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# Legitimating Media: Shakespeare's Awkward Travels Through Video Games and Twitter

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*Since the 19th century, Shakespeare references have recurred with surprising consistency in experimental forms of media. This article considers the role of references to and adaptations of Shakespeare texts when a media form takes on a new valence for a set of users in a particular time and place. We consider two different moments at length: a commercial interactive game from 1984 that made novel use of cassettes and sound, and the production and reception of early Twitter adaptations of Shakespeare in 2010. By standing in for the aesthetic possibilities and limits of a changing media space, Shakespearean references and deviations from them serve a key role for artists and critics in debates over the legitimacy and significance of creative work in emergent media. Thus, cultural producers, critics and audiences thus use these sometimes-awkward appearances of Shakespeare as a means of describing their aesthetic potentials and limits.*

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Twitter, Video Games, Authorship, New Media, Legitimation.

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In the summer of 2014, the authors set up shop in the Folger Shakespeare Library.[1] Our job was to explore the Library's holdings, and those around it in Washington DC, and see what media material might be of interest for a forthcoming exhibit entitled "Shakespeare in America." But the process also helped us to see recent media history in a different light. Ephemeral and sometimes quite awkward uses of Shakespeare appear repeatedly at transitional moments in media history—from the invention of the telephone to the experimental stages of color printing, cinema, and television, among others (Sterne, 2016). The use of Shakespeare to attach prestige to things that are not Shakespeare is the subject of Lawrence Levine's classic *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1998), and therefore are not a surprise. Levine argues that Shakespeare's ubiquity is a product of the prestige Shakespeare's writings conferred on their users, the promotional efforts of institutions who sought to bring

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Shakespeare to new audiences, and in the fantasies of cultural continuity afforded by use of his work across the centuries. But he tends to cast reworkings of Shakespeare's plays and poetry in other media as kitch, privileging literary and theatrical dissemination over other kinds. After our time in archives and libraries, we came to see Shakespeare's awkward travels as discourses on the media forms themselves. Shakespeare's texts appear in emergent or transitional media forms that otherwise had nothing to do with his *oeuvre*, helping to illustrate the threads of meaning that sew together the fantasy of a seamless new media environment.

Shakespeare is not a common object of study in media studies. The last time an article on Shakespeare appeared in an official ICA journal was over 60 years ago, when his dialogues were read as an instance of Korzybskian semantic theory (Neva, 1957). He occasionally appears as a signifier of legitimacy or prestige, or as the source of an anecdote, but only rarely has media studies addressed Shakespeare as a subject for analysis in the terms of the field (some exceptions are Gitelman, 1999 and Taub, 1998). This is unsurprising, given that Shakespeare is a staple subject in an adjacent discipline—English literature. And yet, in recent years, Shakespeare scholars in that field have turned to new media to examine Shakespeare's dissemination and circulation in popular culture. This scholarship focuses on how attention to media can advance insight into Shakespeare, working within the framework of adaptation, especially (Burt, 2007; Calbi, 2013; Semenza, 2010). For instance, in his analysis of early Twitter adaptations of Shakespearean plays, Maurizio Calbi (2013) writes that, "from the perspective of Shakespeare studies at least, the interaction of Shakespeare and social media," prompts the question, "what is Twitter doing *to* Shakespeare?" (p. 138, emphasis in original). In this article, we approach the convergence of Shakespeare and new media from a media historical perspective, and in so doing, reverse Calbi's terms. Shakespeare texts illuminate media for their users at moments of phase change—as they adopt new forms and valences in a particular time and place (Simondon, 2010, p. 1). They help support claims regarding the legitimacy of cultural practices in emergent media domains. Even though at some level many users may not care, media institutions are constantly caught up in games of legitimation: platforms and outlets challenge one another for authority or significance; companies jockey for market share; cultural workers use media forms to confer significance on their own work; journalists, reviewers, and educators make judgments about aesthetic value; and conglomerates and nonprofits promote themselves as hip, cool and relevant (Newman and Levine, 2012).

If the limits of a new media form are also its condition of possibility for aesthetic production, experiments with widely known and cited cultural texts—like Shakespeare—help outline those conditions of possibility and impossibility. In this article, we consider two cases at length. Released in 1984, the video game *Deus Ex Machina* was built around "The Seven Ages of Man" monologue in *As You Like It*. But this was not even its most notable feature: at a time when computer soundcards could play simple monophonic melodies but not prerecorded songs, *Deus Ex Machina* attempted to expand the medium with a full cassette soundtrack that was



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synchronized to gameplay. We set this game aside early performances of Shakespeare plays on Twitter, especially *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a five-week, multimedia story produced in 2010 by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in collaboration with media production group Mudlark. In analyzing these two examples, we explore users' appropriations of Shakespeare as self-referential stories that narrate an old story in new form, thereby describing media forms as they change phase (Figures 1 and 2).

