ARE YOU GAME?
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Video Introduction to Issue 11

Are You Game?

Gilles Bertheau

Transcript:
1 Hello! Welcome to the introduction of issue number 11 of Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World, entitled “Are You Game?”

2 In this world where many adults and children share, even to the point of competition, the same passion for video games (“ludi” in Latin, “jeux” in French), the question of game / gaming / playing and its extensions assumes great topicality in terms of technique, aesthetic and — more negatively — medicine (with the phenomenon of addiction).

3 It also concerns philosophy and the opposition between real life and life by proxy, where “ludere” verges on “illudere, or even plunges one into the fiction of “mimesis”, as in the theatre and the genre of the interlude.

4 This is why the subject of this issue was chosen, with a title — “Are You Game?” — that purposes to challenge the readers.

5 Games already existed in Antiquity, as the Egyptian dice from the British Museum show. Chess — the philosophers’ game — is also a very old human invention, taking its origin somewhere in the East, perhaps in India.

6 For centuries the notion of game has raised questions and the serious aspect of this phenomenon appeared in the 17th and 18th centuries, related to the question of probabilities, the most famous image of which is Blaise Pascal’s wager. In early modern Europe, and in England, the question of games, and especially games of chance, led to very animated and deep controversies among scholars and theologians. Dice in particular came under heavy attack from most Anglican ministers, as it depended solely on chance. Mainly considered a form of amusement, antique game already contained a lot of serious possibilities, through the metaphor of life balanced between
chance and fate, famously illustrated by the “Alea jacta est” (“the die has been cast”) allegedly uttered by Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon (according to Suetonius). It has now become a popular phrase in everyday life.

7 What do we mean when we speak of “game” and “play”? The Oxford English Dictionary provides a threefold answer: first amusement, fun, pleasure, then “an activity played for entertainment, according to rules” and finally all the senses related to hunting, in particular the animals that “are or have been the quarry of hunters”.

8 You’ll see in the Interlude an interesting instance where these different acceptations come into play.

9 As a matter of fact, when the sense of game is drawn towards hunting activities, it can provide another metaphor, that of the Passion of Christ (venatio Christi), compared to the stag chased and killed by the hunters.

10 The topic of game necessarily entails that of play, in the sense of entertainment, and with it the theatrical meaning of the word, already present in the Latin ludus, especially in the phrase ludus scaenicus, where playing a part is translated by the verb illudere. The Latin ludus and ludere are two words that produced a long list of derivatives in English like “ludic”, “ludicrous”, “ludology”, “illude”, “illusion” etc.; they also refer to leisure, free time (in Greek scholè) devoted to learning. Ludus also designates a school in Latin. So we shall see that game is not simply a futile activity and can conduce to education.

11 This issue does not mean to cover all the categories of game as defined by Roger Caillois in Les Jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige published in 1958, which was translated into English in 1961 as Man, Play and Games. It was written against the theories of Johan Huizinga’s Homo ludens, written in 1938.

12 Caillois’ categories are: games of chance (alea), games of competition (agôn), games of imitation (mimicry) and games of vertigo (illinx). The articles in this issue deal mainly with alea, even if video games imply competition.

13 The first three articles in this issue address the topic from a theoretical point of view and show the tight connection between game, reading and fiction. In her article “Play and Games in Fiction and Theory”, Joyce Goggin inscribes her reflection on reading fiction as a game into a wider consideration on what is called the “gamification” of today’s world.

14 The complex meanders of reading as a game is also what Olivier Hercend invites us to think about through the notion of literature as “agôn”.

15 Now if reading is a form of play, then Jean-Jacques Lecercle provides a good illustration thereof, as he takes pleasure in interpreting Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice by analysing its recurrent play on the words “consequence” and “consequences”.

16 The next two articles focus on gambling in the American context, with Bastien Meresse showing how, in Thomas Pynchon’s novels, this capitalistic activity becomes a paradoxical way of resisting the rational rules of the world.

17 On her part, Julie Assouly studies American cinema and explains how the presence of women in this rather masculine environment allows for a reassessment of the myth of the American Dream.

18 The political implications of games are at the centre of Louise Fang’s article on King John by Shakespeare where the ludic metaphors used by Shakespeare’s characters reveal the tension between the roles of chance, providence and human agency in...
history. This is particularly true of the bowling game, as is confirmed by this engraving entitled *The Catholick Gamesters*, published during the Exclusion Crisis, in 1680.

A few decades after *King John*, George Wither’s *Collection of Emblemes* is not simply one addition to the already long list of emblem books, since it includes a lottery game at the end. Although George Wither downplays the seriousness of what he called a “Recreation”, Pierre Le Duff shows that there is much more to it than the mere incidental nature of lottery.

Lottery games are old and have offered cartoonists splendid occasions for mocking their contemporaries' morals, as in this pair of drawings, published in London at the end of the 18th century, commenting on the shares of hopes and the disappointments brought by lotteries in British families.

Whereas pure chance governs lottery games, video game players must develop specific skills if they want to progress from one level to another and eventually to win what often turns out to be a harsh competition.

Game developers have gone a long way from the first Atari console marketed in the 1970s to the latest hyperrealist productions, such as *Assassin’s Creed* and *The Order 1886*, both set in a graphic recreation of Victorian London which Nicolas Sigoillot analyses and assesses in his article. He explains how, beyond sheer entertainment of becoming a fictional character, these games are so designed as to enable the players to educate themselves by appropriating history.

Education is the endnote of this issue, with Jeni Peake and Alexandra Reynolds’ article on the linguistic benefits of video games for speakers of English as a Second Language. Immersed in this gaming environment with their peers, French youths find it easy to learn new words and turns of phrases.

So now, Are You Game?

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**ABSTRACTS**

This issue of *Angles* investigates the diverse aspects of the notion of game, gaming, gambling in the Anglophone world, today and in the past. The perspectives range from theoretical writing, literature, cinema, civilization, pedagogy to video games, in England and the United States.

Ce numéro de *Angles* s’intéresse à la notion de jeu dans le monde anglophone d’aujourd’hui et d’hier. La question est abordée des points de vue théorique, littéraire, cinématographique, civilisationnel, pédagogique et des jeux vidéo, en Angleterre et aux Etats-Unis.
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**Keywords:** research, games, video games, gambling, play, lottery, education, chance, providence, pleasure

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Play and Games in Fiction and Theory

Joyce Goggin

Introduction

There are many reasons to read fictional texts as a kind of play form or game. For example, popular works of fiction disseminated in various media such as novels, TV series and films, frequently foreground their relationship to games with titles such as Game of Thrones (HBO 2011-2019), The Hunger Games (2012), or Molly’s Game (2018). But beyond a survey of titles, there are also more significant reasons for considering fiction and games together. Indeed, the history of literature is replete with examples of fictional texts structured around games, from Boccaccio’s Decameron (1353) and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (1392), to the game of Ombre in Pope’s Rape of the Lock (1712), to the preponderance of texts in various forms from print or codex to digital which have been published in the 20th and 21st centuries, and which somehow foreground their “game-ness”.

In this article, I discuss fiction and games as recounted in literature, including how games structure or articulate plots in specific texts. I will also address how play has been theorized at particular historical junctures. Exploring play and games along with theories of play, I want to illustrate both what paying attention to play and games can do for the study of literature, and more broadly, in the context of our daily lives.¹

Backstory

As it is widely known, novelist Vladimir Nabokov had much to say about games and literature, having been himself a consummate player of games, from tennis to chess, both of which frequently made their way into his fiction. In a passage from his Lectures on Literature (1980), wherein he discusses games in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park (1814),
Nabokov is explicit on the point of why an author might include a scene of game-playing in a fictional text. Here, Nabokov explains that

all talk of marriage is artistically interlinked with the game of cards they are playing, Speculation, and Miss Crawford, as she bids, speculates whether or not she should marry [...]. This re-echoing of the game by her thoughts recalls the same interplay between fiction and reality [...]. Card games form a very pretty pattern in the novel (Nabokov 1980: 40)

In researching play, games, literature, and the work of authors of fiction and criticism who, like Nabokov, are also explicitly concerned with these topics, one soon discovers a sizable critical corpus. In this section, I will touch on some of the seminal texts in that corpus, beginning with Aristotle’s Poetics. This is the earliest philosophical work on aesthetics and drama, wherein Aristotle is concerned with imitation or “mimesis”, one of several words for “play” in ancient Greek, and this is significant because Aristotle understands the arts as forms or varieties of imitation. For example, mimesis in painting and sculpture gives us representational art that mimics objects in nature; music imitates sounds in the natural world; and the characters in tragedy imitate the noble actions of people in the real world. Mimesis or imitation therefore, as one form of play, is an essential element of poiesis, or the “making” of art, which in turn is instrumental in creating what some now refer to as possible or imaginary worlds, that is, fiction.2

This traditional understanding of mimesis as an essential element of poiesis places mimetic play at a more distant remove from reality than even the shadows in Plato’s famous allegory of the cave from book VII of The Republic. Related in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, book VII allegorizes the human perception of reality, likening our reality to shadows projected on a cave wall. These shadows are perceived by human subjects, shackled around the ankles and neck and unable to turn their heads to see the puppeteers who cast shadows on the cave wall before them, which they mistake for reality. In other words, what mortals see and know is merely shadow, and this is what mimesis mimics — not reality.

Importantly, this version of mimesis and reality has long informed the marginalization or trivialization of mimetic arts as “mere play”, “just games”, or insignificant ludic imitations of reality. Likewise, the marginalization of play and its rejection as a serious object of study are motivated by the suspicion that play and ludic cultural forms are treacherous and capable of rendering us the dupe. This suspicion of play and imitation, fiction, poiesis or simulacra more generally, has taken hold at various historical junctures since Plato and The Republic, through Emma Bovary’s tenuous grip on reality nurtured in Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), to current concerns that players are increasingly susceptible to losing themselves in the fictional worlds of video games, or that events we see on the news are fake.3

That said, the 18th century marked an important milestone in thinking about play and games, and in taking play seriously in both the philosophical and in the aesthetic sense. A significant moment occurred in Kant’s Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790), where he aligns Play with Beauty as a “Ding an sich”, that is, as an autotelic entity which contains its own goal or purpose (auto = self + telos = end or goal). In this view, play is thought to be necessarily gratuitous, and therefore “other”. Furthermore, as the opposite of work and a hiatus from quotidian drudgery, play is also atemporal, or possessed of its own temporality, as for example a theatre play which may represent a span of decades in
the space of two hours. Art, as a form of play or mimesis, is therefore theorized as “Purposiveness without purpose” [Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck], hence Art and the Beautiful as forms of play are “other” and elevated, a-historical and therefore transcendental, and distinguished by disinterestedness, either economic or political.

At roughly the same time, Schiller wrote On the Aesthetic Education of Man [Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen] (1795), an epistolary philosophical work in which we read that “man plays when he is man in the full sense of the word and he is totally man only when he plays” [... der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch is, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt] (Schiller 1967: Letter XV, 64). It is play and only play, he wrote, that makes us complete as human subjects [Das ist gerade Spiel und nur das Spiel, was ihn vollständig macht] (64). If play is indeed such an essential element of what makes us human, or “men” in the fullest sense of the word, it is because of the freedom that play imparts: the freedom to play with ideas without serious consequences, for example. And finally, both Kant and Schiller are also significant in this history of play because their writing made it possible to think about play as more than frivolous or trivial, to salvage it from the category of the “merely” or “only”, and to rehabilitate play as the motor of creative thinking and a form of pedagogy.

**Homo Ludens and Fiction**

In the service of brevity I now pass over a number of influential 19th-century writers who have engaged with the topic of play such as Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé or Lewis Carroll, in order to pause at Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens (1938), an ambitious essay on play describing the ludic in the law, art and “Western Civilization” itself (1). In the opening pages, Huizinga outlines his now much-contested, Neo-Kantian definition of play as necessarily “‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place”, such as “[t]he turf, the tennis-court, the chess-board and pavement-hopscotch [which] cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle” (20). Play has its own temporality and may be repeated endlessly in games or rituals and, in play, time may be condensed, arrested or advanced. According to Huizinga, play is also voluntary — it cannot be forced — and is therefore autotelic, having no goal outside itself. Play also transcends other forms of human experience, hence “play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life” (20). And finally, play is display: play, as mimesis, always represents something; it is illusion [ilusio = iludere = in play] (11).

As a means of illustrating what this history of mimesis and play, up to and including Huizinga, may bring to light in fictional worlds, I will now discuss three examples, beginning with Aldous Huxley’s Eyeless in Gaza (1936). The novel is set in England in the period following WWI, with the constant threat of WWII foreshadowed in the text by strange, violent and unpredictable events. This historic moment of terrifying instability is mirrored in the text’s disjointed structure, which divides the narrative into randomly-arranged chapters that readers must shift around in their minds as they attempt to reconstruct a linear chronology. When put in order, the chapters comprise the story of central character Anthony Beavis’s childhood, beginning in 1902 and covering several decades until he is roughly middle-aged.

While there is nothing remarkable about a novel of reminiscences in the modernist period, Eyeless in Gaza is strikingly fragmented, and this feature of the text has been criticized as needlessly jumbled, with some arguing that its central “device of time-
shifting [is] too mechanical” (Bowering 117; Vitoux 216). I would argue, however, that the text might be more productively read and understood through the lens of theories of play and the logic of games. Such a reading would account for the constant implication that the protagonist’s life-world is driven, like a game, by chance and random events, and help to explain the jarring non-chronological ordering of the chapters. Rather than being “needlessly jumbled,” it becomes clear that the structure of the narrative articulates the chaos and mounting violence of the period it represents through its insistent refusal of linearity.

More explicitly, the novel is composed of fifty-four chapters, which correspond to the fifty-two cards in a standard deck, plus two jokers or wild cards. This underlying structure then becomes a device for articulating the narrative and indeed, in the opening chapter set in 1933, we find Anthony Beavis sifting through a jumbled pile of photographs from various periods in his life:

Somewhere in the mind a lunatic shuffled a pack of snapshots and dealt them out at random, shuffled once more and dealt them out in different order, again and again, indefinitely. There was no chronology. The idiot remembered no distinction between before and after […]. Thirty-five years of his conscious life made themselves immediately known to him as chaos — a pack of snapshots in the hands of a lunatic. (Huxley 18)

As Pierre Vitoux explains in his essay on Eyeless in Gaza, this passage “describes the structure of the novel [wherein...] the time sequence is completely subverted [...] as if the novelist had shuffled his pack of [...] cards and was now dealing them out [...] as they turn up” (212). In other words, the structure of the text suggests that the novel, like playing cards or the photographs in this scene, may itself be shuffled, with each of the chapters picking up one of several diegetic strands at a different point in the characters’ lives, seemingly arranged by chance. It is then the reader as player who becomes implicated in the hermeneutic or interpretive game-structure of the narrative, and who is required to actively keep track of the dates that Huxley provides at the heading of each chapter in order to make sense of the text.

In Nabokov’s comments about card games in Mansfield Park to which I referred above, he also makes an explicit connection between games which form “a very pretty pattern in the novel”, and which echo the interplay of fiction and reality (Lectures on Literature 40). Similarly, in Nabokov’s own novel, Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (1969), the central character Van Veen returns repeatedly in his mind to a castle of cards, which then becomes the organizing principle of both the thesis on time that he is writing, and the narrative frame of the novel as a whole. Veen’s Proustian memory centers on the eponymous heroine as a child, building a castle like “a Pompeian Villa with mosaics and paintings inside,” which she made from only the court cards in one of her “Grandpa’s old gambling packs” (113). So, while Ada herself often recalls the pictorial properties of cards in the narrative, her brother Van remembers his own writing at the heart of the novel in which all of this takes place, as being analogous to that same cardboard villa:

It was Ada’s castle of cards. It was the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick’s difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time (184-5)

In other words, the ludic fictional world of the text is possessed of its own temporality which triumphs over the rigidity of chronological time (i.e. “the ardis of time”) and creates its own chronotope or time world. And because a castle of cards is, in many ways, literally a playful fictional world or “nulliverse” unto itself, as a metaphor
embedded in the already ostensibly ludic context of a novel, it communicates the ability of games and fictional worlds to suspend, accordion, or jumble time, as in the example of *Eyeless in Gaza* (Nabokov 1969: 158).

One further example of a text that foregrounds its own ludicity by placing a fictional game at its centre is Herman Hesse’s *Glass Bead Game* [*Das Glasperlenspiel*] (1943). Here, I would like to call attention to his notoriously vague description of the game structure at the core of his narrative, for which the novel is named. The glass bead game is described as an immense assemblage of cords with beads that can be moved to indicate positions sent to game masters by written correspondence. The structure, along with the players’ activities, comprises a mode of playing with the total contents and values of our culture […]. All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art […] produced in creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts. [...] it is on] this immense body of intellectual values [that] the Glass Bead Game player plays […]. Theoretically this instrument is capable of reproducing […] the entire intellectual content of the universe. On the other hand, within this fixed structure […] a whole universe of possibilities and combinations is available to the individual player. (Hesse 15)

This description calls to mind a Massively Multi-Player On-Line Role Playing Game (MMORPG), albeit a painfully slow one. More importantly, this passage is suggestive of how ludic fictional worlds are created and might function as possible worlds which interpolate the reader/player in a more lean-forward, active, or Barthesian “writerly” sense than, for example, standard realist prose.

**Huizinga’s Legacy**

In a lecture to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Homo Ludens*, I discussed the tremendous impact that Huizinga’s work has had on the study of literature from the 1960s onwards (Goggin 2014). Interestingly, while *Homo Ludens* does contain one chapter entitled “Play and Poetry”, writing an essay on play and literature was not Huizinga’s primary purpose. *Homo Ludens* has nonetheless inspired much work on literature and ludicity, beginning with Jacques Ehrman’s “*Homo Ludens Revisited*” (1968), W.K. Wimsatt’s “Belinda Ludens” on *The Rape of the Lock* (1973), and Jori Lotman’s “The Theme of Card Games in Russian Literature” (1978), as well as more recent work such as Kathleen Blake’s study of play and games in Lewis Carroll (Blake 1974), Mihai Spariosu’s *Literature, Mimesis and Play* (1982), Peter Hutchinson’s *Games Authors Play* (1985), Nancy Morrow’s *Dreadful Games: The Play of Desire and the 19th-Century Novel* (1988), and David Bell’s *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text* (1993).

Moreover, while theoreticians have elucidated the ludic properties of literature, authors of literary texts such as Nabokov may always have been aware of fiction’s playful relationship to the world of discourse. As noted above, Nabokov discussed how card games act as a structuring element in the ludic context of fiction in his essays on literature, and he made it a practice to write on index cards. In a 1958 photo shoot for *Life Magazine*, Nabokov made a point of posing while writing on index cards so as to suggest that he was discovered, as if by chance, in the act of composing a novel. At the same time, while mirroring the importance of chance occurrences in his fiction, the photographs from that session seem to imply that the text he was in the act of writing on index cards could be reshuffled, like a deck of cards, and reassembled in any random
order to produce a different story. Moreover, given what one reviewer described as 
Nabokov’s “ludic vitality”, it is also fitting that Ginko Press published an edition of Pale Fire as a reproduction of the index cards on which he wrote it, and the notes section of the novel separately as a booklet contained in the same box, as though it were instructions for readers who might play their way through the text. This is doubly appropriate given the hybrid form of Pale Fire, as well as its subject, a poet named John Shade who, like Nabokov, composes his poetry on index cards (Harvey 2011).

Interlude

From the beginning of this essay, I have attempted to trace a trajectory along which one might place theoretical texts on play and games, from Aristotle to Huizinga. One could also construct a timeline of literary texts — ranging from allegorical to realist, from verse to prose — which foreground their ludicity in a variety of ways. The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales would figure somewhere near the beginning, both texts being composed of discrete episodes embedded in a loose frame narrative, which develops as a character's play at taking turns telling stories. Other texts highlight their ludicity by means of their subject matter, such as The Rape of the Lock (1712), a mock-epic about a game of cards. By the close of the 18th century, the publication of board games as extensions or companions to books with which they often shared titles, contributed to “[t]he deliberate blurring of boundaries between board games [and] fictional narratives”, encouraging readers “to see games and books as mutually-constitutive objects” (Carroll 36). Such texts thus announce their playfulness through a structure which finds both metaphoric and concrete expression in twin games that can be taken apart and manipulated.

More recently, one could cite examples from the 1960s, such as texts that ask readers to intervene actively in the progress of the narrative, and manipulate the text physically, such as Marc Saporta’s Composition No. 1 (1963) or Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962). Texts in this category fall under the heading of what Espen Aarseth calls ‘cybertexts,’ or texts that readers and players are required to physically activate and on which they expend non-trivial effort in order to traverse (1). In other words, such texts require us to do physically what Huxley’s Eyeless in Gaza asks readers to do mentally — reshuffle and move segments around — and, I would argue, texts in the former category form a kind of bridge to computer game narratives. Moving even closer to the present, we encounter computer games, from textual adventure games of the 1970s and 1980s, to full-fledged immersive fictional and playable worlds such as World of Warcraft. In the following section then, I will discuss digital game narratives and their place in the genealogy that I have been constructing.

Game on

In game studies, the historical background and literary associations with play and games as outlined above have been largely neglected, hence “ludology” and game studies seemed to appear suddenly in the early 1990s as a new theory and discipline opposed to literary studies, and specifically to narratology. Ironically, it was precisely in literature departments and through literary scholars that computer games first received serious academic attention. At the same time, the connection between literary
fiction and games was noted outside academia, for example by game enthusiast R.V. Kelly, who instinctively explained that he “learned about people who discard real life to inhabit a richer world limited only by imagination [...and] learned what it was like to live inside a novel as it was being written [...]” through video games (11). Likewise, contemporary novelists such as Douglas Coupland, Jeanette Winterson, Chloé Delaume, and numerous fantasy fiction writers produce work which, in some way, openly “remediates” computer games. In other words, it would appear that the relationship between games and literature is recognised, even if contested, in both games and literature camps.

However, if video games and “commercial” fiction (as opposed to what we might call ‘serious literature’) are also “play forms”, then they do not fit several of the definitions I outlined above, and particularly Huizinga’s definition in Homo Ludens, which is based on Kantian concepts such as autotelism and disinterestedness. Indeed, the notion that play needs to be free of economic interest and “no profit can be gained by it” no longer holds in a world where gaming has become a major industry producing a wide variety of contemporary forms of digitized play invested with monetary interest (Homo Ludens 13).

Other aspects of neo-Kantian theories of play that have been challenged or debunked include the idea that play must be gratuitous and, therefore, liberating and fun. As Jesper Juul points out in The Art of Failure (2013), although people commonly think of video games as being “fun,” players’ facial expressions rarely indicate happiness as they frown and sometimes shout in frustration when they lose, die, or fail to proceed to the next level. Similarly, the attention now paid to the effort and boredom involved in gaming recalls an early essay by Walter Benjamin in which he observed “the likeness of forms of gambling with forms of mechanical labour” whereby “the drudgery of the labourer is [...] a counter part to the drudgery of the gambler” (Cosgrave 121). Drudgery also describes the labor of thousands of people in developing countries who make their living in so-called “virtual sweatshops”, farming and grinding virtual items and currencies for sweatshop wages (Dibbell 2006).

Huizinga further maintains that games and play are always conducted in a magic circle — “the tennis-court, the chess-board” — a notion which no longer holds true, given that pervasive gaming, among other contemporary mobile gaming practices, has expanded the scope of where people play (20). The spread of game play also takes the form of “gamification” or the “game layer on top of the world”, as Seth Priebatsch calls it (2010), that is, a ludic web of interfaces connecting us with our world, and increasingly mediating our interaction with various institutions and activities, as well as with each other (see video extract below). For Priebatsch, game interfaces fall into categories, such as appointment keeping, doing things in a specified amount of time, collecting and finding things, and solving puzzles. Although this description of our world is perhaps simplistic, it lays bare our constant interaction with it and with others as being conducted through a patchwork of playful interfaces and gamified activities, which include everything from liking friends’ posts on Facebook to collecting enough points to get things for “free”, or getting better grades at school.

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If, however, the game layer on top of our world is a continuous interface made up of an endless variety of activities, practices and processes now commonly referred to as “gamification” — if everything has become some form of game — then we must certainly ask, with Bernard Suits (1978) who wrote a book on play, utopia and dystopia, if we have not entered into a particular kind of dystopia where all labor, learning, and punishment — everything, in short — is some kind of game or, in Huizinga’s sense, a play form. As Suits explains, in a utopia where everything becomes a game, and wherein all activity is re-defined as play, playing becomes “a very heavy game-playing indeed”, with the result that a work-free utopia becomes a playful dystopia (201).

One possible key to working through these issues is suggested in Umberto Eco’s essay on Huizinga, published as the introduction to the Italian translation of Homo Ludens (1973). Among many aspects of the text on which Eco comments is Huizinga’s etymology of the “play-concept” as expressed in several languages, and the importance of distinguishing between “game” and “play” (Eco xix-xx). Huizinga claims that Western European languages, wherein the verb and noun for play are elided in one compound expression (jouer un jeu, ein Spiel spielen, een spel spelen, jugar un juego), have “succeeded better than others in getting the various aspects of play into one word” (29). As Huizinga further argued, “so-called primitive languages” like Greek often have many words for a given species but not the genus, including words for various manifestations of play; yet they have no single word that expresses play as a unity. This leads him to conclude “that the Greeks […] failed to perceive the essential play-element” (31) and that the absence of a single word that expresses play as both verb and noun reveals a failure to have achieved a more advanced state of development.

In the case of English, however, Huizinga’s thesis breaks down, given that both play and game are common to English, a language that distinguishes between the activity and the object. Huizinga must then conclude that the verb/noun doublet was “lost” in English, and with it, the capacity to express the unique, independent nature of play which lies outside normal categories of action. The full significance of this seemingly trivial point becomes evident when we see the further extension of Huizinga’s logic, which is also informed by the impulse to collapse the distinction between play and games. For example, when discussing “play-structures” such as cultural institutions, which Huizinga also occasionally refers to as games, he proposes to “consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction”, such as cultural institutions (4). Yet in the first line of Homo Ludens, we also read that “play is older than culture” so that, following Huizinga’s logic, social constructions would result from play, rather than play being a social construction. This formulation of play as a social construction requires that we accept the notion that play is part of the things which it transcends, namely, the structure that gives form to play. In other words, for Huizinga, play is simultaneously a “higher unity” and a constituent of structures through which “ordinary life” emerges and which this higher unity transcends — a somewhat logic-defying move.

Perhaps a better model for thinking about play in the present era was proposed by Jacques Derrida in “Structure, Sign and Play” [La structure, le signe et le jeu] (1967). In this essay, Derrida theorized free-play as that which animates “repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations”, rather than being concretized in game form (279). His model foregrounds movement rather than binary oppositions or structures, such as Huizinga’s magic circle, which presupposes a fixed inside and
outside. Moreover, because Derrida insists on movement and displacement, his approach to play embodies its own playfulness, so that his account of play is flowing and open-ended as well as being decentered and anticipating no fixed ending. Hence, a play of substitutions and fluidity are built into Derrida’s concept so that rather than theorizing play as a game structure and anticipating its end in itself as autotelos, play is indeterminate and characterized by dynamism, volatility and constant decentering, as free-play displaces the concept of a center that might ground or stabilize it, moving through rather than being part of game structures, or formations such as language, literature and other discourses, or institutional structures such as military strategy, economy, or the law.

Importantly, because so much of what has been written on play is rooted in the relationship of play to what is outside of it, studies have been persistently modeled on oppositions such as mimesis/reality, or free play/material interest. In “Playstations. Or, Playing in Earnest” (2005), Steven Connor argues that play is better understood not as transcendental and a-historical, but rather as a concept that bears the stamp of whatever age attempts to grasp its nature. Seen in this way, it is no wonder that Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Schiller, writing about play against the backdrop of the industrial and financial revolutions, saw it as the binary opposite of labor and industry, being free of economic interest, transcendental, and autotelic. According to Connor, since the 19th century, play has instead become “a mirror of the growing regulatedness of what Weber would come to call the administered world rather than being an alternative to it” (11). Hence, “[t]he very emptiness or disinterestedness of play might provide the provocation or opportunity to put it to work, or make it earn its living like everything else” (7).

It would seem that this is our current position: we are in a neoliberal world where many are engaged in “playbour” or supposedly fun work such as fan labour for which monetary rewards are few or nonexistent, precisely because play and work have been conflated, while play continues to be, wrongly or not, associated with fun and freedom.

So rather than playful activities such as fiction belonging, however philosophically, to the realm of gratuity and free-spiritedness, perhaps “the realm of play [has been] annexed by the administered world, [and] a certain principle of play [has] been diffused through the system, such that play constitute[s] the rule rather than the exception” (Connor 11).

Conclusion

Aldous Huxley’s grandfather, T.E. Huxley (1825 –1895), once observed that

“This universe is [...] like a great game being played out, and we poor mortals are allowed to take a hand. By great good fortune the wiser among us have made out some few of the rules of the game, as at present played. We call them ‘Laws of Nature’, and honor them because we find that if we obey them we win something for our pains. The cards are our theories and hypotheses, the tricks our experimental verifications. (Aphorism CCXII, qtd. in Gaither 2012: 1554

This quote highlights an implicit point I have been making throughout this article concerning the profundity of games, their connections with ritual and the importance of games in the construction of subjectivity. The playing card deck, which some believe came from the east and evolved from the mystic augury of the tarot, is a good example of this. Cards retain the cosmic associations that resulted in some of the colorful names
by which they have been known, such as “Bible of the Gypsies”, or “Encyclopedia of the Dead”. In common lore, it is believed that the fifty-two cards of the pack represent the weeks of the year; that the four suits align with the four seasons; and that the thirteen cards in each suit correspond to the thirteen weeks of each season. In other words, playing cards have a sustained connection with ritual and the greater “mystic game” of life, hence in *Eyeless in Gaza* the image of a deck of cards becomes a metaphor for the random events that shape and disrupt the protagonist’s life, while they also serve as a macro-structuring device for the text.

In this essay, I have touched on a number of theories of mimesis and play, from Aristotle to Derrida, while discussing texts that foreground their similarity to games, in order to discuss how fiction may be productively understood as a kind of mimetic game, and one that also demands interaction from readers. I have also suggested that our lives are increasingly gamified, as is currently visible in places like commercial serialized novels, movies, TV series and video games, as well as in more unexpected places such as banking interfaces and education in the form of MOOGs, as well as entertainment, information production and dissemination, and so on. In turn, the gameness of these platforms, interfaces and institutions, which we are often encouraged to experience as ludic and fun, informs how we conceive of, and interact with, our life worlds.

I would like to conclude, therefore, by considering how subjectivity is rendered in *Eyeless in Gaza*. Like Van Veen of Nabokov’s *Ada*, who is engaged in writing a philosophical treatise on the nature of time throughout the narrative in which he exists, and which he likens to his sister’s house of cards, Anthony Beavis of *Eyeless in Gaza* is writing *Elements of Sociology* in which he is concerned with “the individual and his concept of personality” (“December 8, 1926”, 111). As I explained at the outset, *Eyeless in Gaza* begins with Beavis’s observation that life is like a pile of snapshots that may be shuffled at will, reordered and reassembled, so that one must make sense not chronologically, “not before the event, but after it, in what had been the future” through the configuration of the great global game being played out as war (Huxley 3, 19; Vitoux, 19). In this novel, random ordering disrupts readers’ expectations of standard chronology, and Beavis comes to the conclusion that “experience is nothing but a formless collection of states, to prop up the notion of a coherent continuity” (Vitoux 2). Or, as D.H. Lawrence wrote in a letter to Huxley, “the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states”, discreet but connected, that one could lay out like playing cards (qtd. in Vitoux 17).

The idea that subjectivity is fluid and devoid of coherence and continuity was associated in Huxley’s era with modernism, and currently with postmodernism. This is brilliantly illustrated in *Corpus Simsi*, Chloé Delaume’s fictional account of her life in a MMORPG, where she rewrites Rimbaud’s thought-provoking assertion that “I is another” [*je est un autre*] as “game is another” [*jeu est un autre*] (Delaume 8). In other words, subjectivity is a game and is no longer seen as being principally unified. Rather, it now appears that subjectivity is increasingly a question of positions in game structures, and of subjects serving as interchangeable elements in games and rituals rather than modern, individuated beings reassuringly coalesced around a relatively stable subjective core.

Perhaps more concretely, if not more disturbingly, IBM published a report entitled *Virtual Worlds: Real Leaders* (2007) in which the company explained why avid video
gamers are the future of the economy: they are comfortable in simulated worlds; they make decisions quickly; they are not afraid of risk; they believe that management is awarded on a game-by-game basis and is not long term; and they become rapidly immersed and can deal handily with competitive, distributed, virtual environments. So while I have concentrated on the relationship of literature to games and play, given that our life worlds become ever more game-like I believe it has become increasingly urgent to revisit the corpus of work on play and games as a serious, vital topic, in order to examine both our fictional worlds and the ostensibly real, ontological world in which we play and game, and which constructs and contains us as ludic subjects.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank the reviewers of this article for their helpful corrections and comments.
2. While the theory of possible worlds is no longer at the cutting edge of literary studies, it continues to have practical application in computer game studies and, outside of academia, it is at the heart of much in popular culture such as much of Scifi and TV series like Westworld. Possible worlds theory may be defined as follows: “The theory of possible worlds—a modern adaptation of a Leibnizian concept—was originally developed as a means to solve problems in formal semantics. In the early seventies, without detectable or at least acknowledged influence from philosophy, French structuralists such as Tzvetan Todorov and Claude Bremond developed an interest in a number of topics which paralleled informally the concepts and concerns of the theory of possible worlds (hence PWT): the mode of existence of narrative events, the importance of virtual elements in literary semantics, and the problem of the possibility of fictional worlds relative to the laws of the real world” (Ryan 528).
3. Various versions of this argument have been made in any number of works cited throughout the present article, but here I am thinking specifically of Mihai Spariosu’s Literature, Mimesis and Play: Essays in Literary Theory (1982), particularly chapter one. More recently, Mechthild Nagel has published a detailed study of the history of thinking about play, entitled Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play (2002).
4. I have based this section on the original sources and I am much indebted to arguments presented by Spariosu. See also my own unpublished dissertation, The Big Deal: Card Games in 20th Century Fiction, Université de Montréal, 1997.
5. That fictional texts have their own specific temporality has been discussed by theoreticians from Mikhail Bakhtin (2006: 425) and his notion of the chronotope, to Paul Ricoeur and his comprehensive three-volume work on the topic, *Temps et récit* (1985).

6. MMORPG: Massively Multi-Player On-line Role-Playing Game*. MMORPG refers to role-playing games that take place in persistent — i.e. ongoing and 24/7 — fictional worlds, each operated by one server, and played on network-capable platforms such as game consoles, personal computers or mobile devices.

7. Roger Caillois’s *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958) is an essential text for those engaged in identifying genres of fiction that feature games or are constructed like games. Caillois proposes categorizing games under the headings of *agon* [contest], *illinx* [vertigo], *alea* [chance] and *mimicry* [mimesis], animated by *ludus* or rational play and *paidia* or irrational play. While this is not my purpose here, Caillois’s text has been influential in literary studies and forms the basis of Peter Hutchinson’s *Games Authors Play* (1985). It also serves as a model for Wolfgang Iser’s *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989).

8. “This phenomenon I call *ergodic*, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path’. In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1).

9. The debate between ludology and narratology began in the 1990s and continued until the early 2000s. See for example, Janet Murray (2005).

10. I borrow the term “remediate” from Bolter and Grusin who define it, in media studies, as a genealogy of how media build on each other and partially supplant each other. Their work on remediation is an examination of “the formal relations within and among media, as well as [...] relations of cultural power and prestige” entailed therein (22).

11. See also Reith (1999), and Dow-Schull (2012).

12. If this logic seems difficult to follow, it is worth noting that Huizinga’s editor inserted a footnote at this juncture in the text which reads: “This argument does not occur in the German edition of Huizinga’s book, and the presentation of it in his own English version is somewhat obscure. It is hoped that the drift of his argument has been reconstructed without undue distortion” (31).

13. Julian Kücklich’s “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry” (2005) is one of the very first articles on this topic. On playbour, see also Goggin (2011); on fan labor, see Goggin (2018).

14. This is the famous opening line from a letter that Rimbaud wrote to Paul Demeny on May 15, 1871.

**Abstracts**

This article provides an historical overview of various theories of play, games and literature, and examines a number of examples taken from a wide range of texts both theoretical and literary. In doing so, the author analyses specific texts that address the role of play up to the present, and discusses the ludic in relation to mimesis, textuality and literature. The author also discusses fictional narratives on digital platforms such as video games, as well as some of the consequences or ramifications of what is known as the “gamification” the world we currently inhabit.
Cet article donne un aperçu historique de diverses théories du jeu, des jeux et de la littérature, et examine un certain nombre d’exemples tirés d’un large éventail de textes tant théoriques que littéraires. Ce faisant, l’auteur analyse des textes spécifiques qui traitent du rôle du jeu jusqu’à nos jours, et discute du ludique en relation avec la mimésis, la textualité et la littérature. L’auteur aborde également les récits fictifs sur les plateformes numériques telles que les jeux vidéo, ainsi que certaines des conséquences ou ramifications de ce que l’on appelle la « gamification » du monde dans lequel nous vivons actuellement.

INDEX

Mots-clés: jeu, mimesis, fiction, littérature, jeux vidéo, ludisme, subjectivité

Keywords: play, games, mimesis, fiction, literature, video games, subjectivity

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The Agonistics of Reading: Playing, Gambling, Committing

Olivier Hercend

Introduction

1 In *La lecture comme jeu* (1986), Michel Picard remarks upon the increasingly ludic nature of texts, both in contemporary literature and in popular genres like thrillers. The involvement of the reader, figuring out clues, making indirect connections and treating the narrative voice with playful scepticism, is undoubtedly a widespread phenomenon, while genres like the “choose your own adventure books” deliberately blur the line between narrative and game. However, Picard adds that playfulness has always been part of the reading experience, although perhaps in less obvious ways: many forms that are now seen as “serious” literature were formerly considered as games (Picard 1986: 195). Rather than thinking of this hybridization as a process, invented by someone at a certain juncture to mesh the two distinct activities of reading and playing, it may be more fruitful to wonder if these in-between forms do not, in fact, tap into something inherent in all reading.

2 Reader-response theories have long used the metaphor of games and playing — which are both inherent in Picard’s notion of “jeu” — to define and describe the activity of reading. Louise-Michelle Rosenblatt presents an apt explanation as to why this metaphor is so prevalent: to understand reading, theoreticians must go beyond the traditional vision of the reader as a passive audience. “The reader’s creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering, self-correcting process” (Rosenblatt 1978: 11). The process of playing games provides a perfect template to articulate these three points: not only are games actively played, but the players “order” their own moves by conforming to some code of rules, and they make mistakes, from which they can learn in order to perform better. Nearly all reader-response theories rely on this basic parallel, highlighting the active, ordered and non-linear process that reading entails.

3 However, a game is much more than an interactive, iterative process based on rules. It is a human activity, with myriads of variations involving different processes, goals and
faculties. From children pretending to inhabit a fantasy world with ever-changing rules, to a gambler betting it all on the roll of a dice, to martial artists or chess champions performing a highly ritualised set of attacks and counters, games can be widely different. One may wonder to what extent the complex and still ongoing debates between competing conceptions of reading can be understood by asking what kind of game the reader is actually playing. Going into the precise details of the metaphor of reading as a game leads us to question not only the process itself, its structures and the rules that govern it, but also what is at stake, the personal and social values attached to reading. Just as games are a mirror of those who invent and play them, visions of reading imply a certain stance towards interpersonal and social interactions, and a certain idea of their end-goals — that is to say, in the Aristotelian sense of the term, a vision of ethics.

4 This article presents an overview of several reader-response theories, focusing on how they metaphorically or concretely link the activity of reading to different forms of play. I will first present the structuralist and phenomenological approaches, which define reading as taking up a set of established rules and enacting a ritualised performance, with a view to reaching a pre-determined set of end-goals which all the participants can agree on. Just like a game of chess ends on indisputable victories, draws or defeats, and a dramatic or musical performance can be deemed good or bad depending on its faithfulness to the original score, reading according to these theories follows scripts and can be considered and judged accordingly. However, such conceptions are confronted with two major problems. The first is that some texts, especially in modernist and post-modernist literature, deliberately blur the rules that govern reading. By creating unsolvable ambiguities or giving contradictory information, they jeopardize the very ritual that is supposed to make them readable. The second is the fact that some readings can be artistically valuable and meaningful while eschewing or distorting the rules. While it is always possible to dismiss such a use of the text, by considering it as perverse or eccentric, other theories embrace this form of playfulness, and construe a definition of reading which makes room for it.

5 Theories of that kind tend to insist on the notion of “free play”, in some form or other. They emphasise the rights of the reader and the inherent singularity of each new act of reading as a unique event. Be it from a psychoanalytical perspective, as in the works of Michel Picard, or from the deconstructionist standpoint of Jacques Derrida, reading is defined by its contextual and creative aspect. Like the play of children, it takes up pre-existing elements, but never combines them twice in the same way, so that each new reading involves an irreducible fragment of chance. Like Stéphane Mallarmé’s roll of the dice, each reading constitutes a new gamble, which never abolishes chance, never creates a fixed new protocol. Nevertheless, this inherent creativity must not be confused with pure arbitrariness, nor does the contextual nature of the reading event make it totally free. On the contrary, theories that highlight free play also claim that there is a specific form of seriousness to reading as a gamble, that its openness involves another set of values.

6 This is why it is necessary, I would argue, to also think of reading as a game with stakes. Far from being a disinterested operation of one’s free will, reading always happens within certain parameters, and is always the response to a certain call from within the text. The rules that govern the reading of texts do not represent abstract ideals: they are embedded within their rhetorical structures and rely on broader social and cultural
forces. This is why I think that the pragmatic model of reading proposed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle bridges the gap between proponents of reading as a structured game and those that stress the possibility of free play. It puts obedience (the realisation of the ritual) and subversion (the breaking of rules in order to effect another type of performance) on the same plane as possible forms of responses to an interpellation. A text does not offer one meaning to strive for, but a number of positions from which to interact with its contents, some of which its rhetorical apparatus favours and some of which it sidelines. Those postures even include closing the book or looking out the window, for instance — both actions which readers can take in response to stimuli from certain books. Most importantly, each reader’s reaction also comes to bear some meaning. Even closing a book amounts to taking a stance, and this revelatory aspect of all possible responses may be seen as the basis for a form of dialectic evaluation, bearing both on the text and on readers themselves. This article posits that the notion of *agôn* is fundamental in understanding what game the reader is playing. The word *agôn*, in its original Greek context, was used mainly in the context of competitive sport. It implies that the confrontation with another is inherently revelatory. In the case of reading, our reaction to the otherness of the text, whatever it may be, cannot but have implications on our very identity. Our choice to take on certain roles, to obey or disobey the rhetorical guidance of the text, is directly linked to our way of responding to all forms of cultural and social interpellations. It is precisely because none of these messages have a fixed authority over their interpretation, or transcendent claims to our obedience, that choosing to obey or refuse them is so crucial. As Paul B. Armstrong puts it, “parity between the worlds of text and reader [...] would mean that the authority of the conventions governing both are at play and at risk” (Armstrong 11). In the end, the challenge that texts pose, to confront them or to accept them, to reduce them to predetermined protocols or open them up to incalculable gambles, is fundamental in the construction of our identity as readers and as human beings. This is the often unspoken yet decisive game that every reader plays.

**Playing Chess and Playing Music: Reception theories and the traditional metaphors of reading**

7 In *Lector in Fabula*, Umberto Eco compares reading to a game of chess (Eco 1986: 117). This simile underscores a certain vision of the interaction with texts, which stands at the core of his theory. Eco understands texts as frameworks, sets of rules and possibilities, which remain incomplete, and require a form of actualisation. Using the common knowledge of a certain culture, what Eco calls its “encyclopedia”, the text sets up scenarios, from which the reader is supposed to expect a number of consequences. This enables the reader to enact complementary reading strategies, looking for hints and reconstructing the narrated events in order to fit certain “interpretive hypotheses”, that is to say to provisionally give meaning to what he or she is reading.

8 This interaction coalesces in two abstract figures: the Model Reader, as the hypothesis of a reader who would enact the perfect series of interpretive movements to attain a total understanding of the text, and the Model Author, the representation of all the interpretive virtualities of the text as intentional discursive strategies (“The Author wants us to understand this” would be the symbolic equivalent of “the text’s structure leads to such an interpretation”) (Eco 1986: 71; 81). Like in a game of chess, the web of
narrative and stylistic devices within a text defines a set of possible moves, some more fruitful than others, and the “model” reader and author are abstract figures always playing the best possible move in a given situation to create the most appropriate interaction within the parameters. The other possibilities include imperfect moves, for instance a more superficial interpretation, but not breaking the rules. In a game of chess, swiping the pieces off with one’s arm in anger or departing from the table are not moves, and do not need to be recorded as such. Only what constitutes “textual cooperation” in some form or another is the subject of Eco’s research (Eco 1986: 236).

This structural representation of reading makes for effective and cogent interpretations, especially when dealing with texts that play on hints and require a certain form of reconstruction from readers, such as mysteries and thrillers. However, its vision of the “encyclopedia” as a fixed, structural container for all the meanings and connotations of a given word or phrase, raises questions. It seems to externalise something as intimate as the relation that each of us has with language.

Conversely, phenomenological approaches have tried to integrate the original perspective and relation to the world of the individual reader in their reflection. Instead of seeing the act of reading as a logically determined game, on the model of chess, they tend to rely instead on metaphors of theatrical or musical interpretation. In The Act of Reading (1976), Wolfgang Iser likens reading to taking up a role. This position keeps the reader in charge of how exactly the role is played, but nevertheless “commits him to a point of view”, which is embedded within “a certain textual structure” (Iser 1976: 71). The “selective” interpretation is inscribed within a “horizon of meaning” (75), which is to say that the text acts upon its reader, giving hints as to how it should be construed. Borrowing from J. L. Austin’s pragmatics, Iser calls this the “illocutory force” of fiction: it is meant to produce effects on us as readers. Through its rhetorical structure, it asks us to adhere to its perspective, and “construct the context for its reception” (114). As in Eco’s vision of reading as a game of chess, Iser sees the text as delineating a reader-figure, the “implied reader”, which actual readers are supposed to follow, or at least to integrate in a dialectics with their own preconceptions (Iser 1978: 293). The goal of interpretation is hence a form of harmonisation between the reading public and the “implied reader” which the text calls for.

The notion of a dialectics leading to harmony is a fundamental tenet of phenomenological approaches. It underlies what Hans Robert Jauss calls the “conciliation of horizons of expectations”, which is not a structural effect of the text, but is defined by Jauss as a duty of the reader (Jauss 1988: 434). Phenomenological approaches tend to imply a form of value judgement, whereby the reader is morally encouraged to enact such a conciliation. This ties in with a broader philosophical movement, rising from a certain reading of Hegel and of the concept of “recognition”, which posits that human understanding is a goal in itself. Jürgen Habermas is perhaps the clearest advocate of “communicational understanding” as the end-goal of rational human interactions, and the desire for “intersubjective recognition” as the basis of communications (Habermas 1987: 27; 32).

This underlying assumption leads phenomenological reception theories to relegate tensions and conflict to a secondary role. Iser explains that the model for tensions within works of fiction is the beau désordre of Marivaux: it is inherently provisional, and its own dialectical movement leads to its resolution. In concrete terms, this means that, when confronted with complexities and tensions, the reader is supposed to “participate
in the solution” by finding a new interpretation, and reintegrating the anomaly within a broader frame (Iser 1976: 91). In Iser’s theory, this breaking and remoulding of assumptions constitutes the hallmark of a literary style, as opposed to texts that propose only to reinforce existing stereotypes (Iser 1978: 284) However, it ensues that in certain cases, the reader must relinquish freedom in order to follow a certain path: “the communication between the text and the reader can only produce a felicitous outcome if it is under control” (Iser 1976: 297). Consequently, the reader is supposed to have agency only when the text leaves an opening in “places of indetermination”; even then, the potential for disjunction is limited (297). In the end, just like a chess player has a fixed number of moves to play and a performer only a limited amount of freedom within the parameters of a playtext or musical score, conceptions of reading that rely on these metaphors tend to highlight the “limits of interpretation”, to paraphrase the title of one of Eco’s essays. They “aim [...] at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within the text” (Eco 1990: 52).

Although this line of thinking produces undeniably elegant analyses, delineating forms of “perfect reading” called for by the very structure of the text, it is of limited use when applied to more chaotic or confused situations. This of course includes complex texts. The works of James Joyce, in particular, have often been presented within reader-response theories as a sort of margin within the literary corpus, which both fascinates and baffles theoreticians. As early as his seminal work Opera Aperta (1962), Eco saw Joyce’s Finnegans Wake (1939) as a “terrifying document” on the possibilities of semantic ambiguity and formal instability, and the symbol of a temptation to go beyond all the accepted codes that make texts understandable (Eco 1962: 257; 288). Eco’s attempts to affirm the “internal logic” of a totalizing Joycean “encyclopedia” in The Limits of Interpretation (1990) have to come with a caveat on the irreducible “play” with these notions within the text. Likewise, Iser’s musings on Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), which lead him to deduce that the text abandons all possibilities of synthesis in order to create an “experience”, reveal the inability of Iser’s theoretical frame to explain the process of reading Joyce in terms other than negative (Iser 1989: 23-4). Rather than being fully explained by these lines of thinking, some works seem to remain at their limit, and call into question the very possibility of a comprehensive model of reception theories. These theories also tend to ignore that readers can, and often do, break the rules, cheat, or otherwise subvert the rituals that govern the “right” way of reading. Picard remarks that ideas such as that of pacts or duties of the reader exorcise the “tacit, obscure, uncontrolled” aspects of reading, which in reality is a “dangerous game” (Picard 1986: 165). In doing so, we may wonder if they do not also impose a certain standard set of values, which restores the basic structures of authority and intentionality by asking of the reader to accept a form of transcendent guidance — even if they replace the traditional Author figure with the rhetorical structure of the text. As Rosenblatt argues, the notion of a predictive text often hides a willingness to uphold “public control” and “check the relevance of reading” according to institutional or social values (Rosenblatt 1978: 69). Emphasising the rights of the reader to more freedom, to more creative forms of play, may then be a way of calling into question such external standards, of making the act of reading more central and autonomous.
Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction and the Notion of Free Play

Interestingly, a significant number of theories that emphasise the autonomy of reading have been written in French. Perhaps not coincidentally, the word “jeu” in French is open to a much broader range of interpretations than “game” or “play”, enabling thinkers to highlight the inherent dialectics between the logical rules of games, the larger notion of playing, and even more specific meanings. For instance, Roland Barthes, in “Le plaisir du texte” proposed a conception of reading which would include the “logical contradictions” within the text and the unpredictability of reading as “jouissance”, outside of the boundaries set by the rhetoric — in his own words: “que les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu’il y ait un jeu” (Barthes 1973: 9-11. My emphasis). In this sentence, he reuses the set phrase “les jeux sont faits”, or “the bets are off” which the croupier or bookmaker shouts when new bets are no longer allowed, thereby introducing another fundamental term in the semantic field of games and reader theory: that of the gamble. The play of reading only intervenes if “bets are on”, if there are still moves to make and chance involved. This defines another set of conceptions of reading, which oppose the predetermined parameters of structuralist or phenomenological reception-theories, in the same way that games of chance stand in contrast to games of chess.

This approach, which focuses on individual readings, their idiosyncrasies and their relation to chance, underlies Picard’s notion of reading as a form of play. Picard stresses the similarities between the psychological relation towards games and towards art. Both call for a form of psychological “adaptive function” which involves forms of interpretation. The confrontation with artworks and with situations within games conjures up a half-way space between reality and fiction, with its own set of rules and possibilities. Taking up Freudian concepts, Picard identifies texts in particular as “transitional objects” between the mind’s freedom and the resistance of the outside world (Picard 1986: 102). They enable the reader to experiment with interactions, dissociating them from a specific context to manipulate them, through a double mechanism that is both defensive and constructive (27-30). It is not a question of committing to a role, as in Iser’s theory, but on the contrary of trying on many situations and postures for size. According to Picard, this Protean and creative path through the text is the very essence of the game the reader plays (Picard 1986: 93-4).

