



Between Hell and High Water:
Hamlet and the Technology
of Tragedy in Golden Glitch
Studios' *Elsinore*

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to explore through the example of Elsinore, Golden Glitch Studios' 2019 adaptation of William Shakespeare's famous tragedy, Hamlet, the unique capacities and potential of the videogame medium to adapt tragedy as a genre and art form, integrating into an iterative matrix of possibilities and hermeneutic field of responses the agency exercised by the player-as-reader. Placing the interpreting subject into the character of Ophelia, a figure who is rendered progressively marginal and peripheral in the 'original' script of the tragedy, Elsinore tasks the player with enacting through the generative body of Ophelia's fluid and metamorphic character a version of Hamlet's events that does not end in bloodshed and despair, challenging them to negotiate, recombine and navigate across a network of performances the dynamics of knowledge/power in Danish noble society against the forces that have led it to dysfunction and collapse. This technology of branching and reactive scripting serves to abstract, systematize and adapt the process of adaptation itself, producing from the engagement of a reader with the game-text clusters of organic (re)writing that stimulate diverse reflections upon the nature and meaning of time, agency, choice, environment, and the nexus of their collisions within which a tragedy gestates, a diverse series of perspectives engendered precisely by the application of contemporary technologies to the refreshment and recontextualization of classic works of art, the processes and implications of which this paper shall attempt to trace.

Keywords:

Hamlet, Shakespeare, Tragedy, Videogames, Adaptation.

Introduction: (Up)Setting the Scene

In an essay on what is perhaps the most iconic work of art produced by a playwright whose stature has spanned long centuries, the critic William Hazlitt

declares, "It is we who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history." (1817, 84). Indeed, the Bard's ghostly tragedy abounds in matrices of shifting selves and tales retold, from Horatio's mentions in the text itself to the dark omens that befell "the most high and palmy state of Rome" (1.1) before the fall of Caesar (a metatheatrical reference to events portrayed in Shakespeare's prior work) to the profusion of retellings and interpretations the play has gone on to produce- Burnett in a study of *Hamlet's* countless adaptations across global cinema makes a case for the play as "the world's most frequently filmed text" (2019, 1). The tale of the Danish court's fall, as it unfolds across five acts, contains within itself multitudes struggling to be heard and escape, a saturation of narratives that drive characters down labyrinths of speculation and set in motion spiralling conspiracies as they all vie to control the narrative they feel tightening around them, staking claims to it via monologues, recollection, rumour mongering and tangentiality- "words, words, words" (2.2), as Hamlet decries. This density of signification and hermeneutics provides grounds as fertile as they are haunted for adaptation, trotting ghosts and skulls free from graves like the titular prince himself, or indeed garlanding with flowers and songs symbolic of its myriad polyvocal characters in the fashion of subtle Ophelia- "O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits/ Should be as mortal as an old man's life?" (4.5).

It is Ophelia indeed, in all her weavings of wits and mortality, who supplies the beating heart of this paper's subject of study- *Elsinore*, a 2019 adaptation of Hamlet into the medium of a videogame. Of all the mass media platforms that intermediate and texture art, videogames are perhaps the most visibly technological on account of their foregrounding of the interactive apparatus through the delineation of certain functions mapped to buttons and controls whereby a 'player' (as opposed to an 'audience' that implicitly receives and perceives a largely different type of 'player' in a stage or film production) may precipitate certain outcomes, possibilities and reactions within the responsive field of significations that constitutes the ludic canvas. As such, while the agency and perspective of a subject engaging with and acted upon by an artistic event or design mutatively and multifariously informs the affect and 'reading' of an art-as-work in every medium, the import of the player's choices is of special centrality and recognition in the videogame, generating fabrication itself, and

engendering the scripted through activation of branching probabilities, not unlike an act of improvisation worked into the process of a play that is necessarily integrated into the narrative enactment and also produced from it in a cycle of interpretative cross-causality. The nature and potential of such an iterative medium are doubly fitting in the case of *Elsinore*, which looks to adapt not only the character-driven tragedy of *Hamlet* with its lengthy meditations upon action, consequence and the intersections between necessity and autonomy but also to do so from the perspective of Ophelia, a character who floats always about the margins and interstices of the male characters in the text, her perspectives on the loss of all normalcy semantically and literally “drowned, drowned” (4.7) by the events of the play.

