

When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual

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Abstract

Games borrow ceaselessly from the past to constitute themselves. This locates the medium at the heart of our contemporary obsession with how to engage the past and the “real.” In tethering digital hyperreality to the horizon of history, myth, and ritual, games generate a disavowed and subjunctive engagement with a sense of “real enough.” They thus resemble Victor Turner’s liminoids: autotelic, bounded experiences of leisure that cultivate accepting yet playful attitudes against the “real enough” on offer. This commercialized bricolage is not dismissible as inauthentic simulacrum. Rather, such games demonstrate the ways in which new media are recalibrating our modes of engagement with the real. This article analyzes three key aspects of liminoid games: (1) techniques of reappropriation during production, (2) rules and expectations of engagement with the past and the “real” that games offer, and (3) emergent ways in which player communities, discourses, and productions recalibrate those politics of engagement.

Keywords

games, ritual, myth, history, memory, liminoid, paratext, emergent, interface, real, simulacrum

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Our relationship with the past is increasingly dominated by imaginative projection. Notions like “present past” (Huyssen, 2001) or “postmemory” (Hirsch, 2012) demonstrate how simulation has become constitutive of our understanding of memory. From museums to film to souvenirs, we engage in such social imagination through mediated and often commercialized modes of experience. Each form and its attendant culture of consumption generates, over time, normative modes of engagement with the past and the real, that is, different social configurations of memorialization. Computer and video games constitute one emerging frontier of this relationship. Games and digital media are increasingly significant, or even primary, modes of exposure to present pasts. It is no longer far-fetched to speak of individuals whose first and/or most prolonged exposure to the Thirty-Years’ War, tribal *rites de passage*, or Norse mythology is through games rather than books or grandparents. The medium is thus central to the ongoing question of how to engage the past and the real in the age of simulation and simulacra.

Games and play have often been noted for their ambiguous relationship to our felt senses of reality (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Juul, 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Extending this line of thought, this article focuses on one key way in which games make use of history, myth, and ritual: their invocation of a time *when life mattered*, a heroic and superlative past.

Today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula [. . .] it is into this void that the phantasms of a past history recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions—no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when at least there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake. (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 43–44)

Games’ reappropriation of the past is primarily oriented not around “accuracy,” but a pragmatic pillaging of historical, mythical, and ritual elements. These are then fractured and reconstituted according to games’ own technical, economic, and cultural imperatives. I argue that one key aspect of this reappropriation is the way games draw on the past as an intense and heroic time of when life seemed to matter. I do not ascribe, as Baudrillard does, a barren present bereft of such realness, nor does this necessarily demand a critical reading of games as simulacra unbounded. “When life mattered” nevertheless provides a point of resonance for our analysis. Here, the “past” becomes an intersection of a mythical function and a sense of the “real”—the latter not in the sense of historical and factual accuracy, but of feeling what is at hand is significant, intense, relevant, and, perhaps, even “authentic.” In other words, the unmooring of representation accompanies an experienced *effect* of a particular kind of realness. There is no claim here to any particular metaphysical definition of the “real.” Rather, what concerns us are the ways in which some sense, impression, or reminder, which approximates “realness,” becomes mobilized to

affect a certain intensity and significance. Žižek has described this as an “effect of the real”:

The passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real . . . [and] the “postmodern” passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real. (2002, pp. 9–10)

In this formulation, whether the object that produces the effect (such as the game) is “actually” Real or not is almost beside the point; as Žižek (2002, pp. 5–6, 19–21) argues, the Real can be something we dream of, a manufactured effect, which is effective precisely in its *difference* to lived, everyday reality. This effect is our object of analysis. I refer to it here as a sense of “real enough”: We are able to play *as if we believe this could have been real*. The desire for the real does not take the form of earnest angst, but a willingness to dive knowingly into video game spectacles of “when life mattered.”

This tethering of digital hyperreality to the idyllic tapestry of the past recalibrates our modes of engagement with the past and the real. It does so in terms of both the technological and industrial apparatus behind game production and the collective work of “real enough” consumption. This complex relationship between games, developers, players, and the emergent assemblage of gaming culture (Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006) is analyzed by hybridizing software studies’ discussion of *interface* and Victor Turner’s concept of the *liminoid* in ritual theory.¹ Tracing the reappropriation of history, myth, and ritual by games and their user-created paratexts, such as mods and Let’s Plays (LPs), this article reflects on the ways in which new media are inaugurating a phenomenology particular to their technological and industrial structures.

Certainly, games are not unique in this regard, and Baudrillard’s lament has a genealogy of its own. Taylor (1991, p. 4) has shown it to stretch back to de Tocqueville, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche—the disappearance of a “heroic dimension to life.” Meanwhile, Bolter and Grusin have charted the long history of remediation (1998, pp. 23, 56–57, 75, 99), and moral panics about the inaccurate sensationalizing of mass media stretch back as far as, well, the history of mass media itself. As games rise to cultural significance, however, they bring their own configuration of remediation to the table. They combine 20th-century media technologies’ obsession with *visual*, graphic reality with the rules-bound, participatory framework of play and ritual. Games are primarily experienced as trivial, commercialized leisure, but such characteristics did not stop the generic conventions and modes of seeing in media like kitsch and comic books permeating society at large. The specific ways in which we dream of the past through games become part of our generational search for the bygone real.

