Shakespeare's Gamer Girls: Playable Female Characters

Jennifer Flaherty, Georgia College

Abstract

The earliest Shakespeare-inspired videogames locked the audience into the perspectives of male characters, relegating the female characters to passive prize at the end of a quest (*Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?*) or helpless damsel in distress (*Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement*). Representations of Shakespeare's female characters in games have particular resonance given the significance of Shakespeare's Ophelia in studies of girlhood such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia.* Recent Shakespeare games have shifted to allow (or even require) playable female characters. In the videogame based on Ryan North's *To Be Or Not To Be*, Ophelia is portrayed as a clever scientist, and the game requires players to challenge the authority of Polonius and Laertes if they want to continue playing as Ophelia. The videogame *Elsinore* focuses on Ophelia's struggle to break out of a time loop by making new choices that help her to save everyone in Elsinore. The board game *Kill Shakespeare* and the *Council of Verona* card game series include Shakespearean female characters with skills and goals, and one variant of *Council of Verona* requires each character to play as Juliet. The shift in playable characters affects both the narrative and the procedural rhetoric of these new games. If the sudden increase in the number of available Shakespeare games with playable female characters is part of a national trend towards gender equity, the recent GamerGate controversy reveals both the need for and the power of more diverse representation in the gaming world.

Introduction

When Matthew Harrison and Michael Lutz gave a comprehensive survey of *Hamlet* videogames, they subtitled their essay "Actions that a Man Might Play" (2017, 23). The borrowed *Hamlet* quote inadvertently demonstrates an implicit gender bias—the assumption that the players (and therefore the playable characters) of these games are more likely to be male. While female characters have been the focus of hundreds of Shakespeare adaptations across different media (novels, plays, films, music, etc.), particularly since the rise of feminist theory and girlhood studies, this trend did not initially include video or tabletop gaming adaptations. Shakespeare games with playable female characters remained rare until 2014, the year of the GamerGate scandal, when five new games were announced: two videogame *Hamlets* with playable Ophelias, two card games featuring Juliet, and a board game with Juliet and Viola as playable character options. Using theories of procedural rhetoric to examine the gendered

implications of mapping Shakespeare's narratives onto rules-based games, this essay explores games that break the pattern established by previous games that automatically placed the player in the position of titular male characters such as Hamlet and Romeo. By allowing (or even requiring) players to take on the goals and perspectives of Shakespeare's female characters, these new games channel the rhetorical potential of gameplay to challenge preconceived notions of agency in both Shakespeare and gaming.

Narrative as Procedure

To adapt Shakespeare's narratives to a gaming format typically involves blending the story with a rules-based system that links players with characters, and the identity of those characters matters both procedurally and narratively. Shakespeare was used as a cultural touchstone in Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, a definitive study of narrative gaming and digital storytelling, referencing an episode of *Star Trek* which begins with Data assuming the role of Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt. Murray explains that digital environments are inherently "procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic"; combining rules-based system operations with responsiveness to user input creates "an environment that is both procedural and participatory" (1997, 71, 74). Further defining the role of procedure, Ian Bogost argues that videogames present "procedural rhetoric, the art of persuasion through rules-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (2007, ix). Both Murray and Bogost use the "procedural power of the computer" and its "defining ability to execute a series of rules" as an explanation for the procedural nature of videogames (Murray 1997, 71). All gaming is procedural, however, so discourse about procedural rhetoric in videogames is also relevant to analyzing board games or card games. Bogost uses board games to "clarify the difference between [Brian] Sutton-Smith's *rhetorics of play*—the global, cultural roles for exploring themes like ownership and property—and the *procedural rhetoric of a game,*" noting that *Monopoly* and *The Landlord's Game* both deal broadly with the same cultural themes, but their different rules make contrasting arguments about "taxation and property ownership" (2007, 53). Harrison and Lutz's examination of *Hamlet* videogames is a similar case study. All the games adapt *Hamlet*, engaging the themes of progress, fate, and power from Sutton-Smith's discourses of play, but their different approaches and procedures establish each game as a unique response to Shakespeare's text, using gameplay

to enter "a murkier territory of adaptation, remediation, and transformation" (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 24). The rules and structures of Shakespeare games therefore function rhetorically, as gaming procedure works with narrative content to make an argument through adaptation.

The recent Shakespeare games featuring female characters all fit Gina Bloom's category of "*drama-making games*, in which the player essentially inhabits or controls a Shakespearean character [. . .] the gamer does not impersonate the character in the guise of an actor, but rather becomes the character usually to change its outcome in a dramatic plot" (2015, 115).[1] While not strictly bound by the plot of its source text, each game places its players in the roles of Shakespeare's characters as part of the gameplay. Drama-making games are a powerful argument against the tension that exists in games studies between "ludologists and narratologists: people who wanted to study games as abstract systems, on the one hand, and people who wanted to study them as narrative experiences on the other" (Margini 2017, par. 6). Geoffrey Way's study of Shakespeare videogames focuses on narrative, distinguishing between embedded narratives ("pre-generated narrative content" taken from Shakespeare's plays and mapped onto the game) and the emergent narratives ("new narrative experiences" that arise "through players' interactions with the game")[2] (2020, 5-6). Using gaming terms to analyze user-generated social media Shakespeare, Kylie Jarrett and Jeneen Naji emphasize "ludology—understanding games as play [. . .] a computer game cannot be understood without understanding the experience of its game-play" (2016, 9). Because procedure is tied so closely to plot in Shakespeare games, however, both the embedded narratives and the emergent narratives inform and are informed by the game structures. When players inhabit the avatars of known Shakespearean characters, the story affects rules-based systems by influencing the characters' actions, abilities, and goals. The identities of the playable characters and the ways in which the player can alter or adhere to Shakespeare's plot through gameplay come together to create a representational argument that inherently ties structure to narrative and agency.

Who Are the Players?

