

Treading the Maze: Several Entrances to the Shakespearean Ludisphere

Michael Lutz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Where to begin discussing Shakespeare and games? The task is somewhat daunting—daunting not because there are too few inroads, but in fact, because there are many.

We might begin in 1993, when *Wall Street Journal* staff writer Tony Horwitz surveyed the left-leaning Shakespeare productions of director Michael Bogdanov's English Shakespeare Company, which were billed as making Shakespeare "relevant" to modern audiences and which offered discounts to student groups as well as educational workshops. While the article is predictably horrified at the political cast of the productions—shuddering at the idea of young people seeing a *Romeo and Juliet* that was more political critique than celebration of timeless romance—it chooses to end on a note suggesting that despite it all, the Bard endures. After describing one 14-year-old "who feared his first night at the theater was going to be a bore," Horwitz quotes the student as saying, "You know . . . it was better than Super Nintendo" (1993).

A home videogame console, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, comes to stand awkwardly next to avant-garde dramaturgy as a threat to tradition, a tradition invoked synecdochally by Shakespeare's presumed cultural centrality and even his necessity. Yet as Michael D. Bristol reads this moment, there is in fact something similar about Shakespeare and the game console: both are wildly successful products of a capitalist culture industry, both possibly "diverting, but basically empty," and so Shakespeare, like a game console, is buoyed across history by a market "indifferent to the human content of cultural goods" (1996, 88). By besting the Super Nintendo, Shakespeare does not stand fast against the disruptions of postmodernity so much as he soldiers further into them, embodying, as Linda Charnes says, "the values we all presumably subscribe to, even if we're no longer sure what they are" (1993, 158).

As this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* demonstrates, there is indeed a variety of thinking and valuing at work in the Shakespeare games our contributors discuss. Games might make of Shakespeare a kind of cultural litmus test, a body of knowledge to be mastered in order

to pass a difficult puzzle; but they might also give players the chance to speak back to or around the figure of Shakespeare by attending to characters left in his margins. Again, this is not to say Shakespeare and games are not commodities. But while Bristol does not doubt that “Shakespeare *is* better than Super Nintendo,” in the sense that the Shakespeare-commodity has a four-century head start on the home videogame console, he follows Horwitz in considering them as distinct and even opposing forces. Super Nintendo signifies what Shakespeare, presumably, is not—the new versus the old, the upstart versus the established, the frivolous and technological versus enduring and artistic. One aim of this special issue and the essays within it is to probe how games and Shakespeare have become increasingly related sites of inquiry since the early 1990s—indeed, to remind us that Shakespeare and games have already existed alongside each other for some time.

It is true that Shakespeare predates games only if we limit our understanding to *videogames*—whose advent we can date to the 1958 public exhibition at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, when physicist William Higanbotham unveiled *Tennis for Two*, a simulated tennis match played on an oscilloscope. If we were to produce a corny modernization of *Henry V*, perhaps the Dauphin’s snub would be sending Henry not a trunk of tennis balls—a jab at Henry’s reputation for play and idleness—but Higanbotham’s woefully outdated game console. Indeed, if the first videogame was itself an adaptation of a preexisting playful practice, it makes sense to see electronic and digital games as continuations of older traditions rather than totally new developments. And as the example of Dauphine’s gift shows, literature has a history of talking about games, but literary scholars have not always followed suit in seeing games themselves as unique points of literary imagination and representation. This special issue represents one step in this direction, but we follow other scholars attentive to the same goal.

In her recent book *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater*, Gina Bloom makes a persuasive case for understanding the early London theater as a site anticipating contemporary mass media’s embrace of what she calls “interactive play” (2018: 1). After covering the material and social history of games like cards, backgammon and chess—often played publicly in early modern English alehouses, with much speculation and input from onlookers (including, of course, the taking of bets on the game’s outcome)—Bloom traces the appearance of these pastimes through several early modern plays, arguing that their presence on stage imported older, participatory social contexts to the emergent commercial stage,

thus “offering spectators a way to interact more intensively with commodified theater and, in effect, turning spectator consumption into a mode of production” (2018, 13). Certainly, Shakespeare’s plays are often frank about their solicitation of audience belief in the conjuration of playful pastimes or, as one Chorus puts it, how they “[o]n your imaginary forces work” (*Henry V* Pro.19). Likewise, we might say that broadly speaking all games—digital or analog—present themselves to the player as affording an imaginary relationship that takes the form(s) of speculation, interaction, or intervention.

