Gaming the Stage

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Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater.

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INTRODUCTION | Gaming the Stage

For about the past fifteen years, game makers have been meeting annually to participate in Game Chef, a competition that challenges designers to create in one week a nondigital game that fits an assigned theme. The selected themes have tended to be broad enough to appeal to a range of interested participants, but in 2011, for the first and thus far only time in its history, Game Chef oriented its theme around a particular literary figure: William Shakespeare.1 The choice hardly alienated game makers with its specificity and high-culture reference: game entries topped the numbers from the year before. Why would Shakespeare be such an attractive theme for game designers today? Sure, Shakespeare is an iconic literary figure with plenty of cultural capital. But I submit that Shakespeare is fitting inspiration for game designers not only because of the literary content of the plays and the biographical fame of the author, but because of the theatrical context in which those plays were first and continue to be performed. Theater is a good model for games because it is one of the earliest media technologies for interactive play.

The overlap between games and theatrical plays was a foregone conclusion for premodern people. Medieval writers used the term ludus for both games and plays.2 And the earliest commercial theaters of Shakespeare’s era, known as “playhouses,” were built right next to gaming establishments; some of these theaters even doubled as blood sport venues.3 This tight historical linkage between games and theatrical plays has been forgotten over the past half millennium, however. Game Chef aside, theater is no longer an obvious or even likely reference point for most gamers and theorists of gaming, despite the formative impact of work by such scholars as Janet Murray.4 Moreover, although many theater and performance scholars and practitioners have followed Richard Schechner’s view of performance as gamelike, they tend to treat conventional dramatic plays primarily as scripts for theatrical performance and to assume that only avant-garde performances can be conceptualized as games.5

As we have entered a moment in history when games are more perva-
sive than ever, while theatrical plays tend to be relegated to the status of elite entertainment, it is vital that we ask: What do theatrical plays and games have in common, for their producers and their spectators? And what can we learn about gaming and about theater by uncovering the links between these media forms? Recent developments in digital gaming make these questions particularly timely and urgent. The emergence of performing arts games like Dance Dance Revolution and Guitar Hero and the popularity of full-body gaming platforms like the Nintendo Wii and the Microsoft Kinect (best known for its use with Xbox systems) signal a return to traditional theatrical concepts in gaming. These games mandate that players become embodied performers, treat the game space as a kind of stage, and even encourage spectators to cluster around and watch gameplay as if it were a performance for an audience. Although the content of most of these games is dance or music, not theatrical drama, the gaming done via Xbox and Nintendo’s Wii systems is fundamentally theatrical in design and effect. To understand this gaming technology and its social uses fully, we need to overcome what Jussi Parikka calls the “strategic amnesia of digital culture” and look more closely at a historical moment when theater and games were decidedly interdependent media technologies: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the “early modern” period. My book turns to this moment in history to argue for games as theatrical media and theater as an interactive gaming technology.

Few scholars of games have explored the early modern period, even as scholars of media have advocated for studying contemporary media in relation to technologies of the preindustrial age. Yet the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries are highly significant to the history of games, as they are to the history of theater, and thus to theorizing the relationship between these media forms. This period of gaming and theater history is especially important in the case of England, for it was during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that commercial theater first emerged in England, turning playgoing into a commercial activity that vied for customers in London’s “new leisure market.” Entertainment seekers with limited resources of money and time had a wide range of entertainment possibilities from which to choose in the fast-growing metropolis of London, and among their options were attending plays and visiting drinking establishments to wager on games like cards, backgammon, and chess. These options were not as different as they might first appear, for the new commercial theaters that emerged in the last quarter of the sixteenth century turned playgoing into something of a gamble: patrons had to pay before seeing the play. Londoners had for centuries been wagering their money on games, in
and out of drinking establishments, but the idea of paying before seeing a play was a novel concept.

My book investigates how the pervasive gaming culture of early modern London eased the transition to a commercial theater and, in turn, how this history of commercial theater speaks back to pervasive gaming culture today. The shift from noncommercial theatrical performance to theater-for-pay presented challenges for producers of theater and for audiences, who were not used to treating plays as commodities. Purpose-built theaters restricted audience members’ physical interactions with actors and objects onstage, offering a presumably less participatory form of theatergoing than had been available before and elsewhere. For the theater to compete in London’s leisure market, it had to convince theater spectators, however, that a less physically interactive theatrical experience could still feel like interactive play. I maintain that producers of theater made this argument by modeling theater on its ludic competition, which, because it involved spectators betting on games they watched, already had successful ways of engaging nonplayer participants. The commercial theater, in other words, was fashioned as a gaming apparatus for its consumers, whose spectatorship was participatory, albeit in ways that might be missed at first glance. Indeed, the participatory nature of spectatorship in these theaters opens up very different ways of thinking about “interactivity,” in theater and in games.