However, involving chance decisions and the freedom to hop from one position to another does not make the reading process haphazard. Because the reader is producing his own reading, “il joue gros jeu”, as Picard puts it, that is to say, risks are involved. And Picard emphasises the two complementary psychological dangers that haunt every reader: getting caught up in the game, losing perspective to blindly follow a reductive reading path, or — to borrow a word coined by Donald Winnicott — “fantasying”, that is following individual musings to the point of solipsism (Picard 1986: 120). Iser remarked that good fiction always oscillates between involving readers further and distancing them from the action (Iser 1978: 286). Picard sees this rhetorical balancing-act as a set of psychological safeguards which reveal that every interaction with literary texts walks the line between over-involvement and indifference. Far from being marginal phenomena, these unwarranted effects are part and parcel of the reading process and
can be explained within Picard’s theory as the direct consequences of the reader’s freedom and risk-taking.

17 Thus, the conception of reading as free play replaces the opposition between objective “good” and “bad” reading with questions on what it means subjectively to choose a certain path: to adhere to a simplistic view of a complex text or to forget its otherness, which Picard likens to the “resistance” of reality, in order to let one’s own ideas have free reign. All reactions are possible, all are within the framework of these theories, but they have different implications, and call upon what Hillis Miller calls an “ethics of reading”, in the sense that each reading implicates the reader who “must take responsibility for it” (Miller 1987: 59).

18 The relation between play and responsibility in the context of reading has been particularly important in the deconstructionist movement, and has been theorised at length by Derrida. From the start of his philosophical career, Derrida sought to liberate what he called the pluri-dimensional “problem of reading” from unilateral visions of meaning (Derrida 1967a: 31). In De la grammatologie (1967), he claims that writing and reading existed before their subjection to a theory of meaning, which is a more recent, historical phenomenon (130). He also construes a new theory of “play” (“jeu”) which precisely articulates the notions of free play and structured games. Taking up a very specific meaning of “jeu” in French as the ‘looseness’ within a mechanism (like a lock) which gives a small margin to work with, Derrida affirms that a form of play derives from the very fact that perfect, totalising structures, although they may serve as a regulatory ideal, have no actual existence. They are thought of as centres, but in fact constitute only “vanishing points” caught within the structure of “différence”, in the differential between many objects and events, none of which can be the true standard for the others (Derrida 1967b: 423). This applies readily to theories of reading analysed earlier: it is only in how they differ from the ideal of a Model or Implied Reader that individual readings acquire their singular existence. Standard readings are not the most pertinent interpretation, but merely representations of all the protocols that are at play to regulate individual readings and make them go through sufficiently similar motions for them to be compared. In the end, these “standard readings” have nothing to say about what actually happens when we read, that is to say the uncontrolled mechanics of differentiation and dissemination by which my reading differs from yours, and even differs from my reading of the same text at a different moment. Michel Lisse, in his works on Derrida’s conception of the reading process, calls this the “logics of ‘maybe’”. The question is not to reject any regulatory interpretative model based on etymological of philological facts, but, in Derrida’s words, to oppose all “philological fundamentalism” which would erase the possibility of an eye-opening “invention” on the reader’s part (Lisse 2001: 49). Speaking about Mallarmé, Derrida likens this to the notion of the “roll of the dice” in the poet’s works:

Le hasard ou le coup de dés qui “ouvrent” un tel texte ne contredisent pas la nécessité rigoureuse de son agencement formel. Le jeu est ici l’unité du hasard et de la règle, du programme et de son reste ou de son surplus. (Derrida 1972: 62)

19 Every new reading is a composite of probability and chance: it is probable that the reader will take a cue within the text, understand a reference, follow a beaten path, since that is where the text’s structure leads. But at every turn, there is an opening, a “surplus”. The play stems from the looseness of the mechanism, in its inability to
This conception also enables Derrida to assert the seriousness of what he calls “jeu”. In “Plato’s Pharmacy”, he argues that it is only possible to relegate play to the notion of a fun diversion, of games, when there exists a “serious” underlying structure to which it can be compared. The “controlled and contained” reflection on “fun,” alternate readings only works when the distinction with the serious, true meaning of a work is supposed to be founded on solid grounds. If the authoritative notion of the faithful “cooperative” reading is only an abstract ideal, then all takes on a text are serious on some level. Derrida theorises this possibility through the notion of “coup”, playing on the large range of meanings that this word can take: nuances like that of striking (as in a political coup, but also a stroke of luck), of dramatic momentum (the coup de théâtre) and, of course, that of the gamble, since a roll of the dice is “un coup de dé” (Derrida 1972: 180; 192). At each juncture, for each word of the text, there exists the inherent possibility for the reader to enact one of these “coups”, be it a stroke of genius — finding a hitherto hidden chain of connotations that hints at a character’s hidden motive, or a subdued undercurrent that runs counter to the main narrative — or a personal, whimsical reversal of meaning. This is why every reading is an event, even if the text is the same — like any game of roulette or blackjack is a new, incalculable gamble, even if the parameters haven’t changed since the last game which follows the same rules. Someone may always have a stroke of luck, and someone can always decide to hold up the casino.

One of the common points of these different meanings of “coup”, however, is that they all involve some form of contextual value. A political coup, even a coup de théâtre, imply that there was a dramatic situation — real or fictional —, in which the action intervened. Like in a casino, there is always something at stake in play understood as a “coup”. This is why Derrida rejects the idea that play equals “licence”, and affirms the “severity” of his perspective. Just like Picard, he replaces objective notions of “good” and “bad” with subjective postures, “licence” and “severity”. Once again, the set of values which he posits is based on the relation to an Other, to exteriority. The “text of the other”, in its singularity, calls for a “responsible response”, which puts the respondent’s singularity “at stake” (in Dutoit and Romanski 2009: 199). This complex and compressed statement undoubtedly requires analysis, but it points towards the two questions that must be answered in order to gain a full understanding of the act of reading: how it relates to the otherness of the text, and what we concretely put at stake when we open a book, the exact nature and parameters of our commitment.

Understanding the Stakes: Interpellation and its counter-play

Theories of reading rely on the basic idea that the text in some way calls towards its readers, creating a tension between our ordinary way of reacting to people and events and a certain role that it assigns to us within its structure. Iser considers this call, and the fact that the author “sketches an image of himself and his reader” in certain positions, as the source of a tension which is consubstantial with the very notion of an “implicit reader” (Iser 1976: 73). But the concrete explanation for this tension, which implies a force acting upon the individual, differs considerably depending on the
thinker. As Paul B. Armstrong puts it, calling upon the Sartrian reflections on literature, the possibility of mutual recognition between author and reader cannot completely hide the fact that “power is also at work in reading” (Armstrong 2005: 5). Furthermore, American theoreticians of reader response like Stanley Fish have stressed the social and cultural aspect of this relation of power. According to Fish, taking up a certain way of reading is a politically motivated action, which places the reader within a certain “interpretive community” (Fish 1980: 16). Rejecting the idea that texts can bear illocutory power — an idea which runs directly counter to Iser, as seen above — Fish argues that they in fact borrow it from their context, that certain readers, within certain communities “accept the underlying setting” which enables the textual rhetoric to function (Fish 1980: 230).

Thus, the concrete relation between a text’s structure, its effect on the reader, and the social forces at play in the cultural world needs to be understood in order to define how these three instances — text, reader and social world — interact. In this task, the models developed by Marxist pragmatics, and particularly in the works of Jean-Jacques Lecercle on what he calls the ALTER structure, provide a number of cogent responses. Lecercle understands the “call” of the text through the Althusserian notion of “interpellation” as a process which uses historically determined institutional relations of power to make its readers — as well as authors — adopt socially accepted patterns of response and behaviour (Lecercle 1999: 75). Instead of imagining that the written word has its own power to make readers follow certain paths and understand certain references, Lecercle argues that texts (the T in ALTER) borrow both their linguistic structures (the L in ALTER) and web of connotations (the “encyclopedia” or E) from the external state of a certain language and a certain culture, and that these in turn determine socially coded positions (“actantial places”) for the author and reader (A and R). In other words, the rhetoric of a text relies on the fact that readers are human beings in a certain society, and that they will respond to certain recognisable forms of discourses as they do in the rest of their lives, respecting the literary author like they respect other forms of authority — or, in certain social contexts, respecting them as little, and acting overtly against certain frames and clichés.

This is how Lecercle overcomes the limitations that he sees in Iser’s “aesthetics of negativity”, as well as other theories which acknowledge the fact that rules can be broken but cannot fully grasp the “duality of activity and constraint” that defines the real agency of the reader (Lecercle 1999: 90-1). Lecercle argues that reading is entirely “le jeu d’une structure”, that is a structure both “at work” and “at play”. On the one hand, its constraints, like all social structures, live on and are reinforced through “sedimentation”: if many people read trying to emulate the structures of Model Readers, or to follow the will that they attribute to certain Author-figures, and if reading is taught that way, it becomes an increasingly strong norm. But structures are also historically determined, and every new act of reading, like the Derridean “coup”, can “break the crust” and be part of a broader “insurrection” within culture (Lecercle 1999: 166). It then has to face the defensive reactions of cultural institutions. University professors and cultural journalists are bound to rail against “eccentric” or “subversive” readings, which any Marxist will take as proof that there indeed was a spark in the struggle for the control of the cultural field. This explains how free forms of reading are always possible but how, in practice, standard readings are statistically normal:
opposing the rules amounts to taking a risky social stance, struggling with powerful, long-established institutions.

However, Lecercle asserts that resistance to interpellations — what he calls “imposture” — may use the very framework of the ALTER structure, albeit in a different way. Real subversion does not consist in explicitly opposing all social forces, since there is no standpoint, no language or tradition, that is completely outside these forces. They must be challenged from the inside. This is the meaning of “counter-interpellation”: if every text borrows from the structures of a cultural field, it means that these structures are at play within it, liable to be subverted by a new composition or a new interpretation. Giving new meanings to words, changing the connotation and implications of certain phrases (which Lecercle likens to the Butlerian notion of “reworking”, Lecercle 1999: 164-5), and even giving a completely revisionist interpretation of certain narratives, can have effects on the entire cultural framework of a society. Such a perspective also ties in with Michel de Certeau’s reflections on culture and reading. Certeau envisions reading as an “operative process” of “reappropriation” of cultural codes which constantly updates old norms, and stops them from unilaterally exerting oppressive power (Certeau 1980: 11). In this ever-renewed struggle, which he calls the “fundamental polemology” of language, he distinguishes between effects of strategy, that is institutionally imposed norms — how school programs and university curriculums teach people how to read — and effects of tactics, or individual resistances and “coups” (“playing on the occasion”) that readers undertake to express their own, personal take on a text (Certeau 1980: 21).

This means that what is at stake in reading, although of course to widely varying degrees, is not only the posture of the individual, but also the cultural institutions and even the meaning of words. Of course, most readings don’t fundamentally change a culture — for that would result in a nightmarish chaos — but de jure, any of them could. The rest is a question of the individual’s relation to the whole of society, of the interplay between individual moves and large-scale political and cultural strategies. And, as Certeau remarks, this very interaction is the source of a certain type of playfulness. From Zun Tsu’s Art of War and the Chinese Book of Changes to the Arabic Book of Subtle Ruse, the memory of certain “coups” has become the sources of narratives and even new forms of games, where the goal is to invert the relation of force, to make the weak triumph over the strong (Certeau 1980: 64-7). Reading can be played according to the rules, but it is always haunted by the possibility of becoming a challenge, an act of defiance towards the cultural institutions that establish and govern those rules.

The Challenge and the Revelation: Reading as agôn

Hence, from the perspective of Marxist pragmatics, the interaction between reader and text bears not only on their abstract status in a hypothetical Republic of readers and writers divorced from the world of everyday interactions. Who we are when we shop or eat, work for a salary or vote to elect our political leaders, and who we are when we interpret texts, are all interrelated. Hence, the forces at work to define the balance of political power or the redistribution of riches are directly linked with those that preside over our interpretations and our imagination. That is the very definition of “ideology” as “the imaginary relation to the real conditions of living” (Althusser 1976:
Culture, far from being immaterial, informs and changes our relation to the most concrete aspects of our everyday life.

With this in mind, it becomes easier to understand why most phenomenological approaches, and even some advocates of free play, fail to grasp the full stakes of reading. For as we have seen, notions like that of the illocutory force of literature, its effect upon the reader, and even that of commitment, are generally in line with phenomenological theories. Jauss, for instance, shows how texts can “interrogate” their interpreter and make readers call into question their own preconceptions, going so far as to use the idea of “interpellation”. He also defends the reader’s right to question the text in return, to “counter-question” (Jauss 1889: 57-9; 94). However, he asserts that literary hermeneutics must function in such a way that “the quarrel of interpretations does not end with a struggle to the death, like in politics”. He argues for a respectful and pacific vision of interpretation, where only a better mutual understanding can justify new questions (439-440).

First of all, this stems from what I would argue is a flawed reading of Hegel. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the struggle to the death is a pre-political phase which institutes the power relations between humans through the “master-slave dialectics” (Hegel 1971: 158-61). This does not in any way mean that later phases of dialectics in Hegelian thought do not include deadly conflict, which is a fundamental drive in his vision of human affairs, the “work of the negative”. Unlike later phenomenological thought, and the communicational theories of Habermas, Hegel’s phenomenology gives conflict and struggles a decisive role to play in the movement of History. Most importantly, the dichotomy that Jauss proposes between literature and politics deliberately ignores the fact that what texts reveal about their readers, and what readers reveal about the texts that they encounter, have very much to do with the struggles of politics. As Lecercle argues in *De l’interpellation* (2019), there is no clear-cut division between the “communicational” and “strategic” value of interpellation, no way to distinguish between its rational appeal and underlying rhetorical effects. The two are intertwined, and separating them is in itself a politically consequential act which underlies the bias of a certain phenomenological standpoint (Lecercle 2019: 12).

Likewise, Picard’s insistence on personal and psychological discovery seems to forget that individuals and psyches do not exist in limbo and are always inscribed within a social and cultural order. When he asserts that the confrontation to modern texts and their new “protocols of readings” makes traditional protocols moot and reveals new possibilities, Picard should continue by noting that these protocols are linked to broader cultural and political issues (Picard 1986: 249). And when he explains that confronting the risks of reading is a way to “put one’s identity and unity on trial, at stake”, and to acquire a new form of self-knowledge relating to our identity and unconscious, he does not say that this knowledge is not solely intimate, that it bears on our relations to others — which he does imply — and also on our status as social and cultural agents.

This is why the notion of *agôn* is so apposite in re-defining the activity of reading. This Greek term connotes a form of game, of friendly competition divided from the struggles of everyday life. The Olympics of Ancient Greece were a period of truce between warring cities, just like reading does undeniably distance us from the material problems and urgencies of our existence. Yet during this truce, the competitions were serious, because the games being played were deemed to reveal the inmost truth of the
competitors. The confrontation with others, and with the limits of one's body and mind, was a form of trial which brought to light one’s true mettle. Similarly, in the world of ideas, the confrontation with texts and with the readings and interpretations of others, is a way to put one’s own preconceptions and the limits of one's faculties of imagination on trial. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, the agôn of ideas ruled the Greek “society of friends” within the city and, by extension, within the philosophical community: it was the standard by which each thinker's “pretensions” to truth or to faithfulness to an idea could be judged (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 11). Instead of trying to judge reading through some external, neutral standard, a theory of agonistics thus argues that the act of reading itself can set and change values. It is a source, rather than an object, of ethical judgement. When confronted with a text, readers find themselves at the intersection of different forces. Firstly, the originality of the text itself, with its contextually determined set of rhetorical devices and discursive strategies. Secondly, the multiple cultural and institutional prescriptions of a certain social context, which depend on a myriad of factors — when and where the reader lives, how educated they are, what Bourdieu would call their “cultural capital.” And, finally, the idiosyncrasies of their own personal lives, their intimate relation to books, stories, and to language. All these forces have pretensions to inform the construction of meaning, and none of them has any transcendent right to its claim. By deciding to read one way or another, to negotiate and arbitrate between all of these forces, the reader intervenes in the power-dynamics in a way which is perhaps not ‘free’ in the sense of ‘free will’, but always constitutes a form of “coup”, a combination that cannot be determined in advance. This choice in turn reveals a lot, both about the forces at work, which may be challenged in the process and appear under a new light, and about the reader himself or herself. For if there is no “right” way of reading, every decision is meaningful, and has something to say about the one who made it. What is more, if the forces at work in the decision are inextricably intimate, cultural and social, then the posture of the reader that is revealed through their interpretation bears on all of these aspects of their identity. In the end, there is no good or bad reading, just a myriad of motivated interpretations, and choosing one over the other says a great deal about who we are.

This overview calls for two complementary explanations regarding conflict and cooperation to adequately articulate it with traditional reception-theories. Firstly, agonistics does not imply that conflict is the fundamental model for the reading process. It simply posits that it is not inherently marginal: cooperation and conflict are two kinds of response to the challenge of a text and a context of reading, and both should be studied on the same plane. Secondly, this does not make cooperation any less ethical. I would argue that, on the contrary, there is something particularly abstract and unconvincing about the way in which some theories of reading construe cooperation as a sort of transcendent, categorical imperative. Roger Sell, for instance, claims that “A reader responding to a literary text is humanly obliged to give its writer a hearing”, while “misinterpret[ing] the writer by imposing their own world view” is a sort of amoral “temptation” (Sell 2011: 6). Such moralizing discourse, conjuring up a vague notion of “human obligation”, does not do justice to the complexity and the dilemmas that readers face when they actually try to do justice to the otherness of the text. It is precisely because they have no obligation to cooperate that choosing that path is so interesting and valuable.
This is what Derrida means when he talks about a “responsible response”. As Derek Attridge details in *Reading and Responsibility* (2012), the fact that texts and reading protocols do not have any inherent power and are dependent on how readers actually respond to them entails more, not less, responsibility. This requires a specific understanding of the field of ethics, and Attridge shows how Derrida, particularly in his dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, came to assert his own vision of that particular notion. Most importantly, Derrida differs from Levinas because he directly links the violence of confrontation to ethical evaluation, “in the pure and immediate ethics of the face to face” (Attridge 2012: 110), without resorting to a third, overarching term. As Hillis Miller puts it in his *Ethics of Reading*, “each reading is strictly speaking ethical in the sense that it has to take place, by an implacable necessity, as the response to a categorical demand, and in the sense that the reader must take responsibility for it.” (Miller 1976: 59). What is ethical is the fact that there is a confrontation, forces and claims, which the reader cannot simply withdraw from by hiding behind a concept or a protocol: we can decide to read how we want, but we can’t say that we didn’t decide, or that the decision has nothing to do with who we are. Whatever choice we make, we must accept that it expresses something about us.

To respond to the primary question, that is to say what game the reader is playing, I believe we can draw from Derrida’s notion of signature and counter-signature which he defines as “a duel of writing and reading” (Dutoit and Romanski 2009: 287). The question of what rules this duel follows, whether it takes the form of a chess match, a choreography, or a gamble, are secondary when compared to its stakes. In the choice of the protocol, in the oscillations between following and betraying the text, we must commit and open ourselves to be pierced and revealed, just like we may pierce and reveal some meaning that no other reading had brought to light. “Promettre de se compromettre”. These are Derrida’s exact words: to promise to commit, to promise to compromise and question your identity coming in, and to promise to respond to the challenge that the text confronts you with, whichever way you choose to do so.

**Conclusion**

In the end, the agonistics of reading adheres to the metaphor of reading as a form of play or game, but rejects traditional connotations of these words. It asserts that play is in fact a very serious activity, which we use to reveal, challenge and inform our identity as individuals, both psychologically and socially. That is the meaning of *agôn* as I have used it here.

In consequence, theoreticians of reading must continue to elaborate models of socially normative readings, with a contextual and historical framework in mind, seeing them not as overarching structures set in stone, but as institutions linked to broader political and social trends. Furthermore, they must endeavour to evaluate individual interpretations, whether it be those confirmed by documentary evidence at a certain time and place, or their own readings, as so many “coups”, meaningful and revelatory responses to the call of the text. They must analyse the way in which such readings reinforce or call into question certain standards — academic standards of a “good” reading, social standards of “common sense”, political standards of “biased” or “ideological” interpretations, and so on — while always trying to bring to the fore the
relative singularity of each interpretation, and the way in which even faithfulness requires adapting the meaning to a new, original context. This will always entail acts of judgement, a commitment on the part of the theoretician, so that no perspective on reading can be purely theoretical, the contemplation of an objective truth. On the contrary, the only ethically wrong vision of reading is the one that tries to do away with responsibility, to say that some interpretations are neutral and non-committal because they adhere to an objective standard. This vision, however abstract it may seem, is both logically untenable and politically pernicious. It relegates the texts and the readings that it cannot comprehend to a form of aberrant margin, and tries to divorce the forces at work in art and those that govern everyday life, thereby stripping artistic and interpretive agency of their political value. As Jean-François Lyotard asserted, the only way to break away from the reductive, normative standards of communication, and the Terror they exert on language by eliminating subversion and resistance from their models, is a “game theory” of interpretation as “general agonistics” (Lyotard 1980: 23).

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ABSTRACTS

From Michel Picard’s *La lecture comme jeu* to Umberto Eco’s model of the “game of chess”, reading has often been compared to a kind of game. Games serve as a useful template of interaction, highlighting both the exterior set of rules governing an activity, and the agency that these rules leave to the individual. Yet games are also a constitutive human activity, with myriads of variants, from the free play of children to the gambler’s thrill to the highly ritualized sets of actions and reactions seen in martial arts or chess. This article proposes to review classical and contemporary theories of reading based on their specific use of the metaphor of reading as a game. It first presents the structuralist and phenomenological approaches, which tend to define reading as a performance based on pre-established rules, like a game of chess. It then delves into theories that instead choose to highlight the incalculable aspect of every new reading, the possibility for the reader to go off the beaten path. These tend to see reading more as a game of chance than a game of chess. This does not mean, however, that they construe reading as licentious: gambles involve stakes. Theories like Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s Marxist pragmatics are most specific in explaining what the reader is actually committing to. The stance we take, our interaction with texts as “interpellations”, are part and parcel of our lives as social and political beings. They are the products of a certain context, but they may in turn influence or call into question the very structures that make them possible. This is why this article suggests reading be examined through the notion of agonistics. Taking up the ancient Greek word “agôn”, which implies that games are forms of trial made to reveal something of the player’s nature, the agonistics of reading posits that reading must not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, the challenge that texts pose, to confront them or to accept them, is fundamental in the construction of our identity as readers and as human beings. This dialectics of self-revelation and self-construction, through the interaction with texts, is the often unspoken yet decisive game that every reader plays.

De l’ouvrage de Michel Picard, *La lecture comme jeu*, au modèle du « jeu d’échecs » proposé par Umberto Eco, la lecture a souvent été comparée au jeu. De fait, le schéma du jeu permet de penser l’interaction entre une série de règles externes et les possibilités d’action qu’elles laissent à l’individu. Mais au-delà de ces seules structures, le jeu est une activité fondamentale chez
l'homme, avec une infinité de variations, des jeux d'imagination d'enfants aux « coups » du parieur, et aux séries ritualisées d'actions et de réactions qui composent un combat d'arts martiaux ou une partie d'échecs. Ainsi, cet article propose de passer en revue plusieurs théories classiques et contemporaines de la lecture, en étudiant spécifiquement leur façon d'employer la métaphore de la lecture comme jeu. Il s'intéresse d'abord aux théories structuralistes et phénoménologiques, qui tendent à considérer la lecture comme l'application de règles pré-établies, comparable à un jeu d'échecs. Il est ensuite question des théories qui préfèrent éclairer la liberté que possède tout lecteur de sortir des sentiers battus. Ces perspectives comparent plus volontiers la lecture à un jeu de hasard qu'à un jeu d'échecs : un « coup », qui comme le coup de dé mallarméen « jamais n'abolira le hasard ». Mais le « coup » du parieur a toujours son enjeu. A ce titre, les théories comme la pragmatique marxiste de Jean-Jacques Lecercle donnent une explication particulièrement pertinente de ce que la lecture met en jeu. Notre posture face aux interpellations des textes informe notre être social et politique. Voilà pourquoi cet article propose une vision de la lecture basée sur la notion d’agonistique. Reprenant le mot grec « agôn », qui fait du jeu une épreuve révélatrice, l’agonistique de la lecture soutient que les textes posent au lecteur un défi. En les réduisant à des protocoles préexistants ou en les ouvrant par d’incalculables « coups », nous participons essentiellement à la définition de notre propre identité, en tant que lecteur et en tant qu’être humain. Cette dialectique de révélation et de construction de soi, par l’interaction avec les textes, est le jeu fondamental, quoique souvent passé sous silence, auquel se livre tout lecteur.

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Consequence and Consequences in Jane Austen

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

Introduction

1 How is it that, in my old age, I keep compulsively re-reading that glorified Mills and Boon romance they call *Pride and Prejudice* (hereafter PP) – a variation on the ‘boy meets girl’ romance in the bourgeois form of ‘poor girl marries rich boy’? For what is Elizabeth Bennet if not the beggar maid that wins her King Cophetua? And yet I would take the novel with me to desert island.

2 It wasn’t always so. When I first read the novel, at the age of 18, I hated it. I was irritated by its reactionary conformism, its patriarchal ideology, its ‘taming of the shrew’ side, when Elizabeth Bennet renounces her ironic and independent posture and converts to Pemberley. And it is true that, in 1815, presenting Chatsworth or its fictional equivalent as the very symbol of the social cosmos, in the middle of the industrial revolution, of the Age of Enlightenment, after the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley and a host of others, is not a sign of historical or social awareness — hardly a Utopian anticipation of the future, rather a rear-guard action. How, therefore, can I take such pleasure in reading and re-reading the novel?

3 A naive answer is that, like all readers, I am captured into the fictional world of Jane Austen. With considerable narrative skill she lets me in, makes me feel at home in her world, to such an extent that I share the feelings and emotions of the characters, not least of her heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. It takes some talent to make a reader feel, two centuries later, that he shares the lives of the characters as if they were close relatives, or friends of the family.

4 I have just indulged in a number of danger words. For we know full well, in these structuralist and post-structuralist times, that characters of fiction, even if they seem to be as alive as our neighbours, are mere ghosts, whose ghostly existence is confined within a number of words and sentences, that they are constructed, sentence after
sentence, as is linguistically furnished, page after page, the world in which they live. Therefore, if capture there is, the capture of fascination and seduction (of the reader by the text), such capture is strictly linguistic.

5 The best example of this is the very incipit of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (PP 1). At first reading, what we hear is the *vox populi*, a kind of maxim or proverb. At second reading, however, we become aware of a strange insistence, which is perhaps a symptom: the proverb states a *truth*, a truth *universally acknowledged*, presented as some sort of *logical necessity*, or at least *probability* (“...must be in want of a wife”). Methinks the proverb doth protest too much, and the whole thing smacks of Freudian negation. An impression confirmed when we read the third paragraph of the novel and realize the sentence was actually the wishful thinking of a foolish woman, Mrs Bennet, who has five daughters of marriageable age and an estate entailed in the male line — so that we are made to reinterpret the modal auxiliary, *must*, as an expression not of logical necessity or probability, but of obligation: the young man who has just taken Netherfield Park is under the obligation of marrying one of Mrs Bennet’s daughters, which he dutifully does at the end of the novel. I have been captured into this fictional world by the author’s skilful play on the possible meanings of a modal auxiliary.

6 This answer, however, is not sufficient. It doesn’t tell us how we pass from such admirable use of the English language to the fictional universe in which we are captured. Here I need to make a short detour, by way of one of Adorno’s letters to Walter Benjamin. It is dated September 6th, 1936:

> I experienced a similar shock when I read the first sentence of Schnitzler’s *Weg ins Freie*: “Today Georg von Wergenthin sat at dinner alone”. What gives us the right to write about someone as if we were capable of talking about him, as if we knew who he is? (Unless I am mistaken, the first sentence of *Elective Affinities*, with its tentative introduction of the characters’ names, because of Goethe’s infallible tact as regards the philosophy of history, already shows an awareness of the impossibility of this form of narrative). (Adorno 131, translation mine from the French)

7 It seems to me that Adorno, in the historical conjuncture we call modernity, is saying two things: that it is impossible to know someone; and that, therefore, it is impossible to tell that person’s story as if we knew him or her. This has something to do with Adorno’s cultural pessimism, a pessimism which at the time of writing could not yet be ascribed to the memory of Auschwitz, but found its cause in the coming to power of the Nazis.

8 Let us for a moment take what Adorno is telling us seriously: we have no right to claim knowledge of another person. We immediately note that this problem is at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice*, since prejudice consists in the conviction that, contrary to empirical evidence, one knows what the other person is, and since pride, the feeling of superiority induced by one’s class position, has the same consequence. Adorno, following Benjamin, claims that such false knowledge is embodied in the process of naming the characters: naming someone amounts to claiming to know everything about him or her. This is the meaning of Adorno’s allusion to the incipit of *Elective Affinities* (to which Benjamin devoted a whole essay). His “tentative introduction of the characters’ names” alludes to the fact that the four main characters in Goethe’s novel are only known by their first names or their profession (Edward, Charlotte, Ottilie, the
captain), which does not preclude knowledge of their social condition (the novel begins with the sentence: “Edward, a rich baron in the prime of life...”), but fails to give us the impression that we know everything about the character. As Benjamin states in his essay, “all the names are merely Christian names, at least until the appearance of Mittler” (a symbolically important character, as his name means “intermediary”, but whose actual presence in the narrative is rather intermittent) (Benjamin 289, translation mine from the French). So giving a character her full name implies a thorough knowledge of her (we are reminded of the opening of Emma: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich...” — a narrative coup de force if there is any), whereas giving her only a first name implies a more prudent or tentative approach. The difference with Pride and Prejudice is obvious: the first character to be named, in the third paragraph of the novel, is “Mr Bennet”, the second is “his lady”, in other words Mrs Bennet, and neither is entitled to a Christian name. And do we know Darcy’s Christian name? We do: he is called Fitzwilliam Darcy, but this rather cumbersome first name is used on only one occasion, when he signs the letter of explanation he gives Elizabeth Bennet, after she has rejected him. At this point one may object that the heroine does have a Christian name, as do all the Bennet sisters, Jane, Mary, Kitty and Lydia. But this is a question of social etiquette: in society, Jane, the eldest Bennet sister is “Miss Bennet”. Elizabeth is “Miss Elizabeth Bennet” — she is entitled (or should I say sentenced) to a Christian name because she is only the second sister. We must therefore take it as a symptom that Darcy’s first name is never used in the novel, even, on the last page, when he is safely married to Elizabeth.

It appears that, in Jane Austen, this form of naming, family names before first names, far from denoting an antiquated form of narrative, which our modernity has made impossible, is the very condition of her narrative, in so far as, for her, a narrative is a site for social games. This is made very clear in a passage in Mansfield Park (hereafter MP), a conversation between the virtuous Fanny Price and the flirtatious Mary Crawford. Both are in love with Edmund Bertram, Sir Thomas Bertram’s second son, and therefore not the heir to the title. Mary Crawford the incipient socialite would fain marry him, if only his social prospects were better. Catching sight of Edmund Bertram who, in the company of Mrs Grant her sister, is coming to join them, she addresses Fanny thus:

‘My sister and Mr Bertram — I am so glad your eldest cousin is gone that he may be Mr Bertram again. There is something in the sound of Mr Edmund Bertram so formal, so pitiful, so younger-brother-like, that I detest it.’

‘How differently we feel!’ cried Fanny. ‘To me, the sound of Mr Bertram is so cold and nothing-meaning — so entirely without warmth or character! — it just stands for a gentleman, and that’s all. But there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown — of kings, princes and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections.’

‘I grant you that the name is good in itself, and Lord Edmund Bertram or Sir Edmund Bertram sound delightfully; but sink it under the chill, the annihilation of a Mr — and Mr Edmund is no more than Mr John or Mr Thomas.’ (MP 224)

Beneath this amorous contest, there lies an assessment of the importance of social status. And here, there is neither pride not prejudice: Fanny has no prejudice, only the deepest feelings (her preference for Christian names is a sure sign of this), and Mary Crawford has not reached the social heights that allow pride (but her insistence on titles shows that she is ready for it). But the essential features of the social game staged in Pride and Prejudice are already present.
At least this is the point I would like to make. I take it as a way to connect the second answer to my initial question (as reader, I am captured by the language of Jane Austen) with the first (I am captured by the world her fiction creates). And I shall try to do this in the manner of Leo Spitzer, by looking at the occurrences of one word, consequence, as its various acceptations seem to me to frame the semantic programme on which the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* is based. What drew my attention was that the term is often used, to the point of being typical of Jane Austen’s style, especially in its now archaic acceptation, the most famous instance of which may be found in the opening of *Mansfield Park*:

> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and a large income. (MP 41)

“With all the comforts and consequences”: the word refers to rank and station, it denotes a social status, and this meaning derives from a wider archaic acceptation, still heard in the phrase “to be of consequence to someone”, where the word denotes importance, in this case emotional importance. My purpose is to contrast this use of the word with its more common use, where it means the effect of a cause.

**Consequence**

This, therefore, is my answer to my two initial questions (as well as to Adorno’s objection). What attracts me in *Pride and Prejudice* is, of course, Jane Austen’s extraordinary linguistic skill, in so far as it contributes to the creation of a world of fiction, and in so far as her language is the language of a moment in the history of the English language when the two main acceptations of consequence, importance and effect, coexisted. The main interest of such coexistence, which inscribes the narrative programme of *Pride and Prejudice*, is that it makes manifest that a natural language inscribes a world, in this case a social world, in other words that, to speak like Gramsci, “a language is a conception of the world.” The language games that Jane Austen plays, which are the foundation of her storytelling games, of her narrative as game, imply a representation of the social world which the language inscribes, reflects and conditions.

This is why I must start with an attempt at historical semantics, by charting the metaphorical drift the word has undergone in history. In this, the NED will be of help. Here are the first three meanings of the word the dictionary gives:

1. A thing or circumstance which follows as an effect or result from something preceding.
2. The action or condition of following as a result upon something antecedent, the relation of result or effect to its cause or antecedent.
3. That which follows logically, a logical result or inference.

I omit meanings 4 and 5, which are derivations of meaning three, and I come to meanings 6 and 7:

6. Importance, moment, weight. Originating in the attributive phrase “of consequence”, i.e. having issues or results, and therefore important.
7 a. In reference to persons. Importance in rank and position, social distinction. See ‘quality’.
7 b. Importance manifested by appearance or demeanour, dignity.

Meaning 7 a is illustrated by a phrase taken from Swift (but which is also found in Jane Austen): “a person of consequence”. Meaning 7b is illustrated by a quotation from Northanger Abbey: “Her figure gained more consequence”.

The word “therefore” in meaning 6 shows that the word has indeed been the object of metaphorical drifting, along the following stages: 1. Consecution, or simple succession, 2. The result of an antecedent state of affairs, 3. The effect of a cause, 4. The importance of such effect, 5. Social rank and position, 6. The behaviour that corresponds to said rank, in other words dignity.

Stages 2 and 3 correspond to the contemporary use of the term, stages 4 to 6 to its now archaic meaning, a meaning however very much present in Jane Austen. The title of my paper indicates that my reading of Pride and Prejudice is based on the dialectics of consequence as status and consequences as effects.

Let us, therefore, step into the world of consequence — the world of Jane Austen. I have counted 21 occurrences of the word in Pride and Prejudice, 29 in Mansfield Park. In Mansfield Park, 21 of those occurrences concern consequence as importance or status. In Pride and Prejudice the distribution is more balanced: 13 occurrences concern importance or status, 8 consequence as result or effect. But within those 13 occurrences, status dominates importance, by 8 against 5. We can therefore maintain that Pride and Prejudice plays on the contrast between the two main acceptations of the term.

I provide a few examples to illustrate the various meanings. Here is Wickham maligning Darcy:

> The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him as he chooses to be seen. (PP 69)

The collocation of consequence and fortune shows we are indeed dealing with rank and station, with social status. The collocation of consequence and manners suggests that such status comes with dignity, be it genuine or spurious.

And this is what Lady Catherine de Burgh typically tells Elizabeth: “Daughters are never of so much consequence to a father” (PP 168). Here, we are dealing with importance rather than status, and such importance is not merely social (although it probably is for Lady Catherine, who is aware of the entail) but also emotional (which it is for Elizabeth, whose relationship with her father is of the most affectionate kind). This is why, when Fanny Price learns that Mrs Norris, her aunt, wishes to give her a home, she exclaims: “If I could suppose my aunt really to care for me, it would be delightful to feel myself of consequence to any body!” (MP 61)

And, last, this is Mrs Bennet’s reaction when she learns that Mr Collins, whose offer of marriage Elizabeth has rejected, has found a more willing partner in Charlotte Lucas: “The consequence of it is, that Lady Lucas will have a daughter married before I have” (PP 125). This consequence is obviously a result or an effect.

Let’s find out how the word is used at strategic points in the narrative, for instance in the scene of the ball, when Darcy gives his assessment of Elizabeth Bennet, whom he has just met — it will take three volumes for Elizabeth to forgive him: “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.” (PP 9) We are of course keenly aware of the dramatic irony of such pronouncement (the underlined me, the
time adjunct at present), and the consequence mentioned is a mixture of importance and social status — for Darcy, at this stage, there is no emotional consequence which is not first and foremost social, and this is the clearest mark of his pride.

We may also note that on two occasions the word consequence is in collocation with the two keywords of the novel, the words of the title. The first occurs when, Bingley having gone back to London, Elizabeth attempts to console a jilted Jane:

They [Bingley's family and friends] may wish many things besides his happiness, they may wish his increase of wealth and consequence; they may wish him to marry a girl who has all the importance of money, great connections, and pride. (PP 122)

This may pass for a definition of consequence as status, in its connection with consequence as dignity: consequence means a mixture of fortune (in Mansfield Park, Edmund Bertram thus judges Mary Crawford: “She had only learnt to think nothing of consequence but money” [MP 425]), of social station (“great connections”) and pride. Elizabeth probably has Darcy in mind as much as Bingley, and we note the contrast between happiness and consequence, which expresses Elizabeth's position before her conversion to Pemberley, that is to a positive form of social consequence, which, however, is never named as such. The parallel conversion of Darcy is described in the negative language of the renunciation to consequence: “Never had she seen him so desirous to please, so far from self-consequence, or unbending reserve as now, when no importance could result from the success of his endeavours” (PP 232).

Consequence as status and/or dignity naturally occurs in the same context as pride, whereas consequence as result of effect is to be found in the same contexts as prejudice. Thus, when Elizabeth, who has been made aware by Darcy's letter of the truth about Wickham, tells Jane how much she regrets her former praise of him, they have the following exchange:

‘How unfortunate [says Jane] that you should have used such strong expressions in speaking of Wickham to Mr Darcy, for they do appear wholly undeserved.’
‘Certainly. But the misfortune of speaking with bitterness is a most natural consequence of the prejudices I had been encouraging.’ (PP 200)

It appears that consequence as status implies not so much dignity as pride, prejudices and unwelcome consequences. More than the cliché of ‘poor girl marries rich boy’, what the narrative of Pride and Prejudice is about is the consequences of consequence.

We still have to give an account of the various types of consequence as importance or status that we find in both novels. They are three: social consequence, emotional consequence and moral consequence. Placing them in that order suggests a possible move from one to the other, produced by the consequences that each type of consequence implies.

Social consequence has characteristics one easily imagines: it comes with material comfort, money, the part one plays in society. In Mansfield Park, if the flirtatious Mary Crawford hesitates to accept Edmund Bertram, it is because he is not the heir to the title, and, even worse, he means to take orders. She even dares to tell him so to his face: “You assign greater consequence to the clergyman than one has been used to hear given, or than I can quite comprehend.” (MP 120) It will come as no surprise that this type of consequence has psychological consequences — snobbery, giving in to flattery, pride, and even quasi-physiological consequences: you can tell a person of consequence from the way he or she dresses, walks or speaks. Sir Thomas Bertram walks in a slow and majestic manner. His wife, Lady Bertram, is completely motionless. Mr Darcy, when...
he enters the ballroom at the beginning of the novel, is a fine figure of a man because he has a yearly income of ten thousand pounds:

The ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half an evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his huge estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend. (PP 7-8)

As we can see, social consequence has consequences, not all of which are felicitous: whether or not it implies pride, it can make you handsome, or plain. Indeed, if in Pride and Prejudice social consequence is tainted by pride in the character who embodies it, in Mansfield Park, its consequences are of a more serious and long lasting kind: in Maria Bertram, it encourages selfishness (which in both novels is called “self-consequence”), fosters false values and illusions. More than anything else, it provokes the catastrophe: when she, the eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Bertram, has just married the insignificant but rich Mr Rushworth, she elopes with Henry Crawford, and ends up in disgrace and exile. In Mansfield Park, the catastrophe takes us through the whole gamut of the consequences of consequence. In Pride and Prejudice, Maria’s fate is spared Lydia (who has eloped with Wickham), but only through Darcy’s last-minute intervention. And this is no simple deus ex machina: Darcy’s intervention is due to his recently acquired awareness of another type of consequence, emotional consequence. In the famous scene when he first proposes to Elizabeth, such awareness still eludes him, thus justifying Elizabeth’s indignant rejection:

His sense of her inferiority — of its being a degradation — of the family obstacles which judgement had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was unlikely to recommend his suit. (PP 168)

The consequence referred to here is of course Darcy’s social consequence, which he finds it difficult to ignore. But am I forcing the text in reading the phrase “the consequence he was wounding” as ambiguous? For in speaking thus, he inflicts another kind of wound, on the emotional consequence of which Elizabeth, together with Jane, is the embodiment in the novel.

In Mansfield Park, the status of emotional consequence is ambiguous, and does not entail the same consequences. In Maria Bertram, it takes the form of forbidden passion and leads to adultery and ruin. Henry Crawford, before he persuades Maria to elope with him, is in love with Fanny Price, who does not find his attention welcome, as she has doubts, which will later be confirmed, about his morality:

He was in love, very much in love; and it was a love which, operating on an active, sanguine spirit, of more warmth than delicacy, made his affection appear of greater consequence, because it was withheld, and determined him to have the glory, as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him. (MP 325)

That consequence is nefarious. It easily combines with social consequence, as it affects the same characters. But in Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram, emotional consequence takes on another, thoroughly positive, value: it is no longer a case of passion, of devastating inclination, but of affection and selfless love. To be important to someone else (which is, as we saw, what Fanny wished to be in relation to her aunt), and especially to feel the importance to oneself of another being, to give affection as well as being the recipient of it, this is the consequence the acquisition of which Fanny Price’s
success story relates. Said acquisition is well on the way in chapter 22: “Fanny’s consequence increased on the departure of her cousins.” (MP 219)

Hence the move from emotional consequence to the third type, moral consequence. In *Mansfield Park*, this consequence is explicitly mentioned only once, but at a turning point of the plot. Sir Thomas Bertram has departed for the West Indies, to look after his estates. As a result, the young people feel free of all moral restraint: they wish, *horribile dictu*, to stage a play. They all give in to that wind of folly, even the wise Edmund Bertram, and the rehearsals are as many opportunities for flirtatious behaviour (this is when Maria Bertram’s passion is given free rein, although she is already engaged to Mr Rushworth). The only one who resists is Fanny, who in so doing makes the abyssal depth of her virtue (a virtue hardly bearable for today’s reader) manifest:

> Fanny looked in and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end. For her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted, for she had never seen even half a play, but everything higher consequence was against it. (MP 156)

As we can see, moral consequence is called “higher consequence”. And it appears that the theatre is a site for an evil form of consequence, the selfishness and vanity of self-consequence, and its evil nature will be made clear later in the novel, in Maria Rushworth’s ruin — in divorce and exile.

The path of consequence, which at the heart of the plot in *Mansfield Park*, may be represented in the following manner. Social consequence, which is an objective reality (as exemplified by Sir Thomas Bertram, baronet) entails two opposite types of emotional consequence: either “self-consequence”, i.e. selfishness, irresponsibility, social pride, or sound affection and selfless humility, everything that goes under the name of dignity in the most positive sense of the word. Both consequences themselves have consequences, as selfishness leads to social chaos and personal ruin (“What would be the consequences? Whom would it not injure? Whose views might it not affect? Whose peace would it not cut up for ever” [MP 480], thus Fanny Price when she learns of Maria Bertram’s elopement), whereas selflessness leads to moral “higher consequence” and to a newly found cosmos, both social and personal. On the one hand, Maria Bertram, whose fate is presented as an example not to be followed, on the other hand Fanny Price, whose success is exemplary in the opposite sense, and whose personal trajectory follows the path of consequence — at the beginning of the novel, she is still outside the pale, for lack of social consequence (a pauper niece that charity has allowed to enter the great house), but at the end she has found her place at the very centre, as the return to cosmos after chaos is largely due to her apparently insignificant person.

What is implicit in this trajectory is that social consequence, the negative aspects of which have been focused on so far, has a positive side, the source of dignity rather than pride. This positive aspect is spectacularly present in *Pride and Prejudice*. If Elizabeth Bennet undergoes her conversion, it is not of course simply out of social ambition, it is out of her recognition that Pemberley is not merely a myth, but the embodiment of a social, but also an ethical responsibility, and therefore of a form of dignity.

Thus, the path of consequence in *Pride and Prejudice* may be represented in the following manner. It links, or seeks to link, two poles, social versus emotional consequence. Either pole has its positive, as well as its negative aspect, according to the
psychological consequences it entails: pride or dignity for social consequence, humility or selfishness (“self-consequence”) for emotional consequence. The characters each embody a trajectory along that path, like pawns in a game of chess. The negative aspect of each pole entails material consequences, the effect of the psychological consequences just mentioned, and the trajectory ends on failure: Lady Catherine de Burgh remains a prisoner of her pride and selfishness, Lydia and Wickham will never obtain the social consequence they crave for. The positive aspect entails the opposite consequences: Jane, whose feelings are as humble as they are deep, eventually marries her Bingley; before the beginning of the plot, Darcy’s father, aware of the moral responsibility that his station ought to carry, had been the benefactor of an ungrateful Wickham. Darcy and Elizabeth begin their respective journeys from the negative side of their respective poles — from pride and from prejudice, and they end up at the positive side of the opposite pole, respectively acquired humility for the great man and conversion to tradition for the ironic and rebellious young lady. At their middle point, their trajectories cross, and at the end of the novel everything is as it should be.

I have just used a metaphor, of consequence as a game. But is it merely a metaphor? My contention is that it is not.

A game of consequences

I have been economical, if not with the truth, at least with the evidence. I have ignored the eighth meaning of consequence in the NED:

8. Consequences. A round game, in which a narrative of the meeting of a lady and a gentleman, their conversation and the ensuing ‘consequences’ is concocted by the contribution of a name or a fact by each of the players, in ignorance of what had been contributed by the others.

The example that illustrates this meaning is taken from Sense and Sensibility: “They met for [...] playing at cards or consequences, or any game that was sufficiently noisy” (S&S 133).

“Sufficiently noisy”: the game was obviously a great source of fun. It still exists today, albeit in a simpler form, as it has an equivalent in the Surrealist game of cadavre exquis: the first player begins a story, and passes it on to the next, hiding all but the last sentence, on the basis of which the new player will continue the narrative, and so on and so forth. The story thus “concocted” will eventually be read aloud, among general hilarity. This modern version, however, differs from the game as played at the time of Jane Austen in one important respect: in the older version, it wasn’t any story that was concocted, it was the eternal and ever exciting story of a lady and a gentleman, and of the consequences, sometimes surprising but always in a sense predictable, of their meeting.

We know that social games and rituals play a large part in Jane Austen’s world. More often than not they are rituals that allow young people of both sexes to meet and converse without a chaperone. Whist is for older, in other words married, people. But we are aware of the central importance, in the narrative as well as the ethical structure of Mansfield Park, of the theatre, with its amorous duets, and the innumerable rehearsals the staging of the play demands. And the same can be said of the ballroom scene in Pride and Prejudice, even if it occurs at the beginning of the story rather than at its significant middle point. For it is then, in Darcy’s assessment of Elizabeth, that pride
is made manifest and prejudices are born. Even if Darcy and Elizabeth do not dance together, because they do not dance together, they enter an amorous game which provides the novel with its narrative thread.

I therefore suggest we read *Pride and Prejudice* as the development, in the shape of a novel, of a *game of consequences*, as it is in that kind of game that the dialectics of the too well known (the clichés of the romance plot, the ever retold tale of Cinderella) and the surprising is played out. The problem of the couple in the making, what prevents them, for our pleasure, to come together before the end of the third volume, is indeed “the ignorance of what is contributed by the other”. For Elizabeth and Darcy, the consequence of their clinging to a bad consequence (social in the case of Darcy, emotional for Elizabeth) is not ruin (a fate that threatens Lydia) or failure (Lady Catherine de Burgh, unlike the ridiculous Mrs Bennet, will not succeed in marrying her daughter), it is their ignorance of the true feelings of the other, with its consequent misunderstandings.

We understand why the characters, even the protagonists, even the more rounded (as opposed to flat) characters, are what narratologists call actants — pieces in a game of chess, whose moves, like Alice’s moves on the chessboard of *Through the Looking-Glass*, are determined by the strategic and tactical demands of the game. The legendary ‘lightness’ of *Pride and Prejudice* (and it is a short step from ‘light’ to ‘slight’), its Mills and Boon side, from which I started, as the novel doesn’t lay claim to the moral depth of *Mansfield Park*, may be positively reinterpreted in terms of the game: if the brilliant Elizabeth Bennet, contrary to the boring Fanny Price, crushed by her own virtue, is endowed with eternal charm, it is not because she is vivacious and sardonic, it is because she is a pawn in the game of chess, or rather of consequences, of the novel, a pawn who, in the literal as in the figurative sense, *goes to queen*. Or rather, her charming psychological traits are merely the attributes of the role she plays in a game of consequences.

We have moved from a linguistic to a semiotic account, from the meanings of the word *consequence* that give the novel its semantic programme to the structure of the novel as game, with its rules, its moves, its strategy and tactics. This is where we may combine the two answers to my initial question (which was based on a purely emotional reaction). If, like Greek art for Marx (in a famous passage of the *Grundrisse*), *Pride and Prejudice* is endowed with “eternal charm”, it is because the fictional world of the novel has lost nothing of its captivating power, which is the captivating power of a game: every reader starts the game afresh, each new reader is a potential player.

We also understand why Jane Austen, unwittingly and in anticipation, has answered Adorno’s objection about the impossibility of this type of narrative. For her, the object of a narrative is the representation of a social game, a game of ritual and etiquette, carried along by linguistic *agon* (her typical conversations are so many linguistic contests), and this is where the novel reaches the reality of a society in a determinate historical conjuncture, which the reader is able to recontextualize. In Goethe’s novel, the characters are molecules caught in the chemical game of elective affinities — all they need is a Christian name. In Jane Austen, emotions and feelings are filtered through a language in so far as it expresses a conception of the world, in other words, a culture. Two centuries later, society has changed, but the linguistic and pragmatic game of amorous relationship is still with us. What fascinates me in *Pride and Prejudice* (to the point of taking the novel with me to desert island) is both the historical distance
(inscribed in the archaic meaning of consequence) and the ever renewed and successful recontextualization, in other words, the dialectics of consequence and consequences.

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ABSTRACTS

This reading of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* suggests that the semantic framework of the novels is provided by the contrast between two meanings of the word consequence, the archaic meaning of social or emotional importance and the common and garden meaning of effect of a cause. It also suggests that the narrative structure of the novels is that of a game of consequences, a game that was played at the time of Jane Austen.

Nous proposons la thèse suivante : le cadre sémantique des romans *Orgueil et préjugé* et *Mansfield Park* est créé par le contraste entre les deux sens du mot « consequence », incluant le sens archaïque d’importance sociale ou émotionnelle, et le sens commun et habituel qui dit l’effet produit par une cause. Nous suggérons également que la structure narrative des romans est un jeu de conséquences (« a game of consequences »), un jeu pratiqué à l’époque de Jane Austen.

