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**TRAGIC TIME IN
DRAMA, FILM, AND
VIDEOGAMES**

The Future in the Instant

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Rebecca Bushnell
Department of English
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

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PREFACE

In the videogame *The Stanley Parable*, the player inhabits an avatar named Stanley, who punches computer buttons all day. A soothing voice with a British accent begins the game with a past-tense narration, telling the player that one day Stanley found himself unaccountably alone. The player starts by moving in concert with the narration, and, acting as Stanley, emerges from an office to seek his absent colleagues. She thus embarks on an adventure, the nature of which depends on choices made along the way. The narrator leads the player early on to a room where one must choose which door to enter, the left or the right. The narrator says Stanley entered the left one, but in the present of the game the player can also open the right door, in effect disobeying the narrator. If the player chooses the left door and conforms with the narration throughout the short story, as Stanley she can escape the office building and its “mind-control machine.” The player will be told Stanley was now “free” and that he was “happy.” If the player disobeys the narrator at any point, those choices can lead to many different endings, where Stanley might die, stay in a broom closet, get lost in an infinite loop, go mad, or even enter another game, among many other options.¹

The Stanley Parable thus not only parodies the mechanisms of choice that underlie most videogames but also exposes a fundamental tension at the heart of tragedy: that is, the conflict between a narrative’s drive toward a satisfying conclusion and its need to imply that characters are free to make choices—however terrible and self-destructive. *The Stanley Parable* teaches the player that making the choices the narrator proposes may seem to “free” you but only because you have conformed with the program;

disobedience means death or never finding your way to the end. It also starkly demonstrates the conflict between the player's experience of the game in real time, in the present, and the narrator's desperately trying to keep the narrative in the past tense. The player's disobedience constantly drags the narrator to fight with the player in the present where the player can assert his or her freedom—at whatever cost.

This book aims at the heart of the problem that *The Stanley Parable* poses, which is also central to the genre of tragedy: how we experience choice and consequences in time, and especially in an enacted present that conflicts with the past. This book is based on the premise that tragedy is not dead: rather, it lives in new forms, and especially in contemporary media like videogames and films that stage the mechanics of causality and necessity. Many books have been written on the subject of tragedy and its relationship to modern life, especially concerning the representation of violence and suffering in new media culture. But this book explores instead how theatre and tragedy have shaped the representation of time and the consequences of action in multiple media, and in turn, how those new media have reframed the temporality of tragedy.

This book thus participates in the recent “turn to time” in literary and cultural studies, which has brought people to question common assumptions about how time works, whether it be in history, culture, or lived experience. Some attribute this scholarly turn to the exhaustion of the new historicism. More broadly, it also reflects a reaction against how linear time has been used to define how we live in the mind, body, and world.² Critics have produced a lot of work on temporality in literature, but much of it, including Mikhail Bakhtin's influential theorizing of the chronotope, Peter Brook's *Reading for the Plot*, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, and Paul Ricoeur's magisterial three-volume work on *Time and Narrative*, has focused on the novel rather than theater. My own concern is the temporality of *enacted* stories, not just texts, and not just with how time is represented, but with how it is experienced by players and audiences alike.

Often when scholars write about time they are really talking about something else, like “mutability” or “history.” Of course, it is hard to think about time except as it is embodied *in* something else: in matter, nature, or human behavior and events.³ Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield have narrated the human discovery of time through observing change: first in the “changes and chances of individual human life” but then also in the course of human affairs and “the mutability of the Earth, the living creatures upon it, and even the great Heavens themselves” (21).

But buried in this identification of time with change is the broader question of how to define time itself: in Dan Falk's words, "Is time nothing more than change? Or is time more fundamental—is it the mysterious entity that *makes change possible*, a kind of foundation on which the universe is built?" (272).

Switching from thinking about change to instead describing the experience of time brings us to the mystery of what it means to live in the present. Falk wonders what happens if we question the sense of time as a river, asking "could the river be dry, its flow an illusion [. . .] If the flow is imaginary, have 'past' and 'future' dried up along with it, leaving only an array of 'nows,' all on an equal footing?" (73). The idea of the urgency of the present time is not a new one: Martin Luther once wrote, drawing on St. Augustine, "What the philosophers say is true: 'The past is gone; the future has not arrived; therefore we have, of all time, only the now. The rest of time is not because it has either passed away or has not yet arrived'" (cited in Waller 19).⁴ One could see this early conception of time as paralleling the modern conception of time in physics, understood not as linear flow but rather as "a vast block in which past and future have equal status. 'Now,' meanwhile, is reduced to a subjective label, just like 'here'" (Falk 4).

