
THE GAMING ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY HAMLET IN THE DOCUMENTARY GRAND THEFT HAMLET

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the gaming adaptation of Shakespeare's play Hamlet in the documentary Grand Theft Hamlet, focusing on how Shakespearean tragedy is reimagined within the hyperreal digital environment of Grand Theft Auto Online. The documentary presents an experimental performance of Hamlet staged inside a violent, open-world gaming platform, where avatars enact Shakespeare's text amid gunfire, chaos, and player interruptions. This study explores how such a setting reshapes the themes of Hamlet, particularly revenge, surveillance, madness, and moral conflict, aligning them with contemporary digital culture and interactive media. Drawing on theories of adaptation, hyperreality, and game studies, the paper argues that Grand Theft Hamlet transforms Shakespeare's play from a scripted literary text into a participatory, unstable performance that reflects the fragmented realities of modern life. The hyperreal space of the game amplifies Hamlet's existential uncertainty, where questions of action, inaction, and identity are constantly disrupted by violence and unpredictability. Moreover, the documentary challenges traditional hierarchies between "high" literature and popular gaming culture, demonstrating how video games can function as serious platforms for cultural and literary engagement. By situating Hamlet within a virtual world defined by aggression and spectacle, Grand Theft Hamlet offers a provocative commentary on contemporary modes of storytelling, spectatorship, and performance. Ultimately, the paper highlights how gaming adaptations open new critical possibilities for understanding Shakespeare in the age of digital media and interactive hyperreality.

KEYWORDS:

Hamlet, Shakespeare, Grand Theft Auto, games, hyperreality, violence.

Introduction

The documentary *Grand Theft Hamlet* (Grylls & Crane, 2024) opens with a title card that defines *Grand Theft Auto Online* (GTA) as a “violent and beautiful world where almost anything is possible.” This phrase serves as the thesis for a new kind of theatrical exploration. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the physical world became a site of restriction and isolation. For the protagonists, Sam Crane and Mark Oosterveen, the lockdown was not merely a health crisis but an existential one. As professional actors, the closure of traditional theaters left them “jobless and desperate.” Out of creative necessity, they turned to the virtual world of Los Santos.

The beginning of the film captures a poignant contrast: the actors stand on a digital beach, envious of its beauty because they are legally barred from visiting a real one. This envy highlights the transition into hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981), where the digital simulation begins to feel more “real” or more accessible than the physical world. This paper argues that the migration to *GTA Online* was not a retreat from reality but an attempt to find a more authentic space for Shakespearean tragedy in a world that had become tragically absurd.

The Modern Puritan and Theatrical Resistance

A significant discovery in the film is the historical echo of the “Puritan.” While attempting to invite players to participate in their production, Mark is abruptly killed by an unknown player. His reaction “Maybe he’s a puritan” is one of the most intellectually significant moments in the documentary. Historically, the Puritan Theater Bans of 1642 in England forced actors into hiding, as the stage was viewed as a site of moral and physical contagion.

In the context of the documentary, the coronavirus acts as the modern “Puritan force,” locking the population away from the communal experience of art. However, the “griefers” within the game represent a second layer of Puritanism, the chaotic, anti-intellectual force that seeks to silence performance through violence.

When Sam and Mark declare, “You can’t stop art, motherfucker,” they are not just shouting at a screen; they are asserting the same theatrical resistance that actors have shown for centuries (Rowe, 2025). This conflict demonstrates that art does not require a velvet-curtained stage to be “real”; it only requires the will to perform in the face of hostility.

Violence in Shakespeare and GTA

The documentary explicitly compares the “meaningless violence” of GTA to the violence found in Shakespeare’s tragedies. There is a common misconception that Shakespeare is a “polite” academic subject, but the film correctly identifies that his characters are “violent and brutal in nature.” This aligns with Jan Kott’s (1964) theory of the “Grand Mechanism,” in which history is viewed as a wheel of blood and betrayal.

The online players in Los Santos are violent in both their virtual actions and real-world intent, which mirrors the world of Denmark in Hamlet. In the game, violence is constant. Police sirens, drive-bys, and explosions provide the background noise to Hamlet’s soliloquies. Rather than distracting from the text, this violence enhances it. It creates an environment that is “stunning, beautiful, grotesque, and horrible,” reflecting the “rotten state” of the play. When Sam recites Hamlet’s dialogues against the backdrop of devastated wastelands, he creates a parallel between the game’s environment and the real-world devastation of the pandemic.

Global Shakespeare and the Dissolution of the Avatar

The documentary highlights how the online gameplay enabled the actors to break many stereotypes associated with conventional theater. The casting process, conducted through a “Next-Gen” advertising video, attracted players from vastly different social and geographical backgrounds. This created a “Global Shakespeare” (Aebischer, 2024) that bypassed the elitism of the London stage.

One of the most profound examples of this is the player from

Tunisia who appears as a green alien avatar. This player, who recites a passage from the Quran because he does not know Shakespeare's lines, represents the ultimate "hyperreal theatre experiment." This interaction proves that the digital world alters the real boundaries of our present times. It creates a realm where an "Alien" can recite holy scripture in a violent crime game, elevating the watching experience into something truly universal.