Interactivity has been misunderstood and undertheorized in both theater and game studies partly because both fields tend to approach interactivity as an affordance of digital media. The assumption that the rhetoric of interactivity is derived from digital culture has been a useful starting point for important critiques of the commercialism of a range of contemporary “interactive” performance experiences: from “immersive theater” (such as Punchdrunk’s Sleep No More, a long-running adaptation of Macbeth that, at the time of this writing, has become a veritable theatrical theme park in New York City, complete with its own restaurant, merchandise, and repeat customers) to experiments with “original practices” at more traditional theaters, like the rebuilt Shakespeare’s Globe on London’s South Bank. Indeed, heritage Shakespeare institutions regularly tout the value of “interactivity” to build their customer bases: from the “immersive journey” called “Life, Love & Legacy” that the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust launched in 2009 to replace its earlier exhibits; to the Elizabethan-style theaters that even the Royal Shakespeare Company has embraced; to practices like shared lighting that facilitate audience–actor interaction in spaces like Shakespeare’s Globe or the reconstructed Blackfriars Theatre in Virginia.\textsuperscript{11}
Scholars have drawn attention to the commercial logic driving these very different projects by emphasizing the digital rhetoric that underpins their conceptions of interactivity. Shakespeare scholar Kate Rumbold maintains that values of “interactivity, participation, and creativity” are drawn from the “positive discourse of the Internet,” and its commercial intent. Theater and performance scholar William B. Worthen argues that when “terms like ‘interactive’ and ‘immersive’ migrate to the theater,” they remain moored to “the vision of the user-as-commodified-by-interaction that structures the conceptual and financial economy of the digital medium.” As important as these critiques are, their emphasis on interactivity as a digital phenomenon is at best limiting and, at worst, misleading.

I submit that the rhetoric of interactivity so pervasive in the marketing of contemporary theaters and institutions today is borrowed less from digital culture than from gaming culture. This distinction matters. Once we recognize how the discourse of interactivity is indebted to gaming culture, we can trace a much longer history to the commodification of interactivity, identify deeper causes for this phenomenon, and, crucially, explore the means by which audiences/users might resist being conscripted by the productions with which they interact. Experiments with making drama more “interactive” today satisfy not simply a desire to reproduce digital experiences, but to make theater more pleasurable by making it more playable. To explain this desire, we need more than a well-developed theory of user interactions with digital interfaces. We need to know how and why playable theater is more pleasurable for its audience-users. Although the answer to this question can and has begun to be explored through analysis of contemporary immersive performances, there are benefits to focusing analysis on the early modern theater. Produced at a time before digital games, early modern playable theater can be analyzed without the baggage of digital culture.

I would go even further to suggest that bracketing the digital age is essential to achieving a fuller understanding of interactivity in games and theater, because digital games, by design, limit robust forms of interaction between gamer and machine. It is for this reason that the game studies scholars Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux question whether videogames are games at all. They point out that the videogame is a closed system to be executed by the user through interaction with the computer interface. Where is the play in that? In the interaction between gamer and digital game, who is using whom?—a question that has become all the more urgent as big companies like Google and Facebook as well as gaming companies retrieve information about users through their online interac-
tions with digital systems. A related set of questions have arisen around contemporary immersive theater, which aims, in philosopher Jacques Rancière’s words, to “emancipate” the spectator by physically transforming theatrical spaces and/or blurring the lines between performers and spectators. Rancière argues that experiments to make theater more interactive and increase the agency of spectators often miss the mark when they manipulate theatrical spaces to eradicate the separation between actors and spectators: “by placing the spectators on the stage and the performers in the auditorium; by abolishing the difference between the two; by transferring the performance to other sites; by identifying it with taking possession of the street, the town or life.” However enriching these experiments with more participatory performance have been, they have not emancipated the spectator but left in place the power dynamics of performance, wherein actors create and audiences consume, and where spectators, like their digital counterparts in online systems, are put to work to create theatrical engagements.

Like Rancière, I question whether the only or best way to turn passive, consuming spectators into active, participatory ones is by changing the mechanics of spectator–actor interactions—or, to put this in digital gaming terms, to change the interface. We can start to see other forms of spectators’ active participation in theater when we put gaming at the center of our theories of interactivity. As is true in gaming, interactivity in theater is not simply a matter of users physically manipulating an interface. As it is, in both immersive performance and digital games, such interactions are more rhetoric than reality, since these systems must control carefully the kinds of interaction possible, thereby setting rules for what can and cannot be altered. Thus, following Boluk and LeMieux, I would argue that real interactivity comes from the audience-users’ ability and encouragement to play with the objects and narratives presented via the interface. In videogames, such ludic interaction can come in the form of modding (game modification), griefing (online, in-game harassment), cheating (exploiting bugs, codes, or special hardware), and a variety of forms of metagaming—practices that can enable gamers to sidestep the constrictive and co-opting logics of the digital objects with which they engage. It is the ethos of play that makes true interactivity possible, and this is as much the case in theater as it is in games. Interactivity emerges in the theater when audiences don’t simply consume, but play. To be sure, whether audiences choose to play is another matter—codes of socialization in the theater may prescribe and even punish spectators who play too much or in unsanctioned ways. This is true in the world of videogames as well. But unlike in the case of videogames,
where the codes that structure the interface are invisible to most users, in theater and in nondigital games, the option for audience-users to play, to really play, is available. By focusing on theater as an interactive game, and on spectators as potential players of theater, we can begin to see the ways theater spectators can manipulate rules and technologies for their own enjoyment. My book explores how early modern theaters, even as they appeared to restrict physical forms of interaction, encouraged their audiences to play with, around, and through the dramas presented onstage. The theater was “playable media”—a term my title borrows from game studies scholar Noah Wardrip-Fruin, who employs it, as I do, to highlight the crucial role of audience-users in defining what counts as a game.17

My evidence of early modern theater as playable media comes largely from dramatic texts, and, as such, I follow Friedrich Kittler—a founding figure in the field of media archaeology—in arguing for literature as a crucial archive for media studies.18 Though overlooked by most scholars of media and games, plays offer much for our understanding of games as media, not simply because games often employ dramatic narratives, but because the cognitive and emotional experiences of gameplay and of theatrical spectatorship are similar.19 Dramas, I maintain, are forms of play; they are ways of gaming. The ethos of interactive gaming permeates early modern drama, but the mechanisms and ideological effects of this gaming context can most clearly be seen when we focus on a fascinating topos in the plays: scenes of staged gameplay.20 At climactic moments in a number of plays, characters partake in what I will call, following early modern terminology, sitting pastimes: for instance, the backgammon match that provides the occasion for murder in the anonymous Arden of Faversham; the card game through which a husband tests his wife’s infidelity in Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness; and the chess game characters play when Prospero reveals his political scheme in Shakespeare’s The Tempest.21 Although game structures are at the heart of the early modern commercial theater enterprise and could be analyzed at multiple moments in any number of plays, I hone in on these cameo appearances of games onstage because they foreground so elegantly how plays engage spectators by cuing their desire to play.

