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The Fallout of Shakespeare: Playing and Video Game Theater

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Abstract: This article adopts a principle from game design theory which views "play" as a type of negotiation with (and against) the constraints of a given environment. The performances of The Wasteland Theatre Company, an amateur theater troupe staging Shakespearean texts collaboratively online using the video game *Fallout 76*, are examined in light of this approach to playing. This article discusses how tensions between the Shakespearean text and the performances of The Wasteland Theatre Company coerce their audiences into active interpretation of both the game's and the performed text's content. The principle of playing as negotiation, moreover, has applicability beyond video games. Demonstrating how productions can break or bend the "rules" which their texts or settings impose, The Wasteland Theatre Company's approach foregrounds the ways in which such rule-breaking encourages audiences to actively interpret the performance.

Gina Bloom observed in 2015 that "the field of Shakespeare gaming has exploded" since the early 2000s, a trend which has shown no signs of stopping since (Bloom, "Videogame Shakespeare" 114).[1] Even when video games do not explicitly orient themselves around Shakespeare, more or less in-depth allusions to his works are common (as, of course, they are in Anglophone culture more broadly). However, less discussed, and perhaps more unexpected, is the organic introduction of Shakespeare into video games by the players themselves. This essay examines the activities of an online amateur theater company called The Wasteland Theatre Company (TWTC) that performs Shakespearean works within the video game *Fallout 76*.[2] This essay suggests that a foundational principle in game design

theory, that "playing a game means breaking, tweaking, and modifying rules" (Salen and Zimmerman 282), can illuminate our understanding of players who insert Shakespeare into video games. A close reading of TWTC's productions brings the process of negotiation between the constraints and affordances of medium and text into particularly sharp focus. Yet this concept of rule-breaking is equally useful to scholars of performance more broadly: it foregrounds the negotiations with text, expectations, and environment which underpin theatrical practice—in early modernity as in video games—and emphasizes how these tensions provoke actors and audiences alike into active "hermeneutical interpretation" of both the text and production at hand (Kłosiński).

The Wasteland Theatre Company and *Fallout 76*

TWTC emerged, in the words of its founder Northern Harvest (North for short), "organically" during the pandemic. The movement of theater online in the time of COVID-19 restrictions has been well attested (for instance, by Pascale Aebischer), as too has the increase in pandemic gaming (Humphreys). These restrictions not only transformed preexisting activities, but also led individuals to engage in new ones. For North—not previously a gamer—and the company which he founded, video games replaced lunches or after-work drinks as a place of connection.[3] Their first production was *Macbeth*, in October 2021, followed by productions of *Romeo and Juliet* (April 2022), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (October 2022), Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (December 2022), an adaptation of Lewis Caroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* entitled *Alice in the Wasteland* (April 2023), and *Coriolanus* (November 2023), along with two Shakespearean "Sonnet Festivals" in 2022. These productions have become ever more ambitious, increasingly testing the boundaries of Shakespeare and of theater in ways which work with—and against—the affordances of the Fallout universe.

The Fallout series is based in an alternate timeline in which geopolitical circumstances led to a third world war and, ultimately, widespread atomic devastation.[4] The games, set between the years of 2102 and 2287, see their players battle the aftermath of this destruction. *Fallout 76*, the latest instalment thus far in the series but with the earliest setting chronologically, was the first multiplayer Fallout game. This alteration represents a significant evolution in the franchise, and one which has many affordances. The Fallout series are primarily role-playing games (or RPGs for short).[5] The genre of RPGs is centered around players "mov[ing] through game-stories, following the rules, overcoming obstacles, accomplishing tasks, and generally increasing the abilities of your character," generally with no "single endpoint to the game" as a final goal (Salen and Zimmerman, 81).[6] The Fallout games thus begin by initiating players into the role they will play. In *Fallout 76*, users first choose between several character designs (being able to alter their sex, race, hairstyle, and so forth). This process of character-molding continues throughout the game as the player chooses between outfits, weapons, and even character attributes.[7] Users may identify to a lesser or greater extent with the character which they play, with some choosing to act in-character as the persona they invent throughout the game whilst others treat their in-game avatar as more of an abstraction than a role. Players also have the opportunity to intervene in the environment through creating so-called C.A.M.P.s, spaces which can be heavily customized.

As gameplay begins, the player's character awakens in Vault 76 ("built to save the best and the brightest in the event of a nuclear holocaust") on "Reclamation Day," the day in which the shelter's residents intended to "emerge and rebuild America" (Fallout 76). The game continues by allowing the character to explore an open world, although their experience is directed—though not controlled—by a series of "quests." Through exploring the setting of West Virginia, now known as "Appalachia," players gradually develop their characters'

attributes and gain new possessions, whilst at the same time discovering elements of Appalachia's history through its locations, objects, and inhabitants. This rich backstory, or "lore," is a major part of the game's appeal and is laid out on an extensive fan-collated "Fallout Wiki" (*Fallout Wiki*). The Vaults, the fallout shelters which protected a segment of the American population during and following the nuclear attacks, are a particularly rich part of this lore: players learn that the Vaults were not purely intended to save the population, but rather to conduct social experiments such as demanding a yearly sacrifice or providing free access to weaponry (with the results of these experiments ostensibly intended to allow for the creation of a harmonious society upon a starship which would escape an irradiated Earth). Uncovering these histories, and many like them, is a key aspect of the Fallout series.