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**Keywords:** Adorno Theodor, Austen Jane, consequence, consequences, dignity, Goethe Johann Wolfgang von, narrative structure, prejudice, pride, semantic programme, game

**Mots-clés:** Adorno Theodor, Austen Jane, conséquence, conséquences, dignité, Goethe Johann Wolfgang von, structure narrative, préjugé, orgueil, programme sémantique, jeu
AUTHOR

JEAN-JACQUES LECERCLE

“’Tis a reckless Debowch of a Game”: Chance and Resistance in Thomas Pynchon’s Novels

Bastien Meresse

1 Although the moralism of Puritan ministers sternly reminded their flocks to refrain from wasting their earnings on rash bets, it was in the American West that individuals were first allowed to gamble in plain sight. It does not exactly come as a surprise, according to Hal Rothman, if one bears in mind that the entire southwestern economy was itself a gamble: “Grounded in speculative ventures, easy credit, and cheap paper money, […] participating in such an economic environment could be irresistible, as it offered the prospect of making a fast fortune out of nothing. But it required a gambler’s sensibility.” (Rothman 663) In his memoir *Positively Fifth Street: Murders, Cheetahs and Binion’s World Series of Poker* (2003), James McManus explains that the frontiersman’s urge to seize his chance is reflected in the nation’s overall attitude towards gambling. The writer, also a professional poker player, acknowledges the gambling spirit which accompanied pioneers, well before the roulette wheels and faro tables came to represent the country’s fascination for tales of loss and luck:

In America, the story begins rather late but it picks up steam — and big bucks — in a hurry. From Puritan whist tables, Mississippi riverboats, and Gold Rush saloons to Wall Street, Las Vegas, and internet gambling sites, the ways we’ve […] explored our vast continent have echoed, and been echoed by, our risk-loving acumen. (Manus 11-2)

2 The nature of the American frontier, it seemed, attracted risk capital. It prompted many a risk-loving investor to plunge on the market, settler and land speculator alike. Government-sanctioned lotteries, after all, were used by many frontier towns and colonial authorities to raise funds for public works projects as well as to encourage the sale of vacant land. No wonder, then, that the frontier created a pattern of leisure which would gain far-reaching cultural significance. Correspondingly, one of the most distinctive features of the frontier in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997, hereafter *MD*) and *Against the Day* (2006, hereafter *AD*) is the proliferation of gaming clubs on its very edge, where an unregulated market economy underwrites a culture of chance.
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Reversely, risky gameplay remains the mainspring of entrepreneurial expansion for those who wish to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. When Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the two famed British surveyors, set up camp, gaming parlors sprout up overnight on their end of the line, and cheats, suckers, and coteries of prostitutes flock in. As Mason and Dixon carve out their line in the Philadelphia area, “the first structure to go up would be a Tavern — the second another, Tavern” (MD 650) while their nightly encampment lengthens “to a suburbs dedicated to high (as some would say, low) living” (477) with “gaming, corn whiskey, Women able to put up with a heap of uncompensated overtime”. Over the North Mountain, even before the first men have chosen their tract of land, the first noticeable activity is when “the Cards come out, and Chap-books and Dice and Bottles” (587). During their last transit in Delaware, the ocean-crossing surveyors project their dreams for the future, hoping that the Visto is soon lined with “Pleasure-Grounds and Pensioner’s Home, with ev’rything an Itinerant come to Rest might ask, Taverns, Music-Halls, Gaming Rooms and a Population ever changing of Practitioners of Comfort” (712).

3 Similarly, enumerating some of the genre conventions of the dime-novel westerns of the late 19th century, Pynchon’s eulogy of the Old West in Against the Day carries it to the mining boomtowns of Telluride and Leadville in the mountains of Colorado where the nation gives itself over to a full-throttle economic expansion moved by speculative enterprises. Pynchon never forgets gambling-focused impulses fashioned the economy of the nation: crowded with a honky-tonk contingent of crooked gamblers, shifty prospectors, and oil drillers all looking for a lucky strike, the parlor houses of these recreational cities are built on “hopes corroded to fragments — overnight whiskey, daughters of slaves, rigged faro games, the ladies who work on the line” (AD 95), invisible fragments just as adjuvant to the building of a capitalist order as the alabaster temples of commerce touted during the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 mentioned in the early pages of the novel.

4 The first occurrence of the word “Visto” in Mason & Dixon is not concomitant with the demarcation line that will become informally known as the border between the free states and the slave states. It pertains to a gaming hall known as the Pearl of Sumatra where “a Visto of gaming tables may be made out” (MD 24) with seamen reveling in cockfights and drunken card games. This word dispersion of the Visto is of interest, for in all the occurrences I cited, it is quickly populated by invisible communities of players and con artists. In this very process of lexical fragmentation, the margin of the frontier thus intersects with another one, that of an underworld insulated from the world outside — the gaming hall. The location itself does not lend it itself to an easy definition. It is not the ubiquitous coffee-house frequented by itinerants, such as The Blue Jamaican, The Flower-de-Luce, The Restless Bee, The All-Nations-Coffee-House, whose success is dependent on the slave trade. It is not the New York tavern either, shorn of danger and subversion with its “rooms where Smoke is prohibited” (365) — consequently marking an onslaught of cultural cleanliness that resonates with Michael Bloomberg’s decision to enforce an indoor smoking ban in 2002. Rather, I am referring to such gaming houses as those run by the mucilaginous Mr. and Mrs. Edgewise, whose “skills in Legerdemain” and “diverting repertoire of conjuring tricks with Playing-Cards, Dice, Coins, Herbs, Liquids in Flasks, Gentlemen’s Watches, […] Beetles and Bugs” typify a conspicuous location. Such strains of carnivalesque possibilities provide
Pynchon with a narrative space for revelry and reversal, as opposed to the hyperproductivity expounded by the Age of Reason.

*Mason & Dixon* offers a voluminously detailed revision of times past when America was still a zany territory inhabited by dwarf-like spirits, automaton ducks, and creatures of local lore. Well before the upheaval wrought by the transcontinental railroads, it was yet to be chartered by the Royal Society and its men of science in the Age of Reason that birthed a mathematical construct, an absolute line, onto a landscape that knew nothing of Euclid. The text sheds light on the way the dark heart of Enlightenment cartography achieves a victory of sorts as the mapmakers continue their westward progress through the “green fecund Continent” (57), caught up as they are in advancing the imperial process and superimposing a rectilinear narrative over indigenous others. All attempts to map hopelessly point to the pervasive growth of capitalism. While Enlightenment sensibilities and sinister conglomerates such as the British and Dutch East India Companies enforces division onto the shrinking age-old land, it will be my contention that gaming clubs — ranging from taverns in *Mason & Dixon* to casinos and gambling dens in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973, hereafter *GR*), *Against the Day* (2006), and *Inherent Vice* (2009, hereafter *IV*) — can be recognized as counter-sites where otherwise dispersed groups of people momentarily gather in order to gain freedom from the ruling few. Striking an echo with the general 18th-century abhorrence for excess, it is indeed tempting to see how these locations offer an alternative to the sovereignty of global trade. With the text alluding to Adam Smith’s “Invisible Hand” (411) — a famous metaphor for a benevolent *laissez-faire* economy that mysterically guides markets — I would like to argue that in Pynchon’s “tale of licensed and unlicensed economies” (Thomas 42), conspicuous tricks to block the game played by the marketplace become a necessary mode of resistance in the face of a plenty-flushed adversity which threatens to hold sway over the American continent.

**Gaming Clubs as Heterotopian Spaces**

Providing a salient site for spaces of “wish and desire, of the hypothetical and the counterfactual, of speculation and possibility” (McHale 44), *Mason & Dixon* shifts into a counternarrative vision of what early America could have been before the frontier blazed through the land, its primeval wilderness still unplotted by enlightened rationality. Such oddly sensitive openings, figured in the mood of the subjunctive, with its non-realized possibilities or, as Cherrycoke puts it, “Might-it-bes, and If-it-weres, — not to mention What-was-thats” (*MD* 618), carry a great weight in my understanding of how illicit enclaves such as gambling dens eventually force a model of fiction by embedding and replicating interiors, in a similar fashion to how inset narrated spaces pack into the novel even more complex narrative story-worlds.

The smoke-filled gaming clubs that throb from midnight till noon provide readers with such an example of untamed realms nested one level down, while the outside world collapses into certainty and reason. In the Pearl of Sumatra public house in Portsmouth, or in the forgotten recesses of Castle Lepton in America, the interior volume of space is turned upside down, or as Brian McHale gathers, it “impossibly exceeds its exterior bounding surfaces [...] and encloses a space of labyrinthine complexity, as though containing an entire microworld” (McHale 57). The intersection
of a real location with an incompatible space where disparate and conflicting interests thrive tellingly calls to mind Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, in which the French theorist sets to identify features of a range of socio-cultural spaces that behave in a different kind of way from most other spaces, acting as enclosed worlds within worlds, mirroring what is outside but at the same time converting it into something utterly different. While utopias are unreal places, heterotopias are oppositional locations. Foucault establishes that in contemporary society heterotopias enclose some form of deviance, that is, subjects or behaviors inconsistent with the prevailing social norm, “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (Foucault 25).

The scope of Foucault’s understanding of heterotopian locations — museums, libraries, fairgrounds, vacation villages, cemeteries, ships, asylums, nursing homes, barracks, prisons — is far reaching and incorporates additional counter-sites as new technologies and modes of consumption emerge. I would argue that casinos and gaming parlors fall into the category of a “heterotopia of deviation”. Hosting a multitude of possible, the composite quality of heterotopia enables Pynchon to stretch the familiar envelope of experience as dingy gambling dens, run-down casinos, or generally speaking underworld gaming parlors are turned inside-out in order to form placeless places, or rather counter-sites in which “all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 17).

Most heterotopias rely on a system of exclusive inclusion or inclusive exclusion, contingent upon a mechanism of clandestine invisibility and secretive closure vis-à-vis public space: with their system of “deceptive entries and illusive exits, […] walls that appear as doors, and windows that lead to nowhere” (Dumm 40-1), such liberal zones are connected to, and yet set apart from, the everyday world. I would note that casinos and gaming halls that have a pressing need for concealment because they are either illicit play grounds or outlawed establishments have similarly limited points of entry which Pynchon seeks to exploit in order to create areas unobserved and unregulated by authorities. It is only after providing “some password and security hassle at the door” (GR 713) that Pig Bodine is allowed entry into a stable that conceals “a brightly lit and busy combination bar, opium den, cabaret, casino and house of ill repute, all its rooms swarming […] at a noise level the house’s silent walls seal off completely from the outside”. This sustained sense of in-betweenness comes to the fore in the depiction of a sporting establishment situated on the Mexican border, itself a liminal space where fugitives and outlaws drift across national borders, with “walkways in from their street […] covered with corrugated snow-shed roofing” (AD 225). The place is an impossibly large location that encloses “an icehouse and a billiard parlor, a wine room, a lunch and eating corner, gambling saloons and taquerias, […] a sunken chamber almost like a natatorium at some hot-springs resort”. As such, it is reminiscent of the Pearl of Sumatra in Mason & Dixon, from which stems a sense of transiency among gamblers and punters alike, shifting from one room to another as if the place was not bounded by walls:

They go out a backdoor, into the innyard. A leafless tree arches in the light of a single Lanthorn set above a taut gathering of card-players, their secret breathing visible for all to try to read. […] Sailors, mouths ajar, lope by in the lanes. Sailors in Slouch-Hats, Sailors with Queues, puffing on Pipes, eating Potatoes, some who’ll be going back to the Ship, and some who won’t, from old sea-wretches with too many Explosions in their Lives, to Child-Midshipmen who have yet to hear their first,
passing in and out the Doors of Ale-Drapers, Naval Tailors, Sweet-shops, Gaming-Lairs... [...] Beyond this, a Visto of gaming tables may be made out, and further back a rickety Labyrinth of Rooms for sleeping or debauchery, all receding like headlands into a mist. [...] Beneath the swaying Gamester, the general pace of the Room keeps profitably hectic. From the labyrinth in back come assorted sounds of greater and lesser Ecstasy, along with percussions upon Flesh, laughter more or less feign’d, [...] calls for Bitter and Three-Threads rising ever hopeful, like ariettas in the shadow’d Wilderness of Rooms where the Lamps are fewer, and the movements deeper with at least one more Grade of Intent... (MD 20-5)

10 Paradoxically nested within limited volumes, these insulated projections which the Age of Reason seems unable to pinpoint are characterized by forms of modality and uncertainty that question their existence (“secret breathing visible for all to try to read”, “may be made out”, “greater and lesser Ecstasy”, “more or less feign’d”, “at least one more Grade”), but they also promise and yet occlude the possibility of depth, leaving out the narrator to gaze through opaque landscapes that prevent the eye from actually getting a full perspective (“in the light of a single Lanthorn”, “puffing on pipes”, “further back [...] receding like headlands into a mist”, “where the Lamps are fewer”). While Pynchon completes the topology of these off-the-grid enclaves by weaving in the possibility of in-betweenness and transition (“passing in and out the Doors”), this plural unfolding of space underscores an aspect of the novel’s carnivalesque aesthetic, to the extent that it produces an inverted mirror image of the American “wilderness” that used to lay untamed above.

11 By contrasting these heterotopian spaces to the mundane monotony of the Age of Reason, and thus suggesting simultaneously brighter and darker worlds, the text produces gaming environments that lead to glimpses of otherworldly glove-like geographies. A mourning Mason reminisces one of “these terrible unending four-door Farces” (185) that he used to enjoy with his wife Rebekah and his friend Bradley, whose deathbed in Greenwich he is on his way to visit. He is raptured out into a sensual world overrun by revenants and phantom visits from beyond:

The indoor environment quickly became impossible to live in. That strange Parlor-Game commencing, Rebekah and I moving out of the Observatory, down to Feather Row, trudging up and down that hill at all Hours, [...] presently we’re together as a foursome, boating upon the River, playing at Cards upon Nights of Cloud or Storm, Pope Joan, Piquet, Rebekah’s sweet Voice, Susannah’s hands never touch’d by Sunlight, impossible not to gaze at, [...] and the Heavens wheel on meantime.

12 All measure of time is lost, clocks stop ticking. Without giving the reader further notice, the narrative shifts to the present tense as if the wayward world of games tore down the fabric of time-space: upon entering, that dizzying emporium of noise, movement and color, Pynchon’s gamblers are propelled into a timeless world that is insulated from the flow of everyday life inside it.

13 Unlike the world above that can be thoroughly zoned, Pynchon’s heterotopian gaming parlors are the ground for uncertainty and undecidability. Yet, this heightened sense of indeterminacy does not preclude the possibility to glimpse topological forms or arrangements, the ambiguity of which can only stymie any attempt to map them out. The casinos that Doc Sportello explores in Inherent Vice further evidence the fickle topology of such spaces. While Doc makes his way at the Nine of Diamonds through “a complicated path through the casino, toward the deeper region slotplayers avoid in the
belief that machines closer to the street pay off better” (IV 230), he also happens to
drift through “the seedy vastness of the main gaming floor” (236) at the Kismet Lounge
or a “vast indeterminate space” below the desert outside and he eventually gets lost in
“the back regions of the underlit casino” (242). Although it never indulges in
representing the magic landscape of nickel-in-the-slot machines, crap tables, spinning
wheels and other paraphernalia of play, the text emphasizes the transitional nature of
the casino, as Doc spots Mickey Wolfmann escorted out by Special Agents, “as if being
ferried between worlds” (243). While Pynchon would rather insist on delineating the
interstitial otherness of the casino, by placing emphasis on the accessibility and
impenetrability of such a liminal space, it is also noteworthy that the unglamorous
gaming hall mirrors the American continent above, by producing a “lopsided” (236)
version of its own oceanic and terrestrial patches of unbridled wilderness. Such a
doubling of space can be traced out as Doc’s investigation into the Kismet — an
Ottoman word for “fate” which unmistakably likens its occupancy with the Puritan
sojourn in the wilderness — reveals an anamorphic landscape which mirrors the
howling darkness above, “all dry desert and scuffed beaverboard” (241). It does not
take long for Pynchon to displace the desert imagery and to imagine the oceanic
expanses of land on which the casino is set afloat: soon, Doc tries to find his way
“through a labyrinth that was slowly sinking into the ocean”, a representational
overlay of land and water portended by an earlier description of the cigarette-burnt
carpeting whose “allover effect was of wind on the surface of a lake” (236).

14 What I would like to further discuss, however, is not so much the sea imagery that
briefly emerges from this scene than the oblique seafaring narrative that presents the
casino, in a text fraught with allusions to maritime law, as a ship that detaches itself
from the earth in order to provide a sanctuary to its occupants from the unrest of the
outside world. To elaborate Foucault’s dictum, if the ship is “the heterotopia par
excellence” (Foucault 27),” it is because it expresses the desire for a space completely
autonomous from every other space, apart from the world onshore. Locked in a
struggle with the order that defines it, the gaming parlor might be envisioned as
Pynchon’s own alternative site that simultaneously represents order, contests it and
inverts it — an epistemological apparatus that stretches and dissolves space in its
representational possibilities. Vessels, in Pynchon’s fiction, bear much resemblance to
Herman Melville’s “city afloat” or “garrisoned town” with their anti-
Author0000-00-00T00:00:00Aeconomical experiments. The sky-city of the Chums of
Chance paired up with the Wandering Sisterhood of the Sodality of Ætheronauts in
Against the Day immediately comes to mind: the airship community they form blurs
together the present and the future in the name of utopian desire, less a place of desire
fulfilled than a place for posing the demands of desire.

15 Such elusive and volatile spaces as the casino both foster a sense of fraternity and cater
to a community of workaday regulars such as “grill cooks, tire salesmen, house
framers, eye doctors, stick-men and change girls and other black-and-whites off shift
from ritzier rooms where they weren’t allowed to play” (IV 236). Along with the
gambling den that fulsomely conjures up “soldiers, sailors, tricks, winners, losers,
conjurors, dealers, dopers, voyeurs, homosexuals, fetishists, spies and folks looking for
company” (GR 713) in Gravity’s Rainbow or the “dimly illicit refuge for secret lives” (AD
225) located on the Mexican border in Against the Day, it is in such counter-geographies
that the disenfranchised mingle, provoking the ire of moralists bent on defending
social hierarchy. The presence of those very same individuals that either new modes of
global capitalism or the Age of Reason seek to discard or to see “bleach'd away” (MD 35) poses a challenge to established laws and social control. From professional cheats practiced in the various techniques of card-shaping to honest players being relieved of their money, the clandestine goings-on in these halls make the operation of chance an economy bound to succumb to market forces.

“Many Christians believe gaming to be sin” (MD 422) — from idleness to leisure

The flourishing of gambling during the colonial period did not prevent prominent Congregational ministers from wryly pouring a stream of invective from their pulpits. In the wake of Increase Mather who would call gambling a “heinously sinful” activity, early leaders preached against lotteries as productive of nothing and damned gamblers for blatantly disregarding the temporary stewardship of the Lord’s gifts. Although a national movement to stamp out gambling began in the 19th century, in particular on Mississippi paddle-wheel steamers and in cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, which had become the nation’s informal gambling capitals, sharps and suckers who engaged in gambling activities flagrantly embodied resistance to the Protestant ethic of self-mastery, thus signifying, as Jackson Lears demonstrates, a “cross-class male resistance to the encroachments of evangelical rationality — on the bourgeois reverence for discipline labor” (Lears 113). Following into the 20th century, the morality pendulum swung back in such a way that commercial gambling shifted from, Gerda Reith writes, “a disruptive and morally dubious activity [...] which encapsulated an orientation to rational economic enterprise that opposed the ideology of hard work, abstinence and reward” to “a mainstream feature of the high street, enjoyed by large numbers of consumers and promoted by governments and commercial enterprises alike” (Reith 316).

In the new capitalist economy, the shadow of the Puritan abhorrence of squandering wealth has finally succumbed to the widespread commodification of games of chance, sold by business and purchased by the consumer. Dovetailing snugly with Reith’s argument that “gambling can be seen as an arena in which a non-capitalist disregard for money prevails” (146), Pynchonian novels set in the 19th and 20th centuries consider the notion that the duplicitous waves of capitalist enterprise have overseen the gradual re-organization of hitherto unproductive gaming sites into a disciplined production system that ultimately provides controllable yields: idleness, it seems, is never safe from being converted into a form of work in its own right by the leisure industry.11

“He mark’d the cards. The Dice were of cunningly lacquer’d Iron, the playing-surface magnetickally fiddl’d, — Damme, he owes us twenty pounds, — more! What are we suppos’d to do, live upon Roots? ’twas the Royal Society's, belay that, the King's own money!” (MD 423): with wigs almost askew and hats pulled over faces in despair, Mason’s squandering of royal funds at a game of dice closely resembles the raucous assemblage of men gathered around a gaming table in William Hogarth’s The Gaming House from A Rake's Progress (1733) (Figure 1). The appeal of this scene, I believe, is its emphasis on the allure of cheating. Between chance and control, the romance of cheating permeates the lives of Pynchonian characters, whereby gamblers experience their wager as an opportunity to challenge the rigid ordering of the world. For “fraud is the element in which we all fly” (AD 755), asserts Madame Eskimoff, a medium trained
in the reading of Tarot cards in *Against the Day*. In a novel bookended by scenes of flight, one of which consists in flying “toward grace” (1220) as the novel’s balloonists opt for an anarchical airborne community aboard their ship, the medium’s assertion neatly ties up deception with redemption. The only way to escape closure and preterition might be through swift card-shuffling and thimble-rigging; that said, my point will be that the card table or the dice in hand themselves, because of their lack of purpose in Pynchon’s works, are enough to harbor in a temporal oblivion or a destruction of time otherwise routinized by industrial labor, stock exchanges, and factory floors.

Figure 1: William Hogarth, ‘Ruin’d at a gaming table’, *A Rake’s Progress*, plate 6, 1735

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Therefore, it is worth glancing at characters who transgressively engage with gambling as a means to dissent from the compulsion to productive action and time-tracking, or, in the words of Inger H. Dalsgaard, “the gospel of industriousness” that permeates the ideology Pynchon’s fiction seeks to warn us against. Occurrences of gameplay in his fiction showcase an inclination for unproductive production which may achieve to restore vitality to revolutionary politics, or at least actions that may question the status quo. Masters of idleness underpin the dissenting need for laboring classes to indulge in unproductive gameplay in order to elude the totalizing system engineered by the capitalist few, from “gamblers and fugitives from the wide, well-lit streets and whatever these might have required as appropriate behavior” (*AD* 870) to “dervishes, gamblers, and hasheesh smokers getting into the usual trouble” (927), or warnings addressed to the Chums of Chance to “beware even the Tarot cards the Gypsies set out for money or idle divertissement” (926). Instead of joining the cohorts of slaves that plutocrats send underground in the mine fields of Colorado or Alp Mountains, a leisure-seeking Reef Traverse drags his heels in the gambling resorts of the French Riviera.
Oddly enough, growing into the prototypical Pynchonian figure of the slacker, the sluggish dawdler appears capable of protest through torpidity, and casually evades the capitalist regulation of time, “picking up modest sums at the tables [...] and pursuing the life of the flaneur forever” (952). Reef’s escape from work harks back to a slower world of indeterminacy, showcasing an unwitting protest against the local clock of hours and the universal clock of progress which supervise the labor process of the rising capitalist production system in the late 19th century: the next step in Reef’s insurgent trajectory, the text immediately highlights, is “to go out and blow something up” (Author0000-00-00T00:00:00AREF), joining forces with anarchist bombers hoping to attack the local bourgeoisie.

Thus, Pynchon intently links deviant gaming sites with the resistance to the discipline of capitalist productivity in their refusal to equate labor, time, and money. Gambling houses, casinos, and fairgrounds are not only sites of risk-taking play surrounded by related activities, such as prostitution, but also locations where disruptive social forces such as organized crime have historically been at play, intersecting with Walter Benjamin’s discourse on the materialist form of gambling within industrial capitalism.

If idle aimlessness can be recognized as the most effective form of resistance in the age of manufacture, then card-playing represents a desperate attempt at subverting the market. Although Benjamin’s foray into the subversive potential of idleness is brief, his scattered speculations in the Müßiggang file do provide crucial insight into understanding idleness in materialist terms and strike an echo with Pynchon’s views on the nefarious history of sloth in the American mind. In his unfinished collection of archives Arcades Project, Benjamin examined the pointless toil of the worker. Associating the labor of Sisyphus with the burden of work, which “like rocks, always keeps falling back on the worn-out laborer” (Benjamin 1982: 106 [D2a,4]), he took an interest in the way the gambler’s repeating gestures with cards and dice mirror the repeating gestures of a man tending a machine. In its prosaic and unchanging operations, the relation of the factory laborer to the production line is not different from the relation of the gambler to the turn of cards:

[Gambling] certainly does not lack the futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something which is inherent in the activity of a wage slave in a factory. Gambling even contains the workman’s gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. [...] The drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is devoid of substance. (Benjamin 1969: 177)

In Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City (1996), Graeme Gilloch rephrases as such the unsuspected interplay between capitalism and sloth in Benjamin’s work:

Gambling is the economic basis of idling, the disdainful refusal to submit oneself to the rigors of labor and the debasement of the market. [...] Gambling purports to contain elements that are profoundly antagonistic to the central tenets of modern industrial capitalism (Gilloch 158)

In this regard, moments of idle card-playing abound in Pynchon’s novels, sometimes coded in the writer’s most deadpan narratives, striving to escape any connection to work whatsoever. After setting up camp, the axmen that clear up the path of the Mason-Dixon line idle long hours away in “the fragrant noontide so quiet you may hear the shuffling of Playing-Cards” (MD 452); the surveyors themselves fall for “Drink, Smoak and Jollification” (327) as they step into The Indian Queen, somewhere in Maryland, finding “merry pretext to gather, gossip, swap quids and quos, play whist”
while they consult and examine their watches “for Productivity each of their waking Moments, as closely as some do their Consciences, unable to leave quite behind them the Species of Time peculiar to that City”.

23 Graeme Gilloch acknowledges the predilection of the gambler to negate the productivity of the assembly line. However, he also underlines that casinos belong to a series of architectural structures which are coeval with industrial capitalism. Weaving into his demonstration Benjamin’s idea that the gestures of the gambler at the gaming table replicate in his leisure his activity of gambling on the stock market during the day, Gilloch discusses how gambling is a sort of ritual that has taken on a new guise in the exchange economy of capitalism, whereby the web of capitalist relations has turned us all into gamblers:

The gambler as financial speculator does not resist capitalist prescriptions, but rather fundamentally embodies them. [...] Capitalism formalizes the activity of the gambler and his desire to make money simply from money through the institution of the stock-market. (Gilloch 159)

24 Even the most trained of Pynchon’s hustlers, I would now like to argue, have integrated patterns of optimized capitalist production.

Towards the Commodification of Gambling?

25 Pynchon anticipates in his novels the attention of late capitalism to new areas for capitalization, overseeing both the commodification of idleness and the standardized formulation of what is now recognized as modern casino games. In this light, stripped of their political potential, gambling, and more generally chance, typify a mode of consumption that can be unlimitedly bought and sold as just another type of commodity stored in the gradually sanitized dreamworld of gambling resorts and themed casinos. Pynchon depicts the recreational city of Telluride as a townscape, characterized by frontier ruggedness and entrepreneurial individualism on the outside, while concealing its growing dependence on the commodification of leisure activities, a degraded version of the capitalist ecstasies and industrial order epitomized by the glimmering temples of White City earlier in the novel during the Columbian Exhibition: “Telluride was in the nature of an outing to a depraved amusement resort, whose electric lighting at night in its extreme and unmerciful whiteness produced a dream-silvered rogues’ district of nonstop poker games, erotic practices in back-lot shanties, Chinese opium dens most of the Chinese in town had the sense to stay away from” (AD 100) As Doc Sportello roams around the Kismet in Inherent Vice, it is brought to his attention that rash bets are expected from him in order to prolong his stay: “And without meanin to pry or nothin, I notice you’re not playing, just sort of wandering around, meanin you’re either some deep guy, mysterious master of intrigue, or one more jaded sharp looking for a bargain.” (IV 236) Though the Kismet Casino seems to provide a safe space from the excesses of capitalist enterprise in Las Vegas, it is made clear to Doc that he can start immersing himself in the world of the casino only if he complies with the rules that police the system of entry and exit I mentioned earlier. There lies the contractual obligation of the casino, for Doc can only stay if he agrees to try his luck and part with his cash. “It is in this action,” Gerda Reith writes, “that order and regularity emerge out of the sensory maelstrom of the casino floor” (Reith 119): rituals that used to escape the commodification of games eventually succumb to the
encroachment of profits maximization, allowing Pynchon to depict the organization of the casino floor as an industrial playground or financial system in its own right. Mindlessly making themselves available for diverse regimes of consumption, cruise ship tourists are for instance indifferently scheduled to participate in “shopping tours at Mexican maquiladora outlets [and] gambling-addiction indulgence at the casinos of State, California” (Bleeding Edge 15).

These shifts set the tone for additional diversions in Pynchon’s narratives of capital accumulation — diversions not only imagined capitalist economies that seek to enact changes in the nature of games of chance, but also by individuals. In spite of Pynchon’s focus on unsuspected forms of insurgency, it is not an isolated occurrence in his novels that gamblers stray away from the initial devising of games of chance as a subversive attempt to escape from work discipline, and thus turn gambling into an operative mode of being that brings to mind the concept of “casino capitalism” raised by Susan Strange. The critic argues that because of the unstable globalized financial systems of the 1970s and 1980s, we are, to some extent, legitimate gamblers in a culture ambivalent about its deep dependency on chance. From hapless dotcom entrepreneurs to more fortunate slave owners or powerful monarchs bidding human lives, the world of Pynchon’s novels is run by interest rates, mathematical odds that fluctuate widely and wildly and thus let sheer luck determine the lives of its characters. In Against the Day, the heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary asks to rent out a slaughter-house district to shoot Hungarian workers, conflating the games played for recreative purposes with the game or quarry pursued by the hunter.

In Mason & Dixon, the masters of ironworks, who operate an industry that relies on the slave trade to produce their weapons, revel in the gaming halls of Castle Lepton, investing the profits generated from their gruesome venture into the “Paradise of Chance” hidden in the lower levels of the castle, where the surveyors are faced with “an E-O Wheel big as a Roundabout, Lottery Balls in Cages ever a-spin, Billiards and Baccarat, Bezique and Games whose Knaves and Queens live [...] and whose Table is the wide World” (MD 421). The mapmakers are quickly bamboozled by Lord Lepton, in a raucous scene I evoked earlier, as Reverend Cherrycoke discusses the rights and wrongs of gambling and applies the same doctrine to expanding ventures and entrepreneurs walking away with many times their original investment after they have brought suckers to their rigged table. Lamenting their losses at the games of chance played in Lord Lepton’s gambling den, both men agree to resort to cheating where necessary to beat the entrepreneurial manipulations of America’s finest swindlers. From a broader perspective, it could be argued that, for Pynchon, the incorporation of gambling techniques spells out an urge to block the legerdemain of capitalism, famously embodied by the “Invisible Hand” of Adam Smith.

Present since the country’s inception, gambling thus becomes in Pynchon’s novels a structuring principle that insinuates itself into the fabric of existence, whereby chances to reverse the odds in favor of capitalism can only be obtained through the same risk assessment strategy as that applied by capitalism. While Reef Traverse starts off his adult life as “another itinerant gambler, [...] the sort who’s content with a modest jackpot he never expected to win” (AD 377), he eventually employs mining skills learned in the Rockies as a contract worker in the Alps, where he encounters an elite culture of gambling and “what with card games in the changing rooms and the platoons of ladies who gathered each shift’s end at the tunnel entrances, [...] there was
no shortage of work” (733). Interestingly enough, that same line of work does not prove as fruitful for his sister Lake, a world-weary suburban housewife who places “her wagers at the Universal Dream Casino, as to which of them should bring her through, and which lead her irreversibly astray” (1185). Bound to a commodity economy where the culture industry of Hollywood intersects with organized crime, Reef’s sister diverts gambling as a last resort to balance her failed attempt at gaining control over life after she got married with her father’s murderer, Deuce, whose very name is used as a euphemism for the devil in expressions of annoyance but also recalls, in card-gaming parlance, Author0000-00-00T00:00:00Athe playing card with the highest value in German card games. For the young woman, whose marriage “was coming more and more to resemble a kitchen-table poker game [in which] she valued her forgiveness at not much more than some medium-size chip” (532), abandoning herself to the binarity of chance — simple as a toss of coin, either you win, either your lose — may actually be preferable to the control of her own fate.

Pynchon’s novels ultimately negotiate the mutation of the affinity between frontier society and gambling: with the well-policed growth of legal gambling in the 20th and 21st centuries, the natural-born gamblers and crooked card-sharps who were a celebrated feature of American life have become an extinct species of the culture of chance that powered the westward expansion of the country. Nonetheless, with Pynchon casting his gamblers onto globalized financial markets in his fiction, a closer look at Walter Benjamin’s work demonstrates how far the gambler has come from the magic formula by which sameness and repetition would suddenly be disrupted. Listing the gambler, along with artist and lover, as part of a type of adventurers who seek an experience that stands outside the ordinary chain of events in a life, Benjamin’s discussion on the figure of the gambler goes beyond the gap between the gambler’s desire to win and the conditions that permanently undermined its satisfactory attainment: “The wager is a means of conferring shock value on events, of loosing them from the contexts of experience” (Benjamin 1982: 513 [O13,5]). By constantly framing the passage of time within the wish to heroically give a fatal blow to chance, the experience of the gambler desperately seeks to confront fate, or as Graeme Gilloch phrases it, “to discover the unknowable, to predict the unforeseeable, to bring about the uncontrollable” (Gilloch 160).
It is that distinct feeling of elation or thrill which Benjamin's gambler feels as he hopes to cheat on fate. Recognizing the interplay between erotic longing and wagering impulses, Benjamin alternately compares the throw of a single silver ball to “an autoerotic satisfaction, wherein betting is foreplay, winning is orgasm, and losing is ejaculation” (Benjamin 1982: 511 [O11a,1]) and “a joyous embrace returned to the full, [...] words of love from a woman altogether satisfied by her man” (882 <g°,1>). The gamblers who wager their way through the late-capitalist world, I would like to suggest further, no longer chase after the thrill that comes with heightened risk or a distinctly erotic excitation. In Pynchon’s fiction, risk is integrated into the productive apparatus and consequently stripped of its sensual halo. As shown in Vineland (1990), where televised games of chance insinuate into the characters’ consciousness, all that is left to do is to watch other gamblers spin the Wheel of Fortune as letter-turner extraordinaire Vanna White cheers on the Wheel and flips over letters one by one on the blank word puzzle, her suggestive touch as close as it gets to the sublime frisson of play.

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NOTES

1. The practice of raising revenue for public and private purposes by means of lottery began with the Virginia Company in 1616 — so vital were these lotteries to the continued existence of the early colony that Captain John Smith referred to them in 1621 as “the reall and substantiall food” by which Virginia had grown and flourished (Milikan 10).

2. Between 1804 and 1833, Georgia held public lotteries on a periodic basis to distribute the huge expanses of land between the Oconee and Chattahoochee River. Land lotteries are estimated to account for roughly three-fifths of western Georgia. In Lotteries in Colonial America, Neal Milikan suggests that “colonial lotteries became a part of this consumer revolution as colonists had the opportunity to become an “adventurer” and risk a small sum of money in the hopes of winning a valuable prize.” (Milikan 3)

3. As shown by Sean Carswell in Occupy Pynchon (2013), Mason and Dixon overindulge in commodities such as caffeine and “show their complicity with systems of global trade, [...] by literally being addicted to the products of a global consumer culture” (Carswell 55), although claims can be made that the preference for bean-roasted beverages both helped support and undermine the colonial enterprise. See Colin A. Clarke’s paper, “Food and Sacrament in Mason & Dixon”, in which Clarke encapsulates the dual nature of coffee as both a luxury commodity and a drink which spurred the colonists’ growing dissatisfaction with tea taxes: “The overwhelming abundance of coffeehouses, in every neighborhood and on multiple corners throughout the city, becomes an obvious reference to twentieth-century trends in caffeine consumption and commentary on the expansion of Starbucks and other chains during the 1990s, as well as a reminder that coffee in the twentieth century is produced by workers who often receive almost as little profit from it as did the slaves and peasant workers of the eighteenth century.” (Clarke 88)

4. Pynchon engages with similar concerns about hygienist doctrines in Bleeding Edge (2013), as the real estate industry keeps the city in an orderly state by cleansing districts and sweeping workers’ history under the rug.
5. Correspondingly, David Seed notes that Mason & Dixon “demonstrates a post-colonial alertness to mapping as a culturally inflected exercise, an exercise in territorial appropriation where the first casualties to be displaced are the native Americans” (Seed 99).

6. In the Age of Chance (1999), Gerda Reith explains that the Enlightenment’s crackdown on gambling essentially concerned the poor who were thought more fit to get bankrupted at the gaming table than the rich who could still gather at private house parties, assembly rooms, gentlemen’s clubs and spa resorts: “In the eighteenth century, a flurry of legislation removed gambling even further from the reach of the poor by imposing taxes on gaming instruments: sixpence on a pack of cards and five shillings on a pair of dice. [...] This was followed by another statute which outlawed specific games and, while penalizing the owners of public gaming houses, excused the play of the rich. [...] As well as disrupting the health of the individual player, gambling was feared to disrupt the well-being of the social order.” (Reith 68)

7. See Brian McHale’s insight in “Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space”, in which he underscores the narrative model of Pynchon’s novel in the wake of Gerald Prince’s narratological conception of the disnarrated in an eponymous article published in Style.

8. In his short study, Prince provides a theoretical framework to understand events that do not happen but are referred to in narratives: “I am thus referring to alethic expressions of impossibility or unrealized possibility, deontic expressions of observed prohibition, epistemic expressions of ignorance, ontologic expressions of nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations, errors and lies, and so forth.” (Prince 3)

9. Gerda Reith’s depiction of illegal gaming clubs in 18th-century Britain closely resembles the restricted access system of Foucault’s examples: “These clandestine houses often had four or five doors separating them from the outside world. Grilles, secret passages and watchdogs made the gaming room deep in the interior inaccessible to all but the initiated.” (Reith 69)

10. Foucault explains that the boat came to assume such importance in the cultural landscape of the modern age because its symbolic disquiet represents the experience which must be placed outside the realm of reason: “The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [...] but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination.” (Foucault 22)

11. In Benjamin’s view, leisure is profoundly different from idleness: while idleness, or mussigang, escapes co-optation into the homogenizing process of modern life, leisure, or musse, is the by-product of new industrial modes of production, which, at the dawn of the 20th century, coalesce with surplus wages, the culture industry, the commodification of art, and mass audiences.

12. See Pynchon’s investigation of sloth in his article “Nearer, My Couch To Thee”, for the New York Times Book Review, in which he argues that sloth shifted from a religious transgression to a secular one against clock time.

13. Gerda Reith envisions this commodification of games as the institutionalized result of a process that started in the 17th century: “The global expansion of the industry, accelerated by the influence of technology and the impact of sophisticated communication systems, its increasing popularity as a mass leisure activity and its incorporation into state fiscal policy looks set to change centuries of condemnation, bringing gambling into the fold of ‘legitimate’ business enterprise.” (Reith 86)
14. “The Western financial system is rapidly coming to resemble nothing as much as a vast casino. Every day games are played in this casino that involve sums of money so large that they cannot be imagined. At night the games go on at the other side of the world. In the towering office blocks that dominate all the great cities of the world, rooms are full of chain-smoking young men all playing these games. Their eyes are fixed on computer screens flickering with changing prices. They play by intercontinental telephone or by tapping electronic machines. They are just like the gamblers in casinos watching the clicking spin of a silver ball on a roulette wheel and putting their chips on red or black, odd numbers or even ones.” (Strange 1)

15. Robyn Marasco writes that for Benjamin, “the seasoned gambler kisses his hand, merging involuntary reflex with the final concession to fate. […] Surrender is expressed erotically, as a kiss” (Marasco 10).

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to consider games — and more particularly card games and gambling — as an American form of resistance in Thomas Pynchon’s novels. As opposed to agon, a category of games that Roger Caillois delineates in Man, Play and Games (1958) as “a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions,” alea encompasses games of chance which are “a strict negation of controlled effort, [...] efficacious resort to skill, power, and calculation, and self-control; respect for the rules; the desire to test oneself under conditions of equality.” It will be my contention that alea, in Pynchon’s novels, offers the possibility of an alternative world and becomes a necessary mode of resistance in the face of a plenty-flushed adversity which threatens to hold sway over the American continent. For Pynchon’s players, more often than not cheaters and fraudsters, use such games of chance to fulfil their longing for emancipation and flight, at a time in history when the American continent is about to be mapped by the abstractions of colonial companies and Enlightenment science. Gaming clubs — ranging from taverns in Mason & Dixon to casinos and gambling dens in Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Against the Day (2006), and Inherent Vice (2009) — can be recognized as heterotopian sites where otherwise dispersed groups of people momentarily gather in order to gain freedom from the ruling few. Although the moralism of Puritan ministers sternly reminded their flocks to refrain from wasting their earnings on rash bets, gambling can thus be envisioned as a way to escape from the hyper-productivity expounded by modernity, intersecting with Walter Benjamin’s discourse on the materialist form of gambling within industrial capitalism. Following Gerda Reith’s and Susan Strange’s arguments in The Age of Chance (1999) and Casino Capitalism (1986), I will further argue that, in the new capitalist economy, Pynchon anticipates in his novels the attention of late capitalism to new areas for capitalization, overseeing both the commodification of idleness and the insinuation into the fabric of existence of the same risk assessment strategy as that applied by capitalism.

Cet article propose d’envisager le jeu — et plus particulièrement les jeux de cartes et d’argent — comme une forme de résistance proprement américaine dans les romans de Thomas Pynchon. À l’inverse de l’agon, groupe de jeux que Roger Caillois définit dans Les jeux et les hommes (1967) comme « un combat où l’égalité des chances est artificiellement créée pour que les antagonistes s’affrontent dans des conditions idéales, » l’aléa du jeu de hasard, parce qu’il « constitue la négation stricte d’un effort contrôlé, [...] le recours à l’adresse, à la puissance, au calcul ; le
respect de la règle ; le désir de se mesurer à armes égales, » est imaginé par le romancier comme un monde alternatif qui offre un espace de liberté. Le joueur, souvent tricheur et fraudeur chez Pynchon, peut déverser son désir de dépassement et d’échappée des normes sociales qui ordonnent l’Amérique, au moment où le continent s’apprête à basculer dans les cartes des Lumières et des grandes compagnies coloniales. Cet article propose examiner d’abord la façon dont les terrains de jeu — casinos, auberges, tripots — s’organisent autour du concept d’hétérotopie. Avec des règles qui leur sont propres, en contrepoint des cartographies officielles, ces espaces marginaux recentrent sur la carte du monde, le temps d’une partie, le joueur dont le comportement est déviant par rapport à la norme exigée. Le jeu d’argent, oiseux et nécessairement dissident aux yeux de la morale puritaine, devient alors une façon d’échapper à la rationalisation économique du monde : à travers l’étude de la modernité industrielle esquissée par Walter Benjamin, nous montrons comment le joueur déjoue les désirs de productivité du capital. À la lumière des thèses de Gerda Reith dans The Age of Chance (1999) et Susan Strange dans Casino Capitalism (1986), cet article s’intéresse enfin à la marchandisation du hasard par le capital : tandis que l’intersection entre la technologie et le jeu crée de nouveaux types d’environnement contrôlés par l’industrie du divertissement, le personnage pynchonien est aux prises avec un marché mondial, où la finance, erratique et imprévisible, s’est transformée en vaste jeu de hasard.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Pynchon Thomas, littérature américaine, jeu, capitalisme
Keywords: Pynchon Thomas, American literature, gambling, capitalism

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“Gambling and women don’t mix”: Female Gamblers and the American Dream in Film

Julie Assouly

1 Louis Malle described one of his American films, *Atlantic City* (1980), as a metaphor of the US. His film is not a gambling film *per se*, but it relates the improbable encounter of a wannabe female croupier, Sally (Susan Sarandon) embodying the future, and a declining gangster, Lou (Burt Lancaster) embodying the past, witnessing together the reshaping of the city after it became the second American city to legalize casinos in 1976. In this film, institutionalized gambling represents a hope for renewal in a transitory period (the 1970s-80s) after the myth of the American Dream had been intensely questioned by the Counterculture that also collapsed in the 1970s.²

2 The metaphor of gambling was soon exploited in films for its instant life-changing potential, the possibility to transform one’s life with a stroke of luck (e.g. lottery films) or to lose it to addiction and debt (e.g. gambling dramas). But few studies consider female characters in American gambling films,³ probably because a majority of them take place in traditionally masculine environments (e.g. casinos, underground game-houses), and focus on strategic games such as poker that traditionally exclude women. As Ballin (George McCready) tells Johnny (Glenn Ford) before hiring him in *Gilda* (Vidor 1946), “Gambling and women don’t mix,” they are a source of distraction for the gambler and the businessman alike — in the film, they operate a thriving illegal casino in Argentina until Gilda (Rita Hayworth) bewitches them.

3 In his overview of compulsive gambling in film, Jeffrey Dement (1999) considers two categories of gambling films, the “responsible” ones and the “irresponsible ones,” laying stress on the moral message conveyed by these films; dwelling on his preliminary study and exhaustive list of films, Turner, Fritz and Masood (2007) emphasize the “distortions” in portrayals of gamblers and gambling in American films, regardless of their genres; Egerer and Rantala (2015) examine self-control as a determining element that makes gambling “cool” in films; and Aaron Duncan (2015) “explores the rise and increased acceptance of gambling in America, particularly the
growth of the game of poker, as a means for examining changes to the American dream and the risk society.” (1) His thorough analysis is not limited to films and focuses mainly on poker.

4 The focus of this paper is American gambling films with a female lead or central character, specifically Gambling Lady (Mayo 1934), The Lady Gambles (Gordon 1949), Casino (Scorsese 1995), Even Money (Rydell 2007) and Molly’s Game (Sorkin 2017). Other female-led films will be referred to: Play Girl (Enright 1932), Gilda (Vidor 1946), Hazard (Marshall 1948) and House of Games (Mamet 1987). This article aims to establish how lead female characters in American gambling films participate in a reevaluation of the myth of the American Dream. Such reevaluation is usually the focus of films dealing with all sorts of gambling practices, as long as winning is a way to ultimately achieve social, sentimental or moral improvement. In Duncan’s study, gambling in films exposes different facets of the American Dream, with a predilection for economic gain (e.g. the myth of the self-made man). Yet, gambling being a very masculine activity, as demonstrated by many researchers including Erving Goffman (1967), one may wonder how Hollywood has dealt with women’s approach to gambling as male territory. Although the proportion of female gamblers today almost equates that of male ones (Bowden-Jones and Prever 2017: 53), most American films still represent gambling as a male activity, relegating women to stereotypical roles that I will put into three categories: good luck charms/helpers (e.g. The Cooler, Kramer 2003; 21, Lukedic 2008), trouble-makers (e.g. Casino, Gilda) or purveyors of moral standards (Rounders, Dahl 1998; The Cincinnati Kid, Jewison 1966). Conversely, women in lead roles are more likely to embody addicts (The Lady Gambles; Even Money), rare professional gamblers (Gambling Lady) or entrepreneurs/professionals (Atlantic City; Molly’s Game) thus contesting masculine hegemony and offering a possibility to promote gender equality through their depiction of gambling on screen.

5 Nevertheless, would it be rational to contend that the “female gaze” could replace the “male gaze” (in Laura Mulvey’s terms) in these typically masculine films? Are there gambling films immune to gender clichés and stereotypes based on recycled die-hard social constructs? This article will first consider gambling through the lens of the American Dream as male territory, historically and sociologically, to draw a parallel with American films; I will then focus on the Great Depression era as a prolific period promoting strong female characters including gamblers. I will then consider the female compulsive gambler as portrayed in The Lady Gambles and Even Money as another character type and will then study the attraction/repulsion dichotomy underlying gambling films, with the particular scope of female characters trapped in a golden cage. Finally, I will explore the possibility of gambling as a capitalist venture open to women, as depicted recently in Molly’s Game, based on the true story of poker game organizer Molly Bloom.

Gambling and the American Dream Through History and Films: A male-oriented business

6 Connecting films, gambling and the myth of the American Dream may seem like stating the obvious. Hollywood is a great manufacturer of myths and gambling a tantalizing way to make easy money; unsurprisingly, gamblers are a fixture of many film genres, celebrating or condemning gambling seen either as a demonstration of wit and self-
control or as a weakness. Gambling was already present in America during the colonial era and continued to develop throughout the foundation of the United States; card games and dice were brought to America by European settlers in the 17th century (Duncan 2015: 7), but gambling was already popular among some native tribes (Thompson 2015: xxv). Throughout history, moral and political questions have influenced the way public opinion tolerated or despised gamblers. The idea of institutionalized or state-controlled gambling emerged when the rebels in the American Colonies were looking for a way to fund the costly revolution in 1776 and created a lottery (Milllikan 2011), establishing the legitimacy of this game when, a century earlier, the first Puritan communities considered gambling as a sin and the possession of cards and dice was forbidden in homes (Rose 1992: 85). Far from having gained respectability, gambling was soon associated with other evils, namely prostitution, alcoholism and corruption and the new republic soon adopted anti-gambling laws as early as 1835 — in some states, anti-gambling societies formed lynch mobs to rid themselves of gamblers (e.g Vicksburg in 1835, see Berg 2011: 30-1). By 1910, legal gambling had disappeared save for horse bets in Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona (Duncan 2015: 11). In his overview of the history of gambling in the United States, Nelson Rose established three waves of legal gambling: one during the colonial era, as mentioned before; a second during the Civil War and westward expansion; and a third during the Great Depression when Nevada re-legalized casino gambling in 1931 which, incidentally, is the period that saw the development of gambling films (Dement 173-177). Legalized gambling has kept progressing since then, with more casinos opening and the democratization of state lotteries and betting parlors, and finally the invention of the Internet and the blooming of betting or gaming platforms (Barker & Britz 2000).

According to studies about gambling and gambling addiction, the historical and social dimensions of gambling conditioned its development in the United States: the lowering of religious standards and the strengthening of capitalist liberalism throughout the 20th century played a major part in its democratization (McMillan 1996: 6), along with periods of financial strain that could be eased by state lotteries and legal bets (Rose 1992: 96). Today, in the United States, as in other capitalist countries, the question is less a moral than a legal one: whether gambling is a legitimate or a questionable way to achieve upward mobility does not really matter as long as it is done within a legal framework (Cosgrave 1992: 9). The gradual acceptance of gambling regardless of gender is acknowledged by recent studies (Schaffer and al. 1997; Volberg 2003; Rask and Petry 2017). “Before the increased accessibility of casinos and lotteries, gambling options involved mainly the male-dominated spheres of sports, cards, and racing (Ladd and Petry 2002). Therefore, women were arguably less likely to develop gambling problems than they might be today.” (Grant and Kim, 2004: 99) This explains why Hollywood films about gambling are traditionally largely men-driven films. Female characters are not absent from gambling films, but as in most masculine genres (e.g. westerns), they are generally reduced to clichés. Duncan exposed the ‘good’ and ‘bad girl’ clichés in classical westerns and concluded that, in this genre, strong female characters where, in fact, women with masculine qualities (75). I would like to contend that, in gambling dramas other than westerns, female characters are similarly reduced to clichéd categories such as the good luck charms or the supportive women, the trouble-makers or the purveyors of moral standards. In that respect, the two characters played by Barbara Stanwyck fifteen years apart in Gambling Lady (1934) and
The Lady Gambles (1949) are exceptions to the rule, as she embodies two character-types that were until then largely masculine parts: the card shark and the compulsive gambler.

**Play Girl, Gambling Lady: Gambling women in films from the Great Depression era**

Stanwyck was part of strong actors (alongside Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn or Claudette Colbert) who became very popular in the 1930s, participating in “a decade's worth of Hollywood productions about women who broke the rules, beat the odds and survived.” (Smyth 66) The rise of strong female characters is particularly visible in traditionally male-oriented films, such as gambling films, with at least two examples, *Play Girl* (Enright 1932) and *Gambling Lady*. Yet, however progressive — these pre-code films pictured women as strong and independent —, they convey a paradoxical message as regards gender constructs. In *Play Girl*, Buster (Loretta Young) is a hard-working independent woman who wants to do something with her life without getting married; yet after falling for a gambler, she becomes pregnant and accepts to marry him. She then becomes one of the clichéd characters listed above: she doesn’t accept gambling as a real profession and pushes her husband to find a real job. As he continues gambling, she throws him out and ends up on her own, pregnant and unemployed. She then decides to follow her instinct and bets against the odds on a horse called Baby Mine, who makes her win twice. Yet, from a strong, bold girl (as suggested by the title), she turns into a vulnerable prey, alone in a betting parlor, forced to deal with a dishonest bookie. As she is about to get robbed by him, her husband comes back to save her. The film displays a behavior that is in keeping with pre-code, Great Depression strong female characters, yet its judgement on gambling, although not moralistic, follows the gender construct that gambling is a male activity, a viewpoint which will inform most gambling films from then on. Loretta Young does not play a gambler or an addict, but a girl striving to survive who plays on a hunch, one of the enduring clichés attached to female gambling: women don’t understand professional or strategic gambling.

