# INTRODUCTION: THE LUDIC OUTLAW: MEDIEVALISM, GAMES, SPORT, AND PLAY

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The legend of Robin Hood is inextricable from the history of games and gaming. An element of play—combative play—shades many recorded invocations of Robin Hood during the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English May games and related Whitsun ales.[1] At these celebrations, the outlaw was embodied by a hired hand, or by a favored citizen such as a churchwarden, who would don the green garb of the outlaw and attend parishioner competitions of skill and luck.[2] Especially at Whitsun ales, Robin would "steal" or collect money from the pockets of revelers; the funds usually facilitated the construction or restoration of a church building. In exchange for a donation, Robin would bestow a "livery" badge and proclaim the wearer a temporary member of his outlaw band. Honorary outlaws displayed their badges as signs of hyperlocal communal support, inspiring bonhomie among merrymakers and boosting parish morale.

Whitsun ales tended to focus on gathering funds that would benefit the inhabitants of one parish, and the presence of attendees from nearby parishes could at times spark a kind of parish rivalry.[3] As John Marshall writes, "Refusal to pay [Robin's livery fees] by a visitor might be met by a challenge […] Sporting contests between participants of the ales were a major attraction and may underlie the creation of the fifteenth-century Paston play *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngham*."[4] Whether Robin or his ersatz outlaws were victorious in challenges against outsiders was, however, immaterial, as long as the resolution of each challenge could mirror the "Robin

[1] Whitsuntide—the week after Whitsun, or Pentecost—was a week-long medieval holiday that was normally observed, like the May games, in the month of May. While May-game celebrations could coincide with Whitsun ales, the ales were primarily held whenever the local church needed to raise extra funds and, in most parishes, did not occur every year. The English Morris Dances, which also dovetailed with May-game celebrations, frequently featured Robin Hood, as well. See Lorraine Kochanske Stock's "Canonicity and 'Robin Hood': The Morris Dance and the Meaning of 'Lighter than Robin Hood' in the Prologue to Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*," in *Robin Hood and the Outlaw/ed Literary Canon*, ed. Lesley Coote and Alexander L. Kaufman (New York: Routledge, 2019), 109-131.

[2] The term "Robin Hood game" is sometimes used in scholarship to refer to festivities that featured the outlaw figure, but the word "game" in medieval and early modern contexts gestures toward not only competitions but also processions, plays, and dances. For a brief overview of Robin Hood's relationship to May games and Whitsun ales, see Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood: The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020), 56-60. Readers who would like an introductory overview of spring festivals in medieval England may wish to consult Ronald Hutton's chapters "May Games and Whitsun Ales" and "Morris and Marian" in *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 244-276.

[3] Though Whitsun ales were usually hyperlocal affairs, parishes did at times pool resources to host a regional ale that could supply better access to large quantities of food and drink. Even when a large regional ale was not taking place, it was customary to attend the small Whitsun ales of nearby villages/parishes. Multi-parish "ale-crawls" were popular. Ronald Hutton mentions one Sir Henry Willoughby who visited three separate ales in May 1526. See, for example, Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, 246.

[4] John Marshall, "Show or Tell? Priority and Interplay in the Early Robin Hood Play/Games and Poems," in *Telling Tales and Crafting Books: Essays in Honor of Thomas H. Ohlgren*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman, Shaun F. D. Hughes, and Dorsey Armstrong (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2016), 187. For the full standard edition of the Paston manuscript mentioned here, see *Robynhod and the Shryff off Notyngham* in *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson (Tempe: The Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 39-42.

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Hood meets his match" plot that is included in several of the early modern ballads. Even if Robin was bested, a combatant might be persuaded to join Robin's band and, in addition, expand and reaffirm the bonds of a body of local revelers. [5] The manuscript fragment containing an outline for the aforementioned Paston play, along with two other extant Robin Hood play/games, provides little in the way of stage directions, though all three dramas seem to culminate in some sort of staged combat between the outlaw and an opponent, thus manufacturing more festival contests in which a winner was not necessarily predetermined. Though we lack many details about these play/games, it is safe to assume that they, like other elements of May games and Whitsun ales, drew upon the ludic Robin Hood figure in ways that united locals under the banner of communal benefit.

Christine Richardson notes that the festivals at which the play/games would have been performed were steeped in carnivalesque symbolism insofar as they "remov[ed] the barriers between art and life, and present[ed] life itself, life seen as game, as the matter of representation."[6] Robin Hood's association with the idea of life as a (sometimes deadly) game is confirmed in Aberdeen's Maying practices, where Robin's carnival May King figure performs the role of martial leader, supervising mandatory archery practices and competitions for male citizens. If absent from the practices without cause, men were fined an extraordinary fee of 40 shillings. To miss these practices was to dishonor one's burgh.[7] Robin Hood's legend owes much to this loose application of "play" as activity that can reify ideals found in our shared fictions.

