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HACKING *HAMLET*
Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* as update, port and fork of the Shakespearean source code

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Abstract – This article reads the television series *Mr. Robot* (created by Sam Esmail, 2015-2019, USA Network) as a hack of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Deriving the interpretative framework to analyze *Mr. Robot* from the series itself, the essay first explains the use of the notions of computer hacking and source code in the context of artistic adaptation, outlining how hacking can function as an extended conceptual metaphor which enables a fresh, unified understanding of both processes and products of adaptation and appropriation. The framework of hacking is then applied to an extensive comparative reading of Shakespearean source code and televisual hack which focuses on a tightly integrated complex of issues involving the heroes' madness, audience manipulation, and narrative consistency. The central argument of this reading is that the updating, porting and forking of the source code of *Hamlet* performed by *Mr Robot* amounts to an interpretation as much as to a modification of Shakespeare's play. Hamlet's manipulation of the audience throws light on the technologically upgraded means of direct audience communication used in *Mr. Robot*. *Mr. Robot*'s reinterpretation of the Ghost as both a part of the protagonist's mind and a manifestation of his madness in turn suggests an intriguing new reading of Hamlet's madness, and its mode of storytelling enables a reassessment of the various inconsistencies of Shakespeare's tragedy. Reassessing *Mr. Robot* and *Hamlet* in the context of artistic hacking affords new insight into both contemporary complex television series and early modern plays.

Keywords: adaptation; appropriation; television series; complex TV; Shakespeare.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will read the television series *Mr Robot* (created by Sam Esmail, 2015-2019, USA) as a hack of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. First, I will briefly introduce the use of the notions of computer hacking and source code in the context of artistic adaptation.[1] Then, I will apply these notions to

[1] My argument in this article builds directly on the theory I have developed in Winckler 2021. Since this article functions as a case study of the approach developed in detail

Mr Robot and attempt to show how reading the series as 'Shakespeare' can enrich our understanding and appreciation of it, while also shedding new light on the continuing fascination of *Hamlet*. My central argument is that the updating, porting and forking of the source code of *Hamlet* performed by *Mr Robot* amounts to an interpretation as much as a modification of Shakespeare's play, and as such affords new insight into both contemporary complex television series and early modern plays. Hamlet's manipulation of the audience throws light on the technologically upgraded means of direct audience communication used in *Mr. Robot*. *Mr. Robot*'s reinterpretation of the Ghost as both a part of the protagonist's mind and a manifestation of his madness in turn suggests an intriguing new reading of Hamlet's madness, and its mode of storytelling enables a reassessment of the inconsistencies of Shakespeare's tragedy.

2. Adaptation, Appropriation, Hacking

Computer hacking is a versatile, highly contested term (Steinmetz 2015; Holt 2020). In this article, I will predominantly use it to describe the practice of manipulating source code for a certain purpose, benign or malicious, legal or illegal, in order to solve a particular problem or improve a program's functionality. Source code is the code of a computer program as typed into the machine by a human being, which is then translated by other programs (called compilers and assemblers) into the binary machine language, consisting of ones and zeros, based on which the computer executes the program. Hacking can refer to both the writing of new code and the manipulation of existing code through the updating, "porting" and "forking" of source code (Kelty 2008, p. 346).

While updates are essentially hacks which improve a program's functionality, conducted or at least condoned by the program's (group of) developers, porting source code refers to the transfer of a program from one computer system to another, which usually necessitates various modifications. Forking source code, by contrast, means "modifying the existing source code to do something new or different" (Kelty 2008, p. 346). Successful computer programs evolve through a long chain of versions, each of which represents a slight improvement over its predecessor – improvement in the sense of enabling the program to function more successfully in a constantly changing cultural, technical and market environment.

As I have argued elsewhere (Winckler 2021), the model of the hacker who creates new versions of computer programs, as well as new programs, by

there, I will refer to my own work somewhat more than would seem appropriate to me in other circumstances.

updating, porting and forking existing source code opens up a new perspective from which to understand artistic adaptation. Recent theories of adaptation have been trying to evade the establishment of a vertical hierarchy between an adaptation and its projected source and the hierarchy of value it seems to imply by conceiving of adaptation horizontally in the manner of a rhizome (Lanier 2014). In this effort, they can be read as abandoning the idea of a linear relationship between source and adaptation altogether, which leads to a number of theoretical and practical problems (Winckler 2021). As an alternative to such an approach, I suggest to conceive of the source in terms of *source code*. This reconceptualisation makes it possible to respect the crucial importance which the source has for any study of an adaptation *as adaptation* (Hutcheon 2013, p. 6) while avoiding the authoritative implications of the term as traditionally used in adaptation studies. Instead of a restrictive, tyrannical original against which the hack has to be measured, the source is conceived as encouraging of, indeed dependent on, its hacks, because its continuing relevance is predicated upon them. Given the rapidly changing technical and cultural environments in which it functions and to which it caters, any computer program would become obsolete in no time at all without updates, ports and forks, and the same is arguably true for many works of art, and especially Shakespeare's dramatic literature. Adaptation as hacking features in this model as a profoundly creative act, a crucial step in a continual process of artistic renewal.

