DRAFT

The objective correlative of a digital game.

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Introduction.
What do Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a digital game have in common?

In this essay, I examine semiotic parallels between Shakespeare's play and digital games. I use T. S. Eliot's critique of *Hamlet* in 1919 -- based on Eliot's notion of "objective correlative" -- to find similarities between references and referents employed by *Hamlet* (in particular) and by games and play (more generally). I argue that both *Hamlet* and digital games evoke emotion in a similar, self-referential way, and I conclude that neither is rightfully labeled an "artistic failure" (as Eliot claims about *Hamlet*) as a consequence.

Allston's version of objective correlative.
The notion that an "objective correlative" is necessary to achieve emotional effect in art is first attributed to Washington Allston, a painter and a Romantic (see Greenburg, 2007; Winston, 1962). In *Lectures on art* (1850), Allston's describes art as referencing an ideal: an "Idea... independent of the reflective faculties."

During his explanation of how art might accomplish this, Allston establishes a necessary relationship -- a correlation -- between the Idea and its evocation by the artwork. Given this relationship, according to Allston, art constitutes the Idea in much the same manner that (using Allston's own example) a cabbage's "material assimilant[s]" constitute the cabbage. While these constitutive elements are not, strictly speaking, the *cause* of the Idea, they are an "occasion" for the evocation of a pre-existing Idea.

> No possible modification in the degrees or proportion of these elements can change the specific form of a plant -- for instance, a cabbage into a cauliflower; it must ever remain a cabbage, *small or large, good or bad.* So, too, is the external world to the mind; which needs, also, as the condition of its manifestation, its objective correlative. [italics in original] (Allston, 1850/2004, online)

Further, Allston disavows "sensation" as sufficient to evoke the Idea. Sensation is awareness of material assimilants without the organizing influence of any Idea that would assimilate them: potential without actuality. The organizing influence of the Idea is therein more likely predicated by assimilants

arranged in patterns beyond those of nature and any associated vagaries of sensation: patterns resulting from artistic "Composition."

> The term Composition, in its general sense, signifies the union of things that were originally separate: in the art of Painting it implies, in addition to this, such an arrangement and reciprocal relation of these materials, as shall constitute them so many essential parts of a whole. (Allston, 1850/2004, online)

Allston's argument is one that would engage issues beyond those of painting and art: a broad-brushed stab at the mind-body problem. Given the breadth of this argument, it is then interesting to note what elements of it T. S. Eliot subsequently chose to retain within his own, more influential conceptualization of an objective correlative.

T. S. Eliot's version of objective correlative.

T. S. Eliot popularized the concept of objective correlative in a brief critique of *Hamlet*, first published in 1919. In this critique, Eliot maintains that Hamlet's emotional state is unjustified by the structure of the play; according to Eliot, the play fails to provide an *objective correlative* for Hamlet's behavior, or "a set of objects, a situation, [or] a chain of events which shall be the formula of... emotion" (Eliot, 1932, p. 145).

> [Hamlet's disgust] is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence… The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. (Eliot, 1932, pp. 145-146)

Eliot would have us believe that those emotions to which *Hamlet* refers are something like the emotions of an adolescent: intense perhaps, yet fundamentally capricious -- emotions that "Shakespeare did not understand himself" (Eliot, 1932, p. 146). Due most fundamentally to its lack of a proper objective correlative, Eliot judges *Hamlet* an "artistic failure."

Eliot clearly jettisons Allston's "Idea" -- and the Romantic idealism associated with it -- in order to focus on the more limited aesthetic consequence of emotional effect. Also, although Eliot retains the materiality (i. e., the "objective") portion of Allston's conceptualization, Eliot appears, as poet rather than painter, more concerned with *linguistic* than visual composition. This requires Eliot to emphasize the sequential (and/or temporal) arrangement of references (e. g., the signs and symbols of a natural language) as a means to substantiate and extend the more visceral, immediate, and often iconic "sensations" of visual art.

Nevertheless, important similarities between Allston's original conceptualization and Eliot's remain. Eliot considers, as does Allston, the most essential function of an objective correlative to be its reference to a *pre-existing* mental state. Eliot considers, as does Allston, the compositionality of the artwork incapable of creating emotional effect on its own.

> *Qua* work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art… (Eliot, 1932, p. 141)

Thus, we can say that both Eliot and Allston agree that art properly references something outside the artwork itself, and that the referent of the artwork exists within the experience of the artist prior to the composition of the artwork. Given this common ground, we can then classify an objective correlative as a *semiotic* property of art: that to which art refers and, simultaneously, the means by which that reference is accomplished.

Here are some issues.

I find Eliot's aesthetic analysis of *Hamlet* problematic along two connected but distinct lines.

