THE SHAKESPEAREAN LUDISPHERE: BOARD GAME SHAKESPEARE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores connections between tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs), Shakespearean adaptations, and the early modern theatrical stage. It is especially interested in the role of the player in a TRPG, which allows consumers of Shakespearean adaptations to embody the many roles of the player, actor, director, and playwright. As such, TRPGs and the role of the player allows for a unique form of narrative agency and engagement with Shakespeare unavailable in other mediums. This unique form of narrative agency, in addition to aspects of early modern theatrical practice like cross-dressing and single-sex casts, are brought together to examine the recuperative potential Shakespearean TRPGs offer transgender and queer players wishing to speak back to Shakespeare or establish a more positive presence in his – and our – world.

INDEX WORDS: Shakespeare, adaptation, board games, queer Shakespeare, tabletop roleplaying games, early modern theatre, transgender

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INTRODUCTION

Game designers have for centuries appropriated characters, themes, and quotations from Shakespeare's plays and transferred them into the realm of analog card and board games. 1866 brought *Shakspere's Mental Photographs*, a roughly forty-page booklet consisting of ten questions with twenty answers – the "answers" being quotes from Shakespeare's plays (Sullivan). One person asked the questions; the respondent gave a number between one and twenty for each question; and by the end, the respondent had a "photograph" of themselves and their future, divined and predicted through Shakespearean quotations. Party games and other simple, trivia-based games, like the Shakespeare Club of Camden, Maine's 1901 card game *A Study of Shakespeare*, are common enough, using quotes and trivia from the works of Shakespeare to test people's knowledge or give them a chance to play with Shakespeare. Recently, however, Shakespeare has found his way into more modern genres of board games. For example, Ystari Games' 2015 board game, creatively titled *Shakespeare*, falls into the strategy genre, tasking players with running all aspects of an early modern theatre to produce a play.

There is a third type of board game into which game designers have incorporated Shakespeare – the tabletop roleplaying game, also known as TRPGs or TTRPGs. TRPGs combine the social element of early games like *Shakspere's Mental Photographs* with the strategic, turn-based gameplay seen in *Shakespeare*. Performance arts scholar Daniel Mackay

provides a useful definition for TRPGs in his 2001 monograph *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art:*

> an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters*' spontaneous interactions are resolved (4-5).

Some aspects of Mackay's definition are outdated or exclude certain games, but it still covers the major aspects of the genre, particularly in its early history. Players embody one or multiple characters, operating under the set rules to craft a story through in-game interactions with other players. A gamemaster directs the process, carrying out necessary duties that the players cannot. A narrative is collaboratively created – oftentimes involving a fair amount of turn-based combat, though some TRPGs eschew combat entirely or incorporate it as only one possible mechanic or plot device among many others.

Contained within TRPGs, especially those that adapt Shakespeare into their gameplay, is a great deal of theatricality, which gestures to the overlap between games and theatrical culture like those laid out in Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage*. Players – a synonym for actors – perform as one or multiple characters, operating under set rules – a script, or blocking – to tell a story through interactions with other players. Like the director of a play, the gamemaster organizes and carries out tasks the actors cannot.

When one views the board game as a Shakespeare adaptation, new potentialities emerge for the kinds of engagement with Shakespeare's original text the unique role of the player provides. When characters, quotes, or plots from Shakespeare are incorporated into the very fabric of the TRPG – itself a "participatory story-creation system," to return to Mackay's

definition – the texts themselves become playthings, ready to be rearranged, adapted, changed, excluded by the players.

While Shakespeare TRPGs allow *all* players the chance to recraft Shakespeare's words, characters, and plots into something all their own, I am particularly interested in the small-scale recuperative possibilities the genre of the TRPG offers. My thesis will primarily focus on transgender and queer identities and their presence or traces in early modern theatrical practices, the Shakespearean sources, and their game adaptations. I am especially interested in how each of the games I will analyze incorporates the cisgender, heteronormative structures of the original play into the game mechanics, rules, and other features. How can queer and trans players push back against the gender roles and heteronormativity that is built into such games? In other words, how can the role of the player allow for LGBTQ+ people to queer board games and, through adaptation, Shakespeare?

Board Games as Adaptations and Game Chef 2011

The two games I will analyze for this thesis were both created for the same reason – Game Chef 2011, an annual game design competition. Each year, participants in the contest are tasked with crafting a playable draft of a non-electronic (analog) roleplaying game, start-to-finish, in only one week. Participants are asked to craft their game around one central theme and a set of three to four "ingredients," which are more specific prompts and themes. The contest began in 2002 and ran until 2019, begetting a vibrant community of game designers, players, and enthusiasts eager to test out these alpha concepts for analog games. What makes the 2011 edition of Game Chef relevant to this thesis is perhaps best revealed through that year's full title, referencing the birthplace of the Bard himself: *Game Chef: Avon Calling*. Indeed, the primary

theme of the contest was William Shakespeare – the very first (and, as it would turn out, only) time Game Chef designers were challenged to craft games around a particular literary figure. Besides the primary theme, competitors are given four "ingredients," subthemes which complexify the primary theme and make the designing process more challenging and specific for game designers. For the 2011 contest, the four ingredients were *daughter, exile, forsworn,* and *nature*. Participants were tasked with incorporating at least three of these ingredients into their game concept in addition, of course, to the overarching theme of Shakespeare.

Sixty-six concepts for analog games themed around William Shakespeare were submitted and eligible for review – and the win – in the 2011 Game Chef contest. Each chapter will delve into one of the two winners from that year – *Forsooth!* in chapter one, and *All's Well That Ends as You Like It* in chapter two. I am interested in considering how each game incorporates the world and reality *of* a play into its game mechanics and features. Rather than merely incorporating quotes and references to their Shakespeare source or sources, how does each board game render the experience of being a part of the fictional world of the play, with similar stakes and influences? I extend this line of questioning to include the incorporation of aspects of original practice and theatrical performance in general into the gameplay mechanics of each winning game.

When Game Chef chose William Shakespeare as the central theme for their 2011 competition, they were intentionally challenging participating game designers to engage with the field of Shakespeare adaptation. My project is particularly interested in what Christy Desmet has termed small-time Shakespeare adaptations – "individual acts of "re-vision" that arise from love or rage, or simply a desire to play with Shakespeare" (Desmet 14). Small-time Shakespeare is the opposite of big-time Shakespeare, a term coined by Michael Bristol that amounts to an

"institutionalization of the Bard" wherein Shakespeare is used "as a vehicle for accruing capital, power, and cultural prestige" (Desmet 14). The game concepts created for Game Chef 2011 certainly fall under the umbrella of small-time Shakespeare – the "desire to play with Shakespeare" is, in a very literal way, baked into all aspects of the games by the independent game designers participating in that year's contest.

Personal, idiosyncratic engagements with Shakespeare and Shakespeare-derived properties mark a new life for Shakespeare's works, expanding his relevancy into new, perhaps unexpected avenues. Even more small-time than the game concepts, however, are the individual sessions of each game enacted by players – players with their own motives for engaging and playing with Shakespeare; players with varying levels of experience and interest *with* Shakespeare. Small-time Shakespeare in the form of a session of, say, *Forsooth*, might offer players the opportunity to "bring into play (and into the play) human bodies that traditional Shakespeare performance in the twentieth century might have excluded or dismissed as unable 'to Shakespeare'" (Iyengar 156). As I delve further into discussions of *All's Well* and *Forsooth*, I will differentiate among big- and small-time Shakespeare appropriations. Through this, I hope to better understand the motives behind each game's creation and engagement with Shakespeare, outside of the obvious answer of Shakespeare being the prompt for that year.

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon creates her own classification system for adaptations as both product and process in her 2012 monograph *A Theory of Adaptation.* In it, she defines adaptation as "repetition with variation" (5). Hutcheon's definition is indicative of what she identifies as the sources of the pleasure that comes with consuming and engaging with works of adaptation: "the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (5). Shakespeare, too, adapted multiple sources from literature, daily life, and the theatre to write his plays. And today,

adaptations of Shakespeare's works are *everywhere,* with the field of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation studies becoming well-established.

