternative choices that revise or reorder events in ways that render the overall experience fresh each time the game is played. In the following section, I explore the ways in which the mechanics of *Dragon Age: Origins* enable the player to participate in a theatrical drama that feels like a live performance.

Character Development as Acting Decisions

Whether in theatrical productions, cinematic adaptations, or videogames that draw on Shakespeare, Shakespearean roles can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, in an article discussing Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Richard III in *The Hollow Crown*, Marina Gerzic notes that Cumberbatch's Richard has been described as “sexy” by a number of reviewers and fans (Gerzic 2019, 197). Needless to say, *The Hollow Crown* does not alter the story that Shakespeare crafted: Richard III still concocts the same schemes, murders the same unfortunate opponents, and dies the same anticlimactic death when Richmond defeats him in battles and takes his throne. However, Cumberbatch imbues the character with a twisted sort of charm

beyond that arguably inherent in the Vice character type. Ultimately, though, it is Cumberbatch's sexiness that renders his portrayal of the character new and unique. As Dominic Cooke, the film's director, notes: "He's [Cumberbatch's Richard] very charming and sexy and compelling and funny and I think people are going to really enjoy it. We enjoy watching scary and sometimes horrible things" (Debnath 2016, 1). Cooke goes on to say that while audiences may not always *like* Richard, Cumberbatch's portrayal will at least make them enjoy watching his character onscreen. Cumberbatch's Richard serves as a specific example of what lends early modern drama its longevity: with each individual performance of a play, the actors have an opportunity to re-interpret the characters that they play and, in doing so, create a fresh experience.

Perhaps the most striking way in which *Dragon Age: Origins'* gameplay proves itself neo-early modern—offering itself both as spectacle and acting opportunity—is how it features unique player character “origin stories” that recontextualize the player's place in the world, and hence the thrust of the overall narrative. Each origin story essentially serves as a potential prologue to the game, determining the player character's backstory and the hardships they have to endure before the game's main storyline commences. The player may choose to be a human noble, an elf living in the city or wilderness, a common or noble dwarf, or a mage. These origin stories are especially important in exploring *Dragon Age: Origins* as a performance, as they help players to determine how they will “play” their characters, and how the game world will react to them. The city elf, for example, has lived in the slums of Ferelden's capital, Denerim, and has always been regarded as inferior to humans due to their race. By contrast, the human noble is treated like a member of the aristocracy and respected by all. Each origin story shows the main character's path to joining the Grey Wardens, and many players have noted that, though the prologue-like origins only account for two hours of an approximately forty-hour game, these character backstories determine how players decide to interpret their avatars for the duration of *Dragon Age: Origins*.¹

Reading through such fan conversations makes it apparent that the origin stories in this game are crucial to the characters that players design. Although the game is ultimately similar to a play, in that the same major events and conclusion always occur, the way the main character engages with those events is dependent on how the player-as-actor performs their role, and indeed, what role they choose to begin with. As a result, the player is able to explore the political

situations that Shakespeare investigated through fresh eyes, for while most of Shakespeare's *Richard III* follows the eponymous villain as he makes his treacherous way through the events of the play, *Dragon Age's* origin stories allow the player to enter into the sociopolitical tangle of Fereldan not only as a witness to a Richard figure's usurpation and oppression, but also as a force of active resistance. Each of these backstories encourages the player to roleplay in a particular way, and thus inform how the Warden responds to the ambiguities and turmoil that are presented within the game world.

Dragon Age: Origins draws on both the form and content of early modern drama to create a new interactive experience. As Shakespeare's histories do with his audiences, the game solicits players' collaboration in bringing to life an image of a medievalistic past. But what makes the experience "new" is that the game grants players the opportunity to explore the ambiguities of scripted narrative in a way traditional theater does not. To provide an example of the ways in which the gameplay allows players to explore the possibilities implicit in Shakespeare's work, I return to *Dragon Age's* own Richard III, Loghain Mac Tir.

Richard's Redemption

Inevitably, in light of Loghain's crimes, the game concludes with his deposition and subsequent execution. That execution, though unavoidable, is ghoulishly entertaining because the player can determine the manner in which it is performed.



Figure 4: Commanding Loghain to Stand Down

When the player defeats Loghain, they can either execute him immediately or draft him into the Grey Wardens—also ultimately a death sentence, as the Warden can choose Loghain to battle the Archdemon, the leader of the Darkspawn, during the game's final confrontation, and he will not survive. Though both choices lead to Loghain's death, joining the Wardens emphasizes Loghain's status as a once-celebrated war hero, and presents an opportunity to atone for his usurpation and its fallout. In this way, *Dragon Age* explores an alternate ending for this *Richard III* narrative. In an article on games based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Matthew Harrison and Michael Lutz argue that

The untaken paths within a play have their own reality: each night, Hamlet *might* kill Claudius, even though he will not. Games [...] open up the *might* to action as well as to passion, cutting Hamlet loose from the structures of plot and psychology that paralyze him. But, in the process, they eviscerate *Hamlet*, replacing Shakespeare's action with something of our own. (Harrison and Lutz, 2017, 30)

Along similar lines, I argue that, in sparing Loghain, the player has an opportunity to “eviscerate” this Richard III figure, giving the character an unexpected opportunity that can result in a starkly different ending from that which follows Loghain's execution. *Dragon Age* is interested in exploring the “*might*” that Harrison and Lutz describe by offering a usurper an opportunity for redemption through self-sacrifice.