Being the fifth instalment within a popular series, and produced by the successful developer Bethesda, *Fallout 76* should have been an instant hit. Yet the game was quickly declared "an experiment gone awry" (Tyrrel), plagued by bugs (technical issues which interfere with gameplay) and data breaches (Gault). These issues were not only digital. A canvas bag included as part of the Collector's Edition release of the game turned out to be nylon, a misrepresentation for which players were initially recompensed with a small amount of in-game currency until the developers relented and produced the promised item. It is testament to the strength of the community which the game fostered and continues to support that, despite these initial hitches, five years later the game claims to have attracted at least 13.5 million players (Wilhelm 76). It also continues to receive regular updates, demonstrating that its user base is sufficiently large to be worth its developer's time. The game can only be played online, meaning that all gameplay takes place on a network of servers, each of which hosts up to twenty-four players. Players are assigned to a server each time they start the game, rather than being assigned to one server permanently. They thus encounter new players at random (though they can choose to join a server which a pre-existing in-game "friend" is

already on, too) and are encouraged to join busier servers as those with fewer players tend to be closed down, given that they are inefficient to run. This design choice ensures that the game has an omnipresent, and unpredictable, social element. Mechanisms within the game further encourage such sociality, including the ability to form "Teams" and to communicate with others through "emotes"—preprogrammed gestures—or indeed through speech. The affordances of these mechanisms and of this universe are utilized by TWTC to perform Shakespearean plays which interrogate, at the same time, the premises of the Fallout universe and those upon which Shakespeare's texts (and their reception) lie.

Gaming, Shakespeare, and Hermeneutics

The relationship between Shakespeare and *Fallout 76* is one of mutual, and productive, disruption. A useful framework through which to understand this disruption comes from within game studies itself. Michał Kłosiński differentiates between "unconscious understanding" and conscious "hermeneutical interpretation," the latter of which occurs "when we [. . .] want to problematize something we already understand, when there is a problem with the automatic procedure, or when the game malfunctions" (Kłosiński).[8] Unconscious understanding is the default experience whilst playing a game (as indeed in cognitive processing more broadly): we usually do not have to think about processing a game's linguistic or visual features in order to comprehend them, just as we do not have to think about how to look at a plant or the meaning of a stop sign. The insertion of Shakespearean language into the universe of *Fallout 76*, however, forces conscious hermeneutical interpretation both of the game *and* of the Shakespearean texts which TWTC dramatizes.

TWTC imitates professional theater by creating stages on their in-game C.A.M.P.s, spaces which are used to construct playhouses, stages, and even lighting rigs. The player's

avatars can be controlled with some precision (although with an admittedly limited range of movements and expressions) so as to act along to the text which the players speak aloud, and these avatars can also be costumed and customized so as to fit a play's demands. TWTC's plays are streamed "live," both within the game and via Twitch, but are also recorded for future viewers. The live in-game audience are able to position their avatars so as to be able to "sit" within the theater and view the show from this perspective, whilst the Twitch stream and the recording strive to mimic a similar viewing angle.

TWTC's productions are, in some respects, very similar to those of real-life theater. For instance, the first production by the company, *Macbeth*, was played largely unaltered, with the exception of its prelude: a version of the Witches' exchange was interrupted by an (ostensible) audience member who exclaimed "What the fuck is this? Live actors? On stage? My god, this settles it . . . I'm going to the theater!", followed by a dramatized endeavor to find such a theater and a rhymed prologue which briefly introduced the text ("MACBETH FINAL PRODUCTION").[9] On some occasions, the company has adapted Shakespeare's texts to fit the setting of post-apocalyptic Appalachia, such as modulating the Capulets and Montagues of *Romeo and Juliet* into "Raiders" and "Settlers," the two opposing factions of *Fallout 76*. Such choices are of course reminiscent of many previous *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, such as *West Side Story*'s two gangs, the "Jets" and the "Sharks." Yet Shakespeare's words do not always fit frictionlessly into Fallout's virtual universe.