The variations referenced in Hutcheon's definition of adaptation are not insignificant, nor are they merely hints of new material scattered amongst vast swathes of text from the original work. It is difficult to define one *motive* for adaptation, however, complicating the definition of adaptation as "repetition with difference." What are the differences, and why were these variations made? Hutcheon notes that there are several motives behind the act of adapting one source into another medium or form – sometimes positively motivated, sometimes negatively, and even both, in certain situations. "The urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text," writes Hutcheon, "is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (7). The first motive – to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text – falls more in line with Hutcheon's expanded definition for adaptation as "repetition without replication" (149), at least more than the second motive does. The discussion of motive also recalls Desmet, who lists "play," "political commitment," and "agonistic gamesmanship" (15) as possible motives behind small-time Shakespearean appropriations.

Hutcheon extends her "repetition without replication" definition to include three overlapping types of adaptation. The first type Hutcheon defines is a "formal entity or product," "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works" (8), such as Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* – explicitly a filmed version of William Shakespeare's original play, shifting the medium from the stage to the screen. A change in medium is not, however, the only trait that would put an adaptation under this sense of the word. Hutcheon also includes changes in genre, frame (and context), and a "shift in ontology from the real to the fictional" (8). Her second sense views adaptation as a process of creation, described as "a

creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging" (8). One might include the popular "Shakesteen" films (Keam 2) *She's the Man* or *10 Things I Hate About You* in this category. The average high school student shudders at the name *Shakespeare*, but when Shakespeare is filtered through the lens of Julia Stiles or Amanda Bynes, his works become more attractive and accessible. The stories at the heart of *Twelfth Night* and *The Taming of the Shrew* are preserved and told through these film adaptations. The story, deemed "worth knowing," is now able to "speak to a new audience" through its "creative reanimation" (Hutcheon 8).

Her third and final sense of the word is "seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*" (8), with adaptation being a form of intertextuality. For example, the 1985 film *Clue* will be consumed differently by different people depending on their engagement with the original board game *Clue/Cluedo*. Golden Glitch's 2019 point–and–click, time–looping text adventure *Elsinore* also falls into this category – understanding Ophelia's lack of agency in the original play, *Hamlet*, makes her upgrade to protagonist in Elsinore more gratifying and engaging, though she is still restricted to being a "broker of information" (Flaherty 11) to move the plot along. As Hutcheon describes it, "we experience adaptations. . . as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8). Hutcheon's double definition of adaptation as both *product* and *process* allows for a broad application of her definition into theorizations about adaptations, regardless of medium. The overlapping nature of her three definitions is suggestive and intentional – adaptations often resist easy categorizing, containing traits of only one, some, or all definitions.

While there is no question that these board games should be considered adaptations, board games remain understudied in the field of adaptation studies, with more attention going to video/digital games. This remains surprising to me, as Paul Booth, writing about the role of the

board game in fandom, characterizes the board game as "a way for fans to develop their own interactive narrative via players' own imaginative play" through the medium's "ability to generate narrative and its sense of play" (8).

There is a long history of scholars in adaptation studies being primarily interested in film adaptations of canonical source texts, at the expense of other mediums' representation in theorizing within the discipline, as Yvonne Griggs notes. In the introduction to *Adaptation Studies,* Griggs details how she hopes to expand the range of media platforms studied in the field, writing of her eagerness to "explore the canonical text's relationship with *all* types of adaptation produced across a variety of media platforms" (6). However, in the next sentence, she limits her study to "novel to novel" and "page to stage and screen spaces." While this does extend the purview of adaptation studies beyond page-to-film adaptations, there are still many media not present here, including board games.

However, Griggs does engage with *video game* adaptations. Although the systems behind video games are quite different from analog board games, both forms of media are ultimately *games*. As such, Griggs' theory of adaptation can, with some thought, offer insights into analyses of board game adaptations. In fact, although Griggs excludes several forms of media from her analysis, her definitions of adaptation leave room for growth in the field. She defines adaptation as "a complex process that involves complex transitions, both cultural and ideological, in response to changing modes of storytelling and adaptive intent" (257). While motives and kinds of adaptations shift and change alongside cultural and ideological developments, there are, from adaptation to adaptation, still broad categories into which different adaptations fall. Each of these categories, in turn, provides hints to the motives behind each adaptation. Griggs proposes her own set of three classifications for types of adaptation. The first, which Griggs calls "The Classic

Treatment," "foregrounds the quest for fidelity" (11) which, for several decades, was the primary way of judging the success of adaptations. The second, called "Revisioning the Text," "refigure[s] the canonical text's thematic and ideological preoccupations" (11). Finally, the third, named "Radical Rethink," "entail[s] a definitive move (conscious or subconscious) away from the source" (11). Griggs, too, acknowledges the possibility (and even probability) of overlap between these three categories.

As for comparisons between Hutcheon's and Griggs' respective classification systems, however, there is less of a one-to-one overlap. Hutcheon's system is more concerned with adaptations as both *product* and *process*, while Griggs' system is focused on adaptations as *products* with varying levels of engagement with the source text. Both scholars' systems are valuable, however, when it comes to contextualizing board game adaptations of Shakespeare's work into broader conversations about adaptations, offering an explanation for how each adaptation engages with and appropriates Shakespeare into their gameplay. By synthesizing both of their systems alongside Desmet's idea of small-time Shakespeare, I hope to analyze *Forsooth* and *All's Well* for both what *kind* of adaptations they are and for their effects on players.

Summary of chapters

From game studies to adaptations to early modern theatre, the scope of this thesis is wide-ranging and necessarily interdisciplinary. Game Chef 2011 did not arise in a vacuum, of course; instead, the contest comes from the long history of gaming and theatrical culture and the development of TRPGs as a distinct genre that embraces that history. As Mary Flanagan notes, games "reflect the norms and beliefs of their surrounding cultures" and are, therefore, "one of several artifacts of material culture [that can be] used to trace social practices and beliefs" (67).

Using this assertion, I will analyze the game mechanics of *Forsooth!* and *All's Well That Ends As You Like It* (henceforth referred to as *Forsooth* and *All's Well*) to spot those social practices and beliefs embedded into the gameplay, especially as it relates to queer sexuality and transgender identity.

Chapter One establishes a historical basis for putting games and theatre into conversation with another, using one of the Game Chef 2011 winners, *Forsooth*, as an example. Drawing heavily on Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage*, I will centralize interactivity as a strong point of comparison between gaming culture and the early modern stage, which connects with the concept of narrative agency and authorship, as defined by game designer and scholar Jessica Hammer. The discussion on interactivity pivots well into an examination of original practice, aspects of which have found their way into TRPGs like *Forsooth* and *All's Well.* While I will save discussion of *All's Well* for Chapter Two, I will draw direct comparisons between aspects of early modern theatrical culture/original practice and gameplay mechanics in *Forsooth* that seem to adapt or respond to those aspects. I will examine *Forsooth* as a "formal entity or product" (Hutcheon) as well as an example of the "Classic Treatment" *and* "Revisioning the Text" (Griggs). I will pay special attention to those aspects which speak to gender nonconformity and queer sexuality, reexamining original practices for their present-day recuperative possibilities.

Chapter Two brings the discussion back into the twenty-first century. Drawing on the alpha concept for *All's Well*, I will use the theoretical basis established in the introduction and Chapter One to consider how the game allows its players, especially its queer and gender nonconforming players, to play with and speak back to Shakespeare. Board games offer a unique level of engagement with Shakespeare – one which preserves the interactivity found in early modern theatrical culture, but expands upon it, putting even more power in the hands of the

consumer (here, the player). How do TRPG adaptations of Shakespeare's works give players the chance to experiment with identity, interpersonal relationships, and narrative itself? What specific affordances does *All's Well* allow LGBTQ+ players as a "creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging" (Hutcheon 8)?

CHAPTER ONE: THEATRICAL GAMING, NARRATIVE AGENCY, AND *FORSOOTH!*

In Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It,* the melancholy Jaques famously declares his belief that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts" (2.7.1037-40). Sam Liberty and Kevin Spak retool Jaques' words in their game concept for *Forsooth*, writing how, since "one man in his time plays many parts, so we are *all* storytellers, *all* actors, *all* directors, *all* playwrights" (Liberty and Spak). This adaptation of Jaques' philosophy establishes the in-game responsibilities for players of their game, as would be expected in the rulebook/concept for the game, but it also gestures to the similarities and points of overlap between gaming culture and the early modern theatrical stage. Such similarities are detailed in Gina Bloom's 2018 monograph *Gaming the Stage*. Bloom documents how early modern theatre practitioners had to adapt their productions to changing cultural and theatrical norms which turned theatre into a more commercial enterprise. She is particularly interested in the role of the spectator as it relates to the early modern theater, which she describes as "a playable media designed to encourage spectators' vicarious gaming" (185). Through aspects of original practice (which I will soon unpack in more detail), spectators were not at a production to simply spectate; instead, their presence in the space of the theater affected the very narrative unfolding on the stage before them.