At the frontiers of an age when technology wrought rapid and radical metamorphoses in the capacities of art, cultural critic Walter Benjamin proposed the intriguing argument that: “The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form.” (1935, 237). *Hamlet* is a play deeply interested in testing the edges of dramatic temporality, infusing with ambiguity and discontinuity the events that unfold across the acts, bursting at the seams with a panoply of ballads, recollections, projections, histories, myths and even other tragedies that remind us constantly of the fragility of the unified ‘stage’ that supplied the dramatist’s sole plane of expression and operation at the time but could not possibly convey the complexity of the inner worlds and epistemic genealogies that define how its numerous characters experience space and time- as the iconic Ghost muses, “But this eternal blazon must not be/ To ears of flesh and blood.” (1.5). In this vein, much has been written about the intersections of technology and Shakespeare, aiming to explore how the material facilities the Bard had at hand shaped his artistic approaches and how they were woven and stretched by his ambitions in turn, as well as how the resources and tools of today might provide new perspectives and avenues of exploring his work.

Critiquing the practice of “Original Practices” Shakespeare attempts paradoxically to recreate the circumstances of production that would have been contemporary to the Bard’s companies, Worthen writes, “Any medium defines the instruments

of interaction, but not their process or meaning, the work they are capable of doing.” (413). This perspective, which sees Shakespearean drama as being neither independent of its technological means and not entirely bound by them, but rather in a state of constant experimental and practical tension, is expressed also by Rampling in her retrospective on Elizabethan technologies- “On the whole, the “brave new world” of Tudor knowledge-making lay elsewhere — between the commercially minded Antonio, the eponymous merchant of Venice, and the “rude mechanicals” of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” (40). Technological concerns in Shakespearean drama revolve not only around the machinery used to stage the production, but also the broader technological revolutions that transformed Elizabethan society as the Bard wrote, with his plays often employing machinery as a means to dramatize broader questions of identity, purpose and change, the parts and cogs of the soul- as Chiari notes in an analysis of how the rise of mechanical clocks over traditional avenues of timekeeping is echoed in Shakespeare’s plays: “The improvements in early modern horology increasingly compartmentalised the lives of the Elizabethan subjects. Shakespeare’s contemporaries therefore had to learn to live with the pressure of linear time, in a shadowed and saddened present.” (219). Cohen advances a step further and interprets the very characters of Shakespeare’s plays as living technologies and cyborgs, converting and being converted to flows of data across the dramatic apparatus: “In an attempt to make sense of these strange new artefacts and practices, authors like Shakespeare often depicted them in human terms, and they also described human beings themselves as technologies.” (177).

In the context of these perspectives, we may appreciate the richness of artistic opportunity provided by the adaptation of Shakespeare into new technologies, insofar as they enable firstly an exploration of his plots and themes in new media with an increased range of available spatio-temporal and generic manipulations to contextualize the subject, and secondly the infusions of contemporary sociopolitical discourses and perspectives into the frameworks of classic pieces, fitting them physically and figuratively into (post)modern engines of signification. This paper endeavours accordingly to examine how Ophelia and, by extension, the multitudes of marginal and phantasmal characters in the simultaneously microcosmic and closeted society of Elsinore (as space and simulation) are imbued with voices and velocities through the medium of the game, tracing

these articulations and manifestations along three primary lines of influence and exposure. First, we employ a historicist approach to trace how the work illumines the wider sociopolitical undercurrents shaping Danish royal society as relevant to the background and conclusion of the play's action. Next, we employ feminist and queer readings to engage with the game's approach to casting-as-light-and-shadow a more diverse Elsinore. Lastly, we draw upon formalism and post-structural philosophy to discuss the metatheatrical reflections upon tragedy, adaptation and artistic imagination presented by the text's approach to "ending".