To borrow a phrase from Friedrich Kittler (1982), we examine these two experimental uses of Shakespeare as "discourse[s] on channel capacity" (p. 473; see also Mulvin, forthcoming, on the work of proxies). By "channel capacity," Kittler means to highlight the ways in which representational systems can call attention to the conditions of their circulation, rather than just their putative content. In our case studies, people use Shakespeare to signal both the fact of a medium's capacity to carry cultural meanings, and the contours of that process. It is common across media history to consider how artistic practice serves a domesticating function, rendering a new and potentially unfamiliar medium familiar and easier to digest for audiences (Gunning, 1993). Our stories extend this discussion into new media. While the later Twitter users do not directly refer to *Deus Ex Machina*, our two cases share a historical morphology. For our subjects—game designers, performers, critics, and commentators—Shakespeare's appearances serve as evidence and measure of the aesthetic potential of the medium in question. Yet of course the two cases are different, and that is why we chose them: in offering a reminder that culture still matters in the age of the material turn, we did not want to ontologize Shakespeare or media. *Deus Ex Machina* came out right before the video game industry crashed in the 1980s; *Such Tweet Sorrow* appeared right as Twitter was taking off. Two different cases, 20 years apart, keep us tied to context.

Many 1980's gamers and early Twitter users may not have thought their media practices required any legitimation—and one can find a range of rich aesthetic practices that predate the use of Shakespeare in these media. But the people in our cases *did* seek legitimation for a variety of purposes. Through his use of Shakespeare and references to cinema in *Deus Ex Machina*, developer Mel Croucher explicitly tried to set himself up as an *auteur* in an effort to expand the medial domain of video games at the time. He wasn't wrong to press the point. In the mid 1980s, plenty of computer magazines still failed to differentiate between video games and other kinds of more functional office software in their review sections. If Croucher used Shakespeare to promote the aesthetic possibilities of video games, so too did the RSC when they ventured onto Twitter. While it makes sense that a theater company charged with disseminating Shakespeare would experiment with new modes of dissemination, that it happened in 2010, and not earlier or later is significant. Shakespeare still functioned as a shorthand for legitimate theater and literature in 2010, even in the literary world around Twitter; so much so that when the first print volume of Twitterature appeared in English, Penguin Publishers provided a lengthy Shakespeare reference on the back cover.



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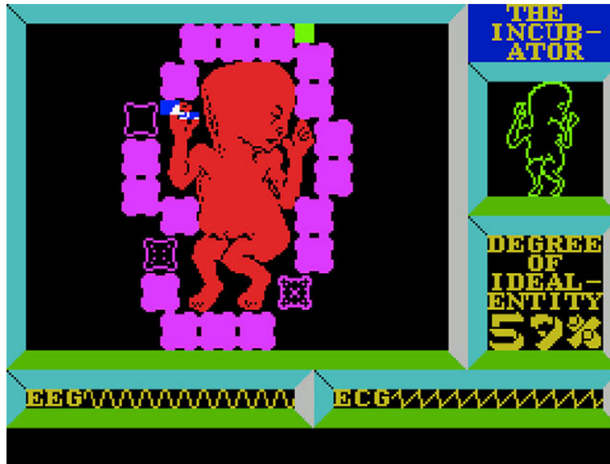


**Figure 1** "ZX Spectrum, Deus Ex Machina—Side 1, Part 2," YouTube video, 2:15, from Automata's Deus Ex Machina, posted by "Jamie Mann," March 30, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNLN76sj-og

**Figure 2** "Let's Play Deus Ex Machina, Part 1" YouTube video, 26:03, from Automata's Deus Ex Machina, posted by "RockPaperMario," October 20, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJBFJKA59fY

Across our two examples, we show how Shakespeare was used to establish media forms as spaces for creative action as understood through a third party, whether an imagined user, reader or critic. The invocation of Shakespeare even worked in reverse: when critics attacked Twitter adaptations of Shakespeare, they also commented on the possibility of aesthetic or performative action on the medium. When Mel Croucher criticized the sad state of video game authorship, he used



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Shakespeare to assert the possibility that video games could be, but before his arrival, were not yet serious aesthetic works. In both examples, artists, critics and marketers used Shakespeare to produce discourses on what media technologies and people could do in particular settings.