Or perhaps "above" them might be more accurate. The physical distance between audience and performer grew as proscenium stages became the dominant type of stage in theatres. The "raised stage height, the admission cost structure… and the construction of a

backstage area hidden from audience view" all contributed to a sense of theatregoers being separated "from onstage action, helping to define spectators as consumers" (Bloom 11). But still, theatre owners found it necessary to preserve the interactivity between theatregoers and actors – an interactivity that characterized much of theatrical performance prior to the proscenium's growing dominance.

The desire for interactivity in Shakespearean performance does live on in productions from companies such as the Atlanta Shakespeare Company, one of many theatrical troupes that advertise their "original practice" method of performing Shakespeare. Shakespearean Don Weingust defines original practice as "the series of techniques for performance, or preparation for performance, of plays from the early modern period which later-modern practitioners believe may be similar to those of Shakespeare and his theatrical contemporaries" (402). The Atlanta Shakespeare Company explains that, for their company, "original practice" entails creating live sound effects and music on period-accurate instruments, using Elizabethan-style costumes, and delivering lines in the play directly to the audience.

This short list is far from the only defining features of original practice - and it is important to note that certain "original practices" are better left unrevived on the modern stage. A troupe consisting of only white males, for example, would be *accurate* to what was seen on the early modern stage (Weingust 1474), but would be considered as exclusionary and outdated by many audiences today. And yet, the use of only men and boys to perform all the roles on the early modern stage also offers a hint at the possibilities for genderplay in early modern theatre. While an all-male cast initially triggers a sense of discomfort within myself, I also see the potential for reading the practice as playing with gender. Adaptations that respond to this practice in some way could also potentially provide an opportunity to speak back to the harmful exclusion

at the center of a practice which allows only white men to speak and perform as all characters. The ability to perform and work with Shakespeare moves from actors on a stage to players at a dining room table – a shift from public to private – and allows for small-scale renegotiations of what voices and bodies get to create meaning from a Shakespearean source.

All-male casts and the use of boy actors to play female roles are not, however, the only aspects of original practice that have echoes in TRPGs. It is helpful to turn to early modern rehearsal processes to illuminate further comparisons. The process was quite unlike modern rehearsals, leading theatre scholar Anna Kamaralli to term it the "performance preparation process," as "it would be misleading even to use the word rehearsal" (28). There were few-to-no group rehearsals, with "no formally structured period during which all the actors worked through a play together, from beginning to end" (Kamaralli 28). Instead, actors were only tasked with learning their role from "handwritten scrolls called 'parts'" (Kamaralli 28). As a result, actors would not know the plot of the show until they performed it with their troupe for the first time.

The story-creation aspect of TRPGs recalls this aspect of original practice. There are obvious differences, of course – there was still a script and a plot in a stage show. The parallel instead lies in how actors only had knowledge of their own character – or characters, considering *doubling*, or one actor playing two or more parts, was another common original practice. Actors were not able to plan out and practice their interactions with other actors/characters. Similarly, in TRPGs like *Forsooth* or *All's Well*, players also only begin with knowledge of their own characters and their various motivations, goals, and the like. Through their interactions with other players, a narrative is crafted; unique interactions emerge once a player is forced to externalize the idea of a character they had in their head, putting it in conversation with another person with

an equally formed character in their own mind. Like actors on the early modern stage, players rely on organic, in-the-moment reactions and interactions to create the scene.

These two aspects of the performance preparation process – only learning one's own role(s) and doubling – have intriguing parallels in *Forsooth* specifically. But to understand that, I must first provide an overview of the gameplay.

Gameplay of Forsooth!

The first winner of Game Chef 2011 was *Forsooth*, a "roleplaying game of Shakespearean proportions" created by Kevin Spak and Sam Liberty. The game challenges players to "control multiple characters with disparate motivations" and "improvise a tale of Shakespearean scope" set in a "nondescript castle." Gameplay concludes when each main character, called the Exile, is either married or dead – a comedy or tragedy, crafted by the players. The roleplaying and scene-crafting is done for the sake of Applause – a trackable currency that determines the winner of each game. After each scene, every player grants one Applause token to the *character* who performed the best or moved along the plot most effectively – whoever they think deserves it, by whatever metric one may choose. Players also have four extra Applause tokens to award throughout the game when a character exits, dies, or performs a Soliloquy (more on that mechanic in a few hundred words). And finally, at the end of the game, "each player [awards] two last Applause to the character or characters he felt did the best" (Spak and Liberty).

Notice how I (and the rules, for that matter) say "character" rather than "player." Crucially, *Forsooth* distinguishes between player and character, since every player is tasked with controlling one to three individual characters, depending on the number of players. This practice

recalls the use of doubling in early modern theatre, where certain actors were cast as two or more characters. Shakespeare's plays were often written to accommodate doubling – for example, Austin Tichenor notes the "tradition that suggests the same actor originally doubled as both Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear*" (Tichenor), an assertion supported by the fact that the characters share no scene. The creators of *Forsooth* seemed to share the same concern for ensuring someone did not have to pull double (or triple, or more!) duty when performing a scene – the rules explicitly state that "no player can have more than one character onstage at a time" (Spak and Liberty).

Only one character is classified as an Exile, however, so the Exile is given a "Fate Score" of three – the Exile becomes a player's main character, to put it briefly. Other characters a player controls are assigned a 2 or 1 Fate Score. There is little in the rulebook that differentiates between a Fate 2 character and a Fate 1 character, however. It can be assumed that the Fate 2 character would be "more important' than the Fate 1 character, but less than the Fate 3 character/Exile - but what does "important" *mean*? The creators of the game leave it vague, perhaps intentionally, to give players more say over the role their non-Exile characters play in the narrative. And really, my loosely-defined "importance" in this case would seem only to apply to the winning conditions for the game – the game, as previously stated, ends when all Exiles are either married or dead. But the *winning* relates back to the Applause feature. Each game of *Forsooth* ends with two winners – or, I should say, two characters. Each character swears as Oath as part of the character creation process, and while I will explain that more in a later section, what is important here is whether the character broke their Oath (becoming Forsworn) or kept it (becoming True). The Forsworn character with the most Applause at the end of *Forsooth* wins, along with the True character with the most Applause. This does mean that it is possible for one player to win with

two of that player's characters – a player could win with their Fate 1 and Fate 2 characters, even, so long as their Exile has died or married in the play. Should a player complete this feat, they receive a Standing Ovation – which, as far as I can tell, is exactly what it sounds like, only with your friends applauding you in your living room. Applause, then, has turned from a real-life reaction to a performance onstage, to a game mechanic represented by tokens, and then *back into* a real-life reaction to a performance. While I do not think players of *Forsooth* should start charging for tickets, it does remind one how deeply entrenched in and inspired by theatrical culture this TRPG really is.

There is one exception to the rule that players may control only three characters. Players of *Forsooth* can also control non-player characters (NPCs). Players are allowed to have only one of their characters onstage at a time, as previously mentioned, and this includes any NPCs they introduce into a scene. As long as the NPC is in no other player's cast of characters, players are welcome to make their NPC anyone they wish, "from a lowly messenger to King Henry" (Spak and Liberty). NPCs cannot, however, win Applause or deliver Asides or Soliloquies. Additionally, NPCs have a Fate Score of 0. The ability to create and control NPCs allows players to control the narrative from another point of view, separate from their main cast of characters. While NPCs in *Forsooth* cannot win the game, they are an invaluable part of the storytelling process, giving players another avenue to exercise their narrative agency.

Narrative Agency in the Character Creation Process

On that note, the character-creation process is the first time that players can exercise their narrative agency over the story that will be mutually constructed throughout the course of a game of *Forsooth.* I connect the idea of narrative agency with the interactivity which permeates

original practice and was so integral to early modern theatrical culture. There are four different parts of the character-creation process: a name, a Nature, an Oath, and the Fate Score. I have already discussed the Fate Score, and choosing a name needs little further explanation. Before defining Nature and Oaths, however, I will define some terms necessary to my discussion on narrative agency in the character creation process. Briefly, however, I will state that a player must create a reason why their Exile was exiled in the first place. As this does affect the starting point of the story told throughout the game, it is worth noting the narrative agency a player has in choosing which of their characters they control is their Exile.

