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Agency and Identity: Ludo-Narrative Tension from *Hamlet* to *Ghost of Yōtei*

The motivating word for my scholarship on the intersection between video game studies and Shakespeare continues to be agency and its interaction with identity. This is best expressed by Hamlet in act three:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;

And now I'll do't...

And so he goes to heaven;

And so am I revenged? That would be scanned." (3.3.73–78)

If Hamlet was certain that killing Claudius now would revenge his father's death, he would certainly do so, but because he questions whether Claudius would be absolved, he hesitates. On its head, the fact that Hamlet hesitates here, right after confirmation of Claudius's betrayal, is borderline nonsensical, but Shakespeare found a way to justify Hamlet's hesitation and thus permit the play to continue. There is a fundamental tension at the heart of the medium of video games (or digital games as Anthrop and Clark call them) between who gets the most agency, the storyteller or the player, that sets video games apart from other forms of storytelling. This tension over narrative agency seems to be a zero-sum game: the more the game narrative asserts itself the less agency the player has, or alternatively the more the game design provides the player with narrative agency the less complexity the game narrative is afforded. I have been playing a few different games this winter season including *Ark Survivors*, and *Ghost of Yōtei*, and each of them achieves a different balance between the tension between player and designer/writer. *Ark's* game narrative seems entirely reliant on the emergent game systems and the behavior of other players. Meanwhile *Ghost* centers on the experience of a Japanese women from an artisan or "Kō" family

in Edo. In other words, *Ark* prioritizes player agency whereas *Ghost* relies on a more traditional narrative storytelling. Yet because of the incredibly open-ended nature of *Ark* narrative priorities, it has far less capacity to explore the intersection between agency and identity, where *Ghost*, because it knows the identity of the player's avatar, can craft a narrative that is far more complex. In this essay I hope will unpack more of this tension through the juxtaposition these contemporary games compared to *Hamlet* and video game adaptations of it like *Elsinore* (2019).



Figure 1: A screenshot from *Elsinore* of Ophelia (right) discussing her lack of privilege with Hamlet (left), that will be the basis of some of my discussion of ludonarrative and traditional narrative tension and its impact on narrative centered on questions of identity. Darr, Andrew; *Elsinore Screenshot 2*; 2019.

Speaking For the Dead: Video Games, Death, and the Bonfire

Writing in his *Issues of Death*, Michael Neill remarks on post-Reformation liturgical changes that caused Protestants to process death in new ways that resonated within literature of the time: “Each individual’s death was now (as *Doctor Faustus* vividly demonstrates) a painful apocalypse, whose awful judgement could never be reversed” (173). Turning to Marlowe’s *Faustus* makes sense as the drama depicts the most learned man struggle with the basic aspects of the human condition, including his own accountability. The stage participated by putting readers face-to-face with death. Like the multimodal media of today, theater provided audiences with an “ocular encounter” (Woolf 57), a way of engaging with and “visualiz[ing] the past” in their imagination (58).

In this short paper, I’m interested in exploring how modern immersive mediums like video games both resonate with and help us to process our own struggles with death and the afterlife. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray questions whether “cyber drama” can capture “something as true to the human condition, and as beautifully expressed, as the life that Shakespeare captures on the Elizabethan stage” (274). I’m interested in exploring the way that Souls-like games enable players to explore issues of death, particularly those related to grace in death and resonating with grace and its relationship to return/afterlife. As a case study, I explore early modern notions of grace (e.g. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) as they relate to *Elden Ring*’s shards of grace and forsaken grace.

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

Neill, Michael. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Woolf, Daniel R. “From Histories to the Historical: Five Transitions in Thinking about the Past, 1500–1700.” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1/2 (2005): 33–70.

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The Melted Body: How to do *Hamlet* with Games

My build: Flow States and *Hamlet*

Abstract:

In this paper, I link the “flow state” of the well-practiced gamer to a similar figure I have come across in writings from the Early Modern period: the melted (*disciolto*) body, affected by Castiglione’s courtier and evoked by Shakespeare’s Hamlet in his numerous attempts to understand how the body uses motion and gesture to adapt to a given situation. I use this discourse of the melting body to think through the boundedness of procedural rhetoric, the conventions of revenge tragedy, and the skill of the gamer in “getting good.”

I will briefly introduce several AAA games that refer to *Hamlet*, in quest titles, dialogue, or character names, but that also find ways to interrupt their flow with moments of Hamletization, or segments when the mechanics of the games break down and seize control from the player. Of chief interest is *Nier Automata* (2017) which puts players in control of 2B (as in, “or not to be”), an android tasked with defeating hordes of robots that have caused humanity to flee Earth and seek shelter on the moon. A lot more is happening under the hood, and the game’s revelations often come wedded to its mechanics—giving and then taking control away from a player, using repetition and new game plus to unveil new story layers, and even asking players to make the ultimate self-sacrifice—permanently deleting their save files. These moments of broken mechanics, arrested progress, and impossible choice force players to consider what a video game can do to, and through, its players.

Remson DeJoseph
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“World-building Shakespeare With Video Games”

The term “world-building,” although frequently deployed in discussions of speculative fiction, can be a useful creative technique when thinking about Shakespeare. I propose that “world-building” and its deployment in video games offer early modern studies a valuable insight into how playwrights, such as Shakespeare, constructed their worlds for their audiences. World-building aims for immersion, allowing audiences to find their roots in the imaginary world, but this level of immersion is dependent on the medium. Not only was there an effort in early modern texts and performance to encourage audiences to imagine worlds, but they also gestured toward a similar immersion that video games exhibit today. Video games offer the bonus of visualizing an imagined world and interacting within it; thus, this interaction creates an immersive world-building experience, granting audiences entry into the world as both spectators and collaborators of its story. As scholars such as Gina Bloom, Andrew Burn, Tom Bishop, and Erika T. Lin have already noted the cross-compatibility between video games and the early modern stage, world-building becomes a stronger link for these two worlds to collide. How might early modern world-building be traced to video game world-building today? How can this link deepen our understanding of performing early modern drama? By the end of this paper, I will look toward video games as a performance space to develop potential avenues for new audiences to encounter Shakespeare in unique ways.