TWTC's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was more radical, reflecting the alterity of the *Fallout* universe. Its staging picked up on a reference contained within the game itself: when the player is exploring the grounds of Watoga High School, its still-live speaker system announces auditions for the Shakespearean play. TWTC used this titbit as a premise for their performance. An induction by "Erik Smalls" (the theater's "proprietor," as he introduced himself) saw him reminisce about how his "daughter" had intended to perform

in this student production, which prompted a brief recollection of "the Watoga Uprising and the Bombs falling, and the nuclear fallout that engulfed our world entire" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream Holotape Cut"). This text, the induction continued, was not "lost to the ashes of time" but rather "discovered [. . .] in the ruins of Watoga High School." The recovery of lost theatrical texts is, of course, not too dissimilar to serendipitous finds in archives or at historical sites today. Yet it is this very suggestion of discovery which the production itself problematized.

"We have made adaptations to fit the world we live in today," the induction briefly warned, without further elaboration ("A Midsummer Night's Dream Holotape Cut"). This promise finally bore fruit in the play's fourth act, when the actress playing Helena (known as Gamergirl) interrupted the reunion of Oberon and Titania by calling to "stop the show." As the entire cast, including the director, North, gathered onstage, Gamergirl announced: "This is dumb. She's just gonna take Oberon's crap? [. . .] Why would Titania accept Oberon just poisoning her, and running off with her kid?" North objected that he "didn't write this thing," to which Gamergirl retorted that "none of these people would get away with this in the Wasteland." The troupe instead insisted on imposing some "Wasteland Justice." A desk magically materialized onstage, as North proposed a rendition of the play wherein "Hermia and Helena wouldn't accept a future with a Lysander and Demetrius that treat them like objects," "Hippolyta wouldn't let go of the fact that she was a war prize," and "Titania knew all along that Oberon was going to poison her." The cast was then instructed to recommence from before Gamergirl's interruption. An original script followed, which detailed Titania—"the eyes and the ears of the forest"—revealing her scheme to the play's women. As the play's lovers returned onstage, the men spoke Shakespeare's words, whilst the women again diverged from them. Helena and Hermia recalled a "whisper" that warned them "[t]hat our sisterhood be torn from us, by men who loved us not." Both pledged to "unbrand" themselves

"with fire" through the shooting of Demetrius and Lysander. As blood splatters the stage, Hermia echoed Puck's earlier spell: "Jack shall have Jill, / Naught shall go ill, / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.4.461–3). Hippolyta soon followed Hermia and Helena's cue, shooting Theseus in similar fashion. After the Mechanicals' interlude, Titania followed suit. With the male love interests no more, and the stage drenched in blood, Puck spoke his famous epilogue with a notable interpolation: "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil / Must give us pause" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet (F)* 3.1.66–8).[10]

These revisions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* owe much to the notorious "Red Wedding" episode from the television series *Game of Thrones*, in which marital celebrations are similarly deployed as cover for a planned massacre ("The Rains of Castamere").[11] The performance within this alternate universe aims to make us question the assumptions and prejudices within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a text. Yet the encounter with Shakespeare also provides insight into the Fallout universe, as the theater troupe are forced to assess and articulate the values of the world which they are attempting to construct. *Fallout* re-casts Shakespeare, as much as Shakespeare re-interprets *Fallout*.

Fig. 1: Bottom and Titania in front of the sleeping lovers, from *A [Red] Mothman Midsummer Night's Dream*, dir. Northern Harvest.

A key tenet underpinning the troupe's engagement with Shakespeare is their belief that theater would inevitably return to a society which suffered such colossal damage, even whilst living in a treacherous wasteland.[12] This ideal of cultural recovery is implicit, if ironically, in the paratexts surrounding *Fallout 76*: one of its trailers begins with a beaming blonde farm girl twirling to the tune of The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice" whilst releasing a volley of bullets at surrounding mutant animals and robots ("Fallout 76—Official Live Action Trailer"); another features a particularly mellow cover of the country anthem "Take Me Home, Country Roads," panning over an eerily desolate West Virginia ("Fallout 76—Official Trailer"); a recent mock-advertisement speaks of "Appalachia" as "a verdant wonderland of promise plucked from post-atomic blight" ("Fallout 76—Answer the Call of Vault 76"). However, the game itself has no built-in facilities for, or instances of, such theatrical events (although radio stations, with limited recordings, still exist). It is the freedom which the game grants to its players, and particularly the ability for multiplayer play, which allows this gap to be filled. Confrontation with Shakespeare's texts—grounded, in this case, in the game's reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—provoked TWTC and its viewers to reflect upon the way which denizens of a shattered landscape would react to the aftermath of nuclear war, and how they would attempt to rebuild society. TWTC concluded that despite the many injunctions to behave pragmatically, such as the constant threat by both non-playable and human enemies, people would not strive to simply fulfil their basic needs. Instead, TWTC insisted, residents of Appalachia would feel the need to reach out to cultural landmarks which are relevant to their current society and to assimilate these cultural remnants into their new world, whether through interpretation or adaptation. Shakespeare, in other

words, has prompted deeper thought about what Wasteland life would mean. In Kłosiński's terms, "hermeneutic interpretation" of the text begins, as its recitation from within Fallout's universe forces reevaluation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