As the cultural practice of computer hacking evolved along with the development of the first modern computers in the United States from the 1940s onwards, hacking quickly developed an ethical dimension. The young men who spent their days and nights writing software at the MIT artificial intelligence lab in the 1960s and 1970s soon came to define themselves as "hackers" against the "suits", the corporate programmers and developers who worked for corporations such as IBM. They were convinced, in Steven Levy's formulation, that "access to computers... should be unlimited and total" and that "all information should be free" (2010, ch. 2; cf. Coleman 2013, pp. 17-20). This vision, which in modified form persists today, eventually set hackers on a collision course with a law that did not endorse the hacker ethic and has struggled to keep up with technological change ever since.

As a result, legal and illegal varieties of hacking evolved, with a constantly shifting grey area in between. As Gabriella E. Coleman has observed, what all of the various groups into which hackerdom has diversified over the years have in common is "a certain relation to legality. Hacker actions or their artifacts are usually either in legally dubious waters or at the cusp of new legal meaning" (2013, p. 19; cf. Coleman, Golub 2008). On the legal side, this is particularly obvious with respect to the hacker-led rebellion against the perceived "enclosure" of software by corporations by

means of copyright laws in the 1970s and 1980s (Boyle 2003), which eventually became known as the free software movement (Söderberg 2008, pp. 11–50). On the illegal side, it is perhaps telling that the term "hacking" first became popularly associated with the criminal activity of digital breaking and entering in the pop-cultural wake of the Hollywood movie *War Games* (Badham 1983). In subsequent court cases, a number of teenagers who had been breaking into computer systems (but who would never have qualified as hackers in computer expert circles due to their limited knowledge of the systems they were compromising) admitted to having been inspired by the movie to become "hackers" in the criminal sense (Brenner 2010, pp. 15-17) – a stereotype which the movie romanticized heavily, creating the "nerd hero" (Brown 2008, n.p.) (what M. Hawn has described as "a schizophrenic blend of dangerous criminal and geeky Robin Hood" (1996)) at the very moment it also created the hacker menace in the popular imagination. It is arguably this moral complexity which has made the hacker such an intriguing figure for film and television producers: hacking is simultaneously good and evil, creative and destructive; hackers are freedom fighters and terrorists, geniuses and madmen, heroes and villains (cf. Comaroff, Comaroff 2004, p. 807; Rosewarne 2016, pp. 119-165).

This moral and legal ambiguity of hacking contributes to the flexibility of the notion as metaphorically applicable to artistic adaptation. The two theoretical terms which have been predominantly employed in the critical literature in the discussion of the modern uses of Shakespeare's plays in the forms of derivative films, television and web series, novels, comic books, video games etc., "adaptation" and "appropriation", have been the subject of much critical debate. While adaptation has been seen as both the product and the process of creating a work of art through the "(re-)interpretation and... (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 2013, p. 8) of another, appropriation, in Jean Marsden's statement, has "connotations of usurpation, of seizure for one's own uses" and is "associated with abduction, adoption and theft..." (1991, p. 1). In Julie Sanders' seminal account, the chief difference is one of the degree of the openness with which the adaptive/appropriative relationship is declared: while "an adaptation signals a relationship with an informing sourcetext or original... appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (2006, p. 26). Yet the impression of two clearly distinct notions is deceptive, as Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar have concluded: "the difference between adaptation and appropriation, from a theoretical and historical perspective, proves to be a difference in degree rather than kind", so that "context" has to decide which is the appropriate term in each individual case (2015, pp. 16, 17).

One of the major strengths of hacking as a conceptual metaphor[2] for the creative processes, practices and products which both "adaptation" and "appropriation" seek to characterize is that it unites the various aspects of the two notions in a single term. As noted above, "hacking" describes the creative work of writing source code, which is typically performed on the basis of pre-existing source code written by others, while a "hack" is simultaneously the process, the method and the product of such work. In this it can be understood to be a form of adaptation in Hutcheon's sense. Yet it simultaneously smacks of criminal intrusion, of acquiring illicitly what "rightfully" belongs to others, of legal, moral and political transgression – the hallmarks of appropriation. If adaptation and appropriation are conceived of as existing on a "continuum *with* one another", as Desmet and Iyengar (2015, p. 16, original emphasis) suggest, hacking bridges the two terms without sacrificing the specificity of either. In embodying and performing the interplay of creation and destruction, craft and art, legality and criminality, and real life and fiction in digital form, hacking constitutes a potent metaphor for the uses of Shakespeare's works in the internet age. It therefore seems fitting that one of the most sophisticated Shakespeare hacks to have been performed in recent years transforms Hamlet into a hacker.

