PLAYING WITH THE PAST: AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN THE SHAKESPEARE-SCAPE

Elena-Ancuța ȘTEFAN
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract: *The interest in theatergoing has decreased exponentially in the past decades among young consumers of entertainment, as video-games propose a more attractive alternative, in which the player has to make certain decisions in order for the story to move forward. The player participates in the action through the digitalized version of the play, which creates duality and confusion between the person outside the computer who clicks the mouse and the actor who voices the character in the game. Moreover, the text is re-staged every time another player starts the game – he or she can become the playwright as well. The play* Hamlet *by William Shakespeare has been adapted into two video-games that were announced in 2010 and 2019 respectively and one downloadable content (DLC) that was integrated into a larger game. They were not extremely popular at the time of their release, but were among the projects that shifted the way in which the audience views and engages with the theater-scape. In this sense, I argue that video-games make canonical texts available to a new level of audience, while maintaining their self-standing independent unity, regardless of their adaptation nature, and that theater is transformed by these digitalized self-involving interactive fictions.*

Keywords: Hamlet, *adaptations, video-games, theatrical space, new historicism, new media*

Video-games offer a different manner of engaging with a literary text; the player actually participates in the action through the digitalized version of it, which creates duality and confusion between the person outside the computer who clicks the mouse or taps the screen and the actor who voices the character in the game. In her book, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (2018), the literary critic, Gina Bloom refers to the person in front of the screen as a "participatory spectator" (7) due to the interchangeability between the opposite parties, player-actor and player-spectator. The text is re-staged every time another player starts the game. Bloom's "participatory spectator" can be extended to the level of the playwright as well, since the players are the ones winning or losing or, in other words, the ones who rewrite the digitalized text with each game. Such a project involves a broader discussion, as it attracts questions regarding theories of adaptation and intertextuality and how these two are intermingled within the digitally rewritten text.

The questions which further my research are prompted by the video-games and the extent to which they represent a better way of engaging with Shakespearean plays than theatergoing in the present, judging by the new historicist perspectives of present-day literary criticism – thus, how is theater changed by contemporary means of storytelling? Furthermore, are video-games a good way of keeping canonical texts in the present? In this manner, *Hamlet*[1] by William Shakespeare has been subjected to digitalization or pixelization. The play has been adapted into two video-games that were announced in 2010 and 2019 respectively and one downloadable content (DLC) that was integrated into a larger game. They were not extremely popular at the time of their release, but were among the projects that shifted the way in which audiences view and engage with the theater-scape. Because the interest in theatergoing has decreased exponentially in the past decades among young consumers of entertainment, video-games propose a more attractive alternative, in which the player has to make certain decisions in order for the story to move forward. In this sense, I argue that videogames make canonical texts available to a new level of audience, while maintaining their self-standing independent work, regardless of their adaptation nature, and that theater is transformed by these digitalized self-involving interactive fictions. Moreover, such theoretical approaches as the adaptation theory or new historicism are further enabling for a more profound reading of what can be deemed as frivolous or unsophisticated.

Pixel(-ing) Theater
The developments in media culture have brought about a tendency towards adaptations, which would conceive new meanings for texts taken for granted or forgotten, as films, comics or video-games are considered textual, insomuch that they can either be analyzed as independent works or can be directly associated with the original. In the article "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success' – Biologically," Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon argue that adaptation theory can be seen as a biological process, because like genes, stories multiply and duplicate themselves "in changing environments" (444). These environments that the two critics talk about are, in literary terms, the historical or social contexts, when a piece of work is rewritten, transformed, adapted into something new that would fit and correlate to the present tense. It only makes sense that in the current digitalized era, writers or creators themselves would want to adapt

---

[1] All references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are keyed to the Bantam Books edition, edited by David Bevington (1980). Quotations to act, scenes and lines will be given parenthetically in the text.

canonical texts into digitalized version, and films are just one segment of the entire process.

