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The Playing's the Thing: A Ludic Approach to Diversifying Digital Shakespeare

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An examination of the potential for diversifying digital Shakespeare scholarship through a ludic approach. After arguing for game-making as a scholarly activity, a survey of the history of Shakespeare and digital games is followed by a discussion of how two interactive digital works—Golden Glitch's *Elsinore* and Lapin Lunarie Games's *Elsinore: After Hamlet*—offer models for thinking through creative/critical ways of diversifying digital Shakespeare.

Il s'agit d'une étude du potentiel de diversification de la recherche numérique sur Shakespeare par une approche ludique. Après avoir défendu la création de jeux en tant qu'activité scientifique, une étude de l'histoire de Shakespeare et des jeux numériques est suivie d'une discussion sur la manière dont deux œuvres numériques interactives — « *Elsinore* » par Golden Glitch Studios et « *Elsinore : After Hamlet* » de Lapin Lunarie Games — offrent des modèles de réflexion sur les moyens créatifs et/ou critiques de diversifier le Shakespeare digital.



Shakespeare's works are certainly not objects of neglect in online digital scholarship or in the development of digital methodologies and tools in the humanities (or in online digital culture more broadly); indeed, the editors of *Shakespeare's Language in Digital Media* argue that "the state of computing in Shakespeare studies" functions as "a benchmark of our scholarly digital literacy in general: now, as ever, Shakespeare is the test bed for our latest remediation technologies" (Jenstad, Kaethler, and Roberts-Smith 2020, 2). Similarly, and more broadly, the editors of *Shakespeare and the Digital World* state: "we assert the mutual importance of the 'digital' as a context that influences the study of Shakespeare and, conversely, the importance of Shakespeare as a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world" (Carson and Kirwan 2014, 1). (For a valid critique of the overfocus on and overvaluation of Shakespeare in digital humanities, an effect of the overfocus on and overvaluation of Shakespeare in English literary studies and, more broadly, in English-speaking cultures, which this essay could be seen as perpetuating, see Estill 2019.) Yet, despite their proliferation, these digital Shakespeares, as the scholarly resources examined in the *Shakespeare's Language in Digital Media* collection show, are clustered within a fairly narrow scope of remediation: digital editions of various kinds of the plays; databases of words, historical events, period documents, and published scholarship; maps; virtual models of performance locations and spaces, etc. (Chapter 7 of *Shakespeare's Language in Digital Media* offers a helpful overview of digital resources for the study of early modern drama.) These digital resources, while undoubtedly valuable, remediate and enhance very traditional modes of scholarship, such as critical editions, bibliographies, concordances, and chronologies. Digital Shakespearean scholarship, this paper argues, can and needs to expand beyond this traditional scope and embrace the ludic potential, realized most obviously in computer games, that digital technologies offer for exploring issues pertaining to (among other things) intercultural relations, transnational migration, racialization and ethnicity, gender, and queerness as it intersects with Shakespeare in his and our time. In terms of this paper's argument, it is notable that neither *Shakespeare's Language in Digital Media* nor *Shakespeare and the Digital World* include any discussion of digital games.

Game-making and/as scholarship

The word "ludic" is derived from *ludus*, Latin for play, sport, game, fun—and school, which suggests that games and play can be a means of, and not antithetical to, learning and knowledge-making (Wiktionary 2023). This suggestion stands in opposition to scholars and teachers of Shakespeare who critique the value of digital Shakespeare (including ludic Shakespeare) in scholarly and learning environments, yet who fail to interrogate their own "serious" (and often bardolatrous) approach to studying Shakespeare. An example of this can be seen in Jim Casey's "Digital Shakespeare Is Neither Good nor

Bad, but Teaching Makes It So,” which is informed by a model of teaching Shakespeare that is akin to driving a train along a track (let’s say in this case the *Hamlet* line) that ends, like all the other Shakespeare lines, at a single terminus: Shakespeare’s texts and historical period. Given this model, it is understandable that one of Casey’s criticisms of digital Shakespeare projects is that they “move the consumer/creators farther away from Shakespeare’s text. Similarly, when such projects are migrated to the classroom, they often reveal more about the attitudes and interests of the students than they do about Shakespeare and his culture” (Casey 2019), which Casey apparently believes is a problem rather than an opportunity. Casey observes that “[i]n my experience, digital Shakespeares work best when the students have a very firm understanding of the intricacies of the text—and that often requires pre-digital close reading and analysis” (Casey 2019). Casey fails to consider, however, how digital Shakespeares might *generate* in previously indifferent students a post-digital interest in “understanding ... the intricacies of the text,” including how that text might help them better understand not only the intricacies of Shakespeare’s world, but perhaps more importantly, how such an understanding can help them navigate the intricacies of the world in which they live. I believe that the study of Shakespeare should not always be a one-way trip towards a single terminus, but rather that Shakespeare’s texts are ships to be launched on open and not fully mapped seas, in search of ludic (and other) shores. If digital Shakespeare is as crucial for furthering scholarly practises and for understanding the nature and future of scholarship in a digital world as suggested by the editors of *Shakespeare’s Language in Digital Media* and *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, then Shakespeare is perhaps the best starting point for thinking through the place of the ludic in digital scholarship and learning. In making an argument for digital ludic scholarship, I therefore disagree with views, such as the one articulated at the outset of Estill’s essay, that set up digital games in opposition to scholarship, for example, as creation versus research (see the mention below concerning research creation) and as entertainment versus education (Estill 2019).

