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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'R. Ziolkowski', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Robert Ziolkowski  
26-06-2021

**By Vengeance United:**  
**William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Last of Us Part II* on Revenge**

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## Abstract

The theme of revenge is a central aspect of the story of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1623). Considering both how known the play from the earlier 17<sup>th</sup> century is, as well as how intricately tied to the theme of revenge it is, any new story that is written and produced with a similar or identical theme begs a comparison with *Hamlet* (1623). One such story is the videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) in which the theme of revenge is the driving force behind the motivations of the characters, as well as the primary narrative force that drives the plotline of the videogame forward.

In light of this similarity, this thesis aims to study the narrative elements of both Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) as well as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) regarding their common theme of revenge, to try to discern the literary and narrative elements that support the idea that the latter is a modern retelling or adaptation of the former, regarding their common theme. As the protagonists of both stories embark on a quest of revenge after the loss of a father or a father-figure, their stories become united and intertwined by vengeance in a way that transcends both time and medium.

The results of the literary study that this thesis conducted reveal that both *Hamlet* (1623) as well as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) are primarily joined by inspiring the appreciation in audiences both modern and historic that pursuing vengeance until the end will lead to one's own downfall and death, while claiming many innocent lives along the way, as well as harming those closest to oneself, while forgiveness is the ultimate path to healing and achieving justice. Each of the two stories is an embodiment of one of those two sides of the same coin, which is the thread that binds *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) to *Hamlet* (1623).

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## Introduction

The works of William Shakespeare, the famous sixteenth-century play writer from Stratford-upon-Avon, have intrigued and inspired people across the globe for many centuries since his death in 1616. Not only are his world-famous plays preserved for posterity through official editions of collected plays such as *The Norton Shakespeare* (2016), in which readers can enjoy both the *Quarto* and *Folio* editions of many of Shakespeare's works such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) or *King Lear* (1623). As Ton Hoenselaars notes in "Shakespeare and the World" (2012), Shakespeare's works have done more than just cross barriers of geography, language or physical borders (736). "He has also entered into new media, undergoing a veritable metamorphosis, also to convey his message in opera, ballet, and dance, on the radio as on the cinematic and television screens" (736). Indeed, Shakespeare has become a global presence, with the influence of his works even seeping into everyday phenomena such as cars brands, namely the Alfa Romeo Giulietta models from the 1950s and 1960s, or the Othello pencils produced by Stabilo (Hoenselaars 736). Another example of Shakespeare's influence are new writings inspired or based upon his works, as even in contemporary times novels continue to be written as adaptations of his plays, such as *A Thousand Acres* (1991) by Jane Smiley, which is a modern retelling of *King Lear* (1623), or *New Boy* (2017) by Tracy Chevalier, which transposes Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603) to a 1970's suburban Washington schoolyard. Yet as can be seen from the number of film adaptations that have been made since the inception of the medium – examples including *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), or *The Lion King* (1994) – films similarly appear to be a popular means through which to produce adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Film adaptations continue to be made for popular culture consumption, with *The King* (2019) – based on Shakespeare's history plays – or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2017) being examples of such. The works of the famous English play writer are not limited to films or books, for as Hoenselaars states in his

article, the plays Shakespeare wrote have been adapted to new media as they arose with the passage of time, and thus they have often been subjected to intermedial shifts (745). Stratford is no longer the sole centre of the Shakespearian industry, and the various appropriations by people all across the globe receive increasing appreciation, as Shakespeare continues to be adapted into even more advanced media (Hoenselaars 747-748).

A medium of popular culture that has been on the rise in recent decades is the medium of videogames. “Videogames have moved, possibly surpassing even movies, into a central role in American popular culture in a relatively short time” (Wolf 120). As there is a growing field of research into this cultural phenomenon, the value of videogames is increasingly appreciated by academic communities. Nick Robinson, for example, elaborates on the cultural, political and military implications that military videogames have on society’s perception on warfare and its history (Robinson 10). Ian Bogost elaborates on the procedural rhetoric behind media like videogames, which allow so-called ‘serious games’ to be produced with a persuasive character and nature in mind (2-3). Clara Fernández-Vara has developed a method of videogame analysis that studies the context in which videogames are produced and played in, giving a game overview that elaborates on the basic features and content of the game, as well as observing the formal aspects that define how a game is constructed (15-19).

It should not come as a surprise that Shakespeare’s plays have already been adapted into this new, increasingly popular medium of videogames on a small scale. Dennis Galanin produced an adventure game called *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (2010), for example, which allows a player to move through the story of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1623) as the play’s protagonist, while solving puzzles and so-called ‘brain teasers’. Edward Castronova has developed *Arden: The World of William Shakespeare* (2008), a massively multiplayer online game wherein the virtual “buildings, characters, and quests all connect to the central theme of the works of Shakespeare” (Grosky

and Westermann 4), but shortly after its release the game was abandoned by its creator, primarily because of a significant lack of public interest in the medium. In an interview with Chris Baker (2008), Castronova stated that the game lacked an entertaining experience, despite its goal to educate players on and acquaint them with Shakespeare's plays.