Meanwhile, pursuing the question of Shakespeare and gaming along generic lines, Rebecca Bushnell sees games as apt for foregrounding and pressurizing what she considers the crux of Shakespearean tragic drama: the problem of making a choice at a moment of crisis, with only limited or uncertain information at hand, while embroiled in time’s forward momentum (2016, 20). Yet while traditional drama is merely something witnessed by the audience, Bushnell observes that in narrative games “the player is simultaneously a playwright, a director, a character, an actor bringing the character to life, and a spectator who observes the action unfolding” (2016: 66). In other words, the choice in the game’s moment of crisis belongs not to Macbeth or Hamlet, but to the players themselves, bringing problems of choice, consequence, and tragedy from the stage to the player’s fingertips.

Both Bloom and Bushnell might be responding to a question posed by Janet H. Murray in her landmark 1997 book on computerized narrative and procedural authorship, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Setting aside the issue of adaptive fidelity her title implies (i.e., can we make interactive, new media versions of Shakespeare plays?), Murray instead asks “if we can hope to capture in cyberdrama something as true to the human condition, and as beautifully expressed, as the life that Shakespeare captured on the Elizabethan stage” (1997, 255). What matters here for Murray is not *Hamlet* itself, but the fact that despite its limitations of time, place, and technology, the play has achieved a momentous cultural staying power, and a reputation as an artwork in some way “true to the human condition.”

Mixing a concern with pure “cyberdrama” and its historical antecedents, Bloom and Bushnell posit two ways that the modern gaming may be fruitfully grafted to Shakespeare’s older artistic practices, both hinging on the idea that there is, indeed, something “true to the human condition” about *games themselves*. As Bloom makes evident, early modern game-players were also game spectators, a cultural habituation that facilitated modes of social interaction that the

commercial theater handily recontextualized—and so that is one way we might see the dueling commodities of Shakespeare and games as actually interrelated. Similarly, we might agree with Bushnell that the player’s experience of a game structurally and affectively echoes the old tragic concern of contingent human actions underwritten by larger, systemic forces, and shadowed by the threat of spectacular failure. Yet if these connections are so clear, if games inhabit both the past and future of Shakespeare’s art, then why does this special issue not appear until 2021?¹

In the previous decade, game designer and academic Eric Zimmerman proclaimed the beginning of a “Ludic Century,” an era when, thanks to the networked computational innovations at the turn of the millennium, we find ourselves with access to an unthinkable abundance of information, approachable from any number of angles, perspectives, or biases: “information is put at play,” Zimmerman writes, and thus “game-like experiences replace linear media” (2014, 20). While the twentieth century was dominated by “linear, noninteractive” media that assembled information ahead of time for narrowly regimented consumption by a general public (Zimmerman singles out in particular audiovisual media like film and television), the media of the Ludic Century “is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory” (2014, 20). The reason games will dominate this epoch, Zimmerman claims, is because they are the cultural formation which best accommodates the multiform tendencies of information-at-play.

Yet as Matthew Harrison and I have written, to study games, or any aspect of culture, from a ludic perspective means to discover “not unlimited freedom but rather a limited perspective on the rulesets that sustain our activities” (2017: 37). How, then, as scholars, critics, and creative makers, working in and across disparate disciplines (such as Shakespeare studies and game studies) that further subdivide (for example, focuses on form and genre, commodity culture, or media history) acknowledge and maintain productive use of our partial perspectives within the wide realm of information-at-play, tessellating them in such a way to make good on the promises of a world increasingly aware of the modular and participatory dimensions not only of its commercial entertainments, but also of its social and cultural fabric?

The answer this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* offers is what I have decided to call “the Shakespearean ludisphere.” The term “ludisphere” I borrow from the work of game studies scholar and sociologist Celia Pearce, who coined it to describe “the totality of networked games and virtual worlds on the Internet” in her work on the migration of massively-multiplayer

online game (MMOG) communities across diverse websites, social media platforms, other online games, and even into real-world gatherings (2009, 57). The ludisphere in this context should be understood as a corrective to a foundational concept in games studies, that of “magic circle” described by Dutch historian Johann Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga, whose object of scrutiny is not games themselves but the phenomenon of play, decides that play can be recognized because it “stand[s] quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’” as well as an “activity connected with no material interest, and no profit [to] be gained from it”—play thus “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” ([1938] 1980, 13).