"The Play's the Thing": Rules for Elsinore

Before we begin to discuss what the text expresses, we must engage with the medium of its expression, the form being of utmost importance in a work that adapts a work connected so deeply and consciously with the dramatic. The "gameplay loop" of Elsinore, is an assemblage of obstacles and approaches that shapes the interaction between player and game by presenting certain tools in conjunction with certain goals and challenging the player to recombine these in ways that correspond to a scripted 'solution', deducing and experimenting their way to an ideal enactment of the game's performance-as-didactics, lies in a literal looping of time experienced by Ophelia as part of the text's central conceit. Whenever she dies as part of the tragic tumble of dominoes and allegiances that sweep across the castle in later acts, Ophelia awakens anew in her chambers at the outset of the play's events, shortly after Hamlet has glimpsed his father's ghost and begins to plot avuncicide, presented now with the opportunity to alter future events to the extent of defusing the tragic collapse. Any work of adaptation, in addition to being post the text it adapts in the sense of the artists being acquainted with its various qualities, characters and conclusions after a 'complete' reading, must also place itself pre the source text on account of being designed by artists who do not have the luxury of a "blind" first reading again and are bound to have read the text in every subsequent instance with an awareness of its developments and denouements, recognizing patterns of foreshadowing, dynamics of tension, and unravelling threads of causality that accordingly inform their own creative choices in the adaptive text as it recreates from (or against) a blueprint and impression a response or reflection of the "origin"- as Rosenberg notes in a reflection upon various adaptations and readings of the

Danish tragedy: “Perhaps the most difficult handicap, for those of us who would interpret *Hamlet*, is that we know it too well. [...] Can we put aside memory and imagine anew? Re-live the hopes- and pains- of the wooed girl and her lover? And other expectations we have forgotten we had?” (1992, xv). In *Elsinore*, this tension between prescience and deviation is represented by Ophelia experiencing visions of the major events of the play, ranging from the appearance of the ghost to the killing of Claudius to her drowning, before she is met by a hysterical *Hamlet* directly after having witnessed his father’s ghost, who rants at her about how everything is rotten and charges away, leaving Ophelia bemused and uneasy. She lives through the unfurling of *Hamlet* as largely concomitant with the play proper until a point shortly after the accidental killing of Polonius by the prince, when a hooded figure accosts her, declaring that the Danish court must fall and Ophelia is the “lamb that must be sacrificed” (Golden Glitch Studios, 2019), stabbing her fatally and leading her to rise once more at the opening of both the tragedy and the game’s(re)generative loop, painfully aware that her visions were no mere dream.

Positioned now in a liminal temporality that is necessarily both before and after *Hamlet*, imbued with the benefit of hindsight and the weight of prophecy, Ophelia reflects: “I’m being given a second chance [...] I can change it. I have to.” (G.G.S). In every subsequent loop, of which most players shall experience countless due to the immense complexity of Ophelia’s objective, our new protagonist cuts through *Hamlet*’s forceful monologues with a summation of all he’s seen and a terse “I know” (G.G.S), arresting completely his train of thought, which is predicated upon *Hamlet* having access to knowledge that the majority of the play’s characters do not at all times, and symbolically wresting the position of the prime knower from the prince to his neglected lover, although as readers of *Hamlet* shall attest, information in Shakespeare’s tragedy is as likely to arrest action as it is to fuel it, and when action is finally taken, it leads to gruesome brutality- “My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (4.4). Accordingly, Ophelia is likely to hasten disaster in her attempts to simply share what she knows on account of how explosive and poisonous the injection of foresight into a member of this high-strung, prejudiced and ambitious court can be. The prime way of precipitating reactions and altering events in the game is to gather information through

conversations, reading and eavesdropping, after which Ophelia can convey these secrets and probabilities to characters in subsequent loops, allowing her, for instance, to warn Polonius of the threat Hamlet poses and save her father. However, if Polonius does survive by being wary of Hamlet's outburst and fleeing his hiding spot in Queen Gertrude's chambers before he is stabbed, he may still end up dying after Claudius, seeing him as a loyalist to the old King Hamlet who is grooming his popular son Laertes to usurp Claudius in a rebellion, poisons him in a private meeting with the same vial he used to slay his brother. Hence, tragedy in Elsinore is framed not as a particularly unfortunate configuration of perilous events arising from heightened emotions and deadly assumptions, but as the logical conclusion of sociopolitical relations in spaces charged with corruption, anomie and a hegemonic celebration of the cults of warrior masculinity, familial fidelity and blood revenge- as Raymond Williams observes: "Before, we could not recognise tragedy as social crisis; now, commonly, we cannot recognise social crisis as tragedy." (1966, 89)