This paper focuses on two ludic digital works that present interesting ways to explore and think about diversity in and around Shakespeare’s texts (in particular, *Hamlet*): Golden Glitch’s time-looping adventure game *Elsinore*, where the player character is a biracial Ophelia (Golden Glitch 2019), and Lapin Lunaire Games’ *Elsinore: After Hamlet*, where the player character is, as the game’s description on itch.io states, “an Asian American university student juggling society, schoolwork, and mental health under the pressure of a global pandemic and mounting anti-Asian violence” (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021). These works offer models for how digital Shakespeare can incorporate a study of the plays (rather than provide yet another conventional digital remediation of the plays) within a ludic framework that enables reflection on the place of Shakespeare in our (and his) diverse world. Like other works usually categorized as adaptations, they

both can be seen as “talking back to Shakespeare,” an approach to Shakespeare which, as Jo Eldridge Carney notes in her 2022 study of recent feminist fictional adaptations and appropriations, has a long tradition (Carney 2022, 1–2). Carney acknowledges that “‘Talking back’ typically implies a rebuke to an authoritative position, but it can also be a less accusatory impulse to continue a conversation” (Carney 2022, 2). As with the works that Carney examines, the two games being considered here are not “unmitigated critiques of Shakespeare’s plays but they do insist on a re-examination of their aesthetic and ideological terms, and they invite a dialogue in which women [and others] and Shakespeare can talk back—and forth—with each other” (Carney 2022, 2). (Both Carney’s book, as well as an essay collection published in the same year on *Playfulness in Shakespearean Adaptations* [Gerzic and Norrie 2020], while doing excellent work, do not contain any discussion of ludic digital adaptations or appropriations.) In his introduction to “Shakespeare and Gaming,” a 2021 special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, Michael Lutz similarly uses the metaphor of “talking back” when characterizing what digital games can bring to the study of Shakespeare: “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” (Lutz 2021, 1–2). Less concerned with aesthetic revisioning or with testing one’s Shakespearean proficiency, the games discussed in this paper focus more on the discourses around Shakespeare’s status in English-speaking cultures, including his unavoidable presence and unmatched position in English literary studies, how his work can be used to interrogate (rather than bolster) the “whitewashing” and heteronormativity that persists in perceptions of the cultures of early modern Europe and England, and his plays’ (in)efficacy in addressing contemporary challenges related to xenophobia and social disharmony. (For examinations of the ideological myth that medieval and early modern Europe was homogenously white, cisgendered, and heterosexual, see Bärwald, Köstlbauer, and Von Mallinckrodt 2020; Perry 2017; *The Public Medievalist* 2017–; *The Public Medievalist* 2018–.)

It is notable that Carney characterizes the adaptations and appropriations she examines as “critiques” and “re-examination[s],” which highlights the critical engagement of these works with Shakespeare’s plays and points to the overlap of the goals and processes of adaptation and scholarly inquiry. In Carney’s outline of the four major principles informing current adaptation theory, two are particularly relevant here: adaptations “often involve ideological critiques of their source text” and “are not unidirectional but can instead invite a return to and a re-evaluation of the source text” (Carney 2022, 3). These principles are essentially those that drive scholarship as well. While some might argue that computer games, like other works regarded as

adaptations, fall outside the scope of scholarship, I argue through this examination of *Elsinore* and *Elsinore: After Hamlet* that computer games need to be brought within the scope of scholarly expression and dissemination, particularly within the digital humanities (including digital Shakespeare): as Michael Lutz observes of a Shakespeare-focused game, “transformative adaptations may be at once creative appropriations and critical interventions in Shakespeare studies” (Lutz 2021, 7). The place of digital games and the value of ludic methodologies in the digital humanities is still uncertain. Perhaps the strongest if not the most persuasive assertion of the importance of digital games in digital humanities is found in Patrick Jagoda’s 2014 essay “Gaming the Humanities,” where he argues, in a manner similar to the editors of *Shakespeare’s Language in Digital Media* and *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, that “digital games serve as a critical test case that might help us think through the challenges and possibilities of the digital for research, scholarship, and learning” (Jagoda 2014, 191). He goes on to claim that “[g]amification is increasingly becoming a key problematic of—that is, in different ways, a problem and possibility for—the digital humanities” (Jagoda 2014, 194), and points to the work of his Game Changer Chicago Design Lab as a possible model for addressing this problematic. The game-making undertaken by Jagoda’s lab can be seen as an example of “research creation”: creative endeavours that explore a research question, or, as Lutz notes above regarding ludic adaptations, creative appropriations that are also critical interventions. Critical making, a major area of praxis in the digital humanities (see, for example, Sayers 2017), can be understood as a form of research creation, and Stuart Moulthrop has argued that the almost exclusive scholarly activity in the humanities, writing, needs to expand to include “the primary production tasks of programming, and by extension, media design” (Moulthrop 2010). (For more on research creation and using non-traditional media formats, including comics and digital games, for scholarly inquiry, see Chapman and Sawchuck 2012; Helms 2015; Loveless 2019; Moulthrop 2010.)