Video-games as a means of storytelling in the twenty-first century can also be perceived in relation to new historicism, because they are not faithful copies of the original, as stated above, but they are representative for the societal context they were created in, even though video-games extract much of the action from the original text. In this sense, Stephen Greenblatt's study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* accommodates a standard for the ways in which literary criticism could examine old texts as new, to the extent of creating contemporary reinterpretations, even for imagistic forms of texts. Stephen Greenblatt is among the critics who have studied the social endeavors of the sixteenth and seventieth centuries, by way of analysis of the plays written in this time interval. He employs new historicism in describing the extent to which the past is relevant in present social conditions. New historicism implies a theoretical attitude to writing, which has been applied in Renaissance studies in particular. He further argues that the personality is formed through collective structures according to new historicism and thus literature is another type of creation that the community creates which, in exchange, is involved in restructuring the community cultural identity that completes the circle of self-creation (Greenblatt 1-2). In connection to Greenblatt's theories, Jean E. Howard also describes in her essay, "New Historicism in New Renaissance Studies," the concept of new historicism as being in truth a response against formalism or an attempt to reinterpret Renaissance texts as they are to be linked to social aspects of the period, by discussing Shakespearean texts (13). Therefore, she analyses the extents to which Greenblatt's studies make sense in explaining the correspondence between Shakespearean texts and more modern circumstances that can also be translated into contemporary meanings. She further discusses the importance of re-reading old texts in order to convey understandings of actual issues, be they of societal or literary nature.

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt's primary concern is the creation of personality. Greenblatt shows the sixteenth century as a pivotal moment in England's history and describes the requirements for the potential of self-designation. In a sequence of meticulous analyses, he explores how, in the sixteenth century, individuals became themselves by being compared to historically oriented personas or supernatural entities, provided by the culture of the time. Of all the many influencing factors on the book is the Neo-Freudian psychology of Lacan with its assumption that the result of the dialogue is not a cohesive and fully independent self, but a temporary and conflicting one (Greenblatt 2). Accordingly, in Greenblatt's research the human being is portrayed as the result of impersonal historical powers fundamentally antithetical to individualism, while disregarding the humanist premise that man (*sic*), the protean agent, governs the creation of his own identity. In this way,

due to their being adapted in games, Shakespeare's characters can be endowed with a whole new level of characteristics or humanism, since the player is the one setting the scene.

Greenblatt's critique relies mainly on early modern drama. He attempts to identify the link between culture and theatre in his evaluations – arguing that "self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meaning that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment" (3-4). Furthermore, according to Greenblatt, "literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of these concrete behaviors of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (4). In the case of video-games, the transmitted codes are interlocked within digitalized versions of the adapted text, only this time the performative is interconnected directly to the spectatorship characteristic that each Renaissance play assumes.

Given the authenticity of Shakespeare's portrayals, Greenblatt seems confident in analyzing the playwright's characters from both a fictional and a real point of view. Thus, he argues that "our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Greenblatt 5). By interconnecting the external social factors and the internal fictional components in an integrative correspondence, there is a better chance of understanding an individual or a certain context. Furthermore, Greenblatt believes that the self-discourse has no particular source of reference, but develops continuously in reaction to multiple sources of cultural influence, both in literary paradigms and in the creation of real lives on paper. The critic also examines the interpretative modes of literary texts, embedded in the social context of a certain period of time and argues that narratives become creations of culture, built on more than one consciousness (Greenblatt 5). The meanings a text generates are determined by the social, political, religious, and economic conditions of a particular society. Such factors propagate throughout communities and transgress their authorship and their point of origin, becoming the media through which suggestive texts reflect the philosophy of a certain period's community.