Before I discuss narrative agency, however, I would like to define some terms, taken from Jessica Hammer. Whereas I have hitherto been using the term "narrative agency" to describe the level of control over the story a TRPG player has, Hammer uses "authorship" (71) to refer to a similar idea. Hammer identifies three levels of authorship and texts in roleplaying games which affect the relationship between authority and agency. The first is the primary text, a world and set of rules created by the primary author, similar to the text of the play. As Hammer notes, this process is "general rather than concrete, world-building rather than story-building" (71). In other words, the rulebook for a game can be counted as the primary text – for *Forsooth*, there is the "default setting" of "a nondescript castle" (Liberty and Spak 2) and an established system of rules and game mechanics, but no required narrative elements beyond that. The secondary author, comparable to *Dungeon and Dragons'* dungeon master, "takes the work of the primary author and uses it to construct a specific situation or scenario" (71) A *scenario* does not a narrative make, however, which brings in the tertiary authors – in this case, the players, described by Hammer as those who "write the text of the game in play" (71). Hammer's three-level concept of authorship in roleplaying divides the different responsibilities and authorities granted to each

different party in a roleplaying game, and, to explain it, she intriguingly crafts a theatrical metaphor. She writes, “If the primary author creates the sets and costumes, and the secondary author provides the characters and a script outline, the tertiary authors are the ones who bring the story to life” (71). These three categorizations of different authorial responsibilities are useful, but very commonly, there is overlap. As will be demonstrated in my further exploration of *Forsooth*¸ players often fulfill responsibilities of multiple authorial levels at the same time.

Players, acting as both secondary and tertiary authors, have the opportunity to exercise some narrative agency in choosing their characters’ Natures. Choosing from a list of eighteen descriptors provided in the appendix of the rule book, players assign two traits to their characters. For example, a character could be a Sophisticated Dullard or a Melancholy Puritan. Primarily, these labels serve as roleplaying cues, providing a personality for each character and suggesting directions their narrative and motivations may go. The Natures system recalls the *dramatis personae* or lists of characters that can be found at the beginning of each of Shakespeare’s plays – or at least can be found in most editions after 1709, thanks to famed Shakespearean editor Nicholas Rowe (Crawford). In both, one can find quick descriptive phrases identifying a character within the parameters of a few traits or otherwise identifying features. While players do have some choice in crafting their characters, this is complicated by the limited selection of natures – only eighteen. Additionally, characters under one player’s control must not have any of the same traits – a player, for example, could not control a small army of three Boastful Crusaders. As such, with each character created by a player, the selection of character traits – the primary roleplaying cues – diminishes by two. Even so, the Natures system ensure a diversity of character types, making the cast of the show engaging and offering the potential for personality clashes based on inherent character traits.

Another part of the character-creation process, the Oath, is central to a character's motivations, being described as "something your character has sworn to do" (3). Players are compelled to create a goal and a method of achieving it as part of their Oath. For example, a specific, suggestive goal would be more along the lines of "I will avenge my murdered mother through social maneuvering, no matter how many lies I must tell" than simply "I will avenge my mother." Oaths, meant to spur the action of the game, are encouraged to be tied in with other characters' goals and to "involve death, love, or another, opposing character, and all three whenever possible!" (3). Players are expected to begin the story-making process immediately through character creation, crafting their identities and goals alongside and around the other participants. People must take turns creating their characters, so there is ultimately some level of power – of choosing the greater narrative, relationships, etc. - for those who establish their Oaths first. However, this power dynamic is unavoidable, in one regard. In another, having the ability to alter another player's established timeline – creating an enemy or blood relation, for example – balances out any narrative agency expressed by the earlier player. The unique creation of narrative arises *from* this relationship building, anyways. So while those players who can establish their Oaths first get to lay out the basis for their plot, it is the players who establish their Oaths *after* the first player who gets to flesh out the details.

Providing a point of departure from the gameplay of other tabletop roleplaying games (including *All's Well*), *Forsooth* does not require a gamemaster – at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, players take turns taking on the role of the Bard, essentially a watered-down version of a gamemaster. Each turn, the player who is the Bard is responsible for providing prompts for the scene to be roleplayed. Building on Grouling's suggestion that a player's narrative agency is a defining feature of TRPGs, *Forsooth* contains a unique, dual role which is

not present in many games in the genre, where players combine the responsibilities of a secondary and tertiary author (to return to Hammer's definitions). Or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say the players remain tertiary authors who take on one responsibility (creating a unique scenario, which here entails setting the next scene up) of a secondary author. The lack of a gamemaster contradicts Mackay, who explicitly described "a group of *players* and a *gamemaster"* (5) as necessary parties for a TRPG to be named a TRPG. Grouling, too, includes gamemasters in her definition of TRPGs (6). I am more inclined to agree with Hammer, however, who argues that Mackay's definition of a roleplaying game is "undermined by several important new sub-cultures of role-playing" (69). Ten years separate Mackay's definition of roleplaying games and *Forsooth's* victory in the 2011 Game Chef competition, and the definition has evolved to include games which contain tweaks to classic TRPG gameplay while retaining most of the recognizable features of the genre.

Asides and Soliloquies are further special actions a player can take to change the narrative of the story they are crafting with their playfellows. Each character can only perform one Soliloquy and one Aside, which is indicative of the game-changing nature of the features. Asides allow a character to contradict information established by another character, or to add secret information to the scene. Soliloquies, on the other hand, allow a player to either foreshadow the death of a character, set up the next scene (even if they are not the Bard for the following turn), or swear a second Oath. I am especially interested in the first allowance of the Soliloquies which lets players foreshadow the death of a character. If a character's death is foreshadowed, any character can kill the death-marked character in any subsequent scene, including the player character themself. The killed character cannot attempt to fight back another player's attack – they must die and perform a death scene. If a character's death is *not* foreshadowed and another

character attempts to kill them, however, the attacked character can either die, exit wounded, or kill their killer in response. For a foreshadowed death, however, the player delivering the soliloquy ensures the death of one of their opponent's characters, holding a great deal of power over the narrative's development.

Forsooth! is a small-scale Shakespearean adaptation which allows for players to inhabit certain aspects of early modern theatrical culture and, through play, to create a new tale "of Shakespearean proportions" (Spak and Liberty). Where does *Forsooth* fit into Griggs' and Hutcheon's schemata? I find it a simpler task to answer the latter – *Forsooth* seems to fit into Hutcheon's first category of adaptation, as a "formal entity or product" that is an "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works" (Hutcheon 8). As the tagline directly states, Spak and Liberty aimed to create "a role-playing game of Shakespearean proportions." Rather than adapting any single play, Spak and Liberty shifted the genre from drama to TRPG. In addition to that, they incorporated recognizable elements of Shakespearean plots into the fabric of the game through its mechanics.

And before I expand on that further, I must classify *Forsooth* using Griggs' categories, though it seems a more difficult task than fitting the game into Hutcheon's system. The complexity might be remedied, however, by acknowledging the permeability of Griggs' categories – *Forsooth* cannot fit into one category alone. The TRPG has elements of Griggs' first sense, the Classic Treatment. Again, I refer to the tagline of the game and its game mechanics, which directly identify the goal of the creators as creating an explicitly Shakespearean-like game. Spak and Liberty incorporate elements of Shakespearean performance into the gameplay; they encourage players to "make an effort to speak with Shakespearean flourishes" (9). More than adapting a specific play into a game, Spak and Liberty have created a game which emulates the

experience of *doing* a Shakespearean play. Spak and Liberty are, through *Forsooth*, Revisioning the Text, to return to Griggs' second type of adaptation. As they shifted the genre from drama to TRPG, Spak and Liberty reconsidered the primary concern of the source material. The primary concern of a Shakespearean play might be to entertain, but the primary concern of *Forsooth* is player experience. Spak and Liberty wanted players to have *fun* above all else, through collaboratively creating a Shakespearean story all their own. By incorporating aspects of early modern theatrical culture, players embody the roles of "storytellers," "actors," "directors," and "playwrights" (Spak and Liberty 1).