3. Going mad, seeing ghosts: Disentangling and reintegrating the codes of *Mr. Robot* and *Hamlet*

In the following close reading, I will focus on one specific complex of tightly interconnected themes and dramatic devices which unites and differentiates Shakespearean source code and televisual hack: the focalization of the story through the hero's perspective, the hero's madness, and the ghost of his dead father.[3] Reading back and forth between hacking and hacked code, the argument seeks to lend support to my basic theoretical claim that the concept of adaptation as hacking source code enables a re-envisioning of the source as a creative rather than restrictive influence on the adaptation and the hack,

[2] "Metaphor" is not inferior to "theory". Indeed, all theories can be understood as elaborate metaphors, especially in the humanities. "Adaptation" and "appropriation", as used in literary criticism, are themselves metaphors, and their perceived appropriacy and explanatory efficacy subject to critical debate. Cf. Elliott 2020, pp. 256-264.

[3] Much more can be made of the connection of *Mr. Robot* and Shakespeare than can be discussed here. Besides *Hamlet*, the source code of *Macbeth* also features prominently in *Mr. Robot* in the form of several extended quotes and, more importantly, the story of Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström), Senior Vice President of Technology of E Corp (and later its CEO), who is pushed by his demonic wife Joanna (Stephanie Corneliussen) to pursue promotion in ever more dangerous and devious ways, providing a neo-Shakespearean *Macbeth*-subplot to the *Hamlet*-hack described in this article.

despite and because of its invasive character, as an enriching, life-extending upgrade of the original source code. At the same time, it aims to provide an example of how reading a work of art against its source code can provide insight into both source and hack.

I would like to stress that, as with any other case of writing about an 'unmarked adaptation' (Lanier 2017, p. 300), reading *Mr. Robot* as a hack of *Hamlet* is a *choice* – we could just as well read the series as a hack of *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) or *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski 1999), as other commentators have done, or interpret it completely on its own terms. One of my goals in the following will be to show that this choice, though voluntary on my part, is not arbitrary: that the connections established here are more than just a testament to my (unquestionably relevant) scholarly "desire to make [the work of art] count as Shakespeare" (Denslow 2017, p. 98). As I have outlined in the article which constitutes the theoretical basis of this case study, I believe that, given a desire to connect a work such as *Mr. Robot* with a Shakespeare play, "a convincingly reconstructable relation with the Shakespearean source code through... ports and forks" can provide an "objective criterion" (Winckler 2021, p. 14) for whether a given text such as *Mr. Robot* can count as a Shakespeare hack or not. Since the texts of Shakespeare's plays, as we have them, are "work-determinative" (Nannicelli 2013, p. 6) in the sense that they imply theatrical production, but do not fix these productions deterministically because of the ambiguous nature of human language (as opposed to computer programming languages), the Shakespearean source code is understood here to include not only Shakespeare's words, but also the play's "distinguishing features such as characters, themes, and images" (Winckler 2021, p. 12), both of the scripts and of the production(s) implied by them. I will argue that with respect to all of these features, *Mr. Robot* can be shown to be updating, porting and forking the source code of *Hamlet*.[4]

For anyone familiar with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a host of parallels with *Mr. Robot* will be readily apparent. Both works of art revolve around a young, male, psychologically unstable protagonist habitually dressed in black whose extraordinary intelligence goes hand in hand with the rejection of adult and state authority, depression and social awkwardness. The fact that Elliot's and Hamlet's shared personal attributes are as characteristic of the modish Elizabethan melancholics Shakespeare parodied in his main character (Gellert

[4] As I have outlined in Winckler 2021, the source code of *Hamlet* exists in different versions, in line with the "collaborative, fluid, and constantly evolving nature of all source code" (12). When I speak about the source code of *Hamlet*, I therefore refer to the aggregate of the existing early versions (what are usually called Quarto 1 (or "the bad quarto"), Quarto 2 ("the good quarto") and Folio in Shakespeare scholarship), and the performances implied by them, not to one particular text. See Thompson and Taylor 2016, pp. 75-87.

Lyons 1971) as of the current-day hackers whose essence *Mr. Robot* seeks to capture (cf. "A Portrait of J. Random Hacker"; Thomas 2002, pp. 47-80) illustrates the felicitousness of using *Hamlet* as source code for a show about hacking: even considered completely apart from the story which is told in *Mr. Robot*, the highly intelligent, socially awkward hacker makes for a logical late-capitalist update of the gloomy Elizabethan scholar (and his posthumous Romantic idealization) as a cultural arche- and stereotype. In the 16th century, intellectual young men who were "particular" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.75)[5] became melancholy scholars; in the 21st century, "different" (*Mr. Robot*, Season 01, Episode 01) young men become psychotic hackers.

Like Hamlet, *Mr. Robot*'s protagonist Elliot Alderson (played by Rami Malek) is driven by the ghost of his late father (MR. ROBOT, played by Christian Slater, the leader of the hacker collective fsociety[6]) to take revenge on whom the ghost, who later turns out to be a dissociated personality of Elliot's, proclaims responsible for his death – and who happens to be the most powerful man around: in Hamlet's feudal world the current King of Denmark, Claudius, and in Elliot's age Phillip Price (Michael Cristofer), the CEO of the world's largest corporation, E Corp (even though he later turns out to be merely a puppet of an even more powerful, shadowy figure). Both protagonists feel profoundly uncomfortable in the role of avenger, worry about being manipulated, and use their brain power to discover the truth behind the ghost's respective accusations. At the same time, the dead fathers' revelations confirm their sons' preexisting conviction that the world around them is fundamentally corrupt, positioning the ghosts as potential manifestations of the protagonists' repressed desires. Finally, in *Mr. Robot* as in *Hamlet* the discovery of the unavenged murder of the father and the moral dilemmas which accompany the seeming obligation of the son to take revenge create a rift which runs through the son's mind as much as through his family and his society as a whole, bringing about destruction on all three levels. *Mr. Robot*, the hack, thus retains the basic structure of its Shakespearean source code: an individual psychological struggle embedded in a private family drama which precipitates a national and international political crisis.