Gaming the Stage argues that staged game scenes trigger spectators’ cognitive and emotional involvement not in spite but because of their withholding of information about and physical participation in the game in progress. On the one hand, staged games foreground the commercial audience’s passivity, for when sitting pastimes were presented onstage, theater spectators—used to playing and betting on sitting pastimes in more inti-
mate gaming spaces—couldn’t follow gaming action directly. On the other hand, gaming scenes take advantage of spectators’ competency as vicarious players to invite alternative forms of interactive engagement. By preventing spectators from knowing through sight or touch, these scenes encourage audiences to know by feeling. The scenes show particularly clearly how all dramas are games of information and how theaters of all kinds can be set up to be game spaces: sites of engagement among audience members as well as between audiences and actors and/or characters, dramatic plots, stage objects, and theater buildings. These dramas thus offer useful evidence not only for macrohistories of theater spectatorship and microhistories of particular sitting pastimes, but also for the study of games more generally. As these dramas pause to represent the act of gameplay, they help us to understand better how players of any interactive game at any time come to know by feeling.

This notion of knowing by feeling informs my book’s methodology, wherein I use insights from gaming to study dramatic literature. If early modern plays are games, then we have to read them differently, studying them in much the way we might other games from the past. But therein lies a dilemma. Unable to see or touch the games of the past directly, we have access only to their traces. In this, the modern historian of games finds common ground with the critic of early modern drama, as well as with spectators in a conventional theater: the past is like a theater stage, and we cannot get close enough to touch or see its gaming experiences. However, the character dialogue on which theater spectators rely to follow a game staged beyond their direct view is also a resource to the historian of games, provided we read these traces differently than we would other literary texts. Rather than treat the language of gaming primarily as an interesting feature of a play’s mise-en-scène or as literary symbol, I approach this language as evidence of gameplay. For instance, when in Henry Porter’s The Two Angry Women of Abington, Mistress Goursey asks her backgammon opponent, Mistress Barnes, “Where stands your man now?,” going on to say that “It stands between the points” (1.123; 124), the play’s editor reminds us that “points” refers not only to the long triangles on which the game pieces stand but also to the laces that attach a man’s doublet to his hose. From this perspective, Mistress Goursey uses backgammon terminology as a metaphor, hinting that Mistress Barnes doesn’t know the whereabouts of her husband. This double-entendre somehow confirms for Mistress Barnes her suspicion that her husband is having an affair with Mistress Goursey, a suspicion the play has trouble explaining. What happens, though, if we take even more seriously the gaming context for this scene, reading its
gaming imagery in more literal terms? From the perspective of an actual backgammon match, Mistress Goursey is calling attention to Mistress Barnes’s sloppy and perhaps fraudulent playing: Mistress Goursey cannot tell where Mistress Barnes has placed her playing piece, her “man”—it is between two points instead of directly on one—which could enable Mistress Barnes to cheat when she takes her next turn, as she can choose to interpret her piece’s placement retroactively, after she sees what dice number she rolls next. From this perspective, Mistress Barnes’s otherwise inexplicable dislike of Mistress Goursey might be understood as a defensive reaction—accused of false play at backgammon, Mistress Barnes deflects the charge, accusing Mistress Goursey of false play in marriage. The game is both symptom and cause of the women’s otherwise fairly nonsensical social conflict.

I examine the significance of this scene in more detail in Chapter 3 and, for now, wish only to underscore what is lost if the scene’s language is analyzed on purely symbolic levels—which, however fascinating, are not sufficient for understanding it, particularly in performance. Consider that the theater audience, positioned at a distance from the onstage game table, cannot see the board and thus cannot be certain of precisely what fuels the characters’ disagreement. Does Mistress Barnes misplace her game piece in an attempt to cheat? Is Mistress Goursey baiting Mistress Barnes, or vice versa? Spectators, who cannot get close enough to the board to see what is transpiring in the game, thus experience the backgammon game in ways that differ considerably from the game’s onstage players. In fact, as I discuss further in Chapter 3, the scene aligns its audience with the husbands of the gaming women, who, though onstage, are positioned too far from the game board to follow the ludic action, leaving them almost tragically oblivious to their wives’ mounting disagreement. Their lack of full information about the degree and cause of their wives’ fury is a central motivator for the drama’s plot.

Porter pulls theater spectators into the social drama of the scene by inviting their vicarious participation in the drama of the backgammon game itself, which, though it is scripted, can feel like an actual match to audience members familiar with backgammon. Theater and performance scholar Stanton Garner describes “actuality” as the “currency of ludic exchange,” arguing, for instance, that quasi-darkness in a theater draws on the sensual experience of actual darkness.24 Although audience members are fully aware that theatrical darkness is fictional, their knowledge of what actual darkness feels like “infuses” their experience of theatrical darkness.25 In a similar way, I argue, audience members’ past experiences playing, watch-
ing, and betting on backgammon matches infuses their spectatorship of Porter’s scripted game. The result is that audiences, though literally held at a distance from the game board—which they cannot see, let alone touch—are able to feel as if they are interacting intimately with the fictionalized game onstage. Some degree of the cognitive processing and emotional rush they have felt while playing or betting on a backgammon match can transfer to their experience of this scene such that they may feel they have a stake in the women’s argument even if, in actuality, they do not.