Although it might seem *Dragon Age: Origins* gives the player substantial options with regards to Loghain, one must also consider the options that the player is *not* given. They cannot, for example, forgive Loghain's atrocious deeds and support him, thereby allowing him to remain on the throne. The game demands that Loghain's nefarious deeds face some kind of repercussion and, ultimately, an appropriate death. Although the game may initially appear to create a fully alternative ending for this Richard-esque figure, it truly only delays the original ending—his death due to his actions. The “options” that the player is given, then, have more to do with the fact that the game itself is a live performance than they do with redeeming *Dragon Age's* Richard.

In deciding Loghain's fate, the player has the opportunity to consider how their character, based on origin and subsequent character development, would choose to punish this traitor. If the player's character is a human noble, for example, then Loghain turns out to be responsible for the

death of their parents, which may color how the player “performs” their character's decision regarding Loghain's execution. By contrast, the Dwarven origin stories do not feature Loghain at all; therefore, a player performing the “role” of a dwarf might choose a different ending for the disgraced general than would a human noble. These origin stories also allow for complexity of character. For example, a dwarf who makes a traditionally “human” decision here would be playing against character type, and the player would probably need to create a justification within the game for portraying their character in this manner. The player is confined somewhat by the constraints of the game's plot, but they have considerable freedom to determine how they will “act” their role and why the character they are crafting makes the decisions that they do. Thus, the familiar, Richard-esque figure of Loghain and his inevitable execution provide the player with a particularly significant moment in which to view *Dragon Age: Origins* as a neo-early modern performance, as the game enables players to explore a shadow possibility that could have—but did not—occur in Shakespeare's work.

Conclusion

In her article “Dramas of Recognition: *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Warm Bodies* as Accidental Shakespeare,” Christy Desmet argues that certain texts “through accidents of cognition and perception become identified as Shakespeare appropriations. They exemplify just how thin the line is between 'Shakespeare' and 'Not Shakespeare’” (Christy Desmet 2017, 266). As I have reiterated throughout this article, I believe that *Dragon Age: Origins* is a text in which our cognition and perception allow for the line between “Shakespeare” and “Not Shakespeare” to grow very thin indeed. I make no claim that Loghain is intentionally based on the Bard's depiction of Richard III, but I do believe that the game developers drew—whether subconsciously or not—on aftershocks of Richard-esque figures when crafting this character, a canny war hero, who also readily betrays his own people and family to seize power. More importantly, though, I believe that the form of the game itself constitutes a work of neo-early modernism in which players are encouraged, through the multiple perspectives provided by the game's origin stories, to understand dramatic action as interactive narrative spectacle. William Worthen further argues that:

Drama, dramatic performance, and the ways we understand them are constantly changing under the pressure of new technologies (indoor theaters, the printing of

plays, stage lighting, the proscenium, film, digital media) and as a result of the shifting frontiers between genres of enactment, nontheatrical as well as theatrical. Today, it shares that cultural horizon with a wide range of live and mediatized enactments, modes of dramatic writing, and of theatrical and nontheatrical performance that define what we think Shakespeare—or any scripted drama—can be made to do as performance (Worthen 2003, 2).

Roleplaying videogames help illustrate what “we think Shakespeare can be made to do as performance.” The fact that *Dragon Age* does not simply replicate the plots of the plays is what renders it “neo”-early modern, rather than merely an imitation of an early modern work. In the future, it may be helpful to consider other medievalistic roleplaying videogames in the context of neo-early modernism. The interactive form of roleplaying games, combining both active participation and spectatorship, cues scholars of drama to notice the clear connection between such games and theater. This connection, and the tendency of roleplaying fantasy videogames to flirt with the themes and characters from Shakespeare’s plays, indicates a need to consider not only how these games appropriate the medieval but also how they draw inspiration from Shakespeare and, therefore, appropriate the broader form of early modern drama as well.

¹ On the *Dragon Age* subreddit, one can find conversations titled “Which Origin in *Dragon Age: Origins* is your favorite and why?,”:

https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/bvj2yi/dao_spoilers_what_is_your_favorite_origin_story/

“Which origin 'deserved' to join the Wardens most?,”:

https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/80h8zh/dao_spoilerswhich_origin_deserved_to_join_the/

“Which Origin works best for future games?,”:

https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5503cr/dao_spoilers_which_origin_works_best_for_the/

These are just a few examples of questions related to the origin stories. Some of these questions were asked quite recently, indicating that, although the game is 10 years old, the origin stories have made it impressively replayable.

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