

Inspiration, Adaptation, and Play:  
On designing Shakespeare themed  
roll and write print and play games  
*What's Eating the Danish Prince* and  
*Uncrossing Stars*

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Abstract

With the surge of interest in analog games the past decade, the further growth of game studies, and the proliferation of the print and play subculture during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has come to a point when designing one's own game customized for one's own classes has become quite feasible. In the paper, the designer will narrate the context, the process, and initial results of creating two Shakespeare-themed print and play roll & write games *What's Eating the Danish Prince?* and *Uncrossing Stars*, following the Evocative, Enacting, Embedded and Emergent Narratives, as based on Henry Jenkins' Games as Narrative Architecture. In *Danish Prince*, the players get to play as Hamlet managing the crises he faces in the original play; in *Uncrossing Stars*, the players try to manipulate the events so that Romeo and Juliet find their happy ending. In relation to this, the designer will also discuss designing within a teacher's budget constraints and the parameters of a classroom setting, in the hopes of encouraging more teachers to explore this path of gamification in the classroom.

Keywords: Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Ludology, Education, Print and Play, Game Design, Henry Jenkins



## Introduction

Consider this difference between literature and games: in literature and theater, readers and audiences follow a protagonist while, in games, players fill the shoes of the protagonist. While an actor also steps into the shoes of the protagonist, those shoes follow a railroad path, unlike the agency a game entrusts to the player. Diving deeper into the etymology of protagonist, we will see that *agonist* is someone who participates in an *agon*, or contest. More than just a “first actor,” a protagonist is better understood as “first contestant” or the first participant in a game. This distinction is crucial: the fate and decisions of a literary protagonist are determined by the author, but in games, the burden of choice and consequence falls on the player.

Just like how beyond mere story, literature relies on language and philosophy, with games, there's more than just giving players meaningful choices. Following Henry Jenkins' lead in his 2004 article “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,”:

“Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations;

they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives.” (Jenkins 2004)

To expound, Embedded Narrative are the given non-negotiable story elements of a game, such as the game’s core premise; Evocative Narrative are the nonverbal story elements, such as the components; Enacted Narrative are the story elements that involve the core game loop, such as what a player is allowed to enact within the game; and Emergent Narrative, or the story elements that emerge from the consequences player’s choices during play. While we may see how Embedded and Evocative Narratives are also present in literary and dramatic media as well as in games, Enacted and Emergent Narratives have a particular uniqueness in games, as these are negotiated by players; at most, designers only curate the enacted and emergent narrative experiences players have through the rules and consequences of play. We must imagine these narrative pillars working together in the game to create the story experience.

### **A Brief Overview of Some Notable Shakespeare-Inspired Board Games**

As with media like visual arts, film, television, and video games, it should not be too surprising that Shakespeare’s presence is also felt in the world of board games. While one may initially think of Shakespeare-themed trivia games like an edition from Chris Haney

and Scott Abbott's *Trivial Pursuit* series, it would be more interesting to note how much deeper Shakespeare can manifest in the hobby.

One might be surprised that the classic abstract strategy board game *Othello*, patented by Goro Hasegawa in 1971, was indeed named after Shakespeare's play. The black-and-white pieces slowly being placed on a green board turns out to be a thematic representation of a battle between Iago and Othello over the latter's mind, with green being a reference to the "green eyed monster."

Over the decades, Shakespeare-inspired board games have made their presence felt in the market. The more recent one in popular memory is Restoration Games' *Unmatched: Slings and Arrows* (2024) where players have Shakespeare and his characters fight it out in a skirmish. While the game itself follows more the *Unmatched* skirmish and hand management gameplay rather than primarily being about Shakespeare, the characters nonetheless feel inspired from how Shakespeare's characters are, especially with Shakespeare himself having special abilities via his iambic pentameter.

Some other Shakespeare themed board games play a bit more with the theme of the plays, such as in Mike Young's *Hamlet* (2002), where players try to rewrite the plot of Shakespeare's play or Michael Eskue's *Where Art Thou Romeo?* (2013) and *Romeo and Juliet in Council of Verona* (2013), where both games utilize the characters from *Romeo and Juliet* for their bluffing mechanic.