Shakespeare and games

Shakespeare, not surprisingly, has been a key locus of digital gamification for some time, both within and without scholarly contexts. The title of one of the foundational texts in game studies, Janet H. Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray 1997), brings together Shakespeare and *Star Trek*’s holodeck, an ultimate vision of virtual reality ludic technology, as an aspirational touchstone for, in the words of the book’s subtitle, *The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. In 2008, in a short survey in the *Shakespeare Newsletter*, Michael Best (Best 2008) considered some of the mostly unsatisfactory Shakespeare-related games available, including *Arden: The World of Shakespeare* (2006–2007), a massively multiplayer online (MMO) world designed to study online economic behaviour and Shakespeare, and created by a team led by Edward Castronova,

a professor of media at Indiana University Bloomington: “The aim was to have players explore an Elizabethan environment, interact with characters from the Bard’s plays, or just go to a tavern and wager a few farthings on card games like One-and-Thirty. Meanwhile, Castronova would further his research by studying players’ behaviour” (Baker 2008). Funded by a quarter-million-dollar MacArthur Foundation Grant, the uncompleted project was considered a failure even by Castronova, who admitted it was no fun as a game (Naone 2007; Baker 2008). (For the other games covered in Best’s article, see [in the Ludography]: CASP 2007; Domenic and Josh 2007; E.M.M.E. Interactive 1997; Johnson 2003; PBS 2004; Quia 2002.) Gina Bloom’s 2015 article, “Videogame Shakespeare: Enskilling Audiences through Theater-Making Games” (Bloom 2015), is primarily interested in digital games that focus on the theatrical dimension of Shakespeare’s plays, and, as well as providing a helpful survey of some at-the-time current games (including tabletop games and games developed in collaboration with Shakespearean theatre companies—the latter of which are now mostly inaccessible), focuses on a project she is involved in, *Play the Knave* (*Play the Knave* 2020), a mixed reality video game that enables players to create an animated film of a virtual production of their own design, using Microsoft’s motion-sensing technology Kinect. (In 2018, Bloom published *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater*, looking at gaming in the early modern period and its connections to the London theatrical world of the time [Bloom 2018].) Matthew Harrison and Michael Lutz’s 2017 essay, “South of Elsinore: Actions That a Man Might Play,” as the title suggests, focuses on *Hamlet* and primarily discusses parser-based interactive fictions, where the player must type in commands to explore and interact with the text-based game world: Charles A. Crayne’s *Castle Elsinore* (Crayne 1983), Benjamin Fan’s *Ophelia* (Fan 2003), Robert Johnson’s *Hamlet: The Text Adventure* (2003), Tomasz Pudlo’s *Gamlet* (Pudlo 2004), and Aanabansal’s *The Adventures of Reynaldo* (Aanabansal 2013; in *Hamlet*, Reynaldo is Polonius’s servant, who is sent to spy on Laertes in Paris). Harrison and Lutz’s essay explores the challenges and questions that arise when gamifying/playing *Hamlet/Hamlet*, observing that, in their exploration of ludic freedoms and textual constraints, “these games materialize pressing questions shared between game studies and Shakespeare studies” (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 25).

There are other Shakespearean digital games not mentioned in or that post-date these articles, such as Jon Thackray and Jonathan Partington’s 1982 interactive fiction *Avon* (Thackray and Partington 1982), featuring a world populated with characters from Shakespeare and described by one reviewer as “a collection of puzzles written by an University professor [Partington, a professor of mathematics at University of Leeds] for a group of University students and therefore the story is ‘you’re trapped in this strange world; try and escape while enjoying the tons of Shakespeare references’” (Schmidl