As Carrie Heeter notes in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, "games intricately intersect with gender identity and act as a lightning rod for internal and social negotiations about appropriate portrayals and performance of femininity" (2014, 373). The unnoticed default of male playable characters (and/or male players) is built into the procedural

rhetoric of several Shakespeare-themed games, reflecting the recurring structural and narrative patterns often found in the presentation of gender in videogames. In *Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?*[3]—an online scrolling game from 2009—the only playable character is Romeo, and the goal is to collect roses and present them to a silently adoring Juliet in the final scene. The game's procedural genre is "simple collect and run;" the only Shakespearean elements are the names and the design aesthetics (Bloom 2015, 124). *Transmedial Shakespeare* blogger Judy Ick notes the game's debt to the early *Super Mario* games, explaining that "you play as the dashing titular Mario-wannabe who goes on a side-scrolling adventure complete with jumping across cliffs just to get to Princess Pea–I mean Juliet" (2011, par. 2). Designed to promote Shakespeare Country tourism, the game was a commercial success[4] despite (or because of) its simple procedural form, with its derivative and nostalgic use of the "woman as reward"[5] trope, as defined by Anita Sarkeesian in the "Tropes vs. Women" series on *YouTube* (2015).

When Ophelia is abducted by Claudius in *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (2010), she similarly waits passively for a "valiant videogame hero" to save her at the end of the game (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 33). Because the playable character is a time-traveler rather than Hamlet himself, Geoffrey Way explains that "the game is not designed for the player to identify with Hamlet, who is valiant but ultimately ineffective" (2020, 7). The game's structure requires the player to replace Hamlet in the narrative and succeed where Shakespeare's Hamlet struggles. The player must defeat Claudius, stay alive, and rescue Ophelia in order to win, making the procedural argument that the players must act as an anti-Hamlet to give *Hamlet* a happy ending. Ophelia functions as a classic damsel-in-distress in the style of Princess Toadstool from *Super Mario Bros.*—waiting for the playable male hero "to defeat the monsters and save the princess" (33). Sarkeesian devotes three videos to the "damsel-in-distress" trope, found in some of the most popular videogames of all time. In each episode of "Tropes vs. Women," Sarkeesian emphasizes that reading texts critically is important and healthy, and that one can denounce harmful tropes while still enjoying videogames that use them. Nevertheless, her analysis of gaming design patterns that objectify and disempower women made her a target of "hate in the form of bomb threats, rape threats, even death threats," all because she "dared to criticize something millions of us play every day" (Chang, 2015).

The backlash against female gamers reveals the dangers of assuming a male player or character default in game development and scholarship. Harassment of women in gaming

escalated in August 2014, when a personal attack on game designer Zoe Quinn by her ex-boyfriend grew into GamerGate: a frenzied campaign of harassment directed at prominent women in the gaming world. While there was no official mission statement for the coordinated harassment, "news outlets began to describe the emergence of a 'culture war' over the diversification of gaming culture" (Todd 2015, 64). Users of #GamerGate on Twitter spoke out against efforts to address portrayals of women and people of color in gaming, citing these practices as a "conspiracy" and a form of "Cultural Marxism" (Mortensen 2018, 788). While Sarkeesian was one of the most prominent targets of GamerGate, she is only one of many women who have been harassed for criticizing videogames or (conversely) enjoying them. Game designers who want to expand their audience to include more women face "structural limitations within the industry that preclude this representation" (Shaw 2015, 5). As one female game developer notes, "GamerGate is a symptom of a deeper industry problem [. . . .] Right now games are made for men, developed for men, and marketed for men. And it's signaling to [players] that games are a space for men. That has the consequence that when women like myself come in here and ask to be represented, [male] gamers feel like it's their space" (qtd in Todd 2015, 65). Because computers and videogames were initially presented as "arenas for American men to prove their masculinity and superiority," even a minor increase in gender representation can seem like an intrusion (Kosurek 2015, 66).

Shakespeare games played no specific role in the GamerGate controversy, but I argue the co-occurrence of these games and the movement is indicative of greater changes in both Shakespeare studies and game design. That the number of Shakespeare games with playable female characters increased dramatically in 2014, the same year that female gamers were targeted for trying to make games more inclusive, is worth considering. The methods used by all of these games to incorporate a female perspective demonstrate how characters and narrative can be used procedurally to increase diversity in gaming. In his 450-page *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost mentions only two videogames designed for women and girls: a puzzle game "that advertised Kotex feminine hygiene products" and "a programming environment designed specifically for preteen and early-teenage girls" (2007, 161, 244). Both games targeted their female audience by using signifiers considered "appealing to girls"—"dancing and clothes" for the preteen programmers and "volleyball, painting, makeup, and ballet" for the Kotex game (245, 162). These tactics are cosmetic rather than procedural or rhetorical—the videogame

equivalent of the toy store's pink aisle. In *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games*, Christopher A. Paul argues that changing gaming structures and procedures can increase the number of female gamers, arguing for the "importance of looking at how different modes of play can attract a different kind of audience" (2012, 154). Citing more effective strategies for creating gender-inclusive games, Shira Chess notes that "diversity of player-playable characters is key to achieving a broad audience base" because female gamers generally prefer games "where players aren't forced to play a specific male character" (2017, 49-50). Adrienne Shaw warns designers to avoid reducing representation to "the more limiting discourse of identity politics," focusing instead on "hybridity, intersectionality, and coalitional politics" (2015, 6). Playable female characters are not a one-step solution to the gender equity problems of videogame design, but paying attention to procedural structures such as the goals and actions of the playable characters will likely attract more female gamers than simply including dancing or volleyball in the visual design. That many game designers choose to avoid including playable female characters because it would add to the workload of game design simply reinforces what Amanda Phillips describes as the industry's "core belief in women as the second, ornamental sex" (2020, 151). The increased attention to the role of women in gaming by academics, critics, and pop-culture commenters echoes the focus on Shakespeare's female characters that came with feminist theory and girlhood studies. The Shakespeare games that were announced and produced at the time of the GamerGate scandal are therefore using adaptation to respond to issues of gender both in Shakespeare studies and in gaming procedures.