CHAPTER TWO: THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS AS YOU LIKE IT*

All's Well, designed by Jennifer Hardy and Matthew Mazurek, consists of "dueling, wooing, vows kept or forsworn, drunkenness, thievery, costumes, identical twins, rightful rulers, virtuous innocents, ghosts, and much more" (Hardy & Mazurek). Unlike *Dungeons and Dragons,* which by and large requires players to invent their own unique characters based on predetermined classes and races, *All's Well* has six playable characters (PCs) with predetermined goals and relationships. Each player chooses one of the six PCs to play as - the Rightful Ruler, Virtuous Innocent, Identical Twins (who are controlled by the same player), Faithful Counselor, Brash Hero, or the Amiable Wastrel. Every character begins the game with equipment, ranging from disguises to weapons, to assist them throughout their journey. Interestingly, there are pre-established relationships among the six playable characters as well as with various non-playable characters in the game. For example, the Identical Twins served in the Rightful Ruler's navy, being separated when the ship was sunk by pirates. The decision by the game designers to pre-craft relationships between playable characters is indicative of the "way the decision space of a game seeks to organize the feelings of its players" (Wehrle). When you play as the Virtuous Innocent, for example, your father will always be whoever is playing as the Rightful Ruler, creating a "new and strange [position] of affective entanglement" (Wehrle) between the two players whose fates in the game are dependent or influenced by the other. Each avatar has two goals: a comic goal and a tragic goal.

The "comic" in comic goal is not meant to imply the goal is comedic. It may, in fact, be funny in nature, but the term is used in the "not-tragic" sense of the word. Or, to echo a shorthand description oft used, an ending where no one dies and/or that ends in marriage – several marriages, if possible. For example, the Rightful Ruler's comic goal is to regain his kingdom by sitting on the throne while the Usurper, a non-playable character (NPC) controlled by the gamemaster, is away. Though there are regrettably no matrimonial themes present in Rightful Ruler's objective, it still falls beneath the veil of a comic goal. The good guy – the Usurped King, like Prospero of *The Tempest* – regains his throne in the end. On the other hand, Rightful Ruler's *tragic* goal is to kill his daughter, the Virtuous Innocent's, true love. The tragedy is obvious here – a dethroned king murders his own daughter's lover, bringing great shame and despair to his family, his name, and his legacy. Marriage is, at the very least, squashed in its infancy here, speaking to the permeability of the labels of *comedy* and *tragedy* in Shakespeare studies.

Games like *All's Well* might be better compared to the problem plays of Shakespeare. William B. Toole names *Hamlet, Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida*, and, quite conveniently, *All's Well That Ends Well* as Shakespeare's four problem plays. Some include *The Merchant of Venice* in this list; Ernest Schanzer even adds *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*, though their inclusion is not especially common. The varied contents of the list speak to how muddled the definition of "problem play" is – which makes sense, to an extent, since the labels scholars use to artificially divide Shakespeare's plays into neat categories are ultimately just that – artificial. Like TRPGs, where the genre or tone is ultimately dependent on the ruleset, yes, but also the narrative that is crafted by its players, the problem plays resist easy categorization into the labels of "tragic" or "comic," though they may contain elements of both.

In any case, winning *All's Well That Ends as You Like It* requires a player to be the first to achieve either of the two goals, tragic or comic.

With pre-established goals, relationships, and equipment, *All's Well* contains notes of a *Powered by the Apocalypse* RPG, a game engine created for the 2010 *Apocalypse World* game by Vincent and Meguey Baker. A game engine, in short, is similar to software on a computer; it is the set of rules, systems, and mechanics that a game needs to run. *Powered by the Apocalypse* is often contrasted with the game engine of *Dungeons and Dragons*, though there are more similarities, in my eyes, than differences between the two. Even the creators of the *Powered* engine specify that it "isn't the name of a kind of game, set of game elements, or even the core design thrust of a coherent movement" (Baker). Instead, *Powered by the Apocalypse* is a simpler game engine than that in *Dungeons and Dragons*, emphasizing the collaborative storytelling aspects of TRPGs over heavy rules and rules-based combat system.

Both *Apocalypse World* and *All's Well* utilize playbooks for their gameplay. Playbooks provide players "specific archetypes that give [players their] skill set and moves, that [they] make choices about" (Dragon). Using *All's Well* as an example, there are the six premade playable characters, including the Rightful Ruler (RR). The RR is given only two sentences of backstory that expand on his past while leaving the specifics up to the player, though the Comic and Tragic goals establish the win conditions for the RR and will ultimately guide the general course of his narrative. The RR comes with two pieces of equipment, the "costume of a foreigner" (Mazurek and Hardy) and an epee. He comes with preexisting skills – Duel being the highest at 4, and Woo being the lowest at 1. And lastly, he is given Luck Talents (commanding or tempering the Fool) and a starting location (the Beach). I summarized a bit for this paragraph, but there is little more information to be found about the RR in the rulebook for *All's Well*. The

player is ultimately tasked with filling in the blanks. The internal worlds of the characters and their specific quirks are left up to interpretation, which is where part of the fun of the game arises from. By having premade characters with determined goals, loot, skills, etc., *All's Well* and other TRPGs which utilize playbooks further emphasize the importance of the narrative being crafted through the gameplay, as opposed to the individual character-creation process.

The use of playbooks does recall the use of parts in early modern theatre. As I covered in Chapter One, early modern actors were not provided the full text of the play; instead, they were only given their own lines and the preceding cue lines. The actor only knew the lines they were meant to say, and whatever plot was contained within them. They knew their own character's motivations, important relationships, status, etc., but possibly no one else's. This is very comparable to the idea of the playbook. A player is only provided information on their own characters. In *All's Well,* players understand their character's potential motivations, how they relate to the other PCs and NPCs. But like the actor on the early modern stage, the interactions between characters, which create the full narrative, could not take place until the performance itself. Both TRPGs and early modern theatre required players to keep an improvisational spirit, ready to respond in the moment to their fellow players in service of creating the greater narrative. Rather than merely blur the line between theatre and gaming, however, *All's Well* constructs its gameplay mechanics entirely around performance.

All's Well challenges players to put their all into each turn's performance for the chance to receive Luck tokens, awarded by the gamemaster (GM) to the best roleplayer that round. The gamemaster has full judgment over who they deem the "best" roleplayer. Luck tokens are similar to *Forsooth's* Applause feature in this regard, but Luck tokens are a far scarcer resource than Applause is in *Forsooth*. Luck tokens are vital for achieving one's goal – each playable

character, for example, has a unique Luck Talent, allowing them to control non-playable characters, change their position on the board (and control the narrative), and avoid unwanted attempts to be wooed, attacked, or stolen from. The only other way to acquire Luck tokens is by rolling a six (though not when rolling for movement) – not impossible, of course, but reliant entirely on the roll of the dice – on luck. Besides, there is just as likely a chance for a player to roll a one, resulting in the loss of one Luck token. As far as this game mechanic goes, the fickle hand of fate is as likely to grant a token as it is to steal one back again. Instead, one must rely on the only tool they have to gain the valuable currency - their roleplaying skills. They must play the part, not simply move the pawn. It would be unwise to hope one could float by on being the best of the worst, as it were, for the gamemaster can choose not to award luck tokens after a boring round of roleplaying.

Here, the gamemaster inhabits the role of critical audience, evaluating the performances before them and affecting the outcome of the game. On that note, I am intrigued with the role of the gamemaster in *All's Well*, especially with the level of control over the narrative the gamemaster has – or, to phrase it more suggestively, what level of control the players do *not* have. Similar to other TRPGs, the gamemaster in *All's Well* has control over non-playable characters (NPCs). NPCs are a common, expected presence in TRPGs, often controlled by the gamemaster, as is the case with *All's Well*. Though not able to be controlled by any player who has the chance to win the game, NPCs can nevertheless drastically affect the outcome of the game. For example, the Usurper, a figure with their roots in characters like *Hamlet's* King Claudius or *The Tempest's* Antonio, is the non-playable counterpart to the playable character of the Prospero-like Rightful Ruler and is an integral part of achieving the Rightful Ruler's comic goal. I do not think the gamemaster controlling NPCs is a detriment to the genre or should be

taken out of TRPGs entirely – it is not a tyrannical display of power on the gamemaster's behalf. It is a feature, not a bug. Instead, the reason I discuss the gamemaster's control of NPCs is to highlight how each player only has the power to control their own character. They must learn to navigate the world of the game among the other playable characters, NPCs, settings, and conflicts, each providing their own unique obstacles, challenges, and opportunities. This differs from watching the show on a stage, for example, where the actions and line deliveries are ultimately dictated by the actor. As an audience member, one has little control over these factors. Even actors are constrained by the text of the play – regardless of a unique line reading or interpretation, *Romeo and Juliet* must end with the suicide of its main characters, and *As You Like It* must end with multiple (debatably) happy marriages. The NPCs in *All's Well* can be partially analogized with these actors onstage, perhaps. Regardless, the genre of the TRPG and the role of the player (as opposed to audience member) allows for more narrative agency, with each player being able to affect the constructed narrative with each utterance, action, and vow forsworn.