2002); University of Oxford mathematician (and creator of the Inform system for authoring interactive fiction) Graham Nelson's faithful interactive fiction adaptation of *The Tempest* (Nelson and Shakespeare 1997), where the player takes the role of the island-flitting Ariel; Kreg Segall's *A Midsummer Night's Choice* (Segall 2016), a "choose your own adventure" elaboration in the style of Ryan North's books *To Be or Not To Be* (North 2013; adapted, in 2015, into a digital "gamebook" [Tin Man Games 2015]) and *Romeo and/or Juliet* (North 2016); Ramsay Ess's *Shakespeare is Broken!* (Ess 2021), where, as Shakespeare, the player is transported from the afterlife into the plays to fix them after "poor movie adaptations, misreadings, and just awful essays have allowed tons of inaccuracies to creep into" them; and Cat Manning's *We Are Not All Alone Unhappy* (Manning 2021b), a hypertextual work that "asks players to create a pairing between two characters who received canonically unhappy endings in Shakespeare's plays" (Manning 2021a, 1). Additionally, there are the Hamlet-related games *Ghost King* (Compton 2020), Jason Compton's retro-text adventure in which the player assumes the role of Hamlet, and Denis Galanin's *Hamlet, or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (Galanin 2010, also sometimes referred to as *Gamelet*), where the player is a time traveller who accidentally incapacitates Hamlet and is forced, in Hamlet's stead, to save Ophelia from being forced to marry Claudius. Despite being "a play that (in the popular imagination) thematizes inaction and delay" (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 24), *Hamlet*, as this survey shows, is an especially popular target for ludic adaptation: half of the works listed in this essay's Ludography are inspired by the play.

As one might infer from these brief descriptions, many of these Shakespearean digital games fall along a ludic spectrum that ranges from challenging or testing the reader's knowledge of the playtexts and/or plots of Shakespeare's plays to having fun messing around with, making fun of, and (some would say) desecrating the plays and their plots. Yet some of these games can also, as Lutz notes, be seen simultaneously as "creative appropriations and critical interventions in Shakespeare studies" (Lutz 2021, 7). The two games under consideration here, *Elsinore* and *Elsinore: After Hamlet* (hereafter referred to as *After Hamlet*), can certainly be seen as performing this double function: they stage encounters of race and racialized people (as well as queer people) with Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, moving through, around, and beyond the text in interesting ways. In the process, they generate a series of scenarios that enable reflections on Shakespeare's play beyond the limitations of the text itself.

Elsinore

Elsinore, the first game produced by Golden Glitch, offers a 3D rendering of the castle and environs of Elsinore from an isometric perspective (**Figure 1**). The player character is Ophelia, and the game opens roughly at the same point as the play starts (act 1, scenes

2 and 3). At the start of the game, Ophelia finds herself in a predicament different from the one she faces in Shakespeare’s play (even if the consequences are the same): in a dream she sees (following the play’s plot) herself sinking through water and the deaths of Polonius, Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes. Subsequently, during play, she is confronted by a hooded figure who stabs her to death, after telling her that her death will be staged to look like she has drowned. But after her murder, Ophelia awakens in her bed. She discovers she is trapped in a time loop and has to find out why and how to escape, in the process learning about the past and present of the castle and its inhabitants, including the history of her mother, the “foreign-born” Elise, as well as Hamlet’s paternal grandmother Queen Astrid, and the mysterious Lady Simona. Besides these three added characters (although only Simona appears, Elise and Astrid being deceased before the game begins), *Elsinore* adds Lady Birgitta (‘Brit’) Brockenhuus, lady-in-waiting to Queen Gertrude, and Irma, the castle’s cook and Gertrude’s former nurse. From Shakespeare’s other plays, *Elsinore* adds, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a sinister Peter Quince, who takes the place of the visiting players of the play, and Othello, who appears as the tavern keeper in the nearby town.



Figure 1: A scene from *Elsinore*, showing Ophelia in the Royal Gallery. Screenshot by author.

The player learns that, before the game starts, Ophelia has broken off a budding romance with Hamlet. In Shakespeare’s play, Laertes, seconded by Polonius, tells Ophelia not to trust in Hamlet’s affections because, as the heir to the throne, his marriage must ensure “the safety and the health of this whole state” (Shakespeare 2020, 1.3.24)—presumably referring to a marriage that will cement a strategic alliance with a powerful noble house or with the reigning family of another nation. In *Elsinore*, however, the implication is that, despite being the daughter of Polonius, a Duke and the Royal Chamberlain, it is primarily Ophelia’s biracial parentage, her brownness, that disqualifies her from such a high-ranking marriage: as Polonius observes, “For

another young noblewoman, things might be different, but not so for you” (Golden Glitch 2019) (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This is the opening to the world of *Elsinore*, which does not so much rewrite *Hamlet* as deepen and extend it, elaborating on aspects of the world the play can only superficially touch on or is silent about, such as the origins, nationality, ethnicity, past history, and personal desires of the characters.



Figures 2 and 3: *Elsinore*: Polonius alludes to Ophelia’s and Laertes’s biracial parentage and the “difficulties” this creates for them at court. Screenshots by author.