What Are the Games?

In 2014, two different companies launched successful fundraising campaigns to turn Shakespeare-inspired books into games: a videogame[6] based on Ryan North's choosable path book *To Be or Not To Be*, and a board game based on the comic book series *Kill Shakespeare*. The revised *Council of Verona* card game was released by Crash Games with an expansion (*Poison*) and a new nanogame (*Where Art Thou, Romeo?*). Kate Chironis began posting a development diary about the game *Elsinore*, which features Ophelia (Golden Glitch 2019). Although all of the games but *Elsinore* still have more playable male characters than female characters, the increased representation indicates a shift in the rhizomatic network that Douglas Lanier describes as "the vast web of adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions that comprises

the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call 'Shakespeare'" (2014, 29). The *Council of Verona* and *Kill Shakespeare* games are the first mass market games with a playable Juliet—remarkable given the number of YA novels, films, songs, and web series featuring her character, who was dubbed Shakespeare's "most famous teenage girl" by scholar Jennifer Hulbert (2006, 202).

　　　Similarly, while there have been dozens of *Hamlet*-based games, the only game to feature Ophelia as a potentially playable character before North's *To Be or Not To Be* was an unfinished game premise presented by Benjamin Fan at IntroComp in 2003. Reviewing Fan's proposal, one blogger observed "I don't think it's possible that the full game can be written [. . .] but I am morbidly fascinated by the mere possibility of it being implemented [. . . .] The goal is to, by careful monitoring of Ophelia's (yes, this is *Hamlet*) depression score, let her live through adolescence and achieve empowerment" (Shiovitz 2003, par. 1). Fan's proposal reflects the instinct to save Ophelia originated in Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, which chronicles Pipher's experiences counseling teenage girls dealing with trauma and depression. Subtitled *Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Pipher's book made the case for intervention practices to help young women deal with the struggles of adolescence. As Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar explain, "Ophelia, arguably a mere object in Shakespeare's play, inspires young users of new media through their identification with and critique of Shakespeare's doomed maiden" (2012, 59). The passivity associated with Shakespeare's Ophelia dovetails efficiently with the portrayal of some female characters in gaming, which is one reason why the character functions as a damsel-in-distress in *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (2010). As Heeter argues, "passive, cooperative, and expressive are constructs traditionally associated with females, and by extension, femininity in western culture," which naturally impacts perceptions of femininity in gaming. Where earlier Hamlet games draw upon the instinct to protect and save a passive Ophelia, the procedural rhetorics of North and Chironis function procedurally to give the player and character opportunities to change her position in the narrative.

Ophelia in To Be or Not To Be

　　　Laurie Osborne sums up the paradox of *Hamlet* gaming as the presumption that "the narrative tragedy of Shakespeare's play requires a certain sequence of events to be *Hamlet*, but

interactive games and digital performance ostensibly give the player/audience the choice of action" (Osborne 2010, 51). North solves this issue by presenting hundreds of possible courses of action across the three possible playable characters. When players choose a character at the beginning of the book or the game, Ophelia's description reads: "She's an awesome lady in her late 20s, with a calm, competent, and resourceful demeanor. She's got a +1 bonus to Science, but she's also got a -1 weakness against water, so heads up!" (Tin Man 2015). Even just selecting Ophelia as a character unlocks "the 'To Be She' achievement," meaning that playing as Ophelia is necessary if players want credit for completing the game's achievements (16). One of the earliest paths available to Ophelia is to ignore the other characters and instead spend days inventing central heating by developing an accurate thermometer system for measuring temperatures in different castle rooms. In possible game endings, Ophelia could kill Claudius herself or murder everyone in the castle, including Hamlet. If the player chooses mass murder, the game narration cheers the decision, explaining that "fantasy is awesome because you can do whatever you want and not get in trouble, Kill 'em all, m'lady!! [. . .] You're the best at what you do, and what you do is relentlessly choose the 'kill everybody' option until there is no one left to die" (Tin Man 2015). In less violent adventures, Ophelia might become Queen of Denmark after Hamlet's death or live happily ever on a vacation in England with "stone-cold hunks and smokin'-hot babes" (Tin Man 2015). Not all choices are equal in the game, however; the narrator frequently interjects commentary that Harrison and Lutz describe as "flippant," "sanguine," and "condescending" depending on the chosen path (2017, 33-4). As Geoffrey Way notes, the narrator even "intervenes and removes players' agency, regularly protesting decisions made by Shakespeare's original characters [. . .] swinging between irreverence and critique" (2020, 19). The branching game mechanics allow players to diverge from the plot of Shakespeare's play or follow the source narrative (more or less) in its entirety for a single path, with commentary and scores that judge the player's choices.

Like the book, the game opens by explaining that North has "taken the liberty of marking with tiny Yorick skulls the choices Shakespeare himself made when he plagiarized this book back in olden times," allowing the player to follow the plot of *Hamlet* through the game (Tin Man 2015). At various points the skull next to Hamlet's choice is marked with a jaunty accessory (a party hat, a pirate hat, a Sherlock Holmes outfit, etc.) to reference a plot point. Ophelia also gets Yorick skulls in the game marking choices that correspond to the choices made

by Shakespeare's Ophelia, but each of her skulls is marked with a tiny bow to distinguish her path from Hamlet's. While Ophelia's Yoricks also have bows in the book, the videogame context invites comparisons with one of gaming's first playable female characters: Ms. Pac-Man, who wears a pink bow to differentiate her from her male counterpart. Ian Bogost devotes a full chapter of *How to Do Things with Videogames* to *Ms. Pac-Man*, one of the only female protagonists addressed in the book. Describing the game as "feminist," Bogost argues that "far from being just Pac-Man in a bow, Ms. Pac-Man offers a counterpoint to the very idea of feminine roles in the videogame experience" (Bogost 2015, 42). Sarkeesian, by contrast, cites Ms. Pac-Man as the first of a series of "Ms. Male Characters" in videogames: female versions of "an already established or default male character" whose gender is their defining characteristic (Sarkeesian 2013). The bow-wearing Yoricks function as Shakespearean Ms. Pac-Mans (Ms. Pac-Men?); Hamlet's Yoricks are the standard, so they can wear any accessory other than a bow and still be recognized as a Hamlet Yorick. Ophelia's Yoricks all wear bows as a means of identifying them as Ophelia's Yoricks.