I begin by deploying Turner’s liminoids to conceptualize the fundamental ambiguity of the “real enough” in games; rules-bound yet emergently creative, bounded yet open ended, transparently artificial, yet able to rememorialize and reimagine the

past and the real. I argue that these liminoid games are best understood as neither texts nor narratives but as interfaces. *Interface* is understood here as a technosemiotic apparatus whose technical parameters, textual “backstories” and play rules all intersect in the game software’s self-presentation to the user’s experience. I then engage in close analysis of several recent, prominent game titles to return to the theme of “when life mattered,” which now becomes explicable as a specific mode or style of the “real enough.” I address the games’ reappropriation of the past at the level of content; development processes and principles; and emergent, user-created paratexts, arguing that the invocation of a mythic time when life mattered comes hand in hand with a postmodern attitude of real enough. I end by suggesting that what is at stake is not the “realness” of games, but a politics of engagement with the real writ large.

Liminoid Games

“It was not a picture of Frodo that Tolkien’s readers taped to the walls of their dorm rooms, it was a map. A map of a place that never was” (Martin, 2001, p. 3). Creating games is increasingly recognized as creating worlds. As the game industry has matured, its collective self-theorizing—whose focal points are found in workshops and trades like Game Developers Conference, Game Developer, and Gamasutra—has become increasingly conscious of this principle. Many mainstream games involve a composite of symbology, rules, technical mechanisms, and aesthetic style that furnishes a plausible and coherent space for player manipulation. As in other media industries, the rise of paratextual and intertextual marketing, product tie-ins, consumption habits, and branding is making world building an increasingly critical task for commercial success (Jenkins, 2006). One designs expansive gameworlds such that sequels and other tie-ins can be plugged into in a modular fashion. I suggest that these gameworlds constitute a form of Turner’s “liminoids.” Turner argues that premodern events such as calendric festivals and religious *rites de passage* were “liminal”—that is, exceptional spaces for the consolidation, experimentation, and/or transformation of social structure that were nevertheless built into the collective flow of “actual social life” (1969, pp. 94–95, 100–102). In contrast, modern liminoids are autonomous “realities” clearly demarcated from social structure and optionally entered into. Liminoids reify leisure as their primary *work*, and fulfill this function by producing reductive, bounded worlds. Finally, liminoids form a multiplicity; although each game is its own liminoid with a unique set of rules, they intertextually suspend into being a wider landscape of specific types of play and imagination (Turner, 1982, pp. 65, 70–74, 84–86).

The intersection of liminoids and games is not new, but relatively few studies have used the concept centrally in their analysis (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Mäyrä, 2008, 2011; Pearce, 2009).² Dovey and Kennedy’s oft-cited description speaks of political protests in *Everquest* as a case of the liminoid as “a site for the generation of alternative social orders [and] utopian imaginings” (2006, p.35). Giddings (2007,

pp. 401–402) has argued that the concept recuperates play and games from the fate of political and cultural irrelevance. Although this is a legitimate reading of Turner, I suggest that such straightforward transpositions of “real-life” concerns do not get into the nuances of the liminoid as a special, semiautonomous space. In the context of the real enough, I emphasize what I will later call the “porous fidelity” of liminoids; how they produce a sense of removal from normal spacetime—a world of its own—and yet rely on a wider backdrop of the real (here furnished by the reappropriated past) and thereby feed back into our cultural definition of “the real” writ large. The liminoid also provides connections to ritual theory and performance studies. Discussions in that context have emphasized how liminoids produce “aesthetic dramas” that can simulate and enact change in normal space (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007). Certainly, these liminoids are “not totally self-referential, but participants act as if [they] were, even when subtly accessing information sources beyond [them]” (Harviainen, 2012, p. 7). Games can be non-/“badly” representational simulacra of the past and still have an asymmetric and atmospheric impact on our experience of the “real.”

In short, I argue that liminoid games provide relatively self-contained, rules-bound spaces that allow for experimentation and simulation with varying degrees of fidelity to the regular social structure. This is not to say that games may “count” as rituals in the traditional sense. Walter Benjamin (1968) pointed out that it is not a question of whether new media are art, but how new media redefine the ontological status of “art” itself. A growing number of game theorists now assert the same (Abbott, 2010; Bogost, 2007, 2008; Hilgard, 2012). Adopting Benjamin’s logic, what “ritual” *is*, is not the central question, but what games have *become* through their partial adoption of ritual forms (Grimes, 2002, pp. 223–229). Games intersect and hybridize certain traditional dynamics of play, leisure, and ritual, even as the external conditions of their goals and messages are inflected by market imperatives.

Not every game is a liminoid game, or at least, not to the same extent. My description applies primarily to mainstream personal computer (PC) and console games with a modicum of storytelling and world-building efforts, exemplified by genres such as adventure, role-playing game (RPG), strategy, and simulation. Within this rubric, we also find great diversity. What liminoid games reappropriate from myth and history ranges from the grandiose to micro level, direct to indirect. *God of War* (2005–), one of the highest profile franchises of the late 2000s, directly draws upon the visual, formal, and narrative aspects of Greek mythology and ritual to construct its plot (the battle between Olympian Gods and the Titans), gameplay mechanics (magical abilities loosely based on the powers of Olympian Gods), and visual style. A scene in *The Witcher 2* (2011) provides a more subtle example, where shamanic and animist conventions in curative rituals are adopted to lend coherence and, perhaps, plausibility to the player’s actions as he or she gathers ingredients to break a magical curse. Reappropriation occurs along the lines of form and system as well as content (Gazzard & Peacock, 2011, pp. 501–503). Typical stages of *rite de passage*, as identified by van Gennep and others, often structure protagonists’ progression