Within this structure, *Mr. Robot* updates a number of the key features and characters of Shakespeare's tragedy in line with its identity as an American prime time television show set in the New York City of 2015. While the global reach of the show,[7] the replacement of *Hamlet*'s rotten state of Denmark by an international conglomerate as the central power structure,

[5] All quotations from *Hamlet* are from Thompson and Taylor (2016).

[6] For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the TV series as *Mr. Robot* and to the eponymous character as MR. ROBOT throughout.

[7] Relevant locations which feature in the story include New York City, Lithuania, the Congo, and China, even though not all of these locations are actually shown.

and the use of computer hacking and social engineering (see Thomas 2002, pp. 61-67) rather than meta-theatrical play-acting as the protagonist's weapon of choice all figure prominently, more invasive updates to the *Hamlet* source code are made on the level of character, particularly in the form of the significantly enlarged role and agency of female characters. This includes the introduction of a sister character for the protagonist, Darlene (Carly Chaikin), who supports Elliot in his quest for revenge and also plays a crucial part in his struggle for mental liberation; and a much larger role for the show's version of Ophelia, Angela Moss (Portia Doubleday), who (even though her trajectory from falling victim to the manipulation of her father and various other men through madness to death is ultimately left unmodified) gets a chance to seek her own vengeance. The show thus diversifies Hamlet's lonely revenge quest against the central villain by putting it into the hands of not just one but four characters (if we count MR. ROBOT), while complicating the act of vengeance by making the enemy systemic – unlike Claudius, conglomerates like E Corp cannot be stabbed in the heart, because, as MR. ROBOT puts it, "they don't have hearts" (S01E01). The portrayal of a number of homosexual and transsexual characters likewise brings Hamlet up to date with the contemporary American moment, most prominently in the main villain Zhang/Whiterose (played by B.D. Wong). Greatly heightening the complexity of *Hamlet*'s rather straightforward (if formidable) central villain Claudius, the split character of the transwoman Zhang/Whiterose mirrors the splintering of Elliot's mind into multiple personalities inhabiting the same body. In *Mr. Robot,* both hero and villain thus conjointly come to embody the schizophrenia which both Fredric Jameson (1998) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) have characterised as a central feature of late-stage capitalism (also cf. Peretti 2010), and which Paul Booth (2011) has described as a key component of the narrative and temporal complexity (Mittell 2015) typical of 21st century television shows.

On a technical level, *Mr. Robot* retains what I would argue is the key feature of *Hamlet*'s dramatic design structure: the focalization of much of the story through the protagonist's subjective perspective. In both works, viewers are manipulated into identifying with the protagonist in spite of his often ruthless and questionable acts, and thereby forced into a position of complicity which necessitates them to interrogate their own responsibilities and moral standards as much as those of the (anti)hero (cf. Bruun Vage 2015, pp. 39-63). Shakespeare manipulates the audience into seeing the world from Hamlet's perspective by, first, creating a shared pool of knowledge which only Hamlet and the audience, but not the other characters, have access to (most notably about old Hamlet's Ghost and murder, Hamlet's ensuing revenge quest, and Hamlet's announcement to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.71), which makes us see as cunning and mockery what appears to the other characters as madness in the following acts (see Anglin 2017). Second,

he puts Hamlet into what Robert Weimann (1978, pp. 49-151) has called a *platea* position on stage, a position at the edge of the fictional world of the tragedy from which the Prince can communicate his private thoughts directly to the audience through puns, quibbles, and soliloquies.[8]

Updating this design feature in line with the possibilities of the televisual medium to which Sam Esmail ports the Shakespearean source code, *Mr. Robot* likewise forces the audience to "get... into Elliot's head" (Esmail 2017a, n.p.), but in a much more radical fashion. Elliot's voice-over monologues, which dominate much of the show's storytelling, establish a continuous private line of communication with the viewer, even in scenes in which Elliot is walking around in a crowd, hacking or conversing with other characters. Tonally and thematically, the "techno-cynicism" (Volmar 2017, p. 1) expressed in Elliot's quasi-soliloquies[9] updates Hamlet's preferred Christian theme of postlapsarian, pre-apocalyptic corruption (Hunt 2004; Keller 1996; Lynch 2019) for a late-capitalist context. Elliot's "fuck society" monologue in the show's first episode, for example, updates and forks code from Hamlet's first soliloquy (*Hamlet*, 1.2.129-37) in which the Prince describes the world as "stale, flat and unprofitable" and as an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.135-36)), as well as the theme of cowardice from "To be or not to be" and other soliloquies, for the social media age:

> KRISTA: What is it about society that disappoints you so much?
> ELLIOT: Oh, I don't know. Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man, even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit... Spamming each other with our burning commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight. Our social media faking as intimacy... I'm not saying anything new. We all know why we do this... because we wanna be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend. Because we're cowards. Fuck society." (*Mr. Robot*, S01E01)

Yet *Mr. Robot* goes much further than merely updating Hamlet's soliloquies thematically. While Hamlet's speeches would have originally been given by a solitary Hamlet on the empty stage of the Globe theatre, during Elliot's monologue shots of his face, moving in from a medium close-up into a decentred close-up in which Elliot's head occupies the entire left half of the

[8] Weimann derives the term *platea* from an analysis of the tradition of the English morality play.

[9] These are not soliloquies in the strict sense because, unlike Hamlet's soliloquies, Elliot is frequently in the presence of other characters when we hear him 'think' the speeches in voice-over. Technically, they therefore resemble Shakespearean asides more than soliloquies. Still, the fact that they are long, coherent speeches which give insight into the inner life of the character aligns them closely with the latter.

screen, are cross-cut with a quick succession of real media images of Jobs, counterfeit heroes like Lance Armstrong and Bill Cosby, and Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook page, visually underlining Elliot's words and illustrating his thoughts in a way unavailable to the Shakespearean stage medium.

In addition to the voice-over, much of what in *Hamlet* is an inner conflict communicated to the audience chiefly in monologue and soliloquy is in *Mr. Robot* reconfigured as what we might call an *internal dialogue* between Elliot and the other personality in his head, the 'ghost' MR. ROBOT. This is best illustrated by the series' rendition of "To be or not to be, / That is the question" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.55-87). Rather than functioning as a piece of seemingly abstract rumination removed from the plot, in *Mr. Robot* the speech is fully integrated into the action. The updated version, employing the computer rather than the book as the dominant metaphor for the human mind, is used by MR. ROBOT to persuade a hesitant Elliot to participate in the planned cyberattack on E Corp: "Tell me one thing, Elliot. Are you a one or a zero? That's the question you have to ask yourself. Are you a yes or a no? Are you going to act or not?"[10] In the bulk of *Hamlet*, the demand to take action exists only as the memory of the Ghost's words from the beginning of the play, and turns out to be nowhere near as strongly imprinted in the "book and volume" (1.4.103) of Hamlet's brain as the Prince initially proclaims. In *Mr. Robot*, by contrast, the murdered father MR. ROBOT is a constant, forceful, aggressive presence on the screen. In later episodes, it becomes clear that in *Mr. Robot* the 'ghost' can indeed not only demand action but act himself, taking over the protagonist's body against his will. *Mr. Robot* thus gives physical shape to what in *Hamlet* is mainly a mental and emotional wrestling with the Ghost's demands.

Further, in *Mr. Robot* the viewer is not only directly addressed, but *created*, and subsequently treated as a character, by the protagonist. The pilot episode begins with a black screen, over which we hear Elliot's voice in voice-over: "Hello friend. Hello, friend? That's lame. Maybe I should give you a name. But that's a slippery slope. You're only in my head. We have to remember that. Shit. It's actually happened. I'm talking to an imaginary person" (*Mr. Robot*, S01E01). This speech act echoes the meta-theatrical implications of the first line of *Hamlet*, "Who's there?" (1.1.1), which addresses an unknown presence on stage as much as the audience in the theatre (and simultaneously alludes to the way in which a beginner computer programmer traditionally announces her digital re-birth as an active agent in the world of computers, instructing the computer to print the line "hello world" to the screen). Yet it goes far beyond Shakespeare's tragedy in

[10] Elliot's answer that 'Life is not that binary' provides one of several examples of tongue-in-cheek literary criticism of its Shakespearean source code evident in *Mr. Robot*.

suggesting from the very start that nothing the audience will be experiencing in *Mr. Robot* will necessarily be congruent with objective reality, but will, like the viewer's very existence, always depend on Elliot's frequently unreliable perspective. This becomes fully evident in *Mr. Robot*'s version of the graveyard scene towards the end of the first season (S01E09). At the grave of Edward Alderson, we realize together with Elliot that MR. ROBOT, who appeared to be a real person up to that point, is merely a mental projection of Elliot's, based on an idealized version of his dead father: we and Elliot can see and hear MR. ROBOT, but the other characters cannot.[11] The audience therefore directly shares in Elliot's subjective experience by seeing and hearing what he sees and thinks – a radically skewed point of view which forces the viewer to share in Elliot's paranoia and dissociative mental states.

This leads to a reconfiguration of the meta-theatrical elements so integral to *Hamlet.* In Shakespeare's tragedy, the staging of the play within the play by professional actors, Hamlet's penchant for play-acting and the discussions of acting styles, genre conventions and gossip alluding to contemporary developments in London theatre serve to constantly remind the audience that what they are watching is a play, not reality, to momentarily suspend the suspension of disbelief – a suspension aided by the Elizabethan stage's anti-realistic staging conventions. Yet, at the same time, the fictional world of Hamlet's tragedy itself remains stubbornly stable, unmoved by the Prince's attempts at meta-theatrical subversion.