On another occasion, however, the company did not alter the text itself but rather challenged the way that Shakespeare's words are interpreted. In their second Sonnet Festival (September 2022), North instructed players who were interested in attending the Sonnet Festival as readers to choose their favorite "Vault" and assigned them a sonnet based upon its number. Having been matched with this number, he then encouraged these participants to research the lore of this Vault. The Fallout series has an extensive Wiki which details, for example, the motive behind each Vault's creation, the often horrifying events which took place within it, and characters who resided there ("List of Known Vaults"). Guided by this information, participants in the Sonnet Festival were prompted to read sonnets from the perspective of their vault's engineer or its former inhabitants (known in the game as "vault dwellers"). This process encouraged a hermeneutic reading which de-naturalized the context of the Shakesperean text and re-situated it within a new one which demands that its language be actively interpreted so as to better understand *Fallout*. The Fallout universe shaped the possible engagement with Shakespeare in practical terms, too, as not every sonnet had a corresponding vault (there are thirty-two Vaults in the Fallout universe, numbered between 3 and 118, as opposed to 154 Shakespearean sonnets, a scarcity which equally leads to some repetition of sonnets). On the one hand, the pairing of sonnet and vault was totally arbitrary: readers chose their favorite vault, were assigned the sonnet of the same number, and were instructed to use the stories about that Vault in order to inform their recitation of its text; though TWTC hosted the Sonnet Festivals in in-game buildings designed to resemble theaters, their readers did not act out the text or adopt a role for the reading (except insofar as their avatars already represented a "role" that they were playing). This interpretation of a

sonnet could take the form of an explanatory preface by the reader: for instance, the experiment of Vault 15 was outlined as that of "the influence [. . .] of time" upon a society composed of a "radically diverse group," which the sonnet reader related to Sonnet 15's portrayal of "time [as] forever linked to brief flickers of growth, but always ending in decay" ("Shakespeare Sonnets in Fallout 76"). Still, part of this interpretation was carried by the reading of the sonnets themselves, such as the same Sonnet 15 reader particularly emphasizing the words "decrease," "decay," and "sullied night" and thereby stressing the ultimate failure of the Vault 15 experiment. Other readers provided only a brief overview of the Vault's history, then left audiences to work out the connection themselves. As such, the interpretation of the sonnets into spoken performance was largely determined by the content of the Fallout universe rather than by qualities inherent to the Shakespearean text. Yet, on the other hand, arbitrariness did not translate to meaninglessness. The desire to translate cultural heritage into this new situation was everywhere evident. Erik Smalls's induction stated that the Vaults were intended to "exploit the moment to test the human condition" ("Shakespeare Sonnets in Fallout 76"). The sonnets' ability to speak "through time," the production argued, allows them to be used as expressions of the conditions within the Wasteland ("Shakespeare Sonnets in Fallout 76"). That each reader managed to find a convincing connection between their assigned Vault and its corresponding sonnet greatly supports this assertion.

This insistence upon Shakespeare as interpreter of the human condition of course opens the company to the charge of bardolatry, in the sense of "establish[ing] cultural hierarchies by upholding Shakespeare as in possession of humanism that is both unique and universal" (Fazel and Geddes 188). Yet TWTC's engagement with Shakespeare is in fact more nuanced than first appears, given that the production strove to both "open an entire new way of seeing the sonnet" and of seeing "lives in the Wasteland," expanding the *Fallout* universe with Shakespeare ("Shakespeare Sonnets in Fallout 76"). When, for instance, the

Macbeth performance declared that it would "bring back the arts, and with that [. . .] life," the theatrical performance constituted itself as an assertion about the conditions of the in-game world and played into the "Reclamation" of American society which the game's first quest announces. The epilogue to this same show continued this theme with its claim that "[t]onight we all made history, the audience, the players, the stage, and we know that this moment is a seed, to blossom and bloom forevermore." The theatrical production was thereby inserted into the "lore"—the background and unfolding story—of the Wasteland universe. Shakespeare thereby becomes embedded into the in-game world and claims to alter the path of its future society.

Yet Shakespeare is also altered by these new readings of the sonnets. We have already seen how the Wasteland conditions, with the premise of a world in which such patriarchal constructs would not be tolerated, prompted a reevaluation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Another instance of Shakespearean reassessment was foregrounded by the prelude to the first Sonnet Festival. This introduction consisted of a dialogue between a man named Dutch Walker and a robot who, when asked whether he knows anything about Shakespearean sonnets, announced that "I am Iambic Pentameter." When Dutch Walker expressed his fear that "the sonnets are smarter than me," Iambic Pentameter first insisted upon the importance of his namesake before elaborating that "Shakespeare's sonnets are about love, time, passion, and human emotion," and a prospective sonnet reader should "find a place of peace and inspiration" to "reflect on your sonnet and what it means to you." Dutch Walker ironically retorted: "I suppose that should be no problem. I mean, after all, take a look around, you couldn't find more peace and inspiration than we see here." There is an evident conflict between the universal principles—both rhythmic and emotional—that the robot insisted are central to Shakespeare's sonnets and the particular environmental situation which Dutch Walker sardonically emphasized.