within the liminoid (Lehrich, 2012). Persistent gameworlds like *World of Warcraft* (2004-) have adopted calendric rites and festivals to manage players' sense of time and space (Krzywinska, 2006, pp. 392–393). Overlaid on this is the periodicity of *technical* maintenance and the impact of unintended “bugs,” all of which concretize over time into formalized interruptions. All in all, what emerges through these reappropriations is neither a recreation of the past in game form nor a simple representation of them. Games themselves constitute a reflexive ritual of rituals or myth of myths. Their referential dependence on the “real” past effectively suspends the liminoid between a closed, self-referential symbology and an open, derivative one. This slippery remediation distinguishes games from traditional rituals (Kapferer, 2004, pp. 46–47). Games thus engender idiosyncratic modes of engagement. They furnish a rules-bound space in which players can performatively *act out* something of the referent. Although this “vicarious” experience may differ significantly from the “real” present or past, games' extensive reappropriation lends it an aesthetic effect of the real (Cossu, 2010, p. 43) that generates a powerful “lusory attitude”: “the willingness to accept the limitations of gameplay to make it more rewarding” (Suits in Harviainen, 2012, p. 3). In this way, liminoid games open up a horizon of the “real enough,” collapsing itself in with the collective “palimpsest of historical consciousness” (Sobchack in Kingsepp, 2007, p. 371) to furnish a disavowed yet committed mode of player engagement. Here, what matters is not so much the impossible question of what constitutes the “really” real, but the *act* of engagement. Nobody is completely fooled by the liminoid, but no matter, we play along.

Interface

The operative principles of liminoid games are neither reducible to symbols nor to narratives alone, but involve, what I call, *interfaces*. In game culture and industry, the term generally refers to the graphical user interface (GUI); buttons, menus, cursors, and other visible objects that mediate player input and in-game output. It is notable that despite a wealth of conventions and standards, many games build their own interface code and art assets—the building blocks of the liminoid and its operative parameters. Here, I use the term in a broader sense to include every aspect of the game which directly *interacts* with the user and thus *mediates* between the user and the underlying code. In contrast, the latter generally remains withdrawn from the experienced liminoid (Berry, 2011, p. 52; Kittler, 2008, p. 40). The interface thus includes technical settings, such as the control scheme; it is also where coded structures like “dialogue trees” or “quest flags”³ (see Wardrip-Fruin, 2009, pp. 58–68) constrain and direct ways in which the game is presented and user actions are recognized by the software. Games' individual senses of space—from two-dimensional “side-scrollers” of the 1980s to full three-dimensional environments (Wolf, 2001b)—and time—from looped cyclic time to the use of “real-world” time (Wolf, 2001a)—are also products of this interface mediation.

Interface, then, is where the logic and affordances of game code intersect with the logic and affordances of the game's aesthetic and symbolic content, and where that interaction is experienced by the user. It seeks to rigorously specify what is typically discussed within games culture and industry as "greater than the sum of its parts," the "fun factor," and so on (Garcin, 2011; Rose, 2008). Interfaces configure the boundaries of liminoid games on multiple levels. For instance, one might think of the boundaries of a fantasy continent that the player can traverse—the edges of the map dictated by logistical (in terms of production scope), technological (e.g. memory capacity), and aesthetic constraints. Even the fact that many computer games default to full-screen mode, concealing the operating system, is an act of boundary drawing that initially emerged out of technological constraints in the pre-Windows era (Wolf, 2003). Game interfaces often seek to *withdraw* from users' phenomenal attention, becoming an environment whose technological nature we subsequently forget (Berry, 2011, pp. 119–120). In doing so, they perpetuate an illusion of indexical execution, which engenders specific modes of engagement and subject positioning (Chun, 2004, pp. 27–28, 43–44). This broader view of games converges with recent theory concerning phenomenology in the age of robotics, computers, and new media interfaces. Thrift (2011) and others illustrate a mode of living that is persistently roaming and fractured, while Sherry Turkle's recent work has focused on the tethering of the self to devices in everyday life (2008, pp. 121–122; 2009, pp. 23–24, 32–33, 76–79). The relation games have with the past and the real is thus dependent on this boundary between code and interface, software, and the user.

Such analysis of interfaces is theoretically compatible with the concept of liminoid games and enables a close examination of games' relationship with history, myth, and ritual. The reappropriation of "when life mattered" occurs most commonly at the level of content. But an analysis of only this dimension would be confounded by the fact that different gamers approach that content very differently. Some ignore the plot and setting altogether, focusing on the competitive aspect, or ignore even that in favor of lackadaisical experimentation. Even for those who take this liminoid reality "seriously," content alone cannot explain what kind of "effect" it might have on the players—not without imputing on them an unrealistic degree of naivety. After all, consumption does not necessarily correlate to a level of "belief" in the liminoid. By relating formal and technological aspects of a game with the content, an interface approach addresses the ways in which players' attitudes to the past and the real are modulated across several different points of interaction/experience. Finally, this perspective corresponds with how games present themselves to the world, and how large portions of game industry and culture talk about games. Game scholarship has constantly struggled with the fundamental ambiguity in the notion of "play" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Myers, 2010); meanwhile, popularized soundbites like "interactivity" and "immersion" have tended to become stretched and vague, black-boxing the precise operation of games (see Wagner, 2012). I offer here not a skeleton key to all these problems, but at least a different kind of tool.