A videogame that did not suffer from a lack of popularity was the critically acclaimed *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), the sequel to the equally praised *The Last of Us* (2013). In this videogame franchise, the player plays through a narrative that is set in a post-apocalyptic world, in which a majority of the world's population has been turned into hostile monsters that have been infected by a fictional, mutated strain of the entomopathogenic *Cordyceps* fungus, which exists in reality. While at a first glance such a narrative setting may not indicate a connection with the plays and works of Shakespeare, the protagonist and the story of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) appear to bear several similarities with the narrative and main character of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1623), in particular to the theme of revenge and how the will to vengeance has a destructive nature in and of itself. Considering how intricately tied the theme of revenge is to *Hamlet* (1623), any new medium that shares this theme begs a comparative analysis with the former.

In light of the rising popularity of videogames as a medium of popular culture, as well as the nature of Shakespeare's plays to cross boundaries of time, location, language and even medium, this thesis will compare and contrast *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) in light of the theme of revenge, in order to ascertain if and to what degree the former can be perceived as a modern retelling or adaptation of the latter. The following question will be at the heart of the research in this thesis: what elements of the narrative and gameplay of the videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) entitle it to be termed a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1623) relating to the subject of revenge, and its destructive nature?

To facilitate the linguistic study that will be performed in this thesis, the following sub-questions will be asked and answered, in order to formulate an answer to the main question of this research:

1. What has been written on the theme of ‘revenge’ in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?
2. How does the theme of ‘revenge’ manifest itself within the narrative of the videogame *The Last of Us Part II*?
3. How does the theme of ‘revenge’ in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* compare to the same theme in the narrative of the game *The Last of Us Part II*?



## 1. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Revenge

There is an undeniably large amount of secondary literature written on Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* (1623), both on the theme of revenge, as well as on other equally interesting and significant themes. However unfortunate it may be, a single thesis could not reasonably encapsulate all the writing on the topic of *Hamlet* (1623) in a manner that would be both comprehensible and achievable within a reasonable timeframe. As a result, this thesis will be limited to a handful of authors of secondary literature on Shakespeare's play about the tragic tale of the Prince of Denmark, which have been found to be especially relevant to the theme of revenge and how this theme manifests itself within the play. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the play's text itself, and subsequently provide an analysis of vengeance as a theme in the play through secondary literature.

"Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love may sweep to my revenge" (Greenblatt 1781). In this scene Hamlet meets the Ghost, who identifies himself as the ghost of his father, and who tells Hamlet of how Claudius, his uncle, the reigning King of Denmark, along with Hamlet's mother the Queen, conspired to murder him (1780-1782). "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1780) is the Ghost's command to Hamlet, to which the latter responds "[a]nd thy commandment alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain" (1782), ending with the words, "[s]o, uncle, there you are. Now to my word: it is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.' I have sworn't" (1782).

As Eugene England states in his essay "Hamlet Against Revenge," it appears as if from this point on Hamlet is fated to be the avenger, as he has been commanded by the ghost of his father to carry out the vengeance (49). According to England, Hamlet's dilemma of "to be or not to be" (Greenblatt 1802) revolves around the question whether it is better to cultivate a manner of thinking and living where God's creation is accepted as is, with any punishments or wrongdoings judged and punished by God (England 50), or whether it is more

noble to enforce justice onto others, even if the risk of such would be death, and thus quite literally not being anymore (50). With regard to this conflict and its relation to “to be or not to be” (Greenblatt 1802), England states that “[i]t was a form of the growing conflict between the Christian ideal of a peaceful, suffering, forgiving response to the evils of the world” (England 49-50), versus “the secular Renaissance ideal of active, passionate battle against those evils—a conflict, that is, between mercy and revenge” (50). This becomes an interesting point to consider, when one takes into account Paul Gottschalk’s essay “Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge,” and the point he makes about Hamlet seeking more than just revenge: “Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish” (155). Gottschalk continues to say that most interpretations of Hamlet in this scene – namely the scene where he wants to murder Claudius during prayer yet fears such would send him to Heaven instead – have been that this was not a display of Hamlet’s true nature, which is why he abstains from taking vengeance in this moment (155). According to Gottschalk, this presents a problem in reconciling Hamlet’s supposed virtuous nature with his desire to force damnation on another being, which he notes was something that only the worst of villains in Elizabethan literature have uttered (156). Gottschalk proposes that this apparent contradiction of perceived virtue and perceived intent, can be solved by assuming that Hamlet is anything but virtuous in this moment, and has, due to the Ghost’s commandment, lost it and himself (156). “The Ghost’s commands are diabolic, and in heeding them Hamlet abandons the teaching of Christianity to follow a course to blood-revenge and villainy” (156). Gottschalk says that in this moment Hamlet had given in to his human nature, at the expense of his spiritual one, and remains trapped between the idea that God had created humans as beings with the ability of thought, while at the same time seemingly commanding them not to use those higher faculties (156). Gottschalk continues by saying that this trapped state that Hamlet apparently remains in, is in large part an effect of the