*Gambling Lady* does the opposite. It remarkably implies that women can be responsible and gifted professional card sharks. Stanwyck, who took a three-week training to learn how to play and shuffle cards like a professional (Wilson 388), is convincing in the part of Jennifer “Lady” Lee. She found a way of acting that both gave her credibility as a professional player (self-control, self-assurance, dexterity), without sacrificing her femininity — her wardrobe was “extensive and lavish” (Wilson 388), which guaranteed her success with a high-class suitor, the son of a judge, who secures her social ascent. She is nonetheless financially independent and scrupulously keeps tracks of what she earns and loses. Lady is a combination of the wit, resourcefulness and resilience necessary to survive the Depression era as represented in films before the enforcement of the Hays code; her street credibility does not prevent her from playing by the rules, and gambling professionally does not make her immoral.

Ultimately, the two films represent gambling as an acceptable way to earn a living. In *Play Girl*, the husband, after spending several months in New Orleans, comes back with enough money from his gambling activity to take care of his family; and, in *Gambling Lady*, Lady is fully accepted by high society despite her modest background and unconventional occupation. Both women are happily married, and the two films' happy
endings display a loving family portrait, the reflection of the American Dream that, in James Truslow Adams’ terms:

is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (32)

Adams’s original text was about equal opportunity and merit, but in the collective unconscious, the myth of the American Dream is often reduced to financial success and upward mobility. In his text, Adams dreaded American society’s shift towards materialism and consumerism in the 1930s. If the two films display a moral ending, they also show American society’s consumerism: through the crowded department store where Buster works in Play Girl, and in the rich circles in which Lady operates in Gambling Lady. Yet, what makes the female characters happy is not money but love, and gambling as a moral evil eventually becomes marginalized although it was central to the plots. This shift in moral standards concerning gambling in the 1930s was probably influenced by “The 1931 Nevada ‘Wide Open Gambling Bill’ [that] started the modern era of legalized gambling in the US.” (Barker & Britz 26) However, the gradual democratization of gambling was unequal, as it depended on state legislations. It did not visibly impact women on- and off-screen, making Gambling Lady a durable exception. The enforcement of the Hays Code did not allow such female gambler characters to develop, instead, a more morally-charged type emerged: the female compulsive gambler.

The Female Addict: From The Lady Gambles to Even Money

The 1940s brought the female gambler back to the screens with a notable difference: the Motion Picture and Production Code, or ‘Hays Code’, that was pushed through the Senate by Republicans supporting its creator, William Hays. It was enforced from July 1, 1934 to 1968, banning most notably blasphemy, unmotivated violence, coarse language, mixed marriages, and sexual content from Hollywood productions.

Hazard (Marshall 1948) introduces Paulette Goddard as Helen, a compulsive gambler who has spent her inheritance gambling in underground houses. She has also lost her freedom cutting cards with her creditor, a dishonest gambler who wants to marry her by force. She then spends the whole film running away from the detective hired to bring her back to honor her lost bet, until she falls in love with him. Neither original nor interesting, this film depicts gambling as immoral, vain and dirty, far from the glamour of Gambling Lady’s high society gamblers. Goddard’s character is constantly on the run and ends up in jail alongside prostitutes after being caught playing dice with men in a seedy hotel room. The film portrays the female addict as dishonest, unreliable and self-destructive, until the resilient detective rescues her from a life of misery by proposing to her. The following year, in 1949, the release of The Lady Gambles marked a turning point in Hollywood’s depiction of female addiction to gambling, a subject that was rarely (if ever) covered seriously before; it was in line with Billy Wilder’s Oscar-winning The Lost Week-end (1945) about alcoholism, that may have inspired a series of films on addiction in the following decade, all featuring male addicts. Long before that, however, a film like The Pace that Killed (O’Connor 1935) — based on a 1928 silent film —,
boldly depicted a woman’s addiction to cocaine after she fell for a drug dealer whom she ends up killing; and the better-known *Reefer Madness* (Gasnier 1936) delivered a (much parodied) portrait of male and female addiction to marijuana. All of these films have in common what Dement calls a “responsible” approach to addiction, as they ultimately serve as a warning against drugs. Gambling is an addiction that has been dealt with in an “irresponsible” way because of its recreational dimension.

14 *The Lady Gambles* has the effect of a government-funded film, warning vulnerable women about the dangers of gambling addiction. Barbara Stanwyck plays a happily married middle-class reporter, Joan, staying in a hotel/casino in Las Vegas while her husband is writing an article on the Hoover Dam. She becomes addicted to gambling almost overnight after being seduced and invited to play for free by the casino owner. She is quickly drawn into an infernal downward spiral, leading her to betray and leave her husband twice, to becoming involved in criminal activities with mobsters who eventually leave her behind because she is so addicted that she jeopardizes their business. In the film, her addiction is a disease that is not compatible with business, and the fact that the addict is a woman makes matters worse (‘Gambling and women don’t mix’). Gambling films usually deal with one or the other aspect of the question, but the two can never be combined successfully; addiction and compulsive gambling inevitably lead to ruin, but a professional attitude toward gambling, poise and reflection, turn the gambler into an entrepreneur, an architect of the American Dream.

15 Early on in the film, Joan is shown begging the manager of the casino for money. Before long, she is so deep in debt that she can no longer hope to find an easy way to settle them. Pawning her camera, she bursts into tears pathetically begging the old pawnbroker for more money, then rushes to the casino. The contrast between her elegant fashion style and manners and the place is emphasized as she walks into the crowded, smoky and noisy casino. She’s making her way through a predominantly male crowd, shot from a high angle.

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16 She chooses a craps table and settles on one edge, surrounded by frantic men in grey suits which contrast sharply with her white, classy blouse and overcoat. Handing in the bills to the croupier with no further hesitation, she picks up the dice and glances at the carpet, both soothed and fascinated, as if the contact of the dice on her hands were her “fix”. First, she hesitates and explains that she is new to the game as the croupier and avid players invite her to throw the dice. A quick dissolve on a pile of chips and two pairs of dice suggest a temporal ellipsis. The oblique high-angle shot reveals only a woman’s hands rubbing the dice with energy; slowly tilting up, the camera then settles on Joan’s conquering attitude and bewitched glance as she frantically throws the dice across the carpet; she is a different woman. The camera faces her from the other end of the carpet, she is staring at the dice with devilish eyes, waiting for the verdict, surrounded by a herd of excited men. This famous sequence bears a sexual connotation particular to table games that were considered unsuitable for unaccompanied women with Joan’s social background at the end of the 1940s, when casinos were still very masculine places, especially at night. Joan wins and can’t stop playing; she has taken off her coat and picks up the dice revealing her bare arms. “One more time! Just one more time!” she begs as the camera is zooming in on her white teeth, completing the sexual...
innuendo that reaches an apex when a man standing behind her very close tells her, “Kiss them lady!”, with a disturbing grin. Her expression changes for a second, she considers doing it but instead she throws the dice even harder than before; a seven, she wins again, close to ecstasy, her conquering eyes make her look possessed. Picking up the dice, blowing on them, and rubbing them between her hands, she now has her ritual, like regular gamblers. The sequence ends with a dissolve suggesting a long night of gambling which marks a point of no return for Joan; now that she has experienced the thrill and power of winning, she is no longer “curious about” but “addicted to” gambling. The kind of sexual connotation conveyed in dice-throwing sequences is specific to female gamblers, and can be found in many films, and even more glamorously and evocatively so in *Gilda* (1946), in which Rita Hayworth is filmed as an object of desire, and, fifty years later, in *Casino* (1995), with equally attractive Sharon Stone. But the craps sequence in *The Lady Gambles* conveys something the two other films don’t: addiction, a disease that makes even responsible people lose control. In fact, this sequence echoes the opening sequence of the film, shot in a dark back alley where a bunch of men are playing dice for money on the asphalt. Joan is the only woman, and she’s caught helping a man rig the game. He escapes and she gets caught by two angry gamblers who beat her up until she collapses on the pavement. This first sequence sets the tone of the film, especially as her husband, in the hospital, explains that he hasn’t seen Joan in two years and tells a skeptical doctor that she is sick and needs help.

Gambling is related to the sociology of risk, strictly speaking, it refers to “financial transactions — the staking of money, or an item of economic value, on the certain outcome of a future event.” (McMillen 6) Risk-taking is what provokes the thrill of gambling. In his seminal essay, *Where the action is* (1967), Erving Goffman relates gambling to “action”: “a term that points to something lively but is itself now almost dead” (149). It refers to the essence of risk-taking, with all the excitement, the positive or/and negative consequences it may imply, and gambling being the epitome of action. Goffman considers action as intrinsically masculine (e.g. action movies), what he calls “the cult of masculinity” in the same article, although it goes beyond gambling, and he establishes four components that appear as essential to the gambler: “courage, gameness, integrity and composure” (229)— with the last one, controlling one’s emotions, being the most important. But risk-taking was proven to be detrimental to women in the 1950s, as a study concluded that women who took chances were less popular than others (Tuddenham 1952). In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, countless studies also established risk-taking as a masculine trait and stereotyped women as more risk-averse. Most studies conducted in the United States from 1972 to 1994 showed that men gambled more than women. This may explain why, in spite of the legalization and global acceptance of gambling in American society (85% of Americans find gambling acceptable — AGA 2013), surveys about gambling preferences by gender invariably show that women still gamble less frequently than men (all games included), win and lose less money, and prefer non-strategic games such as bingo, slot machines and lotteries (Potenza, Maciejewski and Mazure 2006). These social constructs have endured in popular culture although questionable and sometimes “unsubstantiated”
(Philips Wilson 71), and films have largely contributed to perpetuate these clichés that are only beginning to be debunked as demonstrated by the all-women cast sequel of the Ocean’s franchise Ocean’s 8 (Ross 2018), or Molly’s Game, which I will discuss below.

As with The Lady Gambles, sixty years later, Even Money (Rydell 2007) focuses on the evils of gambling through an ensemble narration with multiple plots. The main story is of a middle-aged writer, Carolyn (Kim Basinger), who becomes addicted to gambling. Married to a college professor of English and mother of a thirteen-year-old daughter, she is slowly drifting away from her home. Built like a noir detective story that starts with a murder, the film undertakes an anti-gambling stance. A close-up on an old wrinkled woman shot from the side, wearing aviator mirrored sunglasses and a leopard printed cow-boy hat, smoking while playing a slot machine inaugurates the first casino sequence. Facing her is an old sick man with a Stetson, breathing through a respirator, painfully putting coins in a slot machine. The lateral tracking shot reveals another old lady playing blackjack on a machine, and a few rows away from her, in the middle of what looks like a room full of machines, a blond woman shot from the back is frenetically pulling the lever of a slot machine. The camera focuses on her frustrated face as she loses repeatedly; an extreme close up emphasizes her left eye closed in despair behind her square glasses; most of her face is hidden behind the machine which is virtually swallowing her. Her face appears more clearly; unlike the other players, she is a middle-aged classic-looking woman, the prototype of the white middle-class mother. In that respect, she recalls Joan; yet, this casino is no longer a place of excitement full of action men, but a gloomy, secluded place with tacky multicolor neon lights and a crowd of elderly people. After losing money for several hours, she goes home to her bourgeois life, she lies to her family about gambling, pretending to be writing while she suffers from writer's block. Carolyn seems unsatisfied with all aspects of her life: her job, her marriage and her recreational life that has turned her into an addict, although she had no apparent reason to become one (she has money, a house, a family, security and love). Like Joan, she is initiated to an action (strategic) game, blackjack, and becomes addicted, eventually losing all the family savings. Like Joan, she will return to the casino until she loses everything, including her loving family that she has completely forsaken. The movie plays on two aggravating factors: the husband (Ray Liotta) is very nice and trusting — so irreproachable that she resents him for his perfection; and her teenage daughter, although not a rebel, is visibly becoming more interested in boys and sex, and needs her mother’s attention. As a rule, gambling addiction is made even more difficult to bear for women because of the “social expectation of gender” (Barker & Britz 145); the addicted woman not only loses money but also destroys her family and loses her social status. “Females are expected to serve as the cohesive agent within the family structure — forgiving transgressions and committing few.” (Barker & Britz 145) Contrary to men who often gamble to earn money in films, women like Carolyn and Joan start gambling for fun; both admit that it “amuses” them, reinforcing the idea of women being occasional, non-strategic gamblers or “escape gamblers” (Barker & Britz 145) — yet they get trapped all the same. The trap in both films relies on the magnetic attraction to the casino, a place of deception where the two women can be someone else, combined with their dissatisfaction with a boring life. Addiction to gambling becomes the negation of the American Dream as it leads to complete loss, be it material possessions or family support, other people's respect and one’s self-esteem, for men and women alike.
The gilded world of casinos is alluring, bright and shiny, as exemplified by Scorsese in a subtle slow-motion take at the end of Casino’s half-hour-long introductory part, when an equally shiny Ginger (Sharon Stone), wearing a sequin dress that would make any woman look bad, is creating a fuss. Tossing chips in the air with a classy attitude and a bright smile, she is getting a crowd of avid players to kneel around her as if she were a queen. As stated by Sam (Robert De Niro) in the introduction, “The casino was our morality carwash. It does for us what Lourdes does for the crippled.” Sam and Ginger are king and queen within the casino’s microcosm, it is what feeds them and legitimizes them; outside of it, they lose their shine. In the film, there is a clear discrepancy between the scenes shot inside and outside the casino. Inside, the two characters look bright, lively and glamorous; outside, they become everyday people, cursing and arguing. Everything in casino films is meant to convey the idea that life doesn’t exist outside of the casino, particularly in Las Vegas which is surrounded by desert. Ginger and Sam don’t have a life outside of the casino because Las Vegas is a transitory place for tourists and millionaires; it offers no possibility to create a durable social circle, as most people come and go. Casino films, and gambling films in general, adopt a centripetal spatial configuration that conveys seclusion and stagnation often materialized through an overwhelming use of high-angle shots and bird-eye views dismissing everything going on outside of the game table. Equally important is the use of close and extreme-close shots that emphasize inner feelings (mostly stress, or bluff) and tend to deglamorize the players by revealing their flaws; finally, most of these films are shot indoors, and outdoor sequences scarcely display any horizon, in keeping with the protagonist’s limited future. In The Cooler (Kramer 2003), Bernie (a character from the old days, when casinos hired people with the jinx to make customers lose) wants to leave Las Vegas for a place where “you can tell night from day”, he says, because he can no longer breathe in Vegas.

The character of Ginger in Casino fits the cliché of the gold-digger and the troublemaker: she is a professional working in casinos, as Sam explains in voice-over, describing her routine as a very professional act that never fails to make her win, without even playing. Gambling is not her weakness but her ex-boyfriend and the decadent life that surrounds casinos are — alcohol, drugs, expensive outfits, jewelry. She reluctantly marries Sam for luxury, yet she is still attached to her ex-boyfriend (as Gilda, still attracted to Johnny, marries Ballin for his social position). Gambling is an apt metaphor for her life: she is a winner as long as she remains free to play her own game, and becomes a loser when she settles down and gets everything she wants without earning it. This is what relates gambling to the American Dream: risking everything, building a strategy, and winning, eventually, like an entrepreneur. Characters like Ginger seem to abide by the principle that there is nothing rewarding in succeeding effortlessly. Casinos are temples of consumerism and lust, yet the “gambling holes” of the low-life gamblers are equally attractive because they are dark, seedy and mysterious.

In House of Games and The Gambler, the main protagonists have a compulsion — to steal for one, to play for the other — that has nothing to do with their social status, as both are well-off intellectuals. However, they are curious about this underground world and navigate among low-life, limited characters who entertain them for a while but fail to
give them what they want, risking all in a self-destructive impulse. The theme of self-destruction was already central to *The Lady Gambles*, as Joan, the addicted reporter, proved incapable to refrain her compulsions to play (which was also the case of Helen in *Hazard*). She is like Maggie (Lindsay Crouse) in *House of Games*, the psychologist specialized in addiction who is caught at her own game. Women are depicted as easy preys in this highly masculine environment; at some point, they all end up bullied by a man. Ginger is brutalized by her ex and her husband, Gilda is slapped by Johnny, Molly (Jessica Chastain) beaten up by the mob, just like Nathalie “lady chance” (Maria Bello) in *The Cooler* and Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *Hard Eight* (P.T. Anderson 1996). In that respect, the gambling world echoes the gender inequalities of the business world: women have a chance to succeed (they often outwit or manipulate male characters), but they suffer from a power differential that makes their success virtually impossible. These films also often demonstrate how compassion and a tendency to display emotions make women improbable gamblers but easy targets, which explains the scarcity of female gamblers in gambling films.

**Figure 1**: *Tricheur à l’as de carreau* (1635) by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652)

Historically, gambling is not an exclusively male activity. In Europe, court gambling did not only involve male players, as shown in paintings, notably *Tricheur à l’as de carreau* (1635) by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652) (Figure 1). The gambling circles of 19th-century European high society are also well depicted as a non-gender-determined microcosm in *The Gambler* (1866) by Fiodor Dostoievski and William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844) adapted on screen by Stanley Kubrick as *Barry Lyndon* (1975). Although not a film on gambling, a key sequence in *Barry Lyndon* focuses on male and female players engaging in social circles where seducers can spot vulnerable, rich targets, as penniless Redmond Barry (Ryan O’Neal) seduces the countess of Lyndon (Marisa Berenson) to easily gain a title and a fortune. The dishonest
transaction will seal the countess’s downfall and the curse of Barry Lyndon. The film exploits the theme of upward mobility through gambling, and reestablishes gambling as an old European tradition reminding the American viewer that, before becoming a motif of the western or gangster films, card games were also related to the aristocracy. They led to the same traps (addiction, debts, cheating) and had the same goals (making easy money and reaching select circles), and, above all, professional gamblers were already attractive and self-assured, particularly when they won. Female gamblers already had more to lose than men. The countess of Lyndon is yet another female gambler who lost her freedom gambling with her life and ended up trapped in a golden cage (like Gilda and Ginger). These women are objectified by men and possessed physically by the male protagonist as gambling wins, while visually they are seen through, and displayed for, the men’s eyes or the “male gaze”, to borrow Laura Mulvey’s terms.

23 In her feminist analysis of Gilda, Mary Ann Doane described gambling as “the conflation of economics, risk and desire” (99), a highly masculine combination that unsurprisingly establishes gender relations as the film’s central issue. In the same article, she interprets one of the key sentences of the film, “Gambling and women don’t mix”, which “negates the feminine”:

Within a capitalist patriarchy, gambling and women do not mix because both demand full concentration (they “use up” energy), both are risky, and both entail high stakes. The gambler’s desire for money and his desire for women are incompatible precisely because the money and the woman are substitutable objects within essentially the same system and logic of exchange. (99)

24 Such logic is what motivates poker game organizer, Molly Bloom, a beautiful and clever woman who made a fortune exploiting male poker players without ever becoming a player herself.

Gambling as a Capitalist Venture Open to Women: Molly’s Game

25 Gambling, particularly poker and blackjack, have gained in popularity in the last three decades owing to the development of online poker games and popular stars advertising their interest in this game (e.g. Leonardo Di Caprio, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, among others), which translates into films that consider it as a capitalist venture (e.g. Even Money’s bookmakers), or even a scientific experiment (e.g. 21), that eclipses the traditional Mafia/indebted player plot, and illustrates what could be a new phase in films about gambling. The exclusive and glamorous aspect of gambling that was already at play in Barry Lyndon is reevaluated in Molly’s Game which offers a combination of glamour, seduction, excitement, and cold capitalist entrepreneurship... controlled by a woman.

Gambling has been associated historically with hegemonic masculinity. Thorstein Veblen (1953) suggests that the men of the ruling classes historically displayed social superiority and wealth through conspicuous consumption of leisure activities. As a cultural practice, gambling was an activity of privileged males in male-dominated spaces (Randall 1998). Gambling was a means of demonstrating an ideal masculinity, in which men displayed wealth and put it at risk, while upholding the semblance of control (concealing vulnerability and emotions) through strategy, odds, and probability (Morton 2003). As such, the accumulation of capital (and
statistical procedures to ensure it) has permeated Western capitalist masculinity from the gambling tables to Wall Street (David 1962, Fienberg 1992). (Phillips and Wilson, 2009: 70-1)

Following that logic, Molly Bloom, who is constantly studying gamblers to analyze their behavior and evaluate the risks for her business, endeavors to exploit rich and powerful men’s attraction to gambling. Setting aside her moral judgement, she approaches it as a capitalist venture, considering legal and technical factors before human ones. Molly’s Game is based on the true story of a professional skier, Molly Bloom, who, after her career was cut short by an accident, became a millionaire by creating an exclusive circle of poker games without being a player herself. Contrary to traditional poker films, Molly’s Game focuses on the organizer of the games, a young scrupulous female entrepreneur abiding by the law — until she breaks it. The film refers to a historical paradox that has pushed professional gamblers to question the anti-gambling laws in the past: restricting gambling “competes with US belief in economic liberalism and maximization of profit.” (Duncan 8) In the film, however, Molly is not arrested for earning a living thanks to poker games, but for enabling members of the Russian mafia to play at her table without questioning the origin of their money, making her an accomplice in money laundering.

Molly’s strength is to create a select poker game with millionaires and celebrities, imposing high standards in five-star hotels, with beautiful hostesses (who are not prostitutes). Like Ginger, she is a professional who makes money with games without playing. She explains:

My game had a tricky ecosystem. These guys could buy anything. But in this room, you couldn’t buy your win, you couldn’t buy me, you couldn’t buy the girls, you couldn’t buy a seat in this game. There’s nothing so sweet as a win you have to work for.

Molly applies her entrepreneur spirit to the game, but everything falls apart when she starts accepting Russian mobsters at the table, and Italian gangsters find out they are not getting a cut in her lucrative game. The film then switches from a glamorous and chic atmosphere to raw violence, as she is brutally beaten up by an old-school Mafia henchman. Molly’s life had already started to fall apart before that turning point, however, when at the height of her success, as she explains in voice-over, she was running six games a week and had become addicted to all sorts of drugs that could create artificial nights and days for her disoriented body and mind. Gambling became a business that consumed her life. In that respect, Molly is a character that transcends the gender barriers usually at play in gambling movies, as she controls the game, the players and has no personal life, like the male casino managers.

Many gambling films at some point include a lecture of sorts from the main protagonist, explaining how the system works from the entrepreneur’s (professional) viewpoint. Famously, Casino’s didactic introductory part shows all aspects of casino work, from the bottom to the top of the pyramid and the “eye in the sky”, commented by Sam and Nicky (Joe Pesci) in voice-over. It may have set a precedent that gave way to variations in Hard Eight as Sidney’s routine is methodically transmitted to John as a family recipe; or in Rounders (Dahl 1998) as Mike is explaining in voice-over that poker is not a game of chance but requires skill, practice and discipline. In Molly’s Game, during a particularly tense game, an animation appears on screen in the fashion of a game broadcast on TV, and Molly starts explaining the strategy of the players and the probabilities in voice-over, demonstrating her deep understanding of the game,
debunking enduring clichés about women at odds with strategic games. More interestingly, the film debunks the masculine hegemony at play in most gambling films by choosing to use Molly’s own voice, and therefore her point of view. The use of a voice-over in gambling films is a common device that relates them to film noir, but even in films with a female lead actor, the voice was invariably that of a man, depriving the main character of her “female gaze” (e.g. Johnny’s voice in *Gilda*; the husband’s voice in *The Lady Gambles*; Sam and Nick’s voices in *Casino*).

The voice-over of the (male) detective that opens *Even Money* in a noir fashion also closes it, offering its theory on gambling being closely tied to consumer society, pushing people to always want more of everything: “But you can’t have your dream without laying something on the line. The key is not to risk what you can’t afford to lose.” Gambling, as a means to fulfill a dream, requires a sacrifice. Most films involving female gamblers overemphasize that risk because women seem to be more stigmatized than men (e.g. in *The Lady Gambles*, Joan is treated like a prostitute by the detective because she was caught gambling; in *Even Money*, in addition to being a liar, Carolyn is a bad wife and mother). The use of a masculine voice-over always casts a gender-oriented judgement on these female characters. Molly’s Game’s bold choice of a female voice-over to tell the story of a woman in a managerial position denotes a remarkable change of focus, offering a “female gaze” on gambling and the American Dream — without, however, giving up on male’s “visual pleasure” (e.g. Chastain’s glamorous outfits and provocative cleavage) ingrained in Hollywood films (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Jessica Chastain and Chris O’Dowd in Molly’s Game (2017)*

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4209788/mediaviewer/rm166638081

**Conclusion**

A diachronic approach to the representation of female lead characters in gambling dramas reveals enduring clichés that emerged in early American society (e.g. gambling was soon considered as a male activity; risk-taking is intrinsically masculine; strategic games are male territory…) and spread through popular culture. Female characters in most gambling films are thus sidelined and stereotyped. These clichés are the foundation of long-standing social constructs that have been the focus of sociological and medical research. However, scientific data regarding a gender analysis of female
gambling habits and addiction in the United States is still scarce. Similarly, the representation of female gamblers on screen remains marginal.

In films, women are usually portrayed as reckless players, favoring games of chance over strategic ones, with a preference for roulette or dice in the classical era (The Lady Gambles, Gilda), and more recently on slot machines (Even Money). They play on a hunch, as in Play Girl, instead of calculating the risks. Very few female professional gamblers are represented in films other than westerns, and even this particularly prolific genre which often portrays games (mainly poker), is more inclined to display prostitutes in saloons than women gamblers. The ideology behind the representation of female gamblers is strongly informed by moral standards, particularly during the classical era, with a strong influence of the legal and political frameworks at the time of release. The gradual legalization of gambling played a part in how they were represented on screen in pre-code films (Gambling Lady). The enforcement of the Hays code in 1934 may have given way to the reemergence of the female gambler as an addict in post-World War Two films (Hazard, The Lady Gambles) heralding a reevaluation of moral standards that developed in the 1950s.

Relating female gamblers and the myth of the American Dream in films exposes a gender differential in the way success and loss are depicted on screen. Female gamblers appear in turn as determined and therefore threatening, victimized, humiliated, irresponsible, objectified and bullied in the masculine microcosm of gambling. They are often deprived of the fulfillment of their share of the American Dream, constrained by gender expectations that make them bigger losers than men.

In the post-Weinstein context, however, it is hard to deny that a reevaluation, and even a reshaping of some enduring sexist clichés through films is giving more credit to female characters in traditionally male-dominated genres like superhero films (Wonder Woman, Patty Jenkins 2017; Black Widow, Cate Shortland 2021), heist films (The Widows, McQueen 2018), and gambling films (Ocean’s 8, Molly’s Game) involving female overachievers, symbolically reclaiming the “female gaze,” despite the fact that few of these films were made by female directors.

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Filmography

   The Lost Week-end. Wilder, Billy dir. 1945.
   The Widows. McQueen, Steve dir. 2018.
NOTES


2. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream by Hunter S. Thompson (1971) focuses on the failure of the 1960s Counterculture and the collapse of the American Dream as the two protagonists undergo a trip to Las Vegas, the temple of consumption and the supposed symbol of American success that they decry while experiencing trips with acid and other drugs.

3. I consider gambling films as a group of films whose main subject is gambling and/or casinos, which excludes films with gambling sequences (e.g. Casino Royale, My Darling Clementine). I also exclude here comedies about gambling (e.g. Maverick) that would deserve a specific treatment.

4. Legal gambling contributed to funding reconstruction in the southern states and the construction of the western states (Rose 1992: 96).

5. “Gambling activities are no longer discursively constructed in religious or moral terms, but in economic, consumerist, and medical terms. It is not that moral discourse around gambling has disappeared; rather, the discourse now centers on the individual’s self-governance in relation to gambling.”

6. Scholars disagree on whether the film is really pre or post-code. Technically, it came out before the enforcement of the code, yet, to Dan Callahan “Gambling Lady is Stanwyck’s first real post-code movie, and a chill of compulsory virtue affects her performance right away.” (2012: 58)

7. The Man with the Golden Arm (Preminger 1955) on addiction to heroine, Bigger than Life (Ray 1956) on addiction to cortisone, Monkey on my Back (De Toth 1957) on addiction to opioids.

8. Goffman’s study was later praised for destigmatizing gambling, as it is said to have lifted “gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it and renders possible a consideration of its meaning which is freed from a priori associations of a negative kind.” (Downes and al. 1976:17)

9. Yet they were criticized for using male-oriented questions (e.g. about military decisions).

10. It might explain the behavior of rich, self-destructive protagonists, that may just be self-loathing rich, like Axel/Jim in The Gambler (Reisz 1974), and its remake (Toback 2014).

ABSTRACTS

A metaphorical expression of the myth of the American Dream, gambling — institutionalized in casinos or illegal in underground circles — soon became a fixture of masculine film genres such as westerns and gangster films. As a rule, gambling movies, regardless of their genre, are male-driven films, leaving only secondary parts to female protagonists who usually fall into three categories: good luck charms/helpers (The Cooler, 21), trouble-makers (Casino, Gilda) or purveyors of moral standards (Rounders, The Cincinnati Kid). Conversely, in gambling films featuring women in lead roles, actors are more likely to embody addicts (The Lady Gambles, Even Money), entrepreneurs/professionals (Atlantic City, Molly’s Game) and — more rarely — professional gamblers (Gambling Lady), thus contesting the masculine hegemony usually at play in this type of
film. Through a diachronic approach based on sociological and historical facts, this article proposes to consider how female-driven gambling films may offer a possibility for female lead actors to reclaim the ‘male gaze’ and somehow reestablish a form of gender equality by portraying tough, smart, pragmatic women in a traditionally masculine environment. Achieving the American Dream or wasting their lives to addiction, these women contradict enduring clichés conveyed by Hollywood and informed by the Hays code during the classical era.

Qu’ils soient légaux dans les casinos ou clandestins dans les tripots, les jeux d’argent sont devenus l’une des métaphores du rêve américain, figurant régulièrement dans des films de genres traditionnellement masculins tels que les westerns ou les films de gangsters. En règle générale, les films de jeux, quel que soit leur genre d’affiliation, ont un premier rôle masculin, les personnages féminins n’occupant que des rôles secondaires que l’on peut classer dans trois catégories : les porte-bonheurs/adjuvants (The Cooler, 21), les scandaleuses (Casino, Gilda) ou les garantes de valeurs morales (Rounders, The Cincinnati Kid). À l’inverse, dans les films de jeux offrant le premier rôle à une femme, les actrices tendent à interpréter des rôles de joueuses compulsives (The Lady Gambles, Even Money), de femmes d’affaires/professionnelles (Atlantic City, Molly’s Game) et (plus rarement) des joueuses professionnelles (Gambling Lady) contestant ainsi l’hégémonie masculine à l’œuvre dans ces films. À travers une approche diachronique fondée sur des faits sociologiques et historiques, cet article propose de s’intéresser à la façon dont les films de jeux incluant un premier rôle féminin, offrent la possibilité aux actrices de se réapproprier le « regard masculin » (male gaze) et d’une certaine manière de rétablir une forme d’égalité des genres en incarnant des femmes fortes, intelligentes et pragmatiques dans un environnement traditionnellement masculin. Qu’elles réalisent leur rêve américain ou succombent à l’addiction, ces femmes contredisent les clichés persistants véhiculés par Hollywood sous l’influence du code Hays pendant la période classique.

INDEX
Mots-clés: films de jeux, joueuse, casino, addiction, poker, rêve américain, genre, risque, Hollywood, Gambling Lady, Lady Gambles (The), Molly’s Game, Even Money, Play Girl
Keywords: gambling films, female gambler, casino, addiction, poker, American Dream, gender, risk, Hollywood, Gambling Lady, Lady Gambles (The), Molly’s Game, Even Money, Play Girl

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Graphic Interlude
Are you Game?


Game as Amusement, Fun, Pleasure
Winslow Homer (1836-1910), *Snap the Whip* (1872) - Oil on canvas (30.5x 50.8cm)

This outdoor scene is one of many painted by Winslow Homer, one of the most famous American artists of the nineteenth century. Children at play was a popular subject at the time. Here, probably after attending a lesson in the red schoolhouse in the background, the bare-footed boys are playing the game of snap the whip, where one child (the head) runs in all directions with the others holding the previous player by the hand. As an exercise in coordination and physical strength, it is easy to understand the metaphorical meaning Homer puts into his picture made after the Civil War. Even in this seemingly anecdotal genre painting, gaming takes on a more serious meaning.

Ambrose Andrews (1801-1877), *The Children of Nathan Starr* (1835) – Oil on canvas (72.1 x 92.7 cm)

Here again children are at the centre of focus in this rather eerie indoor scene presenting a mother with her children playing “battledore and shuttlecock”. What seems to be a peaceful and quiet scene of domestic happiness actually begs for explanation. The children look very grave and while the oldest play the same game, the youngest one, Edward, with a hoop in his right hand, points his gaming stick heavenward. As he died in 1835, the painting may be a memorial piece.

Briton Rivière (1840-1920), *Giants at Play* (1882) – Oil on canvas (83.8 x 135.3 cm)

In the Victorian period, Briton Rivière specialised in scenes with animals – this is one instance of them. The three labourers at rest are playing with a tiny dog with string and feather. The dog being a bull-pup, one might imagine that this apparently innocent game is a way of training the animal for fighting.

Have you had a good look at it? What do you see? "Two identical photographs of a mother playing with her daughter Maja," you say. Are you absolutely sure? Actually, in the second snapshot, the woman has slightly lifted her hand to place a piece of the puzzle. Yes, it is almost imperceptible. But it is not the only deceiving element in this work of art: the mother is in fact Duane Hanson (1925-1996), the famous American hyper-realist sculptor and what we all take to be her daughter is nothing but a life-size sculpture of Maja, from the work entitled *Child with Puzzle* (1978), including the rug and the jigsaw puzzle. Photography or the power of illusion (from the Latin *illudere*) – or when the artist plays games with the viewers.


**The Game and Its Rules**
Die, Roman period (30 B.C.-330 A.D.) – Ivory (1 cm square)

The dice with which the Roman soldiers gambled Christ's tunic (see below) might have looked like the ones shown here.
As a Calvinist, Marcus Gheeraerts I, born in Bruges, fled the Spanish Low Countries around 1567 with his son Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (also a painter), before returning to the Netherlands around 1576 and to London again in 1586. In this engraving, the two Roman soldiers at the bottom are seen engaged in a raw that is about to turn to a fight. The stake of the game of dice is Christ’s tunic, which the soldier on the right has already grabbed with his left hand while brandishing his sword with his right hand. This representation of gambling is very much in keeping with the moral treatises flourishing in early modern England: their authors usually warned their readers about the dangers of such games of chance, leading to cheating and therefore to quarrelling.

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Attr. to Gawen Hamilton (c. 1698-1737), *An Elegant Company Playing at Cards* (c. 1725) – Oil on canvas (69.2 x 57.7 cm)

No such thing happens in this eighteenth-century conversation piece attributed to Gawen Hamilton (previously thought to be by Hogarth). The game of cards is presented here as one of the refinements of elegant society, the members of which (probably the Thornhill family) seem to be patrons of the art, to judge by the presence of a painter in the background.

The title of this large piece — a commission from Walter Armstrong — works as double entendre. While it refers to the suit of cards (Hearts) chosen as trumps in a game of what could be bridge or whist, the presence of three young women at the table suggests there is more to it. They do not seem particularly interested in the game. Art history tells us that they are Armstrong’s daughters: Elizabeth, Diana and Mary on the right. The latter, looking straight at the viewer, is holding most of the trump cards, which makes the picture a possible allusion to the competition the sisters are engaged in to find a husband. The literary quality of the painting cannot but remind the viewers of Jane Austen’s novels (see Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s article).

On the satirical side, this English cartoon is a vivid and humorous depiction of the untoward consequences of gambling in a masculine environment. No doubt cheating has been the rule and the stakes have raised high (see the hat filled with gold coins). All sorts of objects are wielded around: pistols, a candlestick, a chair, a glass, not to mention the sword on the table. Anything goes to attack one's adversary. What a shamble! The use of lights and shades is particularly dramatic and efficient in conveying a sense of utter chaos among the participants, coming from different ranks of society. The English officer on the right aims his pistol at an elderly man with a pigtail (a Frenchman), trying to protect his winnings. It is rather ironic that the author of this moralizing picture denouncing the hazards of gambling should have dilapidated his fortune by 1793...

During the Great Depression, Marion Post Wolcott worked as a documentary photographer for the US Farm Security Administration. Her photographs (and those of others, like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans) constitute a unique testimony on the state of American society at a time of great economic and racial inequalities. “As an FSA documentary photographer, I was committed to changing the attitudes of people by familiarizing America with the plight of the underprivileged, especially in rural America,” she once said. The photo kept in the Smithsonian collection shows African Americans playing “skin game” — also simply designated as “skin” — defined by the OED as “U.S. (chiefly in African-American usage). A card game in which players are each dealt a single card and then bet on that card not being the first to be matched in value by another dealt from the pack”.


Chess
This fine piece of medieval craftsmanship reminds us that chess is one of the oldest games invented by Man, perhaps in India around the sixth century A.D. It has become very popular throughout the world, even among children, as the pictures below illustrate.

John Rogers (1829-1904), *Checkers up at the Farm* (1875) – Painted plaster (51.9 x 44.6 x 32.2 cm)

In this (rather wealthy) farmer's family, chess is part of everyday life, perhaps because, as a game absolutely excluding the notion of chance (with no hidden information), it escaped the moral strictures attached to other games involving it (like dice and cards). In any case, this family scene was so popular with the public that the sculptor sold 5,000 copies of it.

Mary Sargant Florence (1857-1954), *Children at Chess* (c. 1903) – Tempera on wood (90 x 40 cm)

Now in this painting no adult is there to play or see the game: the painter’s children are absorbed in thought, the brother wondering what her sister’s next move will be. There is no doubt that the game is part of Sargant Florence’s modern educational views. As a committed feminist (she was a suffragette), she wanted her children to equally develop all their abilities: her daughter Alix became a psychoanalyst and her son Philip an economist.

Thomas Anshutz (1851-1912), *Checker Players* (c. 1895) – Oil on canvas (40.8 x 51 cm)

Even though the game is not exactly chess, but checkers, children are shown to be as engrossed in it as the previous ones. A student of Thomas Eakins, Anschutz was also an arts teacher and founded the Darby School (1898), promoting plein air painting.


**Game & Education**

1. It is now clear that playing games can serve educational purposes, as the following items will show. In 1677 was published a small book entitled *Grammatical Cards*, containing four suits of cards: *Orthographia, Prosodia, Etymologia* and *Syntaxis* intended to teach the rules of grammar (in Latin).
Grammatical Cards (published in London by S. Mearne and A. Clark, 1677. Imprimatur of J. Jane June 1st 1676), Titlepage

“Orthography: It is the method of writing correctly by which we learn how to spell each pronunciation. Thus Lectio and not Lexio. The word comes from orthos, meaning right, and graphè, meaning writing.”

"Close to orthography is orthopeia (the method of speaking correctly), that is to say speaking correctly and accurately." (Translation into English from a French translation made by Christian Leroy)


**Game as Metaphor**

Some of the previous images were proof that gaming was often used both literally and metaphorically in the arts. Here, I would like to pause on a few illustrations of games as political metaphors.
Sir William Reynolds-Stephens (1862-1943), *A Royal Game* (1906-1911) – Bronze, wood and stone (240.7 x 233 x 97.8 cm)

This spectacular sculpture evokes the famous episode of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. The chess pieces are replaced by ships representing the English and Spanish fleets. A regal Elizabeth I is opposed to Spanish King Philip II in a game he is about to lose. This is reminiscent of the use Thomas Middleton made of the game in his *Game at Chess* (1624), the title page of which figures a game of chess played between the "Black House" and the "White House".

Anonymous, *The Gamblers* (1785) – Hand-coloured etching (24.9 x 34.1 cm)

The gamblers sitting around the table are the Prince of Wales (on the right, saying: "Who sets a thousand on this?") Fox, the Whig statesman leading His Majesty’s Opposition (in the middle, saying: "Give me the cog’d dies and I’ll nick him") and, perhaps, Sheridan, a friend and supporter of Fox’s (on the left, answering: "I say done — at it for a thousand"). This satire on the bad influence of Fox (trying to cheat) on the Prince of Wales is one of the many circulating at the time.

© The Trustees of the British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1851-0901-241
George Cruikshank (after George Humphrey), *A Game at Cribbage or Boney’s Last Shuffle* (1814) – Hand-coloured etching (21.2 x 27.5 cm)

In this cartoon, the anonymous English artist pokes fun at Napoleon after his abdication on 6 April 1814. In this game of cribbage, he is opposed to the Regent (the Prince of Wales in the previous cartoon) who, comfortably sitting in a chair adorned with the Royal Arms, triumphantly holds a winning card (a king of hearts) and exclaims “XVIII!!!” in reference to the Restoration of the Bourbons, while the defeated emperor, looking dismayed, puts an eight of clubs on the table. The date of publication of the etching corresponds to the day of the arrival of the Allied sovereigns in England and the author gives credit to the Regent for the restoration of Louis XVIII.


**Post-scriptum: Game or Game?**
In an interesting juxtaposition, this etching by Rowlandson (see above one of his other engravings) enables us to slip from meaning II (“An activity played for entertainment, according to rules, and related uses”) of the word “game” in English (OED) to meaning III: “Senses relating to hunting and the chase” (OED). The moralistic tone of the image is unmistakable: while the early-rising hunter contributes to the happiness of his wife and home, the gamester, coming back late from an unsuccessful game of dice, brings enormous debts (£ 10,000) as well as disarray at home, to the great indignation of his wife.


ABSTRACTS

This graphic interlude features a selection of pictures which can illustrate the topic of this issue: “Are you Game?”.  

Cet interlude iconographique comporte une sélection d’images illustrant à leur manière le thème de ce numéro: « Êtes-vous prêt(e) à jouer ? ».  

INDEX

Keywords: games, chess, cards, painting, caricature, satire  
Mots-clés: jeux, échecs, cartes, peinture, caricature, satire
“The fair play of the world”: Games and Machiavellian Politics in Shakespeare’s King John

Louise Fang

King John has often been regarded by critics as one of William Shakespeare’s most Machiavellian history plays (Roe 2002: 94-5; Loder 2016: 93). Although we cannot ascertain whether Shakespeare had read The Prince directly, or whether or not he was in fact “pro-Machiavellian” (Loder 2016: 90), the dramatist would have been familiar with Machiavelli’s views and the discussions they had triggered throughout Europe (see Grady 2002: 20). The Florentine’s book was first published in 1532 and was widely circulated in French and Latin versions, as well as in English manuscript form in England from the 1580s. In King John, the Machiavellian conception of politics is chiefly exemplified and brought to the fore by one character, Philip Falconbridge, nicknamed the Bastard as he acknowledges Richard Coeur de Lion as his father in act I scene 1. Throughout the play, he acts both as an ambitious character willing to serve the king of England at all costs, and as an insightful observer and commentator of the events staged. More generally, the echoes to Machiavelli also stem directly from the historical period represented on stage: as King John tries to secure an all too fragile crown, threatened by rival, and equally justified, claims to the throne, the plot illustrates how a form of legitimacy may be constructed or acquired in a way that would enable a ruler to remain in power, a concern that is also at the core of Machiavelli’s The Prince. In this paper, I would like to explore to what extent references to the games of the time mentioned by all characters of the play carry a view of politics which closely echoes that of Machiavelli’s The Prince. There are many references to games in this particular history play, all of which are used as metaphorical tools to describe political decisions or alliances of the characters depicted: there are two references to chess (2.1.123; 2.1.221-4), two references to bowling (2.1.562-87; 3.4.128), at least one reference to archery (1.1.174) and one reference to card games (5.2.105-7). In addition to these references to specific games, the vocabulary of play keeps cropping up through the use of expressions such as “play fast and loose” (3.1.168), “fair play” (5.1.67; 5.2.118) or
“false play” and “foul play” (1.1.118; 4.2.93), for instance. All of these ludic references appear at pivotal moments in the play and often shed light on the numerous reversals of situations that occur. Firstly, we shall see the reasons why games feature so prominently in this play by closely analysing the metaphor of bowling and its meanings within the play before delving into the opportunistic and pragmatic outlook these ludic metaphors seem to propound. This paves the way for a reflection on the respective roles of human agency and providence which is also strongly linked to a Machiavellian conception of history.

Bowling in *King John*: The Rules of the Political Game

The most conspicuous allusion to a game in the play is most certainly found in the Bastard’s soliloquy at the end of act II scene 1 in which he compares the world to a game of bowls through an extended metaphor. At that point, the king of France, Philip, has just agreed to a marriage between the Dauphin and Blanche of Castile to seal an alliance with his former enemy England, thereby reneging on the earlier promise he made to Lady Constance to fight for her son Arthur’s claim to the English crown and securing the provinces that King John offers as part of Blanche’s dowry:

Bastard: Mad world! mad kings! mad composition!
John, to stop Arthur’s title in the whole,
Hath willingly departed with a part;
And France, whose armour conscience buckled on,
Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
As God’s own soldier, rounded in the ear
With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
That broker, that still breaks the pate of faith,
That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids, —
Who having no external thing to lose
But the word ‘maid,’ cheats the poor maid of that —
That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity;
Commodity, the bias of the world,
The world who of itself is pesèd well,
Made to run even upon even ground,
Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent;
And this same bias, this commodity,
This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word,
Clapped on the outward eye of fickle France,
Hath drawn him from his own determined aid,
From a resolved and honourable war,
To a most base and vile-concluded peace. (2.1.562-87)

By calling “commodity” the “bias of the world” (l. 575) the Bastard is likening self-interestedness to the weight that was inserted into the bowl, through what was called the “outward eye” (l. 585), in order for it to roll in a curve on an “even ground” (l. 577). The image therefore stresses that the whole world is directed by the motions of interest rather than by the noble intentions that had supposedly led France to fight King John and support Arthur’s right to the crown in the first place. There is another reference to
bowling later in the play when cardinal Pandolf explains to the Dauphin of France why
the situation may turn to his advantage:

Pandolf: Your mind is all as youthful as your blood.
Now hear me speak with a prophetic spirit,
For even the breath of what I mean to speak
Shall blow each dust, each straw, each little rub,
Out of the path which shall directly lead
Thy foot to England’s throne. And therefore mark. (3.4.125-30)

4 The metaphor occurs elsewhere in Shakespeare’s history plays — in Richard III for
instance (1.3.70-3) and in Coriolanus as well (3.1.60-4) — to describe and illustrate
historical and political events. Comparing the world to a game at bowls was perhaps
naturally suggested by the spherical form of bowls themselves which also led
Shakespeare to mention “this ball of earth” in the induction of 2 Henry IV (ll. 3-5).
Shakespeare was not alone in making this comparison. It is found in a number of
emblems from the 16th and 17th centuries — “the world’s the Jack” (Quarles 1635: sig.
D*) — as well as in Charles Cotton’s chapter about the game in The Compleat Gamester:
“To give you the Moral of it, it is the emblem of the World, or the world’s ambition”
(Cotton 1674: sig. E*).3

5 Like all metaphors describing politics in terms of games and playing, this image implies
an essentially relativist view of the world and denies any form of absolute truth
according to Jacques Henriot. At the core of these ludic images lies the idea that games
have rules that are autonomous and independent from the real world and from any
superior moral or spiritual outlook:

Le propre du jeu — dans l’idée que l’on s’en fait — est de se donner des règles qui
n’ont pas de valeur en soi: on doit les respecter seulement le temps que dure le jeu.
Elles lui confèrent structure et signification, mais leur juridiction ne s’étend pas au-
delà. Il n’en est pas de même pour les principes de moralité. […] On peut y voir
l’indice d’un détachement — au moins : d’un commencement de détachement à
l’égard de la notion traditionnelle d’obligation, la substitution d’un mode de pensée
à un autre, le refus d’un absolu des valeurs. Le jeu est le règne du relatif.
(Henriot 1989: 66)

6 We might therefore argue that metaphors taken from games are particularly apt to
convey a Machiavellian view of the world since the chief argument of The Prince is
precisely the distinction between the rules that should be applied to the political realm,
and those that dictate an appropriate moral conduct. Machiavelli repeats that a good
Prince has to adopt an immoral conduct at times if he wishes to remain in power and
expresses this idea more fully in chapter 15, entitled “What men and particularly rulers
are praised and blamed for”:

In the same way, [the ruler] mustn’t be concerned about the bad reputation that
comes with those negative qualities that are almost essential if he is to hold on to
to power. If you think about it, there’ll always be something that looks morally right
but would actually lead a ruler to disaster, and something else that looks wrong but
will bring security and success. (Machiavelli 2009: 61)

7 This Machiavellian dimension inherent in ludic metaphors is more palpable and
relevant in the extended bowling metaphor we find in King John. The defining trait of
bowling is that the only movements that take place are firmly anchored to the ground,
something that distinguishes it from other ball games as noted by scientist Francis
Willughby (1635-1672) in his treatise on games: “The ball is either tossed up in the aire:
Football, Stowball, Stoole Ball; or trulled upon the ground, where it allwaies turnes
about its center, as in Boules, Pelmel, Biliards.” (Willughby 2003: 206) This strict adherence to the ground from the very first moment the ball is released from the hand of the player was in fact part of the rules: “The boule should touch the ground as soon as it leaves the hand, for if it bee thrown forward it will not run so true” (206). Although this may appear as a mere detail, it entailed a significant consequence when it came to symbolic uses or readings of the game. Indeed, the absence of a movement upwards meant that it was not possible to establish any direct link to the divine, something which could occur with other pastimes such as tennis, as we can see from an emblem in Henry Peacham’s *Minerva Britannia* (Peacham 1612: sig. R2, see Figure 1), or hawking which the later king Henry VI construes as mirroring a divine order in 2 Henry VI (2.1.5-8).

Figure 1: Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britannia*, 1612

![Emblem showing a tennis ball.](https://archive.org/details/minervabritannao00peac/page/113/mode/2up)

This opposition between terrestrial and celestial realms is taken up by Francis Quarles in his emblem about bowling in which he opposes the bowling ground which has been laid by “Sathan”, and the higher goal of heaven: “I’le cease to game, till fairer Ground be given/Nor wish to winne untill the Marke be Heaven.” (Quarles 1635: sig. D*). Bowling was entirely comprised of movements of deviation, the players’ bodies themselves “wreath, and screw/Such antic shapes as Proteus never knew” (Quarles 1635: sig D, see Figure 2). The game therefore symbolically hinted at the imperfection which characterises the sublunar world. The extended bowling metaphor we find in *King John* therefore emphasises conflicting individual interests and the instability of the world itself which swiftly rolls from one direction to the other in an unpredictable motion.
As such this image differs markedly from that of other games like chess which is used earlier in the same scene in a way that draws our attention to the structural similarities between the English and French camps which are both under the sway of a powerful queen: “Thy bastard shall be king / That thou mayst be a queen and check the world.” (2.1.122-3). Chess was also much more closely linked to aristocratic ludic practices than bowling which was widely spread in England and particularly popular in London. According to Angela Schattner, there were at least 30 places dedicated to the practice of bowling in London in 1617, probably more as these only take into account those who had secured an official permission (Schattner: 203). Francis Willughby also said that bowling was a practice “more generally used than any other in England” (Cram 2003: 207). It was also much more controversial than other games as it often involved high bets and cheating as we can see from a description of bowling greens in Thomas Dekker’s The Belman of London (Dekker 1608: sig. G2v). It had even been officially banned several times by royal statutes in 1533 and 1574. In using a metaphor taken from this very popular game so extensively, and at a key moment in the plot, Shakespeare turns away from the more idealised image of politics often contained in a game like chess whose symbolical value had been expounded in medieval treatises and draws our attention to some of the less honourable actions players could resort to in order to win the game.
“Well won is well shot”: Games and Political Opportunism

Perhaps what is most astonishing the Bastard’s extended use of the bowling metaphor is the conclusion it leads him to. Far from simply calling into question these relative and immoral rules, he embraces them and concludes his soliloquy by claiming: “Since kings break faith upon commodity, / Gain be my lord, for I will worship thee.” (2.1.598-9) Unlike other uses of the ludic motifs, such as the one we may find in satires and caricatures of the 16th and 17th centuries which openly condemned the action of rulers and the vanity of the time (Figure 3), Shakespeare uses the bowling metaphor to account for the fierceless pragmatism displayed by one of the protagonists of his history play without explicitly voicing or representing any form of moral condemnation. In fact, other ludic metaphors in the play also seem to justify and pave the way for opportunistic action in the realm of politics.