## "My *Citizen Kane* moment": the strange case of Mel Croucher and *Deus Ex Machina*

In 1984, a computer game called *Deus Ex Machina*, inspired by the *As You Like It* monologue "The Seven Ages of Man," was released for the ZX Spectrum computer in the United Kingdom. A convergence of previously disparate media forms, the game lasted 50 minutes and came with an audio cassette soundtrack meant to be played in sync with the action on the screen. In its packaging materials, the game promised "a completely new form of computer entertainment. It is a union of computer game, film, book, and L.P. record. It is the first of a new era of experiences, and it is unique" (Croucher, 1984). Mel Croucher, creator of the game, claimed that *Deus Ex Machina* would be his "Citizen Kane" moment: he would create a masterpiece. (Svelch, 2009). Instead, like many other video games that arrived during the great video game crash of 1983–1985 (Wolf, 2012, p. 5), the game flopped, bankrupting Croucher and his company. Yet it received critical acclaim for its departure from the dominant narrative, aesthetic, and technical forms then associated with computer games (Croucher, 2014). PC World called it "an experience unparalleled by any other game," while the magazine *Computer and Video Games* touted it as "The Computer Equivalent to Pink Floyd's 'The Wall'" (Croucher, 2014, Loc.1369). Croucher invoked Shakespeare at a moment when the status of commercial computer games relative to other forms of software and entertainment was in flux; through Shakespeare, he linked high cultural narratives to the ludic elements of interactivity and simulation of computer games. Thus, while the game failed commercially, it successfully leveraged Shakespeare to illustrate computer gaming's aesthetic potential.

That *Deus Ex Machina* drew inspiration from *As You Like It* was no coincidence: the play's "The Seven Ages of Man" monologue contains Shakespeare's famous pronouncement that "All the world's a stage/And all the men and women merely players." In *Deus Ex Machina*, all the men and women are merely *video game* players. By extension, *Deus Ex Machina* inscribes the video game, the site of play, as a stage. Set in an apocalyptic future, *Deus Ex Machina* imagines a humanoid "defect" born from mouse droppings inside "the machine." Using a combination of Shakespearean verse, colloquial expressions, and pop culture references, a narrative voiced by *Doctor Who's* Jon Pertwee directs the user to witness and take part in the birth and death of the defect. Like the human subject of "The Seven Ages of Man," who has no choice but to progress through seven distinct stages of life, the player must attend to the defect through a series of seven mini-games as the defect ages. Regardless of how well they play, the seven stages inevitably end in the defect's



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death. In the world of the video game, Croucher's "defect" serves as a role for users to play, according to a preset script, evidencing the medium's potential for expressive engagement: error reveals the possibility of an intending subject and authorial agency.

In rewriting a Shakespearean text in accordance with the technological logics of a video game, Croucher intervened in a gaming culture that tended not to ascribe authorial status to individual game developers. *Deus Ex Machina* grew out of the hobbyist movement in computer game programming that emerged with the Sinclair Spectrum computer, a low-cost home computer in the United Kingdom then gaining traction among the U.K.'s working class. Although many of the hobbyist game developers at the time created games with political themes and narratives that drew on the technological affordances of the Spectrum, and some of these developers sought entrance into the commercial video game market, computer games had yet to achieve broad cultural recognition as a genre of media distinct from other forms of computer software and popular entertainment (Deeming 2014). In early computer magazines, which made no distinction between games and other forms of computer software, journalists saw computer games as part of the domestication of the home computer and evaluated them not according to any artistic criteria but, rather, as tools of computer education (Kirkpatrick 2016). When *Deus Ex Machina* appeared, computer magazines had just begun to reposition games as a form of popular entertainment to be assessed on their own terms; and gamers as a different kind of media subject. Unhappy with popular stereotypes of computer users as "socially awkward machine obsessed males, lacking in personal hygiene," those involved in the computer industry in the 1980s aspired to associate computers with the youthful rebelliousness and transgressive appeal that rock music had held for the previous generation (Kirkpatrick 2016, p. 18).

Croucher, inspired by similar distaste for the dominant stereotypes of computer users, responded with the high culture of classic literature. His game is a pastiche of Shakespearean text, modified for the social context of 1984 and the rise of computer culture. In a telling example, *Deus Ex Machina* alters the original Shakespeare verse: "Then, the whining school-boy with his satchel/And shining morning face, creeping like a snail/Unwillingly to school" (Shakespeare, trans. 1906, pp. 74–75) to "Then the whining school child, with cassette and shining morning face, creeping like a snail, unwillingly to databank" (Croucher, 1984). While the former substitution renders game-play gender neutral, distancing gaming from the "machine obsessed males" plaguing popular conceptions of computing, the latter swaps the original's reference to school with a reference to computer infrastructure. Particularly for those familiar with the famous passage, the substitution marks computer pedagogy as but one, early phase in the life mapped out by *Deux Ex Machina*. In other words, through Shakespearean allusion, *Deux Ex Machina* acknowledges the role of computer games as educational media while also insisting on gaming's ability to serve as a medium of artistic expression in its own right.

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Shakespearean source material likewise separated *Deus Ex Machina* from the popular entertainment that inspired many contemporary games at the time: video games based on hit movies such as *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *E.T.* These games generally riffed on scenes or events from the movies, adapting them to suit video game conventions by tasking game players with short-term objectives; a *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* game consisted entirely of users applying chainsaws to victims (Montfort and Bogost, 2009). In contrast, Croucher, who eschewed not only violence in video games but also games constructed around the end goal of "winning" (Croucher, 2014) turned to Shakespeare to show how computer games could capture the spirit of classic literature as easily as they could blockbuster film. Moreover, while the Shakespearean cannon might have provided him with no shortage of violence and gore, the text of "The Seven Ages of Man" enabled a sharp departure from the violence that had dominated video gameplay since the *Space War* had appeared on shelves in 1962. In a departure from video game conventions already in place by the 1980s, then, Croucher drew on "The Seven Ages of Man" in order to show how a meditative game could pontificate on the purpose of life without raising the specter of gratuitous death.