fact that the protagonist of the play is in essence trying on various identities and personalities (158). Throughout the play Hamlet asks questions on who he is, who he is not, what he is and what he is not, while continuously reflecting on his hesitation and doubt regarding this uncertainty of identity that he experiences (Gottschalk 158-159). “No one else in Shakespeare seeks so much for identity in opposites, sees himself so much as the subject of contradiction” (159). Gottschalk notes that these questions of identity are like the various roles Hamlet tries on, yet each time he seems to reject the questions, and thus affirms that he does not know what or who he truly is (159). In order to be able to fulfil his task, namely the Ghost’s commandment to avenge his death, Hamlet must devise a role for himself that can reconcile both what he must represent to Denmark, and the vengeance he must take (Gottschalk 160). “We are used to the notion of a Hamlet looking before and after, pondering what he has done and must do; but more than that, not only does thought modify action for Hamlet, but action thought” (160). Yet William F. Zak notes in his book *Hamlet's Problematic Revenge: Forging a Royal Mandate* (2015) that one of the flaws that Hamlet exhibits throughout the play is that he never examines this duty that is thrust down upon him by his father’s ghost: “Hamlet’s nerving himself to a duty that is never examined or interrogated further is an unknowing laxity of conscience” (53). Zak continues to say that this is particularly problematic, as a critical examination of the Ghost’s commandment to avenge his death would have led to a more morally enlightened, humane and less deadly application of justice for the Ghost’s death (53). By failing to examine the nature of the Ghost more critically, as well as the task of vengeance that is set before him by the entity, Hamlet, a high-minded and conscience stricken character nonetheless, remains blind to the wrongs that he himself is committing, both to others as well as to himself (Zak 54). Yet Zak notes it is important not to forget that while Hamlet can be witnessed to commit unsavoury acts throughout the play, he is also the same man that is battling against the way he appears to be losing himself to vengeance, by

reminding himself of the righteousness he sees in his cause as a sacred obligation, regardless of the fact whether that obligation he perceives damns his own soul (54). Zak states that Hamlet's plentiful truanancies, be they moral or otherwise, should not devalue him as a character in the eyes of the viewer or reader, and should not transform him into a simple villainous avenger (54), despite the fact that one could argue that the role of 'avenger' is one of the identities Hamlet tries on as Gottschalk claimed in his article. In other words, Hamlet's nature, while occluded by his desire for revenge as a result of the Ghost's commandment, remains fair, and once again surfaces at the end of the play, when Hamlet is dying from the poison that he had ingested. "Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death—is strict in his arrest" (Greenblatt 1852), "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name, things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me" (1852). With these words, Hamlet shows the audience of his play that he knows of his wrongdoings, and how his cause driven by vengeance was not righteous, but corrupt, as the imagery of Death as a sergeant that arrests him, draws a parallel with a criminal being tried and imprisoned for their crimes. So too can Hamlet find redemption for his trying on of the identity of the avenger, through death, and bravely faces justice with the righteousness that was within him all along.

## 2. *The Last of Us Part II* and Revenge

Revenge is a theme that authors have worked with throughout the centuries, such as Alexander Dumas in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) or Stephen King in *Carrie* (1974), and is not inherently the exclusive domain of Shakespearean works. Nonetheless, the trait of transmediality that Ton Hoenselaars noted is a feature of Shakespeare's plays and the likely explanation behind its expansion on a global scale (745-748), is similarly present in the theme of revenge, especially its translatability to different media, such as videogames with a strong focus on storytelling. As a result, this theme is a prominent narrative element of the action-adventure videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), which tells the story of a cast of characters in a post-apocalyptic setting, where most of humanity has been rendered extinct because of a deadly fungus that is capable of hijacking a host's brain and nervous system, essentially rendering them a mindless, hostile, cannibalistic puppet.

This chapter will provide a game analysis according to the theory and method as described in Clara Fernández-Vara's book *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2019) relating to the theme of revenge, for which both material from the videogame itself will be analysed as well as content in the forms of reviews and articles around *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). Fernández-Vara's method of game analysis consists of three parts, namely an analysis of the context in which a videogame is developed and played in, providing an overview of the game itself in terms of the content and basic features – which will be the focus in this chapter for its textual analysis of the game – and finally the formal aspects of a game which entail its system and how that system is presented to players (13-17).

To begin the game analysis, this chapter will speak of the context in which *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) was produced. The videogame was created as a sequel to the critically acclaimed *The Last of Us* (2013), and was developed by the game developer Naughty Dog, and distributed by Sony Interactive Entertainment. The latter is a multinational digital

entertainment company which produces videogames for mass consumption by videogaming audiences. The game was developed for Playstation 4 devices, which intend to provide a user with different forms of entertainment, such as the ability to play videogames, watch television series or films, or to engage with a wider, global gaming community in a casual manner. In light of these facts behind *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), it can be concluded that the videogame was produced with a commercial interest in mind, and to provide popular culture entertainment to a wide and diverse audience.