One of the first things that strikes the thoughtful player of *Elsinore* who has read *Hamlet* is that Shakespeare’s play offers little detail about the origins of many of the characters. The dominating and largely unspoken presumption is usually that, unless explicitly indicated, characters in *Hamlet* are white and (mostly) Danish, despite most of the characters’ names being based on non-Danish anthroponyms: Ophelia and Laertes

are from Greek; Claudius, Marcellus, and Polonius (“the Polish man”) are from Latin; Bernardo and Horatio are Italian; Fortinbras is French; and Gertrude is German; the notable exceptions are the Danish-derived Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Perhaps taking its cue from this multinational (if still Eurocentric) melange of names, why, *Elsinore* implicitly asks, should the whiteness of the characters or the court at Elsinore be presumed? This was a question that the developers of the game explicitly asked during development, as team lead Kate Chironis recounts in an interview (from January 21, 2017): “Does something in the original text require [a character in *Hamlet*] to be one of these things [white, heterosexual, cisgender]?” Frequently the answer was ‘no’” (as cited in Darr 2021, 118). Besides Laertes’s departure for Paris and Hamlet’s stated desire to return to university at Wittenberg (in Germany), the play is so inwardly focused on court politics that one can easily not attend to the fact that Helsingor (the historical Elsinore), just north of Copenhagen, was not some rural backwater, but a crucial seaport—the gateway to the Baltic Sea (in *Elsinore*, Ophelia observes at one point that “[a]ll passing ships must stop and pay their tolls to us” [Golden Glitch 2019]). People from many countries would have found their way to the Danish court by sea or road, like the “tragedians of the city” (Shakespeare 2020, 2.2.352) do in *Hamlet*, or like Horatio, in *Elsinore* a person of colour who was born in India, the natural or illegitimate son of a Venetian spice merchant and a woman from Calicut (Kozhikode). Players of *Elsinore* discover that Horatio was taken to and raised in Venice by his father and made his way eventually to Denmark, where he entered the King’s service as a soldier (as Horatio’s case shows, even names may not be revealing of all aspects of a character’s background). In short, Denmark was not as white or heterosexual or cisgender as might be imagined, and *Elsinore* deliberately imagines it otherwise: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are women and lovers, and Bernardo hides the fact that, since a boy, he has appeared on stage in women’s roles. When Ophelia accidentally sees him in town performing Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, he is ashamed and fearful of the exposure of what he sees as his double life; but, after being reassured by Ophelia, he opens up about his experience playing women’s roles: “What you saw on stage ... is me. Or the ‘rest’ of me, I suppose. [...] In the moments when I was up there ... I felt ... like I was showing the world the truer form of myself. The ‘me’ who was not just strong, but *beautiful*” (Golden Glitch 2019). Bernardo is what we might now describe as non-binary or genderfluid; as he tells Ophelia, “Man or woman, I know not which. Some days one, then the other. Both are to my liking” (Golden Glitch 2019). Kate Chironis notes in a game development blog entry (from September 5, 2015):

So much about the way disenfranchised people have lived for centuries has been intentionally repressed and erased from mainstream history—and historical video games have especially suffered from this effect. With *Elsinore*, we want to do better. Shakespeare’s world was thriving and diverse, filled with people from all identities,

backgrounds, and walks of life. We aim to capture that world to the best of our ability. (as cited in Darr 2021, 117)

The narrative of *Elsinore* contains considerable details about race and racism, culture and class, as well as about sexuality and gender identity. The gameplay, which requires players, as Ophelia, to talk with all the non-player characters continuously and in considerable depth, or listen in on the conversations between non-player characters, makes these details unavoidable. As the developers have stated, one of the reasons why Ophelia was chosen as the player character was due to her particular social position in the world and thus action of *Hamlet*:

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia doesn't get to do much. This is partially why Chironis felt that she was the right choice for the protagonist of *Elsinore*. [...]

"Ophelia is kind of the ideal stealth character," Chironis explains, "because nobody pays attention to her and nobody expects her to do anything. She's so unimportant to the major events of the play, and so in some way, she's the perfect person to be whispering in people's ears." (Petit 2016)

Scholars Jennifer Flaherty and Andrew Darr, in their separate but complementary discussions of *Elsinore*, note how the developers factored Ophelia's lack of agency into the design of the gameplay. Darr points out that "*Elsinore*'s traditional narrative and ludonarrative work in concert to force the player to work within the cultural boundaries set for Ophelia" (Darr 2021, 120), and that this lack of agency and marginal status in the Danish court paradoxically is the source of the player character's particular ludic power—overhearing, eliciting, and sharing information: "In place of passivity, *Elsinore* creates agency without undermining or omitting the political and social structures that necessitated Ophelia's passivity in the first place" (Darr 2021, 121). As Flaherty observes, what, in conventional game design, would be seen as a violation of the cardinal rule that gameplay must fulfil the power fantasies of players, is the source of *Elsinore*'s ludic challenge (and, as Darr notes, its "ludonarrative harmony"):