As my brief reading of Two Angry Women begins to illustrate, scenes of gaming urge a shift to a mode of reading and analysis that we might describe as less semiotic than phenomenological, attending not only to what games mean but also to how it feels to play them or even watch them played by others. In order to read dramas as scripts for gameplay, I analyze scenes of gaming through a method sometimes used in videogame studies: play as research. That is, to understand how it felt to play and watch others play the games staged in drama, I not only consult early modern rule books and material objects related to these games, but consider what it feels like to me to play these games today. This methodology is especially suitable for study of early modern games because this was the period when the material objects and rules for ancient sitting pastimes changed, taking on the forms they continue to have today. For instance, tarot cards morphed into the fifty-two-card deck, and the Queen came to be the most powerful figure on the chessboard. Changes like these impacted what it felt like to play these games and, subsequently, the social and political implications of that experience. Rather than telling the history of games as a story primarily of change, though, Gaming the Stage emphasizes continuities in gameplay. Approaching the past as on a continuum with the present, not as a radical break from it, opens up a somewhat different role for the literary and theater historian. Our personal experiences of gameplay, instead of needing to be set aside because they are merely “subjective” knowledge, become useful, even crucial, supplements to the archival study of early modern materials related to gaming, a methodological approach I explicate further in Chapter 1. Games are not something we simply read about, but something we and early moderns alike do with and through our bodies and our embodied minds.

Readers willing to engage in this more participatory form of reading are better able to discover, I argue, the participatory forms of spectatorship enjoyed by early modern audiences. Like spectators of games, spectators of theater could become players, actively involved in producing the phenomena before them. We can say much the same thing about scholars. Indeed,
as I discuss further in Chapter 1, games help us to see what might be gained by thinking of the literary and theater historian less as an archaeologist than as a spectator of the past: not a spectator who sits back and watches, but the kind of participatory or “emancipated” spectator who creates through the act of watching. The historian, in other words, is a gamer who engages her body and embodied mind in the act of playing with the past.

INTERACTIVE PLAY IN THE COMMERCIAL THEATER

Encouraging audiences to feel as if they were active participants in the fictions staged before them was vital for London’s first commercial theaters, which had to introduce their audiences to a relatively new way of consuming drama. To be sure, traditional entertainments with a theatrical dimension had flourished for centuries before—and continued to compete throughout the period with—the plays staged in the first commercial theaters. But there were important differences between the commercial stage and its predecessors/competitors. In the first place, commercial theaters demanded that audiences pay money up front, before a performance, an innovation with a number of consequences for how those performances were experienced. And second, though theater’s defenders often presented the goal of plays to be moral instruction, in truth the commercial theater’s goal was predominantly and openly pure entertainment. Other kinds of theater, including religious drama, educational plays, and court performances, had very different goals and involved different systems of economic exchange. Street entertainments perhaps came closest to the commercial theater in their aims: a secular performance put on for the public purely for entertainment purposes. But these performances would have been more informal in nature, and audiences paid only if they enjoyed the performance and/or felt that it deserved their support; as continues to be the case today, the performers would send a hat around to collect contributions at the conclusion of the show. In contrast, the professional theaters developing in London in the late sixteenth century were commercial enterprises, open to anyone willing to pay the admission price. Once inside purpose-built amphitheaters or converted hall theaters, audience members, used to close involvement and even physical contact with performers, were held at a physical distance. To be sure, the thrust stage promoted some exchange between actors and audiences, and the hall theaters even allowed audiences to pay extra to sit onstage. But many other features of commercial theaters—such as the raised stage height, the admission cost
structure (with more expensive seats further from and higher above the stage in amphitheaters), and the construction of a backstage area hidden from audience view—separated theatergoers from onstage action, helping to define spectators as consumers.

From our perspective today, where commercial theater of this kind is widely available and, at least in the Western world, the norm, it is easy to underestimate the effects and implications of this commodification of performance. Scholar of early modern theater and culture Michael Bristol maintains that audiences in early modern London, already familiar with the workings of a commodity culture and its “more passive habits of cultural consumption,” were prepared for the transition to a commercial theater. But, I would submit, insofar as audiences were not as accustomed to viewing plays in this way, the transition would not have been easy. Audiences needed to learn how to approach theater as a commodity. It is no wonder that the commercial theater drew on traditional forms of entertainment, such as festive performances, inviting audiences to take a more participatory role in plays. To be sure, when commercial theaters appropriated these more familiar forms of entertainment, they offered audiences a way to invest emotionally and cognitively in an otherwise alienating commercial production. But I maintain that the goal was not, as others have suggested, to produce in the theater the kind of communal affiliation found elsewhere; it was to teach audience members their proper place as consumers. After all, audiences appear to have taken great pleasure in disrupting and even destroying the plays they ostensibly paid to see, creating a somewhat unsustainable form of entertainment. No-holds-barred forms of participation may have kept (at least some of) the audience laughing, but if commercial theaters hoped to convince their audiences that plays were a valuable commodity in and of themselves, they needed to channel spectators’ desires for participation. Producers of commercial theater needed to bridge festive performance practices with the emerging idea of theater as commodity. They needed to make audiences feel like participants without allowing for actual physical interaction with the elements of the production (actors, stage, script, etc.).