Below, I examine a range of mainstream, big-budget games for PC and home consoles to illustrate the “real enough” and its specific stylization as “when life mattered.” The sheer variety in game genres and demographics rejects any idea of a “representative sample” that could uniformly characterize gaming culture as a whole. I focus on games that are consumed and discussed by millions and would be regarded by most active gamer communities as important titles. Other studies (e.g., Bogost, 2007, 2011) have examined “serious games” to good effect, but these remain peripheral to large portions of the industry and “gaming culture,” and are less well suited to our question of how gaming is *already* opening up new imaginations of the “real enough.” As such, there is also merit in taking the most mainstream games “seriously.” Among these, I focus on role-playing and strategy genres—both are well known and lend themselves to analysis for their often extensive and explicit reappropriation of the past. Most of the cases from what console history calls the sixth and seventh generations (1999–2005 and 2005–2012), providing them with some continuity in design and consumption styles. In effect, the games and practices I discuss will be familiar to most avid gamers. I do consciously diverge from the recent focus on massively multiplayer online games like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006). This is in order to diversify our collective knowledge and to emphasize the enduring importance of gameworlds despite the celebration of emergent, player-generated content and meanings. Finally, my discussion is limited to computer and home consoles, which continue to be strongly relevant, both culturally and economically. Mobile and social media games introduce a very different phenomenology of gaming, and its impact on the game as interface extends outside the scope of this article. For now, this analysis sketches out the politics and products of reappropriation that are, if not representative, prevalent and influential in the field.

“Real Enough”

Brenda Laurel has argued that the goal of software design is not “realistic” behavior, but to ensure it performs according to artificial, reductive rules that enable intuitive use (Chun, 2011, p. 64). In the same vein, the primary objective of reappropriation of the past is to establish a *minimal* plausibility for invoking a sense of “when at least there was history.” The liminoid game’s performance of the “real” has a performative and illocutionary force, one which suspends the player in its own time and space (Rappaport, 1999, pp. 114–147, 180–181; Turner, 1969, pp. 96–97). *Skyrim* (2011) is an example of a particularly concerted effort at this suspension. The fifth title in Bethesda Softworks’ The Elder Scrolls series, the RPG drew upon in-series lore, Nordic mythology, and generic pseudo-medieval fantasy to construct a gameworld that sold over 10 million copies—the fourth best selling game of 2011 (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2012). *Skyrim* provides approximately 16 square miles of high fantasy landmass to explore. This landscape is populated with flora and fauna; homesteads are filled with domestic paraphernalia; and the

world is subject to weather patterns, day–night cycles, and its own lunar system. Nicknamed the “hiking simulator,” *Skyrim*’s prerelease marketing was explicitly focused on this idea of a full and coherent world; “all the little things that you’re seeing here, plants, micro-detail, big epic details like, that mountain, you can walk to the top of that mountain” (The Elder Scrolls V: *Skyrim* E3 Gameplay Demo, 2011). *Skyrim* exemplifies the self-sustaining, self-authorizing, and self-defining nature of liminoid games. They establish, naturalize, and leverage player expectations through not only their designed content but also their formal/technological apparatus and accompanying discourses (including promotional material). *Skyrim* had to find ways to *communicate* what kind of liminoid it is, how it should be approached, and what is possible in this world—an “interfacing” of the player that extends prior to and beyond the actual engagement with the software (Harviainen & Lieberoth, 2011, p. 11). That is, the player had to be prepared for initiation into this particular liminoid, so that they could develop an implicit understanding of what they should and should not expect with regard to its particular offering of “real enough.” This is especially necessary for games; as mentioned previously, they are “not formally consistent as a medium” in comparison to films or books, and require the mental and phenomenological recalibration of the player for each game (Ruggill & McAllister, 2011, p. 18).

The content—that is, symbology and aesthetics—is the most readily apparent aspect of this communicative strategy. *Skyrim* takes place in a snowy, Northernmost region of a larger gameworld that the series explores. This depiction draws on an undifferentiated mixture of the past that conflates Norse mythology, Viking/Scandinavian history; their popular adaptations in existing works like *The Lord of the Rings*; and anachronistic but aesthetically adjacent elements such as religious inquisitions and Braveheart-inspired “freedom fighters.” Predictably, the world features fur-laden, blonde-haired, and tough-talking warrior “Nords” sporting horned helmets and oversized axes. Standard genre conventions like dungeons and undead are stylized as barrows and *draugar*. Without some knowledge of the original mythico-historical material, it is often difficult to tell which elements are accurate to their “authentic” referent and which are not. Some decry this kind of setting as transparently kitsch, arguing that any uniqueness or complexity in Nordic folklore, politics, or social structure is lost in this undifferentiated aestheticization. Yet it is this very variation upon the same that allows players to quickly and intuitively understand what *Skyrim* is asking of them and what kinds of previous knowledge, both of games and the “real past,” should be transposed to it. The goal is to deliver a sense of wonder at the novelty of the liminoid, even as the player skillfully navigates it with a strange sense of familiarity (lest they quit in frustration). For liminoid games, “immersion” does not represent total absorption in the “reality” of the liminoid, but an oscillation between intertextual awareness and its suspension (see Kaveney in Krzywinska, 2006, pp. 383–384; Ruggill & McAllister, 2011, pp. 60–61). Again, the player is never required to believe, but to only act as if they believe *enough*. For some, this may mean suspending their awareness of the gameworld’s fabricated and

“inauthentic” elements; for others, it might be a more basic suspension of the liminoid nature of the gameworld, so that one temporarily pushes out of conscious reflection the fact that it is “just a game.” The general lesson is that the “imperfections” in liminoids often become occluded in favor of a temporary but effective sense that the gameworld invokes something larger, grander, and more “real” than a collection of pixels and arbitrary rules, a “time out of time” (Rappaport, 1999, pp. 180–181).

