Introduction

“What’s past is prologue” represents one of those pithy Shakespearean lines often taken out of context. In *The Tempest*, Antonio says this phrase to Sebastian in an effort to convince him to murder his brother and take the throne, thereby beginning a new reality. In this paper, however, I want to preserve the intention of this quotation (to imagine a new political reality), but through deliberately and playfully breaking from the book, as Laura Mandell suggests the digital does. The adventure choice-based videogame *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* (Square Enix, 2017) references this line when the protagonist Chloe has a dream in which her deceased father is driving a car and she is in the backseat. Seeing a poster on the back of the passenger seat for her high school’s production of *The Tempest*, Chloe mutters to herself, “What’s past is prologue and shit.” The play functions as the primary backdrop for the game’s own narrative, as Chloe’s love interest, Rachel Amber, plays Prospero. Prior to this sequence, Chloe records in her journal that she had tried to write a sonnet for her past love interest Max (the protagonist of the first installment in the game franchise) until she “realized that rhyming is hard, and nothing really rhymes with Rachel.” Shakespeare’s work operates as a frame for Chloe’s own story and is a tool she uses in order to understand herself, her relations, her world, and the trauma she has experienced since her father died in a car crash. In these ways, the game represents what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the process rather than product of adaptation. When it comes to Shakespeare, M. J. Kidnie refers to the play not as an object or original, “but rather a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users.” Kidnie’s analysis, however, does not take into consideration media such as videogames, which are more participatory with respect to their creation. Looking to Louise Geddes and Valerie M. Fazel’s more recent work on “the Shakespeare user” allows us to theorize something more approximate to the mechanics of *Before the Storm*. The Shakespeare user takes on a “more active
interpretive role” and partakes in “the acts of production.”vi Fazel and Geddes’ user corresponds with Tamer Thabet’s observation that videogame narratives are a process of story-making rather than storytelling.vii Although limited in its capacity to accomplish this feat, Before the Storm gives the user choice at various points in both creating Chloe’s story and recreating Shakespeare’s work.

The layering of Chloe’s engagement with Shakespeare and the user’s engagement with Chloe creates a more complex dynamic, though. This paper argues that the concept of interface allows us to theorize this intersection more readily. Andrew Galloway’s theorization of the interface effect resulting from the exchange between media (elucidating that the interface is not a medium in and of itself) as well as Branden Hookway’s conception of the interface as a liminal threshold provide a better means for analyzing the ways in which Chloe (and the user) interact with Shakespeare, as well as the manner by which the user interacts with Chloe.viii The interlayering of theatrical performance and videogame narrative complicates this further, but the Brechtian likeness that Galloway attributes to the interface offers measures by which we can comprehend the interplay more readily, especially as the game presents these very techniques.ix Although choices and creation are limited in the typical adventure game narrative style of Before the Storm, what I want to argue in this paper is that the game’s and gamer’s use of Shakespeare allows for more radical revision. Between play and videogame, then, lies the potential that Geddes and Fazel theorize, even if as a videogame, it does not achieve the full democratic potential of user creation, given its limitation of choice and action. Along the way, I want to explore how the game reimagines both Shakespearean and videogame ideologies. As Susan Brown has identified, interfaces are ideological constructs that work on the user,x and Before the Storm’s LGBT+ representation may appear to lend some grounds to counter normative white-cis-male assumptions of videogames. As Bonnie Ruberg has recently illuminated, however, we should explore more than “queer”xi representation in videogames and instead consider how mechanics, gameplay, and narrative operate to avoid allowing ourselves to believe that
“representation” and “empathy” offer panaceas. As I examine the ways in which Before the Storm challenges preconceptions and hegemonies of Shakespeare through its interfaces, I want to explore the ways in which the game simultaneously queers Shakespearean performance and text, even if the game’s contours are otherwise quite limited and perhaps even normative.

