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Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On: Shakespeare and the Cultural Legitimacy of Video Games

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“Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On”: Shakespeare and the Cultural Legitimacy of Video Games

It is no secret that video games are a mass cultural phenomenon. In 2010, there were a reported 183 million “active gamers” in the US alone playing on average 13 hours of video games a week, with more than 5 million more “extreme” gamers playing on average 45 hours a week (McGonigal 3-4). Top-tier titles now enjoy budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Video games appear on almost every screen available—from phones to tablets to TVs and beyond. Reactions to this phenomenon have ranged from outrage to zealous devotion. While these growing numbers of video games so often depict battles of all kinds, these games also continue to cause battles in the real world. One of the most poignant and passionate of these battles is for a sense of cultural legitimacy for the medium—some proof that these unique blends of gameplay, narrative, graphics, music, and voice acting can amount to something spiritually and intellectually enlightening, even great art. Other mediums have fought and won this debate before, and I argue that several of the key strategies video games need to win it in their own time can be found in the life and work of William Shakespeare.

In many ways, video games today are fighting much the same battle that English theater was fighting in Shakespeare’s day. While classical drama of Greek and Roman times was worthy of repute, Shakespeare’s own medium—English theater—was viewed in much the same fashion as the video games of our own time. English theater in Shakespeare’s day was literally not much removed from such cheap entertainments as bear baiting, thus Shakespeare’s famous stage
direction from *The Winter’s Tale*: “Exit, pursued by a bear” (3.3). Shakespeare’s Globe stood amidst displays of several cheap entertainments all along the low cultural level of bear baiting—proving as well as anything just how low English drama was considered at the time. Civic officials often petitioned the royal council to abolish drama altogether, causing Shakespeare and other dramatists to build their theaters outside the jurisdiction of London itself (“Theater” xxxv).

Similar to video games’ enemies today, drama’s opponents in Shakespeare’s day objected to plays on both moral and academic levels. Stephen Gosson wrote in 1579 a lament on the destruction of England’s dignity by way of plays. He argued that Ovid’s theater “chargeth his pilgrims to creep close to the Saints whom they serve” but in the theaters of his London he saw only “such heaving and shoving, such itching and shouldering to sit by women…that it is a right comedy to mark their behaviour” (Harrison 133). In Sir Philip Sidney’s “Apology for Poetry” he claimed that “our tragedies and comedies (not without cause cried out against), observ[e]…rules neither of honest civility nor of skillful poetry” (Harrison 134). While we revere Shakespeare in our time perhaps more than any other playwright in history, Shakespeare wrote those same plays we now know and love in an intellectual warzone.

The late great film critic Roger Ebert didn’t think video games could be art, either. He didn’t believe an author could connect with an audience on the same emotional and intellectual level as that same author could by means of novels, theater, or film (“Video games” 2010). No matter people’s personal opinions, our culture agrees with Ebert. We see this based on simple reactions to video games today. Parents the world over lament the amount of time their kids spend playing video games, yet those same parents would praise a child for reading books for the same amount of time, in neither case paying much attention to the quality of the pieces their children engage with, only the medium. Additionally, if those same children read Shakespeare
for the same hours they played video games, their parents would tout it to the whole world, lauding their children’s intelligence and maturity. What many don’t know and others too easily forget, though, is that young people attending English plays in Shakespeare’s own day were perhaps considered worse off than our gamers of today. Gosson wrote that “the common people which resorte to Theatres [were] but an assemblie of Tailors, Tinkers, Cordwayners, Saylers, olde Men, yong Men, Women, Boyes, Girles, and such like” and felt that, in Andrew Gurr’s words, people “needed protection from corrupting experiences like playgoing” (Gurr 145). What everyone regards now as beautiful and cultural was then ugly trash. The people that made up Shakespeare’s earliest audiences were, effectively, the 35-year-old parental basement gamers of their day.

When asked about Shakespeare in an interview, video game designer Jonathan Knight said, “He was an innovator and not just a great story-teller. Arguably, he’s more of a medium innovator” (Brophy-Warren 2010). Knight makes a valid point here. All scholars (and most students) realize that Shakespeare wrote very few original plots and mostly just converted stories from other mediums to the stage, or even from other stage productions to his own. Knight specifically sites Hamlet, but King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and several others also have very clear source material—not to mention all of the history plays. Shakespeare’s genius was not in plot, but in style and innovation. His plays proved what could be done with the medium and cemented their place in our cultural history as great art. In many ways, Shakespeare not only innovated the theater, but the English language itself, adding to it or altering it whenever it couldn’t serve his purposes fully. These innovations are what we remember Shakespeare for today. The stories he told had been told before in several other ways by several other people, but Shakespeare told them on the stage in English poetry—innovating both the medium and the
language to such degree that neither could be ignored and both demanded critical and popular attention for centuries afterward. No one ever doubted English drama’s cultural legitimacy again after the medium went through Shakespeare’s hands. Video games stand in much the same place that English theater stood before Shakespeare. Every day, video games come closer to the moment of their own “Shakespeare”—someone who can take this undervalued medium and show the world its power through innovation.