My first concern is the oddity -- even brazenness -- of labeling *Hamlet* an artistic failure. More commonly, perhaps, the play is regarded a masterpiece. Obviously, something about *Hamlet* can be qualified as an aesthetic success; yet Eliot points confidently to its summary failure.

My second concern is that Eliot assigns *Hamlet* aesthetic value, and that he assigns it oddly.

> ...probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. (Eliot, p. 144)

I take this claim -- and others similar to it elsewhere (e. g., those instances where Eliot details the likelihood *Hamlet* is written by multiple authors) -- to mean that Eliot prioritizes purposiveness and consistency over ambiguity and inconsistency in artistic composition. But I must also take this claim to mean that something about *Hamlet* is interesting; and, further, that some might choose to prioritize that characteristic -- the play's *interestingness* -- over purposiveness and consistency in artistic composition.

Admittedly, those who consider *Hamlet* art because they find it interesting are judged to be in error by Eliot. But that is the curiosity -- for it does not seem that Eliot considers these erroneous critics in error because of either their ignorance of artistic composition or their inability to acknowledge that *Hamlet* lacks an objective correlative. Rather, Eliot considers these erroneous critics to have committed not an interpretive error but wholly an *aesthetic* one: these erroneous critics confuse the aesthetic pleasures gained from the contemplation of something-that-is-not-art (as art) with the aesthetic pleasures gained from art.

What is Eliot's justification for such an essentialist notion of art and artwork?

Perhaps the first sort of aesthetic pleasure -- grounded in *interestingness* -- is more reflective and self-contained and therein more artificial and false; and perhaps the latter sort of aesthetic pleasure -- grounded in an objective correlative -- is more immediate and less reflective and therein more authentic. But we do not know this. We do not have a clear explanation from Eliot on the matter.

What is made most clear in Eliot's claim is that the structure of the play must carry the burden of aesthetic value, if there is any. Eliot locates the structure of *Hamlet* in those elements associated with its supposedly multiple authorship: inconsistencies of plot, character, dialogue, theme, and, in general, ambiguous *intentionality*. Without authorial intentionality of the proper and focused sort (accompanied by the compositional skill necessary to execute that intentionality properly), the author's artwork is an artistic failure.

The special circumstances of *Hamlet*.

Yet *Hamlet* is not just any play. It is a celebrated play. It is a play that contains the role of Hamlet, one of the more challenging and, by multiple accounts, more rewarding roles in English theater.

Even if we are to accept Eliot's argument in its most generic form -- that an artwork referencing emotion without a proper objective correlative is incapable of artistic success -- it is difficult to apply this argument to the singular case of *Hamlet*. Indeed, the unique challenges that *Hamlet* poses for its actors seem to make the play *more* aesthetically valued and *more* aesthetically pleasing than the play without them.

But surely Eliot realizes this and has chosen the play purposively. (He calls *Hamlet*, after all, the "Mona Lisa" of literature.) The popularity of *Hamlet* makes the play both representative and instructive of artistic compositions inhibiting emotional response.

> In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others…. Both workmanship and thought are in an unstable condition... We find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play. (Eliot, 1932, p. 143)

It is this impenetrable *dissonance* of Hamlet that makes it exemplary. *Hamlet* is not merely missing an objective correlative; it is precisely the sort of artwork that is *incapable* of possessing an objective correlative: an artwork with multiple and dissonant intentions.

The audience of *Hamlet* may well sympathize and resonate with this dissonance -- eliciting an emotional response -- but this response is neither organic to the composition of the play nor indicative of artistic success. In analogy, the emotional response of an audience to *Hamlet* is an infectious symptom of the play's incurable disease -- a disease so infectious that actors find it challenging and, ultimately, invigorating: a fevered sort of acting delirium.

Such an explanation may justify Eliot's aesthetic analysis of *Hamlet* as well as it can be justified, given the brevity of the essay in which he presents it. However, there is an alternative explanation more

pertinent to and more revealing of the role of an objective correlative in circumstances and media beyond those imagined by Eliot.

***Hamlet* as its own objective correlative.**

Both Allston and Eliot are, at least as regards the objective correlative, *referentialists*. That is, each believes that the objective correlative of a work of art most fundamentally serves as a reference to something other than the artwork (and, in the more extreme case of Allston, something other than the "external" world.)

However, Eliot's conceptualization, in opposition to Allson's, is decidedly anti-Romantic and, as such, a precursor to New Criticism and formalist analyses of literature. While Allston's objective correlative emphasizes a correlative of *emotion* (and, beyond that, of an "*Idea*"), Eliot's emphasizes the *formula* -- i. e., the *form* -- of that emotive correlative. This formula necessarily includes the entirety of the artwork (rather than any individual component considered in isolation). Thus, the consistency of the composition remains rightfully vital to Eliot's analysis of *Hamlet*, and, likewise, Eliot finds *Hamlet*'s formal dissonance an indication of authorial ambiguity, and therein debilitating.