The option to follow Shakespeare's full plot to the death of the playable character is only available for those who choose to play as Hamlet, however. While both Hamlet and Ophelia begin the game with a series of Yoricks marking the choices made by their Shakespearean counterparts, Ophelia's Yoricks stop abruptly at the equivalent of *Hamlet* 1.3. Players who choose to have Ophelia sit quietly through the lectures given by Laertes and Polonius on sex and propriety are repeatedly prompted to kick the men out of Ophelia's room. Players can ignore the game narration and choose the options marked by the bow-topped Yoricks in a rough approximation of the conversations Ophelia has with Polonius and Laertes, but the choices are followed by the skeptical game narration asking "really?" and "O-okay?" (Tin Man 2015). When Polonius finally orders that Ophelia must "never speak to [Hamlet] again" because she is "too dumb to understand," the game offers one last choice:

- Slap him across his face and tell him you're not dumb and you can recognize sincere emotion in a sexual partner when you see it.
- Tell him—you'll obey? And then call him your lord. And…follow him meekly out of the room? Agree with everything he and Laertes have said, because all that stuff I wrote earlier about you being an independent woman in charge of her own destiny sounds PRETTY DUMB ACTUALLY, and you'd better do whatever

someone else tells you to, because anyone other than you probably knows better about your own life than you do right? Look, I am now trying to think of the dumbest thing you can do. Please, I beg you, do not choose this option. (Tin Man 2015).

If the player follows the bow-topped skull and chooses the second option, they cannot continue to play as Ophelia. The narration cuts in with the message "Okay, you do all that stuff. Listen, I'm going to cut our losses here. You're not allowed to be Ophelia for a while. Be Hamlet" (2015). Pairing the condescending narration with the procedural step of transferring the player to a new character, North makes Ophelia's empowerment a forcible requirement of the game, punishable by restart if ignored. The restart instructions are further complicated by Tin Man Games' introduction of the Haml-o-meter, which measures "how closely players' narrative choices match the game's version of Shakespeare's original narrative [and] asserts a win-state for players that echoes the desire for fidelity to Shakespeare's play" (Way 2020, 17). The Haml-o-meter makes fidelity to Shakespeare a win for someone playing Hamlet and impossible for someone playing Ophelia. Players are permitted to make questionable decisions as Hamlet (or no decisions, in keeping with the source text), but Ophelia must reject the actions performed by her Shakespearean counterpart and follow North's instructions to rebel against her family's sexist expectations.

Ophelia in *Elsinore*

To Be Or Not To Be "suits the action to the word" through game mechanics requiring players to determine the actions of the playable characters (*Hamlet* 3.2.18). By contrast, Kate Chironis's *Elsinore* rewrites the script of *Hamlet* games by creating a time-loop adventure in which Ophelia, the only playable character, is limited by a procedural structure that prevents most direct actions. Connor Fallon, Chironis's lead designer, explains *Elsinore* originally used a branching adventure game structure, with action choices the player could make to save the other characters. The team eventually realized that the branching structure was incompatible with the time-looping element of the game and replaced it with a "hearsay" mechanic allowing Ophelia to collect information and share it with other characters. Ophelia cannot kill Claudius herself, but she can share information with Hamlet that might inspire him to kill Claudius. Ophelia cannot even break into an abandoned building on her own; she must share the information about the

building with other characters so that they break in for her. Fallon's development diary explains
the procedural rhetoric of the "hearsay" mechanic:

> In addition to being a better fit mechanically, this new system wound up working better
> for us thematically. In the original play, Ophelia was not an active participant in the
> events—in fact, she was marginalized or sheltered by most of the important figures in the
> castle…Our initial gameplay directly clashed with Ophelia's character and the social
> constraints of her world…where her opinions are ignored and her voice is not heard.
> (2014, par.10)

Here, the game's embedded narratives (scenes observed or remembered by Ophelia) fit with the
emergent narratives that evolve as a result of Ophelia's conversations with other characters
through the hearsay mechanic. While other characters in the story can fight or kill each other, the
gaming structure prevents Ophelia from participating except as a broker of information. By
preventing Ophelia (and the player) from directly taking part in the violence and action of
Hamlet, the game builds a rules-based structure out of Ophelia's passive role in the narrative,
motivating the player to find inventive ways to work around those limitations. Rather than
challenging the passivity of female gaming characters noted by scholars such as Heeter and
Phillips, Elsinore forces players to work against the frustrating limits placed on the character as
part of the gameplay. The procedural effect of Ophelia's limitations is that "in order to create
change, she has to be smart, sneaky, and subversive—and in turn, this new system helped form a
more accurate Ophelia who is, overall, more nuanced in her actions" (Fallon 2014, par.10).
Players cannot accomplish their goals directly in *Elsinore*, so they must learn creative
approaches to problem-solving using the information available to them.