In addition to content, the formal and technological apparatuses configure the liminoid and player expectations in their own ways. For instance, certain standardized features act as “anchors for attention” (Harviainen & Lieberoth, 2011, p. 11). The crosshair in first-person shooters are obviously indispensable to actual gameplay, but also immediately communicate a set of expectations to the player. RPGs inherit terminology such as “Constitution” and “Armour Class” from pen and paper gaming in a decades-old tradition. For an avid gamer, they turn into familiar tools that they respond to in reflexive and affective ways. This might involve a player who instinctively snaps to the F9 hotkey to reload a game within half a second of a mistake, without waiting to see the fatal or inconvenient consequences. Many multiplayer gamers will be familiar with that half-conscious haze of rapidly refreshing, joining, quitting dozens of games in a server until they find the “right” one for their tastes—recalling, perhaps, the rapid-fire channel surfing of the television viewer. The gamer “naturally” suspends these intermissions and interruptions in gameplay to maintain the phenomenal sense of the liminoid. In the same spirit, *Skyrim*’s “minimalistic” GUI reduces health bars and other superimposed visual elements to a bare minimum. The screen is overlaid with radial blur and droplets of blood when the player is wounded to indicate disorientation and injury. These kinds of verbal and visual signification provide a sense of depth or fidelity, “fleshing out” the liminoid in ways that are critical to their capacity to generate plausible disavowal. Here it becomes clear that formal and technological apparatuses effect both what players make of what is shown and what they are made to themselves perform and learn. Consider the well-established convention of adapting historical *rites de passage*. In *Jedi Knight II* (2002), the player must undergo a lengthy trial of puzzles and challenges to earn the right to use a lightsaber. The process not only trains the player in the new skills now at their disposal but also performatively imbues them with a sense of growth. This, of course, is precisely the ways in which “real” rituals establish their own sense of transformative power (Rappaport, 1999, pp. 108–109, 115, 141). The player is thus enrolled into the ritualization of the liminoid. In the climactic stages of *Call of Duty* (2003), the player is instructed to enact the raising of the Soviet flag over the *Reichstag* as part of a mission. This does not at all help defeat the enemy and “win the game” according to normal rules of play, but is imposed as a special requirement. The *undifferentiated* reappropriation of the past is thereby reorganized (*redifferentiated*) into formal structures of participation.

This work of reappropriation does not occur in a vacuum. Its objective of the “real enough” is constrained and modulated by commercial and logistical

imperatives. The production culture of games is a key influence on liminoid production. Some developers are relatively explicit in theorizing what they do as world building. Chris Avellone, a celebrated game writer, explains how he turns to fiction and nonfiction literature, “location scouting,” and other active techniques of reappropriation:

As Scott Bennie, a designer I used to work with said [. . .] “read interesting history”. There are stories in history that are crazier and more amazing than any fantasy author could write [. . .] Whenever possible, traveling to the actual location or areas that feel like the location you’re designed and walk around and absorb the area . . . (personal communication, April 25, 2012)

But this is not the consensus and may not even be the norm. A great deal of game design and writing often begins from highly functional considerations: “How do we best entertain the greatest number of our players with the time and resources we have available?” (Saunders *in* Weller, 2008) This “functionalist” attitude has only increased with rising development costs. As part of a wider turn to “big data” and data monitoring over the last few years, gaming industries have also introduced “achievements” and other features that are used to collect data on player behavior through always online platforms. The game publishing industry combines this information with ever-growing marketing budgets and “collaboration” with journalists (the various techniques of pseudo-bribery are, by now, an open secret) to determine how player expectations might be catered to and manufactured. This represents the amplification of *preselection* mechanisms previously found in other cultural industries, such as fashion (Hirsch, 1972). In short, to the extent that liminoid games are themselves rituals, we now find that the production of our modern day rituals is circumscribed a priori by the logic of commerce and of data.

It is well understood, however, that such instrumentality cannot afford to parade itself in the open. The liminoid game naturalizes its own conditions of production in order to generate an *organic* sense of the “real enough.” For instance, many games are crafted to satisfy the player’s ego by giving the appearance of a genuine triumph, but care is taken to never reveal this fact explicitly. It is for this reason that developers and publishers increasingly conduct in-house audience research to measure exactly what is “just hard enough.” A contextual politics of reappropriation also emerges in controversies about what elements of the past a game can or should include. *Shogun 2: Total War* (2011), a best-selling strategy game set in Sengoku period, Japan, declined to tackle one of the most significant conflicts of the era—Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea. At the same time, developers Creative Assembly (United Kingdom) were happy to focus on ninjas and geisha, long ago aestheticized into acceptably uncontroversial forms in Western popular culture. In *The Witcher* (2007), CD Projekt RED’s decision to portray racially discriminated dwarf bankers in urban ghettos was judged anywhere from “mature and realistic” to pretentious and pontificating. The question was not only of political correctness

but also of whether steering so close to sensitive “real-life” themes enhanced or detracted from the liminoid game’s function of “real enough.”