The Sonnet Festival's second framing text picked up this contradiction when "Erik Smalls, proprietor of the theater company," addressed his audience in an introductory speech which stressed that these sonnets seek to "connect us with the past gone, a present ready, and a future to behold [. . .]. Shakespeare may not have [written] about our present condition, living in the wasteland of a nuclear apocalypse, fighting every day for survival with threats of human and nature kind, [yet . . .] these sonnets [. . .] recapture a glimpse of our humanity." Together, these two preludes to the Festival presented the notion of an insurmountable gap between the sonnets and the Fallout universe and yet insisted upon the very importance of making these connections to overcome the rupture between "the past gone" and the present "wasteland." This tension continued as Erik Smalls delivered the first sonnet of the festival, Sonnet 129, which he prefaced with the suggestion that: "it reflects the danger of lust. But here in the Wasteland we are plagued by another deadly sin, that of *bloodlust*." By the time the first sonnet was read, therefore, the company have negotiated between the notion of the eternality of Shakespeare's sonnets and the necessary specificity of their interpretations. On the one hand, the texts are preserved; on the other hand, the context demanded an alteration in the way that they are received. This tension is a theme of the Fallout universe. Though the games ostensibly seek the "reclamation" of America by the players (or Vault dwellers), the storyline revolves around a battle against the USA's original government which is striving to eradicate those who have been exposed to radiation. These problematic notions of purity, which find obvious parallels in many historical events in our own world, gesture towards the manifold political issues which led to the nuclear apocalypse. The contradiction between a desire for restoration and a desire for reinvention is thus played out in miniature through the reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, providing a vision in which Shakespeare's "work provides not a body of timeless, inexhaustible, or unmodifiable knowledge, but rather a historical baseline that helps us to measure our difference" (Erickson 164). The performance of each

sonnet provided a space to interrogate the relationship between past and present: whilst the introductions to the readings continually foregrounded the connection to Shakespeare as a historical artefact, these introductions, the performances themselves, and the qualities of the game itself served as continual reminders of the distance from this Shakespearean ideal. In their readings, the sonnets were made new; in their framing texts, the necessary hermeneutic labor of every such reading was foregrounded.

The conclusion of the Sonnet Festival reaches a similar point: reusing the words of Sonnet 30, Erik Smalls announced his "hope that with our festival, '[a]ll losses are restored, and sorrows end'" ("Shakespeare Sonnets in Fallout 76"). Shakespeare scholars would, of course, be far from surprised to hear that Shakespeare has been reinterpreted into a new context. Yet the distance between the context of Sonnet 30 and that of Fallout is especially jarring and thus threw the process of reading into particular relief. Though seemingly reiterating the well-worn tropes of bardolatry—that Shakespeare is an eternal exploration of the human condition—TWTC's framing actually achieved something more ambitious. It did not only view Shakespeare as the key to interpreting all human life, but also notes that particular circumstances are vital to the interpretation of Shakespeare. This virtual life thought experiment, fascinatingly, demonstrates that even those outside of the ivory tower have the same impulse to interrogate, rather than simply adopt, Shakespearean artefacts, and the desire to consider their evolution in specific cultural situations. The circumstances of the game encouraged "hermeneutical interpretation" of Shakespeare's text, but Shakespeare's works simultaneously demanded this same interpretation of the Fallout universe.

Theater: Making and Breaking Rules

The adaptation of Shakespeare's works into modern contexts is, of course, not new. Postcolonial rewritings of Shakespeare and the scholarship which centers them have explored

in great depth how "the Empire writes back" (Ashcroft et al.), so that "Shakespeare's plays continue to be shaped by their historical moment and their performance histories" (Young 254). Feminist rereadings have similarly sought to intervene in Shakespeare's texts, with the endeavor to "create new futures" for *Hamlet*'s Ophelia being a particularly recurrent strain (Bickley and Stevens 125). What is new about TWTC is that the company's engagement with Shakespeare radically alters both context *and* medium of performance. A sense of perpetual disruption, and consequent negotiation, thus characterizes TWTC's video game theater. Yet the process of negotiation rendered particularly visible in TWTC's productions is fundamental to theatrical activity more broadly. Another insight from game studies—that playing involves both obeying and defying given constraints—proves particularly amenable to the study of drama.

As TWTC's productions transfer Shakespeare's texts to an *invented* context, the abstraction from real-world circumstances means that, at least to some degree, all participants are "other" from Shakespeare. None of the company's participants nor audiences "belong" to the Fallout universe. Whilst the game is, admittedly, set in a post-apocalyptic America, a modern-day American cannot be said to truly participate in Fallout's alternate (and far-off) world. The removal from any real-life circumstances makes reimaginations of Shakespeare particularly open by de-automatizing its meaning, so that hermeneutic interpretation becomes necessary. For TWTC this process triggers contemplation, as we have seen, of what theater does in general, and what Shakespeare can do in particular—and in particular circumstances.