Beyond just being able to control NPCs and award luck tokens to each round's best roleplayer or roleplayers, however, the gamemaster is *also* able to affect the dice rolls which determine the success of each character's actions. Again, this is left to the discretion of the gamemaster. Gamemasters can choose to add two or subtract two from a player's dice roll, helping or hindering their ultimate success. A gamemaster having the power to affect dice rolls is not entirely alien to the genre of TRPGs, especially if it is in service of furthering the narrative of the scene. However, Grouling argues "that one of the key features of the tabletop roleplaying game is the narrative agency experienced by players" (124). The gamemaster having the power to affect dice rolls does not necessarily contradict her statement - "agency" does not imply the

freedom to make any choice one would like, of course, and a game would likely be little fun without *some* structure. However, the gamemaster being able to affect the success or failure of a character's actions allows for a large degree of control for the narrative crafted.

Moving from the role of the gamemaster into the rules of the game, *All's Well* suggestively gamifies and codifies heterosexuality. The wooer and "wooee" (as the developers playfully name them) must appear to be a male and female couple. Specifically, the rule reads: "Practice [wooing] on any character in the same location who is wearing clothes of the opposite sex of the clothes you are wearing (in other words, it doesn't matter what anyone's actual sex is, *just so long as the wooing appears to be male-female*" (Mazurek and Hardy, emphasis mine). At first glance, this rule seems exclusive of non-heterosexual relationships, upholding the idea of "compulsory heterosexuality" proposed by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich echoes an idea of Sigmund Freud's that "heterosexual as well as homosexual preferences required explanation, that neither could be assumed to be innate" (de Kuyper 137). However, Freud does ultimately characterize homosexuality as "a variation of the sexual function, produced by a certain *arrest of sexual development*" (Freud 786, emphasis mine). But to return to Rich, her argument is a specifically feminist one. As the term would imply, compulsory heterosexuality is the idea that heterosexuality is "both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women" (Rich 643). Compulsory heterosexuality is a tool for the continued subjugation of women by simplifying their existence down into two inherent orientations: sexual, towards men and only men, and reproductive, towards their children (Rich 631). In a way, the heterosexual-only rule of *All's Well* upholds the idea of compulsory heterosexuality – there are no explicit ways for a queer relationship (defined by marriage here) to exist, as least when it comes to winning the game.

The rule also undeniably excludes polyamorous relationships – the game very much upholds the idea of having *one* True Love. Wooing is of utmost importance to the gameplay, too – if your wooing is successful (by rolling a ten or higher), you and your wooee become each other's True Love. Every playable character in the game, except for the Identical Twins, requires a True Love as part of either their comic or tragic goal. Excluding the Identical Twins from the wooing process is impossible, at least if the Faithful Counselor wants to win – his comic goal is to "marry both Identical Twins to their True Loves" (Mazurek and Hardy). Which is to say, the game appears to implicitly support heterosexual, monogamous relationships as the requirement to win.

I want to focus on the use of "appears" in the wooing rule, but it is necessary to first take a detour to discuss the consent dynamics of the wooing mechanic in *All's Well.* After the section regarding clothes, the rulebook reads that "before [the Wooer] rolls, the character being wooed may declare whether or not s/he is receptive to the wooing, thereby giving a +2 bonus or -2 penalty to the roll" (Mazurek and Hardy). Since *All's Well* was published in 2011, the world of gaming (and the world at large) has grappled with issues of consent and harassment within their community. 2014 saw the rise of Gamergate, a targeted online harassment campaign conducted by far-right male gamers against prominent women in gaming. Acting in response to the perceived rise of feminism and "social justice warriors" in gaming (read: the presence of women in a male-dominated space), these men released the personal home addresses and phone numbers of their targets (doxing) and threatened death and rape. Gamergate has directly lead to the rise of the far-right movement Q-Anon, and it is identified as "a recruiting tool for the growing alt-right movement" (Greengard). Just two years later, in 2017, the Me Too movement grew to

prominence, raising awareness of sexual harassment and abuse experienced by people in Hollywood (especially women, but including people of all gender identities and expressions).

All's Well arose in a pre-GamerGate and pre-Me-Too era, where issues of consent and sexual harassment of all kinds were not at the forefront of the conversation. That, in part, allowed for the Wooing mechanic to exist in its current state. While the "wooee" is allowed to express their resistance to the wooing through the -2 roll penalty, the wooee is ultimately unable to stop the wooing from taking place. Within the rules of *All's Well,* there is a disturbing reflection of our own reality. One might find themself as the target of unwanted advances at any point; marginalized people will experience sexual harassment at greater rates, too, with more than half of transgender people experiencing sexual violence in their lifetimes ("The Numbers"). I will save my discussion of what players can do to reclaim their agency and counteract these troubling consent dynamics in *All's Well* and other TRPGs for my conclusion. But ultimately, the rules of *All's Well* require players to act against them to retain their agency in instances of Wooing. Were the creators of *All's Well* to remake the game today, it is my hope that they would address these issues of consent built into their game mechanics beyond offering the Wooee the chance to marginally penalize the Wooer's dice roll.

To return to the discussion of disguises as it relates to the wooing mechanic, however, I would like to focus attention onto is the use of "*appears"* – as in, the Wooer and Wooee must *appear* to be a male and female couple. Here, there is a connection to the early modern practice of single-sex casts. When the average Elizabethan theatregoer went to see *Romeo and Juliet*, they watched two men profess their love for one another; kiss; get married. A male body might be behind Juliet, but we – the average Elizabethan theatregoer – are meant to interpret what we see as a heterosexual love story. Because of the ability for theatregoers to suspend their disbelief for

stage productions, the costumes are taken as signifiers – we are meant to see a man and a woman, within the world of the play. Through various disguises (all of which, in true Shakespearean fashion, have a one hundred percent success rate), any character can dress in clothing which does not match their given sex. So technically, non-heterosexual couples *can* be present in the game, only in disguise.

There are two trains of thought one could follow from this development. The first is more troubling than the second. There is a history – one that extends into the present day – of people claiming that transgender people are "tricking" straight men, in particular, into having sexual or romantic relationships with them. The source of this supposed trickery is the transgender person choosing not to reveal their identity as a trans person. Of course, no one is *required* to disclose their transness to anyone – that is a choice people should be able to make on their own terms. Where I connect this transphobic idea of "tricking" people with *All's Well* is in the disguise mechanic. As I jokingly mentioned earlier, all disguises in the game are always successful in convincing the people around the disguised character that they are who or what they appear to be – as Hardy and Mazurek put it in their proposal, "When [disguises] are being worn, everybody living is completely fooled by them." A player of the game could, from the built-in game mechanic of disguising, participate in perpetuating this stereotype, if such a word is correct to use here, of donning the clothes of a gender different from one's assigned sex in order to "trick" people in having sex with or starting a relationship with them.

It may feel like a stretch to suggest such a thing, but in roleplaying games such as *All's Well,* players and their actions in the game are informed by the mechanics, rules, and items implemented by the game designers. By specifying that a couple must "appear" to be male and female, the developers do unfortunately leave the door open to continuing a harmful stereotype. I

do not mention this to suggest the developers had the *intention* to do so – I sense no ill will towards transgender or queer people in the game concept. In fact, the stereotype is present in several Shakespearean sources – including *As You Like It,* where Rosalind explicitly *does* trick Orlando into falling in love with her while presenting as a boy. However, as Linda Hutcheon observes, the repetition of stories – that is, the adaptation of stories – "affirm and reinforce basic cultural assumptions" (176). To put it another way, Desmet suggests that adaptations and appropriations "forces us to consider 'where we stand' theoretically in relation to the signifier" (16). By approaching *All's Well* and the coupling rule from the perspective of a trans-identifying person in the early 2020s, one can discover and elucidate points of agreement as well as points of divergence in attitudes towards representations of trans people in games. Even beyond that, drawing comparisons between *All's Well* and the Shakespearean sources which inspire and inform the gameplay and characters allow one to track developments in attitudes towards gender nonconformity and queerness from the early modern era to the present day.