Emergent Meanings and Mythic Time

Having discussed the production phase, we now turn to open-ended, emergent forms of meaning making in the consumption of liminoid games. This will take us back to the theme of “when life mattered,” which we are now in a position to understand as a particular mode of the “real enough.” If *real enough* describes a relatively generic effect of feeling sufficiently that one’s experience invokes something of the real, *when life mattered* expresses a more specific sentiment where the “past,” as an indiscriminate mixture of myth and history, forms a grand backdrop which lends the liminoid game a sense of an intense and superlative reality. Here, I describe this backdrop as an infinite plane of “mythic time.” Eliade (1954, pp. 34–37, 43–46) originally used the term to describe the collective memorialization of an extemporal “Once Upon A Time,” which is idealized and separated from the present flow of “real time.” Eliade describes how mythic time in older myths and rituals functioned not as an idyllic past to be dreamed about, but the “really real”; it was the lived present that was merely a profane shadow in its wake (p. 91–2). Here, mythic time describes a grand tapestry of the past, historical, or, otherwise, which is collectively imagined and thereby engenders the sense of “when life mattered.” The is the time when “life and death were at stake” that is mobilized to produce a situation where gamers *know* very well that the liminoid has little to do with the “real,” but nevertheless access through it some experience and sensation of the real enough. This section focuses on gamers’ practice of emergent meaning making to examine how these consumption styles help concretize and expand the plane of mythic time. In particular, I discuss two forms of game paratexts (material extraneous to the original content) created by users: mods and LPs.

The common belief among gamers and developers is that you never know what small detail, what unintended sequence of events, may trigger a truly memorable event or affective experience and that the success of games is often serendipitous. Despite an array of tightly scripted cutscenes and plot twists that were coded into the game by the developers, players of *Fallout 3* spoke fondly about more “spontaneous” moments, for instance, when “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire” would play on the in-game radio as they happened to be setting their enemies on fire. Developers are increasingly recognizing that:

It’s hard to compete with a story about how a player’s 3rd level Dwarven fighter survived a bum-rush of 20 orcs in a narrow corridor [. . .] and smashed through them Oldboy-style with only 2 hit points to spare [. . .] and it’s guaranteed to generate more passion from the player than perhaps your most tragic character with his heart-rending story. (Avellone, 2010)

This reflects both the *fidelity* of the liminoid, whose configuration of rules and game-world produces situations in which such achievements or coincidences feel like they matter—and its *porosity*—that is, its susceptibility to player manipulation and emergent states of affairs. These emergent meanings of game consumption thus oscillate between the “canon” content of the liminoid and procedurally generated experience on one hand, and the internal verisimilitude of the liminoid and its external referent on the other. Indeed, games that have focused on their liminoid nature tend to be well suited to a variety of player action and experience beyond the developers’ expectations. *Skyrim*’s effort to create coherent verisimilitude has made it popular with players who “role-play” in a more literal sense. Some spend their time collecting domestic objects from all over the gameworld to design an ideal medieval mansion or act out a wandering kleptomaniac that tails the peasantry for odds and ends. In this respect, *Ultima Online* (1997) remains a historical landmark in that respect. It had developed a “virtual ecology” where the dragons, goblins, and wolves that populate the fantasy world were programmed to pursue their own dietary needs (Developer Interview: Richard Garriott, 2011). Although the feature was never fully implemented, gamers still enjoyed the ability to cook dozens of food types (from “Autumn Dragonfish Pie” to “White Miso Soup”) or craft vases and statues, often for negligible instrumental benefit. Games prove surprisingly resilient liminoids in the face of emergent interaction styles. One reason is that bugs and other technical shortcomings in the apparatus do not necessarily endanger or collapse the liminoid’s verisimilitude. In some cases, as every game deploys its own technical rules for everything from the way trees sway in the wind to the way weapons “hit” objects in the world, it can be difficult to ascertain whether an element is a bug or simply “working as designed.” Players ignore some errors to the best of their ability and integrate others into the liminoid. Eager to enjoy the experience in imaginative ways, players often (though not always) rationalize the idiosyncracies of a game experience in synthetic ways to maintain the liminoid (Conway, 2009).

Paradox Interactive’s *Crusader Kings II* (2012) simulates the political and interpersonal vagaries of medieval aristocratic life, including excommunication, assassinations, and adultery. In this case, the general consensus in the fan community is that the “right way to play” is to set one’s own goals and actively narrativize one’s playing experience. The game presents its own criteria, of course, but these remain relatively rudimentary. Experienced players invite newcomers to develop their own “house rules” to actively manage their experience and enjoyment. These might involve “making up” personal goals of defending Christian Iberia from the Muslim factions or obsessively hunting down another dynasty’s scions by whatever means necessary. The player community actively reappropriates history and myth in its own ways for these goals, slipping between the verisimilitude of the game, the approximate idea of “real” past, and the community’s own accumulated interpretations and interests. The developer, Paradox Interactive, actively facilitated such emergent play by providing in-game tools like automatically generated family trees, player histories, and statistics on political, military, and economic progress. These

tools aid the synthetic work of the players, who have since created third-party tools to supplement them. The reappropriation of historical, mythical, and ritual elements provides a wealth of shared raw material that can facilitate the imaginative and emergent potential of liminoid games. It is these ingredients that player activity works upon for the extension of a collectively imagined mythic time.