The following step in Fernández-Vara's game analysis method is to provide a game overview in the form of a textual analysis of the medium (15-16). "[G]ames provide a means to relax and meditate, to enact power fantasies, to explore, to learn about fantasy worlds as well as the real world" (Fernández-Vara 16). *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) does this by allowing the player of the videogame to embody the characters of Ellie and Abby, two adolescent women with a destructive and vengeful rivalry between them, after the latter had murdered Joel, Ellie's father figure, in a bid for revenge following the events from the first game *The Last of Us* (2013). The narrative setting in which the story occurs is a post-apocalyptic, future vision of Earth where the majority of human civilization has been destroyed because of a dangerous fungus that infected most of humanity, turning a vast majority of the human population into what can be considered a different interpretation of a reanimated corpse. At different points in the videogame's story, the player either moves through the gaming environment as Ellie or Abby, yet of the two the former is the more prominent protagonist of the narrative, while the latter can be considered the antagonist. Abby has murdered the protagonist of the prequel to the game, namely Joel, in front of Ellie, while seeking retribution for the death of her own father at the hands of Joel during the events of *The Last of Us* (2013). During the story of that game, Joel became a father-figure to Ellie and came to care for her as he would for a daughter. After he had been murdered with Ellie

witnessing the crime fairly early in the videogame's story, the latter swore vengeance against Abby and her accomplices, namely an organisation called the Washington Liberation Front, before she was rendered unconscious. Following this event, Ellie embarks on a quest of revenge against those who had murdered her father-figure, and is accompanied by another female character called Dina, who is portrayed as a very loyal companion to the protagonist, and is simultaneously Ellie's love interest in the videogame's story. During the story where the player plays as the character Ellie, the narrative constantly depicts that she is obsessed with vengeance against those who had murdered Joel, either through brief conversations with Dina and other characters, as well as her single-minded and unforgiving attitude. Together with Dina she travels to Seattle, where the Washington Liberation Front and a cult called the Seraphites are fighting a war between one another for control over the ruined city. It is during Ellie's exploration of the abandoned buildings of Seattle and its ruined underground that the extent of her drive for revenge becomes evident. During one scene, Ellie and Dina encounter a member of the Washington Liberation Front, WLF for short, who had been killed by the fungus-infected monsters that the player fights throughout most of the game. Ellie states that she would be highly displeased by the fact if the other WLF members would fall victim to random Clickers, which is how the videogame calls the aforementioned monsters, instead of her. Dina responds to this with "[t]hey would still be dead, Ellie" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). To which Ellie replies "I wouldn't call that justice" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). Every action that Ellie undertakes within the story is with the intent to find Abby and kill her as retribution for Joel's murder, which leads to the death of another companion, a young man called Jesse, and a friend of both Ellie and Dina. Yet even the death of an innocent man does not withhold Ellie from continuing onto her path of vengeance, and instead fuels it. "Revenge drives the plot since it becomes the primal motivator for many of its characters, both protagonists and supporting ones" ("Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis"), writes TV and

Film reviewer The Epilogue. They note that the story of *The Last of Us Part II* is indeed driven by revenge, yet that it is not about revenge itself (“Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis”). Instead, The Epilogue notes that each of the videogame’s characters “goes through roughly a path that is shaped by the ability or inability of a character of being forgiving and how the absence of it can corrupt and destroy one’s life and the one of those around you” (“Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis”). This is exemplified by the fact that, much later in the videogame’s story, “Ellie prioritizes vengeance over a down-home family life, partially to satisfy her own desires, partially to placate the PTSD that troubles her” (“When You Seek Revenge, Dig Two Graves”), as Dave Trumbore from Collider noted. This occurs after Ellie and Dina return from Seattle with their quest of vengeance having come to an unsuccessful end, and Ellie is confronted with new information about Abby’s possible whereabouts. When the events of the story conspire to a seemingly final confrontation between Ellie and Abby, and after the former had gained an upper hand in hand-to-hand combat between one another, “[i]t's Ellie's moment to put vengeance aside, even when it's right in her grasp. And it's that moment that Ellie and Abby's parallel stories come to a close” (Trumbore, “When You Seek Revenge, Dig Two Graves”). The Epilogue notes that it is in this moment that both Ellie and Abby, yet especially the former, realise that their vengeful quest against one another has only brought death and destruction to themselves – in the form of a deterioration of their mental states – and their friends and family, who either suffered or were killed (“Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis”). “Only after forgiving can both start their own self-redemption and build back what was once their life, or at least something resembling to a new and peaceful normality” (“Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis”). As a result, it can be concluded that the depiction of the theme of revenge in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), is primarily a lesson of its futility, and how poor a substitute it is for justice or the righting of a wrong.



The final step in analysing a game according to the method devised by Fernández-Vara is taking into account the formal aspects of the videogame. She notes in her book that “[g]ames are often structured systems, in the form of rule sets of computer programs, which are models that lend themselves to study of their form” (Fernández-Vara 16). As such, this part of the chapter will give a brief overview of what the player is able to do within *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), in terms of what Ian Bogost calls the ‘possibility space’, which is explored by a player by manipulating a videogame’s controls and investigating the rules by which the gameplay is bound (Bogost 42-43). In *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), the player is able to control three playable characters from the story’s cast, namely Joel, Ellie, and Abby. The gameplay revolves around moving those characters through the virtual environment of the town of Jackson, the Washington woodlands, the city of Seattle, Santa Barbara and parts of California, while searching for weapons, ammunitions, helpful items, and collectibles. Throughout the videogame, the player will encounter a large number of hostile characters and infected that they need to either eliminate through open and direct combat using the weapons, ammunitions and the items that they have collected, or by using stealth mechanisms to move through the virtual environment, and either evade detection by those hostile game characters, or ambush them. Regarding the storyline, the player has no ability to control the development of the narrative, other than initiating its continuation by moving to the correct place within the virtual environment, or by completing a specific objective. In other words, the player is unable to influence the development of the dialogue or the narrative events of the videogame, in essence becoming a spectator of the story unfolding before them. From this it can be concluded that the player is a viewing audience when it comes to the storyline of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), while only becoming an active participant in the videogame outside of the cutscenes and narrative elements of the story.