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 [...], *Elsinore* forces players to work against the frustrating limits placed on the character as part of the gameplay. (Flaherty 2021, 11)

Ophelia's talking and listening, while key to the gameplay, is not merely (or even primarily) transactional as it is in most conventional computer games, where dialogue only serves to provide information that the player can use to complete the next task, embark on the next quest, or find the next waypoint. The use of information by Ophelia becomes the means to prevent some of the play's tragedies, and to address the mistakes that have happened before the play opens and that shape the action that unfolds. But there is also much information that emerges in Ophelia's conversations that only serves to give the player a fuller sense of the complexities that lie beneath the formal roles the characters play at court and in the play, as Flaherty observes:

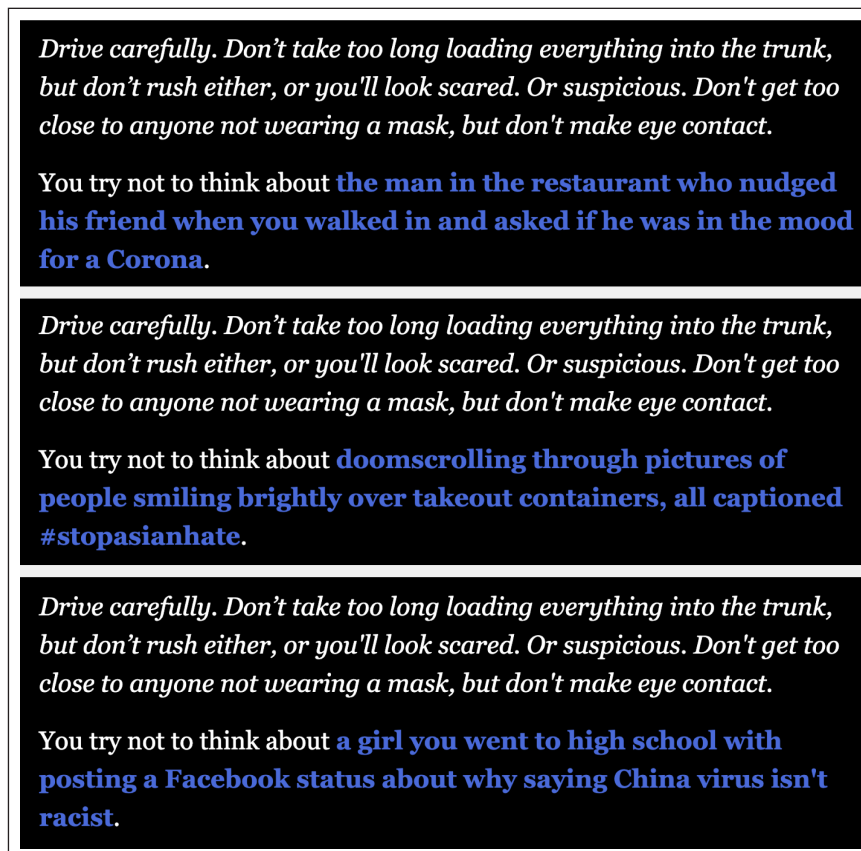
The procedural structure of *Elsinore* reinforces the tragedy of *Hamlet* for the player, but it also builds in compassion and social awareness as components of gameplay. [...] Players learn to use their empathy as a tool for gameplay to predict the responses of the other characters and enact more positive 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. (Flaherty 2021, 12)

This gameplay adds a richness and a sense of generative possibility to the world and text of *Hamlet* that prompts a series of speculative lines of reflection and inquiry that can diversify how we read, perform, and adapt Shakespeare. For example: although it is now commonplace to stage productions of Shakespeare with a diverse range of actors, and there is a long tradition, stretching back to Shakespeare's time, of cross-gender casting, what, *Elsinore* poses to the player, if we imagined not the actors but the *characters* of *Hamlet* as something other than Danish/European, white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical people? What would that do to the meanings of the play? In playing *Elsinore*, *Hamlet* no longer stands as a fixed and closed text; it becomes not a *writerly* but a *readerly* text (in Roland Barthes's terms [Barthes 1975]) enabling reflection on historical and contemporary understandings of race, ethnicity, migration, class, sexuality, and gender. In this, *Elsinore* does more to diversify and advance digital Shakespeare than any digital edition of *Hamlet* has done, no matter how sophisticated or innovative the editorial markup or user interface.