This book does not delve deeply into the philosophy or physics of time. Rather, I focus more narrowly on the ways in which theater, films, and videogames enact the experience of living in a sense of present time that cannot be disentangled from the past and future.⁵ Although I began studying time in classical and Renaissance tragedy years ago, the shape of this particular book has been influenced by my rereading tragedy after watching time-travel films and playing videogames.⁶ In each chapter, I will contend that when it comes to temporality, the medium matters: the enacted media of theater, film, and videogames all engage the spectator—and the player—differently in time. Time-travel films first brought my attention to how filmmakers have used the unique qualities of their medium to undo necessity as it is embedded in linear time, taking advantage of film's ability to "time travel." But more than anything else, playing serious videogames has deeply complicated how I understand the mechanisms of tragic necessity and the tragic protagonist's actions in time.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, a seminal study of what was still a new medium in 1998, Janet Murray argued that in videogames "the interactor is the author of a particular performance within an electronic story system, or the architect of a particular part of the virtual world, but we must

distinguish this derivative authorship from the originating authorship of the system itself [...] This is not authorship but agency” (153). This tension between the “authorship” of the system and the player’s role as author of his or her own performance parallels the conflict between the power that we want to call “fate” and the tragic actor/protagonist’s acting as a self with an ability to choose. Critical to any videogame is how the player is given freedom to choose and act in the context of an unfolding story, while the extent to which those decisions matter in the end can be quite different. On the one hand, videogames seem to grant a player significant “authorship” through the ability to determine a course of action at selected moments: to kill or not kill an antagonist, to forgive or reject a partner. In so doing, a player may affect the shape of the plot in process or even its outcome. For many game theorists, this kind of agency is, after all, what makes a game a game as opposed to a text, play, or film. As Jesper Juul has noted, because the game players are the actors, single-player games make them deeply complicit, feeling responsible for the story’s outcome (Juul 2013 [location 452]).

Videogames have thus brought me to look at tragic theater in the context of games and play.⁷ Some may see such an approach as counter-intuitive: surely, games and play suggest comedy, a world of experimentation and possibility rather than the closed-down world of tragedy, where everything seems to be predetermined. But I am using game thinking to open up what appears to be closed in tragedy, seeking ways in which tragic theater could approximate the conditions of play. I am adapting Roger Caillois’s description of play as an activity defined by six essential qualities: play is voluntary; “separate” or “circumscribed within limits of space and time”; unproductive; make-believe; governed by rules that “suspend ordinary laws”; and for me, most importantly “uncertain,” insofar as its course “cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovation [is] left to the player’s initiative” (9–10).⁸ Further connecting the idea of play to videogames, I argue that understanding how videogames function can unlock the possibilities and play latent in tragedy, both in theater and in film. When videogames adapt generic formulas derived from this theatrical tradition, they also uncover what was always there, temporal contingencies and hypotheses that can exist within a traditional play’s “program.”⁹

It might by now be obvious that, for me, writing this short book meant traveling into new territories: theories and philosophy of time, performance

studies, film theory, and game studies. While I think this book responsibly represents my investigations in the different disciplines involved, above all it is meant to be accessible to people from all those fields. Thus, my goal is not necessarily to add great depth in the special areas of these individual disciplines: for example, the classical scholar might find the coverage of the vast literature on *Oedipus the King* scanty, and in turn, the film scholar might expect much more detailed work on cinematic time. Instead, I hope that scholars from all these fields—literature, theatre, film, gaming—might learn something from looking at their discipline from another perspective. The book is designed to encourage conversation among people in different areas, for example, by asking game scholars to think about theatrical performance and students of tragedy to try their hand at a serious game.

In several ways, this project entailed some deviation from recent scholarly trends in my own area of literary and cultural studies. First, because it covers many kinds of “performance” from different periods, I am sailing recklessly through the powerful wake of thirty years of historicism in early modern studies. While I have long recognized history’s claims, in thinking about tragedy I am resisting here the idea that time moves only in one continuous direction. Rather, following Michel Serres and others, I want to think that “every historical era is multi-temporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary and the futuristic” (Serres 60). I am indeed concerned with how the past both differs from and informs the present, but I also see that the present can make us rethink or reconstruct the past.¹⁰ I concur with Rita Felski’s argument against using context or periodization as a straitjacket, where we are “impaled on the pin of our historical categories and coordinates,” in which a text “exists only as an object-to-be-explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments” (509–10).