With those three steps in Fernández-Vara's method of game analysis complete, this thesis will proceed to compare and contrast Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) in terms of how the theme of revenge is depicted in both, and relates to each.

### 3. Revenge in *Hamlet* and *The Last of Us Part II* compared

In the previous two chapters, the thesis gave an overview of both stories individually, and how the theme of revenge manifested itself in each. This chapter provides a comparison of the play and the videogame in terms of the representation of the theme of revenge, to continue to study the notion that *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) can be construed as an adaptation of *Hamlet* (1623) in terms of that theme.

One of the most evident similarities between the play written by Shakespeare and the videogame released by Sony Interactive Entertainment is that the quest for vengeance of both its protagonists is initiated by the death of a father-figure. In *Hamlet* (1623) the Prince of Denmark chooses to seek vengeance against Claudius and all those involved in the death of his father, after the ghost of the latter informs Hamlet of the treachery and betrayal used to orchestrate his death (Greenblatt 1780-1782). Yet the audience does not see the murder itself unfold, and thus, much like Hamlet, has to trust the ghost of the father on his word that events transpired such as he had described them. As was established in chapter one of this thesis according to the criticisms of William F. Zak, Hamlet did not critically examine the commandments of the ghost, and upon hearing his father's story, similarly did not question whether the events themselves were true (53). In *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) the death of Ellie's father figure, namely Joel, is shown both graphically and overtly, and as has been stated in chapter two of this thesis happened in the fully conscious presence of the videogame's protagonist. The narrative displays Joel's deaths at Abby's hands to the player, as she first tortures him profoundly with a golf club, and – despite Ellie's pleas to spare him – proceeds to mortally wound Joel with that same golf club on the head, in this way taking his life. This can be noted as a difference between *Hamlet* (1623) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), as in the latter the death of the father-figure transpires overtly before the audience of the medium, while in the former the audience is notified of Hamlet's father's death by the

metaphysical manifestation of his ghost speaking of his own death. Yet both narratives have a significant similarity in regard to the death of the father-figure, namely that neither Hamlet (Zak 53) nor Ellie question their desire and quest for revenge, and embark on a mission of vengeance without considering an alternative to obtaining justice for the death of that father-figure.

Hamlet professes this unrelenting focus on revenge overtly, namely by stating: “[a]nd thy commandment alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain” (Greenblatt 1782). This leads first to Polonius’ death at Hamlet’s hands when he mistakes him for the King and stabs him as he is hiding behind an arras (1816-1817), and secondly his fixation on revenge leads to Ophelia’s death by implied suicide (1836-1837), after losing her sanity (1830) following Hamlet’s rejection of her love in favour of his quest for vengeance: “[y]ou should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not” (1803). In act 5 scene 2, Hamlet duels Laertes – who in turn seeks vengeance for the death of his father Polonius and sister Ophelia – and during this scene Hamlet loses his mother, as she drinks of the poisoned cup that the King had prepared for Hamlet (1850), and subsequently succumbs to the poison himself, after both Claudius and Laertes were killed by the same instrument. In other words, in seeking revenge and in ensuring that his quest was fulfilled, Hamlet forced multiple innocent people into death, and in the end lost his own life. This parallels Ellie’s story in *The Last of Us Part II*, as while Abby is taking Joel’s life in front of her, Ellie swears while sobbing “I’ll fucking kill you” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). In the scene following Joel’s death, Ellie speaks with his brother Tommy and clarifies that nothing is going to change her mind, and that she will set out to Seattle – the base of operations of Abby and her group – to seek justice for Joel’s death: “So they just get to get away with this? If it were you or me, Joël would be halfway to Seattle already... You can’t talk me out of this” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). In the following scene,

some of the inhabitants of the town of Jackson express their opposition to Ellie and Dina embarking on their quest for vengeance, and so the two make a plan to depart in secret, stealing two of the small number of horses that the town possesses in the process. This exemplifies Ellie's single-mindedness, as she apparently does not seem to care about the fact whether the town of Jackson would be in need of those two horses while she and her partner are on their way to Seattle. Much alike Hamlet, Ellie's thirst for revenge also drives numerous characters into harm's way – such as Joel's brother Tommy who is taken hostage by Abby – and even death, namely Jesse, who is Dina's former romantic partner and the father of her as of yet unborn child. While Ellie does not take Jesse's life herself – which Hamlet does with Polonius – she causes it indirectly through her conflict with Abby. In the relevant scene, the player sees both Jesse and Ellie running towards a door after hearing gunshots in the other room, yet walk into an ambush set up by Abby who had known about their whereabouts. From the manner in which the latter conducts herself during the exchange with Ellie that followed, it can be concluded that Abby had intended to kill Ellie instead of Jesse. The latter simply had the misfortune of running through the door first and thus being shot in the head by Abby. In other words, in the same manner that Polonius' death was unintentional, so too was Jesse's death, as the bullet shot by Abby was meant for Ellie. Yet Abby's connection to Polonius does not end on that similarity alone. In *Hamlet* (1623), Laertes seeks revenge for the death of his father Polonius and sister Ophelia. Abby, in turn, seeks revenge on Joel – Ellie's father-figure – for the death of her own father, a doctor that had a small role in the videogame's prequel *The Last of Us* (2013). This parallel becomes even more evident when near the end of the story of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) Ellie and Abby duel one another one last time, much like Hamlet and Laertes duel one another in act 5 scene 2 of *Hamlet* (1623). Yet whereas Hamlet kills Laertes in the duel, and later succumbs to the effects of the poison himself from both the cut his opponent inflicted on him and the poison he drank himself, the