In addition to this pattern of innovation, the structure of Shakespeare’s plots could also be useful in the battle for video games. Most of Shakespeare’s plots—and certainly his most famous plots—center around a single strong character’s crucial decisions in crucial moments. King Lear’s reaction to his daughters, Hamlet’s reaction to his father’s ghost, Othello’s reaction to Iago’s words, Romeo’s reaction to Juliet’s beauty—the plots of every play hinge on these important choices, and all their choices lead to the ultimate tragedy of each. The Tempest’s Prospero takes this principle even further. Prospero holds more power than perhaps any other Shakespearean character thanks to his magic and control of the spirit Ariel. Prospero essentially crafts his own entire plot through this magic, leading his family and friends through the island in a veritable maze, guiding them step by step to their final decisions and his own eventual relinquishment of power. Much of the art and emotion of Shakespeare’s stories comes from the audience identifying with these central characters and wrestling in their own heart with the choices these characters face—then, ultimately, coming to understand and sympathize with the character’s decision despite the tragedy it caused. Video games are better equipped than any other medium to take on this theme of choice and consequence because they can literally put those choices in the hands of the audience. Placing such choices as those faced by Lear, Hamlet, Romeo, or Prospero directly in a player’s hands invites naturally the kind of introspection and
reflection that teachers and actors everywhere try to dig out of readers and audience members. In this way, video games are even better equipped than drama to take on the themes that were important to Shakespeare.

Several video games have already begun to prove this. By exploiting the medium’s unique affordances to take on these themes of choice and consequence, such games can produce powerful intellectual and emotional responses. In Fumito Ueda’s *Ico*, the player controls a boy who tries to get himself and a girl out of a castle safely. The main action of the game is to reach out and grab the girl’s hand to take her along. The act of deciding when and why to do this each time is an emotional experience within the game that could not be experienced in the same way in any other medium. Chris Suellentrop writes “My first time doing it gave me goosebumps: *I am with her. I am not alone*” (2011, emphasis in original). *Journey*, a 2012 independent release, presents players with the choice to take on a difficult journey to a distant mountain alone or with an anonymous online companion. Matt Miller writes “Each time [I played Journey], without fail, individual moments (particularly the final level) managed to give me goosebumps, and those moments have remained on my mind for weeks afterward” (2012). My own experience with the game left me with honest feelings of compassion toward a complete stranger as we helped each other succeed. *BioShock Infinite* takes on not only choice and consequence, but racism, religion, and American exceptionalism. Adam Sessler said of its story and world, “It only can work as a game. The unique agency and complicity of the player in the game's narrative is part of its commentary. This isn't a game filled with player choice, but it is the best game about the choices we make as a person and a people, their consequences, and their uncertainty of absolution" (2013). Even the much-debated “*Citizen Kane* moment” question, the assertion that video games do not yet have a work that defines the medium like Orson Welles’s 1941 masterpiece did for
film, may now be closed. As one reviewer put it: “So, when will gaming have its *Citizen Kane* moment? Forget that. When will anything else have its *BioShock Infinite* moment?” (Games™ 2013). Video games are not only capable of taking on the same themes Shakespeare explored, but present powerful new ways to deliver those themes straight to the heart of their audience.

Shakespeare found a powerful weapon to legitimize his theater in looking backward—in harkening back to classical tragedy, medieval history, and other stories already deemed culturally important. When Shakespeare proved that theatre could tackle politics, religion, revenge, love, and all the themes so important to the stories and mediums of the past, the argument for English drama was all but won. Video games could take a page from Shakespeare’s book here, and in some ways already have. In 2010, EA Games released a video game adaptation of *The Divine Comedy* entitled *Dante’s Inferno*. This marked the first major attempt to adapt great literature to video games—others had been done, but none as well-funded or marketed as widely as this. The game’s reception was lukewarm on both the literary and gaming fronts, but the precedent is there, and future attempts can and will improve on what *Dante’s Inferno* started.

Whereas Shakespeare started his career fighting for legitimacy in an undervalued medium, he has risen through the centuries to the status of a sort of patron saint of art in our culture. Roger Ebert said about his own debates over the legitimacy of video games, “Sooner [or] later, these arguments all get around to Shakespeare, and have a way of running aground on him” (“Play” 2010). Perhaps the ultimate litmus test for video games, then, would be to adapt one of Shakespeare’s own works. Indeed, Chris Bateman, author of *Beyond Game Design: Nine Steps Towards Creating Better Videogames* has said, “Most of the histories and all the comedies of errors are open to adaptation in my estimation—and many would produce very interesting experiences!” (2013). He then quickly added: “Note that I don't think existing game genre
formats would work for these game adaptations - you'd need to be creative in designing new approaches.” I believe that not only could such adaptations succeed in taking video games a giant leap forward, they could also enhance understanding of the adapted text for millions of players.