But Pearce is one of many scholars not so convinced that games and play are, indeed, totally without “material interest” and profit, or that the delineations between the playful and ordinary are so “fixed” as Huizinga might imagine. Edward Castranova’s work on the internal economies of multiplayer online games—which, coincidentally, involved building a unique, limited-run MMOG called *Arden*, based on Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (Castranova 2008)—demonstrated that they can be described with the same conceptual toolset used for “real” economies. He has therefore suggested that the “almost-magic circle” should rather be thought of as a porous “membrane” that protects certain unique, internal rulesets (such as the fiction of a fantasy setting) while still allowing elements of the outside world (like behavioral assumptions of players) to pass through (2005, 147-148).

Pearce expands Castranova’s thinking with the ludisphere, arguing that “the larger framework of all networked play spaces on the Internet, as well as within the larger context of the ‘real world’” could be better seen as co-implicated; rather than assuming these various play spaces stand apart from one another, “it may be more useful to see the landscape in terms of a series of overlapping and nested magic circles” (2009, 137). More recently, Tara Fickle has argued that it is precisely the sense of firm division between the real and the unreal coded into the notion of a “magic circle” that has caused game studies as a discipline to undertheorize the ludic’s implication in the maintenance and propagation of social structures like race, class, and gender. Play, Fickle points out, has the curious power to transform “precarious fictions into powerfully enduring worldviews that fundamentally shape the way we perceive—and what we perceive as—reality” (2019: 174). With that in mind, what worlds overlap and nest to make Shakespeare, and which ones shall today conjoin, if only for a little while, our ludisphere?

The question requires us to think like “Shakespeare users,” a term theorized by Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes to describe those new media artists, fans, and practitioners for whom the Shakespearean object is less a single, stable entity and more “a continuously expanding archive that accommodates the far-reaching permutations of a network of linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural associations” (2017, 3). But it could also evoke Christy Desmet’s notion of textual “recognition,” the idea that even when straightforward practices of adaptation or appropriation are apparently absent, “one text is ‘answerable’ to another when it ‘answers’ or responds to that text and when it is ‘responsive to’ and therefore responsible to that text” (2014, 44). And true to the (sometimes) communal spirit of play, it could be seen as realm of “diachronic collaboration” in the sense theorized by Diana Henderson: as individual game players and game designers “work with an exceptional absent presence” in their attempts to bring Shakespeare’s stories and characters across four-hundred years of media history (2006: 8). Yet whether it relies on the rapaciousness of an ever-expanding, renewing archive, the surprising and unexpected connections of textual recognition, or the more conscious joining of hands in collaboration, what distinguishes the Shakespearean ludisphere is, as the name implies, its emphasis on games and gameplay as they emerge from the larger traditions of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation.

Vernon Guy Dickson introduces us to a set of contemporary Shakespeare-themed tabletop games in “Agency within Analog Shakespearean Games.” Using Alberto Bandura’s social cognitive theories of psychology, Dickson investigates the opportunities these games afford players to collectively negotiate issues of agency and trust. Players, however, are often allowed (and in some cases encouraged) to make moves not only to empower each other and foster trust, but to disempower, mislead, or betray their friends in the pursuit of winning the game. The work of Shakespeare, brimming too with questions of agency, trust, and betrayal, thus serves to thematize the questions posed by the rules of the games, and the Shakespearean ludisphere becomes a playful abstraction for the social world that centers on the relationships players cultivate in the intimate space of the tabletop.

In “Shakespeare’s Gamer Girls: Playable Female Characters” Jennifer Flaherty surveys a series of analog and digital games, outlining how they adapt or appropriate Shakespeare’s female characters. While discussions of feminism in Shakespeare studies are well established, with her choice of texts Flaherty further situates this conversation within the context of gaming culture,

historically if erroneously understood to be the domain of boys and men. By looking at Shakespeare games released or announced around the time of GamerGate—a widespread online harassment campaign aimed at silencing marginalized game makers and critics—Flaherty brings into dialogue feminist criticisms and recuperations of the literary canon with similar work done in ludic Shakespeare adaptations, which can both model and speak back to the historical dynamics of gendered exclusion in Shakespearean texts and the study of his work.