It is this arrangement of systemic and genealogical traumas and frictions that endlessly thwart Ophelia's mission of remediation, symbolized most starkly in her initial cause of death, which is not, as commonly assumed after her offstage demise in the original, the drowning of "one incapable of her own distress" (4.7), but rather a politically motivated murder by an assassin who muses, "They'll think you drowned, the louts." (G.G.S) and repeatedly hunts her down in subsequent loops until she uncovers their identity- a spy installed by Prince Fortinbras within the Danish court to report on affairs and sow discord to facilitate the foreign prince's plans of conquering a state he rightly assumes to be "disjoint and out of frame" (1.2) following the death of King Hamlet. This creative decision, in addition to foregrounding the sociopolitical forces that swirl beneath the psychosexual spirals and tawdry affairs of the Danish nobility and reflecting the dire consequences and symbolic ripples of their disastrous (in)actions, also firmly contests the reading of Ophelia's death as the suicide of a woman who succumbs where Hamlet is driven by the madness of loss. Indeed, the assumption that Ophelia's sheltered upbringing in a highly patriarchal society has imbued her with feminine frailty of mind is precisely what the assassin banks upon in their scheme, correctly predicting that her death shall be seen as the fading of a helpless little girl in the face of masculine cruelties and so provoke the

men of her family, such as Laertes, to act in grisly revenge for her to restore lost honour, rupturing the court into factions. This apparatus of near-mechanically efficient misogyny strikes also when Ophelia tries to tell any of the men in power about her visions, as they swiftly conclude she has lost her mind and consign her to a madhouse, with Polonius maintaining, "You'll be safe, dear" (G.G.S) as his daughter is carted off for the rest of her life to a cell in one of the grimmest achievable endings- a plight that reflects Gilbert and Gubar's evocation of "isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis" (1979, 51) to describe the plight of the women of past centuries who dared to be authors- a meta narrative authorship that, in Ophelia's case, pertains to the tenuous right to voice her own experiences.

"Of Ladies Most Deject and Wretched": Feminist Possibilities

Elsinore does not separate its feminist themes of women's erasure and silencing from its sociopolitical portraiture of patriarchal and masculinist royal politics but manages instead to profoundly integrate them, as the spy in question is revealed to be Lady "Brit" Brockenhuus, the daughter of a powerful Danish noble family who has been charged by her parents to operate in their best interests by either securing a match with Hamlet or orchestrating his death to clear the way for Fortinbras, both approaches demanding the death of Ophelia. One of the game's most essential original creations, Brit functions as a middle ground between the powerful yet passive Queen Gertrude, who is herself revealed to be of Habsburg royalty sent to Denmark as a child to secure a match with Hamlet's line, and the disempowered and marginal Ophelia, who is cast as Black (specifically of Moorish descent) in this adaptation, recontextualizing the collapse of her relationship with Hamlet. In Brit, we see a woman determined to move upward and hence exercising those strategies of ingratiation, manipulation, commodification and the elimination of potential "competitors" which constitute the only avenues by which a woman might secure upward mobility in a rigid patriarchy that relentlessly denigrates femininity- "frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2), as Hamlet loudly demonstrates. This destructive mindset is one that Brit has been groomed into not only by her own family but even the other women she may have looked up to as ideals of conduct, evinced when Ophelia learns that Gertrude has been

concealing the letters a homesick and miserable Brit has been sent from her mother to encourage her to grow up and discard her old life, a process Gertrude went through herself before “I learned to find my happiness here” (G.G.S), reflecting the vicious cycle of trauma and repression that comprises a woman’s journey to “maturity” in Elsinore society, a process further enforced by the punishments that women like Ophelia and Brit are subjected to when they behave “childish” by not readily moulding themselves to the performances of femininity expected of them.