On a much brighter note is the second train of thought one can derive from the coupling rule. The rule that a couple must only *appear* to be a male/female pair only explicitly deals with gender presentation. It does not require either character to identify as the gender they are presenting. For me, I see an opportunity for pushing back against rigid standards of sexuality, especially as it relates to Shakespeare's plays. I turn to one half of the game's title, *As You Like It,* to elucidate my point further. One scene from the play that always stands out to me as a queer, nonbinary person is act 5, scene 2, when, in a fit of passion, Orlando cries to Ganymede, "If this be so, why blame you me to love you?". This comes after many days of practice-wooing between Orlando and Rosalind as Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind. When Orlando professes his love – ostensibly "To her that is not here, nor doth not hear" (5.2.2345), or the "real" Rosalind - it

feels like the culmination of their practice-wooing, a "practice" that perhaps has become real. More than that, the scene can be taken to be a profession of Orlando's love for *Ganymede*, an expression of queer love that is quickly covered up. Shakespeare was no stranger to hinting at queer love, and a similar dynamic plays out between the Duke Orsino and Viola-as-Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. Players of *All's Well* could easily engage with the male-female-appearing couples rule in a comparable way, pushing the boundaries of gender expression and sexuality in ways that Ganymede and Cesario do. By being forced to do so under the rule of appearing to be a male-female couple, players of the game are forced to think around the constraints of heteronormativity, much like queer and nonbinary people in times where expression of such love was not accepted to the extent it is today. As such, *All's Well* allows a deeper level of engagement with the social structures which constrain queer love, opening a new avenue of connection between the player and the original Shakespearean source material only available through the medium of the game.

But strictly adhering to the text of the rulebook does not explicitly allow for trans narratives in the gameplay of *All's Well*. Wearing clothes that differ from one's assigned sex is still characterized as crossdressing and a disguise, explicitly separate from the identity of the supposedly "real" sex underneath. Even beyond the wooing, in order for characters to be wed, they must still appear to be a monogamous heterosexual couple. If, after being wed, "a costume change later reveals that the real sexes were not male-female, the marriage is annulled" (Mazurek and Hardy). All of which is to say that heterosexuality and gender essentialism is built into these rules relating to romance and gender presentation. In order to queer these TRPGs, we must acknowledge the agency behind "queer" being, in this case, a verb. The player must do the work themselves to make a trans and/or queer narrative.

Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity and Jane Ward's concept of gender labor both offer suggestions of how players might use the rules of the game (analogous to social structures like cisnormativity, heteronormativity, etc.) to carve a space for their own expression of queer and trans identity. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble,* defines gender as "the repeated stylization of the body. . . to produce the appearance of. . . a natural sort of being" (33). To be perceived as a gender in *All's Well*, one must don the clothing of that gender. Gender expression is given primacy when it comes to determining one's gender, regardless of gender identity. The marriage mechanic further requires one to wear legibly feminine or masculine clothes for their entire life if they wish to be read and treated as their chosen sex. *All's Well's* ruleset seems to uphold Butler's notion that "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (Butler 140). Simply wearing the clothes of a gender different from your own does not make a trans narrative; gender expression does not necessarily correlate with gender identity. However, gender expression certainly *can* correlate with gender identity. It is often affirming to wear the clothes of your gender identity, for cisgender and transgender people alike. While it still upholds the idea of a gender binary, the disguise mechanic in *All's Well* provides players an opportunity to have their characters participate in the repeated stylization of the body to express an identity different from what they were assigned at birth.

Jane Ward builds upon Butler's theory of gender performativity with her concept of gender labor, "the work of bolstering someone's gender authenticity, but. . . also the work of co-producing someone's gender irony, transgression, or exceptionality" (Ward 237). While Ward identifies three major types of gender labor in her article, the two that are most applicable to the text of the disguise and marriage rules in *All's Well* are the labor of alliance and the labor of forgetting. Ward describes the labor of alliance as labor wherein both partners create the genders

and dynamics for public and private. Pronouns, behavior patterns, and language are involved in this creation. The labor of forgetting, on the other hand, where a transgender person's partner(s) "[manipulate] memory to make space for queer and inclusive narratives" (151) – that is, they make the conscious choice to not linger on their trans partner's gender history, perceiving and treating them as the gender they present as. Although disguises in *All's Well* have a 100% success rate, that does not necessarily mean anyone is being "tricked" by anyone's identity. Under the rules regarding disguises and marriages, the cisgender partner in a relationship in *All's Wel*l can have knowledge of the gender nonconforming partner's gender history but could coproduce the gender identity of their nonconforming/transgender partner through the labors of forgetting and alliance.

But again, this requires the *players* to make these interpretations of the text of the rulebook. There is nothing within the rulebooks that requires players to deeply consider the implications of these rules surrounding gender identity and presentation. Speaking for myself, I only noticed the disguise and marriage mechanics in the way I did because of my own identities which have primed my brain to recognize possible transphobia and homophobia in the media I consume and the world I live in. Were *All's Well* remade for the present day, I would hope the creators would more carefully consider the implications of the rules regarding marriage and disguise. I would like to see a conscious engagement with queer and trans stories and life experiences. I would like to see the game made into a safe space by the game designers, not only the players. However, the game was not made in 2024; it was made in 2011. We are left with what Mazurek and Hardy wrote into their game concept over a decade ago. And now, the agency of the player is shifted into the hands *of* the player. "Customization," argues Felix Kawitzky, "is a queer survival skill" (131) – coming into a world which is inhospitable for queer existence, the

ability to rework the rules set forth us and to find a way to customize them and make them work for it is a skill many queer people have. We might be especially well-equipped to deal with uninclusive rules like the one in *All's Well* because of this very idea of customization. And as Sarah Stang suggests, player agency in an interactive medium such as TRPGs lies not within the pre-scripted rules and narrative of the game, "but in the players' interpretations of the game text [and] their engagement with fan communities" (Stang 19). I am inclined to agree.

CONCLUSION: HOW SHAKESQUEER CAN WE GO?

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, Shakespearean TRPGs hold the potential for queer and trans engagements with Shakespeare's works and the social structures built into them. In my conclusion, however, I would like to question the presence *of* Shakespeare – is his presence required for these TRPGs to offer recuperative possibilities for trans and queer players?

Why Shakespeare? The creator of Game Chef, Jonathan Walton, offers some insight into why he chose Shakespeare as the 2011 theme. While he vaguely references the "many things" that inspired his choice, he specifically names the failure of *Arden* as the event that pushed him to decide on Shakespeare as the year's theme. *Arden* was a proposed multiplayer virtual world online game inspired by the world of Shakespeare. Created by telecommunications professor Edward Castronova out of Indiana University, the project was widely viewed as a failure, never being released in full form. As Walton puts it, the project failed "due to the game not being any fun and the design team not being able to figure out how to make a Shakespeare game compelling, despite $250,000 in MacArthur Foundation funding" (Walton).

Walton's words hold very interesting implications for what the role of the TRPG is – or could be – in the world of Shakespearean adaptations. Because *Arden* was perceived as a flop, Walton views Game Chef, and by extension the genre of the TRPG, as capable of "doing one better." His words hold the implication that TRPGs might be better suited to adapting Shakespeare than video games. The performative, embodied aspects of TRPGs make the genre a welcome home for Shakespeare. And more than that, Walton's specific mention of the $250,000

in funding behind the *Arden* project implicitly draws attention to the small-scale nature of the Game Chef competition – or perhaps, the small-*time* nature of it, to return to Desmet. The concepts created for Game Chef being small-time Shakespeare does not inherently make them more suitable or 'better' adaptations. Instead, they are more intimately engaged with Shakespeare. These games were not made with the intention of being sold to a mass market, or to increase the cultural capital of any company. They were game concepts created by interested, unpaid game designers on the internet who were granted a great deal creative freedom through the contest, allowing for riskier game mechanics and concepts that leaned into the hyper specific niche nature of the competition.