Conceiving of plays as games helps shed light on how the commercial theater accomplished this balancing act. Although others have explored ludic elements in early modern drama, their approaches have limited applicability for explaining how theaters engaged audiences in theatergoing, particularly in a commercial context. Many prior studies approach games and play as broad categories that, in most cases, reflect on the nature of pretense in drama, instead of looking at specific game types in relation to
This approach risks not only flattening important differences among games but also overemphasizing pretense as the key competency exercised by participants in gameplay and theater, when, in fact, both call for a broader range of skills. Those studies that do attend to particular games tend to focus on spectacle-driven games or sports, such as bear-baiting, wrestling, traditional festive performance, and fencing, all of which were either performed in venues not unlike theaters or at least shared theater’s fundamental modalities: one or more performers (human or animal actors) engage in spectacular actions for the benefit of spectators.

Gaming the Stage follows the example of these latter studies in its focus on a narrower set of games, an approach that enables me to explore how the formal structure of a game provokes and helps develop particular competencies in a game’s players and spectators—and, by extension, theater audiences. However, my focus on unspectacular pastimes reveals a deeper perspective on theater’s relationship to gaming. In their usual venues (e.g., parlors and taverns), games such as cards, backgammon, and chess were played by seated participants around a table, with spectators betting on the action. When these games were staged in theaters, however, audiences could not participate as spectators in the ways to which they were accustomed. Unlike wrestling, fencing, or other more spectacle-driven entertainments, sitting pastimes draw attention to the differences between theater and other forms of commercial entertainment. There were sound economic and ideological reasons for the theater to underscore differences between itself and its competitors in the leisure market. Consumers had only so much time and money to spend on entertainment, so the theater needed to demonstrate the “relative entertainment value” of their product. Another factor was the need to combat the rhetoric of antitheatrical religious zealots, who strategically collapsed theater and games to argue that all pleasures were the same, no matter their form. The staging of unspectacular sitting pastimes precisely helped to underscore the formal differences among games and between games and theater. Rather than simply exploit the game–theater overlap, then, scenes of gaming defamiliarized and put pressure on analogies built upon it. They called upon audiences not simply to exercise their gaming competencies but to repurpose and adapt them. They invited audiences to approach the play as a different kind of game, one that audiences would, nevertheless, be equipped to play.

Scenes of sitting pastimes underscore effectively how the commercial theater’s efforts to limit spectators’ physical and visual access to the stage, instead of undermining interactivity, could stimulate audiences to discover alternative forms of engagement. John Sutton’s work in cognitive philoso-
phy of sport suggests that spectators who have embodied experience of a
game may feel they are playing even if only watching it. Similarly, staged
board and table games invited theater spectators to draw on their familiar-
ity with these games and to play them vicariously from the sidelines, be-
coming invested cognitively and emotionally in much the way they would
if betting on these games in a tavern or parlor. But because these were bet-
ting games, they also helped audiences retain some distance from the ob-
ject of spectatorship and treat the performance, like a game, as a commod-
ity. Through the staging of these games, the theater could take advantage
of its patrons’ expertise with and interests in competing forms of recreation
in order to build a theatrical form that was new but felt familiar. Staged
games, in effect, conjoined the participatory and the commercial, offering
spectators a way to interact more intensively with commodified theater
and, in effect, turning spectator consumption into a mode of production.
From this perspective, the staged game scene might best be understood as
a “metagame,” as that term is defined by Boluk and LeMieux—not simply
games about games, but practices that “anchor[ ] a game in time and space.”
If in contemporary videogame culture the metagame uncovers
the often hidden and constraining commercial logic of the videogame in-
dustry, then metagames in early modern drama, as they situate sitting pas-
times in the historical and material context of the early modern theater,
expose the commercial logic of these early playhouses, making audiences
as well as modern scholars aware of the emerging and yet unwritten con-
straints of theatergoing.

In tracing the ways the early theater commodified interactivity, Gaming
the Stage offers something of a prehistory not only to interactive games but
also to contemporary immersive theater. Some have suggested that the
genre of immersive theater emerged in the second half of the twentieth
century when directors explicitly began to blur and even reverse the lines
between actors and audiences, turning the audience into an empowered
community. Such practices have a long history, however, going back well
into the medieval period. In England religious cycle plays had theater audi-
ences walk from one performance site to another hundreds of years before
avant-garde directors used the promenade theater technique, to take one
example. Such spectator mobility and related forms of audience interaction
with the performance certainly were more contained in early modern the-
aters, but they were not eradicated so much as they were sublimated and
redirected. Early modern plays may not, like contemporary immersive the-
ater, have invited their audiences to become physically part of the perform-
ance, even if Francis Beaumont’s Knight of the Burning Pestle (1607)—
which several actors pretend to be audience members, directing play action
and sending their apprentice onstage to take on a part—suggests audiences
may have or would have liked to invite themselves. But staged gaming
scenes exemplify theater producers’ broader efforts to make their plays as
cognitively and emotionally immersive as possible. Even if held at a physical
distance from the action, audiences could feel like participants in it.
Staged games help us to see how early modern commercial theaters attempted to commodify interactivity, much as today’s digital games do.

SOCIAL AND THEATRICAL INFORMATION GAMES

To understand how theatrical dramas functioned for audience-users as
playable media, it is useful to conceive of plays in much the way some have
conceived of games: as systems of information. Modern game designer and
scholar Celia Pearce theorizes four kinds of information that players have
or pursue: information known by all the players, or to only one player, or
to the game only (i.e., to no players), or generated randomly (e.g., by dice).