This book may also seem to veer out of the critical mainstream because it makes claims about a genre called tragedy. Genre criticism has often been held in disrepute, largely because much of it has focused defining genres and policing their boundaries, a project so ably deconstructed by Jacques Derrida in his essay on “The Law of Genre.”¹¹ However, this book is not concerned with those kind of definitions. When discussing time-travel films or videogames, I will not address the question of whether they are tragedies: that is not the point. Instead, I am asserting that over the long haul, enacted tragedies have established expectations for representing and experiencing events in time, in many performative media.¹²

As loosely identified with a collection of texts, a genre establishes what Hans Robert Jauss called the “objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance” (22).¹³ But that is certainly not a stable system; Jauss argues that throughout time, even as something like the idea of a genre as “tragedy” persists, those expectations shift, as each “new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectation and ‘rules of the game’ familiar to him from earlier texts.” Yet, in turn, these “rules” can be “varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced” (88). That is, a genre is like a game, constantly in the process of dynamic change, where the new adapts the old, but in so doing also transforms the way we see the old. In proposing that we think about cultural production in the context of “deep time,” Wai-Chee Dimock also asks us to see genre developing not merely in a linear fashion but rather as “a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (3–4). So here I am exploring how modern performance, adaptations, film, and videogames expose and transform the deep structure of tragic temporality, with “input going both ways.”

This book may also raise some critical eyebrows in its unabashed focus on freedom, agency, and choice. At times when writing this book I felt like I must sound like an unreconstructed 1950s existentialist, uninformed by or even unaware of the last thirty years of cultural and political criticism that has thoroughly complicated and undermined all of these concepts. In fact, all of my scholarship in the past has been in dialogue with this criticism. My first book, *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles Theban Plays*, tackled some of the same questions I address here, in considering the tragic hero’s resistance to entrapment in his own story as represented in the future language of prophecy. In that book I followed the tragic heroes’ ethical drive to reject or subvert prophecy, that is, to write their own stories, but I concluded that, of course, they could not do so in the end, because “their stories belong to everyone, not to themselves alone” (107). I took the position then, as I do now, that we should not take the idea of tragic “fate” for granted; I was guided by Walter Benjamin’s wise statement on tragedy that “The necessity which appears to be built into the framework is neither a causal nor a magical necessity. It is the unarticulated necessity of defiance, in which the self brings forth its utterances” (115). As I look back over my thirty-five years of scholarship since then, I recognize that I have never stopped writing about cultural

forms of resistance to authority, whether embodied in prophecy, tyranny, pedagogy, or even gardening. Rather than starting with a pre-existing theoretical framework, I always tried first to understand that discourse on its own terms and then to engage in dialogue with contemporary theory. Here I have taken another approach by thinking about choice, agency, and authorship in terms adapted from game studies, but it always with an eye to the specific qualities of different media.¹⁴

The primary concern of much game studies theory has been the function of interactivity, which negotiates a complex balance between “free choice” and the purposes of a game. Mark Wolf has described how choice and consequence work in videogames:

The very ‘rules’ and cause-and-effect logic that dictate the events of the video game’s diegetic world contain an imbedded world view which matches actions with consequences and determines outcomes, and it is here that an author can best guide a player into a particular way of thinking (and acting). Goals and obstacles, choices and their consequences, and the means and ends with which the player is provided; these become the tools that shape narrative experience, and the real narrative becomes the player’s own passage through the narrative maze of branching storylines and events. (*Medium* 109)¹⁵

Thus one could say that, like a tragedy, a game has a story to tell in which “free” choice becomes an essential part of its framework, or in Espen Aarseth’s words, a structural feature of “the prison-house of regulated play” (133).¹⁶ Thus, while the player feels involved in the present of play when she is free to choose, in the end all of her choices are part of the plan. But videogames, of course, differ most significantly from the conventional view of tragedy in offering multiple choices in the present. In this sense, playing videogames exposes how tragic ends are constructed in time. It has brought me to look again for the multiple stories latent in any tragic script, in what *Macbeth* calls the “seeds of time.”