One last noteworthy example is John Kean's *Black Sonata* (2017), where the player takes the role of the detective trying to discover the mysterious dark lady in Shakespeare's sonnets. This is particularly notable, as this won 1st Place as Best Overall Game in the 2017 Board Game Geek Solitaire Print and Play Game Design Contest and made its mark in the more mainstream board gaming community.

The list of Shakespeare-inspired board games is itself rather extensive, so much so that a study focusing on the games alone is already a worthy pursuit. However, as this is more of a craft essay about designing two Shakespeare themed roll and write games that is potentially usable as a classroom activity, this sampling is sufficient to establish a bit of the tradition.

On Designing *What's Eating the Danish Prince?* and *Uncrossing Stars*

To break it down, Roll & Write is a subgenre of tabletop games, where the core game loop has players roll dice and make the most of the die results by marking a play sheet. Crisis management games are games where players constantly face threatening situations as they try to achieve the winning condition before any of the losing conditions trigger.

### ***What's Eating the Danish Prince?***

While it's easy to see how Hamlet's circumstance in the play is a series of crises he has to manage, translating this into a game experience requires reflection. As a solitaire game, the players should play Hamlet; for the player's decisions to have meaning, we start with Hamlet's natural resources: his Sanity (already suffering from the start of the play), his Alibis (before Claudius finds out what Hamlet's up to), and Time (before Claudius ships Hamlet to England).

As in the play, he has different tasks: verifying whether the Ghost is his father or the devil; determining his uncle's guilt; filtering through the people he can trust; knocking sense into his mother; and directly confronting the king.

As Hamlet goes about these tasks, people constantly plague and toll his resources: people he holds (or held) dear, like Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Gertrude; or people hell bent on discovering his secrets, like Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius.

Here, the game almost builds itself: Hamlet's interaction with these people drain him of Sanity, Alibi, and Time—the same resources Hamlet needs for his journey to find peace. Can Hamlet find peace before he succumbs to the strain from the people around him?

And why Roll & Write? With just a sheet for rules, a play sheet, five dice and a pen, a teacher now has an affordable engaging post-reading activity for the students. The game's text and images take care of the Embedded and Evocative Narrative; the decision space as the game progresses takes care of the Enacted and Emergent Narrative. Admittedly, given player agency, I had to sacrifice the order in which the play originally unfolds but the sacrifice is worth it, given the game's short length. A relatively light simulation of the different worries Hamlet has to juggle can go a long way in terms of empathy. In breaking down Hamlet from a ludological lens, It emerges that he is not one who simply dilly dallies, but one stretched in different directions by external forces. As a teacher, I think this is something worth bringing up in class and pose the heavy question: would we have managed better than Hamlet?

### ***Uncrossing Stars***

For *Uncrossing Stars*, the inspiration is none other than the star-crossed lovers themselves. For this roll-and-write game, the players are trying to manipulate the stars in order to give Romeo and Juliet their happy ending.

The inspiration here is that a close inspection of Act V, we will see how Romeo's journey to the Capulet crypt is not only a lengthy journey but a deadly one: had he been caught buying poison or re-entering Verona, or had he lost to his fight with Paris, Romeo

would have been dead. I found this detail significant as the play has Romeo overcome all of these dangers in order to fulfill the tragic end he had determined for himself. This is something I had already explored in a paper back in 2014, *The God of My Idolatry: the determining of good and evil in Romeo and Juliet*.

The purpose in this game is to have the players reflect on the challenge of Romeo surviving long enough to make it to Juliet in Capulet's crypt, while also trying to have Juliet wake up just in time for Romeo's arrival. The core concept of the game is to manage the traffic of the events, speeding up and slowing down the advancement of each character involved in the hopes of achieving a happy ending for the lovers.

### **Why I Bother**

Why do I bother making these games? Aside from the aforementioned, this kind of gamification adds insight to Shakespearean plays, as experiencing the tug of war between luck of the dice and agency of choice opens for fresh insights. Agency creates the experience of accountability; weave it in with some narrative architecture, the experience becomes richer through empathy.