Interfacing and Gaming

To begin, it is important to delineate what is meant by interface for the purposes of this study and to grapple with the overlapping ways in which the game’s interface(s) manoeuvre(s) between its own contours and those of the theatrical medium. Joanna Drucker defines interface as the “mediating structure that” functions as a “space between human users and processes that happen according to complicated protocols.” When it comes to a videogame, this mediating structure involves the projection of a self through the avatar. As Hookway suggests, “a video gamer internalizes the use of controls to project an agency or selfhood into the world of the video game,” but this notion does not take into account Brown’s point that the interface itself shapes the user through its own ideological constructs. Hookway’s overarching claim that interface at once involves “holding apart and drawing together” does, however, indicate a more conflicted relation between user and interface. In Before the Storm, these implications for identity politics take two forms, that between the user and Chloe as well as that between the user as Chloe and the Shakespearean personae dramatis. However, this paper mainly focuses on the interface between media, namely theatre and videogame, in Before the Storm. Scholarship on theatrical spaces in videogames to date has taken account of the ways in which performance alters in these virtual environments. Katherine Rowe, for instance, observes the ways in which interactions between personages in Second Life’s Shakespearean theatres point to the changing circumstances whereby one is in the play as an avatar the user creates rather than an audience member. The immersive world of Second Life certainly has multiple dimensions in this circumstance, and its liberating gameplay in which users determine their
characters, actions, and interactions differs from Before the Storm, but the intersecting and overlapping narratives of Before the Storm offer different ways to think about theatrical performance in videogames and their parallelism disrupts the conventional interfaces of these media. The incongruency between media is important to note, as Galloway reminds us in his study that interfaces are defined not only by their ability to facilitate processes between media, but also by their disruptive or non-responsive processes. These moments or dynamics are thus equally important for theorizing the interface, and Galloway connects these disruptive potentials with Brechtian techniques, thereby readily allowing for a bridge between theatrical performance and videogame play.

These connections between theatrical performance and gamers have an early modern history as well. Through her interactive game Play the Knave and her recent historical study, Gaming the Stage, Gina Bloom has elucidated the manner by which early modern theatre audiences used games as a means to understand the new technology of the theatre, having previously only experienced drama outside of these purpose-built spaces. Bloom identifies that “[l]ike spectators of games, spectators of theater could become players, actively involved in producing the phenomena before them.” The participatory environment of the Shakespearean theatre therefore makes it readily integrate with videogames’ capacity to immerse and involve the user in the narrative, making it as they play. The Tempest’s closing address to the audience likewise reminds audience members that it is within their power now to set Prospero free, and the play metatheatrically stages Miranda and Ferdinand playing a game of chess. Both of these circumstances speak to the theme of power that pervades The Tempest: Prospero’s magic and ability to liberate those he enslaves now rests with the audience, and chess is an aristocratic game that in this case is played between two young people and that facilitates their burgeoning romance. As William Poole identifies, the chess game is the only occasion in which a “Shakespearean play-within-a-play goes uninterrupted,” and this speaks to the similar crossovers between play-world and audience reality that occur in Prospero’s final speech. In these cases, the
distinctions between one realm and another are blurred, but power is questioned as well, for the ringleader becomes the humble servant and characters are watched as play characters and manipulated by the ringleader as they manipulate other pieces. Indeed, Prospero surreptitiously writes or makes Miranda and Ferdinand’s love story, and they happen to play their parts willingly.

These elements from Shakespeare’s play likely inform the romantic narrative of Chloe and Rachel to some degree, but The Tempest’s attention to games as microcosms for reality certainly mirrors Before the Storm’s preparation of the user and Chloe to take to the stage. Multiple instances before Chloe must play impromptu understudy for Ariel’s actor establish a dynamic in which the videogame user plays as Chloe playing games. In the first of three episodes, Chloe encounters some peers playing Dungeons and Dragons and is asked to join. Playing the game-within-a-game offers Chloe the opportunity to fashion a character, and as this process takes shape within the narrative of Before the Storm, the camera angle oscillates between the figurine representative of Chloe’s character and Chloe herself looking down at her character and guiding them. The design allows the user to remember that they are experiencing a similar connection with Chloe, though unlike the character Chloe has fashioned, Chloe was not chosen by the user. The emotional connection between character and user is stressed, however, when Chloe sacrifices her character to save her friend’s and states, “I actually feel sad right now.” The investment and attachment to the avatar prompts the user to reflect upon their own tie to Chloe or other characters in Before the Storm or games in general.

Games later become the means by which Chloe and Rachel develop their relationship when the two characters steal away on a train car. They play two lies and a truth, and then an improvisation game that Rachel states she learned through her theatrical education, claiming “I like games.” Before the Storm therefore overtly builds a bridge between gaming and theatrical performance, and much like in The Tempest, games are utilized to develop and frame the relations between the characters. Chloe’s relations with other characters are likewise defined by the contours of games. If
the user opts to work on mending relations with Chloe’s militant and chauvinist stepfather, Chloe will define this action as, “reset button pressed.” The user is therefore repeatedly reminded of the fact they are playing a game, much as Shakespeare’s audience are reminded that they are watching a play. The ongoing efforts to make the user cognizant of this fact prompt them to reflect upon the effect of what they are watching, and the interface and its mechanics make themselves evident.