While they might not stay this way, the current industry standard length for gameplay in a single narrative game is around 15 hours. This investment expectation would allow for the entire text of any of Shakespeare’s original plays to occur within a game adaptation, as well as several hours of extra gameplay material to further immerse the player in the experience and allow room for thought, exploration, and reflection. Consider, for instance, the ways the following aspects of *The Tempest* could be powerfully recast in a video game version of the play:

First, Caliban and Prospero’s relationship. "All the charms / Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!” Caliban curses on Prospero, “For I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o' the island” (1.2.406-411). We're not sure how long it took Prospero to gain his powers after crashing on the island, but at some point in that process he had to decide to enslave Caliban, Ariel, and the other spirits. Many have connected Caliban with natives that Europeans enslaved upon reaching the New World, bringing up themes of power, abuse, and slavery. An Role-playing/Adventure game of *The Tempest* could extend this theme interestingly with game mechanics. The game could be designed as such that the player knows he or she can enslave Caliban, but may not want to on a moral level and so consider that maybe Prospero could get by without him. However, inevitably, the player could be forced to realize that he or she has to enslave Caliban to carry on. This in turn brings a new interpretation to the play itself and the character of Prospero. Prospero has often been interpreted as angry and domineering, but as gamers play a video game version set up like this, it could open a new interpretation of Prospero
as turning to his powers simply to survive as he tries to rebuild his life and raise his infant
daughter in exile. Or, alternatively, players could decide that Prospero is angry and domineering,
and enslave Caliban as soon as they learn how to from Prospero’s books. Thus, interpretations of
the play itself could become part of the game, and players would naturally reflect on the
implications of these decisions without having to be prompted to by a teacher, actor, or director.

Second, the Trinculo and Stephano subplot. Following in the tradition of interactive
productions of Shakespeare such as Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, and even first-person video
games like *BioShock*, this subplot could be hidden within the game world, never forced upon the
player, but rather something to be sought out and discovered. As Ken Levine, creative director
for the *BioShock* series said, “When people find stuff, they feel like it’s theirs” (2013). Letting
the player find this subplot while navigating through the island in pursuit of the main narrative
would naturally open up more interest in these side characters and could help realize the same
power this subplot was meant to have on the stage—comedic relief and absurdity, yes, but also
plot depth and range of perspective. These subplot moments could even introduce absurd mini-
games (“Untangle Trinculo and Caliban!” for example) to draw out the comedic elements in a
way that might be missed by an inexperienced reader trudging through the text of the play. This
hidden subplot would also invite replay of the game as perhaps players focus on the main action
the first time around, but play again to discover the complete depths of the side stories. Such
time investment would leave players much more familiar with the text and plot of the play than
any typical reading or viewing of a production.

Third, Prospero’s final speech and the theme of vision versus reality. Some moments of
*The Tempest* seem more relevant to a gamer community than any other group of people in human
history. Prospero’s speech in act 4, for instance, seems directed right at gamers: “And, like the
baseless fabric of this vision, / The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve / And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.168-175). This comes in direct response to Ferdinand’s wish: “Let me live here ever. / So rare a wondered father and a wise / Makes this place paradise,” a wish surely shared by many a gamer toward their own game worlds (4.1.137-139). A player controlling Prospero suddenly forced to choose to stop the visions after hearing those words would naturally ponder deeper on their meaning, especially if the “visions” were done with the powerful aesthetics of which modern video games are capable.

This theme of vision versus reality could reach a level deeper than even any stage production ever has at the end of the game with Prospero’s final speech: “Now my charms are all o'erthrown, / And what strength I have's mine own, / Which is most faint: now, 'tis true, / I must be here confined by you, / Or sent to Naples. Let me not, / Since I have my dukedom got / And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell / In this bare island by your spell; / But release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands.” (Epilogue.1-10). Having played the game as Prospero in first person, the end of the game could suddenly shift to third-person, and Prospero could speak these lines directly to the player. The game could be programmed as such that the only way to progress to the game’s close and “win” is to answer Prospero’s request and “release” him by turning off the game controller. After some time of great confusion and even frustration before discovering this, the moment would surely stick in the player’s mind long after turning off the TV and leaving the game. The same point Shakespeare made with these lines about the difference between fantasy and reality and the need for both—and especially the need to understand the limits of both—would be made in a powerful, emotionally charged way that requires the player to
physically and literally fulfill Prospero’s request. Such an ending would leave players otherwise unfamiliar with Shakespeare understanding and talking about *The Tempest* like no other medium of production could ever achieve.

Video games may not have their “Shakespeare” yet, but with how the industry has grown and the strides it has taken—with the possibilities that are now open to the medium and the innovations that have already been made to achieve those possibilities—such a powerful, legitimizing influence cannot be far off. Video games can and will win their cultural legitimacy, and in the not-too-distant future, children and adults alike will sit down to play a video game not just for entertainment, but for some of the most powerful and emotional cultural experiences of their lives—experiences that will uplift, enlighten, and provoke thought along with the very best art humanity has ever produced.
Works Cited