The hearsay structure is not the only obstacle stemming from the procedural rhetoric of
Elsinore. The time-looping structure is a response to Chironis's key question: "What if there
were a game which explored the futile nature of tragedy through its mechanics? The act of [. . .]
failing in different ways each time, thwarted by the aforementioned tragic system—would that
make for compelling gameplay?" (2014, par. 5). That Ophelia can make positive changes to her
narrative and environment is empowering for the player, but because the game relies on Ophelia
failing repeatedly (by dying or seeing others die), the game mechanics also simulate learned
helplessness. Frustration is a key component of *Elsinore*'s gameplay, which combines the
Groundhog Day-inspired time-looping "power fantasy where all you do is win win win, with a

tragedy where all you do is lose lose lose" (quoted in Petit 2016, par. 3). Chironis explains that players might begin the game expecting to achieve "perfect mastery" and play "puppet master" with the characters of *Hamlet*, but "you can't because the characters are still really fucked up people with their own aims and ambitions that will get in the way of your best intentions" (quoted in Petit 2016, par. 9). While Chironis's Ophelia can easily change many of the events of *Hamlet*, tragedy is constantly reasserting itself in the game, and some goals are impossible to accomplish. Bogost cites Shuen-shing Lee's assertion that a game can be considered a tragedy if it contains "a goal that a player is never meant to achieve, not because of a player's lack of aptitude but due to a game design that embodies tragic form" (quoted in Bogost 2007, 85). Bogost uses the term "the rhetoric of failure" to express the "procedural representation" of tragedy in videogames, which used to "make operationalizing claims about how things [. . .] don't work" (85). While Bogost uses the term to explain impossible-to-win games of politics and war, *Elsinore* demonstrates its application to drama-making games of literary tragedy.

The procedural structure of *Elsinore* reinforces the tragedy of *Hamlet* for the player, but it also builds in compassion and social awareness as components of gameplay. Because Ophelia cannot control the other characters by force, the player must use the available information to effect change humanely. A character can become "upset" (temporarily unresponsive) or "shattered" (devastated beyond recovery) if Ophelia reveals negative information that affects their worldview or publicly shames them (Golden Glitch 2018). Revealing information at the wrong time or to the wrong person can set off a chain of events where characters hurt themselves or each other despite the player's efforts to keep everyone safe. Chironis defines tragedy as "watching characters that you empathize with do things you don't want them to do" (quoted in Petit 2016, par. 9). Players learn to use their empathy as a tool for gameplay to predict the responses of the other characters and enact more positive outcomes that prevent at least some of the tragedies that threaten the Danish court. The diversity of the game gives players additional opportunities to observe or demonstrate empathy or awareness. To "reinterpret Hamlet for a modern audience that, I hope, doesn't want to see an all-male, all-white cast," Chironis creates a diverse cast of characters representing different races, religions, sexualities, and gender identifications (quoted in Petit 2016, par. 10). *Elsinore's* Ophelia, who is biracial, learns painful secrets about how her deceased mother was treated by the Danish court. She discusses racism with Laertes (and Othello, who appears in a prequel to his own tragedy) and considers leaving

Denmark for a more accepting country. As Chironis explains, "people think of history as being predominantly white and male, but it actually isn't, these people have been here all along. We're gonna talk about their stories and their experiences through the lens of *Hamlet*" (quoted in Petit 2016, par. 11). Due to the procedural mechanics, the only way to succeed at the game is to understand and respect the experiences and feelings of others.

The Women of Kill Shakespeare

Understanding the conflicting goals and abilities of different characters is also the key to success in the board game *Kill Shakespeare*, inspired by a series of comic books also published by IDW Games. Mark Fortier identifies the *Kill Shakespeare* comic book series as "an intermedial mashup—piling characters from a number of plays into one new work" (2014, 381-82). The *Kill Shakespeare* game similarly serves as a mashup of procedural genres and conflicting narratives. As a semi-cooperative game, it borrows elements from cooperative games such as *Pandemic*, but also integrates competitive rules with a single winner. The premise is that the playable characters collaborate in a rebellion against Richard III and Lady Macbeth. They lose as a team if the rebellion fails. If it succeeds, the winning player determines Shakespeare's fate and is crowned Shadow King or Queen. Two of the playable characters are female: Juliet, the "dynamic speaker and resilient fighter" leading the rebel forces, and Viola, a disillusioned pirate who "believes in anarchy and trusts nobody" (IDW 2014, 18). In an example of procedure following narrative, the two characters have advantages and disadvantages matching their background stories, including places where the plot of the *Kill Shakespeare* comic book diverge from the Shakespearean source texts (such as Viola's disguise as Captain Cesario, the leader of a ruthless band of pirates or Juliet's responsibilities as commander of the rebels). As the military leader, Juliet has more authority during the bidding phase of gameplay, but less time to bid with. Viola can travel easily across water,[7] but she cannot command as many military troops as the other characters.

Because Juliet and Viola can become Shadow Queen if their player wins, the game departs from the comic books, where Hamlet is the Shadow King. Juliet and Viola have specific goals with the Shadow King/Queen Prophesy. Juliet "will save Shakespeare and ask him to use his power to return the land to its former glory," while Viola "will kill Shakespeare and take the quill herself so that she can rid Illyria of [Richard III and Lady Macbeth]" (IDW 2014, 18). To

win, players need to complete a series of quests, assisting nonplayable Shakespearean characters in fighting the corrupt regime. While most those quests involve male characters (e.g. Sir Toby from *Twelfth Night* and Philip the Bastard from *King John*), some of the quests focus on female characters. Players can help Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* escape a potential forced marriage to "the slobbering beast [. . .] Richard III's pawn Hastings" by working with her to take Hastings hostage (IDW 2014, card). Similarly, players can help Rosalind use her power of disguise to infiltrate Lady Macbeth's castle or they can work with Beatrice to steal valuable artifacts from Richard III.