Part of the new historicism approach are all the various adaptations of Shakespeare's texts, especially of the plays, through which the relevance of the playwright's works finds its way further into contemporary day. Thus, it is also important to discuss the differences between the distinct ways through which a story can be rendered. To this extent, the media through which a play's plot is portrayed has an important role in understanding it. While a theatrical piece has to respect certain rules regarding the length, and it also has to contain

certain comical elements, in order to ease and appease the audience, a video-game can accommodate both text and action in a lengthier narrative. A play, as a visual medium, can provide props and add to the spectators' imagining the story, but a game might go beyond this and imagine the entire scene in digitalized format, while also adding to the performative and receptive aspects of the play. Shakespeare, indeed, allowed for his audiences to fill in certain gaps with self-interpretations, but a play still does not allow for further dwelling upon certain matters, whereas a game, through lengthier narratives, can accommodate additional discussions and interpretations through the player's starting the game.

Theater audiences and video-game players
In the Elizabethan period, people of all ages and status would go to the Globe to get themselves immersed into compelling stories written by William Shakespeare or any other of his contemporaries. I argue that most notable for the reception and performance theory are the groundlings – the people standing on the lowest level, who were the closest to the stage, to the action itself. The actors could interact with them in a straightforward manner, with instances when the actor/character even addressed them directly, such as Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* or Hamlet might have done. Furthermore, the groundlings are immersed in the world of the theater – one such instance is Hamlet's description of them: "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow [...] split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise" (3.2.7–11). Hamlet refers to the audience on the low levels with contempt – however, it is not clear whether he refers to the groundlings/performers in the play or the groundlings/audience outside the play, and this confusion only blurs the boundaries between the fictional theater-scape and the real world. Moreover, in her article "Looking up the Groundling," Amy Rodgers describes the groundlings as uneducated and unable to see beyond the words of the actors on stage: "Coined by early modern playwrights, the groundlings connoted a spectatorial type defined largely by boisterous behavior, a preference for low comedy and bombastic acting, and a tendency to snack during performances" (75-6). In other words, Hamlet's line suggests that the audience fills a double function, that of character inside the play and of viewer outside the play. Although they are dismissed and seen throughout as marginal to the theatrical experience, groundlings can be seen as canvases on which the creative playwright paints. Rodgers further describes the groundlings in comparison with the aristocracy in the upper seats, asserting that while the privileged were detached and unengaged, as if they are "twin specters of modern visual technologies and audiences," the groundlings are "almost ekphrastically corporeal" – they can smell and feel every scene, even if their judging of the

play is only based on superficial reactions (Rodgers 78). They are most valuable to the world of the theater, because of their natural unfiltered gestures, passionate implication and natural response. They represent a certain type of raw audience that the twenty-first century could never go back to. Even if the Internet provided the world with the chance of writing and sharing their theatrical/cinematic experiences, this can never compare with the first-hand sharing of opinions or reactions with the others standing gathered in a tight place, shoulder to shoulder, as the Renaissance theater offered. In Shakespeare's time, the groundling was the first reviewer, the first proof-reader, who could further the creative genius of the playwright.

If, in the sixteenth and seventieth centuries, theater was the main form of entertainment – be it at the Globe or on the road, as some performers would tour around the country, present-day forms of amusement have expanded so much that the question posited upfront remains whether theatergoing is still a relevant form of entertainment or is something that people talk about using the past tense. The new digitalized media that emerged in the past decades developed immersive cinematic experiences and video-game playing that are part of people's daily vocabulary – entertainment is at a click away. Nowadays, theater is perceived as something for the elite, something for a certain group of people. Even the lower seats of the Globe have become something for the educated class. However, in the past, theatergoing was one immediate and cheap form of entertainment, as Gina Bloom argues (24). This is an aspect that can in turn advance the idea that there might exist a possibility of uniformity between theater spectacles and game-playing.