This role of the player is most explicit in their production of paratexts. In its original context of literary interpretation, *paratext* denotes supplementary material that accompanies the main text of a published book, including front matter, cover art, and so forth. Games accrue an even wider variety of paratextual material, some of it user created. For instance, modding involves an external manipulation of the game's code and other technical assets by the players. Some mods apply specific changes, such as adjusting the color of the sky in *Skyrim*. Others rework the liminoid wholesale, perhaps transforming *Skyrim*'s "Nordic" tundras into swampland or presenting an entirely different plot. For games such as *Crusader Kings II* and *Shogun 2*, among the most popular are "realism" mods that might replace Anglicized nomenclature with the indigenous or rework the games' calculation of battle casualties to more accurately represent combat lethality in the Sengoku period (e.g., DaVinci, 2011; Europa Barbarorum, 2012). Although these mods generally accept that realism is ultimately a tool for the greater goal of entertainment, they will nevertheless go to great lengths for the sake of historical accuracy. This hybrid attitude exemplifies the practical ideal of "real enough." Mods represent a willingness to delve into the liminoid as a fabricated system and to disrupt the liminoid's original order. This is the case for both active modders and consumers of mods that construct their own customized bricolage of a liminoid.⁴ At the same time, the popular mantra "modders will fix it" expresses the notion that the original game can be flawed in accordance with its own standards and that players have an active role to play in the creation of a "proper" gameworld. Hence, we find in many modders and mod-users a desire to maintain, amplify, and even "correct" the liminoid's appropriation of the past. The very *extensional* nature of this work means that it is not reducible to the standards of historical accuracy alone or even to the authorial intentions of the game developers. Rather, it reflects the players' acquired understanding of and taste for the "real enough" these games provide. A "realism" mod thus aspires not to factual accuracy over all other concerns but to factual accuracy *in order to* more effectively tap into the grand tapestry of heroism—a history defined not by "what actually happened" but a place and time where "things of note happen."

Not all modding activities conform to this desire for when life mattered, of course. Mods can also actively disrupt the integrity of the liminoid. Some are lackadaisical, such as a host of "dancing" mods for *Skyrim* that turn the medieval world into a procession of disco peasantry; others are unashamedly deviant, including the ever-present nudity mod and cheat modifications to instantly access the game's various rewards. Here, the ritualized procession of action and consequence is broken down, and the imagined order of the liminoid is exposed as a farce. Players' attitudes to cheating range from a purist rejection of all forms of external aid to an

unapologetic belief that cheating is a legitimate form of enjoyment (see Consalvo, 2007, pp. 89–91). Clearly, not everyone cares about the liminoid. What is notable, however, is that players who do care often argue against the cheating of *others* on the basis that it disrupts their own experience. This occurs even in cases, such as single-player titles, where their own game outcomes have no relation whatsoever to that of the cheaters. The argument is that the *knowledge* of others' transgressions weakens their own liminoids' sense of the "real enough," exposing its fabricated nature. The players' influence as participants on the emergent meaning of games means that the liminoids' state as "real enough" relies on what Rappaport (1999, pp. 118–119, 122–123) described for ritual as *acceptance*, that is, the performed indication that all participants share the consensual frame of disavowed, "sufficient" imagination.

Liminoid games are thus not only sites of play *in* the liminoid, but *with* it—more akin to lucid dreaming than pure spectacle. They are characterized by a *porous fidelity*, wherein the mechanical rules of the gameworld are committed to, *even as* those rules are visibly identified as fabricated and adjustable (Huizinga, 1950, p. 22–23). Here, the reappropriation of history, myth, and ritual provides the quilting points in this diffuse, intertextual net of symbols and texts. Mythic time ensures not only the coherence of the liminoid experience but also its sense of intensity and significance. This role is demonstrably manifest in the fan practice of LPs. LPs elaborate on the timeless practice of talking about play and involve multimedia productions based on fans' own experience with a given game. A fan might record what is happening on the game as he or she plays and then overlay a "director's cut"-style commentary. Or he or she might collect screenshot images of key moments during play and post them online as a narrative. What makes LPs distinct from other player-produced narrative content is the way they combine creative license with a reliance on the liminoid's verisimilitude. For instance, where walkthroughs are oriented by the instrumental goal of completing mission objectives or creating optimally powerful characters, LPs are explicitly about telling new stories. Yet, unlike traditional fan fiction, which tends to be relatively independent as a text, many LPs are strongly reliant on the original liminoid's content, encouraging the player reader to comprehend it in tandem with their own experience of the game. LPs, therefore, exemplify the notion of porous fidelity and exteriorize the entanglement of creativity and canonicity latent in the consumption of liminoid games.