Shakespeare's "The Seven Ages of Man" served *Deus Ex Machina* as an allegory for the extent of control enjoyed by users in interactive gaming. Just as in life, people either continue aging or die, *Deus Ex Machina* affords the user a limited amount of agency over the defect's passage through the game's stages. Furthermore, as in traditional forms of theater or cinema, the game would continue even if the user engaged only as a passive observer. Croucher's use of "The Seven Ages of Man" thus highlighted the limited scope of contingency encoded in all games by bringing it into the diegesis. As the defect will ultimately die, "The Seven Ages of Man" signifies a major departure from the dominant play structure of video games at the time, since most were constructed around a goal or set of goals, and meeting those goals constituted winning, thus ending the game, moving the user up a level, or starting the game over. By invoking the famous Shakespearean passage on the inexorability of human life, and illustrating it through interactive computer gaming, Croucher provocatively demonstrated gaming's potential as a medium of artistic expression.

Croucher, who recently chronicled his failed dream with the book, *Deus Ex Machina: The Best Game You Never Played in Your Life*, claims auteur status over the work. The book emphasizes his complete control of everything from the game's musical score and graphics, to its packaging and marketing materials: "Everything was designed in advance, down to the last detail. Including the music and the marketing. I was completely Stalinist about it" (Croucher, 2014, Loc. 654). Croucher's design process deviated from typical approaches to computer game design, which usually centered on the work of multiple programmers (Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. 1). Although Croucher hired a programmer to implement his designs, and takes care to describe the numerous contributions of his team in the development process, he maintains his claim to authorship. He recalls using "felt tip pens and graph paper

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to hand-draw all the graphics pixel by pixel" and goes on to liken his creative process to that of a screenwriter or a playwright: "I wrote the mechanics of the game as a screenplay and typed out the instructions for the programmer a bit like a stage production" (Croucher, 2014). As painter, playwright, and producer rolled into one, Croucher uses his Shakespearean adaptation to demonstrate both his artistic self-understanding and authorial control. At the same time, he also repeats a classic self-aggrandizing male fantasy of an artist exercising total control over a collectively produced artwork. In devaluing others' labor, Croucher also begins to outline the aesthetic possibilities and *impossibilities* of the genre in the 1980s.

Given Croucher's insistence on sole authorship, however specious, it is worth considering how the game's Shakespearean source material itself bolsters the perception of authorial status in game design. Because of the plasticity of the computer interface, creators of computer games abandon a certain element of control (compared with literary authors or film producers), as users actively engage in making decisions about the action on screen (Frasca, 2003, p. 230). However, the author of the simulation creates the rules by which the story can be modified and altered. Because *Deus Ex Machina* departed from most popular games of the time by unfolding in a linear fashion that approached a fixed and final outcome, Croucher's role in controlling the game better resembled more traditional forms of authorship. Put a different way, Croucher seized upon Shakespeare's "The Seven Ages of Man" to create a game structure that would fit within genre conventions of a film with its fixed duration while allowing for enough gameplay to be engaging as an interactive game. By basing the game on the fixed linear narrative of "The Seven Ages of Man," Croucher not only positioned himself as a game developer capable of Shakespearean adaptation, but also emphasized his own authorial control, positing the possibility of auterism in the emerging media genre.

The clearest invocation of Shakespeare in *Deus Ex Machina* is also its most technologically innovative: the audio soundtrack. Prior to 1983, there were few examples of prolonged background music in computer games, since the processors could not simultaneously handle graphics, sound, and interaction. In her account of sound in early video game history, Karin Collins (2008) writes that if there was music, it was in the form of short theme songs that occurred in the beginning, at the end, and in non-interactive sequences between levels. Yet without audio narration, the Shakespearean themes of *Deus Ex Machina* could only be suggested through the game's temporal structure; the Shakespearean language would have no place in the game. Croucher's use of Shakespeare thus not only renegotiated the cultural connotations of computer gaming, it also expanded the operational dimensions of the media form.

Where both the audio and visual aspects of computer games were usually found on one cassette tape, Croucher expanded the limitations of memory by creating two cassette tapes, one that the user would load into the computer, and one that the user would load into an audio cassette player. Additionally, he increased the available memory by calling on the user to flip the computer cassette tape midway in the

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game to the second side—a technical action that echoes the Shakespearean theme of passing through discrete phases. By using an audio cassette, the game foregrounded the soundtrack in the overall experience of playing the game and made the linear time of the soundtrack as important as the visuals to the unfolding of its narrative. Indeed, Croucher would later complain that a pirated version of his game garnered negative reviews largely due to the fact that the audio portion was missing (2014). To the players of the pirated version of the game, the missing Shakespearean text rendered the game unintelligible.