While Ophelia can report on Brit’s activities after the discovery of her spying and solve the immediate problem of her assassination, this only pushes her survival forward by a day, as the invasion of Fortinbras that sweeps in at the end of Hamlet’s fifth act continues regardless, and the brutal interrogation by starvation that Brit is subjected to in the castle’s dungeons yields no helpful results, representing the text’s rejection of torture as a viable solution to the problem of imperialist encroachment. It is only by befriending Brit that Ophelia can truly make progress in stalling the invasion, bonding with her over their shared struggles as Brit laments in one of the more unguarded moments, “If only we’d been born as men” (G.G.S), they could fight and paint and travel as they pleased. Overcoming by consistent kindness, empathy and connection the lenses of dehumanization and utilitarianism through which Brit has learned to process every relationship until she can finally believe in Ophelia’s idea of an Elsinore that can support itself without foreign intervention and where she can love and live unhindered, Ophelia is able with Brit’s insight to locate Fortinbras’ hiding-place outside the castle where he oversees the plan of attack, although his arrest by the guards is temporary and indeed only cements the certainty of war with Norway, the difference being that Denmark is now marginally better prepared for the long conflict to come. Ultimately, the best Ophelia can do is buy herself precious time, the date of a calamity stretched forward by degrees to secure her more space to study, experiment and contemplate, reflecting the deep-set nature of her society’s issues insofar as war, conquest and slaughter, being the foundations on which the monarchic state is built, shall necessarily return with every shift in political dynamics as spectres far more imposing than King Hamlet’s. In his magisterial study of historic fiction, Lukács remarks that: “the central theme of drama is the collision of social forces at their most extreme

and acute point." (1937, 97), and Elsinore is the site of just such a collision, as the problems of gender, race, property, power and class radiate forth from the sparks ignited by the death of a king, although we gradually learn that the seeds of what is "rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4) have been laid long before, and hide traces not only of cruel kings and lost wars but also of phantasmal women and lost stories like Ophelia's very own.

In keeping with the game's adaptive treatment of Hamlet's disjointed and metamorphic temporality, Ophelia must delve into the castle's past to save its future, and as she investigates the tales the denizens have to tell, a piece of hearsay she commonly encounters is the tale of Queen Astrid, mother of King Hamlet and Claudius, who is "spoken of only in stories" (G.G.S) about her descent into insanity and the cruelty of her warlike husband King Alexander, whose spartan methods of parenting are implied to have cultivated in his sons a similar brutality, the mixture of despair and cruelty pooling to overflow and poison all of Elsinore in the figure of Hamlet. An archetypical madwoman in the attic, it is the trial of Astrid and not any of the looming men of Elsinore's past that illumines the blood beneath its flagstones and the ghosts upon its walls, leading Ophelia to discover that her wretched predicament of endlessly looping tragedy is by no means unique, but also plagued King Hamlet and his predecessors, a futile struggle waged across multiple generations to arrest the spiral of Elsinore toward disaster. At the culmination of her search, Ophelia encounters Simona, a servant whom King Alexander took as a lover and Queen Astrid accordingly despised, having her killed in an event that sparked off a profusion of loops much like the ones Ophelia is confined in, leading Simona to suffer through "countless worlds, each worse than the last" (G.G.S) until she finally engineered Astrid's fall into madness as a means of revenge and engineered an escape, choosing to sacrifice some and save others in a decision symbolized by a mechanic key to how to game handles the question of a conclusion to and an escape from the tragic setting- the Book of Dionysus.

"The Story is Extant": Queer Adaptations

This tome operates as a reference to the Greek deity to whom the City Dionysia, site of tragedies that number among the world's oldest and grandest, was dedicated,