Virtual reality is another element that has revolutionized the way people – especially youth – spend their time, and video-game creators have become more and more interested in designing attractive stories, with appealing characters and plenty of tasks to be done, which transform the activity of playing into a real experience. All these developments have shifted the way the digital world of video-games is perceived, since they provide such a large palette of narratives, in which the player can actually participate. In this manner, I argue that the Renaissance groundling of the seventieth century and the theatergoer of the twentieth century have transformed into the video-game player of today. The concepts behind the participatory project remain the same – spectators come, enjoy, and leave – only this time, performance theory is expanded on the consumers' part, who become tridimensional, since they can be considered spectators, actors and playwrights all at the same time.

In addition, Daniel and Sidney Homan argue in their article "The Interactive Theater of Video Games" that "video game designers, writers and directors are starting to blur the lines between interactive theater and games," (169); since the connection between the groundling and the stage can be considered a raw envisionment of interactive theater, the player of today

becomes unknowingly the creator of his/her own stage, because of the tridimensional nature he or she has. Furthermore, as Gina Bloom argues in "Gaming the Stage," the fact that nowadays theater and games overlap is a predictable conclusion for premodern people, since "Medieval writers used the term *ludus* for both games and plays" (21-22). More than the historical link between the two terms, there is also a commercial linkage, because of the existence of playhouses built near gaming establishments – thus, by excellence, theater can be deemed as something that provokes amusement. Video-games might even be considered closer to the immediate reality of one's life, because of the "self-fashioning" that Greenblatt talks about in his work – that is, in regard to the decisions that the players have to make or the progress of the action itself (9). Furthermore, with games that are played in an online medium, it "becomes even more real since it depends on a society of gamers/actors/playwrights at the controls," as Homan and Homan argue (176). It is even clearer that the theater experience and audience can be accommodated within the gaming-scape, when it is played for an audience, as players sometimes broadcast gameplays that further their role in a certain type of a show reminiscing theatergoing.

Examining the structural elements behind theater plays and video-games, Linda Hutcheon regards in her work, *A Theory of Adaptation*, video-games as proper media for adapting textual narratives, because of the dynamism that can work upon the player once the game starts. People are more likely to positively react to digitalized media, such as modern soundtracks or lively images: "Our visceral responses to the immersive experience of both the visual and audio effects (sounds and music) create an intensity of engagement" (Hutcheon 51). Hutcheon also argues that games, as different from theater or even cinema, offer different perspectives on stories, according to the role the player has – he or she can be given a first- or third-person position in the story and there can even be a combination of both (55). In short, a play and a game will portray certain elements differently – by excellence, a play has a dialogic side, whereas a video-game, relying more on the visual, will present different meanings of the same story and even the audience interpretations will be different. This is especially the case of video-games, since each player has a different reason to open it (whether it is relaxation or curiosity) – with each opening of the game a new world of interpretation will open up.

Consequently, the audience plays an important role in such instances, since readers are most often than not invited to share their own assumptions and opinions, whereas with a play such demands are only present when the playwright breaks the barrier between actor-audience. In this sense, in his book, *A World of Others' Words Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality*, Richard Bauman argues that "the collaborative participation of an audience, it is important to emphasize, is an integral component of

performance as an interactional accomplishment" (9). Although the audience might have short and fast reactions, they are important in delivering the performance on stage. Furthermore, transmigration from drama to pixels and re-staging a dramatic piece are similarly processed, as both the re-staged play and the game are interpreted and developed as part of an extensive sequence of intertextually connected repeated contextualizations, in certain periods of time and within different communities. Every time a dramatic piece is played, not only the audience might be different from one period to another, but also the director and actors are changed as well. Thus, certain symbols might be also rendered and understood differently and the same process takes place in the reinterpretation of a game – symbols are translated differently, according to the targeted audience.