After Hamlet

Elsinore: After Hamlet is a hypertext fiction written using the authoring platform *Twine* (<http://twinery.org>). (Potential players should note that the work uses time-delayed text at some points, and some screens may become "stuck" and require the player to refresh the browser screen.) This very timely work could have been titled *Hamlet*

during COVID, given that it explores what it means to study Shakespeare’s play, and literature more broadly, as a university student and person irrationally targeted as being “responsible” for COVID due to their racialized status (based on disinformation that COVID is a “Chinese virus”). Implicitly, the game’s premise poses the question: given the protagonist’s situation, is there any value to studying *Hamlet* in this moment, other than as something they must do for a course assignment? The narrator is an Asian American student whose attempts to formulate an argument for a course paper on *Hamlet* are constantly diverted towards scenarios of COVID-related acts of hate and violence against Asian people. After waking from a dream of the closing scene of *Hamlet*, the narrator thinks of their parents, who have gone to the grocery store, and the strategy they have developed: “*Drive carefully. Don’t take too long loading everything into the trunk, but don’t rush either, or you’ll look scared. Or suspicious. Don’t get too close to anyone not wearing a mask, but don’t make eye contact*” (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021). The work uses Twine’s rotating text substitution function (which rotates between a list of phrases when a player clicks on a hyperlinked section of text) very effectively to list examples of anti-Asian hate fed by COVID disinformation (see Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6).



Figures 4, 5 and 6: *Elsinore: After Hamlet*: Examples of textual variations that appear when a reader clicks on the hyperlinked text (in blue). Screenshots by author.

The narrator at one point imagines what they would do if they were attacked in a grocery store, making a comparison of their envisioned unheroic death with that of Hamlet's, with its histrionic grandeur: "Hamlet gets to launch into over thirty lines of tragic monologue and declare he's dying between every other profound statement on human nature and memory. I'm doomed to a single scream and maybe a plea for mercy. Does that seem fair to you?" (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021). But the narrator goes on to state that they do not want to be a tragic stabbing victim, Hamlet-like or otherwise, the subject of yet another news story on anti-Asian hate crimes:

I don't want to be a tragedy. I don't want to clutch some stranger's hand while I bleed out on a supermarket floor and beg them to get my grandparents to safety and tell the cop everything that happened—to swear on God (the capital G for Jesus one, not the lowercase one we throw around for emphasis at home) in my most perfect English that I didn't do anything but exist between the oranges and apples and maybe glance the wrong way with my chinky eyes, and please, officer, we're just out getting groceries and our parents are waiting at home and our grandparents don't speak English very well, I'll translate for them—. (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021)

As in *Elsinore*, where Horatio is revealed to have an unrequited love for Hamlet, the narrator's essay draft suggests the same, while noting that "everyone on the internet got really mad last time I blogged about it" (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021); they also worry that such a reading on its face (rather than the persuasiveness of the argument supporting such a reading) will result in a failing grade. This subtly gestures to the policing and gatekeeping that can happen around Shakespeare, both within and without academia, where attempts to interrogate and problematize the heteronormativity and the whiteness of Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies are met with hostility, ridicule, and rejection. At another point, the narrator critiques the tendency (a result of the unreflective veneration of Shakespeare's plays) to valorise characters like Hamlet and fates like Ophelia's: "You also treated Ophelia terribly.... Four hundred years after you barge into her bedroom and mass media still touts her around as the tragically beautiful maiden figure that all depressed teenage girls definitely need to see" (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021).

As the work's title suggests, it offers a reflection on what happens after the death of Hamlet and the ending of the play, after, in other words, a major societal disruption: where do we go from here? Harrison and Lutz note that a central problem with gamifying *Hamlet* is that "to play Hamlet is inevitably to depart from *Hamlet*, to leave behind plot, character, language, and theme and head south into a murkier territory of adaptation, remediation, and transformation" (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 24); yet, as they also note, most ludic adaptations of *Hamlet* are constrained by their unwillingness to stray too far

from the play's setting and action as well as by the labour involved in creating original game spaces and game play that would extend *Hamlet's* world: "to flee Elsinore threatens running out of illusion, hitting the boundaries of the game's environment. [...] [T]he fantasy of free play is bounded by the constraints of the created environment that makes it possible" (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 36). In *After Hamlet*, these constraints are less relevant because it is, from the outset, outside of the play; when it does enter the world of *Hamlet*, it does so after the end of the play and remains in rather than flees Elsinore.

However, in imagining an Elsinore after *Hamlet*, *After Hamlet* faces, rather than textual or computational constraints, very real-world ones. The fatal catastrophe that ends *Hamlet* has a finality that imparts a sense of closure, while the arrival of Fortinbras provides a resolution of sorts, a new figure of authority who will restore and maintain the social order. In *After Hamlet*, the narrator, trying to write their essay, suddenly finds themselves in Elsinore, right after the ending of the play, and at the tip of Fortinbras's sword. Although Fortinbras assumes from his appearance that the narrator is from "the Orient," the narrator tells him he is from Denmark: "I was born here. I grew up here." This seemingly ineradicable tendency of (mostly) white people to assume that (most) non-white people in North America and Europe are foreigners or immigrants, and the anti-immigrant prejudice exacerbated by COVID-fuelled xenophobia, leads to a conversation with Horatio, where the narrator asks: "Have you ever been a 'them,' Horatio? Have you ever been unwanted by the only home you've ever known, the only little niche you've ever carved out for yourself to rest in? Told to go back somewhere you've never been?" (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021). (This disease-fuelled xenophobia is found also in *Elsinore*, where Ophelia's and Laertes's mother, Elise, infected with the plague, is sent away by King Hamlet (Hamlet's father), who "would not let her convalesce within the castle along with the rest of the [presumedly white] noble-affiliated victims.")