and as observed by Easterling, “the secret story of Dionysus’ dismemberment, death and rebirth and the pattern of mystic initiation for which the story served” (1997, 52) renders him a deity fitted uniquely to the structure and themes of tragedy, being a bender of forms, intoxicator of sensibilities and fount of ecstatic rebirth and apotheosis that inspired cultic fervour. Accordingly, the process of Ophelia’s “infinite hell” (G.G.S) can be departed by use of the book to select a fate, accepting a possible ending to the tragedy of Elsinore at the cost of all others— a decision symbolized in the technological medium by the game’s deletion of a player’s save file, which contains all the information they have toiled to gather and seed over the loops, in exchange for the playing of an animatic voiced by Ophelia that narrates the life she led moving forward. This opportunity to make her own destiny, to receive for all her pain and efforts in learning the dynamics of the castle a way to finally alter rather than merely responding to them, is a triumph crucially gained through Ophelia’s commitment to uncovering and engaging with the stories of those seemingly invisible women who haunt and shadow Elsinore’s history. Chief among these is Ophelia’s own mother, Elise, who we learn was quarantined during a plague, decades ago, out of a racist belief that she was a carrier on account of her foreign origins, perishing in a shack sequestered from the rest of the castle, representing the ugliness of the bigoted and exclusionary past that Elsinore strives to repress from history and is yet inseparable from in consequence— as Ophelia laments: “My mother died alone, with no one to talk to.” (G.G.S). Nonetheless, it is through the diaries left by Elise that Ophelia can piece together the final pieces of the mystery and locate the elusive Simona, who was herself quite close to Elise, seeing her as the only ally she had in the long nightmare of Elsinore’s past, and accordingly hands over the book to rescue her daughter. Hence, the text asserts that though Elise is marginalized from the formal histories of the court, and its genealogies of illustrious thoroughbreds, her kindness and empathy live on both in and for a daughter who grew up not knowing her, this inheritance of hope and survival acting as a sharp contrast to the destructive void that the loss of Hamlet’s seemingly ideal and looming patriarch leaves. In an assertion of the value of the ballads about cheated and suffering women sung by Ophelia in the original play, Luke argues: “In her subversive and anti-tragic role as a storyteller not just for herself, but for abused women, Ophelia acts as the first feminist critic of Hamlet. She refuses to accept the inherent dignity of the suffering of elite men, and instead voices the suffering of any and all abandoned

women.” (2020, 15)– a capacity for restaging and moulding genres that is carried to its fullest conclusion in *Elsinore*.

The Book of Dionysus, both in the process of its acquisition and the possibilities that it illumines, reveals across its pages a panoply of narratives and characterizations that do not and cannot spring to life in any singular “telling” of the *Hamlet* story, but compose via the medium of the videogame a constellation of readings, for adaptations are functions of their environment and every retelling must recreate the world from whence it unfolds. The cast of *Elsinore* is thus both at first glance and across deeper explorations decidedly diverse in dimensions that range from expansions upon Shakespearean subtext, such as Horatio’s deeply homoerotic respect for his “sweet prince” (5.2) being verbalized in private company as love, to integrations that reflect historic patterns of migration and movement often elided in popular imaginations of European history, such as Horatio also being of Indian descent from a Calcutta merchant who was raised in Europe, although these differences are not taken as a matter of course despite their historical viability, and generate continual subtle frictions on account of their tenuous tolerance within a society predominated by ideals of hetero normative white masculinity– as Horatio remarks, the “slightest insinuations” (G.G.S) about his sexuality outside of trusted circles could cost him his life, and quips that he prefers “my devas and asuras” (G.G.S) when asked to pray at the chapel by the chief of the castle guard, Bernardo.

This very chief, who in Shakespeare appears only in the first act to report the portentous appearance of the ghost– “Is not this something more than fantasy?” (1.1)– is made multifaceted in myriad ways by *Elsinore*, serving not only as a childhood friend to Ophelia who is relatively more receptive to her Cassandran counsel than other men but also later revealed to moonlight as an actor in plays staged at the town outside the castle, a place Ophelia is physically denied access to by the guards until she uncovers their gambling rings and blackmails them to let her go, revealing the intersections of power, gender and mobility at play. These complex dynamics find further expression (and repression) in Bernardo, who plays women’s roles in the fashion of a young Elizabethan actor under the name of Katherine (a metatheatrical nod to the character of the same name from a Shakespeare play about the taming of deviant gender performances),

but is increasingly aware of the dropping tolerance for his continued presentation as feminine as he grows older and therefore diverges from the ghettoized and exoticized forms of queerness indulged in by patriarchal society only insofar as they are appealing without threatening in any meaningful way the prevailing standards, a dress that may be easily thrown on and off, though as Bernardo confesses, "I thought I could separate these two parts of myself, but it's tearing me apart" (G.G.S), an adversarial and tormented relationship with his queerness further burdened by the fact that Claudius knows of Bernardo's double life and uses it to compel his obedience by threatening to reveal "what you are" (G.G.S)- the action of a patriarchal apparatus that is by no means oblivious to queerness, but can indeed cunningly subsume and exploit it to turn the interests of marginal subjects against each other. Nonetheless, it is through Horatio's advice on Brit's secret melancholy and Bernardo's willingness to trust her claims about Fortinbras that Ophelia is able to quell the invasion long enough to procure the Book, the diversity of the castle proving ultimately to be a source of resistance and freedom that she can tap into by embracing her own intersections of race and gender, and proving therefore the value of colouring, queering and reorienting Shakespearean narratives to imagine new outcomes and possibilities that arise not *despite*, but *through* the latent themes of the text- as Jarrett-Macauley in an introduction to a collection of essays upon Shakespeare and diversity remarks, "far from thinking in monolithic terms of a 'Black British Shakespeare' or 'British Asian Shakespeare', the reader is invited to embrace the conceptual horizons of diaspora and the vocabularies of liminality, hybridity and dislocation." (2019, 7).