Subsequently, formalist critics influenced by Eliot's point of view have expressed similarly anti-Romantic inclinations while evaluating art and the artistic:

> ...we can see that almost all modern critics have agreed on the following point: the poet should not put their thoughts into the poem straightforwardly, because such preaching will deviate from the poetry fundamentally, and finally lead to the abandonment of the art. (Wi, 2014, p. 85)

In these subsequent extensions of Eliot's approach, the *form* of the poem is a critical component of any objective correlative that would reference that poem's content (or "meaning"). But the form of the poem is more than just this. The form of the poem *is* the referent of the poem. That is, the form of the poem *becomes* its content; its form *becomes* its meaning.

If so, then why must Eliot's original notion of an objective correlative -- as a "formula" of emotion -- point *outside* the work of art?

If the objective correlative is a reference, as both Eliot and Allson insist, is there no possibility that this reference might point *inside* -- *at* -- the work of art itself? There seems no immediate formal obstacle to it doing so. And, in fact, if we look closely enough, Eliot implies as much about *Hamlet*.

In his essay, for instance, Eliot described the madness of Hamlet as "less than madness and more than feigned" (p. 146). These characteristics seem more reasonably associated with a *reference* to madness than with madness itself. If so, then the semiotic function of the play points to itself: the play is simultaneously both reference and the referent of that referencing. Such a recursively drawn semiotic function then seems an appropriate candidate -- even a likely one -- to serve as an "occasion" for the manifestation of *Hamlet*'s widely acknowledged emotional effect.

Eliot locates specific structural elements -- verse and theme -- in *Hamlet* that, regardless of any confusion associated with a multiple and mixed intentionality, welcome this interpretation: Hamlet's obsessive tendency toward introspection and soliloquy; the multiple plays within the play; and, of course, the ultimate tragedy of Hamlet's inability to ascend to either the throne of the play or the play of the throne. The defining characteristic of the character of Hamlet is the potential -- not the actuality -- of that character to *become* Hamlet. This is echoed most definitively in the character's most memorable lines (e. g., "To be or not to be...") and, ultimately, in *Hamlet*'s denouement:

> Beare Hamlet like a Soldier to the Stage,
> For he was likely, had he beene put on
> To haue prou'd most royally
> (*Hamlet*, V.ii.407-9)

Of course, identifying this sort of recursive and self-reflexive objective correlative needn't be restricted to *Hamlet*. Many of Shakespeare's plays employ similar allusions of actors and acting, Indeed, self-reflexivity of this sort has become an increasingly persistent postmodern trope. But *Hamlet*, in its time -- and in Eliot's -- is deserving of its own context of interpretation.

***Hamlet* as a special case.**

Eliot's objective correlative references a *pre-existing* mental state, and *Hamlet*'s peculiarity -- again, according to Eliot -- is that the play simply muddles this referencing. Without any conventional sort of reference guiding the role of Hamlet, the actor playing that role is isolated from the guiding hand of the playwright. The actor is forced, in effect, to go "rogue."

Under other circumstances, roguish and unbridled improvisation of this sort might result in unconvincing farce or, as Eliot describes it, "buffoonery." However, because the character of Hamlet is likewise set adrift from the guiding hand of his father and king -- entreated without being empowered -- the play of *Hamlet* provides an occasion for the emotions of its namesake character to be less than what those emotions are and more than what those emotions are not (i. e., "more than madness, and less than feigned").

Hamlet succeeds as an *expressive* work of acting precisely because it fails as an *intentional* work of art. This positions the flaws of the play as an "occasion" (though, admittedly, never quite a certainty) for an acting triumph.

***Hamlet* as a digital game.**

The semiotic interpretation of *Hamlet* and its objective correlative that I have offered here -- embedding a self-referential reference -- is in close parallel with the semiotic function of digital games.

Games tend to undermine the influence of authorial (game designer) intent through persistent and recursive replay -- an outcome enhanced by the interactive and ergodic mechanics of digital media. This is most obvious, for instance, as regards the relationship between digital games and narrative storytelling -- and those controversies surrounding it:

> Storytelling is crucially *all about* control. It sometimes obliges the viewer to take adventures she could not imagine. Storytelling is artistic tyranny, and not always benevolent. (Thompson & Bordwell, 2009, online)

Player choice and interactivity during digital gameplay exert their own control in conflict with that of designer/narrator intent (cf. "oppositional play" in Myers, 2012). Consequentially, the compatibility of digital games and traditional narratives remains unresolved and precarious in contemporary digital game analysis. (Ryan, 2006, has a summary of these controversies.)

Digital games also tend to require re-interpreting and revaluing familiar signs and symbols according to instrumental functions realized during gameplay. Commonly, for instance, during the course of repetitive game play, regardless of what game references point to outside the game, these referents are necessarily (for optimal game play) detached from game play.