Furthermore, the play breaks gender barriers in a way that recalls and then subverts Shakespearean history. While the Elizabethan era used men to play women, Grand Theft Hamlet features a female player as Laertes and a trans woman who uses the character of Hamlet to explore her own struggle for truth and identity. As Judith Butler suggests, gender is a performance; in GTA, where the avatar is a literal mask, the "truth" of the individual is liberated from the physical body.

Hamlet on a "Billion-Dollar Budget"

The actors describe the experience as "Shakespeare on a billion-dollar budget" or as if "Elon Musk decided to put on a version of Shakespeare in LA." This points to the incredible scenographic potential of the open-world game. Without spending a single dollar on production, the team had access to breathtaking visuals, skyscrapers, vehicles, and a "limitless" ecosystem.

This "threshold feel" allowed for the reinterpretation of scenes in locations that even big-budget films could not afford. By using the Vinewood Bowl or a floating blimp as a stage, the production achieves a "seamless watching experience" that blends high-quality graphics with classical text. However, this beauty is always fragile. The unavailability of peaceful locations and the constant interference of the police, who shoot players for practicing their sword-fighting (gun-fighting) scripts, creates a unique tension. This tension forces the actors to explore their creative limitations and exceed them through sheer dedication.

“To Be or Not to Be” in Los Santos

The ultimate question of the play, “To be or not to be,” takes on a literal meaning in the game. During a rehearsal of Hamlet’s first soliloquy, a player accidentally kills himself with a grenade while operating a helicopter. This “unorthodox sequence” replicates the original unpredictable characteristics of Hamlet’s self-destructive nature.

The documentary explores the “uncertainty of life and death” through the game’s mechanics. When Sam recites Hamlet’s lines in a digital bar, only to be killed by the police in a “bar brawl,” it explains the fragility of existence in both the real and simulated worlds. The characters are constantly asking, “I to exist or not to exist?” This is not just a line from a play; it is a question about their own lives. They question whether they are “wasting their time” in GTA or if they are finding the “real meaning of art.”

This existential dread is compounded when a lead player leaves the production because he got a “real job” in the “real world,” indicating the end of the lockdown. This dilemma and tension between the “meaningless” digital work and the “meaningful” real world, is the central conflict of the documentary. It forces the actors to decide if their virtual Hamlet is a distraction or a vital act of human connection.

The Distance Between Real Life and Hyperreality

A significant subplot involves Sam’s wife, who joins the game because she is “sad about his recent absence from the world.” This highlights the psychological distance between the real world and hyperreality. As people become more “immersed” in the virtual world, their absence in the physical world creates a negative impact on their families.

However, her entry into the game also allows her to witness the “stunning beauty” of what they are trying to achieve. It bridges the gap between Sam’s “pointless” obsession and his artistic purpose. This subplot serves as a provocative commentary on

contemporary modes of spectatorship; the “audience” is no longer just the person in the theatre seat, but the family member in the next room, or the viewer watching a live stream on YouTube or Twitch.

The Final Performance

The culmination of the documentary is the successful performance of Hamlet, live-streamed to a global audience. The performance is “unstable” and “participatory” in the most literal sense. At one point, the play is stopped because everyone dies when a blimp is blasted out of the sky. This chaos does not ruin the play; it becomes the play. It proves that in the digital age, the “proper streamline” of a story is less important than the “decentralized rights” of the participants to be a natural part of the art.

The play ends not with a curtain call, but with the actors shooting each other and “dying on the field.” This act of “celebratory violence” indicates that they have finally achieved the freedom of the other online players. They have successfully blended the high-brow tragedy of Shakespeare with the low-brow joy of the game. The success party that follows, where all players exist and celebrate together, shows that the virtual world can indeed function as a “serious platform for cultural and literary engagement.”

Shakespeare’s Contemporary Reality

The documentary concludes with a success party that dissolves back into the “meaningless violence” of the game. After the play, the actors shoot each other in celebration. This final act of violence is symbolic of their liberation. Throughout the film, they struggled to be “different” from the violent online gamers; by the end, they realize that they are the gamers.

Shakespeare’s violence and GTA’s violence are revealed to be two sides of the same coin, human expressions of frustration, power, and play. The “success” of the play is not found in a perfect, uninterrupted performance, but in the fact that it happened at all. By successfully live-streaming a 17th-century tragedy within a “billion-

dollar” crime simulation, Sam and Mark proved that the virtual world is a valid site for cultural engagement. As the players exit the game and return to their “real-world jobs,” they leave behind a Los Santos that has been briefly transformed from a playground for murder into a stage for the soul.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Grand Theft Hamlet argues that if Shakespeare were alive today, he would not be in a library; he would be in a virtual world. “Just as Shakespeare intended,” the game provides the “chaos and spectacle” that the original Globe Theatre offered. The documentary demonstrates that video games can elevate the watching experience by providing breathtaking visuals and a “limitless” scope for imagination.

By staging Hamlet in Los Santos, Sam and Mark have not only retold a classical work from a different point of view but have also proved that art is the only thing that gives meaning to our “crushing inevitability.” Whether in a real bar or a digital one, the quest for truth, the struggle against violence, and the question of “to be or not to be” remain the most significant parts of the human experience. Gaming adaptations, therefore, open new critical possibilities for understanding Shakespeare, not as a dead poet, but as a living force in the age of interactive hyperreality.

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