Mark Fortier explains that in the *Kill Shakespeare* comic books "Shakespeare's heroes are given a chance at a do-over; they are given a second chance at life—having somehow survived the tragic events attached to their names—a chance at renewal and redemption" (2014, 382). The origin stories drawn from the comics and detailed in the rule book for Juliet and Viola each begin with the death of their male love interest, an inciting incident that leads each woman to join the Rebellion. For Juliet, the death in question comes reimagines the ending of her Shakespearean source text: "after a failed suicide attempt following the death[8] of her lover Romeo, Juliet was spirited away from her home, never to return. Since then the young girl has rejected Cupid for the embrace of a cause, becoming the head of the Prodigal rebellion and leading the fight to save the oppressed" (IDW 2014, 18). The death in Viola's backstory, by contrast, turns the comic ending of *Twelfth Night* into tragedy by introducing an early run-in with the game's villain, Richard III: "Viola is a woman with a secret: she is pretending to be the famed pirate Captain Cesario. Viola took the mantle of Cesario after her lover died fighting Richard's fleet and has hidden herself in the Captain's clothing ever since" (IDW 2014, 18). Using the deaths of male characters to inspire female characters inverts the "Women in Refrigerators" trope noted by Anita Sarkeesian, who details "many female characters whose random and meaningless death was constructed in order to create a more intricate storyline for a male hero" in comics and gaming (2011). In *Kill Shakespeare*, this trope is just as likely to be used for women as it is for men; both Juliet and Viola respond to the deaths of their loved ones by fighting for justice and redemption, even in painful circumstances. Their progress is measured by the Hope index, which rises or falls as different areas are liberated or lost by the rebels. The game mechanic of gaining hope as the rebellion succeeds mirrors the progression of the characters as they recover from past tragedies, literal and literary.

The Women of the *Council of Verona* series

Michael Eskue's *Council of Verona* series includes the original *Council of Verona* card game (2013), the second edition (2014), the *Poison* expansion (2014), and the *Corruption* expansion (2015), as well as a companion nano game *Where Art Thou, Romeo?* (2014). Rather than emphasizing an abundance of choice, these small-format games rely on limited options to simplify gameplay. Within the series, only *Where Art Thou, Romeo?* functions as a standalone game. The procedures of the nano game are straightforward, especially when compared to the complexity of *Kill Shakespeare*. One player acts as Juliet, while the others each choose one of two possible secret characters (for example, one card allows the player to choose either Tybalt or the Nurse). The character each player chooses has a stake in whether the Juliet player manages to figure out which player (if any) has chosen to play as Romeo, and players receive points according to whether the accuracy of Juliet's guess aligns with their own character goals. The game design presents Romeo as the hidden object of desire and Juliet as the searching player who must find him. This structure flips the "Woman as Reward" trope that is used not only in videogames (such as *Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?*), but also in competing nano card games like *Love Letter*, in which the object of the game is to get a love letter to a princess. The game requires each character to take the role of Juliet for a round before the game ends. A player might play *Kill Shakespeare* many times without ever choosing to play as Juliet or Viola, but everyone who plays a full game of *Where Art Thou, Romeo?* plays as Juliet once.

Council of Verona does not require players to take on the role of a specific female character as its companion game does, but it includes five female characters with their own agendas and abilities: Juliet, the Nurse, Lady Capulet, Lady Montague, and Rosaline. Instead of choosing a single character before the beginning of the round or game, as players do in *Where Art Thou Romeo?* or *Kill Shakespeare*, players of *Council of Verona* take several character roles in one game, and each game requires that nearly every female character is chosen by at least one player. Each turn involves placing a character card in Exile or in the Council (while using any abilities possessed by the character) then placing an influence token on any character card with an agenda that is already in play. Character agendas relate to the final position of the character cards in Exile or the Council, and character abilities allow players to make adjustments to the positions of the existing cards and their influences. With influence markers, players use the goals and abilities of the characters and earn points by completing their agendas.[9] The abilities of both

Lady Montague and Lady Capulet (who can swap influence tokens) might even cause a player who played an influence token on a male character to suddenly find themselves working towards the agenda of a female character instead. With the game's two expansions, gameplay is further complicated by introducing more mechanics to change influence tokens, so the odds of playing at least one female character increase. The *Council of Verona* games incorporate minimal embedded narrative (and even less emergent narrative), but the series uses game procedures to construct versions of *Romeo and Juliet* which can be controlled by playable female characters.

Finding and Funding Female Characters

In *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw issues a call to action: "the industry, as well as scholars, must treat diversity as a goal in its own right rather than the exception to the rule or the sole domain of those who are marginalized" (2015, 5). While GamerGate is an indication that some game designers and audiences are threatened by diversity, the industry is shifting to provide alternate ways of developing games that appeal to wider audiences. The increase in playable female characters is not a result just of a changing audience of gamers, but also of changes in how games can be financed or marketed. These five games were all launched through Kickstarter, an online fundraising platform allowing the general public to contribute money to unfinished projects in exchange for rewards after completion. The authors of *Spreadable Media* cite crowdfunding as a valuable resource assisting "independent artists" such as "comic book artists, game designers, authors" to target their audiences directly rather than taking top-down funding from major companies (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 251). As part of the pitch to prospective donors, each project clearly specified the playable female characters on their Kickstarter page. IGN, the first comic book company to produce a game through Kickstarter, emphasized the names of the female characters in *Kill Shakespeare* and how the gameplay uses their Shakespearean background stories (Yehl 2014, 3). The *Council of Verona* page specifies that each player takes a turn as Juliet in *Romeo, Where Art Thou?* and mentions the inclusion of Rosaline as a playable character in the second edition. Ryan North's page praises Ophelia's role:

> Ophelia's adventure is as well-thought-out as Hamlet's, but rather than being a hero suffering from crippling inaction, you are a smart, self-sufficient woman who knows what she wants and is totally rad 100% of the time, and also you are dating a PRINCE. You can choose what you want to do with your life: help your boyfriend who's crying

about a spooky ghost, or I don't know TAKE DOWN INTERNATIONAL

TERRORISTS INSTEAD?? It's nuts. It's awesome. Oh my gosh. (*To Be or Not To Be*,

Kickstarter 2013)

North's enthusiastic (and somewhat defensive) description positions Ophelia as a better character

choice than Hamlet. Why play a crying prince when you can be a smart, self-sufficient woman

who defeats terrorists? North's assertion that Ophelia's adventure is as well-thought-out as

Hamlet's is indicative of the skepticism that some players might feel about whether a game

might give female characters an equal range of opportunities and actions. The fact that Harrison

and Lutz's analysis of the game does not even mention that Ophelia is a playable character

option is perhaps an indication the North doth protest too much on this point.