The choice of simplicity in the game loop, the components, and game length is deliberate, as I hope to see these games to be feasible classroom activities: six-sided dice are relatively easy to procure, the

# Longhand

game itself is just one sheet of regular paper and thus easy and cheap to reproduce, rules take around five minutes to learn, and the game itself takes only ten to fifteen minutes to play. Neither the teachers nor the students need to be experienced board gamers to get into this game, and the game itself will leave enough space in the classroom afterwards for processing.

Of course, there is the prerequisite that the player has to have at least a minimal knowledge of these two plays in order for the thematic elements and the other narratives mentioned by Jenkins to emerge.

It should go without saying that the game itself is designed to be non-profit. Given the circumstances of our teachers and students, learning tools like these should not be exclusive to those who can pay for it.

## **The Games as Entries in the 2024 Board Game Geek Roll and Write Design Contest**

Given that timing for the inspiration for these games coincided with the call for papers in the 2024 Asian Shakespeare Association Conference, there was limited time to fully polish the game through local playtesting. Thankfully, the 2024 Board Game Geek Roll and Write Design Contest was still open for entries.

For those unfamiliar with the BGG Game Design Contests, here is a brief overview: these contests are held online via the Board Game Geek website. The format of the contest was initially designed in 2011 by Chris Hansen and, in the present, it has evolved into a variety of print and play board game subgenres. The contests usually run for a number of months, following these phases: the submission phase, the development phase, and the voting phase. The submission phase is mostly straightforward, where participants create Work-in-Progress Discussion threads about their entry, uploading their files for printing, crafting and playtesting. For an entry to be eligible for the contest, the designer must playtest at least two to three other entries and give actionable feedback. This continues through the development phase, where new entries are no longer accepted. During the voting phase, the entries are then voted upon and judged by the community, with each contest category concentrating on different specific aspects of the game.

For this specific context, both *What's Eating the Danish Prince?* and *Uncrossing Stars* were entries to the 2024 Roll and Write Game Design Contest. Of the 29 entries that year, *What's Eating the Danish Prince?* won 6th place in Best Light Minimal Build Game and 1st Place in Best Low Ink Game. *Uncrossing Stars*, on the other hand, won 7th place in Best Light Minimal Build Game, 5th Place in Best Family/Children Friendly Game, and 4th Place in Best Low Ink Game. The categories these games won in are happy indicators that the design is heading in the right direction.

But more important than the rankings are the feedback given by the playtesters. *Uncrossing Stars* was, at the time of playtesting, deemed to be a bit too easy. But the changes in the mechanics have allowed the game to increase in challenge. For *What's Eating the Danish Prince?* was also deemed a bit too easy, although the game was also deemed highly thematic: Hamlet juggling with so many concerns was felt during the gameplay. Both games were considered by the playtesters as something interesting to use in a Shakespeare class.

### **Reflections for Future Projects**

The ultimate test is whether these games will get students to reflect deeper on the two plays. This is something that will only be revealed over time and something one would be uncertain of yet, given the tight timeframe of its creation and development within a few months as part of the ASA Conference.

However, given the outcome in the contest and the feedback of the playtesters, the theory fueling the creation of these two games remains sound. Even outside the context of a literature class, the game stays fun as a game and, if the player is familiar with Shakespeare's works the games' meaningful choices allow the player to experience the stories from different kinds of narrative approaches, especially one where the burden of outcome is what the players will feel responsible for.

I find that the comment about the game being too easy not to be too big a concern. As mentioned earlier, when used in a classroom, the point of the game is primarily thematic. Furthermore, the difficulty can be cranked up by balancing out the different tracks in the game, instead of tampering the game loop. At the time of this writing, the game is already working, despite some room for improvement. As with all creative works, there will always be room for improvement.

All in all, the project of gamifying Shakespeare's plays in an easy affordable manner is still at its first steps but, it seems, they are on its right steps.

**The files to the games and their rules can be accessed [here](#).**

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