**Acting Lessons as Game**

After framing the videogame as theatrical games for the entire first episode and a half, *Before the Storm* then turns its Shakespearean performance into a game. The entire storyline’s arc prepares the user to see the production of *The Tempest* as the central event. As a prequel to the initial instalment, *Life Is Strange, Before the Storm* establishes the origins of the actual storm in the first game with Rachel’s fury at her father’s supposed infidelity and plays upon this shared content by including an adaptation of *The Tempest*. Rachel plays Prospero in the private school’s production of the play, and the chemistry between her and Chloe emerges from their shared witnessing of Miranda and Ferdinand’s romance played out by teenage actors who are rehearsing the scene. These segments augment the aforementioned dynamics of the play’s effects on the game’s narrative. The earlier instructions prepare the user to see the performance as a game, and they must play it when the actor playing Ariel cannot make it to the performance because of the fire encroaching on the town. Chloe is the only person who can fulfill the role, and Rachel suggests that she is suited because of her knack for the theatrical improv games she has played with her. Once Chloe reluctantly accepts the role, and the cinematic sequence ends, the user finds themselves as Chloe costumed as Ariel backstage. Looking around the space, the user has the opportunity to read the script beforehand. They may opt not to do so, but if they read it, they will find lines and cues for Ariel in Act One, Scene Two of the play. At this point, the videogame user prepares according to the techniques and mechanics of the stage, wherein they must memorize and prepare their delivery by knowing when...
and what to speak. The user has the choice of whether or not they will adhere to this stage practice, but other than the fact Chloe now dons a raven costume as Ariel and is ostensibly going onstage soon, there is nothing to dictate she must peruse the script or prepare. The user must also anticipate this game of language and stage business beforehand and know to listen for cues to deliver their lines.

As the second scene of act one commences, Chloe as Ariel receives her cue from Rachel as Prospero and enters onstage. In the exchange of dialogue, the user has the option of three possible lines to respond with, and their ability to do so depends upon their prior knowledge of *The Tempest*. The event elicits multiple possibilities. On the one hand, it simulates the live anxieties and pressures of the actor whose ability to recall the play’s lines properly can result in the success or failure of the play. On the other hand, because of its carefree nature as game, the user can opt to deliver the wrong lines incorrectly. Much of this depends upon the user and their desires, but in some ways the game encourages a disruption of Shakespeare’s text. At multiple points in the storyline, Chloe is able to graffiti images, and some of these are related to Shakespeare. The user is also rewarded for these actions through game trophies. For example, Chloe draws on the poster for the play at one point, and at a later instance the user can decide whether to draw marijuana leaves or anarchy signs on the spotlights for the high school production, guided by Chloe’s question to herself of what the play could use more of in its production. Likewise, her journal is a space of artistic resistance to Shakespeare. She writes “Dead White Guy” under an illustration of Shakespeare, and she illustrates Shakespeare later with devil horns and a goatee. All of these options guide or allow the user to speak truth to Shakespeare’s power, but also to make his work and image their own. Returning to the production, then, where the user can opt that Chloe speak the correct or wrong line, according to the original Shakespearean text, there is a pleasure the game suggests by design that is to be found in altering Shakespeare. In interfacing between game and play, then, the theatrical medium is both
revered and challenged. A user can discover and learn the elements of performance and the lines of
the Shakespearean text and take pleasure in participating in this process through a performance of
*The Tempest*, which allows for a similarity and difference of theatre and videogame, or to use
Hookway’s terms a holding apart and drawing together. However, a user can also derive joy from
the less harmonious interfacing between media that Galloway theorizes, as the user can make the
play anew, much to the chagrin of the theatre instructor in the game’s narrative but much to the
pleasure of the player making the story their own.