Fig. 2: The outside of TWTC's recreation of the Globe theater (2023). Screengrab, courtesy of Northern Harvest.

The media of *Fallout 76* also promotes a re-interrogation of both theater's and gaming's premises. The first lens through which this questioning can be framed is through that of staging, in both the senses of the location of performance and the activities which occur within it. The troupe has a member dedicated to staging and has produced some impressive stage spaces using the customizable C.A.M.P.s system: their performances of *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* were staged in a theater modelled upon the Globe (see Fig. 2), whilst *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had a two-part stage which adds an elevated platform. In terms of the operations of the game, these custom-made theaters create an interesting tension. Whilst the game privileges exploring in order to "level up," the productions staged by TWTC consciously choose to remain in one location and refrain from engaging in actions which produce in-game "experience" points or other rewards such as loot. It is not just the stage but the very idea of scripting which operates counterintuitively in relation to the design of *Fallout 76*. As Steven Jones observes, ordinarily "the human player" is "the truly unpredictable

element" in a game (Jones 91). In contrast, an NPC ("Non-Playable Character") interacts with the game-world through programming and, when more complex, varies in its responses through AI.[13] Although NPCs may seem intelligent, therefore, they are predictable: they will attack when provoked, for example, and their responses are transparent and therefore comprehensible. The interaction of TWTC with the game reverses this dynamic. It is the player-actors' actions which are scripted; the environment of the game becomes the "truly unpredictable element." This reversal disrupts the gameplay and thereby insists that the experience of gaming is subject to active and conscious interrogation.

In one sense, the staging used by TWTC employs (or, rather, exploits) the affordances of the game. For instance, the lighting which already exists within the game is manipulated so as to become functioning stage lighting, such as using the spotlights or floodlights which are intended to improve weapons' targeting accuracy as, instead, spotlights replicating stage lighting. These spotlights prove particularly important in directing attention to speakers given the limited range of movements which the games make available to TWTC's performers: the avatars have only a small amount of reactions, or "emotes," which they can use while speaking, and otherwise can only walk, run, or crouch. In-game items can similarly become props, with members of the troupe often being sent into the real world to scavenge items which can be crafted into stage materials. Sometimes these props are mostly aesthetic, as in the newsboy's cap which the Messenger wore in *Macbeth*, or serve as signals to the audience, such as the "Raider" armor which distinguished the Montagues from the Capulets (see Fig. 3) or the protest signs carried by the hungry Roman citizens in *Coriolanus* (see Fig. 4). Yet props may also be functional. To simulate death in their production of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, beds were used so that the actor who lay upon them could more accurately portray a dead body. In their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the game's operations were used for something closer to their actual purpose because each murder which the adaptation

added involved the real death of the actor's avatar, with splatters of blood remaining onstage to mark these killings (although the imagined deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe in the play-within the play, interestingly, were *not* so enacted, with these deaths being represented by simple departures from the stage). Particularly jarring, in this case, is the scripting of death, contrary to the game's persistent injunctions to avoid such a fate. In each case, the mechanisms built into the game are exploited, creatively turned to new ends, and thereby de-automated.

Fig. 3: TWTC's rendering of Romeo and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Northern Harvest. The Wasteland Theatre Company, 2022. Screengrab, courtesy of Northern Harvest.

Fig. 4: Coriolanus confronts the rabble in *Coriolanus*, dir. Jonathan Thomas. The Wasteland Theatre Company, 2023. Screengrab, courtesy of Northern Harvest.

TWTC's productions must also battle against the game itself, which predictably behaves unpredictably (or at least in a manner outside of the players' control). As already noted, the game's "servers," the online networks upon which the game runs, are limited to a maximum of twenty-four players apiece. As these servers are public, they are necessarily occupied by players who are not members of the company. For the troupe to be able to meet, whether to rehearse or for their final performances, its members have to carefully manipulate these servers to ensure that there is space for all of its members (given that the cast and crew may well number near to twenty-four). Often entering the chosen server an hour or more before the designated time, the troupe members are tasked with causing organized chaos, such as dropping nuclear weapons to gently encourage people away from the server. Getting the cast and crew successfully upon the server is just the beginning. Hostile enemies who