Unlike modern video games, which tend to build worlds for a player, the play/games and related events evoked abstract, ill-defined game worlds contingent on immediate local environments and participants' connotations with the outlaw in his many forms. This marriage of reality and play—as in the Aberdeen example above, in which real martial practice was in some ways "gamified"—has extended to the modern video games in which Robin features: though these games texture Robin's world for the player, they simultaneously recall the medieval outlaw's ludic functions as a figure who blurs the designation between competitive play and the potential for

[5] If a visitor from another parish refused Robin's livery, the Robin Hood actor may have relinquished immediate control for long-term gains. Marshall explains, "A real fight might […] result in injury that prevented the chosen Robin Hood from continuing his duties. If, however, Robin controls the fight and either concedes or sees it through to a draw, honor is satisfied, and the opponent, in game at least, becomes a member of the band and makes his livery donation." See Marshall, "Show or Tell?," 187. Similarly, Christine Richardson sees the popular "Robin Hood meets his match" plot as proof that Robin's (mis)rule is "labile: he can be challenged and overcome," but, at the same time, when "[t]he antagonist joins the band, he is included and incorporated into the system of Robin Hood's authority." See "The Figure of Robin Hood within the Carnival Tradition," *Records of Early English Drama* 22, no. 2 (1997), 19.

[6] Richardson, "The Figure of Robin Hood," 18. It should be noted that not all scholars agree on the carnivalesque nature of Robin Hood as the King of May. See Marshall, "'Comyth in Robyn Hode': Paying and Playing the Outlaw in Croscombe," in "Porci ante Margaritam: Essays in Honour of Meg Twycross," ed. Sarah Carpenter, Pamela King, and Peter Meredith, special issue, *Leeds Studies in English* 32 (2001): 345-68, esp. 346.

[7] See Keely Fisher, "'The Crying of ane Playe': Robin Hood and Maying in Sixteenth-Century Scotland," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 12 (1999), 19-33, 35-58. Fisher observes that, on top of a 40-shilling fine, truant archers would lose burgh privileges such as fishing rights; enforced participation fairly guaranteed that "Aberdeen's Robin Hood May parade in 1508 was […] a spectacular event, with all the burgh's men in a special green and yellow livery, equipped with bows, arrows, and archery braces," 25.

social change.[8] Like his medieval predecessor, the digital outlaw is "much more a character of ludic texts, of play-games and festival culture, than of writing."[9] Through digital representations of Robin Hood, players explore themes that delimit our lived social experiences, such as the subversion (and reinscription) of authority, status, and economic privilege. It is Robin Hood's perpetually playful nature, aligned with the idea of community, that has helped to preserve the outlaw as a mechanism through which everyday people can disparage authoritarian abuse, both in the medieval past and in the present, where he is more consistently a protector of the vulnerable. Robin's image has so consistently connoted competitive play throughout time that, just as in his appearance at medieval festivals, modern versions of Robin often need no more contextualization or backstory other than shared cultural associations with the outlaw and his greenwood.[10]

This special issue of *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* is concerned with the examination of a diachronic ludic Robin Hood: as a whole, this issue insists that games and gaming are salient (yet frequently overlooked) commentaries on contemporary social ills and how those who are marginalized can powerfully affect communal good. Because Robin's games—and the analyses they elicit—are diverse, no single definition of *game* perfectly maps onto every example mentioned in this issue. Nevertheless, of the many competing definitions of the term in game studies, Jesper Juul's widely accepted model fits most of the situations in which medieval and modern versions of the outlaw play.[11] For Juul, a classic game model is:

1. a rule-based formal system;
2. with variable and quantifiable outcomes;
3. where different outcomes are assigned different values;
4. where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;
5. the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;
6. and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.[12]

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[8] Jesper Juul argues that the inclusion of a complex fictional world in many video games is "part of the newness of video games," as the intricate worldbuilding which interacts with game rules distinguishes modern digital games from most traditional non-electronic games—such as chess, go, and backgammon—which largely ignore narrative frames. See Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 1. One might consider how the literary Robin of medieval and early modern ballads participates in ludic worldbuilding—as he often supplements the overarching fictional narrative with more fictions, fashioned from disguise, trickery, and wit—while setting "win conditions" for himself and challengers.

[9] Thomas Rowland, "'And Now Begins Our Game': Revitalizing the Ludic Robin Hood," in *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 175. Rowland points out that "[t]he videogame medium recovers a new way to experience Robin Hood in a way that is most analogous to the popular experience of Robin in the Middle Ages. […] For the most part, Robin Hood has been known to the popular reader through the many books, movies, and television programs of the outlaw, so it might come as a surprise to most to find out that there have been more videogames developed on Robin Hood than there have been movies and television adaptations," 176-77.

[10] The 2021 multiplayer action video game *Hood: Outlaws and Legends* proves just how little backstory is necessary for a game featuring Robin Hood: Robin isn't even named, though he is purportedly the main character. Though players eventually stitch together a barebones narrative concerning characters and locations in the game, this narrative seems unnecessary and subsumed by the gameplay itself. See *Hood: Outlaws and Legends* (Paris, France: Focus Home Interactive, 2021).