The kind(s) of information used in a game and the ways in and extent to
which that information changes over the course of a match determines the
degree of chance and, thus, level of risk involved, features that distinguish
games from each other. For example, chess can be identified as a game of
perfect information, as it is played on a game board seen by both players and
their spectators equally at all times. Because there are no elements of chance
internal to the game, chess is less risky than a game involving cards, for
instance. Cards are designed for use in games of imperfect information, as
information is hidden and revealed to players during the course of a match.
Card games are riskier than chess because some of the information hidden
is left entirely to chance, due to the shuffling of the deck and the randomness of dealing.

Given how crucial the circulation of information is to board and table
games—both for players and for spectators betting on the action—it is not
surprising that when these games are staged in early modern drama, they
almost always appear at key moments where information is at stake
within a plotline. In fact, games tend to appear onstage when a character
is or is alleged to be hiding something. Through games, characters in
plays practice, discover, or hide duplicity in their social relationships. Of
note is that the relationships established, negotiated, and tested in and
through scenes of onstage gaming in early modern drama are almost
without exception those of same- and cross-sex friendship, romantic
courtship, and marriage. The emphasis of these game scenes on intimate relationships makes sense, since relatively compact and/or private parlor-like settings where sitting pastimes would be played are conducive to explorations of social and sexual alliances. As well, games are opportunities for social bonding; as is true today, when friends, romantic partners, or spouses play together, they do so because they enjoy each other’s company—or wish to show that they do.

Early modern dramas use gaming to investigate codes of social intimacy, and as such they reveal broad ideological implications of interactive play: in particular, they call attention to friendship, courtship, and marriage as games of risk. In this, the plays counter other early modern writings that tend to mythologize these relationships as, we might say, games of perfect information: relationships involving less risk because participants know all they need to know about each other. The plays, however, emphasize quite the opposite, instead critiquing idealistic views of friendship, courtship, and marriage. This becomes particularly clear when actual games are staged as part of a play’s plot. For instance, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the card game scene in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* underscores the play’s critique of a humanist model of ideal male friendship, suggesting that even ideal male friendship is, like cards, a game of imperfect information, where intimacy is produced by each participant/friend revealing information that the other does not know.

Anthropologists and social theorists have studied the ways, in particular, men in many cultures use games to negotiate social ties and to assert social dominance over other men as well as women; but early modern drama proves a particularly fruitful archive through which to explore the complex intersections among gender, social status, and gaming. The plays foreground the extent to which, in the largely patriarchal culture of early modern England, men of higher status had the most at stake in idealistic models of friendship, courtship, and marriage and, consequently, were under greater pressure to negotiate the risks inherent in these social games of imperfect information. Again, the gaming scenes in the plays distill and exaggerate these issues. I find that games offer a testing ground for characters’ achievement of patriarchal masculinity, a concept I draw from the work of historian Alexandra Shepard. Shepard identifies “patriarchal manhood” and “anti-patriarchal manhood” as two different social codes that were available to early modern men: while some men pursued or exercised their patriarchal privileges through the demonstration of qualities such as “[s]trength, thrift, industry, self-sufficiency, honesty, authority, autonomy, self-government, moderation, reason, wisdom, and wit,” others, who could
not gain access to patriarchal privileges on account of their lower status or younger age, developed a counter-code of conduct, embracing “prodigality, transience, violence, bravado, and debauchery” as signs of their manhood. Shepard’s work is useful because its definition of manhood takes into account class and age, thereby helping to explain the different ways that male privilege and hierarchy were exercised in early modern England. But sitting pastimes, which in early modern England were as available and popular among women as they were among men, complicate Shepard’s findings in important ways. For one thing, scenes of gaming foreground women’s pursuit of patriarchal masculinity, reminding us that some women—perhaps because of their higher status, more advanced age, or particular social circumstances (e.g., widowhood)—subscribed to codes of patriarchal masculinity. As is demonstrated in Chapter 2’s reading of Gammer Gurton’s Needle and Chapter 3’s reading of Two Angry Women, games provide a means through which some female characters pursue patriarchal masculinity and its privileges.

My focus on games also enables me to highlight a subtle but illuminating distinction between Shepard’s two codes of masculinity: that they involve very different levels of risk. Most of the qualities of patriarchal masculinity that Shepard identifies—particularly thrift, industry, self-sufficiency, honesty, autonomy, self-government, moderation, and reason—minimize an individual’s risk in terms of personal comportment and economic and social interaction with others. By contrast, the prodigality, transience, violence, bravado, and debauchery that mark antipatriarchal masculinity are significantly riskier forms of social and economic engagement. In focusing on the tolerance of risk endemic to different codes of masculinity, Gaming the Stage shifts attention away from the individual and toward the social constitution of gender, demonstrating how patriarchal masculinity was achieved not simply through an individual’s exercise of virtuous behaviors but through active competition with others over sparse resources. Because the terms of that competition were unpredictable, the plays often end up highlighting an inevitable tension: although the model of ideal patriarchal masculinity emphasizes surety, the pursuit of it necessitates risk.