sporadically appear throughout the game's environment mean that the troupe has to cast security guards, as well as actors, to patrol the theater's boundaries and prevent any unwanted monstrous attendees. Such interlopers nonetheless impinge upon the performances. During the first Sonnet Festival, Erik Smalls interrupted the reading to note that "I hear gunfire outside of the theater, and remind all theatergoers that we do have security posted outside to take care of any super-mutants or whatever else may try to interrupt our show"; at a barrage of such gunfire, he commends "ah, the sound of music!" ("SHAKESPEARE SONNET FESTIVAL"). His reading of Sonnet 29 was overlaid with the noise of further shots, so that Shakespeare's words—with a speaker who "scorn[s] to change my state with kings"—sat alongside a reminder of the unfortunate background of *Fallout* 76's world. In one rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet* security failed to intercept these threats, leading to the death of its titular heroine, whilst in the actual performance an unsuspecting gamer wandered on the stage mid-production ("The Weird and Wonderful Fans Still Playing Fallout 76"). Issues—whether created by enemies controlled by the game or by belligerent players occupying the same server who aim to destroy others' in-game creations—manifest themselves despite these measures and such incidents always prompt a debate about whether the show should go on. Remembering that the theater troupe is operating within a wasteland, Erik Smalls notes, there is an element of realism to such interruptions. Once more, however, this instance of the troupe battling against the game in which it exists provokes questioning of what theatrical activity constitutes, both in *Fallout 76* and more broadly.

The server limitations of *Fallout 76* produce another site of theatrical negotiation. The game's server limitations highly restrict in-game attendance—that is to say, attendees who occupy the same virtual space as TWTC whilst the company performs—especially given that the company frequently occupies most or all of the server space available. Consequently, TWTC livestreams its productions for free through the platform Twitch. Yet the Twitch

audience members themselves experience the livestreams similarly to gameplay, with Erik Smalls's prefatory material positioning audiences within the Wasteland environment, each actor wearing the game's signature wearable walkie-talkie (called a "Pip-Boy"), and the constant possibility of interruptions from within the game disturbing the action. The camerawork of the Twitch livestream, controlled by a member of the company, for its part, largely seeks to mimic the perspective of a single viewer (a perspective, incidentally, shared by both a player of *Fallout 76* and by a spectator of conventional theater). The Fallout universe thereby expands beyond the confines of its original platform. In this sense, TWTC extends the game outside of its original sphere, fitting for a company which questions, too, the conceptual borders of theater as a place or space.

This notion of theater as a negotiation with its environment is illuminated by games studies. The landmark monograph *Rules of Play* defines the concept of "play" as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 304). Paradoxically, "play exists *because* of [these] more rigid structures, but also exists somehow in *opposition* to them," as the process of the play "make[s] use of existing structures to invent new forms of experience" (Salen and Zimmerman 304). A good example is slang: "[s]lang is only slang because it departs from the grammatical norm [. . .] oppositional to the more staid and conservative 'official' uses of language," yet slang can only possibly exist in relation to these same linguistic norms (Salen and Zimmerman 304). This "freedom to change the game" gives gamers an extraordinary "power" (De Koven 53). Defined in this manner, "play" is inherently transgressive, existing in resistance to (although necessarily formed by) the structure which constitutes it. Thus, although the company may operate in a way unforeseen and unintended by the designers of *Fallout 76*, TWTC is in fact quintessentially "playing" in that the company stretches, challenges, and defies the constraints—the background, story, and functionality—of the game it operates within. This notion of "play," however, is not only

useful in the context of *Fallout 76*; it carries equal pertinence to the playhouses of early modern theater.

As Bloom notes, "[t]he overlap between games and plays was a foregone conclusion for premodern people" given the double meaning of the Latin word "ludus" (*Gaming the Stage* 1). Her suggestion that "[d]ramas [. . .] are ways of gaming" primarily focuses attention on the participatory element of spectatorship in the early modern period (*Gaming the Stage* 6). However, this statement becomes suggestive in another sense when illuminated by the tensions underpinning TWTC's productions. Seeing theater as a type of play which "make[s] use of existing structures to invent new forms of experience" demands a reexamination of the operation of commercial theater of early modern England. The evolving media of early modern theater itself fed off a tension between a system of constraints—including, but not limited to, audience expectations, possible venues, and past forms—and innovation which circumvented (yet still abided by) these rules. From this perspective, "playing" is not only the action of the players onstage: it is the province of theater more broadly, as it gains its power through working both with and against its own constraints, expectations, and history. It is this very process of negotiation which allows theater to de-automate lived experience, and thereby demand that it becomes subject to the same "hermeneutical interpretation" that Kłosiński identifies in games.

The productions of TWTC, in short, do more than require us to stay alert to how shifts in media are altering the way in which Shakespeare is staged (though such studies are, in and of themselves, naturally a worthwhile endeavor). Video game theater's "play" with its environment reminds us to look again at how early modern theater played—indeed continues to play—with and within its own. TWTC's (ab)use of *Fallout 76*, such as the manipulation of beds and guns, is a new perspective from which to examine the importation of props onto the early modern stage. The company's constant battle against the game's environment echoes

the shaping of theatrical experience by the circumstances in which Shakespeare's works were played (or, indeed, not played). Their elaboration upon the game's "lore" finds its parallel in the intertextualities of the early modern stage. And just as they negotiate between Shakespeare's language and the Fallout universe, so too did Shakespeare mediate between past works and his own words. Examining theater as a practice which, like gaming, consists of "free movement within a more rigid structure" foregrounds the consistent negotiations which were fundamental to its composition and performance (Salen and Zimmerman 304). TWTC's Shakespearean performances, and the constant "hermeneutic" focus which they demand, amplify a quality intrinsic to early modern theater. By centering this experience of negotiation between conformity to and resistance against an environment, expectations, and prior experiences, their productions focalize how theater itself seeks to provoke its audiences into "hermeneutic interpretation." The relationship between TWTC's *Fallout 76* and Shakespeare, then, is truly reciprocal, with each offering the other new ways of seeing and being seen.