[11] Many thanks to game studies scholar Taylor Orgeron for her thoughts on various definitions of *game*.

[12] Juul, *Half-Real*, 6-7.

This last feature, regarding the variable negotiability of consequences, points to players' agency in choosing whether a game's results will have real-world impact. In other words, a game might be a sandbox in which players run simulations of consequences; likewise, game outcomes might immediately affect players' daily lives. This possible slippage between artificial and real makes Juul's model exceptionally useful, both for thinking about a ludic outlaw who is infamous for his use of the greenwood as a social sandbox and for pondering the ways in which participants in play/games and modern video games might use Robin's ethos to guide actions that impact reality. In his book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds,* Juul expands on how video games "modify and supplement" this classic game model; nevertheless, Juul's six-point definition sufficiently describes each game, whether encountered in literary or digital contexts, treated in the essays of this issue.[13]

The three essays in this special issue form a triptych that folds around the temporal space between an early literary Robin Hood and two examples of his modern video-game reincarnations. The theme of games, particularly their usefulness in investigating marginalized power, is the hinge that joins these reflections. In "Games of the Greenwood: Archery, Pluck-Buffet, and Violence in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*," Megan Woosley identifies a game of pluck-buffet as a commentary on the position of yeomen in relation to medieval social orders, as well as a mechanism that averts potential class revolt. The function of pluck-buffet in the *Geste* is, Woosley points out, unique in medieval literature. While most medieval romances presuppose an intrinsic connection among nobility, skill, and good character, the *Geste* complicates this connection by pitting Robin Hood, who is in this text a player of superior skill, against the disguised King, whose superior status does not guarantee him a win against the outlaw. Though Robin does lose to the King, which ultimately affirms the divine order and deflects the possibility of class war, Robin's winning potential makes the reader question whether this order need always be static. Woosley links Robin's status as a yeoman—an enigmatic new social distinction that could mean neither peasant nor noble, but something in between—to his winning potential in the fantastical greenwood. Though, she stresses, this is not revolutionary literature, for there does seem to be a place in outlaw tales in which late medieval English yeomen could explore their powerful potential in a rapidly changing social order.

Since, as Juul maintains, video games have intimately bound fictional worldbuilding and rule-based systems for the modern player, it is imperative that gaming scholars critique how players choose to transfer both fictional elements of game worlds and their rules to real-world applications.[14] Kevin Moberly and Brent Moberly's "What Wouldn't Robin Do?: The Hacker as Outlaw in *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood*" presents a critical review of the tensions associated with the "outlaw" ethics of hacker communities and gaming networks from the 1970s to the 1990s. The authors frame these tensions with an exploration of copyright anxieties that game designer Christy Marx integrates into the gameplay of her 1991 video game *Conquests of the Longbow*. Moberly and Moberly assert that Marx effectively rewrites Robin Hood's legendary criminality as something incongruous with modern hacking activities; in doing so, Marx deploys a fantastical version of medieval morality with the aim of discouraging digital crime. This

[13] Juul, *Half-Real*, 7.
[14] See footnote 8.

divorces Robin Hood from his traditional ethos and situates him as a champion of the video-game industry, though in collective consciousness, Robin is a figure whose ludic endeavors would work to mitigate the systemic abuses of an industry notorious for overworking its employees. The dissonance between outlaw ethics and corporate protection serves to highlight how firmly embedded in the modern psyche is Robin Hood's habit of "[doing] poor men much good."[15]

Kersti Francis employs Eric Hobsbawm's description of the noble robber to argue that the popular *Assassin's Creed* video-game series is heavily indebted to modern connotations of the medieval outlaw. "*Assassin's Creed: Nottingham*: The Medievalism of Ubisoft's Ludic Outlaws" traces echoes of Robin Hood's operations as a noble robber, in not only the games' semi-historical narratives and titular Creed, but also in numerous gameplay mechanics. Notwithstanding the notoriously gory missions of the games, these narratives and mechanics weave together to prioritize care for those oppressed by authoritarian systems. In making a case for Robin Hood's presence in a series that never explicitly names the outlaw, Francis encourages a broadening reconsideration of the prominence of the outlaw's place in cultural memory and the ludemes of digital medievalisms.

In sum, the articles in this special issue tacitly underscore the extent to which scholars of medieval studies, medievalism, and neomedievalism must recognize games and gaming as inseparable from historical, literary, and cultural considerations of the diachronic Robin Hood figure. Medieval and modern individuals alike have always been likely to encounter Robin as a ludic entity, and to date, there has been too little focus on the outlaw's role in play, particularly in situations where the consequences of play might be a reimagining of the status quo. The transformative potential of the outlaw to frustrate authority is, perhaps, the most enduring facet of Robin Hood's appeal—and this potential is never more apparent than when the outlaw draws his bow in sport.

[15] This refers to the last line of Wynkyn de Worde's edition of *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*: "For [Robin] was a good out lawe / And dyde pore men moch god." See *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* in *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson (Tempe: The Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 147.

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