hand-to-hand fight between Ellie and Abby ends with both of them alive. In the videogame, the player fights Abby as Ellie, yet the entirety of the narrative is scripted, with a different outcome than what its developers had devised impossible. After an intense combat scene between the two characters where both endure even more losses and injuries than they already had – as Ellie loses two fingers, while Abby receives multiple stab wounds – Ellie gains the upper hand, and as the fight had occurred by the shore in the water, she starts drowning Abby. The expression on Ellie's face is one of hard, cold-blooded determination, and the impression is created that she will continue to hold Abby underwater until she is dead. Yet at this critical point, Ellie experiences a flashback and the scene depicts an image of a smiling Joel playing a guitar. This image appears to break her determination to end Abby's life which can be seen by her facial expression breaking similarly, and she releases her opponent from her deadly grip, who in turn gasps for air. Ellie retreats into a sitting position while crying and tells Abby to leave, which the latter does by a peddling boat.

The final scenes of *Hamlet* (1623) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) appear to be vastly different, yet because of that difference the two mediums allow the same idea about revenge to be appreciated. As Hamlet is dying from the poison inside his body, he becomes aware of all the loss, pain and destruction his quest for vengeance had caused. Similarly, as Ellie is drowning Abby after their confrontation, in which she even lost two of her fingers on top of the deaths and relationships that had been undone because of her desire for revenge, she realises that none of those acts will restore Joel back to life, or inflict any meaningful change other than causing yet another death. "That memory of Joel that appears as she's drowning Abby? It reminds her that she's capable of mercy. That she can honour her friend's memory by being better than him" (Avard "The Last of Us 2 Ending Explained"). Ellie was in the process of forgiving Joel because of the events of the first game *The Last of Us* (2013), during which Ellie was found to be immune to the spores of the fungus-infected creatures that had

spread across the globe. Joel had been hired to take Ellie to one of the last research centres left in the United States of America in the hopes of creating a cure from of Ellie's immunity.

Unfortunately, the operation would cause Ellie's death which Joel had not been told about, and refused to accept. As a result, he assaulted and killed the doctors that were to perform the procedure, Abby's father being one of them, and rescued Ellie afterwards. In essence, Joel had robbed humanity of a cure for the disease that had been causing people to transform into cannibalistic fungus-controlled monsters, and lied to Ellie that the procedure had failed, because the doctors learned her immunity would be meaningless to others. The story of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) demonstrated that Ellie had learned of this fact, which caused a distance between Joel and her. Yet the day that he had been killed by Abby, Ellie was in the process of forgiving him, and by murdering Joel, Abby had taken away the ability to forgive the only father-figure she had ever known for what he had done. Yet "if she's able to forgive Joel for committing one of the most unforgivable acts in human history, then she can forgive the woman who killed him" (Avard "The Last of Us 2 Ending Explained"). By forgiving Abby for the murder of Joel, Ellie breaks the cycle of revenge that had inflicted so much harm and death on the characters of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), and stops one more unnecessary death in the story. "Having made that decision, bringing meaning to Joel's death through mercy rather than violence, she's finally able to move on from this sorry chapter of her life" (Avard "The Last of Us 2 Ending Explained"). Hamlet, by contrast, does not forgive Claudius or his mother for orchestrating the death of his father, and instead of showing clemency and mercy in act 5 scene 2, his determination to see retribution enacted onto them causes his mother's death, and that of Laertes, Claudius and himself (Greenblatt 1852). Hamlet places vengeance above forgiveness in that moment, and fails to spare more lives than had already been lost or damaged as a result of it. In other words, both Ellie and Hamlet embody the different outcomes of the lesson on the destructive nature of vengeance, and how it ultimately

causes one's undoing. Ellie chooses forgiveness and lets Abby live, and thus ends the cycle of violence and vengeance. By doing so, she spares not only Abby's life, but also her own in the form of her conscience, as she would have to live with Abby's death weighing down upon her for the rest of her life, or her literal death through someone close to Abby seeking revenge against her in turn. As such, in the end Ellie chooses not to condemn her soul any further by choosing clemency. Hamlet on the other hand chooses to exact vengeance against Claudius and his mother, and instead of sparing them continues to take lives in the cycle of revenge that he perpetuates, which culminates in his own end and the condemnation of his own soul. His choice shows that a drive for vengeance is ultimately self-destructive, while Ellie's that forgiveness is ultimately the true path to justice.