In order to establish the grounds of its argument, this book begins by considering the temporality of classical and Shakespearean tragedy, offering readings of a select set of plays meant to unsettle conventional ideas about how choice relates to both tragic character and consequences. I then discuss how performance and adaptation can uncover the temporal contingencies underlying tragic narratives, using the case studies of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and The Performance

Group's historic production of *Dionysus in 69*. The book then turns to the ways in which time-travel films can challenge the linearity that we associate with tragic present time. This chapter pursues the implications of the time-travel film's investment in film's multifaceted temporality, and with that questions how time can be manipulated to open up new ends. Only then do I get to videogames, exploring in the final chapter how videogames make us rethink the tragic time that is defined by the "end." In fact, the book was written backward, beginning with my playing and then writing about games. That experience in turn informed my rethinking of the plays, performances, and films I discuss. When I finally came to compose the first chapter on classical and Renaissance tragedy, my way of reading the dramatic tradition thus was transformed by my experience of serious play, seeing how choice and consequences work in present time. If a reader chooses to read the book backward as well, that is fine with me.

Writing this book has been a wonderful adventure, but as I travelled into unfamiliar territory, I depended on having knowledgeable and kindly guides who tolerated my naiveté and steered me in the right direction. Phyllis Rackin first suggested that I write a book about time and tragedy, and as always, I thank her for her wisdom and friendship. Since then, many colleagues and students have been teaching me about those fields in which I was a novice, and I apologize that I cannot possibly remember or name them all here. However, I am particularly grateful to the Cinema Studies faculty at Penn (especially Timothy Corrigan and Karen Beckman), as well as friends and colleagues with expertise in theatre and performance (including Cary Mazer, Erika Lin, and Gina Bloom). Matthew Wagner's book and his collegiality have both been inspirational. But I owe the greatest debt for this book to my daughter Ruth Bushnell Toner. Professionally Ruth is a data scientist but she is also a dedicated gamer who first made me the importance of videogames for the study of choice and consequences. She also taught me how to play them myself and let me watch her shoot and navigate her way through many game worlds. This work has greatly benefited from her insights and encouragement; it is really partly hers. Of course, I also am grateful to my husband John Toner and my daughter Emily Bushnell Toner, for their love, kindness, and tolerance of my insistence on watching cheesy time-travel films. I also want to thank Ben Doyle for encouraging me to write this book for Palgrave Pivot, when it was just a wild idea, and Bronwyn Wallace, for her incisive comments and her patient help in preparing the manuscript.

Some material from the book has appeared in an earlier form in a short essay on "Tragedy and Temporality," *PMLA* 129 (2014), 783–789.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Fenner, “The Stanley Parable Endings Guide” (Fenner 2013).
2. For examples of recent work on time and literature in areas closest to my own field of early modern studies: Newman et al., *Time and the Literary*; Wood, *Time, Narrative, and Emotion*; Harris, *Untimely Matter*; Wagner, *Shakespeare, Theatre, and Time*; Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*; Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*; Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?* See Lewis for a review of the history of criticism on Shakespeare and temporality; also Cohen, [Chap. 1](#), on “critical temporal studies.” Temporality has also been a focus of significant recent work in queer studies: see Dinshaw 32–33 for a summary of this work with a bibliography (Dinshaw 2012).
3. Over the period I’ve been concerned with this project, I have consulted many general books on time and temporality (in addition to the works cited in note 2), and many specific studies of temporality and tragedy, theater, film, and videogames are covered in [Chaps. 1–4](#). Here I will just mention three older books that traditionally shaped thinking about time in Western culture since the Middle Ages: Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time*; Waller, *The Strong Necessity of Time*; and Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*. Toulmin and Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time*, and Falk, *In Search of Time*, provide useful summaries of the issues for a general reader. The essays in Burges and Elias, *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, offer a comprehensive survey of theories of temporality focused the post Second World War world. My own general thinking about temporality has been influenced by Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, and Hoy, *The Time of our Lives*, and I have benefitted greatly from Wagner’s phenomenological approach in *Shakespeare, Theatre, and Time*. However, mostly I have focused on the temporality of the individual media I discuss rather than general theories of time.
4. See also Waller on Michel de Montaigne: “He finds it impossible to pin down the essence of man except in the present instant: ‘I describe not the essence,’ he exclaims, ‘but the passage; not a passage from age to age, or as people reckon, from seven years to seven, but from day to day, from minute to minute’” (30).
5. See Hoy on “a conceptual distinction between the terms ‘time’ and ‘temporality.’ The term ‘time’ can be used to refer to universal time, clock time, or objective time. In contrast, ‘temporality’ is time insofar as it manifests itself in human existence” (xiii). I will not be so rigorous in distinguishing between the two terms (Hoy 2012).