Many such LPs go beyond the simple act of retelling, undergoing a multimedia production stage where fans conjecturally expand on the gameworld in order to enrich the narrative of their personal experience. Some even mod the game to fit the storytelling needs of the LP. For instance, "Knud Knýtling," a popular LP based on the original *Crusader Kings*, integrated the game's procedurally generated events (such as the persistent adultery of Knud's wife) into a comic alternative history (Phargle, 2006). The game's tendency to randomly generate events about childbirth, assassination, adultery, and rivalry among its medieval characters was knitted together into a comedy of errors spanning four centuries of disaster. "Bastions,"

a more sombre piece, began with a 39-part historical fiction about the migration of the Saxons to Prussia *before* chronicling the actual game experience, where the author played the King of Prussia in the 14th century, all to logistically and stylistically (re-)integrate the liminoid into history (Mr. Capiatlist, 2010). This LP folded together “official” history, in-game events, and the writer’s own historical fiction. LPs develop their own performative and technical conventions on how they refer back to the liminoid, and how they knit the game experience together with external supplements such as historical paintings, quotations, anecdotes, and even period music. This typical “prosumer” activity is broadly framed by the liminoids presented in the game, but clearly reaches beyond it. In the same way mods “correct” and extend the liminoid according to an imagination of the past that is larger than the gameworld, LPs are undergirded by a collective sense of mythic time that provides intuitively felt guidelines for how to reach beyond the actual content of the game. Such paratexts work in tandem with liminoid games to depict a silhouette of the past as a grand, sprawling tapestry of events and characters that can never be exhaustively catalogued. It is this infinite horizon that enables us to play *as if we believe this could have been real*. The politics of reappropriation directly inflects the ways in which we dream of the past, and, in turn, of the real.

The Politics of Engagement

I sought to understand games’ reappropriation of the past—from history to myth and ritual—in terms of an intense real, *when life mattered*. Games were defined as *liminoids* in an effort to capture their bounded yet porous nature, and their ability to engender a *real enough* attitude; that “I know it is not real, but I will partake of it as if it is.” The actual components and operations of these liminoids were examined in terms of *interfaces*, a composite assemblage of content, form, and technological features that communicate and negotiate a multileveled relationship to this “real.” It examined (1) the techniques of reappropriation during production and its susceptibility to commercial and technical imperatives; (2) Liminoid games communicate rules of engagement not only with the game software, but the “real” past they reappropriate; (3) Emergent consumption practices recalibrate these politics of engagement, and themselves connect to the past and the real beyond game content, invoking a collectively imagined tapestry of “mythic time.”

Žižek (2002, pp. 5–6, 19–21) argued that we *dream of the real*, or rather, we long for a semblance that is more real than the lived itself. We thus require the image and spectacle to connect to a felt sense of the real. The obsessive production of “when life mattered” in liminoid games is not simply a case of vulgar kitsch, a juvenile want for escapism; after all, the formal principles of bricolage in kitsch is itself “authentic” and auratic in its own right (Binkley, 2000, pp. 145–146; Bolter, MacIntyre, Gandy, & Schweitzer, 2006, p. 33–34). It is exactly this kitsch reappropriation in games that hosts a radical aestheticization and stylization of the real as myth. Questions of this kind are beginning to be asked of new media technologies

as a whole. Turkle's (2011, pp. 8–9, 18, 151) recent work interrogates this satisfying and improvisatory oscillation between real, artifice, and “real enough” in the case of new media objects. She warns that this performativity of life is symptomatic of a collective inability to judge and navigate between the real and real enough (p. xxi–xxii). Not that this is unprecedented. The proliferation of spectacles in mid-late 19th-century Europe was a source of similar ruminations about the phenomenal and psychosocial relation to the real (Marvin, 1988; Schwartz, 1998). What emerges is a debate about games' *politics of engagement* with the real. What is at stake is not so much the *object* of our engagement (and the legitimacy of its status as “real” or not), but the *style of engagement itself* we are cultivating across various digital media. What normative or ideological stakes and lines of force do liminoid games, as products of technological and industrial imperatives, demarcate for their consumers? The progressive commercialization of modding (Kucklich, 2005) and other prosumer activities, the paratextual convergence of gameworld design, and game promotion—it is in such shifts that we find the emergence of new modes of reappropriation within the medium, which, in time, will have consequences beyond games culture. Liminoid games are emergent breeding grounds for contemporary modes of engagement with history, myth, and ritual, and, in turn, our collective imaginations and subjective relation to the real. To memorialize the past in digital form is to dream of the real, and, in doing so, rearticulate our own place relative to that ‘real’.

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Notes

1. This analysis thereby draws on the formal similarities between play and ritual. Huizinga (1950, p. 15, 18–19) hinted that play may well underlie ritual in general—that is, ritual as a formalized process of generating truth regimes (see Rappaport, 1999, pp. 27, 32–43). Furthermore, the commercial logic in games reflects the structuring function of “leisure” as work in capitalist society (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 79–83).
2. Also relevant is Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) “magic circle”—now something of a piñata for games scholars for its allegedly rigid and formalistic tendencies. Yet, as Zimmerman (2012) himself noted, the magic circle was intended to be a basic metaphor and not a full-fledged theory, leaving room for other ritual readings of the medium.

3. For instance, “quest flags” describe a conventional form of coding events in role-playing games, whereby the user navigates a series of discrete stages (e.g. “The girl has asked you to find her missing farmer” → “Save the farmer from the bandits” → “Escort the farmer to his daughter” → Quest Completed).
4. The last decade has seen the popularization of “modlists,” where players would offer a recommended constellation of mods for the newcomer. Sometimes, specific mods become “canonic” to the degree that many players cannot remember what the liminoid game was like without it.

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