I do agree that TRPGs offer an opportunity to embody Shakespeare's words in playful performance in a way that other mediums do not, including video games. Melissa Sanchez has suggested that "Methodologically, a queer approach to Shakespeare requires. . . lingering with a more tentative, occasional, even amateurish use of his plays and poems" (Sanchez 177). But when I return to my previous question about the recuperative possibilities offered to trans and queer players, it begs the further question – how impactful are these TRPGs in terms of political power, or of being a legitimate social force? These questions are, in a way, hard to put down on the page. Throughout the process of composing this thesis, I have been plagued by these questions and others like it that ultimately boil down to: "does this work really *matter*, or is it too niche to be impactful?"

While I am certain these questions are partially painted by the imposter syndrome that has plagued me (and every past, present, and future graduate student) for the past two years, I do think it is productive to engage with them. Would the recuperative possibilities of Shakespearean TRPGs be available to more people if Shakespeare was not there at all? There are absolutely

players of TRPGs who resist adaptations, preferring an original story and world for their gameplay. There are also just those who hate Shakespeare, for whatever reason, like high school students who have only mumbled through *Romeo and Juliet* in their ninth-grade classroom. There are likely transgender and queer people who have felt turned off from Shakespeare, not feeling represented or respected in his plays.

All of these perspectives are valid – equally as valid as the transgender person who loves Shakespeare and board games and wants to combine their hobbies by playing through a round of *Forsooth*. While certain people might be put off by the *Shakespeare* part of Shakespearean TRPGs, that does not change the fact that there are people who embrace the Shakespeare part just as enthusiastically. The TRPG might even encourage people who do not like Shakespeare to engage with him in a new way. The hypothetical high school student from my previous paragraph, for example, might have hated their in-class reading of *Romeo and Juliet,* but they love playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. Games like *Forsooth* or *All's Well* combine the familiar genre of the TRPG with the unfamiliar Shakespeare, and that initial familiarity could be the comfort that person needs to engage with Shakespeare on their own terms.

Shakespeare TRPGs are absolutely for a niche audience, but I believe a niche audience is worth catering to, and worth studying/theorizing about in a thesis like this one. As I said in my introduction, I am interested in small-scale adaptations, and I include niche things like *All's Well* in that conversation. The topic of this thesis is quite narrow, but that should not open the door for it to be taken less seriously. As my discussion of adaptations in my introduction noted, board games have simply not been taken seriously as an object of study in academia. As a trans and queer person in academia (and, let us face it, the world at large), I often feel *I* am not taken

seriously. I feel a kinship with the weird; the ignored; the underappreciated. I am attracted to TRPGs as an object of study for many reasons, but it ultimately boils down to that.

The road to queer and trans liberation might not be paved with Shakespearean TRPGs. Sitting down to play a session of *Forsooth* is not large-scale political organizing; bathroom bills are not being struck down because I won a round of *All's Well*. But Shakespearean TRPGs do have real impact for queer and trans players and help us cultivate skills that *can* be translated into real-world action. And more than that, TRPGs and the communities we form around them allow us the opportunity to imagine potential futures and establish a safer, more inclusive present. A survey of TRPG players asked why people were attracted to the genre, and the third-most popular reason was that TRPGs are "therapeutic" and provide a place "to work out issues in reality" (*DND Research*). While players of diverse backgrounds and gender identities were surveyed, I certainly connect to this motive for playing TRPGs. Katherine Cross discusses her experience as a trans woman playing TRPGs and online RPGs, and how for her and other trans people, "roleplaying offered people a means of safely and comprehensively exploring a subjectivity from which they were otherwise restricted" (Cross 75). Colleen Macklin expands on a similar idea, where games give us a space to explore alternate identities through avatars and the characters we play as. She writes how "gender play is a form of meaning made somewhere in the air between the game and us, through the playful conversation between the possibility space of the game and our own subjectivity" (254). Trans and queer people can create a safe space to explore and express those aspects of their identities in TRPGs through play. "Therapeutic" is an apt word to describe how that feels.

But playfulness is not the only skill transferable outside of the game board. Here, it is useful to turn to Huizinga's concept of the magic circle, which Felix Kawitsky engages with and

expands upon in their article “Magic Circles: Tabletop role-playing games as queer utopian method.” The idea of the magic circle conceives the game world as “a performative space apart – a shifted, heightened reality in which the players control the rules and social world of the game” (132). In a “moment of choice,” players decide to “enter an altered system of logic” (133). But the magic circle is not – *can* not – be entirely separated from the reality of the players’ lives and the world they live in. Kawitsky draws a comparison between this idea of the magic circle and “the queer practice of forming bubbles of suspended, altered reality – pockets of joy, freedom, and expression” as “rooted in a historical and contemporary necessity to have access to spaces that are not governed by rules that criminalize, threaten, other, or ostracize queer lives” (132).

All of this conversation leads back to the idea of queer world-building, a skill practiced within the fictional world of TRPGs, yes, but also at the table where the game is being played and, potentially, in the world outside of it. I discussed the questionable consent dynamics present within the rules of *All’s Well*. I withheld a potential solution to this problem in Chapter Two, but with the idea of queer-worldbuilding and community in mind, it feels an adequate time to provide a suggestion. The idea of the magic circle might indicate that there is a clear separation between the Real World and Game World, but there is really no such distinction – or, at least, the barriers between the worlds are thin. As Kawitzky writes, the “behaviors and ways of relating to fellow players are both contained within the game space, and, inevitably, bound to seep out of it and impact extra-game behaviors and relationships” (133). The game is not real, but the gaming *is*. The community formed around games is very real. With that in mind, to combat reinforcing harmful stereotypes or social norms, it would be wise for players of *Forsooth, All’s Well,* or any other TRPG to have conversations before the game, setting out what topics are and are not okay to broach within the roleplaying.

My suggestion is not novel, of course, especially with the rise of safety measures in more modern TRPGs like the "lines and veils" first introduced by Ron Edwards for his RPG *Sorcerer*. For queer and trans TRPG players especially, however, intentionally setting out one's intentions to combat transphobia, homophobia, etc. that is contained within the rulesets of TRPGs is necessary. And to return to Kawitzky, the community a group forms around TRPGs should be a "queer enclave" (134). Kawitsky contextualizes their discussion of queer enclaves around the real-world ones that arose during the AIDS crisis – safe spaces where people could feel freer to be themselves in spite of what society says is wrong about them. Trans and queer TRPGs players are already skilled in creating their own queer enclaves, and TRPGs provide a possibility space for testing out what those enclaves could look like.

But ultimately, I return to a sentiment I have felt throughout this writing process – games are ultimately meant to be *fun.* In spite of the topic of my thesis, do I sit down to every session of a TRPG or other board game thinking about the political implications of my play? *No, of course I don't*. But because I live in a politicized body, the very act of playing a game – of queering, or of trans-ing a game – is political. Jack Halberstam writes of how "Queer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter" (187). The thought of transgender people might have never crossed the minds of the designers of *Forsooth* or *All's Well*, but that does not change the fact that trans people are playing the games, bringing in and painting each gameplay session with their perspectives and experiences. TRPGs "offer a way of establishing a generative, performative space that is anti-hierarchical, experimental, and process-based, privileging agency and emergent collaboration over a predetermined product or outcome" (Kawitzky 129). Again, games are meant to be *fun*. They are a space to play around and test things out and mess things up, all with the promised safety of the community built around the game.

Board games, as adaptations, reinforce cultural assumptions within their gameplay, rulesets, and characters. They allow for a unique level of narrative agency, something unavailable while, for example, seeing a play by Shakespeare onstage. Even in original practice companies where individual performances are affected by the audience's presence, the level of engagement and influence an audience has on the *narrative* is limited – the play, after all, is already written, and no amount of laughter or booing from an audience can *really* change that. The role of the player in a tabletop roleplaying board game, however, allows consumers of Shakespearean adaptations the ability to inhabit the roles of the player, actor, director, and playwright. Roleplaying games necessitate acts of creation and embodiment of the characters and scenarios being crafted. In these games, the play truly *is* the thing wherein a novel Shakespearean world may be created – and a new world of our own may be tested out.

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