Hamlet meets Ophelia in Elsinore

The new media has furthered the interactionist approaches adopted by theater: through tasks, missions or provocative stories, video-games extend the audience's reactions to more than just applauses or cheers. Video-games have become in the present a "natural extension to classic theater" (D. Homan, S. Homan 183), and it is only a natural process to which all classic media have been subjected (the emergence of electronic books or audio books, for instance). Part of this digital transformation are mostly the stories that, in one way or another, have changed the world or had a broad influence, because "[stories] have evolved. The weakest have died and the strongest have survived and they have grown fat on the retelling," as Terry Pratchett asserts in his novel, *Witches Abroad* (Pratchett 8). One such story is *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, which not only has been adapted to screen or has been retold in a novel format, but it has also been transposed into video-game format. Furthermore, besides the medium, the meanings have also been accommodated to the present-day social context and audience.

The most notable game-format adaptation of *Hamlet* is *Elsinore*[2] – a video-game released in 2019. The game centers on Ophelia, Hamlet's love interest in the eponymous play, with the difference that this time she does not commit suicide – on the contrary, she becomes an independent character, as the entire action is moved by the decisions she makes within the re-created Shakespeare-scape. The game posits social implications as well, since it can actually be interpreted as a re-reading of *Hamlet* from a feminist standpoint – Ophelia is not only the protagonist of the story, she is also a woman of color. With regard to feminist approaches, among the many names that have discussed Shakespeare from this perspective, there is Jean E. Howard. In the

---

[2] All references to the video-game *Elsinore* are keyed to the Windows PC version, designed by Golden Glitch, 2019.

essay "New Historicism and Renaissance Studies," she highlights the degree of Shakespeare's living in a patriarchal world, dominated by men, in which women were generally the means of exchanging dynamics amongst the "male-dominated social order" (Howard 69). It comes only naturally to mention the feminist approach conveyed by Howard in relation to a recreation of Shakespeare that re-tells the action of the play from a completely different or even novel point of view – the female protagonist is regarded as self-sufficient in order to solve the issues raised by the action within the game.

The action of the game is set in Castle Elsinore and the main hypothesis with which the game begins is that, in four days, everyone in the castle will die and the only character who is aware of this presupposed tragedy is Ophelia. She is plunged into a time loop that she cannot recover from and, even worse, she is compelled to relive the same four days repeatedly, until she succeeds in finding out what there is to be done in order to forestall this grim future. Because the video-game is a simulation time-looping adventure, then the player is immersed in the world of the game through Ophelia's eyes and thus the tridimensional nature of the consumer is set in motion. The player becomes an actor, because he or she literally plays together with the digitalized version of Ophelia, a playwright, because the story unfolds according to the decisions he or she makes, and a spectator, because of the players' position outside the screen. *Elsinore* incorporates powerful aspects of social simulation, a complex plot that responds to the player's choices automatically, and a world full of diverse protagonists with mysteries to unravel. Although the player might be familiar with the original text and might recognize some famous lines or scenes from the play, the game still includes some new instances (such as the time-loop occurring every four days in the game), which signal the fact that the story has been adapted for a different type of spectator, that is, a younger one. Furthermore, the language has also been accommodated to present-day English, which also assists the idea of the youth being the targeted group for this adaptation.

To decide which events occur, based on the previous experiences, *Elsinore* uses a narrative simulation engine. Over the course of each time loop, each character handles their own lives, routines, needs, expectations, and plans. As it happens, even the tiniest contact has an effect on the world in the game-scape. The character Ophelia remembers everything she has learned from the past each time the time loop resets itself, creating a doubly autonomous world, in that the player and the game work the script together – the game remembers the player's choices and the person outside the screen has to play in accordance with the previous engagements. Thus, the game ends the moment the player and Ophelia understand the standpoint of each of the other characters, since the game provides complex background stories for each of them, which the gamer has to address in order for the tragedy to be avoided. However, the

classic ending of the Shakespearean tragedies is not forsaken in this game, since the player faces certain moments when hard decisions need to be made, in order for the story to unfold.