Figure 3: Le revers du Jeu des Suisses, 15th century

What is sometimes considered as the first ever printed caricature, Le Revers du Jeu des Suisses (c. 1514-5), represented rulers at a gaming table playing cards.
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb41499415g

Very early on in the play, the Bastard seems to proclaim an opportunistic principle using a metaphor taken from archery when he alludes to his mother’s infidelity with Richard Coeur de Lion, his biological father:

Queen Eleanor: The very spirit of Plantagenet!
I am thy grandam, Richard; call me so.
Bastard: Madam, by chance but not by truth; what though?
Something about, a little from the right,
In at the window, or else o’er the hatch:
Who dares not stir by day must walk by night,
And have is have, however men do catch.
Near or far off, well won is well shot,
And I am I, howe'er I was begot. (1.1.167-175)

“Well won is well shot” (l. 174) is an allusion to archery which has strong sexual undertones in this specific context. It also expresses a ludic principle that the Bastard will apply throughout the play according to which victory must be obtained whatever the cost. This goes against the moral and aesthetic ideal of “fair play” which was gaining momentum in early modern Europe according to Georges Vigarello who analysed how several commentators of the time valued what was deemed right or beautiful in games and sports rather than the actual victory itself (Vigarello: 32-3). Laurent Thirouin also identified the moral imperatives behind the French ideal of the “beau joueur” in the 17th century who, to play in a way considered “fair”, had to show no excessive interest in the gains or losses of the game itself (Thirouin 1999: 201-18). This, of course, is the opposite of cheating, or “foul play”, which discards any aesthetic or moral consideration in order to ensure victory.

In the rest of the play, the Bastard repeatedly asserts the necessity to resort to “foul play” in order to ensure the victory of king of England over his enemies. When King John agrees to peace with cardinal Pandolf although French troops are already in England, the Bastard insists on sending an army despite the agreement that has just been reached:

Bastard: O inglorious league!
Shall we, upon the footing of our land,
Send fair-play orders, and make compromise,
Insinuation, parley, and base truce
To arms invasive? (5.1.65-9)

The “fair-play orders” he alludes to are equated with morally degrading decisions: “inglorious league” (l. 65) and “base truce” (l. 68). It hints at a discrepancy between the line of conduct that is to be wished in theory and what should actually be applied in practice. In that perspective, this cue also brings to mind several common sayings of the time that equated playing and cheating and stated that true “honest” players were seldom to be found at gaming tables: “Hee hardly can/ Be a good Bouler and an Honest man.” (Quarles 1635: sig. D'). John Florio also noted the following saying in his *Firste Fruites* according which only fools do not cheat at games: “Three sortes of men that are to be counted fooles, a faytheful lover of maydens, a mercyful soldier, & a fayre gamester” (Florio 1578: sig. G1³). The phrase “fair play” such as it used by the Bastard moments later, when he asks for an audience with the Dauphin just as he expects to attack him, is therefore particularly ironic: “According to the fair play of the world, / Let me have audience” (5.2.118-9). Just after this scene, the Bastard is bluffing, as it were, by considerably exaggerating the number of soldiers of the English troops in order to frighten his enemies. He is therefore presented to the audience through these ludic metaphors and expressions as a daring player who knows the different possible tricks that might give him an advantage over his opponents.

Naturally, Philip Falconbridge is not the only character to choose an immoral course of action in order to secure victory. The decisions of many other characters in the play are also described in terms of “foul play”, to take up the phrase Salisbury uses when he is convinced that Prince Arthur has just been killed on King John’s orders:
Salisbury: It is apparent foul play, and 'tis shame
That greatness should so grossly offer it.
So thrive it in your game; and so, farewell. (4.2.93)

Even though the death of Arthur is actually the result of an accident we later witness in act IV scene 3, the audience knows that it had indeed been ordered by King John in act III scene 3. However immoral the assassination is — even the Bastard is horrified when he discovers the body of young Arthur, exclaiming: “It is a damned and a bloody work” (4.3.57) — it is also portrayed as the only possible course of action for the King of England by cardinal Pandolf:

Pandolf: [...] John has seized Arthur, and it cannot be
That whiles warm life plays in that infant’s veins
The misplaced John should entertain an hour,
One minute, nay, one quiet breath of rest.
A sceptre snatched with an unruly hand
Must be as boisterously maintained as gained;
[...] That John may stand, then Arthur needs to fall;
So be it, for it cannot be but so. (3.4.131-40)

We may note the insistence with which Pandolf explains that killing Arthur is absolutely necessary and unavoidable for King John at that point: “it cannot be but so” (l.140). Again, this consideration, even though it is voiced by a cardinal, is purely strategical and in no way moralising.

The same kind of “foul play” is perceptible in the French king’s decisions during the play. When King Philip is at first unwilling to listen to cardinal Pandolf, the “meddling priest” (3.1.89), demand the king break his newly contracted peace with England, he asks himself whether such sudden changes of policy do not amount to cheating faith:

King Philip: [...] And shall these hands, so lately purged of blood,
So newly joined in love, so strong in both,
Unyoke this seizure and this kind regret,
Play fast and loose with faith, so jest with heaven,
Make such unconstant children of ourselves,
As now again to snatch our palm from palm,
Unswear faith sworn, and on the marriage-bed
Of smiling peace to march a bloody host,
And make a riot on the gentle brow
Of true sincerity? (3.1.165-174)

Although “to play fast and loose” had already grown into a common phrase highlighting a form of inconstancy, it also referred to a specific “old cheating game” (OED) which was played in taverns; it is also mentioned in that sense in Antony and Cleopatra. Later in the same scene, despite his remorse, Philip finally agrees to do what Pandolf asks and reneges on his peace treaty with England, thereby showing that faith is in no way binding for political actors. Faith, as well as religion, are always instrumentalised in view of more pragmatic and strategic decisions. This is also what the Bastard suggests when he tells the Dauphin that King John has only used cardinal Pandolf, and through him, religion, “rather for sport than need” (5.2.175) and that he was not sincere in the peace he had concluded with him. Of course, this bears echoes to the religious dimension of the play which has often been considered as less Protestant than the other play dealing with the same historical events, The Troublesome Raign of King John (Hamel 1989: 13-4). In light of this, we are led to see King John’s successive rejection and acceptance of Pandolf’s propositions as resulting from strategic considerations rather than spiritual convictions, a suggestion that directly
addressed some of the most debated issues of post-reformation England (Lake 2016: 184). By contrast, the only selfless deed inspired by a moral sentiment of pity in the play — Hubert’s refusal to kill Prince Arthur in act IV scene 1 — is ultimately overturned by the prince’s accidental death in act IV scene 3. Ironically, this selfless act leads Hubert to incur the recriminations and threats of the nobles even more brutally as they come upon the body of Arthur just before Hubert tells them the young prince was spared, allowing them to accuse him directly: “O, he is bold, and blushes not at death! — / Avault, thou hateful villain, get thee gone!” (4.3.76-7)

King John therefore illustrates the necessary “foul play” that occurs in the world of politics in order to reach a greater goal. This opportunism is all the more central as it stems from the Machiavellian idea that human agency plays a vital part in the unfolding of historical events.

“[T]he best cards for the game”: Human Agency and Providence

Game metaphors also lead us to a question the respective roles of skill and chance in the outcome of a game. This was a central issue in early modern debates on games as the distinction between skill and chance was often called upon by moralists to determine which games were acceptable and which were not. For William Perkins (1558-1602), a theologian, games where the “industry of the mind & body hath the chiefest stroke, are very commendable, and not to be disliked”; contrariwise, “games that are of meere-hazard, by the consent of godly Divines, are unlawfull” (Perkins 1606: 590). Chess thus belonged to the former category; dice, and sometimes cards, were more often considered as belonging to the latter. These practices were all the more polemical as the luck that players had during their games was deemed by some, like John Northbrooke (1577: 107-8) or Thomas Wilcox, as “one of the principall testimonies of the power of God, because it is ruled and governed immediately by his hand and providence” (Wilcox 1581: sig. B7v) and was therefore considered as misdirected when it was sought by players in leisurely pursuits or out of covetousness. This issue directly echoed questions concerning political action itself. As many writings promoted a providentialist view of history, including those, like Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles, that served as a source for many of Shakespeare’s history plays, Machiavelli’s The Prince, on the other hand, claimed that there was also room for human agency and opportunistic action. He stresses this point in chapter 25 entitled “The role of luck in human affairs, and how to defend against it”:

I realize that many people have believed and still do believe that the world is run by God and by fortune and that however shrewd men may be they can’t do anything about it and have no way of protecting themselves. [...] All the same, and so as not to give up on our free will, I reckon it may be true that luck decides the half of what we do, but it leaves the other half, more or less to us. (Machiavelli 2009: 98)

Such a conception of history and politics considered at least partly controled by human actions is perceptible in King John, especially in the way Shakespeare uses references to games in the play.

There are at least three occurrences in King John which can denote either a divine intervention or a disruptive form of contingency in political outcomes: the arrival of the cardinal, Pandolf, act III scene 1, has been construed by Kelly Hunter as a possible,
albeit ultimately ironical, answer to Constance’s call for help to the heavens (Hunter 2004: 45-6); the prophecy of Peter of Pomfret at act IV scene 2; or the accidental death of Prince Arthur at act IV scene 3. However, it is unclear whether these events are truly providential and if they are, what meaning directs them given that they often lead to unexpected consequences, backfiring on those that had called upon a divine intervention. Furthermore, they are overshadowed by the depiction of the potency of human actions which is strongly highlighted by ludic metaphors. The extended bowling metaphor in the Bastard’s soliloquy of act II scene 1, for instance, highlights the consequences of human actions which can shape and direct the world as a whole. The analogy drawn between the terrestrial globe and a bowl entails that the changes in the world are entirely directed and triggered by human actors engaged in a political game. Bowling was often considered as a game of skill whose issue was determined by the physical dexterity of the players, rather than exclusively by the intervention of luck or providence. Fortune played a part in the outcome, as is evident from the description we find in Quarles’s emblem (Quarles 1635: sig. Dr-v), but it only partially determined the issue of the game. As such, bowling was part of what William Perkins and other authors of the time who attempted to classify games called “mixed games”:

The allusion to card games at the end of the play also seems to suggest the strong interlocking relationship between fortune and human agency. In answer to cardinal Pandolf’s demand that he immediately cease his invasion of England, the Dauphin Louis answers that, having the upper hand, he would be a fool to stop his attack at that moment:

Louis the Dauphin: [...] Have I not heard these islanders shout out ‘Vive le Roi!’ as I have banked their towns? Have I not here the best cards for the game, To win this easy match played for a crown? And shall I now give o’er the yielded set? No, no, on my soul, it never shall be said. (5.2.103-8)

The allusion to cards here, and to the money that was commonly played during these games through the double meaning of the word “crown” (l.106), portrays the king as a shrewd player who, like Machiavelli’s prince, knows how to seize the opportunity of attacking a new enemy to increase and shore up his own power (Machiavelli 2009: 84). It was not uncommon to portray rulers as playing a card game and Shakespeare has done so in other plays (e.g. Antony and Cleopatra, 4.15.15-20). Cards were deemed to be the perfect example of a “mixed game” (Perkins 1606: 591). The metaphor as it appears in act V scene 2 of King John then fully exemplifies Machiavelli’s distribution of luck and human agency.

And yet, the Dauphin’s ambitions are quickly upset as we learn in the following scene that the reinforcements of the French army have been shipwrecked. Although this could clearly be construed as a divine intervention — an earlier version of the “Protestant Wind” that defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588 — another possible reading of this event could be that the Dauphin is not an unfortunate player thwarted by providence, but a mere card in the game played by the Pope, cardinal Pandolf, and the other rulers who are vying for power. This reading is suggested by the exclamation Louis claims to have heard on his arrival in England — “Vive le Roi!”- which was also a
phrase that could be found on actual playing cards of the time (Figure 4). Although there is no way of knowing exactly how widespread such objects were, had it been in the minds of Shakespeare’s contemporaries it would have certainly induced a comparison between the Dauphin and the actual playing card, hereby suggesting that the Dauphin himself is in fact nothing more than an object in the hands of more cunning players.

Figure 4: Early 16th century playing card by F. Durand

The inscription on the bottom left reads ‘vive le Roy’.


Both the references to bowls and cards therefore suggest that human intentions are behind the unstable motions of the world. They show the importance of human actions on the course of history and how these actions may be, in turn, influenced by chance or providence. Such is not the case in all of Shakespeare’s history plays. At the end of Richard III, for instance, the reference to dice underlines the protagonist’s loss of power over the events that are unfolding. Referencing dice, one of the only games to rely exclusively on chance, is therefore highly significant here, as it clearly portrays the outcome of the Battle of Bosworth as being providential. As Richard III exclaims “I will stand the hazard of the die” (5.7.10), it is clear to the audience that Richard has already lost the game. By contrast, references to games in King John tend to play down any exclusively providential reading of the historical period represented on stage. This may also account for the Bastard’s patriotic last cue at the end of the play. Although the idealism that pervades it may well be read ironically (Champion 1989: 151-2), it may equally be construed as a call to action and, more specifically, as a reminder of the importance of individual actions and interests in the political realm, especially when it comes to uniting the kingdom. This, as we know, is a rather pessimistic conclusion as it casts the shadow of the civil wars to come and of the disastrous consequences of never-ending contentions between aristocratic factions. As such, the ending of King John may also be reminiscent of the concluding remarks of chapter 25 of Machiavelli’s Prince.

The numerous references to games such as chess, bowls, archery, and cards, in King John shed light on a deeply Machiavellian view of politics and history which pervades
the play. These references and their symbolism serve to highlight the autonomy of the political realm from morality and religion. Metaphors taken from games also account for characters who embrace this relative perspective and resort to “foul play” to maintain power despite the immorality or lack of consistency such choices may imply. Ludic metaphors also question the respective roles of human agency and providence in the play in a way which seems to emphasise the former over the latter, thereby taking Machiavelli’s view that human actions are necessary and highly influential in the “fair play of the world” (5.2.118) whatever the ways of providence may be in the end. This question also pervades Shakespeare’s later history plays, in which references to games of dice or cards constitute a similarly significant metaphorical subtext ultimately questioning whether rulers are cunning players in a subtle game of alliances and strategy... or merely pawns in the hands of higher inscrutable powers.

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NOTES

1. All references to this play and other plays by Shakespeare are taken from the second edition of The Complete Works edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor for Oxford University Press.
2. The language of archery, like that of chess and bowls, had given rise to many common phrases in everyday language, it is therefore possible to read other references to these practices in the play in addition to the most obvious ones which are mentioned here.
3. The image of bowling as a game illustrating the conflicting interests of individual parties was in fact also taken up in the 17th century by William Strode in a poem entitled “A Parallel betwixt bowling and preferment”.
4. One of the earliest printed books in England was William Caxton’s The Game and Playe of Chess in 1474, and again in 1483. It was an English translation of a treatise by Jacobus de Cessolis which described each pawn of the game and conveyed an idealised view of medieval society.
5. “Antony: This grave charm [...] / Like a right gipsy hath at fast and loose / Beguiled me to the very heart of loss.” (4.13.25-29)

ABSTRACTS

This paper aims at analysing the different metaphors and references drawn from games in Shakespeare’s King John. Far from being neutral, I argue that these images are underpinned by a deeply Machiavellian view of the world and politics. This is particularly perceptible in the extended bowling metaphor used by one of the play’s protagonists, Philip Falconbridge, nicknamed the Bastard, in a soliloquy which leads him to adopt a pragmatic and opportunistic
course of action which he will apply throughout the play. This also leads him, and the other characters as well, to resort to acts that are characterised as “foul play” in order to secure victory. Ultimately, ludic references throughout the play give rise to a reflection on the respective roles of chance, or providence, and human agency in shaping history. Although some games, like dice, were often used to suggest a providentialist view of history, the ones we find in King John are “mixed games” in which luck and human agency constantly interact. In that perspective as well, the play seems to echo a Machiavellian outlook on history as expressed in the last chapters of The Prince.

Cet article vise à analyser les différentes métaphores et références tirées des jeux dans King John de Shakespeare. Loin d’être neutres, ces images ludiques sont sous-tendues par une vision profondément machiavélienne du monde et de la politique. Cela est particulièrement perceptible dans la métaphore filée du jeu de boules telle qu’elle est employée par l’un des protagonistes de la pièce, Philip Falconbridge, surnommé le Bâtard, au cours d’un soliloque qu’il conclut en adoptant une ligne de conduite pragmatique et opportuniste qui le guidera tout au long de la pièce. Cela l’amène également, ainsi que les autres personnages de la pièce, à recourir à des actes qualifiés de « foul play » afin de s’assurer la victoire. En fin de compte, les références ludiques tout au long de la pièce donnent lieu à une réflexion sur les rôles respectifs du hasard, ou de la providence, et de l’action humaine dans le déroulement de l’histoire. Bien que certains jeux, comme les dés, aient souvent été utilisés pour suggérer une vision providentialiste de l’histoire, ceux que nous trouvons dans King John sont des « jeux mixtes » dans lesquels la chance et l’action humaine interagissent constamment. Dans cette perspective également, le jeu semble faire écho à une vision machiavélienne de l’histoire que l’on trouve dans les derniers chapitres du Prince.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Shakespeare William, théâtre historique, jeux, théâtre élisabéthain, jeu de boules, Roi Jean (le), Machiavel

Keywords: Shakespeare William, history plays, games, early modern theatre, bowling, King John, Machiavelli

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‘Ev’ry Gamester winneth by the sport’: George Wither’s Emblem Lottery (1635)

Pierre Le Duff

“I confesse that this Devise may probably be censured, as unsutable to the gravitie expected in my ripe yeares: and be reputed as great an Indecorum, as erecting an Ale-house at the Church-stile” (Wither A1v)

1 The “Devise” mentioned in this rather striking simile is the lottery game that George Wither invented for his Collection of Emblemes (1635). Emblem books, which were a popular literary genre throughout Renaissance Europe, are collections of intermedial compositions usually encompassing an allegorical engraving and varying amounts of text that convey meaning through the combined reading of both semiotic codes. Emblems were usually intended as didactic material, as they often invite the beholder to ponder moral or religious advice exemplified in the engraving and expounded in the accompanying verse, but, as Manning and others have shown, as the 17th century unfolded, they were increasingly used to serve distinctly political aims as well, most notably during the English Civil War (Potter 1989: 48 qtd. in Browning 2002: 70), and were also progressively understood as playful devices (see Manning 2002: 220-74).

2 This is particularly clear in the case of Wither’s Collection: each one of his two hundred emblems, which are divided into four books of fifty, is accompanied by a short stanza, or “lottery”, to be found in a section appended to the volume. The last page of the work shows an engraving of two square-shaped dials (Figure 1), each of which was intended to be equipped with a wooden pointer in the middle. The player would spin the first pointer to be directed towards an emblem — or one of six blank lots —, and then the second, which would indicate the volume in which the emblem was to be sought. Although Wither did not feel the need to specify in what order the lottery verse and the emblem were to be read, the phrasing of the former often implies that the reader ought to start there. It is possible to play the game on one’s own of course, but Wither
suggests that it “may as well become / The Hall, the Parlor, or the Dining-room” (A3r), and bases most of his statements about his lottery on the assumption that his readers will play the game collectively, each person in attendance spinning the pointers and then reading their lottery verse and the corresponding emblem aloud for all to hear (Wither [1635] 1975: A3r).

Figure: Wither’s lottery dials. A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne... Printed by A[ugustine] M[athewes] for Robert Milbourne, and are to be sold at the Grayhound in Pauls Church-yard, MDCXXXV), last folio (v)

In the title of the volume, the lottery is mentioned and even advertised as an addition to the volume “[t]hat Instruction, and Good Counsell, may bee furthered by an Honest and Pleasant Recreation” (Title page), and in the first section of the epistle “To the Reader”, it is described as a game devised “to allure men to the more serious observation of the profitable Morals, couched in these Emblems” (A1r). As such, it would appear to be in line with the Horatian precept of “utile dulci” (Horace I. 343), which was frequently used during the early modern period to defend and justify the writing of poetry (Matz 2004: 1-3), and to constitute one more instance in a long tradition of books containing interactive and playful devices (Karr Schmidt 2018). The Veridicus Christianus (1601), an emblem book by the Dutch Jesuit Jan David, even sets a precedent within the same genre, as it contains a very similar contraption — David calls it “Orbita probitatis” (David 351 ff.), which loosely translates to “wheel of probity” — that directs the reader toward a specific emblem by means of a volvelle. As Wither points out himself in the section titled “The Occasion, Intention, and use of the foure lotteries adjoyned to these foure books of emblems”, the game also serves a far more pragmatic purpose, that of ensuring the commercial success of a volume that would otherwise be among “over-solid and serious treaties [that] would undone the Book-
sellers” for lack of enthusiasm from a readership that “is so in love with Follie” (A1v). It is to “please the vulgar Capacities” that Wither begrudgingly — or so he claims — condescended to append the lottery game to his emblems.

Given his honourable didactic purpose, his reliance on a well-established tradition, and the sound mercantile strategy he lays out, it may seem surprising that Wither anticipates censure for his lottery. And yet, he pre-emptively names, or suggests, several reasons why some of his readers may take exception to it. Aside from being deemed possibly “unsuitable to the gravitie expected in [his] ripe yeares” (A1v) — Wither was in his late forties when the work was published — and “indecorous” — as was mentioned above, the game could also be mistaken for an actual divinatory device, or so the poet supposes: “For, my meaning is not, that any should use it as an Oracle, which could signifie infallibly, what is divinely alloted” (A2v), a notion he immediately, and strongly, repudiates: “And, that I may no way encourage the secret entertaining of such a Fantasie, I doe before hand affirme unto them, that none but Children, or Ideots may be tollerated to be so foolish, without laughing at” (A2v). Wither’s main concern however, deeply rooted in his own experience with the reception of previous works, is that some of his readers may take his lottery verses and the corresponding emblems to be veiled personal attacks:

Some will thinke perhaps, that I have purposely invented this Game, that I might finde means to reprove mens vices, without being suspected, (as I have hitherto unjustly beene) to ayme at particular persons (A3r).

And yet, Wither’s other comments on the game, as well as the lottery verses themselves, are, at times, so strikingly dissonant with these careful pre-emptive caveats that, on the whole, his stance concerning his playful device can only be described as ambivalent (Bath 1994: 126). Although the two paratextual sections that discuss the lottery strongly emphasise the playful, innocent, and even incidental nature of the game, its importance in the general economy of the work becomes apparent upon closer examination. As I shall try to show, the lottery constitutes an ingenious and interactive way to reflect on serious religious and philosophical questions, such as the dichotomy between free will and predestination, or the trustworthiness of predictions through the process of bibliomancy, both of which were the matter of lively discussion, and sometimes fierce hostility, in early Stuart England. Furthermore, the element of play that is inherent to the lottery, especially if, in accordance with Wither’s instructions, it is used as a parlour game, is employed by Wither to momentarily, and playfully, arrogate control over the fate of prospective players of all ranks and classes, so as to shift social hierarchies and power structures in his favour.

The Lottery Game and the Porous Border between Prophecy and Agency

As was noted by several scholars (e.g. Bath 1994: 126; Ripollés 2008: 118-9), the lottery game is (meta-)emblematically represented in the centre of the frontispiece to A Collection of Emblemes (Figure 2), a fact that jars with the claim that the device is merely a late, and dispensable, addition to the book. The frontispiece is an intricate engraving by a famous English artist, William Marshall, which Carmen Ripollés describes as follows:
The image depicts a group of pilgrims which, emerging from a grotto located at the lower part of the composition, pass by the presence of the two allegorical figures, Virtue and Fortune. Perhaps encouraged by the presence of the Church and the seven virtues, some pilgrims decide to follow the path of Virtue, difficult and rocky in the beginning, yet gradually becoming more open and bearable as it leads to an ideal city. Other pilgrims, seduced by the sight of the temple of Venus and the seven vices, follow the path of Fortune, enjoying a pleasurable walk that progressively becomes difficult and deadly, concluding with death in hell. (Ripollés 2008: 119)

Crucially, when the pilgrims reach the two allegories mentioned above, they are required to draw lots from a large ewer. The frontispiece can be read as a mise-en-abyme, where the path walked by the pilgrims from the grotto towards the twin peaks at the back would echo the figurative journey from ignorance to moral edification undertaken by the reader, on which the lottery game — represented by the ewer in the picture — would constitute a significant milestone (Le Duff 2020: 6-7). Despite Wither’s remarks in his “Preposition to this Frontispiece” and in his aforementioned paratextual notes, it seems that the lottery is in fact as central to the book as the ewer, its emblematic pendant, is to the frontispiece.

Figure: The frontispiece. A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne... Printed by [Augustine] [Mathewes] for Robert Milbourne, and are to be sold at the Grayhound in Pauls Church-yard, MDCXXXV), first folio (v)


A Collection of Emblemes, though it is first and foremost an emblem book, can therefore be examined in light of a long-established, if minor, literary genre that one might term “bibliomancy books”, that is, literary works that are designed as divinatory tools, in which the reader would be directed towards a passage either by simply opening the book at random or by using a device such as a volvelle or a pointer, and would then endeavour to interpret the passage thus selected as an oracle. This process was used,
among others, by the Greeks and the Romans (especially, in the latter case, the sortes 
Vergilianae, where oracles were derived from the texts of Virgil), and gained 
considerable popularity in Europe during the early modern period. Although early 
instances of this practice used literary works that were not specifically composed with 
it in mind — bibliomancy was often practiced using religious texts or poetry —, the 15th 
and 16th centuries saw a consistent output of so-called “lottery books” (or Losbücher) 
that were written and advertised as such (Kelly 2011: 42-71).

As defined by the literary historian Johannes Bolte, a lottery book is “a collection of 
prose or metrical oracles, one of which may be obtained by the curious inquirer in a 
manner that is not dependent on his own calculations, but rather on the mysterious 
exercise of an instrument subjected to and set in motion by chance.” [Bolte 1903] 
Serving as a mediator between the questioner and the array of possible oracles 
within the book’s pages, this instrument can take a number of different shapes. 
Most often, it is a device that has strong connections to themes of fortune and 
games of chance, connections which both augment and insist on the aleatory 
element of the process. Given the genre’s strong tendency to eschew specialized 
knowledge and calculations, anyone could make use of the lottery book for their 
own divinatory ends. The volume is presented as the locus of interpretation. If the 
inquirer casts the lot, the book transforms the action of sortilege (as the casting of 
lots is often called) into a meaningful statement for the reader’s reception. (Kelly 
2011: 44)

Kelly adds that, after the casting of dice, the use of a lottery wheel was the most 
popular way of drawing lots in lottery books (45). It is noteworthy that, if one replaces 
the term “oracles” in Bolte’s definition with the term “emblems”, it would fit perfectly 
with Wither’s work. The resemblance becomes even more striking when one reads that 
“[t]he sixteenth-century lottery book was not just a textual affair, it was also heavily 
illuminated. For Rabelais, the lottery book is distinguished not only as a printed object, 
but as a particularly visual one.” (43) Kelly’s reference to Rabelais’ satirical inclusion of 
bibliomancy in his Pantagruel (1546)9 points to another fact when dealing with books of 
this kind: the degree to which their authors took their divinatory powers seriously 
varied greatly, from earnest prophetic intent to deliberate ambiguity and playfulness 
(56-7, 67-71).

Wither’s stance towards the divinatory power of his lottery certainly bears witness to 
both. His stern and adamant castigation of anyone who would be so foolish as to believe 
that the game actually possessed divinatory powers stands in clear contrast with 
numerous lottery verses that suggest, and in some cases even assert outright, that lots 
are in fact assigned not by random chance, but mysteriously find those among the 
players for whom the corresponding emblems are most fitting. Lottery stanza I-12, for 
instance, addresses the player as follows:

[...]

In several cases, the verse suggests that the player’s drawing of a particular lot betrays 
their secret vice or shortcoming. Lottery II-7 warns the reader in the following terms:

[...]

Angles, 11 | 2020
Similarly, lottery III-27 admonishes the reader as follows: “There may be some concealed Cause, / That, none but you, this Emblem drawes”; and lottery IV-34, which directs towards an emblem that advises moderation in all things, rhetorically asks “If, truely temperate, thou be, / Why should this Lot, be drawne by thee?” Some are even explicitly prophetic, as is the case of lottery stanza I-16, which tells the reader that the corresponding emblem “prognosticates” that they will thrive in spite of being afflicted; lottery I-28 explicitly states that the emblem “prophesies”; and lottery II-19 reassures the reader that “as [their] Emblem doth foreshew, / A good conclusion will insue” if they remain constant in their hopes.

Crucially however, even among the lottery verses, the poet’s stance on the divinatory power of his game remains highly ambiguous. As noted earlier, the epistle “To the Reader” expresses scorn and disdain in no uncertain terms for believers in divination, and the same is true for several lottery stanzas. Lottery I-41, for instance, reads “Whether, meerely, Chance, or no, / Brought this Lot, we doe not know”; lottery II-7 urges the reader to “rue” the advice contained in the emblem, even though “in jest, this Counsell came”. Some stanzas even echo Wither’s derogatory remarks about those who would trust the oracular powers of the game contained in the paratext. Perhaps the most straightforward instance of this is lottery II-51 which mockingly chastises the player as follows:

Of Planetary-Calculations,
Of Superstitious-Observations,
Of Lots, and Dreames, and Accidents,
Which have but casuall events,
Thou art so fond; and, unto such,
Thou dost adhere, and trust so much,
That, it succeeddeth very well,
No Emblem, now, to thee befell:
Lest, these, which onely Counsells bee,
Might seeme firme Destinies to thee.

Despite its rejection of several types of “Superstitious-Observations”, among which it notably names “Lots”, Wither’s persona nonetheless implies that the player was mysteriously guided towards this particular stanza because of his or her innermost beliefs about the supernatural powers of devices such as lotteries, suggesting that this “Accident” may in fact not be so “casuall” at all. This apparently irreconcilable inconsistency places the stanza squarely within the realm of play, where, as Johan Huizinga puts it, “it is [...] a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (1980: 8). In this “temporary sphere”, it does not matter whether the player who draws this lot actually has blind faith in divination and astrology: the verses instead fashion a role for the willing player to take on, and, in the case of a collective use of the lottery, for the other players to acknowledge as part of the game, a role that will serve its recreational purpose best, if, as Wither puts it, the recipient of the lot may be “laughed at without [...] blame” (A3r). Although the laws of probability will, at times ensure that players who “are notoriously Guiltie [...] [will be] so fitted with Lots [...] that [their] vices be therby intimated to the by-standers, of which the world knowes them guilty” (A3r), this is not necessary for the game to work. Just as Wither addresses the players through an elaborate poetic persona (Tung 2010), the players themselves are invited to participate in what the poet calls a “Puppet-play in Pictures” (A1v) in which the roles are assigned by chance, but where the maximisation of one’s enjoyment relies on a willing suspension of disbelief in a
supernatural mechanism that would deliberately deliver the most appropriate lot to each person.

At the same time, the lottery game arguably maintains a residual, supernatural eeriness at a time when divination was still a widespread, if fading and increasingly contested, activity in England and early modern Europe (Capp 1979). Bath even points out that Wither himself was “himself regarded as something of a Magus, whose books were regarded as having mysteriously foretold future events” during and after the commonwealth period (Bath 1994: 125). To an audience that was likely to include firm believers in divination, the combination of relatively broad and transferable advice contained in the emblems with the extremely personal and apostrophising lottery verses may well have created the impression that fitting lots were mysteriously assigned to those best suited to receive them after all. The ambiguity Wither cultivated throughout the work may therefore bear witness to his own ambivalence on the issue, or it may constitute an effort at making the book popular with both proponents and critics of divination alike, or perhaps both. It seems, however, that the mechanism of the lottery game, if examined in the light of the work as a whole, is meant to steer the player/reader towards a specific conclusion about the relationship between divination and one of its problematic corollaries: the idea of personal and moral responsibility.

Although the mechanism of chance has a role to play in the lottery game, it is framed by instances of player agency: the spinning of the pointer on the one hand, and the reading of the lottery verse and of the emblem on the other, both constituting voluntary actions undertaken freely. As Wither himself emphasises, “every man hath his choice, whether hee will make use of those Lotteries or no” (A3r). Contrary to the axiomatic belief in the determinacy of fate that underlies the practice of divination, the game presupposes an active player who may well be assigned a disappointing or humiliating lot, but who makes a deliberate choice to take that risk beforehand. Furthermore, once the lot is drawn, the player, in Wither’s words, “must beare their Fortunes, be they Good, or Ill” (“A Direction, shewing how they who are so disposed, shall find out their Chance, in the Lotteries aforegoing”). The advice to endure one’s misfortune patiently, and the idea that one ought to take responsibility for one’s choices, even though chance may play a role in one’s circumstances, is mirrored in a large number of emblems throughout the Collection. Even more prominently perhaps, the emblems and the lottery verses often suggest that good fortune is not, in fact, a contingent stroke of luck, but the just reward for those who lead a virtuous life, and that virtue, patience, and wisdom have the power to overthrow whatever adverse fortune may befall them (e.g. emblems I-6; II-47; or IV-10). Instead of envisioning a predetermined world in which bearing one’s lot requires merely a passive stance towards one’s inevitable and foreseeable destiny, Wither’s emblems are decidedly coloured by Stoic precepts, and advocate undertaking active and voluntary efforts to be wise, prudent, and patient, a virtuous path on which readers may take their first steps by spinning the lottery pointer and heeding the advice that is thus bestowed upon them. As Warhaft puts it in an article exploring the connection between Stoicism, ethics, and learning in 17th century England:

[…] virtue was not to be confused with mere abstention from evil, or with passive, ignorant inaction before the temptations and trials of the world. It was rather an enlightened and dynamic force, which, based on knowledge, actively directed the reason and the will to choose the good (83).
The lottery game therefore invites interaction with the volume both on a physical and on an intellectual level, thus endowing the player with the capacity of choice and with the responsibility of bearing the consequences where the outcome is not predetermined. More than a mere pastime, the lottery is a ludic and interactive simulation of life’s trials, one that does not entirely repudiate divinatory practices but nonetheless encourages the reader to become, as Bacon puts it, “the architect of his own fortune” (Bacon 1908: 184).

Once it has outlined the basic pattern to be followed for the players, the section titled “Direction shewing how they who are so disposed, shall find out their Chance, in the Lotteries aforegoing” (last folio V) introduces special rules of the game that apply exclusively to the royal family and to the upper classes. Although these appear to be consistent with Wither’s flattering, at times even ingratiating, dedications in A Collection of Emblemes, closer scrutiny of the lottery game may reveal a far more politically subversive side to the game.

**“Personages of High Degree”: Playing with Power?**

Throughout his literary career, Wither was no stranger to political and social outrage, or, for that matter, to the ensuing consequences. As mentioned earlier, when A Collection of Emblemes was published in 1635, Wither had already been imprisoned at least twice in 1614 and 1621 following the publication of his Abuses Stript and Whipt (1611) and of Wither’s Motto (1621) respectively, which seemingly personally offended high-ranking members of the Jacobean court, even though neither text mentioned anyone by name, and despite Wither’s adamant protestations that he intended merely to castigate abstract vices, rather than any specific person who may exhibit them (French 1930: 960-1). Given the increasingly tense social context during Charles I’s “personal rule” in the late 1620s and throughout the 1630s, it is understandable that Wither was treading lightly. It could hardly have escaped his attention, for instance, that, only two years prior to the publication of his emblem book, his immediate contemporary William Prynne was sentenced to have his ears cut off and fined five thousand pounds for an allegedly seditious work titled Histriomastix (c. 1633), which, his accusers claimed, criticised and satirised Charles I’s Catholic Queen consort Henrietta Maria (Oxford DNB: “Prynne, William”). It is therefore not surprising that, despite his gleeful anticipation of the humiliation visited upon a player who would have been assigned a particularly fitting lot, Wither would provide a loophole for the more powerful among his potential readers. Any chance of suffering such embarrassment is effectively cancelled when the player is of royal blood or a person of “High degree”, who “will professe our Authors [friend] to be”:

If King, Queene, Prince, or any one that springs
From Persons, knowne to be deriv’d from Kings,
Shall seeke, for Sport sake, hence to draw their Lot;
Our Author says; that, hee provided not
For such as those: Because, it were too much
For him, to find out Fortunes, fit for such,
Who, (as hee thinkes) should rather, Ayde, supply
For him, to mend his evill Fortunes by.
To them, hee, therefore pleased is to give
This noble and this large Prerogative;
That, they shall choose from hence, what lots they please,
And make them better, if they like not these.
All other personages, of high degree,
That, will profess our authors friends to be,
This freedom, likewise have; that, till they find
A lot, which is agreeing to their mind,
They shall have liberty, anew, to try
Their sought-for chance; [...](last folio V)

But is this “noble and [...] large prerogative” granted to the powerful as socially and politically conservative as it seems? Such unmitigated submission would be surprising coming from Wither, whom David Norbrook has termed a “levelling poet” (1991) and who joined the parliamentary side during the Civil War, even under threat of renewed incarceration. In fact, Wither did not shy away from directly attacking Sir Richard Onslow, an influential MP, in his Justitiarius Justificatus (1646), nor did he refrain from violently criticising the cavalier parliament in Vox Vulgi (1661), and was jailed for several months each time (French 1930: 962-4). Although his subversive intent may be more subtle in the lottery game, its presence is still arguably corroborated by textual and structural evidence.

First, even merely visually, the “direction, shewing how they who are so disposed, shall find out their chance, in the lotteries foregoing” is divided into two very distinct sections. The basic instructions as to the operation of the lottery are written in prose and cover the first half of the page, whereas the rules applying only to royalty and the nobility appear as two stanzas in verse below them (Figure 3). Although Wither lends his voice to a persona in other prose texts in his Collection of Emblemes (Tung 2010), the pragmatic and straightforward tone of the former, as well as the merely instructive content, suggest that the antecedent of the first-person pronoun at the antepenultimate line of the prose section can safely be assumed to be the author himself. It is all the more striking that the poem then immediately abandons the first-person address and refers to Wither in the third person, as “our author”, throughout. The same is notable in the opening verse of the collection, titled “a preposition to this frontispiece”, which, as was mentioned before, several scholars have analysed as an elaborate poetic riddle whose trustworthiness is questionable at best. This shift strongly suggests that Wither switches voices in between the two sections, and that it is his often ambivalent and tongue-in-cheek persona, and not the poet in person, that addresses the reader in the poem, the contents of which ought, therefore, to be viewed with relative suspicion.
Second, although the “noble and [...] large Prerogative” that is enjoyed by the noblest among potential players sets them apart from the rest of Wither’s readership, it is nonetheless a concession that Wither’s persona charitably, if generously, grants them, and not a privilege that would naturally fall to them. Although it appears to mimic the social hierarchy that exists in the real world, it is also worth remembering that this special set of rules is embedded, again, in the “temporary sphere of activity” (Huizinga 1980: 8) that constitutes play — in this case, the lottery game —, which is itself part of the microcosm of *A Collection of Emblemes*. Within this fashioned space, it is Wither’s persona who is the sole and final arbiter of Fortune’s grasp on the players: the common reader must “beare their Fortunes, be they Good, or Ill”, while players of royal or noble blood may “chuse from hence, what Lots they please, / And make them better, if they like not these”, but only insofar as “our Author” is “pleased to give them” this prerogative, which is “noble and [...] large” by the persona’s own decree. Furthermore, the poem immediately emphasises that this privilege is not intrinsic to one’s social status, but rather predicated upon the player’s relationship to “our Author”. The first stanza claims that the latter included the special rules

Because it were too much
For him, to find out Fortunes, fit for such,
Who, (as he thinkes) should, rather, Ayde supply
For him, to mend his evill Fortunes by.

These lines echo Wither’s dedication of Book I of his *Collection* to the King and Queen, throughout which he praises both as “double-treble-four-fold emblems”, which “more Vertues might convey, / Than many Volumes, of these Emblems, may”, and may be
read as the humble concession of a man submitting to the moral authority of his betters, who would help him tread on the path of virtue and thus “mend his evill Fortunes”.

Another leitmotiv in Wither’s dedications to members of the court and gentry is a more pragmatic concern: that of his financial situation. Although still veiled in euphemisms such as “[I] please to favour me, / When I growe old, and, You a Man shall be” in his epistle to the young princes Charles and James, Wither’s need for pecuniary aid is expressed outright in his poem to Philip of Pembroke in the dedication of book IV, where he deplores “that my estate grew lesse, / (By more than twice five hundred Marks decrease)”. A Collection of Emblemes even includes a peculiar section unequivocally titled “A Supersedeas to all them, whose custome it is, without any deserving, to importune Authors to give unto them their Bookes”, in which Wither stresses the expense involved in publishing the work, as well as his precarious circumstances. When the persona therefore states that players belonging to the royal house “should, rather, Ayde supply, / For him [Wither], to mend his evill Fortunes by”, the polysysem of the term “Fortunes” is one more vector of playful ambivalence, suggesting that the poet is expecting more than merely moral assistance from the monarch and his family, but also, crucially, that the concession of the “noble and [...] large Prerogative” with respect to the lottery game is, in fact, predicated on both moral and pecuniary assistance being forthcoming. This *quid pro quo* logic is made even clearer in the second stanza of the poem, where “Personages of High degree” are indeed exempted from the consequences of lots that are unsatisfactory to them, but notably only if they “professe, our Authors friends to be”, the latter noun here being another euphemism for “patron”. It appears, then, that the privilege in question is granted not on the basis of social status, but rather on that of financial liberality towards the author. It is worth bearing in mind at this stage that the “noble and [...] large Prerogative” merely entails the possibility to exchange whatever lot one obtains if one is dissatisfied with it — or, if the lottery is used as a parlour game in accordance with Wither’s intentions, if one anticipates mockery or humiliation for having drawn a particularly fittingly withering emblem. Within the self-contained, ludic space of the game, where it is “our Author” who “find[s] out Fortunes” for his players, the stern power structure of Caroline England is momentarily shifted in favour of the destitute poet. If Stephen Greenblatt is correct in asserting that the “quintessential sign” of power “is the ability to impose one’s fictions upon the world” (1980: 33), then, within the limited scope of his game, Wither playfully manages to arrogate a symbolic and trivial, but arguably still somewhat subversive, portion of the same. This subversive process is made possible, one might argue, by the tacit constraints that the very nature of a game places upon participants. As Huizinga puts it,

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport.” The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion — a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (Huizinga 1980: 11)
Crucially, the “noble and […] large Prerogative” presupposes participation in the game: even players of royal or noble blood must actually spin the pointer and engage with the lottery to be able to assess their given lot, and to either keep it or exchange it. If they refuse to participate in the game, they are akin to Huizinga’s “spoil-sports”, and although they may not be “cast out” in any physical sense, they will be de facto excluded from the game, which is henceforth going to be played in their absence. If they consent to play, however, they must consent to its “illusion” and submit to Wither’s rules. Furthermore, the “Prerogative” itself, “noble and […] large” though it may seem, is very much a double-edged sword. To make use of it upon drawing a lot that is unsatisfactory — which, in the context of the lottery used as a parlour game, should be understood as one that would elicit mockery or humiliation, be it outright or merely within the minds of the other participants — implies rejection of said lot, which entails, of course, a tacit recognition that it does, in fact, “strike a chord”, thereby vindicating Wither’s subversive and tongue-in-cheek intent either way.

This subversive use of play has an advantage over acts of merely textual insubordination: as was noted earlier, participation in the lottery game presupposes an active and responsible choice to do so, which is clearly epitomised by the required interaction with the pointer on the last page of the volume. Even this simple mechanical aspect is made subservient to Wither’s rhetoric of player responsibility: as the poet puts it in his “Occasion, Intention, and use of the Foure Lotteries…”, people who are “worthily suspected of Haynous crimes and Scandalous conversations” are duly warned “either to forbeare these Lotteries; or to excuse [the author] if they be justly shamed by their own Act”. Anyone who engages in the game is therefore responsible for whatever ensues, and Wither can disclaim any ill intention on his part: players who are humiliated and mocked as part of the game “therin make their owne Libels”, and “may be laughed at without my [Wither’s] blame”. This measure of self-preservation implemented by a man who has previously experienced particularly severe conditions of imprisonment (French 1930: 961) is remarkable in that it testifies to Wither’s profound understanding of, and deep confidence in, the “absolute and peculiar order” that naturally emerges from participation in a game, and which will be upheld by willing players, as “the least deviation from it ‘spoils the game’, robs it of its character and makes it worthless” (Huizinga 1980: 10).

Although most of the emblems simply convey general moral advice, some of them may nonetheless have justified such pre-emptive safeguards on Wither’s part. Emblem I-32, for instance, asserts that a virtuous King is “ready, […] to advance, / The Lib’rall Arts, and from his Lands to drive, / All false Religion, Schisme, and Ignorance” — perhaps a thinly veiled critique of the decline of literary and artistic patronage under the Caroline monarchy (Parry 2008: 136), and of the King’s policies intended to “to ensure the dominance of Laudian Arminianism in English religious life” (Reeve 1989: 62), which, along with his marriage to the fervently Catholic French princess Henrietta Maria, deeply angered the English Calvinist factions and fostered the widespread belief in a “popishly inspired plot to undermine the English constitution” (Hughes 91). Wither himself is certainly no Calvinist, as is made clear in emblem II-33 (Figure 4): although the motto, “What ever God did fore-decree, / Shall, without faile, fulfilled be” (Wither 1635: 83), appears to be a direct endorsement of the Calvinist doctrine of double-predestination, the subscriptio strongly mitigates this initial statement. Indeed, the text acknowledges that God’s decrees are immutable, but adds that
Divine Providence has, indeed, established an unchangeable decree to govern creation, but, somewhat ironically, a “branch” of that decree provides that one may still earn the Lord’s “compassion”, and thus effectively change and improve one’s fate. In other words, what is immutable about it is... that it is not. Neither does Wither endorse, or claim allegiance to, the doctrine of Arminianism, as he points out in a much later work, his Parallellogrammaton (1662), where he states the following about the doctrine of Universal Redemption:

I know many in these times (some of them in other respects very good and learned men) who think Universal Redemption to be a new Doctrine, terming it Arminianism and Popery; but, it is neither new, nor repugnant (as is pretended) to the Orthodox Doctrine of Election, Predestination and the Free Grace of GOD; [...] So far is it also from being a Novelty (as ignorant hearers are made believe) that it was received and professed for a necessary Truth by the Churches of GOD in all Ages since Christ’s birth, and contradicted by very few in the first times of Christianity. Yea, it was believed many hundreds of years before Arminius was born, or Popery
had a being in the world [...]. It is, I confess, a Doctrine imbraced by many in the
Church of Rome, but that makes it not erroneous. (Withers 1662: 62)

29 This last quote epitomises both Wither’s denominational independence and his
presumably heartfelt desire for social cohesion and religious toleration in England, a
wish clearly expressed in his dedication of Book 1 of the Collection on Emblemes to King
Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria, respectively the Head of the Church of England
and a fervent Roman Catholic:

For, as you, Both, Prime Children are of those
Two Sister-Churches, betwixt whom, yet growes
Unseemly strife; So, You, perhaps, may be
An Emblem, how those MOTHERS may agree. (folio 3v)

30 These statements are remarkable, both on account of their diplomatic pragmatism and
of the political courage they embody. Other instances of a similar nature include
emblem I-5, headed by the motto “That Kingdome will establish’d bee, / Wherein the
People well agree” (Wither 1635: 5), which asserts that the king ought to ensure that his
subjects are “freely tributary” to his power and uphold social cohesion. At a time of
increasingly tense political and religious conflicts in England which would culminate in
the Civil War only a few years later, such advice would undoubtedly have been liable to
draw accusations of sedition, especially given the — grimly accurate — prophetic tone
of the final couplet: “where this Duty long neglect, they shall; / The King will suffer,
and, the Kindome fall” (5).

31 It is impossible to ascertain to what extent the royal family and the nobility paid any
attention to A Collection of Emblemes. Its success with the English readership at large is
attested by the circulation of at least six variants of the volume in 1635, and later by the
publication of a “pirated” version of the emblems, presumably by Nathaniel Crouch
(see the introduction by Freeman in Wither 1975: xvi-xvii), by the inclusion of the work
in William London’s Catalogue of the most Vendible Books in England (1658: 122), and by a
peculiar reference to the collection in a work by Dutch painter Edward Collier titled
“Still Life with a Volume of Wither’s Emblemes” (1696). There is no evidence that the
work underwent any kind of censorship, or that Wither had to answer for its contents
in any way. Whether this testifies to its ultimate harmlessness, or perhaps to the
subtlety of a subversive lottery game, is a question that is for each of Wither’s
individual readers to decide. As the poet puts it himself in his epistle “To the Reader”,
he leaves “You, to accept of these Play-games as you please”.

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Sons, 1908.


NOTES

1. For in-depth discussions of emblems and emblem books, see Praz (1939), Spica (1996), and Manning (2002), among many others.

2. In his introduction to the 1989 facsimile edition of A Collection of Emblemes, Michael Bath mentions that, in the Stirling Maxwell copy which is held at the Glasgow University Library and was used as the original, “the lottery is remarkably well-preserved, and the pointer still attached” (Wither 1989 : 11).

3. Among many other examples of this kind, the end of lottery I-5 reads “Looke, what thine Emblem counsells thee”, lottery I-8 says “See, what your Emblem hath injoyn’d”, and lottery II-5 urges the reader to “Marke, what thine Emblem teaches thee.”

4. The fascinating website Architecture of the Book (or ArchBook for short), hosted by the University of Saskatchewan in Canada (https://drc.usask.ca/projects/archbook/index.php), defines the volvelle as: “A unique codex technology, the volvelle consists of one or more layers of parchment or paper discs and shapes fastened to a leaf, allowing for each individual layer to be rotated independently of the other components. The volvelle allows the reader to perform calculations or discover additional information through the rotation of the pieces, which work in conjunction with an illustrated base printed directly on the leaf. Generally, the parts bear text or illustrations.
and are anchored to the page with string; some volvelles include a decorative cap fastened with glue to cover the knot on the reverse page. The name derives from the Latin volvere, meaning “to turn,” and variant names include wheel charts, information wheels, and rundells. The volvelle first appeared in thirteenth-century England, but gained prominence in Germany to become one of the earliest known examples of a movable book part. Its ingenuity allowed for greater interaction between reader and text, conveying information through a more dynamic delivery system.” (https://drc.usask.ca/projects/archbook/volvelles.php)

5. Wither states that he invented the game “to advance their [the booksellers’] Profits, rather than to satisfie [his] owne judgement” (A1v).

6. When A Collection of Emblemes was published in 1635, Wither had already been imprisoned twice, perhaps even three times. His two stays on record at the Marshalsea prison were both due to influential courtiers believing that his Abuses Strippt and Whipt (1613) and Wither’s Motto (1621) contained concealed personal attacks against them. Wither always protested that it was untrue, but served a total of at least thirteen months behind bars. See French (1930) and O’Callaghan (2014).

7. In the section titled “The Occasion, Intention, and use of the Foure Lotteries adjyned to these foure Books of Emblems”(A2r-A3r), Wither calls the game a “Morall Pastime” and a “Recreation”, which, he assures, will be “as harmlesse as any if it be used according to [his] intentions”. In his epistle “To the Reader” (A1r-A2r), he even claims that his “Play-Game” was “but accidentally composed”.

8. The “Preposition to this Frontispiece” is a poem that appears on the first page of the volume, in which Wither — or rather, Wither’s tongue-in-cheek poetic persona — claims that he commissioned something completely different, but that the engraver had “[mistaken] quite / The true Designe”, and that, “(with paines, and cost) / The first intended FRONTISPIECE, is lost.” The persona then continues to state that, while being far from the one that was intended, the frontispiece, despite its “Errors and Confusions” [...] fitted many Fantasies / Much better, then [sic] what Reason can devise", and that the artist had, upon closer examination and albeit unwittingly, created an “Object of Delight”. Bath (1994: 115) and Corbett and Norton (1964: 186-8) interpret Wither’s dismissive comments as a rhetorical strategy, a “far-fetched conceit with the engraver as an Aunt Sally or tacit accomplice” (Corbett & Norton 1964: 188), and conclude that both the frontispiece and the “Preposition” were perhaps designed as “riddles for the ingenious reader” (188). See also Le Duff (2020).

9. Kelly provides a summary of a passage in the Tiers Livre, in which Pantagruel’s friend Panurge uses the process of bibliomancy in the works of Vergil to decide whether he should marry. However, the efficiency of the oracle is undermined by the widely differing interpretations that he and his companions attach to the verse towards which he is directed. Ultimately, these interpretations all suggest, of course, that Panurge will end up a cuckold (Kelly 2011: 42). The passage discussing the “sors Virgilianes” in the Tiers Livre is found in chapters X-XII.

10. Capp states that Astrology in England reached its “full maturity” only in the middle of the 17th century, but that it was also “beginning to part company with astronomy, mathematics, medicine and the whole mainstream of scientific development” at that point (Capp 1979: 20). He also attests to the popularity of printed almanacs throughout the 17th century: as late as the 1660s, 400,000 copies of such works were purchased in England annually, “a figure which suggests that roughly one family in three bought an almanac each year” (23). The controversies about divination were mostly religious, as its critics associated it with witchcraft, but it also raised concerns about the existence of moral freedom in a world in which all events would be predetermined in the stars (131-144).