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Notes

[1] Post-2015 Shakespearean-inspired video games include: *A Midsummer Night's Choice* (Choice of Games, 2016), *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch, 2019), *Furry Shakespeare*, *Paper Shakespeare*, and *Scarecrows of Illyria* (Stegalosaurus Game Development, 2019, 2020, 2023), *Romeo Must Live* (Little Black Book Entertainment, 2021), and *This Way Madness Lies* (Zeboyd Digital Entertainment LLC, 2022).

[2] Although not organized as a troupe, a comparable project is the actor and video artist Sam Crane's attempts to perform Shakespearean extracts in the game *Grand Theft Auto*: see "Grand Theft Hamlet."

[3] Humphreys notes, however, that the "blurring of realities" experienced in the pandemic "isn't new," with "live concerts" in games having taken place before the pandemic in games such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox* (291).

[4] Although not made explicit by the game itself, a legal document issued by its developers notes that "[t]he FALLOUT franchise of video games draws gamers into alternate history, diverging from existing reality shortly following WWII" (Bethesda Softworks LLC). A game's "universe" is "the story and back-story and imaginary settings, even across different works in a consistently imagined franchise," although it should be noted that the proliferation of different gaming experiences means that the boundaries of these universes are "amorphous and always shifting," with any universe constituting a "contested space" (Jones 69).

[5] Despite being an action-oriented RPG, and hence theoretically open-ended, a limited number of "quests" also direct a player's experience. Nonetheless, gameplay extends far beyond this preprogrammed storyline, particularly as multiplayer elements encourage collaborative (or antagonistic) relationships to other players. As such, the game also has elements of "sandbox" gaming, wherein the game allows for "free-form" engagement with the universe. However, this liberty is contained by the world as programmed, hence the metaphorical "sandbox" (Kramarzewski and De Nucci 62).

[6] This lack of "goals" means that RPGs are a "limit case" for Salen and Zimmerman's definition of games as by nature goal-oriented. However, more recent work has complicated Salen and Zimmerman's restrictive definition through challenging the belief that games must have a "quantifiable outcome," particularly when they are narrative-driven (see e.g. Costikyan 12).

[7] The character attribute system in the Fallout franchise is known as "SPECIAL," an acronym for the traits of strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck. As a player "levels up" throughout the game, they unlock the ability to advance these attributes.

[8]This distinction borrows from C. Mantzavinos's differentiation between text which is "understood automatically, and not consciously," and that which creates "difficulty" and thus must be "consciously interpret[ed]" (46).

[9] Unless otherwise specified, citations are taken from the recordings of TWTC performances.

[10] All references to Shakespeare's texts are taken from the Arden *Complete Works*.

[9] Indeed, TWTS's script is entitled "A [Red] Mothman Midsummer Night's Dream," although—much like the *Game of Thrones* episode—this title was not shared with the in-game audience in advance and is not included in the title of the production's recording so as not to spoil the surprise. "Mothman" is a deity in *Fallout 76*, and the production frames Oberon and Titania as the "Mothman Queen" and "Mothman King." A line from *Julius Caesar* is also borrowed: "The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 2.2.31).

[11] North has elsewhere stated that "[o]n a philosophical level [. . .] theater survives conflict [. . .] when there's a war there's often soldiers doing theatr[ical] performances in order to keep a sense of their humanity in a terrible place" ("The Weird and Wonderful Fans Still Playing Fallout 76" 20:37). A similar premise, focalizing the role of theater in a post-apocalyptic society, underpins the novel *Station Eleven* (St. John Mandel) and its televised adaptation (*Station Eleven*). However, as Charles Conway has observed, although *Station Eleven* insists that mere "survival is insufficient," it also "interrogates" and even "contradicts" this assertion by "gradually de-emphasis[ing] the importance and value of Shakespeare" and by extension of culture as a means to salvation (9, 11).

[12] Yet, as Jones notes, "paradoxically, an AI can be too intelligent" and must be limited by a game's developers (91): as Christ Butcher and Jaime Grisemer, developers of the Game *Halo 2*, observed, "too much in the way of hidden states (or inner motives) can make it difficult for a player to 'read' the AI as intelligent, making it appear merely opaque and confusing."