With “Richard Reborn: Neomedievalism as Performance in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009),” Caitlin Mahaffy considers how Shakespeare’s plays participate in a tradition of neomedievalism, a term used by scholars to describe contemporary fantasy properties like the television series *Game of Thrones* or the videogame *Skyrim*. These franchises fabricate pseudo-medieval pasts in ways that demonstrate complex entanglements of real-world political history, knowledge production, and consumer entertainment. But Mahaffy reads neomedievalism into the past by positing Shakespeare’s history plays as themselves a form of neomedieval reimagining. Though a close reading of a particularly ambitious and treacherous videogame character—and the decisions the player may make to support or undermine this character’s political aspirations—Mahaffy explicates how Shakespeare’s dramatic neomedievalism continues to provide a dynamic, and now interactive, grammar for how we imagine monarchical sovereignty and the uses of (re)staging of history.

“We Are Not All Alone Unhappy,” a short text-based game by Cat Manning, provides our issue’s most forthright opportunity to play with Shakespeare. The game presents players with a list of Shakespearean characters from across the plays, all united only by the fact that they do not, in their home texts, meet happy endings. It is then up to the player to set these characters up on “dates” and watch the sparks fly (or fizzle). Not all characters will get along, and who does or does not make a match may not be immediately clear based only on your own knowledge (or interpretation!) of the plays, requiring you instead to attend to the way the game itself imagines these figures. Combining character criticism, scholarly play, and the sort of reparative reading common in fan work, Manning’s game demonstrates how transformative adaptations may be at once creative appropriations and critical interventions in Shakespeare studies.

In “Playing with Shakespeare in *Silent Hill 3* and *Manhunt 2*: From Reverence to Rejection” Andrei Nae explores tensions across media formats and within the division of “high” and “low” culture. While Shakespeare traditionally has signified all that is “high” in culture and

videogames are often consigned to the “low,” Nae looks at how two videogames—both dripping with viscera and the aesthetics of grindhouse cinema—incorporate Shakespearean elements in gestures alternatively aspirational and subversive. While some videogames may use Shakespeare and knowledge of his works to signal the heights of accomplishment the medium may hope to reach—signified by one of *Silent Hill 3*’s most infamously difficult puzzles—others may be like *Manhunt 2*, a gory tale of revenge and mind control that skewers *The Tempest* in an ironic and bloody dismemberment of Shakespeare’s art.

Speaking of *The Tempest*, I find now that I begin to feel like old Gonzalo, who after a day of crisscrossing the enchanted island says he must rest his “old bones” now that he has “a maze trod indeed / Through forthrights and meanders” (*The Tempest* 3.3.2-3). What forthrights and meanders they have been: I began this introduction wondering how to approach the question of Shakespeare and games, overwhelmed by my options, and I have not at all succeeded in narrowing the field of play. From the archaic Super Nintendo to the timeless tabletop, from feminism to fanfiction, the Shakespearean ludisphere has only grown increasingly strange and complex. But at least these paths have now been marked—unlike those Titania mourns, “quaint mazes in the wanton green / For lack of tread indistinguishable” (*Midsummer* 2.1.99-100).

Both Gonzalo and Titania are referencing the turf mazes of the English countryside, a common early modern sight and apparently often used during local festivals as part of various folk-games (Russell and Russell 1991; Greene 2001). Perhaps historical mazes like these provide yet another avenue of exploration, though one we do not pursue too far today, having already done so much walking. I point them out only to suggest that the Shakespearean ludisphere goes further than we have space for here, and we are not, in the famous words of the *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first work of electronic interactive fiction, lost “in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike” (Crowther and Woods 1976/7). Our passages here, though they may at times overlap, twist in similar ways, or bend backward seemingly in the direction from which we first came, are for now somewhat more distinct, and when we walk them again, they may lead to places that feel both old and new.

What forms does Shakespeare assume, what transformations do he and/or his texts undergo, when they are reformulated and represented as part of a ludic pastime? The work this issue represents provides only a handful, but a valuable handful, of possible answers. Our contributors have for us traced some paths through the Shakespearean ludisphere, and in the

process provided entrances to it: for there are more connections to be made, more paths to take. Though we might rest for a moment with Gonzalo, there's a broader Shakespearean ludisphere to appreciate, as long as we're game for it.

Notes

¹ After initially trying to appear in 2020, but we all know how that went.

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