The limitations of the medium opened up a space for Croucher to decenter the visual mode of engagement as the primary means of consuming and interacting with video games. In combining disparate media systems, Croucher's platform immanently internalized the hybrid genre of the game through its material form: the video games industry had appropriated the cassette tape as a storage medium. With *Deus Ex Machina*, a pair of cassettes linked the emergent form of the computer game with the cassette's much longer history as a medium for music recording and playback, just as the narrative linked computer gaming with a still longer history of Shakespearean drama. It set up a relationship of equivalence: if Shakespeare was great art, if music was great art, and if one could apply Shakespearean text and music technology to computer games, then gaming too was a great art form that could support great artworks.

It might be tempting to read the *Deus Ex Machina*'s commercial failure as evidence that gamers were not persuaded by this kind of legitimating talk, or that they did not find the game fun. But the software press of the time, and the game's later cult status demonstrates that Croucher's use of Shakespeare was not entirely off key. It resonated with players and critics who were not simply interested in playing games, but with the game itself as a historical artifact. Just as Croucher's in-game literature references created an intertextual field for players, the readings of the game as part of game history for its narrative and technological form ultimately render it a comment on the medium itself.

Twenty-five years after Croucher debuted *Deus Ex Machina*, Shakespeare would make a similar appearance on a newly emerging digital platform: Twitter. Staged at the moment when Twitter was becoming a mass medium, Shakespearean Twitter productions document the persistent invocation of Shakespeare by cultural producers seeking to expand their technological toolsets, even as they grappled with an altogether different set of technological forms, cultural pressures, and metrics of artistic success.

## "Something to do with poetry": Shakespeare on Twitter

In 2009, Shakespeare debuted on Twitter. That January, the three-year-old media company climbed to third among the Internet's most visited social media sites; a year earlier, it had held number 22 (Kazeniac, 2009). Along with its influx of users came the tweeted renditions of Shakespeare. First, in February, the Amway



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Shakespeare Opportunity, under the direction of Florida-based performance artist Brian Feldman, used the microblogging platform to present a Shakespearean adaptation titled *Twitter of the Shrew*. The production utilized 19 Twitter accounts, one for each of the play's characters, and staged their dialogue in real time, with one scene presented every day for 12 days. The following month, in London, *The Times* undertook an initiative that used 15 Twitter handles, each a character in *Romeo and Juliet*, to tweet the entirety of the tragedy at 15-minute intervals over the course of a month. As Calbi takes care to note in *Spectral Shakespeares*—and perhaps in a nod to conventions of social media—for each character's avatar, *The Times* selected a photo of a cat (2013, p. 199, n2). Yet Calbi's primary interest in Shakespeare Twitter, like that of most critics who have given attention to the genre, is a higher caliber production that launched the following year. *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a five-week, multi-media extravaganza produced by the RSC in collaboration with media production group Mudlark, reimagined Romeo and Juliet as smartphone-equipped millennials, and coincided with the RSC's more traditional production of the play in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Just as *Deux Ex Machina* raised the possibility of artistry in computer gaming, so too did these Shakespeare Twitter projects demonstrate the capacities of a digital medium, early in its emergence. However, where Croucher's aspirational auterism shows the utility of Shakespeare to a lone individual seeking to mark his work as culturally significant in a medium lacking prestige, the Twitter Shakespeare productions index an opposite cultural process. Unburdened by skepticism over their claims to artistry or cultural import, the acting troupe, the newspaper, and the Shakespeare theater turned to Twitter as a means popular engagement. For these organizations, adding Twitter to their artistic toolset served not as a means of demonstrating their cultural prestige but their social savvy. Yet these projects likewise drew attention to the potential of Twitter to function as a site of highbrow artistic expression. In the case of a medium that limited lines of dialogue to 140 characters, the turn to Shakespeare not only invokes the specter of authorship, but of *lengthy* literature, and of work famous for regimented dramatic structure. These plays endeavor to mark a medium conventionally understood as belonging to the realm of popular chatter into a medium of artistic presentation and demonstrate how a medium designed to foster short conversational exchanges can serve as medium of durational art.

Twitter, launched in 2006, is a media platform through which registered users submit short posts, limited at the time of its launch to an SMS-friendly 140 characters. The platform first gained popularity at the 2007 SXSW music and media festival, where, as reported by Newsweek, "conference goers kept tabs on each other via constant twitters," an article so early that "tweet" had not yet become the preferred noun to describe posts (Levy, 2007). Compared with the Shakespearean productions of 2009 and 2010, the platform's early uptake as an unofficial public messaging system for convention-goers adheres more closely to Twitter's roots: the site began as a podcasting company's internal office communication system. As such, the platform

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exemplifies the "group work-software" that is a chief form of "gray media," the literatures and technological forms involved in institutional administration (Fuller and Goffey, 2012, pp. 1–2). Rich in medial dimensionality yet rarely studied as cultural objects, gray media contrast sharply with the artistry typically associated with Shakespeare. Putting Shakespeare on Twitter thus posits that a technology that was originally intended as anaesthetic technology can act as an aesthetic technology. Or, given Fuller and Goffey's insistence that organizational communication media exert a powerful, if invisible, cultural force, we might say that Shakespeare renders explicit the aesthetic potential always already inherent in the technology. Just as computer games were originally reviewed alongside office software, Twitter's cultural life began alongside its more functional dimensions, only later eclipsing them.