To the interactionist feature of the game and the shifted classical theater audience role, an escapist characteristic is also added, which supports the current involvement and participation of the spectator in the Shakespearean theater landscape. Hutcheon argues that people feel sometimes more present in the immersive world of the game than they feel in their own reality, and this is the effect caused by the "aural (music, sound effects), visual and kinesthetic" stimuli of videogames, which ask forth for active responses from the gamer's part (135). This way, the activity of gaming is transformed into a real exploratory experience, having a very high degree of immersion. All these features are introduced in *Elsinore* by way of creating thirteen possible conclusions to the story within the game – endings that create certain difficulties for the player, as the more is discovered, the harder it becomes to see what has gone wrong and what has been overlooked. This adds a psychological point of view to the game, because it induces real feelings of paranoia, as the same actions can be done more than one time, in order to move on with the story. Thus, if the showing mode, represented by plays and films, involves the consumers by way of perceiving only the visual and the audio provocations, the participatory mode, represented by videogames, adds physically and kinesthetically features to the two stimuli already mentioned.

Conclusion

The ludic experience can have a variety of forms and, historically speaking, it has always needed an audience in order to perform its interaction. The audience inclusion has had a long tradition and has helped the development and growth of the theatre. As already mentioned, the contemporary video-gaming scene and the present-day theatre world are somewhat distinct from what they were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Much as it was a benefit for early modern dramatists, actors, and consumers to incorporate game concepts into theatre, nowadays the gaming industry benefits from building dramatic concepts into video-gaming. Therefore, the new historicist approach, as illustrated by Stephen Greenblatt, represents the stepping stone in understanding the implications of history in the contemporary means of storytelling, since criticism in the twenty-first century can also be connected to the adapted Shakespearean plays. Video games will (or will not) become the theater of the future, or at least the most common new expression of the theater's evolution, as they have completed the long journey from simple sniper games to an art form. To a degree, the video game player can mimic in his or her home the audience, which is live at the time of the performance. His or her presence as a player would be more evident, instant, observable, but

there is no way to assess if such participation or such a creative intrusion into the world of the performer is less important in the theater than on the screen.

As for the creator, just as the theatre playwright can be seen as expanding his/her influence over the future directors who stage the play time and again, so does the writer of the video-game give the player some control. Moreover, just as a performance is a transaction between artist, performer, and viewer, so is a video-game an exchange of ideas and experiences between video-game developers and communities of players. If it were to compare the play *Hamlet* with its video-game adaptation, *Elsinore*, it is possible to see an advantage on the game's part over the play, when it comes to the way the audience engages with the story for by excellence, the game is an interactive medium. However, it can also be reversible, since, while playing, the consumer might overlook the story and focus solely on the participatory aspect of the game – the tasks or missions. Nonetheless, theater is definitely altered by these new media, exactly because of this reasoning – players can engage in a more kinesthetic manner with a text, be it canonical or not and, in this manner, old texts are rendered new and authentic. This engagement with the stage, which includes new manners of storytelling, has the potential of taking over the stage, especially nowadays and especially in the current pandemic situation.

Works Cited

Bauman, Richard. *A World of Others' Words - Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Bloom, Gina. *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater*. San Francisco: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

Bortolotti, Gary R. and Linda Hutcheon. "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success' – Biologically." *New Literary History,* vol. 38 no. 3, 2007, pp. 443-458.

Elsinore. Windows PC version, Golden Glitch, 2019.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Homan, Daniel and Sidney Homan. "The Interactive Theater of Video Games: The Gamer as Playwright, Director, and Actor." *Comparative Drama*, special issue of *The Audience as Player: Interactive Theater over the Years,* vol. 48, no. 1/2, 2014, pp. 169-186.

Howard, Jean E. "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies." *English Literary Renaissance,* vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 13-43.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Pratchett, Terry. *Witches Abroad*. New York: HarperTorch, 2002.

Rodgers, Amy. "Looking Up to the Groundlings: Representing the Renaissance Audience in Contemporary Fiction and Film." *The English Renaissance in Popular Culture: An Age for All Time*. Edited by Greg Colon Semenza. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 75-87.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by David Bevington. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.