11. Constancy, and more precisely the patient endurance of hardship, is a recurring credo in Wither’s emblems. Mottoes such as “With Patience, I the Storme sustaine; / For Sun-shine still
doth follow Raine” (emblem I-26) or “No Inward Griefe, nor outward Smart, / Can overcome a
Patient-Heart” (emblem I-28) occur frequently throughout the Collection.

12. Each book of A Collection of Emblemes is dedicated to one or several members of the Caroline
court: Book I to the King and Queen, Book II to the young princes Charles and James, Book III to
the Duchess Dowager of Richmond and to the Duke of Lennox, and Book IV to Philip of Pembroke
and to the Earl of Holland.

13. In his instructions pertaining to the game, Wither states that “Some will think perhaps, that I
have purposely invented this Game, that I might finde means to reprove mens vices, without
being suspected, (as I have hitherto unjustly beene) to ayme at particular persons: For, if any who
are notoriously Guiltie, shall by drawing their Chances, among other companions, be so fitted
with Lots, (which may now and then happen) that those Vices be thereby intimated to the by-
standers, of which the world knowes them guilty; they do therin make their own Libels; and, may
(i hope) be laughed at without blame. If not; I doe here warne all such as are worthily suspected
of Haynous crimes and Scandalous conversations, either to forbear these Lotteries; or to excuse
me if they be justly shamed by their own Act.” (A3r)

14. The lottery dial that is intended to indicate to the players in which of the four books their
emblem is to be sought is divided into four sections, each bearing the name of a cardinal point.
Furthermore, a similar idea emerges from Wither’s use of an architectural metaphor to describe
his work, where each of the four books would constitute one side to a building. See Bath (1994:
122-3).

ABSTRACTS

George Wither, a notoriously controversial poet of the 17th century, wrote in the introductory
text to his Collection of Emblemes in 1635 that he was adding a “harmless [...] recreation”, referring
to the lottery game he included in his book, which contains two hundred emblems. Wither goes
to great length to claim that his lottery is merely an innocent pastime that was added to the work
to make it less “over-solid and serious”, but a careful examination of the game in relation to the
rest of the volume reveals a more complex rhetorical and aesthetic purpose. The lottery game is
allegorically represented in the middle of the frontispiece on the first page of the book, an
intricate engraving by William Marshall representing the pilgrimage of life on the paths of virtue
and vice, where the pilgrims draw their metaphorical lots from an ewer under the supervision of
Fortune personified. As the frontispiece can be read as an emblematic representation of the
volume, this mise-en-abyme contradicts the poet’s assertions about the lottery’s incidental
nature, and therefore raises questions on its true place in the work. Through his game, Wither
establishes a close, personal, often tongue-in-cheek and multi-faceted relationship with his
readers, addressing them directly and creating the impression that the broad and general advice
provided in the emblems is in fact tailored to their very personal needs. It is an original vector
for social criticism and satire, and mirrors the author’s own religious and philosophical
ambiguities with respect to notions such as free will, personal responsibility, and fortune. It
gants the emblems a theatrical, dynamic, and social dimension that testifies to Wither’s
profound understanding of the rhetorical possibilities granted to him both by the emblematic
genre and by the nature of a game.
George Wither, poète anglais controversé du dix-septième siècle, écrivit dans l’un des textes d’introduction à son œuvre *A Collection of Emblemes* en 1635 qu’il ajoutait un « divertissement [...] innocent », faisant référence au jeu de loterie qu’il avait inclus dans l’ouvrage, un livre de deux cents emblèmes. Wither insiste sur le caractère innocent de sa loterie, et affirme qu’il n’a consenti à l’inclure dans le volume que pour que celui-ci soit moins aride et moralisateur. Néanmoins, une analyse du jeu à la lumière du volume dans son intégralité permet de discerner son rôle au sein d’un projet rhétorique et esthétique complexe. La loterie fait l’objet d’une représentation méta-emblématique au centre du frontispice de l’ouvrage, une imposante gravure de l’artiste William Marshall qui représente le pèlerinage de la vie, tantôt sur le chemin du vice, tantôt sur celui de la vertu. Lorsque les pèlerins atteignent la croisée des chemins, sous la supervision de dame Fortune, ils plongent la main dans une urne afin d’y trouver le lot qui les accompannera tout au long du périple. Le jeu de loterie fait ainsi partie intégrante du volume, et ne peut être relégué à une simple annexe ludique, nonobstant ce qu’en dit l’auteur. À travers le jeu, Wither construit une relation interpersonnelle complexe avec ses lecteurs, s’adresse à eux directement et crée l’impression que les emblèmes, malgré leur portée générale, constituent en réalité des conseils et des avertissements personnalisés à l’égard des joueurs à qui le sort les aura réservés. De plus, la spécificité du jeu permet à Wither d’exprimer ses opinions parfois subversives, mais également de participer à un débat philosophique de son époque, celui du libre-arbitre, de la responsabilité individuelle et de la fortune. Le jeu de loterie confère aux emblèmes une dimension théâtrale et dynamique qui témoigne du potentiel rhétorique de l’activité ludique, potentiel dont Wither avait saisi la subtilité.

**INDEX**

**Keywords:** emblems, Wither George, lottery game, games, satire, rhetoric  
**Mots-clés:** Wither George, emblèmes, jeu de loterie, jeux, satire, rhétorique

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From Cardboard Settings to Ludo-anthropological Experiences: The Failures and Successes of Victorian London’s Adaptations in Video Games

Nicolas Sigoillot

“Oh, splendid, you’re here to murder me [...]”
“I’m not here to kill you.”
“Then what’s your game?”

Lady Hattaway, a powerful opponent in the video game Assassin’s Creed Syndicate (Ubisoft 2015), addresses these words metanarratively to Jacob, the player’s avatar. As the title of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate implies, the game consists in assassinating enemies. What has made this series of games popular is its impressive rendition of the geographical and historical context in which they take place. The Syndicate episode is set in London at the end of the 19th century — in 1868, to be precise. The Victorian setting has always been popular in video games because the period is both modern and intriguing, close to our times but still shrouded in a strong mythos. The popularity of the Victorian setting has also been raised by the steampunk artistic movement which emerged in the 1980s which blends elements of both science fiction and magic to an aesthetic of the industrial revolution (Vandermeer 2011). Some of the most popular games taking place in Victorian London, or in a fictional city inspired by it, include: The Chaos Engine (Renegade Software 1993), MediEvil 2 (Sony Computer Entertainment 2000), Alice: Madness Returns (Spicy Horse 2011), Assassin’s Creed Syndicate (Ubisoft 2015), The Order 1886 (Ready at Dawn 2015), Bloodborne (FromSoftware 2015) and Vampyr (Dontnod Entertainment 2018). Video games enable the player to explore their fictional settings in a manner that no other medium or form of art allows. Even if a painting or a movie representing a specific historical setting provoke different subjective reactions in different people, they still represent the same item for each viewer. A video game, on
the other hand, thanks to its unique input/output logic associated to a predetermined
gameworld, should never offer the same experience to anyone because what the player
sees is triggered by his/her own actions. The (musical and pictorial) artistic
components of a video game are subordinated to the actions undertaken by the player.
In other words, the player experiences the gameworld by entering a separate space on
which he/she exerts a form of power through his avatar and/or his controls.

2 Thanks to the graphic improvements of video games over the past two decades, the
fidelity and authenticity of the games’ renditions of real-life places such as Victorian
London have been examined by historians such as Robert Whitaker, a specialist of
Modern Britain and Professor of History at Collin College. Critical literature has been
produced on whether big budget video games can be used in school lessons to help
students understand or picture some historical or geographical areas through a
medium which they may find more appealing. For example, Romain Vincent, a PhD
candidate is undertaking research on this field and devoted a blog, https://
jeuvideohistoire.com/, to his research, further suggesting how historical video games
can be used pedagogically in classes for all levels. Due to the popular appeal of video
games, it would give students the possibility to experience the object of study in a
unique way (Karsenti 2019). However, this approach divides cultural historians, as some
question the legitimacy of such a medium. Marc Marti, professor at Nice Sophia
Antipolis University, thus points to the relationship between the game narrative and
the historical narrative and how the representation of history in games contributes to a
fictionalisation of history which then contributes to a national narrative (Marti 2018).
For Marti, video games are more interesting from a historiographical standpoint than
from a historical one.

3 Cultural studies as well as humanities in their broader sense could offer a different
point of view on this debate. From asking: “is this game faithful to history?” one could
move to the more anthropological question of the uses of depicting a certain
environment, accurately or not. What would be the effects of the representation of child
labour in a game on a player, for instance? What use is this representation in terms of
play? How are gameplay and representation of history linked? What could
narratology, anthropology and history bring to game design? And finally, is the
opposite true? Could video games develop useful skills for cultural studies in their
users, notably through the use of methods for the study of anthropology such as
fieldwork and ethnography?

4 In this paper, I compare the representation of Victorian London in two video games:
Assassin’s Creed Syndicate (Ubisoft 2015) and The Order 1886 (Ready at Dawn 2015). Both
constitute a solid basis for a comparative approach because they take place in the same
setting and were released in the same year while presenting a fair number of
differences. Assassin’s Creed Syndicate is a stealth-action game released on various
platforms (Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PC) which claims to remain faithful historically to
its setting and puts the player in the role of two assassin twins acting covertly to get rid
of the secret society of the Templar that dominate London economically and politically.
Assassin’s Creed Syndicate thus presents a uchronic story of an invisible war that
realistically could have been taking place in London. The Order 1886, on the other hand,
is a third-person shooting game which takes place, as its name suggests, in 1886. It was
released on only one platform (PlayStation 4) and never claimed to be entirely faithful
to history as it places the player in the role of a member of the Knights of the Round
Table, an organisation aimed at fighting against mythological creatures such as werewolves and vampires in Victorian London. The games also differ in that *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is part of a long series of games (*Assassin’s Creed*), while *The Order 1886* is a standalone game.

5 The game-design philosophies of the two games are very distinct. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is an open-world game, leaving nearly its entire environment accessible to the player from the beginning, placing exploration and experimentation at the centre of its device with what one calls an ‘emergent gameplay’, i.e. a set of situations resulting from the ability of the player to approach problems in different manners thanks to a set of simple rules. The way the game “plays” is thus defined by the player’s actions. If the player needs to climb a tower, he or she can do it either through the use of a grappling hook, through normal climbing, or by going in the tower and using the stairs. The variety of possibilities offered to the player is key, even though these are not explicitly suggested to them.

6 The pacing of the narrative is also different in both games. In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, the player is free to put the plot on hold and undertake other quests through London at any moment. On the other hand, *The Order 1886* is a plot-driven game where the players are directed in a predetermined order and cannot escape the unfolding of events which are presented to them.

7 My aim, through a transdisciplinary comparison of these two games will be to show the relevance of the study of video games to both cultural and historical studies. Video games, I will argue, represent a virtual new-frontier that enables players to take up the role of an anthropologist through a fictional participant observation in a defined setting. According to Philipp Schweighauser, Professor of American and general literatures at the University of Basel, the gaming experience generates a dual reality, the fictional universe and the player’s alter-ego in this universe. The fictional gameworld creates a real space in which the player’s understanding of his/her environment is strong because it becomes real to him/her, the player is himself/herself (with limitations imposed by the game) while stepping out of his/her physical reality (Schweighauser 2009). A transdisciplinary comparison of *The Order 1886* and *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* ultimately will allow me to propose a model of two different approaches to player participation in the exploration of historical settings in video games.

**The Order 1886**: Victorian London as a Setting, but Nothing More

8 *The Order 1886* is a third-person shooter game. It might be classified more precisely as a cover-shooter genre because at the core of the game’s design is the ability of the player’s character to hide behind elements of the environment. The camera is set very close to the main character, off-centre, as if the player were watching above the character’s shoulder. The game has a clearly cinematic style, with frequent cutscenes during which the player cannot interact at all. To maintain the attention of the player, the game relies on the use of Quick Time Events (QTEs) during which the player has a very limited amount of time to execute a command when prompted on the screen. In *The Order 1886*, there are only three types of commands: pressing a specific button on the game controller, or rapidly mashing or holding down a specific button (Figure 1). QTEs are somewhat controversial in video games: they can have two different
interpretations and depend heavily on the choices the developers made in incorporating them to their game-design. They can easily ruin immersion by not requiring complex inputs and can lead to an impression of playing interactive movies; or they can offer more immersion by creating stressful moments in cutscenes, making the player feels the same amount of stress as his/her character. Overall, critics agreed that *The Order 1886* failed at involving the player through this process. The display of a big triangle on the screen when the character needs to open a door in a cutscene, which makes the game belong to a hybrid genre between movies and games, led it, in addition to its relative shortness, to receive mixed reviews with an average Metacritic score of 63 out of 100, with reviews ranging from 95 to 20.¹ The combination of two genres (movie and game) requires a certain balance to work in an immersive manner. In the case of QTEs, making them challenging or involving different outcomes to a scene rather than just displaying a ‘game over’ message on the screen when the player fails to execute them can be a solution. Games such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) or *Shenmue* (SEGA 1999) were critically praised for their smart use of QTEs. For movies which adapt video games, the system works similarly: simply porting a game setting and plot doesn’t work, often leading to poorly rated movies when the adaptation is not a standalone movie, requiring knowledge of the game to be appreciated. Movies such as *Mortal Kombat* (Anderson 1995) or *Max Payne* (Moore 2008) are good examples of such failures.

Figure 1: An example of Quick Time Event (QTE)

![Quick Time Event (QTE)](image)

Here, the player has to keep pressing on the triangle to pick up an item during a cutscene.

Credits: *The Order 1886*, Ready at Dawn.

*The Order 1886* is set in a fictional London that belongs more to the science-fiction steampunk genre than to a realistic neo-Victorian interpretation of the city. The plot of the game involves the Order of the Knights of the Round Table, a not-so-secret organisation that fights against an illness that spreads through the city, making people mad and turning some of them into werewolves. It is not explained how secret the Order is, but it seems that most of the policemen the player encounters know them. The playable character is Sir Galahad. Three other knights are there to help him.
through his quest: Lady Igraine, his trainee, Sir Percival, his mentor, and the Marquis de La Fayette, an indomitable French seducer.

10 The Victorian city is a setting in the game which never really offers gameplay opportunities. Even though the game possesses excellent graphics and the realism of the scenery is impressive, London is rarely visible in its entirety and the player can only visit the interiors of buildings and underground sewers. The Victorian setting is shown through scraps of newspapers, props and the characters’ dress and appearance. Sometimes, the player wanders through streets that look realistic and convincing, but this design never contributes to the gameplay itself (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The rendition of a street in Victorian London in *The Order 1886*

![Image](image.png)

Credits: *The Order 1886*, Ready at Dawn.

11 The choice of the setting is revealing despite its uselessness for gameplay. Even though the director of the game, Ru Weerasuriya, claims the game does not belong to the steampunk genre (O’Rourke 2014), it possesses all its typical qualities. Jeff Vandermeer, who specialises in this genre, defines steampunk humorously:

STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man / baroque stylings) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot. (Vandermeer 2011)

12 The Victorian setting is a key in the steampunk aesthetic in which the game revolves. *The Order 1886* is a grim game with a dark plot: the first act consists in chasing rebels against the British Empire and werewolves. The rebels seem to have made the United India Company their main target and Galahad and his clique must defend the Company, no doubt inspired by the historical East India Company which was dissolved in 1874. The second act has a convoluted storyline. Eventually Galahad discovers the rebels are right, and that the United India Company brings vampires into the United Kingdom and is assisted by one prominent member of the Order of the Knights of the Round Table. Galahad, after being expelled from the Order because of the machinations of the traitor in its midst, decides to side with the rebels and their leader, the steamy Lakshmi, fighting against the United India Company and the traitor. The game ends on a
panoramic shot of London with Galahad looking over the scene and talking with Lakshmi; Galahad mentions his imminent departure from the Kingdom.

The game uses the Victorian setting to reinforce the dark atmosphere. The game takes place mostly at night, in dark streets lit by gaslights. Gothic elements such as werewolves and vampires typical not only of the steampunk genre but of Victorian culture contribute to the frightening atmosphere of the game. The game rewrites history, making Jack the Ripper the werewolf at the head of the United India Company. The presence of advanced technology explains why the game belong to the steampunk genre. The Knights of the Round Table use radios to talk with each other during missions; they also use thermite and electric arc rifles, two fictional weapons (see video extract below).

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These weapons are the fruit of the inventor Nikola Tesla, whose name is that of the famous inventor born in the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1856, who is supposedly at the service of the Order but who is actually a member of the rebellion. The game occasionally presents documents to the player to give him/her a sense of realism (Figure 3). Even though those documents are unauthentic, some efforts were made by the development team to make them feel realistic; unfortunately, these documents seldom appear in the game.

Figure 3: A realistic flyer found in the game

Credits: The Order 1886, Ready at Dawn.

As Cristopher Byrd summed up in The Washington Post, “although the storyline invokes weighty subjects like colonization and socioeconomic inequality, it fails to address these topics in any substantive way” (Byrd 2015). Indeed, the presence of the United India Company, the cruel role played by the Empire, and the atmosphere of social revolt (anarchists are frequently mentioned in-game), the dirty muddy streets and the smoked-filled sky are omnipresent, but never addressed. As such, the game seems to appeal more to the collective imaginary built around the Victorian era than around
reality. This is symptomatic of the issue raised by Marc Marti in his article on the Spanish Civil war and its representations which sometimes fall into a fictionalization of history for the sake of creating a national memory (Marti 2018).

The Order 1886 is thus frustrating for a player who desires to know more about, or to immerse himself or herself in, Victorian London. The game’s narrative techniques are more akin to a cinematographic culture rather than to a ludic culture. Whether the player is a ‘completionist’ or a casual player, an academic or someone with no knowledge whatsoever of the Victorian era, his or her experience will be the same, whatever the player’s intentions (anthropological, historical, or casual). The horror shooter genre to which the game belongs makes the gloomy and dirty state of Victorian London’s streets appear as something inherent to the genre of the game rather than to the period itself. The Order 1886’s approach to history could be summed up as an aesthetic or cinematic approach.

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate: Immersing the Player in a Seemingly Authentic 1868 London

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate is part of a series of more than twenty games that each take place during a specific and highly identifiable historical, geographical and cultural era. The following chart sums up the main games of the series in order of publication in order to gain a sense of the place of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate in the series:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Release Date</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Main Location(s)</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Cultural Landmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed</td>
<td>Jerusalem, Acre, Damascus</td>
<td>End of 12th century</td>
<td>Third Crusade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed II</td>
<td>Venice, Rome, Florence</td>
<td>End of 15th century</td>
<td>Italian Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed III</td>
<td>Boston, New York, the Frontier</td>
<td>1754-1783</td>
<td>American Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag</td>
<td>Caribbean islands and cities</td>
<td>1715</td>
<td>Golden Age of Piracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed Unity</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>French Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed Syndicate</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Victorian Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed Origins</td>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>49 BC</td>
<td>Ptolemaic Egypt, before the Roman conquest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed Odyssey</td>
<td>Different cities and locations in Ancient Greece</td>
<td>431 BC</td>
<td>Peloponnesian War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At first glance, the series aims at offering very diverse contexts to its players, a variety justified by a simple plot device. The story takes place in the present, with contemporary members of the Assassin’s secret society exploring the memories of previous assassin members around the world throughout the ages thanks to a technology known as “Helix”. This is a pretext, as only a small fraction of the game occurs in the present. In Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, the player is unable to play in the present time and is just a spectator of the events unfolding; most of the gameplay consists in wandering about in London in 1868.

This leads to an interesting concept from a ludo-narrative point of view. The player will effectively play the roles of Jacob and Evie Frye, two assassins in Victorian London. But he or she is actually impersonating the Helix user who remains nameless in the game. This creates two diegetic environments which serve to tighten the relation between the player and the assassin twins whilst still setting the game in our present times, creating another identification mechanism between the player and the Helix user. These identification devices, both to the characters of the Victorian period and to the current day assassin exploring his/her forebears’ memories, make the player an explorer of the Victorian period because it places him/her in the role of an explorer in the game.

One could thus explore the game from an explorer’s, or even an anthropologist's point of view, as suggested by Kiri Miller, an ethnomusicologist at Brown University, in an article about the Grand Theft Auto video game series. In her article, she shows how “players move beyond tourism to collaborative complicity with the avatar” (Miller 2008). Assassin’s Creed’s gameplay is similar to Grand Theft Auto, sharing the same documentary practice, while differing from other classic historical fictions since, in video games, its audience can interact with the recreated historical surroundings. Miller explains that the player adopts the standpoint of an ethnographer when visiting gameworlds (Miller 2008). This analysis functions well in the context of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate with its exploration mechanics at the core of the gameplay.

The game is an open world with two main mechanisms to motivate the player to explore it. The first is the defining of objectives in an emergent way: it is the environment itself that provides clues to the player. Thanks to the game design, these clues will incite the player to set goals by himself/herself and to experiment with various interactions within his/her environment. The second mechanism is the defining of set objectives by the plot: to progress through the story the player has to accomplish specific objectives.

The emergent gameplay mechanism is what will set the player in the position of an anthropologist via the need to develop an observational attitude. For example, in Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, to find what to do in London, the player needs to climb tall buildings or monuments, called viewpoints (Figure 4). From these vantage points, the game will show points of interest that will, from this time onwards, appear on the map (Figure 5).
For example, to know what to do, the player will have to climb Big Ben to locate a high-ranking member of the rival organisation, the Templars. From this point, he or she will be able to assess the quickest way to reach and eliminate the target. To eliminate his/her target, the player will have to use the field to his/her advantage, first by climbing one of the tallest buildings of the location, to spot how the enemies move around their territory. Then, he/she will have to visit the location, find a way to intervene and remove his/her target without being seen. Stealth is encouraged through the game because if the player character is invisible, he has the ability to kill his foe in one deadly strike. If the player character is discovered by his enemies, he will have to fight first in a single combat and then in a mass combat since the foe will call his allies to the
This prioritizing of stealth also benefits exploration because it will incite the player to explore his/her surroundings to find ways to hide effectively. Thus, the game invites the player to visit London from a global and local perspective. The player will thus map the city, visit the main buildings, travel through the city and visit anonymous houses or flats to accomplish his/her objectives. Adopting the stance of a tourist is therefore rewarding.

The immersion of the player in the Victorian city is reinforced by the graphic quality of the game. The technical progress achieved by video games over the past two decades has enabled them to represent anything in a credible fashion. This is certainly true in the case of buildings where current day screen resolutions enable artists to depict the models of buildings realistically. Allied to the different mechanisms that let players explore their gameworlds both horizontally (on the ground and through the different neighbourhoods of London) and vertically (from the underground sewers to the chimney tops). The first means to travel is the free climb up and climb down action sets which are directly inspired from parkour. The second means is the rope launcher that is unlocked at a later stage in the game and bestowed to the player by Alexander Graham Bell, a character named after the famous inventor, born in 1847, who purportedly created the first telephone; the launcher essentially functions as a grappling hook and enables the player to move easily from one roof to another without having to climb down then up again. The rope launcher also allows the player to climb buildings significantly faster than with the usual free climb up mechanism.

The combination of realistic graphics and easy ways to explore the world makes it possible for the player of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate to visit Victorian London in ways that would not be possible even if he/she had been there. Within only two hours after having started the game, it is possible to climb buildings such as Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, Admiral’s Nelson’s Column or even Buckingham Palace. The development team behind the game put impressive efforts to faithfully and realistically render the historical buildings, placing the player in the position of an ethnographer. During his/her climbing or exploratory activities, the player can actively examine the details of the rendition of the buildings while he or she tries to find efficient ways to climb them. Once again, the gameplay (the climbing) is dependent on the adoption of an acute observatory attitude by the player.
Lee Jackson, historian of Victorian London and author of books about the city such as *Dirty Old London* (Jackson 2014) and administrator of the reference website victorianlondon.org has called the rendition of the city marvellous (see video extract below). He even adds: “I can tell you from looking at photographs of the period that’s exactly what you would have seen” while showing the city’s Southbank from the point of view of his character standing on top of Big Ben.

This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document http://journals.openedition.org/angles/2818

In the video (see above), Lee Jackson enables the viewer to experience a tour of the city with his voice-over, commenting on every detail of the city: from the padding of the carriages in the street, to the gas lamps, through the typical iron and glass coverings of the market places. He also evokes and shows in-game the north-south division of London, with the industrial south and its sawmills, factories, black smoke rising from the chimneys, the windmills and the streets of mud with ranges of houses and yards stuck to each other with barely room to walk among the mess, described by Friedrich Engels in his essay on *The Condition of the Working Class* in Victorian Times (Engels 1892). The city is divided into seven areas (The Strand, The Thames, The City of London, Westminster, Whitechapel, Lambeth and Southward), each divided into sub-areas. The Thames, crowded with boats, occupies a central position in the game, reflecting its central position in the real city and in the history of London (Figure 7). The north of the city in the game also reflects this class division with richer neighbourhoods, nicer houses, larger and cleaner streets (Figures 8-9).
Figure 7: The crowded Thames

Credits: Assassin's Creed Syndicate, Ubisoft.

Figure 8: A street from the northern part of London

Credits: Assassin's Creed Syndicate, Ubisoft.
To recreate the Victorian setting, Ubisoft hired a full-time historian (although not an academic writer), Jean-Vincent Roy, to document the Victorian city in order to help the game artists render a city faithful to the original. Roy explored archives and made several field trips to get a sense of the city, and collaborated with Judith Flanders, a senior research fellow in 19th-century social history (Sapieha 2015). Nevertheless, Roy kept in mind that the rendition of 1868 London needed to be considered from the perspective of the game. Assassin’s Creed is a video game franchise where not only exploration but also action are at the core of its gameplay. The series became famous because of its parkour mechanisms which allow the player to make his/her character climb and jump to almost anything realistically usable and within his/her reach. To do this, Roy could not work on an authentic rendition of the city, but rather on a gameworld that offers the player “a highly authentic impression of London” (Sapieha 2015, my emphasis). Thus, the landmarks in-game are to scale and highly faithful to their originals, but their distances from each other are shorter.

The tourist’s stance that the game incites the player to take culminated in the series in an episode in Assassin’s Creed Origins which takes place in ancient Egypt, with the addition of a discovery tour mode. This game mode is defined by the editor as a “new educational mode” enabling the player to “dive into the history of the ancient world with 75 interactive tours”. This game mode lets the player re-experience the gameworld, in this case Alexandria and its surroundings, but without the dangers and objectives of the main game. The creative director of Assassin’s Creed Origins, Jean Guesdon, explained in a promotional trailer that “all of a sudden you’re not in the game anymore, you’re just in Egypt, enjoying it and looking at the world like never before” (see video below).

The discovery tour is not a full documentary and contains adapted history. Over the past few years, Ubisoft has been trying to push a progressive agenda, and since 2015 the
games of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise load with a text written on a black screen stating: “Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities.” This text serves to remind the player that the gameworld remains a world of fiction and the discovery tour contains falsified elements to fit that agenda. For example, in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, a vase depicting children going to school in Ancient Greece was modified to include girls to make the game and its gameworld more inclusive (Figure 10). As such, the ‘discovery tour’ should not be taken at face value.

**Figure 10: A ‘behind the scenes’ inclusive entry from *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey***

This example shows how history is sometimes adapted to fit the game’s political message of inclusivity.

Credits: *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, Ubisoft.

32 For Evelyn Ferron, a history lecturer on documentary methodology at Sherbrooke University who acted as a consultant for the creation of the discovery tour mode of the episode *Assassin’s Creed Origins*: “Students [...] will remember more what we teach if they can feel it” (Ubisoft North America 2018) — an assertion made not in an academic article but in a promotional video for the game. Nevertheless, the use of the word “feel” is revealing because that is what Jean-Vincent Roy intended to do with *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, i.e. to have the player feel as if he or she were in 1868 London, making this fictional London credible, if entirely accurate. In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, there was no ‘discovery mode’, but the game does offer an Encyclopedia of the places visited (Figure 11) as well as of the people of Victorian London met there, providing anecdotes about both.
The non-player characters in the game contribute to the immersion of the player as much as they help him/her to get an understanding of the issues of the time. The main opponent of the player is Crawford Starrick, a member of the Templars who controls London’s economy. The characterization of Starrick serves a dual purpose: to motivate the player to remove him, but also to help him understand what Victorian London was like.

This tea was brought to me from India by a ship and up from the harbour to a factory where it was packaged and ferried by carriage to my gaol, unpacked in the larder and brought upstairs to me, all by men and women who work for me, who are indebted to me, Crawford Starrick, for their jobs, the time, the very lives they lead. They will work in my factories and so too shall their children and you come to me with talk of this Jacob Frie, this insignificant blemish who calls himself an assassin, you disrespect the city that works day and night so that we may drink this miracle, this tea. (Ubisoft 2015)

Crawford Starrick may be a fictional character, but this monologue shows the extent of the British Empire (monopolistic capitalism, the import of exotic products, the colonies) and raises class issues (cultural class reproduction, the development of factories, debt). In a brisk monologue, even a player with limited knowledge of history will understand what was going on in the capital of the British Empire in the 1860s.

The feeling that the player is exploring history is also reinforced through the presence of real historical characters: Alexander Graham Bell, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Benjamin Disraeli, James Brudenell, Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale all make appearances. This roster of characters sums up the period thematically; it is not just occupying filler positions. Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Darwin and Florence Nightingale represent the scientific achievements of the United Kingdom in the four main scientific fields: physics for Bell, biology for Darwin, and mathematics and medicine for Nightingale (Figure 12). Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, Florence Nightingale and Benjamin Disraeli represent politics and the need for reform: Dickens through the arts and his interests; Marx through his sociology, philosophy and activism; Nightingale through pragmatic measures and the emergence of women’s
liberation movements; and Disraeli who represents social change through parliamentary activity. The strength and the reach of the British Empire are embodied in Benjamin Disraeli for the political aspect, the Queen for the imperial one, and James Brudenell for its military might.

Figure 12: The in-game encyclopedia entry for Florence Nightingale and her model

Credit: Assassin's Creed Syndicate, Ubisoft.

The crowd also plays its role in the immersion of the player. The developers of the game made great efforts in building the fictional world so that the population seems lively. As explained by Jonathan Dumont, the game’s world director:

At night the crowd doesn’t do the same things it does during the day. We’ve tried to make it a living ecosystem. Aside from major markets that could be open day or night, you won’t see many merchants at night. Areas where people go to work during the day, like the financial district, are a lot emptier at night. At a pub you’ll see people having a beer during the day, but at night it’s a party in there. It makes it more credible. (Sapieha 2015)

The crowds wandering about in Assassin’s Creed Syndicate are not inactive, the player can follow non-player characters in the city and watch them live little slices of their lives. Some of these characters are directly linked to some short-term objectives in-game; some missions involve liberating child labourers from evil factory managers, for instance. This is put in context in-game: the children carry out repetitive tasks like assembling small screws or sweeping the floor, they are pictured as dirty and very thin, poorly clothed and often subjected to beatings and violence by adults in factories. If the player wanders around these factories, one can see the children being brought in by child traffickers.

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate can be summed up as a historically set game. A great deal of realism emerges from it and gives birth to a credible adaptation of its historical and geographic setting. The city offers not only a realistic environment but uses this to contribute to its gameplay, making the Victorian setting an integral part of the mechanics of the game.
Conclusion: Two Models of Incorporation of History into Video Games

The different genres of the two games studied in this article may have preconditioned the way in which they incorporate history. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is more oriented towards free roaming among the city, and naturally invites the developer to fill its setting with elements to make it interesting and not repetitive. Ubisoft made the choice of realism by inviting and even recruiting historians to make its city as believable as possible. Importantly, Jean-Vincent Roy had previous experience in the video game development field and had knowledge about what made a game interesting and fun to play, and his work as a historian was made in close cooperation with the world development team that took part in Roy’s research on Victorian London (Sapieha 2015).

The game set aside “grand history,” using only parts of it. Instead, it relied more on city’s details, making the game use history but also show pieces of history to its players through the feeling that one explores the city in the position of an anthropologist, inciting players to be curious about their environment. The game’s faithfulness to history is strong and was praised by professional historians. With the integration of the setting into the gameplay I described above, the Victorian setting was made an integral part of the game on an organic and thematic level.

Conversely, *The Order 1886* fails in this regard: it only uses Victorian London as a backdrop whose sole purpose is to generate an atmosphere of anxiety. Any other gloomy setting could have produced the same effect on the player. The genre of the game and its linearity might not be the cause of its failure to exploit the Victorian setting. Many games function in a very directive way, offering little more than corridors to visit, but usually compensate this narrow perspective by offering rich details to their players through dialogue, information and a long-developed story (Simons 2007). It seems the failings of *The Order 1886* to exploit the Victorian stem from its failure as a game. One popular and knowledgeable French game-streamer described the game as “50% movie, 40% QTEs and 10% game” and as “Netflix: the game” (BenzaieLive 2015). The lack of ‘gameness’ seems to be a consensus among negative critics: the story is told in the manner of a film. If the player tries to walk too fast in a corridor, he/she will be stuck until the dialogue heard in the background is over. The lack of interaction and responsiveness more often than not incites the player to drop his/her controller on the couch, waiting for the scene to solve itself on its own.

*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* will appeal to historians and can trigger interest in, as well as educate on, Victorian London, creating fruitful debates on the fidelity of its transposition from game to reality. In contrast, *The Order 1886* will only appeal to people who appreciate not Victorian society, but steampunk aesthetics inspired by Victorian times. The game teaches the player almost nothing about its times and offers no device to trigger the interest of the players in their surroundings. Another element that contributes to the gap in cultural content between the two games is their length. The average time of completion by the players recorded on the website howlongtobeat.com for *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* while doing a few extra missions at a leisurely pace is an impressive 67 hours and 38 minutes. The same measure applied to *The Order 1886* indicates a completion time of only 13 hours and 20 minutes.

The Victorian setting is a rich one which has often triggered the interest of game developers, but its transposition into an effective and successful in-game use is
complicated and requires much forethought. It is easy to fall prey to a thematic approach to a certain setting. *The Order 1886* draws much inspiration from movies, to the point it fails to use the full possibilities offered to video games. The success of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* in exploiting its historical setting compared to other games seems to be the consequence of its better understanding its own medium; it plays with history and let gamers play in history (Marti 2018). The different approaches of the two games can be modeled below:

Table : Synthesis of the two models of historical games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary Field</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>The Order 1886</th>
<th>Assassin’s Creed Syndicate</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narration</td>
<td>Diegesis</td>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>Form of narration (place/focalisation/time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linearity</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Non linear</td>
<td>Is the player free to decide what he/she does?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Observant</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Can the player interact freely with his/her environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Camera</td>
<td>Free camera</td>
<td>Free camera</td>
<td>How does the camera move around the character?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Close to character</td>
<td>Variable distance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Design</td>
<td>Gameplay</td>
<td>Fully scripted</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
<td>Is the player allowed to choose how to resolve the problems he/she faces?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cutscenes</td>
<td>Numerous and long</td>
<td>Few and short</td>
<td>Presence of cinematic moments of “non game”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graphics</td>
<td>Very realistic</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Quality of the graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Faithfulness</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Seemingly faithful</td>
<td>Feeling of authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elements of reality</td>
<td>Scarce</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>Presence of non-fictional elements (characters, works of art, locations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model of approach</td>
<td>Filmic</td>
<td>Ludo-anthropological</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The immersive models of the two games show how the player will integrate the historical setting to their gaming practice. *The Order 1886* responds to a filmic approach, where the experience is presented to the player in a certain predetermined form. This approach will result in a similar experience for all players; freedom is sacrificed for a
more controlling type of storytelling. As such, the game uses a fictional rendition of history to create another space. The immersion is drawn from the filmic techniques employed rather than a seemingly faithful rendition of Victorian London. What is taken from history is only what could serve the fictional aspect of the game even if it means rewriting it. **Assassin's Creed** capitalizes on a historical and anthropological approach to let the player experience London by being able to interact with it. As shown above, London is part of the gameplay rather than just part of the setting. As a result, **The Order 1886** will require its player to adopt the stance of a game-movie spectator while **Assassin's Creed Syndicate** will require him/her to adopt the stance of a game-ethnographer. In this respect, video games could fulfil methodological objectives akin to role playing games used in anthropology classes. Susanne Kuehling (University of Regina) has thus developed a role-playing game with her students in which they play the roles of islanders. Through her experiments, the professor observed that:

As members of The Tribe, students can feel like owners of their knowledge as they are at once authors, performers and audiences. As author, the student has the opportunity to script the action; as performer, he/she must deal with the consequences of this script as well as unforeseen developments; and as audience, he/she observes and reflects upon the unfolding action. This synergy, according to recent studies on educative computer-based simulation games, “yields a dynamic set of positioning with the potential to simultaneously establish a narrative and convey a lesson, all in a manner that grants the player involvement, ownership, and responsibility”. (Kuehling 2014)

Games which are rich in content often give birth to wikias or wikis, i.e. sites created under the model of Wikipedia thanks to a standardized model created through the site [https://www.fandom.com/](https://www.fandom.com/). To this day, thousands of collaborative game-encyclopedias have produced lengthy articles about in-game characters, places, concepts written and documented by the players themselves. The collaborative nature of these articles makes the players who want to contribute take up the role of encyclopedists, or researchers. To write these articles, players explore the gameworld meticulously and search information through other sources to document their findings (Figure 13).
Such documentary efforts concerning the space in which the player evolves can result in a virtuous circle of involvement both in the game and in side-related research that could be summed up as follows:

Table: The virtuous cycle resulting from anthropological approaches to video games

Wiki pages have their limitations, but they teach players to document their experiences of the gameworld and how to source their data. Occasionally, academic works are listed among the references of articles (Figure 14), showing the proto-academic nature of this type of game. The centralisation of data makes it easy even for a player with no specific methodological training to retrieve information on the setting of the game he/she plays, resulting in a pedagogical experience through browsing an encyclopedia and a more intellectual involvement in his/her game.
The success of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* in incorporating the Victorian setting to its gameplay proves that a transdisciplinary approach to game design, at the crossroads of history, ludo-narratology, and anthropology could be beneficial to all aspects of a game, from a technical, commercial, scientific and educational perspective.

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NOTES

1. Metacritic is a website that aggregates reviews of video games. The metacritic score is made up of the average of the grades given to the game in the specialized press around the world.

ABSTRACTS

Historical games deserve to be examined not only by video games academics but by cultural studies academics. The environments in which historical games are set, and how their gameplay and game design allow the players to explore them, give new opportunities to the public to learn about history. Furthermore, the excitement and interest players have for locales has reached the point where a “tourism/educational mode” has been added in the Assassin’s Creed games series, allowing them to freely explore ancient Egypt (Assassin’s Creed Origins) and Greece (Assassin’s Creed Odyssey). This mode features information about historical monuments recorded by academics, which allows players to learn about the environment. Interestingly enough, industrial Britain and especially Victorian Britain have often been chosen as a setting for numerous games. This paper compares the representations of Victorian Britain in two games. The first is Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, a game in which one plays an assassin in a realistic representation of Victorian Britain; the second is The Order 1886, a game set in a fictitious alternative world in 1886 in which one plays Knights of the Round Table fighting against gothic-themed creatures such as werewolves and vampires in a steampunk setting. Examining historical representations in fiction is interesting, but video games bring a new component to the experience compared to other media, as they let players create their own experience and narrative interactively. Gaming can thus be considered a worthwhile cultural practice because it succeeds in giving history subjective, sensory and experimental dimensions that other media lack. It enables the player to play in history as much as playing with it, sometimes giving the player an anthropological stance. In this respect, Assassin’s Creed stands as a successful adaptation of the Victorian context because it manages to integrate its historical setting into its gameplay mechanics, while The Order 1886 only uses it as a cardboard setting with limited interest to the game itself. This article attempts to create a system by comparing the two games, presenting new means of analysis of the use of history in video games.
Les jeux vidéo historiques permettent aux joueurs de visiter des environnements auxquels il leur est impossible d’avoir accès dans la vie réelle, de cette manière ils fournissent de nouvelles possibilités pour le grand public d’explorer l’histoire de l’humanité. L’intérêt suscité par cet aspect particulier du jeu vidéo a abouti récemment en la création d’un mode « tour » dans les jeux de la franchise Assassin’s Creed. Ce mode éducatif permet alors aux joueurs d’explorer librement l’Égypte antique (dans Assassin’s Creed Origins) et la Grèce antique (dans Assassin’s Creed Odyssey). Ce mode de jeu inclut des commentaires écrits et enregistrés par des universitaires, ce qui permet à son public d’en apprendre plus sur l’environnement dans lequel leur avatar virtuel évolue. De son côté, la Grande-Bretagne victorienne a connu également son lot d’adaptations vidéoludiques. Cet article compare la représentation de la Grande-Bretagne victorienne dans deux jeux en explorant à la fois l’intérêt de sa représentation d’un point de vue vidéoludique et ethnographique. Le premier jeu étudié, Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, propose au joueur d’incarner des membres d’une confrérie secrète d’assassins dans une représentation réaliste du Londres des années 1840. Dans le second jeu, The Order 1886, le joueur joue un chevalier de la table ronde affrontant des créatures issues de l’imaginaire gothique (des loups-garous ou des vampires) dans un univers steampunk. Si l’étude des représentations de lieux historiques dans des univers fictionnels est intéressant, la nature expérimentale du jeu vidéo permet à son public d’approcher l’histoire d’une manière unique, laissant ses joueurs créer leur propre approche d’univers de manière interactive. La pratique du jeu vidéo peut alors être considérée comme une pratique culturelle à part entière car elle permet de fournir à l’histoire une dimension subjective, sensorielle et expérimentale qui ne peut être fournie par aucun autre media. Les jeux vidéo permettent ainsi aux joueurs de jouer au sein de l’histoire mais également de jouer avec l’histoire même, en initiant, par leur nature, le joueur à une pratique anthropologique. À ce titre nous examinerons comment Assassin’s Creed réussit à adapter le contexte particulier du Londres victorien par sa capacité à intégrer son univers contextuel dans ses mécaniques de gameplay, là où The Order 1886 n’utilise l’univers victorien que comme décor unidimensionnel. Cet article développe, enfin, un système de comparaison proposant de nouvelles pistes d’études pour l’analyse des usages de l’histoire dans les jeux vidéo.

INDEX

Mots-clés: jeux vidéo, Assassin’s Creed, Order (The), Ubisoft, Ready at Dawn, jeux historiques, ludo-narratologie, narratologie, anthropologie, jeux, londres, époque victorienne, steampunk, néo-victoriannisme, ethnographie

Keywords: video games, Assassin’s Creed, Order (The), Ubisoft, Ready at Dawn, historical games, ludology, narratology, anthropology, gaming, Victorian London, steampunk, neo-Victorian, ethnography, games

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“There’s a sniper on that hill!”: Gaming in English as a Global Language Environment

Jeni Peake and Alexandra Reynolds

Introduction

1 For many speakers of English as a Second Language (L2), the online gaming world provides unlimited access to the wider English-speaking community of speakers of English as a *lingua franca* (Jenkins 2015; Kachru 1992) through written forms, such as instant messaging, and oral forms with the use of connected headsets. Through online gaming, gamers can develop computer literacy skills which are increasingly recognised as key communication skills learners need to develop (Burwell 2017; Godwin-Jones 2004).

2 The ever-increasing popularity of digital games has inspired educators to consider the impact online gaming has on language learning (Wang et al. 2017). The present study considers online gaming which occurs outside of the classroom but which nevertheless impacts the holistic language learning identities of gamers who are also university students. Although some university programmes have included *gamification* as part of their university syllabi, the present study considers student attitudes to gaming for leisure in English. Those who argue in favour of gamification as an institutional tool say that language learning requires a context in which engaging games provide a more meaningful situation for learners to use the language than drilling and practice games (Chiu et al. 2012). We nevertheless consider online gaming as a learning environment because the gamers are immersed in a second language, in this case English, and they must understand the instructions and communicate with other players in English in order to play and advance in the game.

3 Given that online gaming is primarily a leisure activity, we can assume that the online gaming context is a pleasant one, especially as it has been freely chosen by the gamer. In this respect, online gaming is a playful environment which can positively affect...
learning performance (Tsai et al. 2012). Roger Caillois defines playful environments as “free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe” (2001: ix); Callois’s dictum notwithstanding, the present study would argue that gaming is productive in terms of English language development.

The present article focuses on the context of online gaming for English language learning through a leisure activity. We will first analyse the current literature and main concepts within the concept of online gaming for language learning. We discuss the different contexts for language use within online gaming, including speaking through headsets, instant messaging, forums, and reviewing gaming techniques through tutorials on YouTube.

We then present the methods used to interview young French students who play online games in English, as well as a collection of examples of gaming language used in written form. We then present the results of our questionnaire. The interviews with French youths show that non-educational online gaming has a positive effect on the confidence and language skills of the players. In addition, the corpus of gaming language found in open spaces at the University of Bordeaux highlights how the youths develop English language skills as part of their academic and personal identity.

The study reveals that non-educational online games are valuable tools that youths can choose to use in order to improve their English skills in an informal environment, which would complement other more formal language-learning contexts. These non-educational games can be used to educate in the same way as serious games which “aim to teach, inform, train or test uses users while they play” (Alvarez & Michaud 2008: 9).

**Literature Review**

**Understanding Gaming: Objectives, rewards, and motivation**

Online video gaming can be defined as a leisure activity involving a computer or other technical support such as mobile phones or video consoles, with additional equipment such as a keyboard, console, and headphones. Games are part of all cultural identities in general, albeit Johan Huizinga argued that “play is older than culture” (Huizinga 1988: 1). Video games are no exception in triggering “powerful emotional responses, such as curiosity, frustration and joy” (Buckley & Doyle 2016: 1162; McGonigal 2011). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Henritius et al. found that user “satisfaction” was the most common emotion-related concept related to studies of virtual learning, of which gaming is an example (2019).

Like other games, video games have final objectives and specific rules. These rules need to be understood and progressively mastered to advance in the game. Video games are based on a rewards system for achieving certain levels, achieving goals or overcoming obstacles (Smith-Robbins 2011; Glover 2013; Buckley & Doyle 2016). These rewards can take the virtual form of tokens, ranks, prizes, badges, or trophies. Zicherman and Cunningham (2011) refer to these types of rewards as SAPS (Status, Access, Power and Stuff). Buckley and Doyle acutely point out that rewards for learning are paradigmatic to current educational systems where grade and qualification “trophies” are key to their rewards system (Buckley & Doyle 2016: 3). Likewise, the competitive element of gaming results in a leader board ranking top achieving players. These rankings are
“publicly and instantly recognized” (Buckley & Doyle 2016: 3; Domínguez et al. 2013). One recent example of public ranking of this kind was 16-year-old Kyle Giersdorf who won $3 million as the highest scoring *Fortnite* player (Taylor & Chokshi 2019).

A feature specific to gaming, as opposed to more formal educational contexts, is perhaps the greater acceptance of failure as part of the gaming or educational journey:

> A key objective of most games is not to forbid failure but to develop a positive relationship with it. Failure is not seen as an end, but as a step on the journey to mastery. (Buckley & Doyle 2016: 3)

Gaming is thus understood as a problem-solving, rule-driven, competitive, and reward-based activity. It is for this reason that gaming can be categorized as a virtual learning activity firmly associated to the world of education. Virtual learning is considered as “non-physical learning that utilizes technology including online and offline solutions” (Henritius et al. 2019: 80). The definition of virtual learning is closely aligned to the definition of gaming as being representative of learning via technology. However, gamers initiate the activity in online gaming, whereas educators initiate virtual learning in formal institutional contexts. This is a first step in understanding motivation for gaming but also in understanding those who are behind the scenes of virtual technology. In gaming, product designers and marketers have specific sales objectives and motives (Zichermann & Cunningham 2011; Buckley & Doyle 2016). Educators also wish to align their students’ activities with their institutional rewards system, whilst working within the constraints of institutional demands.

The motivational drive for gaming is strongly tied to motivational theories in relation to why learners wish to learn. The two main types of categories of student motivation are usually referred to as intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci et al. 2001) although these categories are broad strokes of much finer and contextualized categories. If intrinsic motivation involves learners being interested in the tasks themselves, then this could apply to gamers who enjoy gaming as an activity: “Some learn for pleasure or to satisfy curiosity, whereas others learn to obtain rewards” (Buckley & Doyle 2016: 5).

If extrinsic motivation involves learners wishing to learn as a means to an end (for example, winning the game, or achieving a grade), then gaming also involves extrinsic motivation.

**Insights into Gaming Interaction**

Current virtual learning theories argue that successful language learning occurs “in the wild” (Thorne 2010: 144) and that the online interaction provided by gaming gives L2 speakers access to real talk rather than the techniques used in the second language classroom such as simulations or role-playing activities (Kohn & Hoffstaedter 2017; Thorne 2010). Communication during online game play takes many forms. Firstly, in the form of synchronous activities such as instant messaging, written texts, and talking via headsets. Secondly, in the form of asynchronous activities such as forums and online reviews. Asynchronous texts in gaming are referred to as “paratexts” (Burwell 2017). Asynchronous online learning is defined as learning that occurs without a real-time component (Majeski et al. 2016: 111). Learners can use paratexts surrounding the game frames in their own time and at their own pace. L2 speakers of English use these texts in the same way as they would read for the purposes of learning English, for example by looking up words they did not know. Asynchronous learning involving
paratexts, which particularly focuses on reading and writing skills, is autonomous and self-directed (Sanborn 2016).

Gamers are sometimes required to communicate through computer-controlled characters by selecting an option in order to advance in the game. This method of communicating through gaming is an example of controlled language practice whereby gamers choose between different options. This is the case in some online games where the players can only communicate through predefined answers. This can be seen in Figures 1 and 2 where the pre-defined choices are thank, emote, hello, need healing, group up, ultimate status, voice line and acknowledge. The game interface, in this case, limits communication between the players.

Figure 1: Predefined phrases in Overwatch

Player's name has been obscured for anonymity.

Credits: Overwatch. Blizzard Entertainment.
Gamers can also engage in free creative writing when they write open messages to communicate with the other human controlled players. In Figure 3, we can see that the players are able to write freely to communicate with each other. The chat box allows players to communicate with other players without any pre-defined language restrictions. The players then choose to communicate in long or short sentences, using general or game-specific acronyms.
Multi-modality is a feature of the online game environment and is related to working memory (Wei et al. 2018). Multitasking ability in a multi-modal game involves several executive cognitive functions, including inhibition, interference control, and working memory (Chang et al. 2017: 654; Miyake & Friedman 2000). Learning with online gaming can be attributed to the functions of Information Processing Theory (IPT), which is based on the review process induced from short-term to long-term acquisition (Wei et al. 2018). One variant of IPT is Cognitive Information Processing (CIP), which is made up of three different components: knowledge, decision-making skills, and executive processing domain, i.e. thinking about thinking (Reardon & Wright 1999). Research has shown the importance of information processing theory in relation to multi-modal learning contexts, as well as being increasingly supported by cognitive neuroscience research (Wentzel & Miele 2016; Tangen & Borders 2017). Yip and Kwan (2006) have shown that online games helped to achieve both learning and longer memory retention in participants. In addition, online games that feature several gamers can be considered as complex forms of interactive media that challenge social and cognitive skills (Thorne et al. 2009).

Learning through games can increase motivation, reduce anxiety and promote educational outcomes (Young & Wang 2014). Indeed, anxiety when learning a foreign language can be attributed to the feeling of inability to use the second language and the skills that accompany it (Wei et al. 2018). Additionally, Elkhafaifi (2005) has shown that students who suffer from second language anxiety tend to underestimate their ability and eventually have lower scores and performances. Although gamers may be anxious...
about losing a game, the English language they use is a means to an end, rather than the primary objective of play.

Gaming, where users put into application their already existing language repertoires in an informal context, involves verbal expression. In the case of online gaming, the game is the main goal and English language learning a secondary outcome of the gaming experience. This explains why some gamers are not deterred by playing an online game in English. The motivation to game overcomes the language barrier — if English can still be considered a as barrier for French university students who use English in a variety of both academic and non-academic contexts (Reynolds 2016). With practice, the second language (English) becomes an inherent feature of gaming as a global leisure activity through which English is used as a lingua franca.

Some learners of English may decide to immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment to improve their English language skills and gain access to a community of practice (Wenger 1999). It is through communities of practice that language learning takes place (Wenger 1999). This is because context and social interaction are key when learning a language (Lantolf & Thorne 2006). In particular, gaming helps players develop their communication skills without having to travel physically (Ducheneaut & Moore 2004). Gaming is one way of breaking down the geographical barriers between speakers of English. The nature of online activity creates a sense of community amongst the different members (Jiangnan et al. 2014); this is particularly relevant in online gaming communities (Hsiao & Chiou 2017).