As social crises often impact on the way we read, the play's closure and resolution contrasts suggestively with the COVID-19 pandemic, where mass death and the breakdown of leadership and social disunity has not been assuaged by either closure or resolution. It is in fact the uncertainty and lack of a clear ending to the pandemic that would appear to drive the conclusion of *After Hamlet*: it turns out that a contagious disease is spreading in Elsinore, too, and the narrator comes to assume the role of medical advisor, using their familiarity with measures designed to inhibit the spread of COVID to try to limit the spread of the disease. The measures are moderately successful, but eventually Fortinbras becomes sick and dies. The resolution implied by the ending of *Hamlet* turns out to be a temporary one. So where do we go from here?

In answering this question, *After Hamlet* goes off in a rather unexpected direction. Harrison and Lutz see games based on *Hamlet* as a negotiation between freedom and

constraint, asking: “How do we balance our own interpretive freedom with the ways that Shakespeare—the myth, the industry, the cultural form—is also a structure of constraint? These games ask us to think about the relationship between our freedoms—of action, interpretation, and self-presentation—and the systems within which they are contained” (Harrison and Lutz 2017, 25–26). With the death of Fortinbras, the constraint, the system imposed by “Shakespeare” is loosened, if not eliminated: we learn that Denmark is subsequently ruled by Petra, a distant relation of the Danish royal family, who, when she first appears, the narrator protests is not in the play, leading to their being teased by Horatio: “You speak of this play as though it ought to govern us. Do we not have free souls, Kit?” (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021)—an interesting rejoinder to Harrison and Lutz’s question posed above. The outcome where Petra succeeds to the throne is designated as the “true” ending (there is also a “good” and a “bad” ending), and the narrator in the “true” ending ends up being transported back to their parents’ house, the only evidence for their strange experience being “a scrap torn from a folio of *Hamlet*; there, written in a strange hand, were lines for a certain Petra” (Lapin Lunaire Games 2021). In a manner similar to the much-derided Restoration (and later) revisions and “improvements” to Shakespeare play texts, at the end of *After Hamlet* we have a new variant of the text (or a “writing back” to Shakespeare) that suggests that this *Hamlet* is no longer a tragedy of the rottenness of the state of Denmark, but a play about the restoration of a society under a wise female ruler, in a manner similar to the “prophetic” lines (about the future Elizabeth I) in the final scene of John Fletcher and Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*: “She shall be, to the happiness of England, / An aged princess; many days shall see her, / And yet no day without a deed to crown it” (Shakespeare 2015, 5.4.65–7).

Elsinore: After Hamlet tells a story about how Shakespeare’s play circulates and means to an Asian American person in the very present present. Like the lines Hamlet writes to add to “*The Murder of Gonzago*,” the work rewrites *Hamlet* to address the concerns of the moment, to make an argument, to expose wrongdoing, in a present where pandemic fears, disinformation, and social disintegration are part of the way we read Shakespeare now. In one sense, in using *Hamlet* as the touchstone for the narrator’s situation, it reinforces the bardolatrous claim that Shakespeare is timeless and for all peoples; yet it does so by undermining the whitewashed heteronormative imaginary of “the West” and Shakespeare. If Shakespeare is for everyone, then everyone can have—can play with—their own Shakespeare. Like *Elsinore*, *After Hamlet* can be understood as *elaborating* aspects of Shakespeare’s play and its setting that are forthcoming for the reader who reflects on the text’s silences, on the places where the text leaves open spaces for speculation and talking back, on what Shakespeare might mean in our moment.

One of the most powerful qualities of computer games and interactive digital stories are their ludic potentiality, their openness to the player's conscious choice and input, to deliberate exploration, experimentation, and reflection, in multiple ways along multiple paths. Digital editions of and research tools related to Shakespeare's plays (at least as currently conceived and designed) do not exhaust what can be done with and learnt from Shakespeare's plays in the digital realm. *Elsinore* and *Elsinore: After Hamlet* are two compelling examples of what is possible at the intersection of Shakespeare and interactive digital media, modelling forms and modes of engagement with Shakespeare that can open up his work and the community that studies it in ways that can diversify digital Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies more broadly. The question that remains is: are scholars of Shakespeare willing to explore the ludic potential of digital technologies for the diversification of digital Shakespearean scholarship, or will they leave the exploration of this potential area of scholarship to game-makers working outside of academia?

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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