The Shakespeare Twitter plays took place at the same time as a variety of literary Twitter experiments that aimed to take the medium out of grayscale and into technicolor. Sometimes dubbed "twitterature," these experiments included mini-stories that spanned just 140 characters; original works of fiction, typed-out in 140-character increments; crowd-sourced narratives, with multiple contributors sharing sentences marked by hashtags; and classic works of literature abridged as terse tweets. Covering wide-ranging topics, genres, and languages, some of these projects eventually found homes in more traditional publishing outlets (Aciman and Rensin, 2009; Blechman, 2011; Dyer et al., 2012; Hill, 2011; Stewart, 2010). An enthusiastic 2011 article on the rise of Twitter as a literary medium looks to the site as portending an "ecosystem (…) being built for the fiction of the future," analysis that identifies the platform's emerging potential as a conduit for creativity (Rudin, 2011, n.p.) And yet, it acknowledges that even authors whose creative writing on the site led to book deals disagreed over the long-term viability of Twitter as a literary outlet. If these early literary experiments on Twitter raised new possibilities for the future of literature, they also reflected aesthetic practices then in such nascent stages that, as the essay puts it, "Hemingway himself might not have bet on them" (Rudin, 2011, n.p.).

In the context of Twitter's emerging but uncertain literary future, the titular book to emerge from literary Twitter forays centered Shakespeare in its promotional copy (Aciman and Rensin, 2009). Among the first books to get its start as a Twitter feed, *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less*, hit bookstores at the end of 2009, on the heels of the first Shakespeare Twitter productions. Written by a pair of college undergraduates and published by Penguin, the collection apprehends Twitter not as a site conducive to theatrical productions of Shakespearean plays but as a platform suitable to a literary compendium. However tongue in cheek, the book's blurb asks readers: "Perhaps while reading Shakespeare you've asked yourself, *What Exactly is Hamlet Trying to Tell Me?* (…) if the Prince of Denmark had a Twitter account and an iPhone, he could tell his story in real time—and concisely!" (Aciman and Rensin, 2009). Although the collection includes tweeted versions of more than 80 classics, Penguin zeroed-in on Twitter's capacity to convey Shakespearean meaning as its clearest signal of twitterary merit.



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The Shakespeare Twitter plays likewise marked the platform as a site of artistic expression—and did so on a grander order of magnitude. Where *Twitterature* invoked Shakespearean Twitter adaptations as an example of ironic, bite-sized comedy made possible by the new medium, more elaborate adaptations like Amway Shakespeare's *Twitter of the Shrew* and the RSC's *Such Tweet Sorrow* positioned the platform as a Shakespearean stage in its own right. Just as Croucher had intervened in early 1980s computer gaming with an ambitious adaptation of Shakespearean text, these production companies orchestrated highly complex Shakespearean adaptations that reimagined the uses of the social media platform during a time of fecund experimentation.

Shakespeare's earliest social media forays long precede the emergence of Twitter. As early as 1993, a cyber *Hamlet* adaptation, performed by a group calling themselves The Hamnet Players, took place via Internet Relay Chat (IRC). As Brenda Danet shows in her study of the performance, HAMNET played with the specific communicative capacities of IRC at the same time that it also demonstrated the possibility of creativity in that medium. Similarly, for Katherine Hayles, *Romeo and Juliet: A Facebook Tragedy*, an undergraduate English literature project by Helen Skura, Katia Nierle, and Gregory Gin, portends a promising pedagogical practice because the assignment required that students "use software with which they were familiar in unfamiliar ways" (2012 p. 76). That is, it asked that they apprehend a platform conventionally understood as a medium of social communication as a medium of literary expression—and, specifically, that they do so through Shakespeare.

The Shakespeare Twitter plays, like their Shakespearean social media forbearers and twitterary contemporaries, sought to identify a social communication medium as medium of artistry. "It's the model for literary upstarts everywhere," remarks Rudin of Twitter, whose study of twitterature celebrates the ease of finding and building readerships by publishing short works directly on the platform (2011, n.p.). In this digital literary milieu, the appearance of Shakespeare is perhaps less remarkable than the participation of the RSC. As a legacy cultural institution with an international reputation, the RSC can hardly be described as an "upstart." Yet like the works by little-known authors whose Twitter-enhanced careers interest Rudin, its production of *Such Tweet Sorrow*, designed to coincide with the more traditional *Romeo and Juliet* at the Globe, likewise mined Twitter for artistic as well as promotional purposes. In other words, just as upstart authors sought to hone their craft through a new medium that would double as a form of self-promotion, the RSC turned to Twitter in order to exploit an emerging form of public engagement, which would take the form of a high-caliber, tweeted production of Shakespeare.