My treatment of intimate social relationships as risky games of imperfect information puts pressure also on certain critical understandings of friendship, courtship, and marriage, emphasizing their epistemological rather than primarily their affective registers. That is, intimacy in these relationships is a function not only of individuals’ emotional bonds but also of what they feel they know or don’t know about each other. The implications
of this difference are especially evident when we think about a matter like cheating—so often a source of conflict in the dramas, as it is in games.45 If friendship, courtship, and marriage are approached predominantly as affective bonds, then cheating is an ethical affront and a sign of betrayal of the bond. But if these relationships are thought about as games of information, cheating constitutes a manipulation of an inherent imbalance in knowledge between parties. The gaming context helps us think about cheating not simply as a destructive violation of trust that undoes a relationship, but as an opportunity to assess and sometimes, I argue, even strengthen the bond between two people. Consider that in games, the line between violating rules and exercising strategy is constantly negotiated; as games evolve, actions once considered violations of the rules can be integrated into the game to produce new and more pleasurable versions of old games. For instance, medieval chess rules prohibited the Queen piece from moving more than one space at a time; but by the sixteenth century, the Queen could be moved in any direction as many spaces as the player wished. An action that once constituted violation of the rules became one of the more interesting new rules of the game.

Arguably, what distinguishes cheating from this sort of productive breaking and changing of the rules is simply that cheats usually conceal their violations. But early modern dramas and many gaming contexts today (e.g., the phenomenon of griefers, discussed in Chapters 2 and 4) highlight the actions of cheats. In fact, just as in early modern paintings depicting gameplay (see, for instance, images of cardplay in Figures 13–15), theatrical game scenes almost always center on cheating. As game scenes raise questions about and lay bare the violations of game rules, they use cheating to comment on the role of information in social relationships. Imbalances in information, though they create the conditions for cheating, also can create the conditions for intimacy. In games and in intimate social relationships, the deceit that can undermine a game is difficult to separate from the deceit that makes the game pleasurable to play.

Viewing friendship, courtship, and marriage as relationships grounded in contest need not lead to an entirely cynical view of intimacy.46 Even in competitive games, contest and cooperation are dialectical partners. Like game participants, friends, lovers, and spouses in early modern plays often agree to take up contestatory positions, and antagonism sometimes is portrayed as a source of their pleasure. Consider, for instance, The Tempest’s closing chess match, which I discuss in Chapter 4. The play represents the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand as a comedic triumph not despite but because of Miranda’s questioning and acceptance of Ferdinand’s alleged
cheating. Miranda demonstrates a gamer attitude that may not please her father—who, I argue, arranges Miranda’s marriage as if it is a game of perfect information over which he has total control—but is represented as pleasurable for Miranda and Ferdinand. *The Tempest* and other plays suggest that in games and in intimate social relationships, little is gained by minimizing risk; the greater the risk, the greater the reward.

Miranda’s acceptance of marriage as a game of imperfect information—and the possible foul play that can ensue as a result—models a different perspective on social intimacy as well as a different view of theatrical intimacy. I argue that theater—like friendship, courtship, and marriage—can be envisioned as a game of imperfect information played between its producers (dramatists, actors, etc.) and audiences. Theater, as Andrew Sofer argues, may be defined by what it hides from its audiences. And part of the pleasure of theater comes from the audience’s willing participation in this state of unknowing. As characters in a drama navigate imperfect information in their fictional social relationships, they engage theater audiences in another, related game of imperfect information. Dramas inspire hermeneutic work on the part of audiences, but they can make that work feel, to audiences, like play. In the playable media form that is theater, as in other games, risk can be a site of pleasure and the ludic currency through which to establish intimacy with other theater participants. Even if in the early commercial theater, actors were professionals instead of friends and neighbors, even if the theater reinforced spatially the difference between those actors and the audience, and, yes, even if spectators had to pay in order to watch, the theater used gaming structures to offer itself up as a site of social bonding between its producers and consumers.

Conceiving of theater as an information game played between its producers and audiences gets us out of a stalemate in the current study of early modern audiences and the question of how much power spectators had. Few doubt that early modern audiences in commercial theaters—either rowdy by nature, spurred on to be demanding as a result of their newly sovereign position as paying customers, or simply radically individuated in terms of interests and identities—needed to be managed, to have their attentions directed toward the play on offer. But how successfully playwrights, actors, and theater entrepreneurs achieved this management has been a source of much debate. Could theater’s producers count on and evoke a mostly unanimous or dominant response to the play from all audience members? Some scholars maintain that whatever the challenges audiences presented, including ignoring the play completely, producers of plays found effective techniques to shape audience attention, response,
and pleasure. Others emphasize audiences’ resistance to being controlled by the fiction onstage, the actors presenting it, and/or the theatrical space itself. In my own earlier book, *Voice in Motion*, I argued that early modern plays presented audiences as capable of resisting even the most potent and persuasive sounds coming from the stage, and maintained that the ability of audience members to refuse to hear put greater pressure on theater’s producers to make audiences into their partners. Other scholars posit an even greater disjunction between theater’s producers and audiences in order to allow more power for the latter.

Past discussions of spectatorship view theater’s producers and audiences as engaged in either a partnership—in which neither party is a winner or loser—or a competition, whose outcome is a source of debate. But must partnership necessarily be opposed to competition? Approaching theatrical plays as games troubles this binary and reorients the debate about the power of spectators. In games we find a partnership around and through competition, an *agreement* to battle for temporary superiority over another. Competition in games is not a sign of destruction or enmity—though, of course, some matches may end that way. Rather, in games like cards, backgammon, and chess, competition and the display of enmity are essential to ludic engagement. They are the fictional terms by which people enter into a partnership with each other, if only for a few hours. As early modern theater producers made a bid to audiences to approach dramatic plays as games, they presented the commercial theater as a cooperative space where competition between producers and receivers was all part of the fun. Staged games made room for the audience’s participatory energies not, as others have suggested, by insisting on the play only as a mimetic representation—an object consumed and enjoyed at a safe aesthetic distance—but by presenting the play as an opportunity for play.