The Kickstarter page for *Elsinore* emphasized that Ophelia is the only playable character:

"In *Elsinore* you play as Ophelia, a young noblewoman of Denmark [. . .] Forced to relive the

same four days over and over again, Ophelia must learn to survive in Elsinore, doing everything

in her power to change the future" (*Elsinore*, Kickstarter, 2015). As the only one of the games

with a locked-in female protagonist, *Elsinore* is marketed as a version of *Hamlet* that

Shakespeare gamers haven't seen before. The *Elsinore* development blog features a fan comment

linking to the Kickstarter page and encouraging friends to contribute: "If any of you want to

support a game with an awesome storyline (thanks to both Shakespeare and super creative

developers) and a very diverse cast (including a WOC protagonist!!) now would be the time to

do it!" (a-lost-narnian, quoted in *Elsinore* Tumblr). Chironis highlights Ophelia's identity as a

woman of color by featuring her image in screenshots and artwork based on the game throughout

the Kickstarter page. Chironis does not explicitly state her goal of increasing diversity in

depictions of the early modern world on her Kickstarter page, but the images speak to her ideas

about representation. *Elsinore* fits with the gender-inclusive game design described by Sheri

Graner Ray in 2004, including "a playable female character, female designers, focus on plot and

relationships, generally nonviolent play" where "very little of the violence is perpetrated by the

main character" (Cox 2018, 31). These are all aspects of the game that are highlighted in

Elsinore's Kickstarter page. That the game raised over $32,000 (more than twice their stated

goal) is evidence that there is an audience for gender-inclusive games based on Shakespeare.

As Shakespeare studies moves further from an emphasis on fidelity in adaptation towards

a more rhizomatic approach, and media production shifts from a top-down model to a hybrid

model through crowdfunding and independent production, opportunities to adapt Shakespeare into innovative games that appeal to broader audiences will likely increase. Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Gap of Time*, which adapts Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, presents the Polixenes character as a videogame designer who wants to create games that are "as good as books" as a way of expanding the market to appeal to more women (Winterson 2015, 38). He asks Perdita if she is a gamer, explaining that "Women aren't, usually. It's not brain-wiring, it's because games are not designed with women in mind" (192). The games described here, all in development at the same time Winterson was writing her novel, are not designed specifically or only for women. At least, they are not marketed to women in the sense that the Kotex game cited by Bogost was. And yet the decisions of these game designers to expand the choices available for their players represent a cultural shift towards a more inclusive range of games and gamers. In the aftermath of GamerGate, it makes a difference that drama-making Shakespeare games are now available that allow Juliet to pursue Romeo (or choose not to) and Ophelia to save Hamlet (or choose not to).

---

[1] Gina Bloom differentiates *drama-making games* from "*theater-making games*," which "turn their players into creators of theatre (actors, dramatists, theater managers, or designers)" and "*scholar-making games*, which center on trivia" (2015, 115).

[2] Way credits game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman with the origination of these terms.

[3] Not to be confused with *Where Art Thou, Romeo?* (the *Council of Verona* nano game I examine later in the article).

[4] Within three months, the game brought more than 2.5 million players to the Shakespeare Country website; three years later the game had been played 50 million times (van Veenendaal 2012, par. 3).

[5] The "woman as reward" trope presents female characters as passive objects waiting at the end of the game, sometimes with a chaste kiss or a more overtly sexual reward for the male hero

[6] North's book (2013), inspired by choose-your-own-adventure books, was converted directly to a gaming interface for the game *To Be Or Not To Be* (2015), allowing players to click through their chosen adventure on a computer rather than flipping through the pages of a book. The text

of the book and the game are nearly identical, with the game even keeping lines referring to the game as a book.

[7] Viola's procedural association with water also grows out of the shipwreck Viola survives in *Twelfth Night* (and the references to piracy in the play), which likely inspired her character arc in the *Kill Shakespeare* comic books.

[8] Given that one of the quests in the game deals with Romeo, who turns out to be very much alive, Juliet is only motivated only by her belief that he is dead, not his actual death.

[9] For example, Juliet's agenda is to be in the same group as Romeo. A player who places an influence token on Juliet's card will try to fulfill that agenda because it will result in points at the end of the round.

References

Best, Michael. 2008. "Electronic Shakespeare: Which Way Goes the Game?" *The Shakespeare Newsletter*. Spring/Summer: 29, 37.

Bloom, Gina. 2015. "Videogame Shakespeare: Enskilling Audiences through Theater-Making Games." *Shakespeare Studies*; 43: 114-127

Bogost, Ian. 2015. *How to Do Things with Videogames*. Minneaoplis: University of Minnesota Press.

2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Chang, Juju. 2015. "Sex, Violence, and Video Games." By: BYRONBYRON, PITTSPITTS, CHANG, JUJU, *Nightline* (ABC News). Airdate: January 14, 2015.

Chess, Shira. 2017. *Ready Player Two*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chironis, Kate. 2014. "Dev Diary #1, "Beginnings" - By Katie." *Elsinore Development Blog*. Game tumblr. Posted April 19, 2014.
https://goldenglitch.tumblr.com/post/83234211387/dev-diary-1-beginnings-by-katie

Crash Games. 2014. *Where Art Thou, Romeo?* A nano game set in the world of *Council of Verona*. Designed by Michael Eskue.

Crash Games, et. al. 2014. *Council of Verona* (second edition, with Poison expansion). Designed by Michael Eskue.

Crash Games, et. al. 2015. *Council of Verona* (Corruption expansion). Designed by Michael Eskue.

Cox, Angela R. 2018. "Women by Women: A Gender Analysis of Sierra Titles by Women Designers." *Feminism in Play*, edited by Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, Emma Vossen. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan. 21-36.