Backed by a powerhouse production team, *Such Tweet Sorrow* employed highly complex yet controlled forms of collaboration. The team of actors cast in the *Romeo and Juliet* at the Globe improvised their counterpart roles in *Such Tweet Sorrow*, following a story grid developed by the project's creators. It gestured toward Shakespearean dramatic structure by extending the production over a period of five

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weeks, where the action of each week corresponded to its counterpart act in *Romeo and Juliet*: tweets during first week mirrored the action of Act I, and so forth. The project's run over several weeks, combined with its association with the high profile of the RSC (and with promotion by the theater's PR department) helped *Such Tweet Sorrow* receive coverage across an array of popular media, much of which addressed the project as a theatrical novelty (Itzkoff, 2010). So, too, did it incite vitriolic responses, which more usefully illustrate (to paraphrase Calbi) what Shakespeare did *to* Twitter. In a piece titled "A Plague on the Twitter Romeo and Juliet," *The Guardian* found the project's length among its chief flaws: "the whole thing's interminable. It's been going on a fortnight, and we've only just had Romeo and Juliet falling for each other" (Higgins, 2010). The *Guardian's* critique reverses conventional conceptions of Twitter as overwhelmingly instantaneous, a space for rapid and punctuated response to current events, even though the original rushed action of *Romeo and Juliet* was supposed to take place over a matter of days. *The Guardian's* very objection to the long-form nature of *Such Tweet Sorrow* points to Twitter's capacity to transmit cohesive content over a far larger timeframe. In other words, *Such Tweet Sorrow* demonstrated Twitter's capacity for durational performance by taking the rapid-fire platform popularly perceived as unsuitable to sustained discourse or narrative arc, and using it to tell a story so epic it tried the patience of a seasoned drama critic.

*The Guardian's* critique also echoes concern long voiced by theatrical producers that contemporary audiences find Shakespearean five-act structure tedious (Falocco, 2012, pp. 119–143). Even as the newspaper rebuked *Such Tweet Sorrow* for debasing Shakespearean language, it interpolated the production within the very terms used to debate the utility of Shakespeare on the contemporary legitimate stage. This is particularly interesting for our argument here, because one might expect to find a critique (or, from a more populist vantage point, a celebration) of a tweeted Shakespeare as the transformation of great drama into a bite-sized modern medium. James Wakefield, the actor who played Romeo in both *Such Tweet Sorrow* and in the RSC's production of *Romeo and Juliet* which it accompanied, described the experiment to the BBC as, "trying to find a way to tell the story in the 21st century." Indeed, *The Guardian* finds the transmutation of Shakespeare's text into Twittter conventions distasteful, objecting: "Didn't the original have something to do with poetry? Does a tweet like 'Goooooooooood morninggggg:):):):):):) It happened (…) with THE most beautiful boy alive (…)' really cut it?" (Higgins, 2010). Yet even as *The Guardian* takes umbrage with the linguistic modes of *Such Tweet Sorrow*, it extends to Twitter the problem of audience engagement that has long posed challenges to durational art. In this formulation, Twitter represents not a media solution to the theater's problem of audience engagement, but a medium of durational performance in its own right.

Perhaps because the journalistic and scholarly critiques of *Such Tweet Sorrow* are concerned with Shakespeare, rather than with Twitter, these treatments neglect what is, to our mind, the most salient use of Twitter to tell the story of



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Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers: the plot revolves around a feud! Teenagers take the feud too seriously. Their talk erupts into violence that leads to their deaths. Is it an accident that this description works as both a synopsis of *Romeo and Juliet* and of anxiety about Twitter, a site where public feuds between members of opposing camps have become standard practice? We pose this question as a means of suggesting that, while our approach to Shakespearean media is admittedly more invested in what Shakespeare reveals about media forms than what media adaptation reveals about Shakespeare, these inverse critical orientations can work in tandem. By mapping the Shakespearean tragedy of adolescent passions gone awry onto a platform famous for its conduciveness to feuds, *Such Tweet Sorrow* plays on the dynamism of the hostilities that set the plot in motion.

At the same time, fear that teenagers' entry into sexuality and criminality, the plot points on which *Romeo and Juliet* turn, will be spurred by their exposure to new technologies has driven panic over the emergence of a range of media forms (Hasinoff, 2015). In that sense, the Shakespearean tragedy is particularly suited to aestheticizing cultural anxiety over media—and Twitter, perhaps more than any contemporary media form, is associated with the art of the feud. That *Such Tweet Sorrow* illuminates the social resonance of the feud at the heart of *Romeo and Juliet* becomes salient only through critical attention to the medial conventions of Twitter.