Unlike Chloe’s own engagement with her *Dungeons and Dragons* character, though, the user is
limited in terms of their control, something that has been previously observed in the game franchise.
The choice-based adventure narrative game style already reduces the capacity of a player for
exploration, identity formation, or expansive journeying and narrative making, but this also infringes
on the interface’s critical capacity. Looking to the first *Life Is Strange* game, Holger Pötzsch and
Agata Waszkiewicz argue, based upon a Brechtian dialectical approach, that “the scripted endings
are problematic in terms of a politics of entertainment.” xxii Despite not engaging extensively with
*Before the Storm*, the two nevertheless conclude that for all the feminist ambitions of the games “lapse
back into narrowly framing these protagonists’ agency and capabilities.” xxiii There are complications
with this approach, however, both from ludological and narratological perspectives. Andrea Luc
points out that the genre and the franchise offer the ability to play out alternative possibilities and
replay actions that patriarchal society does not offer women and non-binary players: “we might not
be able to rewind time in our ‘real’ lives, [but] being able to do so in a simulated environment was a
cathartic and reflexive experience.” xxiv Play and making the play disrupts the view that choice is
limited, and speaks to Rebecca Bushnell’s similar views of the original game, namely that it questions
what a “correct” or “successful” action is. xxv
Even from a narratological standpoint, the videogame’s interfacing of play and game results in a revision of the text inevitably, as Rachel goes off script as Prospero regardless of what the user as Chloe decides to do. The failure to complete the Shakespearean text is therefore celebrated rather than its perfection. Rachel’s divergent lines end up culminating her and Chloe’s romance onstage between the characters, and the discourse of power between Prospero and Ariel transforms into a more mutually informed one. Before Chloe responds to Rachel’s request as Prospero, the exchange prompts an audience member to cry out “Say yes!”, displaying a Brechtian model of deriving action from the crowd that speaks to the user’s own investment. Picking up on Jack Halberstam’s notion of the queer art of failure, there are of course two ways of viewing this scene, if we acknowledge failure as the refusal “to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline” and the recognition “that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant.” xxvi On the one hand, by structuring and scripting the approval of the audience, the game renders the romantic union between Rachel and Chloe into a chrono-normative bond that develops through heteronormative conventions: their love story’s arc could be said to mirror teenage heteronormative fantasies. On the other hand, however, this can only be accomplished through queering the Shakespearean text. The interface between theatre and videogame thus makes the sequence far more complicated than it might at first appear. By applying Bonnie Ruberg’s ground-breaking work on queer theory in videogames, it is possible to appreciate what is at work in Before the Storm’s interface. Ruberg elucidates that videogames are not inherently queer according to their content, but through how they are played. This complicates the notion of “success” or winning, much as Bushnell has already identified in this game series. xxvii In this context, regardless of whether or not one believes they have succeeded through accurately delivering Shakespearean lines, the real achievement derives from breaking from them, from failing. Therefore, even if the videogame represents heteronormativity, xxvii it still queers the theatrical gameplay, or at least that of traditional Shakespearean performance. It is Rachel rather than
Shakespeare’s Prospero who elicits the Brechtian response, but it is only through being and then breaking from Prospero’s book that she can accomplish this feat.

_Before the Storm_ may not be radical then in the interface it establishes as a videogame with the user, but in its interfacing of the theatrical medium through videogame media, it accomplishes the critical potential of betweenness that interface theorists laud. In the process, it manages to revise and adapt Shakespeare’s work through endowing the user with the ability to make and game the play in ways that echo the original work’s ambitions and circumstances, and it also encourages the user to challenge the patriarchy and hegemony of Shakespeare as cultural icon through its narrative. In this manner both the game’s ludology and narratology work in concert to alter and remake the Shakespearean text. This process or play of adaptation is queer not necessarily because of the characters involved, but because of what Ruberg refers to as “re-gamification” through the celebration of playing freely from the original language. It is not the interfacing of the videogame that accomplishes this feat, but the interfacing of the theatre through the videogame as well as between the mechanics of theatre and the choices of the videogame that establishes these revels. Chloe perhaps said it best, though: “We ended up creating a new story together on stage. A much better story, because this one ends with the two of us escaping the island and sailing off into the sunset together. Take that, Shakespeare.”

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1. This conference paper represents an early draft of a submission to Paul Budra and Clifford Werier’s *Routledge Handbook to Shakespeare and Interface*, forthcoming.
3. All quotations taken from *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*. The author of this paper played the game on a PS4. For an idea of the gameplay (I say idea because a video does not accurately simulate the experience of play), particularly that which involves the Shakespearean performance, please see the following clip: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xfOqKHZHv8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xfOqKHZHv8)
Galloway makes the point that a “middle…is not a medium.” Andrew Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Polity, p. 18.


I use the word queer in this paper according to Ruberg’s definition: “an umbrella term for people who do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality.” Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, NYU Press, p. 7. When used as a verb, the word signals “a way of being, doing, and desiring differently.” Ibid, p. 7.

As we’ll see later in the paper, Ruberg distinguishes queer play from queer representation in videogames to challenge narratives that the media are made only for white-cis-men. By making this claim, they offer an important observation about the dangers of empathy, namely “the worrisome implications that underlie the belief that a brief gameplay experience could (or even should) effectively communicate to a straight, cisgender player what it feels like to be queer.” Ibid, p. 25.


Ibid, p. 4.

Katherine Rowe, “Crowd-Sourcing Shakespeare”, *Shakespeare Studies*, pp. 61-62.


Galloway actually establishes such readings in relation to videogames. Ibid, p. 44.


It is worth noting here that the concern is that the actress lives outside of where the road is closed off and cannot attend the performance… but there is never a question of whether or not the high school should still put on *The Tempest* while a massive fire looms on the outskirts of their town.


Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Game Have Always Been Queer*, NYU Press, p. 18.

I am not foreclosing the possibility that the game does offer a queer reading in terms of Chloe and Rachel’s storyline.