Fallon, Connor. 2014. "Dev Diary #2, "Interacting with the World of Elsinore" - By Connor." *Elsinore Development Blog*. Game tumblr. Posted November 2.
https://goldenglitch.tumblr.com/post/101619861076/dev-diary-2-interacting-with-the-world-of?is_related_post=1

Fortier, Mark. 2014. "Beyond Adaptation." In *OuterSpeares: Shakespeare, Intermedia, and the Limits of Adaptation*, edited by Daniel Fischlin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Golden Glitch. 2018. *Elsinore*. Beta Version. Steam. Windows 7 or later. Katie Chironis: Team
        Lead, Writer. Connor Fallon: Game Designer.
        2014. *Elsinore*. Game website. Last updated 2018. Last accessed January 9, 2019.
        https://elsinore-game.com/

Harrison, Matthew, and Michael Lutz. 2017. "South of Elsinore: Actions that a Man Might
        Play." *The Shakespeare User*, edited by Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes. Cham:
        Palgrave Macmillan.

Heeter, Carrie. 2014. "Femininity." *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by
        Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge.

Hulbert, Jennifer. 2006. "'Adolescence, Thy Name is Ophelia!': The Ophelia-ization of the
        Contemporary Teenage Girl." *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, edited by Jennifer
        Hulbert, Kevin J. Westmore, Jr., and Robert L. York. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ick, Judy. 2011. "Shakespeare in Video Games." *Transmedial Shakespeare*. Last modified
        January 24, 2011.
        https://transmedialshakespeare.wordpress.com/2011/01/21/shakespeare-in-video-games/

IDW Games. 2014. *Kill Shakespeare*. Designed by Thomas Vande Ginste and Wolfe Plancke.

Iyengar, Sujata and Christy Desmet. 2012. "Rebooting Ophelia: Social Media and the Rhetorics
        of Appropriation" in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne
        Williams. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Jarrett, Kylie and Jeneen Naji. 2016. "What Would Media Studies Do? Social Media
        Shakespeare as a Technosocial Process" in *Shakespeare and Social Media*, special issue
        of *Borrowers and Lenders*, edited by Maurizio Calbi and Stephen O'Neill.
        Spring/Summer, Vol. X: Issue 1.

Kickstarter. 2013-5. Pages for *Council of Verona* (2013), *Elsinore* (2015), *Kill Shakespeare*
        (2014), and *To Be or Not To Be* (2013). *Kickstarter*. Last updated 2019.
        https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/crashgames/council-of-verona-you-influence-the-
        world-of-romeo
        https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/235466673/elsinore-a-time-looping-adventure-
        game
        https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/breadpig/to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-adventure

Lanier, Douglas. 2014. "Shakespearean Rhizomatics." *Shakespeare and the Ethics of
     Appropriation*, edited by Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin. New York: Palgrave
     MacMillan.

Margini, Matt. "*Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Twenty Years Later." *The New Yorker*. August 30,
     2017
     https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/hamlet-on-the-holodeck-twenty-years-
     later

Mortensen, Torill Elvira. 2018. "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate."
     Games & Culture; December, Vol. 13: Issue 8, p787-806.

Murray, Janet Horowitz. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*.
     Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Osborne, Laurie. 2010. "iShakespeare: Digital Art/Games, Intermediality, and the Future of
     Shakespeare Film." *Shakespeare Studies* 38: 49-57.

Petit, Carolyn. 2016. "Shaking Up Shakespeare's Balance of Power in the Upcoming Game
     Elsinore." *Feminist Frequency*. Last modified April 11, 2016.
     https://feministfrequency.com/2016/04/11/shaking-up-shakespeares-balance-of-power-in-
     the-upcoming-game-elsinore/

Phillips, Amanda. 2020. *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*. New York:
     New York University Press.

Pipher, Mary. 1994. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York:
     Putnam.

Sarkeesian, Anita. 2011. "#2 Women in Refrigerators (Tropes vs. Women)." *YouTube:
     feministfrequency*. Last updated Apr 6, 2011.
     https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DInYaHVSLr8
     2013. "Ms. Male Character - Tropes vs Women in Video Games." *YouTube:
     feministfrequency*. Last updated November 18, 2013.
     https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYqYLfm1rWA
     2015. "Woman as Reward - Tropes vs Women in Video Games." *YouTube:
     feministfrequency*. Last updated August 31, 2013.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2015. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer
     Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shiovitz, Dan (Inky). 2003. "Ophelia (Benjamin Fan) *Java.*" IntroComp Reviews 2003. *Inky.org*
https://inky.org/if/introcomp.html#ophelia

Tin Man Games. 2015. *To Be or Not To Be*. A Choosable Path Adventure by Ryan North. Steam. Windows XP or later.

Thomas, David, Kyle Orland, and Scott Steinberg. 2007. *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual*. Edited by Scott Jones and Shana Hertz. International Game Journalists Association and Games Press. Power Play Publishing.
http://www.gamestyleguide.com/

Todd, Cherie. 2015. "GamerGate and Resistance to the Diversification of Gaming Culture." Women's Studies Journal. August 2015, Vol. 29: Issue 1.

van Veenendaal, Paul. 2012. "Case Study: Shakespeare Country." *ViralBlog*. Last updated February 7, 2012.
https://www.viralblog.com/research-cases/case-study-shakespeare-country/

Way, Geoffrey. "Shakespeare +1up: Theorizing Video Games as Adaptation/Appropriation." Forthcoming 2020. Full citation upon publication.

Winterson, Jeanette. 2015. *The Gap of Time*. New York: Hogarth Shakespeare.

Yehl, Joshua. 2014. "IDW Games Launches Kickstarter for *Kill Shakespeare* the Board Game." *IGN.com*. February 19, 2014.
https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/02/19/idw-games-launches-kickstarter-for-kill-shakespeare-the-board-game