Attention to the synergies between Shakespearean plays and Twitter practice likewise bolstered reception of the Shakespeare Twitter productions that lacked the RSC's high profile and elaborate production values. Comparing the Amway Shakespeare Opportunity's *Twitter of the Shrew* with The Times' *Romeo and Juliet*, the blog Shakespeare Geek found in favor of the former. It deemed tweeting *Romeo and Juliet* in full "a lousy idea" given that "one simple soliloquy will take dozens of tweets." The site preferred *Twitter of the Shrew* because, "you've got people actually attempting to rewrite the text in a more Twitter-friendly manner (…) [m]aking a statement about communication as a whole, and the core of what you are trying to express versus the medium by which you choose to express it" (Shakespeare Geek, 2009). For Shakespeare Geek, a Twitter-specific Shakespearean adaption, rather than a verbatim Shakespearean recitation, best illustrated the expressive capacities of the medium.

Transmitting Shakespeare via a medium that consisted at the time exclusively of short form text posited the possibility of longer-form art—regardless of whether the tweeted plays succeed as theatrical or Twitterature works themselves. As with Croucher's video game a quarter century earlier, the tweeted Shakespeare plays articulate the medium's formal limitations as conducive to the creation of Shakespearean-caliber art. Yet unlike with Croucher, the producers of the Shakespearean productions each enjoyed varying degrees of cultural legitimacy and shared little of Croucher's anxieties over their own prestige. These more recent Twitter forays show how, whatever an author's intent, invoking Shakespeare can

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serve as a legitimizing force not on a particular author but on an emerging medium itself.

By staging a Shakespearean production in a new media context, *Such Tweet Sorrow*, like *Twitter of the Shrew* and The Time's *Romeo and Juliet* before it, reveal Twitter's aesthetic contours. In doing so, it uses Shakespeare to enrich a gray medium. If *Such Tweet Sorrow*, in *The Guardian's* estimation, fails as gripping drama, it nonetheless leaves open the possibility that a future artistic endeavor might successfully harness the platform: in the theater, a poorly reviewed production is still, unquestionably, housed within a legitimate site of performance. Staging Shakespeare on Twitter renders the media platform a site of aesthetic production, comparable to a theatrical stage.

## Conclusion: medial legitimation

References to Shakespeare's work, as well as the work itself, can function as a provocation across media forms. They operate as stand-ins for creative potentials of media technologies—and people within them—at moments when a particular media form's cultural significance undergoes a change of phase. Across media forms and timeframes, critics, audiences and makers use Shakespeare to mark the aesthetic possibilities associated with different media forms, especially as the media forms themselves undergo changes. Their invocation of Shakespeare may be self-aggrandizing, but it is also meant to aggrandize the aesthetic dimensions of the media form to which it references.

By "proving" a new kind of media context as suitable for aesthetic production—the short form of a Twitter thread, or the narrative and ludic unfolding of an interactive computer game—mediatic differences in Shakespeare texts perform a kind of aesthetic legitimation for users who seek it. If creative work is possible in a new media form, then it must be a legitimate space for self-expression and the production of meaningful cultural texts. In the case of *Deus Ex Machina*, Croucher used Shakespeare as a shorthand for the possibility of narrative invention. In turn, that narrative function pointed back to other media: Croucher used it as an intermedial pathway to expand the operational dimensions of computer games, positing audio technology as central to gameplay. When Shakespeare appeared on Twitter, it was meant to demonstrate that a technology that emerged as an inter-office communication protocol, or a low bandwidth microblogging service, could be a space for high art. In both cases, users and creators of emerging media employed Shakespeare to demonstrate the possibility of aesthetic production in emergent or transitional media contexts, through both the affordances and limits of the new media forms. Even when critics dismissed these appropriations of Shakespeare as relatively trivial or ineffective, they opened up the debate on aesthetic production in video games and Twitter. As volumes of scholarship on error, glitch, and noise have shown, that which is excluded from the semantic part of a communication—the so-called message—usually carries traces of its conditions of possibility (Kelly, 2009).



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Shakespeare's awkward travels through video games and Twitter show how subjects negotiate textual materiality and how texts themselves undergo medial transformation. Meaning cannot be understood apart from its means of transmission. Where Twitter got its start as a gray medium, a platform for mundane managerial communication, its Shakespearean productions work to enrich cultural perceptions of the technology's communicative capacities. *Dues Ex Machina*, meanwhile, takes the notion of defect, glitch and limits, and makes them the source of artistic generation itself. While it casts aside the old double entendre of "stage," the game's very narrative plays on a new double entendre of "mouse"—as both a computer appendage and a rodent: it asks users to imagine that "mouse droppings," a scatological riff on the technology's unintended excesses, have the capacity to birth a Shakespearean world. Again, elements that at first only appear as byproducts of communication—error, noise, excess—become essential to its so-called message. Those who brought about Shakespeare's appearance in the new media contexts considered here did so to suggest that a particular kind of media practice is ready to be apprehended as a legitimate space and object of aesthetic expression. A gray communication system becomes a site for durational art. A computer game becomes a vehicle for authorship. In this way, subjects use old media forms to bring new ones to life for new audiences, and for themselves.

## Note

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