Research question

The aim of this paper is to examine student attitudes to language learning in relation to online video gaming in English as a leisure activity. Examples of oral and written English used by players when gaming were collected into a small corpus to better assess the attributes of English within the context of online gaming.

Methods

The present study is based on the testimonies of 90 French speakers of English who use online games in English. The participants were students from the School of Science of the University of Bordeaux, France, who played online games outside of university hours as a leisure activity. The participants were 21 years old on average; 85% were male. All of the participants indicated that they spoke at least two languages, English being the first of their second languages. The qualitative methods used were a questionnaire and semi-directive interviews and photographs taken of gaming language written as desktop graffiti.

The participants were asked which online games they played in English and how they communicated with other players in English. The participants were also asked if they could recall specific vocabulary related to gaming. The participants were asked if gaming had helped them develop their English language skills. The full interview schedule is included in the appendix. Pseudonyms were attributed to the participants.
Results

The participants spend an average of 16 hours a week playing video games, i.e. just over two hours a day. This result shows that the participants spent more time gaming in English than they did attending their English class at the School of Science. Most (84%) of the gamers communicated with other gamers through the written form, although 67.8% also communicated with other gamers orally using headphones and a microphone. We include listening skills among 'oral skills' as the study shows that participants were able to listen, understand, and respond to a variety of English speakers. Over half of the games gave the players the option to communicate verbally or through written text.

The most striking result of this study was that 84.4% of the participants reported that gaming helped them to improve their English. The following sections discuss how English was used and learnt through gaming.

Questionnaire Responses: Attitudes to English language learning through gaming

Gaming gave the participants a wide range of contexts through which they could practice and learn English. Indeed, ‘learning English’ was mainly equated with acquiring vocabulary. This is because most of the games cited were configured in English and the gamers therefore had to use English to understand the instructions and rules of the game. The use of online multiplayer games was also the reason given for playing in English (as using English allowed them to communicate with other players).

119 online games were cited by the participants, of which the most popular were: League of Legends (57 citations), Counter Strike (38 citations), Minecraft (33 citations), Overwatch (18 citations), Call of Duty (14 citations), World of Warcraft (13 citations). League of Legends is a role-playing game involving real time strategy. Counter Strike, Global Offensive Overwatch and Call of Duty are multiplayer First-Person shooter games. World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) and Minecraft is a multiplayer online Indie Sandbox game. The results show that the most cited game types were multiplayer First-Person shooter and role-playing games. On average, the participants played 2.7 games where the game’s language settings were in English and 1.6 games where English oral (speaking and listening) communication was necessary to progress in the game.

The nature of the online game influences the degree to which the players interact with each other in English. Online multiplayer gaming, for example, involves complex English communication skills, including cooperation and negotiation with other players. The nature of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) lends itself to interaction between players where they must communicate and work together in order to solve problems and complete tasks to advance in the game (Voulgari et al. 2014). MMOGs are therefore accessible learning environments for many because they are:

Extensions of life in a quite strict sense, since they recruit and externalise some of the most fundamental features of how beings orient themselves in and to the real world, especially when they are operating at their best. (Gee 2005: 95)

When the players are working together to advance in the game by finding objects, defeating enemies, solving puzzles, etc., they encounter a wide variety of vocabulary.
This can be, for example, objects and places within the game or the verbs used to control the movement of the online characters. As shown in Figure 4, the game provides the players with directional (steer and drift), positioning (tilt), and movement (accelerate) vocabulary that can be applied to other areas of English.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Mario Kart 8: Game Play in English

Whether the participants associated the acquisition of vocabulary with the gaming context was addressed by asking them if they associated specific words to the world of gaming. The participants were asked if they could identify any particular words they had learnt when video gaming. Although the working hypothesis was that participants might not be able to identify a particular given context through which specific vocabulary had been acquired, the participants nevertheless disproved this hypothesis by citing 328 words that they had learnt through gaming. 71 participants provided a word list of an average of 4.6 words that they related to gaming specifically. These words were principally nouns (209) such as “a shovel, a pickaxe, a chainmail and forklift”. Full phrases were also cited, including: “make your acquaintance”, “I’m heading west” and “There’s a sniper on that hill!” The vocabulary cited by the respondents according to semantic fields is summarised in Table 1. The full list of words cited by the respondents is reproduced in the Appendix.

Table 1: Table of vocabulary per grammatical form cited by the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Interjections</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Adverbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
65% of the words cited by the participants were nouns; verbs accounted for 24% of the words learnt through gaming. When comparing these results to the LOB (Lancaster Oslo Bergen) corpus, our “gaming” corpus contained a higher percentage of nouns. This can be explained by online gaming involving places and objects within the game scenery. These noun objects are also the prizes which the players need to collect as they progress through the game. The results show that the nouns fell into five main lexical fields (Table 2) related to the places and objects which the participants used in the games.

Table 2: Gaming word categories per lexical field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical Theme</th>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>Weaponry</th>
<th>Minerals</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nouns were categorised according to lexical themes, revealing a trend in mining and wartime vocabulary. The gaming nouns cited by the participants showed examples of concrete nouns (such as gate, shovel, ore, chainmail, library), and abstract nouns (health, tournament, and heist). Not surprisingly, the lexical fields were linked to the general game themes: Minecraft teaches geological and landscape vocabulary such as iron and coal because it is a game based on mining materials and creating buildings; Call of Duty teaches modern warfare terms including barracks and assault rifle.

The results show that gaming in English allows students to learn unusual and quirky words that they may not necessarily come across in formal language learning contexts. However, this does not mean that these expressions are useless. Language is a repertoire that can be used and cross-referenced in multiple contexts according to need. Such quirky words include insults and inappropriate phrases, such as retarded, dummy, you suck and noob. Insults and rude words are not words participants use in their formal English language classroom. Gaming gives learners the opportunity to hear and use these phrases in an appropriate context and also gives them access to vernacular English.

Gaming as a Global Community of English Speakers

Overall, the participants could give specific examples of where their co-gamers were geographically located. Figure 5 shows the detail of the countries mentioned in the participants’ open responses. The most often cited examples referred to countries belonging to the European Union. The result relating to identifying co-gamer location shows that the players were acutely aware of where their co-gamers were located and could give specific information regarding their geographic location. It must be noted...
however, that location does not equate with nationality. The participants gained location information via the gaming software, which sometimes geographically positions players on a map. The participants also gained this information by chatting with their co-gamers. It is noteworthy that the gamers know where they are in relation to each other: having access to geographical knowledge about other players reveals a specificity of gaming as an online but situated community of practice. The results also show that the players engaged in small talk (about their geographical locations) and that they were therefore not only “gaming”. The games themselves serve not only as an area of play, but also as a communicative environment where gamers learn about each other.

The participants either decided to refer to their co-gamers as “Europeans”, or identified the countries belonging to Europe. Great Britain, in keeping with Brexit, was identified as non-European by the participants. After Europe, Great Britain and the United States were high-ranking examples of locations more traditionally associated with English language use (see Figure 4 for full details). Nevertheless, English was undoubtedly the language of gaming in all of these locations. The present study therefore confirms the international aspect of gaming in English, where no continent is left unmentioned. The gamers were aware of the international aspect of gaming and referred to gaming as international. As in other areas, such as scientific and academic English (Reynolds 2016; Phillipson 1992; Kachru 1992; Kachru 1986), gamers agreed that, overall, the de facto language of gaming was also English. One French-speaking participant remarked that he used English even when “gaming” with other French-speaking players and said: “I’m speaking English, even with French players.” (Anonymous survey response)

Figure 5: Word frequency of countries mentioned by gamers in the open questionnaire responses
The students who were interviewed were asked whether they felt that gaming had helped them to improve their English and if so, how. In keeping with the questionnaire responses, the participants reported that gaming helped them with their English. One participant believed that his English language skills were almost entirely due to gaming: “90% of my English learning came from speaking with people in games” (Pascal).

Another participant believed that online gaming in English had helped him to keep up with his English classes in lycée (high school) despite never having attended English lessons at middle school:

Je n’avais pas de cours d’anglais, jusqu’au lycée... J’ai réussi à suivre [des cours d’anglais] malgré que [sic] je n’ai jamais eu de cours d’anglais et je pense que c’est que du coup [sic] grâce aux jeux vidéo. (Thomas)

Translation: I never had any English classes, not until high school... I managed to follow [English classes] despite never having had English classes and I think that it was thanks to video games.

Robert, a C1 level speaker of English, also believed that his current level of English was entirely “due to playing in English realms on World of Warcraft.” He explained that he had had enough of playing in French realms and therefore turned to English ones. In addition, Robert met a British player in the game and they became friends. He believed his spoken English improved as they talked regularly both within and outside of the game. Robert believed his general English skills improved overall because gaming gave him access to a community of practice. It must be noted, however, that the participants were not pre- or post-tested for language proficiency, and their testimonies were a general impression of their self-assessed proficiency levels.

Three of the interviewed students believed that the games only helped them learn specific vocabulary. Anthony said that playing Minecraft taught him words such as “grass”, “hardened clay” and “rocks”. Whereas five other students said that they even learnt basic words when gaming. For example, Thomas remembered travelling to an English-speaking country and being able to recall the word “chair” from the games that he had played.

One of the main ways the students improved their English was through the forums, vlogs, and tournaments associated with the games they played. Benjamin explained that gamers play with a wide range of other nationalities, and since English is the language of communication, this was the only way he could understand everyone. Benjamin therefore described that all his English skills improved through gaming. His oral skills (speaking and listening) in English improved through talking to a variety of English speakers, and his reading and writing skills improved through participation in forums, vlogs and chats. This result is in keeping with the reference to the global English community of players referred to in the questionnaire results: “When playing and chatting with ten people from different countries, that’s when we really improve our English.” (Benjamin)

Three of the students mentioned that either there was no French translation of the less mainstream games or that the quality of the French translations was poor. The French translations could even confuse gamers, especially when looking for help. For example, the character Barnes in Zelda, Twilight Princess is called Crahmé in the French version of Zelda, Twilight Princess is called Crahmé in the French version of...
The nomenclature of character names is a rich aspect of gaming and contributes to the general knowledge of gaming. Barnes's name may be a pun on 'burns', a point echoed in the French version with his translated name as Crahmé, a pun on the French slang for burnt, or 'cramé'. Not knowing the English name of a character could penalize a player who was looking for help, whereas having access to the English name of a character would enable a player to find help about the character in an English forum, for example. The participants' English was good enough to read instructions in English and gain more meaning from the English texts than in the poorer French translations. The students explained that being able to use English was also an advantage when searching for help and advice in forums. The participants could gain more help in English and they had more difficulty in finding the information they needed in French. Given that most paratexts in gaming are in English, the gamer has a better chance of finding an answer to a question in English than in French.

The only disadvantage relating to gaming in English that Robert and Anthony mentioned was that there were no “native speakers of English” in their group chat and no one to correct their English. They believed that this meant that they would “continue to make the same mistakes”. This result shows that some participants still favoured native-like role models of the English language.

Nevertheless, the results show that the online nature of the exchanges between the players made the speakers feel more confident when trying to communicate in English (both within the game and when interacting with others in English when not gaming):

[Gaming] can decrease the shyness... because we just make conversations in English in a written way and so when we are speaking to other people we can remember the sentences, the forms, we have used to talk with other people and these sentences are then memorized and we can just use them without being shy or making mistakes because if we have made it, we’ve already made it in the game and some people have corrected us. (Anthony)

**Gaming as a Bounded Leisure Activity**

Despite having said that gaming helped their English, the students were unanimous in not wishing to mix pleasure with work. The students were asked if they would be in favour of a gaming room at the University Language Centre, for example. They did not favour a gaming room for the following reasons: gaming was described by Robert as “an escape from reality”, especially from the formal setting of the University of Bordeaux; Thomas did not see the appeal of a room with online games he already had at home, and Robert did not like the idea of being “forced” to play an online game at University. Online gaming was considered a home leisure activity. However, the participants welcomed other types of games being used in an educational context (as long as this did not involve consoles or online games). Brigitte and Benjamin were in favour for using interactive multiplayer quizzes such as Kahoot and Jackbox in the classroom. Interactive multiplayer quizzes were indeed used on the participants’ mobile phones in the physical presence of their peers and their English teacher. The participants' attitudes to their formal English language learning were mixed and often critical:

To be honest, we all know that English teachers, at high school, they're really, really awful, most of them at least, and it wasn't really working for anyone even. I was just in a corner of the room not saying anything or participating because I just didn't care at all. It's a bit different, but I know that it’s not thanks to them that I'm fluent in English. (Robert)
The participants also agreed that they still needed formal English classes in order to continue improving in English:

We need formal classes and gaming. When gaming we use franglais [a mix of French and English], or don't get corrected but in class we are forced to work on more complicated structures. (Thomas)

Overall, the interviews revealed that the virtual world of gaming was reported as being distinct from formal English language learning contexts at University. The use of English for gaming was not perceived as difficult, or as an impediment to gaming successfully. The use of English for gaming could therefore be attributed as a home language on a par with diglossic language contexts (Ferguson 1959). English language progression was mostly related to progressing as a gamer and could yield similar language progression (e.g. in the acquisition of specific lexis).

**Gaming Language as Desktop Graffiti at the University of Bordeaux**

The community of global English-speaking gamers also affects the identities of the participants on a local level. In a parallel ongoing PhD study, Peake is studying desktop graffiti at the University of Bordeaux. Desktop graffiti are defined as “student-authored graffiti on student desktops” (Ball 2019: 1). Peake’s study reveals that gaming is part of students’ bilingual identities at the University of Bordeaux. Examples of desktop graffiti written in English in the lecture halls of the University of Bordeaux confirmed that gaming is relevant to student identity. Table 3 (a-f) gives examples of gaming terms found written or etched on desks at the University of Bordeaux:

**Table 3 a: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IT’S ME!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MARIO!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo: J. Peake.
Table 3 b: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux

TEAM
Photo: J. Peake.

Table 3 c: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux

SVTE
FIRST
LOOSERS
Photo: J. Peake.
Table 3 d: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux

OY LOOSER
AN WINNER
Photo: J. Peake.

Table 3 e: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux

CALL OF DUTY
JE SUIS LE MASTODONTE
Photo: J. Peake.

Table 3 f: Gaming reference found on desktops at the University of Bordeaux

LOL
NOOB
FAG
Photo: J. Peake.
These examples of desktop graffiti reveal that students decide to transfer texts from their virtual gaming environment to their local physical environments. The misspelt noun “loosers” refers to gaming terminology, but can also be a judgment on the abilities of either their lecturers or their peers. Catchphrases of popular games are referred to by the table-top writers, such as “It’s *me! Mario!” (3a) (a reference to the opening credits of *Super Mario*). There are also hybrid phrases such as: “*Call of Duty, Je suis le mastodonte*” (3e), with *mastodonte* referring to a heavily armoured character (a juggernaut) in the *Call of Duty* game series. “Noob” (3f) is a common insult used for gamers who are losing and implies that they are inexperienced players (*Noob* comes from the word *new* or *newbie*).

The appearance of gaming graffiti at the University of Bordeaux can be interpreted as either acts of desktop vandalism or text art (Jaworski 2014) created by the students. In this case, students use their knowledge of both English and gaming to inscribe fictional stories on real (in this case, institutional) objects. That gaming should be used as the subject of these inscriptions reinforces the results that showed the practice (English) language of gaming is considered a counter-institutional act where “the meaning of graffiti is to protest, to defy” (Gross & Gross 2016).

**Conclusion**

Gaming is a non-institutionalised activity in which English is one of the key tools. The study reveals that English, rather than French, is the language of online global gaming. English language skills gave the participants access to international communities of gamers where the use of French was a barrier to comprehension and communication. The immersive aspects of the online game gave the L2 speakers of English the ability to travel virtually outside of their L1 local language environment. In addition, the repetitive nature of online games and gaming vocabulary helped the participants to learn English words and phrases without the impression of being drilled.

As the present study consisted of French-speaking university students who also learnt English at university, careful attention was given to how the participants compared informal gaming in English to more formal English language learning activities. The results showed that student participants had no negative associations with gaming in English, whereas their attitudes to formal language learning were more mixed. The students appreciated being able to game in English as a leisure activity which was separate from formal education. Gaming as escapism from formal university education was also confirmed by the appearance of gaming graffiti at the University of Bordeaux as acts of desktop vandalism. These examples of gaming graffiti reinforce the non-institutional and counter-institutional dimensions of gaming.

Motivation to play comes above and beyond language learning interests despite the participants also reporting that they learnt English through gaming. The study therefore reveals that leisure activities, such as gaming, which involve communicating with other speakers in English are key to successful and positive attitudes to language learning as a whole.
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APPENDIXES

A survey about gaming

- How many hours on average do you (or did you) spend playing games a week?
- What games do you play in which you communicate (orally or through written texts) with other players in English?
- Which countries do the other gamers come from?
- How do you communicate with other players, by written or oral communication?
  - Oral, written, other:
- Gaming has helped me to improve my overall English skills:
  - Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree
- Can you give some examples of any words that you have learnt through gaming?
- How old are you?
- What gender are you?
- Would you be available for an interview?
  - If yes, please write your email address in the box below

Gaming in English: Interview schedule

- Why do you play video games?
- What games do you play?
- What type of games are they?
- Does gaming help your English?
- If yes, how does it help your English?
- When do you use English?
  - Game play
  - Oral Communication
  - Forums
  - Walkthroughs
- Does being good at English help during the game?
- Can you apply the English learnt to any other areas?
- How should games/gaming be used at the university?
- Should the university favour educational or non-educational games?
- Would you be in favour of a gaming room with consoles at the language centre?
- What do you think of the translations of the games?

List of words cited by the respondents, listed alphabetically

- Angles
- 11 | 2020
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### NOTES

1. Online gaming is a term used to refer to video gaming which uses the internet.
2. Drilling is an example of mechanical practice (Richards 2014) consisting in making pupils or students orally repeat target vocabulary or structures.
3. Online informal learning of English is defined as incidental language learning that takes place online (Sockett 2014).
4. Serious games are defined as games that “have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (Abt 1970: 9).
5. The term ‘gaming’ will be used to refer to the activity of players who are involved in ‘video gaming’.
6. Motivation is a theoretical framework for understanding learner behaviour and orientation (Ryan & Deci 2000).
7. See Buckley and Doyle (2016) for an overview of motivation in relation to gamification, as well as Vallerand et al. (1992).
8. The questionnaire was sent out to 200 undergraduates who study at Collège Sciences et Technologies, University of Bordeaux, where the authors also work. 90 participants responded to the survey. Eight of these participants were subsequently interviewed. Participants could signal whether they wished to be interviewed in the questionnaire.
9. Their specialities were either Geology, Computer Science, Maths, Chemistry, or Physics.
10. According to *l’Essentiel du Jeu Vidéo* (October 2019), men represent 52% of gamers in France. The present study shows a higher percentage of male gamers, but this is perhaps in keeping with the proportion of male to female students at the School of Science of the University of Bordeaux which made up the participants of this study.

11. The use of English in French Higher Education, and increasingly in wider society, is classified as a second language and not as a foreign language (Reynolds 2016; Kachru 1992). French schoolchildren usually learn two second languages: English and Spanish, or English and German, for example, in keeping with the multilingual language policy of the European Commission.

12. All translations provided by the authors.

13. This CEFR level was gleaned by the authors (trained language proficiency assessors) during interviews.

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**ABSTRACTS**

Gaming, where users put into application their language repertoire in an informal context, involves language. For speakers of English as a Second Language (L2), gaming provides access to the wider English-speaking community of English as *lingua franca* speakers (Jenkins 2015; Kachru 1986). According to Thorne et al. online games “comprise the most socially and cognitively complex forms of interactive media currently available” (2009: 808). To this end, gamers use language through a variety of modes, including speaking and writing. In addition, the skills and capacities needed to instant-message whilst gaming are forming new types of literacy and communication (Godwin-Jones 2004). In accordance with online language learning theories which argue that language learning occurs “in the wild” (Thorne 2010: 144), online interaction can give L2 speakers access to “real talk” rather than the simulated or role-played talk of the second language classroom (Kohn & Hoffstaedter 2017). Motivation for learning a language for gaming can therefore be aligned to intrinsic motivational language learning models (Ryan & Deci 2000; Wæge 2007). The present study considers French youths who use online games in English and asks what makes the language and environment of gaming an accessible way to learn English. The methods used were an online survey and interviews of students at the University of Bordeaux who reported on how gaming helped them to improve their English through immersion. The results show that the online nature of the exchanges between the speakers made the speakers feel more confident when trying to communicate in English (both within the game and when interacting with others in English when not gaming). In addition, the repetitive nature of games and gaming vocabulary helped the participants to learn English words and phrases without the impression of being drilled. The immersive experience facilitated by games gave L2 speakers of English the ability to travel virtually outside of their L1 local language environment.

forment de nouvelles formes de littérature et communication (Godwin-Jones 2004). Conformément aux théories de l’apprentissage des langues en ligne, qui soutiennent que l’apprentissage des langues a lieu dans « dans un contexte naturel » (Thorne 2010: 144), l’interaction en ligne peut donner aux utilisateurs de l’anglais comme deuxième langue un accès à un « langage réel » plutôt qu’à un langage simulé ou relevant des discussions liées à des jeux de rôles survenant dans les cours de langues (Kohn & Hoffstaedter 2017). La motivation pour apprendre une langue à des fins de jeux en ligne peut donc s’aligner sur celle de la motivation intrinsèque aux modèles existants concernant l’apprentissage des langues (Ryan & Deci 2000; Wæge 2007). Cette étude s’intéresse à des jeunes français utilisant des jeux en ligne en anglais pour se demander dans quelle mesure le langage et l’environnement des jeux en ligne constituent un moyen accessible d’apprendre l’anglais. Nous nous appuyons sur un sondage en ligne et plusieurs entretiens réalisés auprès d’étudiants de l’Université de Bordeaux qui avaient affirmé avoir amélioré leur anglais à travers l’immersion dans les jeux en ligne. Les résultats montrent que la nature virtuelle des échanges entre les participants a rendu les communicants plus confiants dans leur manière de s’exprimer en anglais (que ce soit dans le contexte des jeux en ligne ou en dehors). De plus, la nature répétitive et le vocabulaire des jeux semblent avoir aidé les participants à apprendre de nouveaux mots et phrases en anglais sans avoir l’impression d’avoir été forcés à les apprendre par cœur. L’aspect immersif des jeux a ainsi donné à ceux dont l’anglais est la deuxième langue la capacité de voyager « virtuellement » hors de leur environnement linguistique familier.

INDEX

Mots-clés: jeux en ligne, environnement d’apprentissage virtuel, motivation, apprentissage de l’anglais, jeux vidéo, jeux
Keywords: online gaming, virtual learning environment, motivation, English language learning, video games, games

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Varia
 Churches, City and National Identity in Mid-19th Century Edinburgh

Clarisse Godard Desmarest

Introduction

As the days lengthen towards the close of May, and the foliage grows thicker in the Princes-street and Queen-street gardens, an unusual influx of black coats and white neckcloths announces the season of the annual meeting of the Scottish Convocation, the Supreme legislative and judicial court of the Kirk, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The ecclesiastics of Scotland have chosen for their meeting [...] twelve days divided between the latest of May and the earliest of June [...] the streets swarm with clergymen of every possible diversity of appearance, and from every corner of Scotland [...] not only does the General Assembly of the Kirk meet at this time, but also that of the “Free Church,” which has closely copied the organization of the national establishment: there are more clergymen, for the time, in Edinburgh than there are priests in Rome. (Fraser’s Magazine 1856: 1)

This quote is from an article entitled “Edinburgh during the General Assembly.” The Free Church was established in 1843, when 450 evangelical ministers of the Established Church broke away under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) mainly over the issue of the Church’s relationship with the State, an event known as the Great Disruption and whose principle goes back to Andrew Melville who advocated, in the Second Book of Discipline (1578), the ‘two kingdoms’ theory whereby the Church and the State were deemed separate spheres of influence (particularly on the thorny issue of patronage). The Disruption was an event “by which the greater part of the evangelical clergy of the Established Church voluntarily relinquished their livings and their resources, rather than yield to the Erastian principles adopted by the civil government”, as explained by the Rev. Dr. Duff, Moderator of the Free Church in 1851 (The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review 1851: 575). In this new Reformation aiming to restore the spiritual independence of the Church — Chalmers famously declared “let kings retain their sceptres and nobles their coronets” (Watt 1946: 4) — and the purity of doctrine, the training of divinity students who had joined the Free Church and would...
train students for the ministry was deemed essential. The Free Church’s new training college was opened in 1846 on the Mound (as will be explained later), next to Victoria Hall, the recently-opened building which housed the headquarters of the rival Church of Scotland:

The tourist or visitor from the south, who has sauntered along that unrivalled Princes-street, must have observed, high up on the Castle Rock, a little way down the slope towards Holyrood, a noble spire, of, we believe, some two hundred and fifty feet in height, and in its design not unworthy of Pugin. That spire marks the position of “The Assembly Hall,” a handsome Gothic building, which was erected at a vast expense for the use of the General Assembly, and is so arranged as to be used as a church during the remainder of the year. (Fraser’s Magazine 1856: 2)

Rather unusually for a paper which argues its topic has a global context, the prime focus will be here on the two buildings mentioned above — Edinburgh’s Victoria Hall and the Free Church College. It has been argued that these two buildings inaugurated a transitional period when the Old Town, all but rejected by the 18th-century ‘Improvers’, was regenerated. My wider aim is to show how the urban landscape and the historic setting of Edinburgh, revived for the purpose as Scotland’s ancient capital, was used by two rival national Churches to each assert its significance and historic entitlement; and to suggest that the impact of each building as rival headquarters was not just local, but national, and indeed — in the context of British Empire, colonialism and maritime commerce — global. This conclusion is drawn by studying a tiny hub of only two buildings which almost touch each other in the Old Town, within immediate proximity to the Castle. This paper therefore fixes upon a moment in history and a location in central Edinburgh that is rich in cultural, ecclesiastical, urban and architectural history. The story of this episode and site has been previously referred to in other Scottish publications, but it has not been pulled together in a comprehensive manner, partly because different specialists have approached it from their own points of view, whereas this paper will examine together the story’s ecclesiastical, urban and architectural aspects.

This paper further argues that by the mid-19th century, the Lawnmarket area formed a ‘holy corner’, and all this new building was in proximity to the ancient cathedral or High Church of Edinburgh, St Giles, further down the High Street towards Holyrood Palace. Viewed from Princes Street, the Free Church building and the Church of Scotland building, both in dialogue (as discussed below), had a dominating presence in the urban landscape — as also had the nearby Bank of Scotland building (by Richard Crichton & Robert Reid, 1806), deeply plain, until extravagantly reconstructed in swaggering baroque in 1864 (by David Bryce [1803-76]) to match the churches’ aesthetic vigour.

**Victoria Hall and the Lawnmarket area**

In the late 1830s, the Church of Scotland decided to build a new assembly hall at the top of the Lawnmarket; because of the national status of the Church, it would be called Victoria Hall, after the monarch, and would be paid for by public funds. Of the total cost of £16,000, the Town Council paid £6,000 and the Treasury the rest, including £3,600 for the site. It was erected under the provisions of the Edinburgh Improvement Act of 1827. This building is the result of a request addressed by the Treasury to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests (officials charged with the management of Crown lands) “to
consider and report the most economical arrangement that could be made for providing a proper place of meeting for the General Assembly and the Royal Burghs, in lieu of the present Aisle”. In 1834, the General Assembly complained of bad acoustics in St Giles; on 13 June 1834, the Committee of Woods and Forests replied with a report (dated 30 May 1834) by Robert Reid (1774-1856), the Master of Works in Scotland (royal architect), who suggested means of getting rid of the echo sound which would be necessary if the aisle became a church. Reid wrote “that in every other respect the present Hall is most admirably suited to the meetings”, and he added that he did not imagine that any satisfactory site could be procured on which to build a new place of meeting. On 25 March 1836, following the reports produced by two Edinburgh architects, William Burn (1789-1870) and William H. Playfair (1790-1857), the Commissioners of Woods and Forests “had arrived at the conclusion that no alteration that could be made in the Aisle of St Giles Cathedral [that] would be likely to make that building suitable for conducting the business of the General Assembly, and that the only way of bringing the matter to a satisfactory result is to build a New Hall”. The Treasury suggested selling the aisle to the City as a church and recommended the restoration of Holyrood Abbey as a hall-cum-church; the Abbey kirk had been abandoned as a ruin when its roof collapsed in 1768. James Gillespie Graham (1776-1855) was consulted on the potential restoration of the roofless building, and his estimate in April 1837 was £20,276 (excluding professional fees), but the Treasury was not prepared to go ahead with the work.

A rumoured Castle Hill site was not considered suitable by the General Assembly. However, on 24 December 1838, the City agreed to cooperate in providing the General Assembly with a Hall on condition that it be used also as a church, and suggested two sites (Castle Hill and Parliament Square), and the Treasury had plans for a church for Parliament Square (plans by Robert Reid) and also a ground plan of the Castle Hill site. The Treasury eventually decided on the Castle Hill site on 11 January 1839 and on the cost detailed above. A rival of Robert Reid and a man of incredible ambition, James Gillespie Graham secured this nationally important commission and his plans (drawn by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin [1812-52], Graham’s amanuensis) were approved in November 1839. The architect sent working drawings in March 1840. It is said that Gillespie Graham and Pugin befriended when the latter was ship-wrecked off the coast at Leith, and several of Gillespie Graham’s buildings benefited from Pugin’s prodigious talent and knowledge. As detailed in the Dean of Guild Petition, dated 4 February 1841, “The said new Church and Assembly Hall is to have three parts — the North front facing the street of the Castle Hill, the south front facing the new west approach to the city, and the east front looking to the West Bow and the Lawnmarket” (Figures 1-3). No objections were made by the proprietors of the adjoining tenement, called Rockeville House or Rockeville’s Land, to the west of the area where the church was planned to be built.
Figure 1: Victoria Hall, Outline of Ground and Plan of the Assembly Hall to be erected on the Castle Hill by Pugin and Gillespie Graham, 28 January 1841

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Figure 2: Victoria Hall, South Elevation of the Assembly Hall to be erected on the Castle Hill by Pugin and Gillespie Graham, 28 January 1841

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Victoria Hall (afterwards the Old Tolbooth Church), on Castlehill, was built in the Gothic style by Gillespie Graham and Pugin, 1841-44, at a cost of about £16,000 — John Lind was the master builder (Groome 1901: 515) (Figures 4-7).
Figure 4: Victoria Hall, east entrance front, viewed from intersection of Castlehill, Johnstone Terrace and Lawnmarket

Picture taken by the author.

Figure 5: Victoria Hall, north front, viewed from Castle Hill Street

Picture taken by the author.
Figure 6: Victoria Hall, south front, viewed from Johnstone Terrace

Picture taken by the author.

Figure 7: Hill and Adamson, *View of Victoria Hall, and St Columba's Free Church*, 9 September 1844

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Pugin, in the background, had helped Charles Barry (1795-1860) (and, ironically, Gillespie Graham) in the Houses of Parliament competition at Westminster, which Barry won (Macaulay 1984: 406-420). Prior to the opening of Victoria Hall, the 1841, 1842 and 1843 General Assemblies were held in St Andrew’s Church, George Street. In the 1820s remodelling of St Giles, William Burn had made provision for the Assembly to occupy its southern part, creating an enlarged hall for it (Glendinning 2004: 211). The pre-reformation church of St Giles (with fabric dating back to the 12th century), with a catholic liturgical plan, had been adapted since the 16th century for Protestant worship and had been subdivided into four churches. By the 1840s, these were found to be inadequate and the church, in any case, was subject to remodelling as part of an important new urban design that was mainly concerned with linking up the Old Town with the New Town and with both the southern and western suburbs. Attention, therefore, now focused on the upper end of the Old Town, where an improvement scheme conceived in 1824 by Thomas Hamilton had begun to advocate new bridges and vistas.

The Lawnmarket, that area of the main street of the old city that connected the castle to St Giles, lay at the heart of this urban development, and the two new buildings discussed in this paper sit right in the middle of this developing area. The urban significance of these two buildings is key to their interpretation. John Bartholomew’s map of Edinburgh, 1864, for the Post Office Directory shows this new development, and the two churches are noted ‘Assembly Hall’ and ‘Free Church College’ (Figure 8). Victoria Hall is in clear view from the Castle esplanade, and from Princes Street and Hanover Street in the New Town (Figures 9-10).

Figure 8: John Bartholomew, Plan of Edinburgh & Leith with Suburbs, from Ordnance and Actual Surveys. Constructed for the Post Office Directory, 1864 (detail)
Figure 9: Victoria Hall, viewed from the Castle esplanade

Picture taken by the author.

Figure 10: Victoria Hall, viewed from Princes Street and Hanover Street in New Town

The spire of Victoria Hall appears between the twin square towers of Free Church.

Picture taken by the author.
As explained above, the new building was designed and built to serve both as a church for the Tolbooth congregation and the meeting hall of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; it kept this dual role until 1929, when the reunion of the United Free Church with the established Church of Scotland reversed the Disruption of 1843 and resulted in the merging of the University’s faculty of divinity with its former Free Church rival, New College. According to John Gifford, Victoria Hall was the ideal parish church of Pugin’s *True Principles of Christian Architecture* (first published in 1841):

> An old English parish church, as originally used for the ancient worship, was one of the most beautiful and appropriate buildings that the mind of man could conceive; every portion of it answered both a useful and mystical purpose. There stood the tower [...] formed of [...] solid buttresses and walls rising from a massive base, and gradually diminishing and enriching as they rise, till they were terminated in a heaven-pointing spire surrounded by clusters of pinnacles [...] (Pugin 1895: 42)

This praise notwithstanding, ironically, Pugin had converted to Catholicism in 1835 and was critical of the Scottish Kirk.

The church not only has the tallest spire in Edinburgh but is the highest building in the city. The spire was described admiringly in the *Ordnance Gazetteer*:

> At each corner [of the church] is a richly adorned pinnacle, and at the east end is a massive tower containing the chief entrance. The buttresses at the corners of the tower terminate in pinnacles, and from its top springs a handsome octagonal spire, which rises to a height of 241 feet, and forms a very prominent object in many of the views of Edinburgh. (*Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* 1901: 515)

The church stands prominent in the heart of the Old Town amidst tall, mainly 17-18th-century tenements, where, it was observed, there seems to be “some ecclesiastical gravitation to the spot” (*Fraser’s Magazine* 1856: 2). By 1856, within immediate distance from the Assembly Hall, featured St Columba’s Free Church (originally Free St John’s) (by Thomas Hamilton, 1845) (Figure 11), and St Columba by the Castle Episcopal Church (14 Johnston Terrace) (by John Henderson, 1846-7) (Gifford 1984: 167-8).
Access to the Lawnmarket from Castle Terrace to the west had been made possible thanks to the new ‘west approach’ (Johnston Terrace), which skirted the Castle on the south (Lizars 1856). Also nearby, in Victoria Street, was St John’s parish church (by George Smith, 1838). And by 1865, on Victoria Terrace (above Victoria Street), there stood also a tall-windowed Quaker church (ECA Dean of Guild 16 June 1865; *The Builder*, 19 August 1865) and a 3-bay Italian gothic church (now Baden-Powell House), each by Paterson and Sheills (ECA Dean of Guild 15 April 1865; *The Builder*, 4 November 1865).

**Victoria Hall, a citadel of British royalism**

Before Victoria Hall was built, Pugin produced a design (unexecuted) for Glasgow Cathedral, providing what appear to have been big identical twin steeples for the west front, in 1837. This was also the year the Holyrood Abbey kirk scheme (also by Pugin, 1836-7) was rejected, the year of the coronation of Queen Victoria, and of future Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel’s banquet in Glasgow. (A concern had arisen that Glasgow’s unequal west steeples were unsuitable, and they were demolished in 1846 and 1848).

As built by Gillespie Graham and Pugin, the imposing church and hall of the General Assembly (Victoria Hall) in Edinburgh takes up the whole upper floor. The processional layout survives, beginning at the entrance door under the tall spire, passing through first a handsome vaulted lobby, then along a deep passageway, which on either side had committee-rooms and other official chambers, continuing the full length of the building so far as the grand staircase at the far end. Upstairs, lit by wide windows, the church has a groined roof (flat, and its wide span is remarkable for its time), a deviation from the canons of Gothic architecture because Presbyterian worship sought to render audible voices speaking from any part of the hall. Improvements to the Hall’s acoustics were carried out in the mid-1850s. The room is dominated by a dais, elevated about
six feet above the floor of the house, and enclosed in a massive oak railing. In the
centre of this platform stands the throne bench, the seat for the Lord High
Commissioner to the General Assembly — the monarch’s representative, almost always
a Scottish nobleman. The throne was an item of importance, as shown by a letter from
Gillespie Graham to the Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Woods and Forests: “I have
given the most mature consideration to the Designs for the Throne”; two designs were
prepared by Gillespie Graham (i.e., Pugin) in 1843, with estimates from Edinburgh
upholsterer Charles Trotter (£155 and £218 each). The Throne Gallery could
accommodate 40 to 50 people. Immediately in front of it, on a slightly raised platform,
stood the chair of the Moderator, who sat with his back towards, but beneath, the
Commissioner. Other senior members of the Church sat around a large table before the
Moderator’s chair. To the right and left of the Moderator’s chair were benches. In 1869,
it was observed (perhaps light-heartedly) of these benches that those to the right were
occupied by the ‘Moderate’ or ‘Conservative Party’ and those to the left by the ‘High
flying’ or ‘Movement party’; and that because of the disposition of the seats and the
personalities in the Church, debates could compare with those in the House of
Commons (Tinsleys’ Magazine 1869: 595). Facing the throne was a large gallery; allotted
to students of theology and members of the public. The members’ part of the hall could
accommodate 600 people; the entire building about 1300. The Royal Arms in front of
the Gallery opposite the throne were provided by Trotter (who doubtless charged his
estimated cost of £23), the steeple bell by Messrs Mears, bell-founders in White Chapel,
London (they estimated £140,15,4) and both Robert Bryson and Son and James Ritchie
and Son provided estimates for the clock in the steeple (of £216 and £176 respectively).

According to Fraser’s account of the opening of the Assembly in 1865, addressing the
Commissioner who is sitting on the throne, the Moderator, a Doctor of Divinity and a
clergyman of many years’ standing, has to testify “the affection of the church to the
Throne”. Also, “The Commissioner in his speech expresses the attachment of the
monarch to the Church of Scotland, and the resolution of the monarch, under all
circumstances, to maintain the rights and privileges of the church”; the Commissioner
is also in charge of reading a letter from the sovereign to the Assembly. Although the
Commissioner (representing the Sovereign, and the secular authority) and the
Moderator (a representative of the Congregation and of God’s Word) appear
superficially to be on the best of terms, the relationship between the two was certainly
not always easy, as shown by the ending of proceedings described here in the author’s
bitter irony:

It was curious to see the little proof of the mutual jealousy of the Church and the
State, in this form of dissolving the present Assembly, and appointing the time of
meeting of the next; the Moderator doing so in the Saviour’s name, without the
least recognition of the Queen’s power to interfere; and the Commissioner doing so
in the Queen’s name, without any notice of the previous words of the Moderator.
Long may the spiritual and temporal powers work together harmoniously as now,
without hitch or hindrance (Fraser’s Magazine 1856: 17)

The Presbyterian form of government was in fact guaranteed by the monarchy and in
the 1707 Act of Union with England, before the British Parliament restored patronage
in 1712 against the wishes of the large majority in the Scottish Church. The foundation
ceremony took place on 3 September 1842 by Lord Frederick FitzClarence, the Grand
Master Mason of Scotland, in the presence of the Lord Provost, Sir James Forrest, and
the Moderator, Rev. Dr. David Welsh. Taking nothing to do with the ceremony, the
Queen, on her first visit to Scotland, waved at the attendees both on her way uphill to
the Castle and when she passed them again on her return downhill. Dick Lauder
referred to “the Victoria Hall as the building is henceforward to be called”, and quoted
the document inset within the foundation stone whose inscription included:
To the Glory of God, in Honour of THE QUEEN, on the 3d day of September
MDCCCLXII The Day of Her Most Gracious Majesty QUEEN VICTORIA Visiting the
City of Edinburgh, THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR JAMES FORREST OF COMISTON,
BARONET, Lord Provost, The Reverend David Welsh, DD, Moderator of the
Assembly, the Foundation Stone of this Superstructure, to be Called VICTORIA HALL
for the use of the GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, was laid by
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE LORD FREDERICK FITZCLARENCE, GCH, &c., Grand Master
Mason of Scotland, in presence of the Grand Lodge, and other Masonic Lodges.
JAMES GILLESPIE GRAHAM OF ORCHILL, ARCHITECT. John Lind, Master Builder of
the Hall. Length, from East to West, 141 Feet, Height of Spire over the Entrance, 241
feet. (Lauder 1843: 115)

In that document, God was mentioned once; Victoria twice — or thrice, should we count
referencing the building’s name; and each was in bolder lettering than God. The name
‘Victoria Hall’, however, sounded discordantly on the ear of many: “How strange that
the holiness of purpose which has been so carefully uttered in stone should be denied
in name! Victoria Hall! Why, Minerva Temple would hardly have a more heathenish
twang!” (Fraser’s Magazine 1848: 491). Victoria Hall was at that point arguably Scotland’s
greatest public building project of the century. The wish to highlight its two longest
dimensions in the document quoted above indicates the creators’ pride in it. It was
built by and for the Established Church which had a leading role in propagating loyal
devotion to the monarch. It would become the tallest building in the Scottish capital,
and a citadel of British royalism.

The Free Church of Scotland’s headquarters, a building
in the English collegiate style

Between 1842 and 1843, tension within the Kirk rose over patronage with the
evangelicals. The result was the 1843 Disruption (Brown 1996: 29-50). At the opening of
the Assembly on 18 May 1843 in the temporary venue of St Andrew’s Church in George
Street, the retiring moderator (David Welsh) denounced the royal court’s interventions
(which some considered to be meddling where the Crown had no role) as intolerable
erastianism, and led out 40% of the clergy, 474 out of the 1,195 present. The procession
headed downhill to Tanfield Hall, where each individual signed a ‘Deed of Demission’
giving up their livings. There, they convened the first General Assembly of the new-
formed Free Church of Scotland.

Customarily, during the ceremonial of opening of the sessions of the General Assembly
of the Church of Scotland, the usual procession of the Lord High Commissioner was
from Holyrood Palace to St Giles’s, via Abbey Hill, Calton Hill, Waterloo Place, North
Bridge and High Street, eventually reaching the High Church (which, as we saw, was a
sub-division within St Giles). The Free Church, by contrast, sought independence from
the monarch:
At a meeting of the “Free Church” party in Edinburgh, an unhappy individual named Hetherington, a minister of that “body” [...] spoke to the following effect:

“The Church of Scotland! It is no church at all! It is a mere engine of State domination! It is a traitor church: a Scottish traitor, which is worst of all: a traitor like him who betrayed Wallace to the English!” (Fraser’s Magazine 1856: 11)

21 The opinion of the friends of the Free Church had been that “an architectural building for the accommodation of her college, in the centre of the metropolis, would be becoming her position as a National Institute”. The purchase of the site at the head of the Mound, announced at the 1844 Assembly, amounted to £10,000; admittedly, “no better [site] could have been found had we searched all Scotland” (Brown 1884: 332). Funding was made possible thanks to the active exertions of Rev. David Welsh, with the intention that no direct appeal be made to the Church in order to prevent imposing any burden on the Church at large. Previously, in June 1843, the Free Church had purchased a house at n°80 George Street, which it altered to provide the necessary provisions for a training college. On account of the George Street premises being quickly considered too small, a public competition for the erection of suitable college buildings was launched in September 1844. The Church was optimistic that it would grow, and indeed, by 1847, the number of students who matriculated at the New College was 300.

22 Twenty-five competition entries, plans and designs, were lodged for this purpose-made building. The designs were displayed for some time in a large hall in George Street (perhaps the Free Church’s own hall in 80 George Street) for the friends of the Church to see. Professional expertise to judge the design was considered necessary and Charles Barry, the celebrated architect of the Houses of Parliament, was invited to advise by Alexander Earle Monteith, advocate, and the convenor of the building committee. As an outsider, Barry might have been thought less likely to show bias amongst Scottish architects, and his celebrity status meant that some might have considered him the de facto head of the profession in the UK. According to Ian Gow, “When the Free Church, who were architecturally ambitious, got hold of the land behind his building [ie. Royal Institution], Playfair felt a proprietorial interest, and must have been alarmed when the design was put out to competition and Barry was invited to help select the winner” (Gow 1984: 53). Barry selected two designs; one bearing the motto ‘Labor ipse voluptas’ and one numbered ‘379’. He responded thoughtfully:

[...] each has its practical as well as aesthetical advantages over the other; but their respective merits are very nearly equal, apart however from the consideration of cost. I am inclined to prefer the Design n°379, on account of the concentration of nearly the whole of the class rooms upon one floor, and also on account of the symmetrical principle and imposing extent of the North Front, which in my opinion is better suited to the situation proposed for the intended Building, than the North Front of the rival design; but as in the conditions of the competition considerable importance is attached to the point of economy, and as I feel some doubt whether the Design N°379 can be executed within the amount prescribed by the terms of the competition, I have no hesitation in stating that the author of the design bearing the motto ‘Labor ipse voluptas’ is in my opinion fairly entitled to the first premium.

23 Although they displayed considerable taste and talent, neither of the two designs was considered wholly suitable. A second competition, on a more enlarged and literal plan, this time for accommodation for the College and a Church, was launched; old houses on the site were removed in August 1845.
Because this renewed attempt at obtaining a suitable design and plan by competition was similarly deemed unsuccessful, a professional architect was finally appointed. The commission was awarded to Playfair, whose close friend, Lord Rutherford, the Lord Advocate, was a prominent Free Church member — by this stage, the Free Church was lavishly financed, and was therefore able to fund the construction of a theological college in Edinburgh on a grander scale than the competition entries had been asked to provide. This was one of Playfair’s few but highly-significant post-University commissions (he had modified and completed Robert Adam’s building 1817-26), as were also Donaldson’s Hospital (1842-54) and the National Gallery of Scotland (1850-57) (Haynes and Fenton 2017: 67). In October 1845, Playfair brought forward a design which was approved of by the building committee; the entire college at a cost originally estimated at £30,000, and a portion of the design at £20,000. This portion of Playfair’s design, first contracted for (and executed), was to “form a Building very complete in all its parts, as it will embrace the whole of the lower quadrangle” with the following: seven classrooms, professors’ retiring rooms, public library, librarian’s room, reading room, museum, conservator’s room, senate hall, porter’s lodge, room for public documents, one church, vestry, session room, water closets, and cellars and also a house for the principal of the College. Playfair indicated that when the whole plan shall be completed there will be in addition to the accommodation enumerated above: a proper and permanent museum, a chemistry classroom with apparatus room & working laboratory to serve as a classroom of practical chemistry. A natural philosophy classroom with apparatus room, all with retiring rooms, together with two other classrooms making eleven classrooms in all. Instead of 7 as now proposed. If the Principals House be thought superfluous it can be made to contain various small classrooms instead.

The foundation stone for the Free Church’s training college was laid on 4 June 1846, the ultimate cost being £46,506 8s. 10d, including the price of the ground, £10,000 (Grant 1885: 97-8). Playfair wrote about the ceremony: “I hear from Mr Smith the contractor for the New College, that yesterday, Dr Chalmers unknowingly broke the bottle when putting it into the stone. He said nothing at the time for fear of creating confusion. I have ordered a new bottle […] I intend to see the whole replaced myself”.

The warrant to erect the New College (Figure 12), on the south of the road leading from the head of the Earthen Mound to the Castle Hill, was issued on 29 October 1846, with four plans by Playfair dated 15 July 1846 (ground plan, elevation of the north, south and east external fronts) (Figures 13-16). As for the timing of completion, the builders agreed to “finish and give possession of the whole of the college buildings, on the first day of November 1849. The Church forming the east side of the quadrangle, to be finished by the first day of November 1848”.
Figure 12: Free Church College, north front, viewed from the Mound

Picture taken by the author.

Figure 13: The New College of Edinburgh, General Plan by W.H. Playfair, 12 August 1846

Copyright Edinburgh City Archives.
Figure 14: The New College of Edinburgh, Elevation of the South External Front by W.H. Playfair, 15 July 1846

Copyright Edinburgh City Archives.

Figure 15: The New College of Edinburgh, Elevation of the North External Front by W.H. Playfair, 15 July 1846

Copyright Edinburgh City Archives.
In July 1847, regarding a statue to Chalmers who had died on 31 May, Playfair wrote:

I have been anxiously endeavouring to find out the best place for the proposed statue of Dr Chalmers, to whose memory it is impossible to pay too much respect. I send a sketch pointing out the position that has occurred to me, if it be placed within the walls of the college. I think the statue would stand nobly at the east end of the library. There would be a side light from the Quadrangle. And I can contrive the Roof in much a way as to throw down a stream of light from above, in the most favourable manner for producing a good effect upon the sculpture. And the apartments below being arched there will be plenty of strength to bear up the great weight of the marble [...] PS. If the new assembly hall be built the statue will be still more seen if placed in that building.²⁷

By then, difficulties which had arisen over the foundation of the building had been resolved. Playfair thought it necessary that the foundation should be carried down to the rock, at an additional cost of £1,800. The construction of the Church relied solely upon individual contributions with an original appeal to twenty individuals, who contributed £1,000 each.²⁸ Further appeals were made to clear the debt, including in 1850.²⁹ The Heads of Agreement between the College Committee and the Deacons’ Court of the Free High Church Congregation of Edinburgh, dated January 1848, refers to the building contract for the erection of the New College and Church dated 17 March 1847 entered between a sub-committee of the College Committee, Playfair the architect, and Alexander and Robert Smith, builders in Edinburgh.³⁰ The building was to be completed by Martinmas 1849. Payment was made to Messrs Maclure and Macdonald for a lithographic print of the Free College, at a cost of £28.7.6.³¹ In September 1848 Playfair wrote that there was no present need to insure the buildings because of there being so...
little that was inflammable, “But when the roof of the Church is ready for the sarking & for the plumber work, I would recommend a small insurance, say, for 300 pds. And when the joiners begin to work in the interior this should be increased to 5000 pds and again as the work advances”. In 1849, Playfair recommended that in order to obtain space for a building fitted to serve as a church and an assembly hall, “the whole of the property extending to the close immediately to the west of Mylne’s Court must be bought & cleared away”. Such an extension was carried out by David Bryce ten years later (see below). In September 1850, a contract was signed between Playfair and the builders to fit up a library in the three attic rooms of the building for the sum of £163.2.8. The introduction of gas into the Church was intimated by Playfair in 1849, and the payment for the water duty settled in 1841.

The building was opened on 6 November 1850 with an official meeting in the Common Hall at noon to celebrate the achievement and, in the evening, a dinner at the British Hotel (most subscribers residing in enviable locations in the New Town).

Stylistically, the building is in the English collegiate style, combining the common Tudor with some of the later Gothic, and arranged to form an open quadrangle entered by a groined archway; the Free High Church is situated on the east of the courtyard. The principal’s house occupies the south-east block in the lower quadrangle. The College north quarter has two square towers (each with four crocketed pinnacles), and a third tower moved away from the central gable of the church, to the east — a variation of the standard church formula of placing an entrance tower central on the gable (as seen for instance at St John’s Church, on Princes Street, below). This had the effect of maximising the north quarter’s show front while buttressing the sense of its resilience above the declining terrain. At basement level (plan of 4 February 1846), on one side of the archway is the porter’s house and, on the other side, a senate hall beyond which, and separated, is a vestry connecting into the church by steps. Inside the church, the pulpit, ministers’ pew and elders’ pew are situated to the north, with a gallery on the south. Two classrooms feature on this level (one in the west quarter accessible via the courtyard, and one in the north-west corner) (Figure 17).
Figure 17: *The New College of Edinburgh, Plan of Basement Floor, No. 8*, by William Playfair, 1846

Source: Centre for Research Collections, The University of Edinburgh, George Square. https://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/7epa90

31 On the principal floor above the main porch is a reading room and, also in this north block, are a waiting room, a session house and a library (Figure 18).
Two additional classrooms feature in the south and south-west blocks. At attic level, an upper library stands immediately above the entrance, and five other rooms are described as 'library' in the west block, and south-west and north-west corners. With a further library at roof level, two superimposed libraries stand above the main entrance, facing the courtyard and the Mound on either side.