Yet seeking vengeance has its consequences, which is exemplified by the ending of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). When Ellie departs Jackson a second time to initiate the final confrontation between her and Abby, she has already settled with Dina and the child the latter had given birth to, outside of the settlement. At one point, Ellie receives information on Abby's whereabouts in California and feels the urge and need to finish her quest of vengeance which had ended in failure in Seattle. After having been told of Abby's location, Ellie prepares quietly in the night to leave the farmhouse she and Dina started a family in, yet the latter hears her and approaches her. Dina asks Ellie to return to the bedroom with her, yet she refuses. "I have to finish it" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020) are the words she utters, to which Dina reacts with a pained expression and implores her to stop her quest. Ellie responds by saying "I don't sleep, I don't eat, I'm not like you Dina" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020), and later she professes that she loves her. The latter asks Ellie to prove this by staying with her, receiving a statement that she is unable to do so. Ellie in turn proceeds to leave the farmhouse but Dina attempts to stop her once again: "we've got a family, [Abby] can't be more important than that" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). Ellie continues to refuse to change her



decision, to which Dina turns around in grief while saying “I can’t do this again” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020), to which Ellie responds “that’s up to you” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020) while turning around and leaving her partner behind. This scene parallels the moment in which Hamlet turns away Ophelia after she had been led to believe that he had loved her, which this thesis discussed earlier in this chapter. Upon professing that she had been deceived by Hamlet in believing that he loved her, he dismisses her by saying “get thee to a nunnery!” (Greenblatt 1803). By turning Ophelia away in favour of vengeance, Hamlet parallels Ellie’s decision to choose revenge on Abby over her family life with Dina. The consequence is that both Hamlet and Ellie lose the person that they loved, or at least claimed they had loved. Hamlet loses Ophelia through her implied suicide in act 4 scene 4, while Ellie learns that she has lost Dina and her child upon her return from her final confrontation with Abby in California. The protagonist of *The Last of Us Part II* returns to an empty farmhouse where all the personal belongings except Ellie’s are taken away. The scenes show that Dina and the child have moved elsewhere by carefully showing the player that all the rooms are empty, while Ellie’s belongings are left behind in the room that she had claimed as her own when she had moved into the farmhouse with Dina. The former wanders through the empty house forlornly until she reaches her room, opens the guitar case that was placed within it and attempts to play the only object that Joel had left her. Her losses as a result of her quest for vengeance become very visible within this scene, as not only is Ellie in an empty house having lost the woman she had loved as well as her adopted child, yet because of the loss of her two fingers during her confrontation with Abby she can no longer play the guitar properly. “Both Abby and Ellie lost everything in their paths of revenge...Ellie even loses her ability to properly play the guitar; her most personal connection to Joel” (“Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis”). In the epilogue of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), Ellie’s losses as the consequence of her choice to pursue revenge are depicted in both physical losses, as well as emotional

ones. The physical is represented in the loss of Ellie's fingers and thus her ability to play the guitar. The emotional losses are portrayed by her loneliness, as she remains within an empty house all alone. Hamlet's losses as a result of his choice to seek vengeance are similarly portrayed in *Hamlet* (1623), as in act 5 scene 2, Hamlet is also physically wounded and thus harmed by his quest for vengeance, and faces the ultimate form of abandonment, namely death. As such, both *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and *Hamlet* (1623) allow their audiences to witness the consequences of revenge, and that unless forgiveness and mercy are at one point granted, the ultimate price to pay for one's quest of vengeance will be their own death, either a literal or metaphorical one.

#### 4. Conclusion

In each of the three chapters of this thesis, excluding the introduction itself, one of the research questions was answered in an effort to formulate an answer to the question at the heart of this literary research, namely what elements of the narrative and gameplay of the videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) entitle it to be termed a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1623) relating to the subject of revenge, and its destructive nature?

In the first chapter, this thesis examined the manner in which the theme of revenge was portrayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) by drawing upon the findings and observations made in the works of Eugene England, Paul Gottschalk and William F. Zak. According to England in his paper, the theme of revenge and its portrayal in the play is a manifestation of the conflict between the Christian idea that punishment and justice are exacted on wrongdoers by God, and the Renaissance notion that justice had to be enforced by the individual, even if it came at the cost of death (50). This intertwines with Gottschalk's analysis of Hamlet's character, as he notes that he was not vengeful in nature (155), yet that throughout the play he tries on various roles, including that of the avenger (158), and continuously remains in conflict with himself on the question of exacting vengeance and seeking justice by himself against Claudius (155-156). Yet the diabolic commands of the Ghost lead Hamlet onto a path of retribution (156), and thus Hamlet's inner conflict is a manifestation of the conflict between Christianity's complacent and forgiving nature, and the Renaissance's more passionate call to battle the forces of evil and injustice (England 49-50). The problem in Hamlet's quest for vengeance lies in the fact the he does not question the ghost's commandment to him, according to Zak (54). Because of this, Zak states that Hamlet remains blind to the existence of possible alternatives for vengeance, that would in fact bring about true justice (53-54). In the final scene during his death, Hamlet admits to knowing he did

wrong, as he calls Death a sergeant that has come to arrest him (Greenblatt 1852). As such, revenge in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) is shown as a destructive force that blinds those who choose to embrace it to alternatives such as forgiveness. It shows that by pursuing vengeance, the self will be lost in the process through death.