**GAME PLAN**

Chapter 1 of this book provides a foundation for what follows by surveying archival evidence about early modern sitting pastimes at the same time as it critically investigates archival history as a method for studying games. On the one hand, the chapter provides the kind of thick description of early modern parlor games that currently exists only for early modern festive recreations and sports by examining gaming objects (game boards, chess pieces, printed playing cards) as well as rule books and prescriptive literature on gaming. On the other hand, the chapter explores the limits of tradi-
tional archival evidence for a history of gaming. Surviving game objects and published rules provide scripts for theoretical play scenarios, but they do not capture easily how games work and change in practice. The chapter proposes that early modern drama, and particularly the gaming scenes in these dramas, are crucial kinetic supplements to other, comparatively more static gaming evidence. Plays enact the performance of games.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 illustrate this argument, each by investigating the experience of playing a particular game: cards, backgammon (often called by its more generic term, “tables”), and chess, respectively. The particular games I have selected and the order in which the book’s chapters examine them bears further explanation. The choice of these games is partly a function of my methodology of play as research. In comparison to games like merels (or Nine Men’s Morris) and Game of the Goose—both board games that were extremely popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but that are known today only by the greatest of game history enthusiasts—cards, backgammon, and chess remain extremely popular and widely played today. And as I discuss further in Chapter 1, the rules and materials of play for these games have changed very little since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thereby making it easier to draw on our familiarity with these games when analyzing their appearance in dramatic literature. Chess, for instance, is so widely represented in Anglo-American culture (not to mention throughout the world) that just about everyone has a sense of what it feels like to play the game even if not everyone actually sits down to play it.

However, I also group these games together because they have historically been associated closely with each other. In one of the earliest pieces of evidence about the playing of sitting pastimes in England, cards, backgammon, and chess are mentioned as the three games that are played during the Christmas season at a noblewoman’s house. Many writers name this trio of games as distinctive because they are worth playing despite involving no physical exertion. Sir William Forrest’s “The Poesye of Princlye Practice,” presented to King Henry VIII’s son, describes “tables, chesse, or cardis” as “syttyng [sitting] pastymes” fit for sovereigns in the evenings after dinner, but not for daytime and not for lower classes, who should get more exercise and open air. (Pace Forrest and his classist reservations, all three games appear to have been quite popular among all sorts of English people during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.) Thomas Elyot, in The Boke Named the Governour (1531) groups them together as the three games involving no physical exercise that are still worthwhile to play, distinguishing them from dice, which he advocates under no circumstances.
And Francis Willughby’s seventeenth-century manuscript “Book of Games,” which categorizes forms of play, opens by dividing “plaies” into several categories: one having to do with what is exercised (wit or body) and the other to do with degree of chance/fortune involved. In the first category, chess, tables, and cards are the only three games mentioned by name under games that “exercise the wit.” Willughby even goes so far as to limit the term “game” to sitting pastimes, naming these three as his key examples: “The word Game is most properly used for Cards, tables, /Chests &c, not for games of exercise.”

Although many early modern writers group the three games together, they also draw attention to a key difference among them, particularly the degree to which they involve chance or fortune. Willughby writes that chess differs from cards and tables in that it involves no chance, whereas cards and tables involve both “art & skill.” Cards and backgammon belong in a category with other games of fortune (like “Inne & In, Crosse & Pile, One & Thirtie”), but also differ from these entirely chance-based games because cards involve some skill. One especially intriguing treatment of cards, backgammon, and chess as a self-contained group whose members can be distinguished in terms of the degree of chance involved in each is the dialogue about games in John Florio’s Second Fruits (1591). In the dialogue the characters Samuel and Antonio decide to play a game as their postdinner recreation because the weather prevents them from taking a walk. They first turn to cards, then backgammon, and finally to chess. Notably, the games are ordered from greater to lesser degree of chance and, relatedly, imperfect information involved, a factor that also influences the amount of bickering the men do as they play. The more imperfect information in the game, the more likely the men are to accuse each other of cheating. Chapters 2–4 of my book follow Florio’s organization—moving from cards to backgammon to chess—in an effort to understand how the formal properties of different games, and especially the extent to which they rely on imperfect information, provoke different experiences of play for direct participants and for spectators who play vicariously.

My book’s investigations of theater as playable media come full circle in the Epilogue, which examines theatrical content and form in contemporary digital games in order to think about how theater informs game design today, and vice versa. The chapter examines “mimetic interface” platforms, and particularly Microsoft’s Kinect, arguing that one of the distinguishing features of these platforms is their theatrical affordances and particularly the way they expand the experience of gaming beyond the players and toward their spectators, who are encouraged to play vicariously. I argue that
Kinect’s design is deeply indebted to theatrical concepts and promotes theatrical forms of engagement—as becomes evident in Microsoft’s marketing of the gaming peripheral. But I also maintain that the commercially released software made for Kinect has rarely realized this potential because most software designers have yet to figure out how to harness the cognitive and emotional investments of game audiences. That potential is evinced in a game that I have been involved in developing at the University of California, Davis, ModLab: Play the Knave, a game for Kinect that is about theatrical performance of Shakespeare. Play the Knave actualizes the potential of Kinect as a theatrical platform that encourages vicarious spectator play. Drawing on my own experience designing Play the Knave and observing its use in numerous public and educational installations, I demonstrate how motion capture gaming rediscovers the link between gaming and theater that was so crucial to the commercial theater’s success in the early modern period. As today’s theaters fight to attract audiences in a leisure economy where games reign supreme, I consider how digital games can help contemporary gamers build theatrical competencies much in the way early modern dramas once did.