The televisual port intensifies the destabilizing effect by inverting these parameters. While *Mr. Robot* uses all the resources of a high-budget quality TV show to strive for a maximum of authenticity in its portrayal of hacker culture (Zetter 2016) and its positioning of the show in the cultural, economic and political reality of the New York City of 2015 (including, for example, the extensive use of manipulated news footage (Riesman 2016), this realism exists side by side with the show's radical subjectivism: the viewer constantly has to consider the possibility that *the entire story*, including the viewer's own role in it, might be just a figment of Elliot's imagination. This is particularly obvious in Season 2, where the viewer learns only in Episode 7 that Elliot had been in prison for the previous six episodes. The updated version puts the viewer at the protagonist's mercy to an unprecedented extent.

Still, this mode of directly sharing in the hero's subjective experience is already evident in the closet scene (3.4) of *Hamlet*. There, Hamlet and the audience, but not Gertrude, can see (and hear) the Ghost "in his nightgown" (3.4.99, stage direction, only in Q 1). Gertrude takes the fact that her son

[11] *Mr. Robot* is not completely consistent on this point, as there are many scenes in which Elliot is not present and which the audience still witnesses. The formula also gets more complicated as the show progresses beyond its first season, where it is the most stringently applied.

does, as she sees it, "with th'incorporal air... hold discourse" (3.4.114) as an indication that Hamlet is mad, providing source code for Darlene and Angela's reaction to seeing Elliot talking to the invisible MR. ROBOT at his father's grave. The possibilities explored in *Mr. Robot*'s hack of *Hamlet* suggest a reading of the closet scene which focuses on the various layers of access to Hamlet's mind implied by it: Shakespeare puts us directly into Hamlet's head, letting us share in the Prince's subjective perceptions, to the exclusion of the other character on stage. We can perceive the Ghost, not necessarily because it is really there, but rather because *that is what Hamlet perceives*. This raises the possibility that the Ghost in this scene, like MR. ROBOT in the hack, could be a product of the hero's imagination, implying that the Ghost's intervention to save Gertrude from her son's wrath might really be made by a dissociated part of Hamlet's own troubled mind. This in turn would lend an appropriate, ironic double edge to the Ghost's line, "Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" (3.4.110), which is usually taken to refer to Gertrude, that embodiment of alleged female "frailty" (1.2.146) in both Hamlet's and the Ghost's (cf. 5.1.41-58) estimation, but might now equally well point to the melancholy-stricken, Ghost-seeing Hamlet himself – enabling a reading of the hero's revulsion of women which permeates the play as a dissociated form of self-hatred. Pushing this line of interpretation further, we might then double back to the first act and ponder in how far the specific instructions to take revenge that Hamlet receives from the Ghost in 1.4 – a dialogue likewise seen and heard only by Hamlet and the audience – might actually originate in Hamlet's own "prophetic soul" (40). As *Mr. Robot* shows, this interpretation provides an intriguing premise for a hack of the play. One might object that it is not consistent with *Hamlet* as a whole, but then much of *Hamlet* itself is inconsistent – key aspects of the play's plot and themes remain ambiguous, the nature of the Ghost among them.

Along with leaving the question of the Ghost's origins, reality and intentions unclear (Greenblatt 2013, ch. 5), *Hamlet* does not definitively settle the question of whether it's hero's madness is real or mere pretense: Hamlet's announcement of the antic disposition in Act I and the histrionics he engages in in front of Ophelia, Polonius and others in the subsequent three acts stand unmitigated next to his declaration that "What I have done... was madness" (5.2.208-09) in Act V. *Mr. Robot*'s resolves this ambiguity. The crucial move in Sam Esmail's forking of *Hamlet*'s source code consists in making Elliot's madness the cause of MR. ROBOT's existence, and MR. ROBOT's existence the manifestation of Elliot's madness.

In line with its contemporary American setting, Elliot's 'madness' corresponds to a diagnosed clinical condition, "dissociative identity disorder" (S04E13), and is managed with drugs and psychotherapy. Ontologically speaking, the 'ghost' MR ROBOT is nothing more or less than the most

prominent symptom of this disorder; its traumatic origin, the "method to Elliot's madness" (S04E07) is definitively explained towards the end of the series as being sexual abuse by his real father when Elliot was a boy.

Still, as with the nature of *Mr. Robot*'s 'ghost', we can find Elliot's mode of madness prefigured, though not dominant, in *Hamlet.* The series manifests televisually, virtually word for word, the straightforward-sounding excuse which Hamlet offers to Laertes in Act V as to why he killed Polonius: "What I have done... I here proclaim was madness... If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away / And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, / Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it. / Who does it then? His madness. His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy." (5.2.208-17) If we substitute "Elliot" for "Hamlet" and "MR. ROBOT" for "madness", we have a remarkably accurate description of what happens in *Mr. Robot*. MR. ROBOT repeatedly takes over Elliot's body while Elliot is asleep or unconscious to do what the protagonist does not, first conducting the 5/9 hack against Elliot's intentions and subsequently trying to stop Elliot, at times violently, from reversing it. During Seasons 1 to 3, MR. ROBOT literally acts as Elliot's enemy.