In the second chapter, this thesis examined the same theme yet now as shown in the story of the videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) by using Clara Fernández-Vara's method of game analysis. Through this analysis it became evident that the narrative was driven by the quest for vengeance of two characters, namely Ellie as the primary protagonist, and Abby as the main antagonist of the story. Both sought revenge for the death of a father-figure and an actual father respectively, and in the process hurt their friends, family and themselves, causing multiple deaths, including those of innocents. As the TV and film reviewer *The Epilogue* remarked about the videogame, the story is driven by revenge, yet the actual plot of the narrative is not about vengeance itself, but rather the ability or inability of individual characters in the story to forgive ("Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis"). Dave Trumbore from Collider affirms the latter by giving Ellie's choice of choosing revenge on Abby over a family-life with the woman she loved as an example, and that she can only put aside vengeance at the end of the parallel story that runs between her and Abby ("When You Seek Revenge, Dig Two Graves"). *The Epilogue* notes that it is due to the forgiveness that Ellie displays in the final confrontation between her and her nemesis that she is able to leave behind the traumatic events that had led her onto the path of vengeance, and break the cycle of destruction and violence that had been called into existence as a result ("Not A Revenge Story – An Analysis"). Thus, *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) depicts that forgiveness and clemency are the path to healing and mending emotional trauma or pain, while revenge instead brings about harm and death on those close to the person seeking vengeance.

The third chapter of this thesis compared *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) to *Hamlet* (1623). The comparison drew multiple parallels and similarities between the two storytelling media regarding the theme of revenge. Both Ellie and Hamlet, the protagonist of each story respectively, seek vengeance for the death of a father or a father-figure, and by pursuing retribution as a form of what they perceive to be justice, they bring harm upon the characters that are close to them, and cause the deaths of innocent individuals in their respective stories. Both protagonists of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and *Hamlet* (1623) also are faced with the choice to either take the last step and enact vengeance against those that had harmed them, or to forgive them instead. Whereas Ellie chooses to forgive Abby during their final confrontation and continues to live, Hamlet chooses the opposite and ultimately causes his own death and downfall. While these outcomes are different, both allow the same idea to be appreciated, namely that revenge leads to the destruction of one's surroundings and in the end oneself. Both characters are also forced to endure the consequences for their choice to pursue revenge, as Ellie loses her partner and adopted child after she chooses vengeance over a family life with them, while Hamlet loses Ophelia to implied suicide, and later his mother as well as his own life.

These three chapters, and with them the answers to the three sub-questions accompanying the primary research question of this thesis, form the answer to the former. Due to the similarities and differences of the manner in which the theme of revenge has been depicted in both forms of storytelling, the historical text may enhance the appreciation of the modern game and its ethical dimensions. The longer the cycle of vengeance is perpetuated, the more people close to those seeking revenge will be struck by its destructive nature, and the quicker death will rush towards them as the final sergeant coming to arrest them for the crimes they have committed in their blindness to alternatives. As a result, the conclusion can be drawn that there are arguments in favour of construing *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) as a

modern retelling or adaptation of *Hamlet* (1623) in terms of the theme of revenge, because both allow the idea to be appreciated that forgiveness and clemency are the true path to healing and coming to terms with the loss of someone, instead of seeking retribution for their deaths, which will not bring that individual back to life, nor lessen the pain one experiences as a result of their deaths. Instead, seeking vengeance will only cause someone to experience more losses, until loss and pain are the only sounds they can hear, and they die as well. The destructive cycle can only be broken, and thus the seemingly inevitable death of those seeking revenge, by making the hardest choice possible in such a situation, and forgive the wrongdoer for their deeds. This is what both *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and *Hamlet* (1623) depict in each of their respective narratives, the former showing the consequences of choosing forgiveness over vengeance, while the latter the outcome of choosing revenge over clemency. In this manner, both stories become two sides of the same coin, a coin that tries to make its audience appreciate the notion that forgiveness mends, and revenge destroys.

Naturally, this thesis has its limitations, as it only studied the theme of revenge in each of the two narrative mediums, while ignoring other equally important themes, such as madness, religion or honour, which all appear in some form or another in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and *Hamlet* (1623). The thesis also focused primarily on a literary analysis of the theme of revenge, and did not research more technical similarities between the two works. Finally, the thesis also operated on the assumption that the videogame can be seen as an adaptation of the play, while a research paper or thesis on the opposite is also possible, namely trying to discern what elements of the videogame contradict the notion that it is an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. As such, future research on the topic of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) being seen as an adaptation of *Hamlet* (1623) could focus on the manifestation of religion in each, for example, or investigate a more technical trail of similarities regarding the presentation of the videogame and that of the play. Such research could ask questions whether

videogames are modern interpretations of plays, as both have large audiences, are intended for entertainment or the conveying of artistic messages, and have attracted great popularity across the globe. Future studies could also take other plays by Shakespeare or other notable writers, and research connections between those and contemporary videogames that heavily focus on storytelling, to try to prove that they are indeed adaptations of the original works of renowned play writers. Considering the growing popularity and notability of videogames in the daily lives of individuals across the globe, as has been noted by this thesis earlier, it would be a worthwhile field of study to build upon and expand, and to try to discern the possible future of storytelling, and the passing of narratives from generation to generation through different forms of media.

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