Considering the vista up Dundas Street, the pinnacles on New College are clearly made to match those of Victoria Hall, and so made to further the pretence of the three towers all belonging to the same building, almost marrying them together (Figures 10 and 19).
The pinnacles on New College are made to match those of Victoria Hall behind it, as if the three towers belonged to the same building.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland, UC 5998.

34 The pinnacles of course repeat a standard Gothic formula, one already used by William Burn at St Giles, but here the pinnacles at New College and at Victoria Hall are much more slender — and matching. The Tudor collegiate formula of New College signalled that it was a place of learning; the same style had been used in the 1820 by John Smith for the reconstructed King’s College, Aberdeen.

35 In broader urban design terms, William Henry Playfair, the architect, deliberately designed his Free Church building so that its twin towers framed the huge spire of the Victoria Hall, thus visually and symbolically uniting the two buildings of the divided Church and providing a powerful visual axis through the city, uniting New Town and Old Town, and linking the buildings all the way to Tanfield where the disruption ministers held their own first assembly. Playfair designed this powerful visual statement into the city at the same time that he was designing the physical link between Old and New Towns, and at the same place. The perfect symmetry of Playfair’s building is shown on a c.1846 lithograph (Figure 19), with the flat front terrace disregarding the reality of the steeply-sloping terrain.

36 The stairs on the south side of the quadrangle leading to the Free Assembly Hall were added in 1858-9, after designs by David Bryce; the site was purchased on 13 March 1858. It was reported that:

A committee of the Free Church General Assembly have purchased an extensive area on which to build a new hall of Assembly. Plans are in preparation for the proposed building, which is expected to cost about 7,000l. It will have a frontage of an ornamental character towards the Castlehill, and is to provide accommodation.
for at least 2,000 persons. The building will be situated immediately in the rear of
the Free Church College, and will close up the south side of its quadrangle, thereby
completing it. The hall will thus also be accessible from Mound-place, by the broad
staircase ascending from the quadrangle. (The Builder 1858: 183)

37 Two tenements, on each side of Blythe’s Close, property of the Free Church and situated
to the east of the courtyard were taken down to build this large hall and other buildings
to be used for the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. This addition,
opening into the High Street, increased the footprint of the Free Church building, as
shown in the overall and section plans by David Bryce, dated June 1858. This
extension immediately adjacent to the Playfair-designed buildings was reached — as it
is still the case today — by a flight of steps, leading to a porch and into a long corridor
running east to west. The main body of the hall was sunken into the slope and was
skirted by a gallery running on its four sides. Such a building would provide adequate
new premises for the future meetings of the General Assembly of the Free Church.

38 After much discussion about an increasing problem of accommodation in the 1880s and
1890s, in particular because of the growth of the library, a scheme for an extension of
the premises was adopted to coincide with the celebration of the Jubilee of New
College, in 1900. Plans were prepared by Sydney Mitchell (1856-1930) of Sydney
Mitchell and Wilson in 1899, with the overall cost expected to exceed £10,000.

The Upper Library was greatly expanded by the incorporation of the two adjoining
classrooms. Two new classrooms and a Societies’ room were provided in what came
to be known as the Ramsay Lane wing. The Rainy Hall was built on the ground
between that wing and the Assembly Hall […] A new kitchen was installed to the
south of the Rainy Hall; and a corridor along its north side connected the main
building with the Ramsay Lane wing. Improvements were effected in the west
quadrangle. The Common Hall, now superseded as a Dining Hall, became a much
better general reading-room, while the demand for a quieter place for the
consultation of books was met by assigning to that purpose a portion of one of the
two classrooms annexed by the Library. (Watt 1946: 83-4)

39 Sydney Mitchell and Wilson also altered the doors leading to the Assembly Hall from
the quadrangle and, as quoted, designed the Rainy Hall west of the Assembly Hall. It has
3-metre high panelled-walls with painted shields at the top of the panels, and more
shields at the corbels from which springs the elaborate painted and gilded
hammerbeam roof (Gifford 1984: 185). By then, Sydney Mitchell was a sought-after
architect who restored the Market Cross, in Edinburgh, and experimented a variety of
styles; his housing developments at Well Court and Ramsay Garden were both in the
neo-baronial style and, at Barnbougle Castle for the Earl of Rosebery, Mitchell
referenced the Scots Renaissance (specifically, Linlithgow Palace).

40 David Cousin (1809-78), a Whig Free Churchman and a former pupil of Playfair, was
commissioned to design the Free Church offices and Savings Bank in 1858-63. This
comprised a pair of 18th-century tenements above the Mound (15-16 North Bank Street)
directly to the east of New College. Cousin produced an outstanding picturesque
neo-Jacobean design enhancing the Old Town skyline while, like New College itself,
addressing the New Town. These buildings are now used as a training college for the
Free Church. Like Playfair, David Cousin joined the newly-formed Free Church at the
Disruption. The College has a high five-storey and attic front divided into two unequal
parts by a pavilion-roofed tower (Gifford 1984: 179, 196). Although the superimposed
windows give the north façade an air of gravity, Cousin used detailing and buckle
quoins derived from Heriot’s Hospital, Scotland’s greatest Renaissance building; by
doing so, Cousin was referencing ancient Scottish buildings, and such motifs of Scottish Revivalism were repeated elsewhere in the Old Town, like in the elaborate strapwork at the school built by George Smith, 1844-45, on the western approach (now 14-15 Johnstone Terrace). The overdoor sculpture on Cousin’s north front of the College is informative; the sculpture includes the date 1843 besides its actual datestone of 1860. The Burning bush symbol and Latin motto ‘nec tamen consumebatur’ (Figure 20) deployed within a medallion above the entrance was historically that of the Church of Scotland, meaning that the Free Church saw itself as the ‘real’ Church of Scotland, and therefore retained the ‘logo’. Artist D. Y. Cameron gave it its standardised form in 1930; significantly, to please everyone in the new united Church (unification occurred in 1929).

Figure 20: Overdoor sculpture on Cousin’s north front of the Free Church College

David Cousin had in fact been providing architectural advice in 1844 for the New Free College before the launch of the above-mentioned official competition; the Free Church was at that point hoping to erect a college which would be a credit to the Church on what afterwards would have seemed a comparatively meagre £20-25,000 budget (this of course preceded the enthusiasm in favour of building the College, and inflation of the budget ultimately available) (Brown 1884: 329):

Strict attention to economy being the sole aim, and carried to an extent not hitherto attained, in the designs prepared for the committee all regard to mere architectural effect, or professional habits and predilections was of necessity excluded. In a merely professional point of view therefore nothing could have been more irksome and un congenial to my previous tastes than the duties thus assigned me. 39
Sydney Mitchell and Wilson also made piecemeal additions and alterations to this building in 1891-c.1905 mainly relating to classrooms, panelling and heating systems, but externally, it remains much as Cousin left it.

**Conclusion**

The building of Victoria Hall and Free Church evidence two rival national institutions making it clear they each regarded Edinburgh as the national capital and therefore the only option for locating their headquarters. While the Church of Scotland built its training college in Glasgow, the Free Church based itself entirely in the capital. From Edinburgh came the inspiration for what was to be disseminated to all parts of the country and beyond. “The constitution of this college is the same as that of the Free Church colleges elsewhere” (Grant 1881: 97). Students of Divinity came from all parts of the Empire, as the prestige of the training offered by the Edinburgh College grew in the course of the 19th century. The Free Church and the Church of Scotland were important in people’s lives, and reminders of this can be seen in public sculpture: a statue of Rev. Thomas Chalmers designed by John Steell in 1878 was erected on a George Street crossroads in a position fully as prominent as that of King George IV (statue by Sir Francis Chantrey, 1831); also, a statue of John Knox, designed by J. Hutchison RSA, was placed in the quadrangle of New College in 1896, thereby ‘claiming’ the Free Church as the prime product of the Scottish Reformation of 1560.

The twin towers of the Free Church building took their place midway between the Old Edinburgh and the New, and the respective presence of the two churches in the urban landscape suggests a battle of the spires; the spire of Victoria Hall was even higher than the Castle. The construction of the Free Church was to embody the power of the newly-established institution; Chalmers in his speech hoped that the Free Church building ‘would shortly […] arise in graceful superstructure to delight the eye […] of admiring citizens’ (Watt 1946: 3). He never saw it completed, having died in 1847. The fact that many congregations had been forced to place their churches out of sight, in back lanes — though some such as Musselburgh did find prominent sites — rendered it only the more important to have the Free Church College set advantageously in clear public view. The Gothic style of both Victoria Hall and the Free Church contrasted with Playfair’s Greek Revival Royal Institution (1822-26 and 1832-35) and National Gallery (1850-57) at the foot of the Mound below, and the contrast adds to the buildings’ prominence.

Here, in the fine perspective of the High Street and the Lawnmarket, that prestige of grandeur — arising from the simultaneous look of antiquity and modernity of the two churches — persisted, where not far away poverty otherwise frequently prevailed. The social mission of the Churches, and their missionary role, was important in the context of the Empire, and both Churches celebrated Britishness within Scotland — a point on which they agreed. But they took opposing views on the role of the UK’s monarchy within that arrangement, which led to there being not one, but two buildings for discussion in this paper.

The link made at the beginning of this paper with 'Holy Corner' in the Morningside district of the city is apposite, but also contrasting, because we see here the toleration of a greater diversity of Christian belief in a middle class, inner suburb whose influence
in the city expanded in the Victorian era. In this case study, we witness a schism and
later reconciliation within the post-Reformation, Presbyterian Church of Scotland —
the Established Church of the country (after unification in 1929).

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NOTES

1. In 1633, Charles I made St Giles the cathedral of the Diocese of Edinburgh. St Giles lost cathedral status after the restoration of Presbyterianism in 1638, but served again as a cathedral during the ascendency of episcopacy between 1661 and 1690.


3. Woods and Forests to the Treasury, 30 May 1834. NRS MWS/204.


5. Gillespie Graham’s estimates, 21 April 1837. NRS MWS/204.

6. Memorial from the General Assembly, 14 December 1838. NRS MWS/204.


9. Edinburgh City Archives [hereafter ECA], Dean of Guild Petition, Commissioners of Her Majesty’s Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works and Buildings for Leave to Build a New Church and Assembly Hall, 4 February 1841.

11. See, for e.g., Report of the Sub-Committee of the General Committee on the Improvement of the Assembly Hall, 19 November 1855. NRS MW5/188.


15. 'New College', signed by William Cunningham, convener of the College Committee, and Alex. E. Monteith, Convener of the Building Committee, 1850. Edinburgh University, New College, AA 1.5.12, Correspondence and Memoranda.

16. Alexander Stuart to Maurice Lothian, 6 June 1843. Maurice Lothian to Archibald Bonar, 29 June 1843. Alexander Stuart to Maurice Lothian, 16 August 1843. See also Maurice Lothian to James Bonar, 11 July 1845, for details of the property purchased on 80 George Street. Edinburgh University, New College, AA 1.5.10, Correspondence and Memoranda.

17. Free Church of Scotland, Report of the New College (Edinburgh: John Greig, 1848). Edinburgh University, New College, AA 1.5.11, Correspondence and Memoranda.


19. Barry to Committee for erecting the proposed college for the Free Church of Scotland in Edinburgh, 11 February 1845. New College, AA 1.5.10.


21. Report to the Committee of the Free Church regarding the New College of Edinburgh, Edinburgh April 1846. New College, AA 1.5.11.

22. Ibid.

23. Playfair to Building Committee, 2 April 1846. New College, AA 1.5.11.

24. Playfair to Monteith, 4 June 1846. New College, AA 1.5.11.

25. Petition by A. E. Monteith, Esqr, and others for warrant to build New College at the head of the Earthen Mound, 29 October 1846. ECA, Dean of Guild Court.


27. Playfair to Committee, 23 July 1847. New College, AA 1.5.11.

28. To the Marquis of Breadalbane, 18 January 1848. New College, AA 1.5.11.

29. The debt on the Building Fund to be cleared amounted to £8,000 in 1850. New College Building Fund, July 1850, signed Robert Buchanan. New College, AA 1.5.12.

30. New College, AA 1.5.11.

31. Playfair to James Bonar, 17 April 1848. New College, AA 1.5.11.

32. Playfair to James Bonar, 18 September 1848. New College, AA 1.5.11.

33. Playfair to A. Earle Monteith, 6 December 1849. New College, AA 1.5.12.


36. Opening of New College, Subscribers ticket, dinner at the British Hotel. New College, AA 1.5.12.

37. ECA, Petition of the Trustees for the Free Church of Scotland, 1858, extracted 17 July 1858.

38. ECA, Four designs by David Bryce of the Free Church Assembly Hall, 23 June 1858.
ABSTRACTS

This paper reflects on the importance of Edinburgh’s Lawnmarket and Castlehill area in the context of the 1843 Disruption which saw the separation of the Free Church from the Established Church of Scotland mainly over the issue of the Church’s relationship with the State. Edinburgh’s Holy Corner, as it is colloquially known, refers to the Bruntsfield and Morningside junction with four churches; but this paper argues that by the mid-19th century the Lawnmarket area was an even ‘holier’ corner. Within a discrete area west of St Giles — Edinburgh’s Cathedral — and almost touching one another were built the Church of Scotland’s headquarters at Victoria Hall (or Old Tolbooth Church; today, ‘The Hub’), and for the Free Church, its headquarters at New College. These two buildings alone (other churches were constructed in closest proximity) show that for both organisations, Edinburgh in its old role as the national capital was deemed vital. This national importance was here emphasised (or resurrected) and intentionally exploited by each organisation for the purpose of demonstrating its own historical legitimacy and validity, each regarding itself as the national Church continuing. That it was not simply Edinburgh, but the Old Town, which was chosen, emphasised yet further the heritage, continuity and historic validity claimed by the two ‘ancient’ Churches; the Tron Church was a lesser ornament, as the fire of 1824 had diminished its prestige of antiquity. A major — if perhaps inadvertent — consequence was that the Old Town’s renewal was now securely in hand thanks to these competing churches; and all following the effective reincarnation in dressed ashlars of St Giles in the 1830s by William Burn. Both organisations being based in Edinburgh made the city not simply the two Churches’ national headquarters, but also, given the impact of missionary work and Empire, the international hub to which every congregation looked to for leadership and support. By focusing on a small area at the very heart of the Old Town of Edinburgh, this paper brings together a key moment of ecclesiastical history, whose significance goes well beyond Edinburgh itself, with important developments in urban design and architectural history.

Cet article s’interroge sur l’importance de Lawnmarket et de Castlehill, à Édimbourg, dans le contexte de la « Grand Rupture » (ou Disruption) de 1843 qui a vu la séparation de la Free Church de l’Église établie d’Écosse (Kirk) — principalement sur la question des relations de l’Église avec l’État. Le Holy Corner d’Édimbourg, comme on l’appelle familièrement, fait référence à la jonction entre Bruntsfield et Morningside et à ses quatre églises; cet article affirme pourtant que le Lawnmarket était un endroit encore plus « saint » au milieu du 19e siècle. Dans une zone clairement identifiable, à l’ouest de l’église Saint Gilles, la Cathédrale d’Édimbourg, et presque se touchant les uns aux autres, étaient construits le siège de l’Église d’Écosse (Kirk) à Victoria Hall (ou Old Tolbooth Church; aujourd’hui The Hub) et celui de la Free Church à New College. Ces bâtiments (d’autres églises étaient construites à proximité) montrent que, pour les deux institutions, le rôle ancien d’Édimbourg en tant que capitale nationale était jugé essentiel. Cette importance nationale était ici soulignée (ou réactivée) et intentionnellement exploitée par chaque institution dans le but de démontrer sa propre légitimité historique et son fondement, chacune se considérant comme la continuité de l’Église nationale. Le fait que ce n’était pas simplement...
Édimbourg, mais la Vieille Ville, qui était choisie, soulignait encore davantage les valeurs d’héritage, de continuité et de légitimité historique revendiquées par les deux « anciennes » Églises ; la \textit{Tron Church} devenait, à l’inverse, un élément moins important du paysage urbain à la suite de l’incendie de 1824. Une conséquence majeure, quoique sans doute fortuite, était que le renouveau de la Vieille Ville était désormais solidement en marche grâce à la construction d’églises concurrentes ; et le tout intervenait après la création d’une belle enveloppe en pierre de taille pour l’église St Gilles par l’architecte William Burn dans les années 1830. Les deux organisations basées à Édimbourg faisaient de la ville non seulement le siège national des deux Églises, mais aussi, compte tenu de l’impact du travail missionnaire et de l’Empire, le centre international vers lequel chaque congrégation en quête de sens et de soutien pouvait donc se tourner. En se concentrant sur une très petite zone au cœur même de la Vieille Ville d’Édimbourg, cet article met en lumière un moment clé de l’histoire ecclésiastique dont la signification dépasse Édimbourg, et dont les répercussions sont importantes pour l’histoire urbaine et l’histoire de l’architecture.

**INDEX**

\textbf{Mots-clés:} Édimbourg, architecture, urbanisme, 19e siècle, église, histoire de l’Église, Écosse  
\textbf{Keywords:} Edinburgh, architecture, urban design, nineteenth century, church, Church history, Scotland

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Blue Balls of Fire and the Ethics of Spectatorship: Verlaine, Yeats, Beckett

Alexandra Poulain

This paper looks at three short dramatic scenes by Paul Verlaine, W. B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett which all pick up that most conventional of theatrical themes, thwarted love, only in a disturbing way, by shifting the focus from the torments of the soul to the painful embodied experience of sexual frustration, and by having it performed not by youthful “star-crossed lovers”, but by ambiguously incarnated revenants, or by decrepit, nearly dead old people. I want to suggest first that a certain filiation, conscious or not, runs from one of Verlaine’s most famous poems, “Colloque sentimental”, through the dance of the ghosts in Yeats’s “play for dancers” The Dreaming of the Bones, to the “love scene”1 played out by Nagg and Nell out of their respective dustbins in Beckett’s Endgame. More importantly, I argue that the three pieces ask uncomfortable questions about the ethics of spectatorship, and invite us to think critically about the conceptualising of theatre as “face-to-face encounter with the Other”, a notion inspired by Levinas which has gained currency since the “ethical turn” hit theatre studies in the mid-2000s.2 This paradigm, I suggest, is applied inaccurately to the theatrical encounter, especially in such contemporary productions as Milo Rau’s 2019 show Orestes in Mosul, which really rests on a problematic ethics of empathy. The three scenes by Verlaine, Yeats and Beckett, on the other hand, offer an alternative model of unempathetic spectatorship which, paradoxically, may go further towards allowing the presence of radical Others on the stage.

1. Thwarted Love, Grotesque Bodies

1 “Colloque sentimental” is the last poem in Verlaine’s early collection Fêtes galantes, published in 1869, just a few years before his encounter with Rimbaud. It consists of a dialogue in direct speech between two “spectres” reminiscing about past love, framed by a deceptively simple narrative. The title, which is left in French in most English
translations, is largely ironic and foregrounds the asymmetry between the two ghosts, only one of whom is actually being “sentimental”, while the other remains cold and indifferent, and refuses to join in a nostalgic evocation of past romance. The two ghosts are not gendered; in fact, they appear at first only as nondescript “shapes” (“formes”) in the dark of night (l. 2), and in the reprise l. 6 as “spectres” (“ghosts” in Symons, “shadows” in Dowson), although it remains unclear whether this term is metaphorical (since the dialogue is completely banal and could be spoken by any old couple) or literal. The dialogue is contained within four of the eight rhyming couplets of the poem, each of which contains the first ghost’s eager openings and the second ghost’s cool rebukes. The asymmetry is conveyed dramatically by the uneven distribution of speech in the middle stanzas (l. 9-12), where the first ghost’s cues take up almost the whole couplets, and the second ghost’s responses are correspondingly laconic. It is also inscribed in the disparity of grammatical modes of address, the first ghost addressing the second with the intimate “tu” (the second person singular), the second answering with the more formal, distance-inducing “vous” (the second person plural) — an effect which Dowson tried to recreate unconvincingly by resorting to the archaic “thou” in English. While the first ghost at first churns out abstruse sentimental clichés, to the second ghost’s evident disgust — “notre extase ancienne” (l. 7), “Ton cœur bat-il toujours à mon seul nom?” (Symons, l. 9), “ Toujours vois-tu mon âme en rêve?” (l. 10) —, he or she eventually conjures up the memory of past kisses, expressed in a straightforward, intensely erotic phrase: “quand nous joignions nos bouches” (l. 12). The second ghost’s refusal of nostalgic exaltation, his or her radical grounding in the gloomy present rather than the hopeful past, makes the reiteration of past kisses impossible. While the two spectres glide through the night together, the dialogue both materialises their intimacy and drives a wedge between them. They might be in a kind of proto-beckettian infernal afterlife, rehearsing forever their past love, substituting empty words for carnal embrace.

Yeats first encountered Verlaine’s poetry in 1890 when he founded the Rhymers’ Club with Ernest Rhys in London. Among the two dozen (male) poets who met regularly in the Cheshire Cheese pub under the Club’s auspices were Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson, both of whom were acquainted with Verlaine’s works. Symons in particular soon became Yeats’s intimate friend, and read him Verlaine and Mallarmé’s poems, which he was translating, helping Yeats whose grasp of French was always abysmal despite his lifelong effort to learn the language. In 1894, for his first trip to the Continent, Yeats travelled to Paris with Symons, and visited Verlaine “at the top of a tenement house on the Rue St. Jacques” (Yeats 1999: 261) — luckily Verlaine was able to chat to him in English. Yeats was impressed by the dual nature of Verlaine, whom he saw as divided between spiritual elevation and beastliness, and recorded the occasion in a highly colourful passage of his Autobiographies. The poem “Colloque Sentimental” did not feature among Symons’ translations of Verlaine published in the second edition of his collection Silhouettes in 1896, but it appears in the enlarged edition of his influential essay The Symbolist Movement in Literature published in 1919, the same year Yeats published the Noh-inspired play The Dreaming of the Bones (which was staged much later at the Abbey Theatre, in 1931). Yeats’s play is set in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising in 1916: a young rebel has fled to the West coast of Ireland, where he encounters a Stranger and a Young Girl at night. As they walk together up a mountain-top, he gradually discovers them to be the ghosts of Diarmuid and Devorgilla, the King of Leinster and his adulterous lover who, according to legend,
“brought the Norman in” (Yeats 2001: 314) to help them fight off Devorgilla’s jealous husband Tiernan O’Rourke in 1166, thus starting the colonization of Ireland. As a penance for betraying their country for the sake of love, they have been condemned to stay together in the afterlife without ever being able to kiss or embrace each other. Whenever they come too close, the memory of their guilt drives them apart again. The cruelty of this punishment is conveyed by the Young Girl in one simple, coldly regular iambic pentameter: “Though eyes can meet, their lips can never meet.” (313) The barrier of guilt which keeps them apart is materialised by the hemistich, separating “can” from “can never”. As in Verlaine’s poem, the ghosts’ bodies are invoked by way of synecdoche in terms of “eyes” and “lips”, but here the obstacle to erotic fulfilment is not the asymmetry of desire but an external constraint, the curse that keeps them in a loop of perpetual desire and frustration, and that they perform in a dance which the Young Man describes as he tries to make sense of it:

Why do you dance?
Why do you gaze, and with so passionate eyes,
One on the other; and then turn away,
Covering your eyes, and weave it a dance? (315)

The whirling rhythm of the lines and the repetitions (the anaphoric “Why do you”, the sequence gaze-eyes-eyes, and the epistrophe with “dance” at the end of lines 1 and 4) create a flowing movement, the verbal counterpart of the dance which the words describe, interrupted by the semi-colon at the hemistich of the third line, which again materialises the invisible obstacle that keeps them separated and forces them to perform the dance in a loop. The curse might be lifted, the Young Girl explains, if “somebody of their race” agreed to forgive them, but on two occasions the Young Man, who has just been fighting for the freedom of Ireland, decrees that “never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Devorgilla be forgiven” (314-5), thus in effect keeping the dance going, instead of freeing the ghosts from their penance and purging the revolutionary present from the haunting of past betrayals.

The ghosts’ dance, with its contradictory centripetal and centrifugal movement, anticipates the grotesque “love scene” played out by Nagg and Nell out of their dustbins in Beckett’s *Endgame*. In what is arguably the play’s most outrageous passage, the old people push against the lids of the dustbins in which their son Hamm keeps them “bottled” (Beckett 2009: 17):

Nagg: Kiss me.
Nell: We can’t.
Nagg: Try. Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.
Nell: Why this farce, day after day? (12)

In Beckett’s sardonic rewriting of Yeats, the graceful dance of the ghosts, who have kept their youthful appearance (Yeats 2001: 312), is translated into the grotesque clowning of two elderly half-corpses who are literally falling apart: they are legless, hard of hearing, almost blind, and Nagg mentions he has just lost his last tooth, making the perspective of the kiss particularly unlike the conventional representations of erotic encounters which saturate literature and art. Here the graceful dance of the Yeatsian ghosts is reinterpreted as a minimalist choreography in which the two dustbin-bound bodies, defying stasis and death, merely lean towards each other and back again. The endless penance of the traitorous ghosts in *The Dreaming of the Bones* in the afterlife returns as a meaningless “farce” which must still be played out “day after
day” in this life, unmotivated yet inevitable — both the grim “farce” of old age and
decay which must be played out until death, and the weird “farce” that this
unclassifyable play is, played “day after day” to bemused audiences who may well be
wondering “why”. Beckett was also very familiar with Verlaine’s poem, from which he
borrows the title of another play, *Oh les beaux jours!* (*Happy Days*), a deliberate
misquotation of Verlaine’s “Ah les beaux jours...”8 In this scene, he adapts Verlaine’s
sardonic resort to nostalgia (Nagg and Nell reminisce “elegiacally” about past luxuries,
such as having sawdust instead of sand in their dustbins), as well as his use of
asymmetry between the two lovers. Nagg is much more eager than Nell, who is a step
closer to death than he is (she will be pronounced dead soon after this scene). He is the
one who initiates the ritual of the kiss despite Nell’s reluctance (“Kiss me — We can’t —
Try”). When this fails, as it always does, he launches into a long-winded story
calculated to cheer up Nell and restore a symbolic, rather than physical, form of
intimacy between them, although she has no interest in hearing it. In a nutshell: an
Englishman orders a pair of trousers from a tailor, who repeatedly fails to deliver on
time because he has botched the crotch area. This makes for a series of obscene puns
(“a snug crutch is always a teaser”, “I’ve made a balls of the fly”, “a smart fly is always a
stiff proposition”, etc.), and for a punchline which recycles the epigraph to Beckett’s
earlier essay “La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon”, written in 1945:

> [Customer’s voice.] ’God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it’s indecent, there are limits! In six
days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world! Yes Sir, no less, the WORLD!
And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three
months!’ [Tailor’s voice, scandalized.] ’But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look — [disdainful
gesture] — at the world — [pause] — and look — [loving gesture, proudly] — at my
TROUSERS!’ (Beckett 2009: 16)

The joke encapsulates Beckett’s take on the inevitability of creative failure. After the
debacle of Genesis (“look at the world!”), all subsequent acts of creation can only hope
to emulate God’s initial failure. The tailor never completes his trousers, and Nagg, in his
desperate attempt to cheer up Nell, only botches up his rendition of the story.
Disgusted with his own narrative incompetence, Nagg accelerates towards the end of
the story: “Well, to make it short, the bluebells are blowing and he ballockses the
buttonholes.” (16) When I taught *Endgame* in a seminar last year, one of my students
suggested that this line contains the hidden signifier “blue balls”.8 (For those who, like
me at the time, may not be familiar with this phrase, “blue balls” refers to “pain of the
testes and scrotum occurring after prolonged sexual arousal without orgasm.”10 “Blue
balls”, of course, are what the “story of the tailor” both attempts to defuse (by
diverting Nagg’s attention from the frustration of the failed kiss) and recreates by
endlessly delaying the (failed) climax of the punchline. Whether or not Beckett actually
had the phrase in mind (he probably did), it is in tune with the play’s focus on
dysfunctional bodies. “Blue” is both metaphorical and literal: it connotes melancholia
but locates its source in a grotesque, graphically aberrant body.

2. The Reluctant Spectator

The three pieces thus revisit the old theatrical theme of thwarted love by staging
bodies not conventionally associated with representations of love (ambiguous spectres
or very old people) and by emphatically supplementing feelings (heartbreak) with
grotesque physical pain (blue balls). The three couples are either dead or dying, but

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they perform both a metaphysical and an aesthetic transgression by appropriating the life-force of desire on the stage of the living. Something else also unites the three pieces: the presence of a reluctant spectator. While Verlaine’s poem and Yeats’s play are set at night, when the presence of the ghosts is hardly discernible, the scene in Endgame, lit by the ubiquitous Beckettian “grey light”, is witnessed by Hamm, who is blind. The onstage spectators in the three scenes are thus blissfully saved from having to see anything, but they are also desperate not to hear. Much of the dramatic intensity of “Colloque sentimental” comes from the poem’s paradoxical treatment of the narrator—a presence, a witness to the scene who tries very hard to deny that he or she was ever there, and to disappear from the surface of the text. The only syntactic inscription of the narrator in the poem concerns, symptomatically, the act of (hardly) hearing: “Et l’on entend à peine leur paroles” (l. 4). The narrator is implicitly present but disappears behind an indefinite grammatical subject (“on”), translated by the passive voice in Symons, and the rather awkward “a man” in Dowson. But even this minimalistic form of inscription is later denied in the final line, which revises line 4 and performs the erasure of the narrator’s presence: “Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.” Of course, the poem itself, by recording the dialogue of the spectres in direct speech, invalidates this claim of absence (someone must have heard since we now have the poem), and indeed the narrator’s reluctant presence is subtly suggested throughout the text. The title with its sarcastic tone creates a distinctive narrative voice which is far from impersonal. This voice is then materialised in the singsong dactylic rhythm of the poem (an unusual rhythm in French poetry) which suggests a kind of flippancy, as if the narrator were mocking the ghosts’ predicament. Yet this apparent flippancy is challenged by the gloomy tone of the opening line. The description of the setting is apparently impersonal and objective, yet can be read as an extended hypallage (a figure of speech in which an adjective describes something or someone else than the noun to which it is attached grammatically). All three adjectives attached to the noun “parc” (“vieux”, “solitaire”, “glacé”) apply rather awkwardly to a park, and more convincingly to a human presence. It might be argued that they apply to the “spectres” who appear as an emanation of the gloom, although they are walking and talking together and thus don’t quite come across as “solitary”. The adjectives might just as well apply to the narrator, who in typically Verlainian fashion is trying to conceal a deep melancholia behind a surface of sprightly carelessness—and now we have not only a recognisable voice but a complex persona fleshed out of the text’s silences, a witness who is trying to disappear from the scene, yet reluctantly bears witness to it.

In Yeats and Beckett, the presence of the reluctant spectator is more straightforward: this is theatre, and both the dance of the ghosts in The Dreaming of the Bones and the love scene in Endgame are witnessed by onstage embodied spectators. The dance of the ghosts is both a performance of the ghosts’ penance and an appeal to the Young Man’s feelings: he is “of their race” and could lift the curse by granting them forgiveness. The Young Man watches the dance and describes it, yet denies them forgiveness. Ironically, in refusing to listen to their pain and to intervene, he ensures that the performance will go on forever. In Endgame, the blind, wheelchair-bound Hamm has nowhere to go, and is forced to listen to his parents’ love scene. The violent power relations are both very clearly delineated in the play, and always reversible: Hamm keeps his decrepit parents “bottled” in their dustbins, yet when they push up their lids and impose their presence on the stage he becomes, literally, their captive audience, trapped in a kind of Freudian nightmare where he is forced to witness the “primal scene” of his parents’
lovemaking. No wonder that he is a reluctant spectator; not only is he blind, but he also
wishes he were deaf, and tries to silence the old couple:

Hamm (wearily): Quiet, quiet, you're keeping me awake. (Pause) Talk softer. (Pause) If
I could sleep I might make love. (Beckett 2009: 14)

The implication of rivalry is clear: if his parents only shut up, he might live out his own
erotic fantasy (if only in a dream) instead of having to witness their grotesque amorous
ritual. Yet by keeping them confined in separate dustbins, he provides the
scenographic arrangement that keeps them apart and forces them to perform “this
farce, day after day”. In all three cases, then, the reluctant spectator is somehow
responsible for the lovers’ presence on the stage which he or she shares with them. In
“Colloque sentimental”, the figure of the “reluctant spectator” is the elusive narrator,
who is perhaps even ghostlier than the ghosts themselves: the poem’s effectiveness
thus relies on a sophisticated handling of voices, a construction which highlights its
highly self-conscious literariness, despite its apparent simplicity. In The Dreaming of the
Bones and Endgame, on the other hand, the embodied presence of the “reluctant
spectator” on the stage opens up a space for a metatheatrical reflexion about the ethics
of spectatorship.

I now want to suggest that the paradigm of the reluctant spectator, as we have
encountered it in the fictional worlds of Verlaine, Yeats and Beckett, offers a
productive counter-model to a recent but ubiquitous discourse about theatre and ethics
in the real world.

3. “Face to Face” (Really?)

Since the ethical turn in literary criticism hit the field of theatre and performance
studies in the mid-2000s, many critics (eg. Phelan 2004; Read 2005; Grehan 2009; Jeffers
2012) have invoked, more or less critically, Levinas’s concept of the face-to-face
encounter with the Other as particularly suited to account for the ethical obligation
inherent in the theatrical experience. To summarise a complex notion, Levinas
contends that our human existence is grounded in the encounter of the “face” of the
Other, for whom we are obligated to recognise an infinite responsibility. While the
“face” remains an abstract concept for Levinas, theatre critics often transpose his
ethical thinking to the literal “face-to-face encounter” which allegedly occurs between
actor and audience in the theatre. To quote Mireia Aragay:

Theatre and performance may even appear, from a Levinasian perspective, as
privileged cultural practices as regards the exploration of ethical issues since they
seem to be based, almost literally, on co-presence, on the face-to-face encounter
between embodied, vulnerable spectators and Others wherein the former are
summoned to respond, to become actively engaged in an exemplary exercise of
ethical ‘response-ability’. (Aragay 4-5)

One senses the hesitancy in the above quotation, and indeed Aragay, after others,
cautions against such a literal understanding of Levinasian ethics, and questions its
relevance to the theatrical experience, pointing out, among other things, Levinas’s
“profound suspicion of aesthetic representation” (5). In his book Theatre, Intimacy and
Engagement: The Last Human Venue (2009), Alan Read questions his own earlier embrace
of the paradigm of the “face-to-face encounter” between spectators and actors and
provocatively claims that “the one thing that is obvious from any witness of
performance, even to the most passing eye, is the lack of anything that could be described as 'face engagement.'” (Read 2009: 36) He continues:

There are face-to-face encounters in the theatre but there should be no presumptions that these encounters occur across the footlights, between performer and audience in a school-gymnasium, nor between the Boalian Joker and witnesses in a Romanian orphanage. They are much more likely to occur with another set of actors whose ciphers should not obscure the fact that their engagement with us operates on an adjacent yet concrete economy: meetings with the usherette, the barman and the ticket seller, the janitor, the pupil and the parent, the management, the resident and the orphan, are far more facially specific encounters than theatre agents, called actors, can maintain. (37)

While the transposition of Levinas’s concept of the “face-to-face encounter” does not really suffer literal transposition to the concrete experience of a performance, it is also questionable whether the kind of encounter that does occur in the theatre necessarily entails a confrontation with radical otherness. Commenting on Hans-Thies Lehman’s notion of “responsibility” in his influential Post-Dramatic Theatre (1999), a book which only references Levinas in passing but seems to riff on the Levinasian notion of ethical responsibility, Nicholas Ridout remarks:

Spectators are called upon to recognise that there is a relationship between what is shown in the theatre and their own experience of the world. In responding to this call, spectators take responsibility for making what is shown part of their personal experience. The spectators are invited to do something about it. (Ridout 59)

As Ridout points out, when we attend performances that demand from us a form of responsibility, “perhaps we are responding not to the ‘other’ but to ‘the same’, to a reflection of our own ‘self’.” (66) I would add that behind the hasty transposition of the Levinasian concept of the face-to-face encounter with the Other to audience-actor encounters in the context of performance, what often seems to be at stake is empathy, that most un-Levinasian notion which has been critiqued in much postmodern thinking about ethics. Rae D. Greiner defines empathy as “a way for the ego to gaze upon itself and transport itself into the minds and bodies of others” (Greiner 418). The violent narcissistic potential of empathy implicit in this definition is expressed explicitly in Jonathan Boyarin’s Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory (1992). Noting that the otherness of Jews has been occluded in the West since WWII, he suggests that one reason is “the hegemony of empathy as an ethic of the obliteration of otherness” and notes “the repressive effects of empathy on those who remain beyond the Pale” (Boyarin 86) — those whose otherness, in other words, cannot be assimilated into sameness.

It is precisely those radical others who are staged in the three pieces I have been considering. In Verlaine and Yeats, the radical others are revenants, literally from “beyond the pale” of death, who refuse to stay dead and return to haunt the world of the living, conjuring up past intimacy and attempting (in vain) to recreate it in the present, as shared reminiscence in Verlaine, and embodied dance in Yeats. Their usurpation of the life-force — of the sex drive — creates a metaphysical disturbance in the world of the living, and they can never be perceived as “the same”. In Beckett, the old couple are nearing death, and by the ageist, ableist standards of Western modernity, they should know better than to take to the stage like young star-crossed lovers. The fact that Hamm keeps them in dustbins graphically expresses the violence of the modern utilitarian ethos according to which bodies that can no longer work productively (or, indeed, reproductively) are considered useless, human detritus to be
stowed away and disposed of. The dustbins anticipate coffins — replace them in fact, since in the dystopian world of the play where all vital resources are fast disappearing, “there are no more coffins” (Beckett 2009: 46). It may be useful here to invoke Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject to account for Hamm’s revulsion, his incapacity to empathise with Nagg and Nell. The abject, says Kristeva in Powers of Horror (1982), is a fallen object, which threatens my identity unless I expel it from myself, reconstituting my own integrity in the process. Corpses (or cadavers, from the Latin cadere, to fall) are the ultimate expression of abjection, bodies like mine which have fallen into death, and which I must push away to stay alive. Kristeva points out the power of disturbance of the abject:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...

(Kristeva 4)

17 Nagg and Nell are abject because they are poised ambiguously on the border between life and death; near corpses, falling apart, yet alive enough to push up the lids of their coffin-like dustbins to perform the daily farce of the love scene. Ghosts, of course, are similarly ambiguous. Verlaine’s narrator expresses his revulsion at the spectres — moving, talking, desiring bodies who look like cadavers, with their “dead eyes” and “fallen lips” (in French, note the paronomasia by which “mort” becomes “molles”, creating an imperfect internal rhyme which again distills a sense of confusion throughout the line). The ghosts in Yeats are not physically repulsive (they have kept their youthful appearance), yet they too disturb the order of things and dismay the Young Man: “Who are you? What are you? You are not natural.” (Yeats 2001: 315) They are in fact doubly abject, as revenants and as traitors, who “sold their country into slavery” yet would be forgiven by “somebody of their race” (314), and while they claim the Young Man for their descendant, he rejects them violently by denying them forgiveness and condemning them to repeat their dance forever.

4. By Way of Conclusion: “Against empathy” in the theatre

18 What I am suggesting, then, is that these three scenes may offer an alternative ethical framework to think about theatre, one in which lack of empathy, the refusal to project oneself in the place of the Other, creates the conditions for performance, and allows for the presence of radical Others on the stage. I am not, of course, advising that we, in our practice of spectatorship, should emulate the indifference or indeed hostility manifested by the three reluctant spectators in Verlaine, Yeats and Beckett; nor am I advocating the bottling of old people in dustbins. I do suggest, however, that the three scenes I have discussed invite us, paradoxically, to recognise the ethical integrity of the unempathetic spectator — one who does not presume that she can see the world from the perspective of radical Others, understand their unique circumstances, or experience their pain and vulnerability — who does not, indeed, attempt to bend the uniqueness of their experience to a grammar of the knowable and the familiar. What this might mean in practical terms remains to be thought through. What theatrical
language can make space for Others and preserve us from the temptation of obliterating their otherness by reducing it to our own experience?

One implication, certainly, is that the sort of theatre which represents the pain of real Others in other parts of the world, courts our empathetic response and sends us home feeling good about ourselves — the sort of allegedly “political” theatre which has become so popular on Western stages — might not be the only valid paradigm for an ethically responsible theatre in the global era. It might, in fact, be less ethically pristine than is commonly assumed. I am thinking, for instance, about NT Ghent artistic director Milo Rau’s 2019 show *Orestes in Mosul*, a multimedia theatrical metafiction where a company of Flemish actors travel to Mosul, the former capital of the Caliphate just liberated from ISIS forces and still in ruins, to stage the *Oresteia* with local Iraqi actors. In keeping with Rau’s 2018 “Ghent Manifesto”, which stipulates that at NT Ghent “at least one production per season must be rehearsed or performed in a conflict zone or war zone, without any cultural infrastructure”, the show was devised, rehearsed and first performed in Mosul, and then played in NT Ghent and on many Western stages. The scenes involving characters played by Mosul-based actors — including Iphigenia (student actor Baraa Ali), Athena (Khitam Idress), and all the chorus members — were shot in Mosul and inserted into the play in video, with occasional intermedial interaction between the European actors, playing live, and the Iraqi actors on film. The show, loosely based on Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, purported to explore the possibility of interrupting the chain of violence in a conflict situation, and of promoting peace and justice rather than revenge. While there is no doubt Rau and his company were well-intentioned and genuinely concerned to connect with their Iraqi counterparts in an act of artistic solidarity, the production was nonetheless ethically and politically problematic at many levels. The project was premised on the notion that the *Oresteia*, which dramatises the mythical origins of Western democracy, is somehow relevant to the context of the Iraqi war. It thus pivoted a universal framework of relevance and celebrated democracy as the solution to the devastation and multiple traumas suffered by contemporary Iraqis (the fact that the war had started with the invasion of Iraq by a coalition of Western democracies was apparently not factored into the equation). In one particularly embarrassing scene inspired by the trial of Orestes by a jury of Athenian citizens at the end of the *Eumenides*, the Iraqi chorus was invited to vote on the fate of ISIS killers and decide whether they should be sentenced to death or forgiven. Rau and his Belgian actors remained in Iraq altogether for two weeks, and while their project demonstrates genuine empathy, they never came close to grasping the actual, multiple, complicated wounds suffered by their Iraqi fellow-actors. As Alissa J. Rubin of the *New York Times* reported:

> Actors like Mr. Dargham, who played a member of the chorus, saw Mr. Rau and his team arriving with preconceptions, focused on the Islamic State’s invasion but seemingly oblivious to other painful episodes. Since the “Belgian group,” as he called them, did not ask, he never mentioned that his father, an Iraqi army colonel, was killed by Al Qaeda when Mr. Dargham was barely 10 years old. Similarly, since Mr. Rau never inquired, he did not mention the daily difficulties that he said many of his classmates faced. “They did not ask about water, about electricity,” he said. But Mr. Dargham ultimately chose to give the Europeans the benefit of the doubt. “I am sure they asked somebody else,” he said. (Rubin 2019)

While the “Belgian group” knew hardly anything of the suffering of the Iraqi actors, their empathetic response to their situation prompted them to transpose it into the familiar tropes of classical Greek tragedy and represent it in terms intelligible to them.
and to their Western audiences, in an act of mistranslation in which otherness is violently cancelled out. This violence was arguably materialised in the differential performative treatment of the Iraqi group, who did not share the stage space with the Belgian group, only appearing on video. Reflecting on Levinas’s ethic of responsibility — not empathy —, Kelly Oliver usefully clarifies:

We have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others. This is what I take Levinas to mean when he says that we are responsible for the other’s responsibility, that we always have one more responsibility. We are responsible for the other’s ability to respond. (Oliver 18–9)

With their performance determined in advance in the paradoxical presence/absence of film, visible and audible but not, in fact, present in the same space and time as the rest of the cast and the audience, the Iraqi actors were both interpellated and divested, to use Oliver’s term, of their “response-ability”. Orestes in Mosul received rave reviews and played to enthusiastic audiences, and the performance I attended at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers on 10 September 2019 received a standing ovation. Spectators were encouraged to empathize with the poignant fate of Mosul’s population and left the theatre expressing feelings of both acute pain and a sense of moral and spiritual regeneration. Yet I would argue against this model of empathetic spectatorship which assumes that the experience of radical Others can be felt from within. To paraphrase Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz in their article “Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical Criticism in the 21st Century”: “while striving to simulate the inside experience of a [theatrical] characters, empathetic [spectatorship] becomes unethical, since it involves (even if unconsciously) an essential disregard for the inaccessible singularity of the other’s experience.” The shockingly unempathetic spectators in Verlaine, Yeats and Beckett point in a different direction, one in which spectatorship does not entail trying to know unknowable Others, but rather allowing them to appear on their own terms and to speak in their own (perhaps incomprehensible) voices, ultimately bearing witness to their appearance — as does Verlaine’s ghostly narrator who, effacing himself, leaves us only with the trace of passing voices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIXES
Paul Verlaine: “Colloque sentimental”

Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé
Deux formes ont tout à l’heure passé.
Leurs yeux sont morts et leurs lèvres sont molles,
Et l’on entend à peine leurs paroles.
Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé
Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé.
—Te souvient-il de notre extase ancienne?
—Pourquoi voulez-vous donc qu’il m’en souvienne?
—Ton cœur bat-il toujours à mon seul nom?
Toujours vois-tu mon âme en rêve? —Non.
Ah ! les beaux jours de bonheur indicible
Où nous joignions nos bouches ! —C’est possible.
—Qu’il était bleu, le ciel, et grand, l’espoir !
—L’espoir a fui, vaincu, vers le ciel noir.
Tels ils marchaient dans les avoines folles,
Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.

Les Fêtes Galantes, 1869.

Arthur Symons (1865-1945): “Colloque sentimental”

In the old park, solitary and vast,
Over the frozen ground two forms once passed.
Their lips were languid and their eyes were dead,
And hardly could be heard the words they said.
In the old park, solitary and vast,
Two ghosts once met to summon up the past.
—Do you remember our old ecstasy?
—Why would you bring it back again to me?
—Do you still dream as you dreamed long ago?
Does your heart beat to my heart’s beating? —No.
—Ah, those old days, what joys have those days seen
When your lips met my lips! — It may have been.
—How blue the sky was, and our hope how light!
—Hope has flown helpless back into the night.
They walked through weeds withered and grasses dead,
And only the night heard the words they said.

The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 1919.
Ernest Dowson (1867-1900): “After Paul Verlaine-ii — Colloque sentimental”

Into the lonely park all frozen fast,
Awhile ago there were two forms who passed.
Lo, are their lips fallen and their eyes dead,
Hardly shall a man hear the words they said.
Into the lonely park, all frozen fast,
There came two shadows who recall the past.
“Dost thou remember our old ecstasy?”
“Wherefore should I possess that memory?”
“Dosth thine heart beat at my sole name alway?
Still dost thou see my soul in visions?” “Nay!”
“They were fair days of joy unspeakable,
Whereon our lips were joined?”—“I cannot tell.”
“Were not the heavens blue, was not hope high?”
“Hope has fled vanquished down the darkling sky.”
So through the barren oats they wandered,
And the night only heard the words they said.

*The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, 1905.

**NOTES**

1. The phrase does not appear as such in *Endgame*. I use it in reference to Nagg’s line, “Time for love?” which opens the sequence (Beckett 2009: 12).
2. See Aragay and Monforte (4 sq.); Jeffers (158).
4. At 272 rue St Jacques, the apartment of Eugénie Krantz, a prostitute known as Nini-Mouton who inspired the twenty-five poems of *Chansons pour elle* (1891). Yeats describes her as Verlaine’s “homely middle-aged mistress” (Yeats 1999: 261).
5. For a detailed presentation of the expansion of the book between the first (1899) and second editions (1919) see the edition introduced and annotated by Matthew Creasy (Symons 2014).
6. Another point of contact between Verlaine and Yeats was Edmond Dulac, who had illustrated an edition of Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes* in 1910 and became Yeats’s collaborator and close friend in the early 1910s.
7. Or perhaps replace altogether, as Pierre Longuenesse suggests: “Nothing in the text tells us that the ghosts are actually dancing, or on the contrary that they are not: ultimately the decision is the director’s. But to have the actors dancing on the stage may not be the best choice, since the dance is primarily happening in the words themselves.” (Longuenesse 309. My translation.) While in Verlaine’s poem the ghosts are materialised as voices heard by the anonymous narrator, in Yeats’s symbolist version of Noh drama, they are visions who can only appear to a human character, who acts as mediator between the ghosts and the audience. They are embodied by...
actors on the stage, yet may only be figments of the Young Man’s imagination. Longuenesse’s suggestion that the actors need not perform the dance which the Young Man describes makes their ontological ambiguity uncomfortably palpable.


9. I am grateful to Alban Ménissier for this illuminating suggestion.


11. Aragay borrows the spelling “response-ability” from Kelly Oliver’s Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (2001). In a paradigm of ethical relationships between humans inspired by Levinas, Oliver defines “response-ability”, along with “address-ability”, as “the roots of subjectivity”, which is “the result of the process of witnessing.” (7)


14. “Thus, while striving to simulate the inside experience of a literary characters [sic], empathetic reading becomes unethical, since it involves (even if unconsciously) an essential disregard for the inaccessible singularity of the other’s experience.” (Amiel-Houser & Mendelson-Maoz: 3)

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at three short dramatic scenes by Paul Verlaine, W. B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett which all pick up that most conventional of theatrical themes, thwarted love, only in a disturbing way, by shifting the focus from the torments of the soul to the painful embodied experience of sexual frustration, and by having it performed not by youthful “star-crossed lovers”, but by ambiguously incarnated revenants, or by decrepit, nearly dead old people. I first suggest that a certain filiation, conscious or not, runs from one of Verlaine’s most famous poems, “Colloque sentimental”, through the dance of the ghosts in Yeats’s “play for dancers” The Dreaming of the Bones, to the “love scene” played out by Nagg and Nell out of their respective dustbins in Beckett’s Endgame. More importantly, I argue that the three pieces ask uncomfortable questions about the ethics of spectatorship and invite us to think critically about the conceptualising of theatre as a “face-to-face encounter with the Other”, a notion inspired by Levinas which has gained currency since the “ethical turn” hit theatre studies in the mid-2000s. This paradigm, I further suggest, is applied inaccurately to the theatrical encounter, especially in such contemporary productions as Milo Rau’s 2019 show Orestes in Mosul, which rather rests on a problematic ethics of empathy, a notion foreign to Levinas. The three scenes by Verlaine, Yeats and Beckett, on the other hand, offer an alternative model of unempathetic spectatorship which, paradoxically, may go further towards allowing the presence of radical Others on the stage.

Cet article lit en parallèle trois extraits dramatiques d’œuvres de Paul Verlaine, W. B. Yeats et Samuel Beckett qui sollicitent l’éternel trope théâtral de l’amour impossible, mais de manière insolite, en insistant moins sur les tourments de l’âme que sur l’expérience douloureusement corporelle de la frustration sexuelle, et en mettant en scène non l’habituel couple de jeunes premiers, mais des spectres ambigus ou des personnages vieux, décépits et déjà à moitié morts. Je montre d’abord qu’une filiation, consciente ou non, relie le dialogue du « Colloque
sentimental » de Verlaine, la dance des spectres dans The Dreaming of the Bones de Yeats et la « scène d'amour » qui se joue d'une poubelle à l'autre entre Nagg et Nell dans Fin de Partie (Endgame) de Beckett. Mon hypothèse est que les trois passages, qui mettent tous en scène un spectateur involontaire, interrogent le rôle éthique du spectateur de théâtre. Depuis le « tournant éthique » des études théâtrales dans les années 2000, il est devenu courant de concevoir la représentation théâtrale comme le lieu d'une rencontre avec le Visage de l'autre, au sens où l'entend Lévinas ; toutefois, cette lecture est contestable, et recouvre trop souvent la notion, étrangère à Lévinas, d'empathie. Prenant pour exemple le spectacle de Milo Rau, Orestes à Mossoul (2019), je montre en quoi un théâtre qui en appelle à l'empathie du spectateur est potentiellement problématique. Les trois scènes évoquées plus haut de Verlaine, Yeats et Beckett proposent un contre-modèle de spectateur résolument dénué d'empathie, qui permet peut-être paradoxalement de faire sur scène une place à l'Autre dans toute son irréductible étrangeté.

INDEX

Keywords: Verlaine Paul, Yeats William Butler, Beckett Samuel, Levinas Emmanuel, spectatorship, theatre, ethical criticism, empathy, Rau Milo

Mots-clés: Verlaine Paul, Yeats William Butler, Beckett Samuel, Lévinas Emmanuel, tournant éthique, théâtre, spectateur, empathie, Rau Milo

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