The Book allows Ophelia to potentially discover and channel shades of queerness and post coloniality within herself in a manner that reflects the characters who expand her horizons, or to embody with all the required pragmatism the conniving personae of authority that she has perilously learned to navigate- a capacity for "becoming" that reflects Ophelia's dualistic role as both character and actor, player and agent, on account of being controlled by and therefore controlling the reader-as-interacting-subject of the game. The player-Ophelia's choice of allies, loyalties, placements and revelations during a given loop thus constructs in the social field her image for this particular iteration, a series of ripples in the body personal-politic that connects and detaches her from various flows of authority and influence, a juggling of probabilities that intertwines with the player's

imagination as they experiment with various combinations of facts and ideas, unlock threads of thought and action, and choose to trace or terminate them relative to their capacity to disrupt or support a certain assemblage of dynamics necessary to generate a deviation sustainable enough to warrant accounting in the book, new pages sketched by the blooming of performative possibility- as Sharp observes, "A game play experience is crafted through rules, mechanics, and goals in order to generate a space for player actions. [...] Games can be a medium through which play makes material both concept and form." (2015, 82) On a loop where Ophelia shadows Hamlet or Claudius, she can accordingly gather important insights into their secrets and needs, ingratiate herself to them, rectify their most glaring dysfunctions to secure stability at the Danish court, and even engineer relationships with them by eliminating competitors like Brit or Gertrude to rise to queenhood herself, understanding the shortest route to power for women under patriarchy is to align herself with powerful men and enjoy safety and respect through proxy exercises of their prestige, attaining freedom through captivity. An approach that dismisses the tragic royal core for the peripheries of text and context conversely provides uncertainty and opportunity, allowing Ophelia to elope with a barkeep from the town who is implied to be a version of Othello from before the events of his tragedy, connecting with Ophelia over their shared status as outsiders in an ending that exchanges "Permanence for Passion" (G.G.S), or join the crew of pirates the abducts Hamlet en route to England before the fifth act, being taken as a lover and protégé by another original character, the queer pirate queen Grace O'Malley, who sees in Ophelia a spirit desirous of freedom and willing to forgo the ease of nobility for the thrill of liberation, opening to a girl sheltered in Elsinore the wealth and fate of the seven seas in an ending that trades "Predictability for Adventure" (G.G.S).

Consistent among all these endings is a sense of bitter sweetness, the notion of a change in Ophelia's destiny that is not a perfect inversion from crushing tragedy to restorative comedy, but rather a sacrifice that reflects the weight and power of a choice, opening up some paths at the cost of others in a movement that both stems from and shapes the quintessence of character as it derives and diverges from the environment. The most triumphant outcomes contain still motes of sadness- should Ophelia "Sacrifice Innocence For Power" to take the throne, avert the war with Norway, check the nobility and elevate Denmark to

a superpower, she muses that the cost of greatness is to leave her “only half-human” (G.G.S), the perfect monarch with no life outside her duties. Conversely, the grimmest endings issue stray cathartic sparks of joy- should Ophelia choose to “Sacrifice Struggle for Peace” and let Fortinbras’ invasion conquer Denmark without protest, the former Danish nobility sinks into silent mediocrity and dies forgotten as their new emperor consolidates stability through ruthless domination, freeing the characters from the toil of struggling to save a doomed society, as Ophelia concludes- “We paid for this peace with our lives. I hope the future is a better one because of it.” (G.G.S). In *Man and Superman*, Bernard Shaw, a playwright whose talents rival the Bard’s, posits, “there are two tragedies in life. One is to not get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it.” (1903, 174)- a sentiment echoed across *Elsinore*’s many endings, as they offer in tragic fashion didactic reflections upon life, love and the roads down which circumstance and dreams lead us, a thought-provoking exercise whose open-ended efficacy stands greatly improved by the technological apparatus through which it is enacted, enabling the reader to engage at the closest levels with the forces of tragedy and, in doing so, discover their capacities for engagement and imagination refracted through the text’s capacity for organic hermeneutics, a waltz of responsive (re)readings that wholly integrates an audience into the collective and continuous creative process of interpreting *Hamlet*.