Within the context of *Hamlet*, however, the Prince's apology to Laertes has seemed anything but convincing to many frustrated critics, who couldn't help but notice its incongruity with Hamlet's deliberate antics in the first four acts. Perhaps most notoriously, T.S. Eliot's pronouncement that *Hamlet* is "most certainly an artistic failure" (1921, 90) is made partly on the grounds that Shakespeare did not make a clear decision about the nature of his Prince's madness when hacking *his* source code, the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* (a lost play which Eliot attributes to Thomas Kyd), leaving Hamlet's mental state "less than madness and more than feigned" in Shakespeare's own version (1921, 93).

Intriguingly, even though *Mr. Robot* expunges the ambiguity surrounding its hero's madness, the series reproduces its source code's inconsistencies towards the end of its run. In the series finale, it is 'revealed' that whom we took to be Elliot throughout the series purportedly had all along been just another dissociated personality, the Mastermind, who had taken control of Elliot's body and (most of) his mind. In a scene taking place inside Elliot's mind, the Mastermind is characterized by Elliot's mental projection of his therapist Krista, with apparent authority, as "the personality created to carry Elliot's rage" who tried to "shelter" Elliot by manipulating his memories and trying to "take down all the evil that surrounded him in the real world", and therefore "formed fsociety" (S04E13). The show ends with the real Elliot, who had been trapped by the Mastermind in a simulated perfect world, finally waking up, seeing the 'real' Darlene instead of the 'imaginary' viewer he addresses in *Mr. Robot*'s very first scene. But this resolution contradicts everything that happens during the first three seasons of the show. There, it is *MR. ROBOT* who rages against the system and tries

to destroy it, while Elliot (Mastermind?) spends most of his time in frantic attempts to stop him. Just like *Hamlet* seems to forget about Hamlet's antic acting between acts I and IV in its concluding act, the finale of *Mr. Robot* seems to forget about the existence of MR. ROBOT in Seasons 1 to 3.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to suggest that reading *Mr. Robot* as a fork of *Hamlet* opens up a new way to think about this problem in both source code and hack, enabling a fresh take on the venerable problem of Hamlet's real or pretended madness, as well as on the respective inconsistencies of *Hamlet* and *Mr. Robot* as a whole. In an interview, creator Sam Esmail has stated that for him, plot consistency is not the most important consideration when it comes to writing a TV show because "you don't remember plot. You remember the characters" (Esmail 2017b). Accordingly, the main purpose of the storytelling in *Mr. Robot* is to gradually (and sometimes radically) change the viewer's perception of its protagonist through what Esmail has described as a series of reframings: "There is a linear story, but as we fill in the details of the past, the present starts to get reframed. So we have this circular logic to our storytelling" (2017a). This "circular logic" goes hand in hand with the complex serial format in which *Mr. Robot* is presented. Each episode simultaneously constitutes a narrative unit in itself, carries on the linear story, and reframes what came before. Because multi-season complex TV series are produced over a period of several years in a dynamic process which takes viewer feedback into account (Kelleter 2017, pp. 12-16), attempts to read such series as a singular, integrated whole, with both beginning and end firmly in view, inevitably fail to do them justice;[12] rather, complex TV series are meant to be appreciated in sequence, with earlier episodes slowly fading into the background of the viewer's memory so that later episodes are able to reframe earlier experiences to create new effects at the current moment of watching – even if those moments are to some extent inconsistent with earlier ones. As Vikram Murthi (2019, n.p.) has pointed out, the final twist in *Mr. Robot* "works less because it fits into the plot and more because it makes emotional sense."

What happens to the problem of Hamlet's madness if we take the hint from its fork *Mr. Robot* and read the play serially, treating character as more important than plot and the earlier acts as open to later reframings? Given the nature of *Hamlet* as a drama which would have originally been performed in a single afternoon, such a procedure might appear misguided. However, an argument can be made that it is encouraged by the structure of the Shakespearean source code itself.

[12] Of course, doing just this also constitutes part of complex TV's appeal through what Mittell terms "forensic fandom" (2015, p. 137). As Mittell points out, TV producers often get in trouble because the expectations of fans for logical coherence are almost impossible to fulfill over a TV show's multi-year run.