For experienced chess players, a "king" denotes one square of movement in any direction on a chessboard -- with few, if any, connotative meanings beyond that. In checkers, a superficially similar referent -- a "king" -- has a unique referent wholly apart from any preassigned cultural meaning or values associated with, for instance, King George, Burger King, or a "king" in chess. This semiotic function of the game -- stripping predisposed referents from game play -- extends beyond digital gameplay to play with toys and to play more generally.

> Play as a kind of assimilation has the potentiality to retreat increasingly from its original objects of reference. The toy itself which signals the first such departure, then makes possible a series of increasingly remote responses depending on the resident fantasies within the players' experience. (Sutton-Smith, 1984, p. 19)

Given these consorting features of the digital game -- exertion of player agency and declining influence of designer intention -- it is difficult to apply Eliot's original, non-recursive conceptualization of an objective correlative to an understanding of how digital games evoke emotion. Applying the recursive, self-referential version, however, seems particularly appropos.

> "a true poem is a simulacrum of reality...an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience." (Brooks, 1947, p. 194)

The experience of the digital game player can be understood as closely analogous to the experience of the actor playing *Hamlet*; actor and player have similar phenomenological experiences during the acting of the play and the playing of the game. Both player and actor are guided by a pre-existing formula of emotion: personal experiences, histories, and memories that have, in the past, evoked emotion. Both are confronted with ergodic texts -- theatrical play and digital game -- that require repeated and recursive effort to decipher and value. The generic tasks of the actor and the player are also quite similar: to evoke emotion by making an artificial context "real."

Actor and player experience a similar sort of dissonance during this effort to reconcile the aesthetics of self with the aesthetics of the artistic composition that confronts and challenges them. And both experience resolutions of this dissonance -- should any resolutions be found -- as aesthetic pleasure. These pleasures are, in many cases, personal and intimate, yet these are not evoked by entirely idiosyncratic circumstances.

The composition of the artwork -- the rules of the game and the structure of the play -- must provide the proper occasion necessary for this evocation. And, in fact, we often use familiar and similar concepts to indicate successful means of reconciling subjective experience with objective design. We might, for instance, refer to "method acting" as regards the play; and we might refer to a "lusory attitude" as regards the game.

Just as method acting internalizes the external requirements of dramatic relationships, a lusory attitude (Suits, 2005) internalizes the external requirements of game play: i. e., "rules... [are] accepted just because they make possible [game play]" (p. 10).

This sort of self-reflexive and self-referential internalization of an external aesthetic goal bootstraps that goal into existence prior to any full realization (or knowledge) of it. In the special circumstance of *Hamlet*, this bootstrapping is made possible only because the problem confronting the actor is simultaneously the *données* of the problem confronting the playwright; or, in other words, the problem of the play is simultaneously (even if only coincidentally, given Eliot's analysis) the objective correlative of the play. In the much broader and more general circumstances of digital games, this bootstrapping is made possible wherever players have -- within their individual play experiences -- a pre-existing objective correlative that serves as a referent of the "lusory attitude" necessary to play a game.

The self-reflexive references in *Hamlet* (in particular) and in digital games (more generally) are then equally *liminal* states in which potential and actuality exist simultaneously -- and somewhat paradoxically. This liminal state is less than true; it is more than false.

Conclusion.

Whether through intentionality or serendipity, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appears to tease a postmodern sensibility from the eclecticism of Elizabethan theater. T. S. Eliot found *Hamlet*'s structure wanting an objective correlative and therein an artistic failure. Yet *Hamlet* is uncomfortably classified an artistic failure.

Interpreting Eliot's objective correlative as self-reflexively referencing the artistic process (i. e., as art *qua* art) allows insight into why *Hamlet* so strongly resonates with audiences. This interpretation offers a structural (semiotic) solution to the nature of the aesthetic problem Eliot's analysis identifies: "to express the inexpress[able]." And this problem peculiar to *Hamlet* is then very similar to the problem facing an aesthetic appreciation of game play: to believe the unbelievable.

For those seeking a conventional sort of representational form in which reference and referent are distinct entities, the ubiquity of gameplay is inevitably a buffoonery of any emotion that would require a different (i. e., non-playful) set of objects, situation, or chain of events as its objective correlative. However, for those under the influence of a lusory attitude, these objects, situations, and events are made "real" precisely (and, most often, restrictively) in order to evoke those emotions that require them to be real.

Thus, in the case of the digital game, the referential insularity of a self-reflexive playfulness is *a default condition*. Sporting a lusory attitude in lieu of engaging with conventional representational form, game players find the occasion necessary to represent themselves and their play as an emotional and expressive work of art: art evoked by an objective correlative that is both more and less than Eliot's original conceptualization.

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