Conclusion: News Ex Machina

In their seminal analysis of the Enlightenment philosophies that bridged and blockaded the centuries between the Bard’s age and modernity, cultural critics Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that “The great artists were never those whose works embodied style in its least fractured, most perfect form but those who adopted the style as a rigour to set against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth.” (103). In *Hamlet*, we may mark the sentiments of an artist who wishes to transcend prevailing stylistic approaches to space and time on stage, portraying through a cast of characters immersed in private narratives and secret trajectories the subjectivity and mutability of human purposes as they both texture and are oriented by time, which offers here and there the opportunity for monologues and asides, for woven ballads and opulent retellings, for conversations with skulls and pursuits of ghosts, but reinforces ultimately its

metanarrative authority over action and duration to pull the play toward a close, regardless and relentless of how prepared its characters may be for cutting denouements, for in a tragedy all (dis)positions are constellated- as *Hamlet* reflects before his final bout: "The readiness is all." (5.2).

Ophelia's predicament in *Elsinore*, wracked upon a wheel of time that is both furious in progress and intractable in repetition, accordingly mirrors and amplifies the pain suffered by Hamlet in the original, positioning her as a profoundly postmodern protagonist who occupies the latest position in an infinite genealogy of adaptations, tragedies by the thousand accounted and extrapolated in her struggle to escape, to distinguish her aesthetic and material existence, to wrest from her travails some dram of meaning. She, too, turns apathetic and detached as the possibility of a bloodless ending grows increasingly remote- "I've stopped counting my deaths" (G.G.S)- and verges on despair as the combinations slip by, each with their harsh price exacted for every gain, and faces that fact, that once she uses the Book, it shall pass on to someone else just as it did from Simona to her, for so long as there exists inequality, repression and deception, tragedy shall never be far behind. This negative truth, progressed by regressions, contextualized via a thousand fractured narratives as leafed past in both the Book and the game, embodies the didactic realism that has shimmered in every age through the prism that art holds to life.

In its employment of the videogame medium's unique technological capacity to sustain alternative ontologies, progressive epistemologies and nested adaptations that construct even unto themselves complex dynamics of collapse and reformation, *Elsinore* succeeds in the lofty undertaking of abstracting the tragic apparatus of causes, forces, influences and environments into a system that organically responds to the player-as-reader's endeavours to appropriate and mediate its mechanics toward a retelling. In doing so, it achieves secondly the most profound possible connection between audience and actors, sensation and scripting, by generating at and through the nexus of reader-text intersection, an anatomy of interpellations, a procedural "body" shared between Ophelia and the player that integrates through identification the reader into the field of tragic affectation, until the very sight of the seconds ticking away upon the interface's clock impels and orients player agency toward specific goals, rendering them

unable to retreat for even a moment from the inexorable immediacy of dramatic momentum, transformed in this association into an agent chemical and heuristic that precipitates and is condensed by the flows of ludic signification- “the time is out of joint” (1.5), Hamlet may rue, but in *Elsinore*, the nerves and muscles of temporality have been worked perfectly and precisely into the body subjective. There await no perfect conclusions at the culmination of this experience, but glory still blazes in the choosing, value arising from the act of living and erring and learning from these wounds and woes the measure of our lives and times- so the spectre of King Hamlet advises a distraught Ophelia as she considers myriad futures: “choice is the sword that cuts through the darkness” (G.G.S). As a work that laces tragic forces into the generative machinery of videogame code, *Elsinore* is a work intimately invested in the questions of choice and agency that have defined the tragic genre since its primal origins and found famous expression in *Hamlet*, a text it pays loving tribute to precisely by daring to treat it not as an assemblage of events, but an engine of possibilities, masterfully adapting adaptation itself in the tale(s) of a character who dreams of enacting something new.

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