In a manner which is mirrored inversely by the role switch between Elliot and MR. ROBOT at the beginning of the final Season 4 of *Mr. Robot* (where MR. ROBOT begins to advocate restraint and also to communicate directly with the viewer, while Elliot isolates himself from the audience and behaves in an increasingly villainous fashion), both *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the character undergo a sudden, radical change in the last act. Following the graveyard scene in which Hamlet confronts both his childhood and his mortality in his conversation with the skull of his childhood friend "Yorick... the King's Jester" (5.1.167), Hamlet's previous mode of lamenting the state of the world and his own insufficiency in soliloquy, alternating with play-acting in and against the world around him, gives way to a serene acceptance of the ineluctability of fate: "If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.198-201). However, as in *Mr. Robot*, the apparent psychological plausibility of this shift is largely a wishful, ad-hoc construction of viewers and critics on the basis of an overall incoherent text: in the actual text of *Hamlet* the transition is *not* psychologically straightforward at all. On the contrary, as Margreta de Grazia has noted, instead of ushering in a new maturity, the confrontation with death actually gives rise to "the high point of his antic act" (1996, p. 151), namely Hamlet's spectacular leap into Ophelia's grave and subsequent fight with Laertes. The Prince's hyperbolical declarations of his love for Ophelia – he would "weep... fight... fast... eat a crocodile" (5.1.263-66) for her – grotesquely exaggerate what the audience already knows to be untrue. Yet in the very next scene (5.2), little more than ten lines after this absurd declamation, the mature Hamlet of the rest of the play suddenly emerges and declares that everything that went before had been madness – another move forked and amplified in *Mr. Robot*, where the introduction of the Mastermind personality in the last episode declares the Elliot of *all* previous episodes to have been a psychotic illusion.

The fight in the grave has frequently been ignored by post-Romantic Shakespeare critics who, in a seeming bid to make the development of the titular character appear more consistent and psychologically realistic than the text of *Hamlet* actually supports, opted to believe Hamlet's claim that he had really been mad. De Grazia takes this inconsistency as a reason to dismiss 'modern' readings of the play altogether (2003). Yet if we follow *Mr. Robot*'s clue, I would argue that the interpretative mistake she detects on the part of post-Coleridgian 'psychological' critics of the play itself makes perfect psychological sense: as in *Mr. Robot*, emotionally satisfying character development has been deemed more important than overall logical coherence. Inconsistencies have been overlooked or explained away in favor of embracing a Hamlet who (finally!) behaves as the protagonist of a revenge tragedy should.

All this might seem arbitrary, were it not for the fact that this approach is arguably followed by Hamlet himself when he declares his pretended madness to have been real. He says, after all: "What I have done... I here *proclaim* was madness" (5.2.207-10, my emphasis). Shakespeare thus has Hamlet unabashedly *reframe* his own actions as real instead of pretended madness, despite the blatant contradiction with the play's earlier acts. In the context of the current discussion, I would therefore like to suggest that Hamlet himself encourages us here to read his tragedy serially: not as an integrated whole whose parts have to make coherent sense when considered as a unit in the manner of New Criticism, but in sequence, scene by scene, act by act, permitting the reframing of earlier story events when the play and especially the characters demand it at a later point. Who, apart from a few experts, really remembers the plot of *Hamlet*? Yet who, conversely, does not remember the character?

4. Conclusion

Reading *Mr. Robot* as a hack of *Hamlet* throws new light on both 21st century television series and Elizabethan play. By focusing on one particular section of their set of complex interconnections, this article has sought to document how the thematic updates, in tandem with the technological innovations engendered by the porting of the Shakespearean source code to the televisual medium, tweak, modify and amplify key aspects of Shakespeare's characters, plot and themes to fork a new, contemporary work of art out of the early modern source code. Viewed from this angle, *Mr. Robot* emerges as a television series about hacking which is itself a hack, encompassing both the hacked Shakespearean source code and the theoretical metaphor for its own analysis.

In porting Hamlet's story to work in a 21st century medium and updating it to appeal to a contemporary audience, *Mr. Robot* takes advantage of what has long been perceived as a major bug in the Shakespearean source code, but what I would argue is really a feature. As the analysis has shown, it is precisely *Hamlet*'s manifold ambiguities and inconsistencies which account for the play's astonishing longevity and continuing relevance: the difficulties of the manipulated audience to know whether to sympathize with or despise Hamlet, the uncertain provenance of the Ghost and the fact that the question of the reality of the Prince's madness is left unresolved have become one of the primary engines of what Russel Samolsky, borrowing a concept from Jacques Derrida, has called the "programming machine" (2008, p. 34) of *Hamlet*, able to generate ever new meanings out of new ideas fed as input into the text.

Here as elsewhere, Hamlet can not only contribute to appreciating *Mr.*

Robot in a more substantial way: *Mr. Robot* can also be drawn on to arrive at a clearer understanding of *Hamlet*. Elliot's comment about software bugs equally applies to the source code of Shakespeare's tragedy: "The bug forces the software to adapt, evolving something new because of it. Work around it or work through it. No matter what, it changes, it becomes something new, the next version, the inevitable upgrade" (S01E03). This is what has happened, and continues to happen, with *Hamlet*: it is precisely the ambiguous, 'problematic' elements of the play's source code which have proved the most fertile basis for its unending stream of updates, ports and forks, including *Mr. Robot* itself. Indeed, over the centuries these hacks have added to the very nature of *Hamlet*. While the original work, a stage play to be seen and text to be read and interpreted, still provides the source code that anchors and identifies the phenomenon, *Hamlet* has gradually evolved into what Gwenllian Jones has described as the "transmedia fictions" as which complex television series function in the 21st century, namely "cosmologies to be entered, experienced and imaginatively interacted with" (2002, p. 84) – that is to say, to be hacked.

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