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Empathy and Enfranchisement: Popular Histories

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This article considers the media phenomenon of 'history' over the past decade. In particular I am interested in the complex types of historical engagement available, and what these various models of 'experience' suggest for consumption and understanding of the past. Analysing re-enactment, 'reality' history TV and first-person shooter (FPS) computer games, I suggest that engagement with the discourse of 'history' in popular culture is a complicated and problematic issue. I further suggest that these models offer the professional academic historian a number of interesting methodological and epistemological paradigms. All three of the media I consider refuse to fit into specific, disciplined or institutionalised order. Their dynamism and levels of complexity are crucial to their consumption. Analysis of history-as-experience illustrates that it is a set of narratives divorced from an institutionalised framework, used in different and dissident ways by a variety of social groups. These uses interact with the notion of 'history' as an academic pursuit but also create a space between ontological and intellectual approaches to the past. On the one hand increased access and interrogation of historical narratives suggests an enfranchising of the population into history; on the other the factuality of history organises and disciplines.

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Over the past decade, 'history' has become a leisure activity as never before. 'History' as a brand or discourse pervades popular culture from Schama to Starkey to Tony Soprano's championing of the History Channel, through the massive popularity of local history and the internet-fuelled genealogy boom, via million-selling historical novels, television drama and a variety of

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films. Television and media treatment of the past is increasingly influential in a packaging of historical experience. The product of these media processes is, for all it oftentimes presents itself as 'accurate' or 'educational', a subjective and ideologically directed version of a constructed history. However, such cultural product widens access to historical appreciation, and it therefore is notable that the pedagogy, epistemology and methodology of such activities have not been particularly analysed by historians (Jordanova 2000; Champion 2003; Wilson 2003).

This article considers a number of ways that history is consumed and defined as cultural product, offering a necessarily brief overview of the variety of popular historical interaction and experience open to contemporary society and the epistemological issues these phenomena raise for us. A brief discussion of the longstanding activity of re-enactment provides the paradigmatic foundation for an exploration of how history works in two distinct media: television and computer games. Analysis of history-as-experience illustrates that it is a set of narratives divorced from an institutionalised framework, used in different and dissident ways by a variety of social groups. These uses interact with the notion of 'history' as an academic pursuit but also create a space between ontological and intellectual approaches to the past. On the one hand increased access and interrogation of historical narratives suggests an enfranchising of the population into history; on the other the factuality of history organises and disciplines. The ambivalence of much of what I am going to discuss here is striking, and, I argue, crucial—the ability of the user to engage with a number of behavioural paradigms or historical models simultaneously without seeming contradiction is what makes studying these phenomena fascinating and important.

Re-enactment and Empathy

What is the motivation for the re-enactor? Many societies do exist for the presentation of, for instance, the society of Jane Austen or early dance. Within the Sealed Knot, Britain's largest re-enactment society, there is a range of living history activities ranging from basketry to cookery via the renaissance art of war. Their journal, *Order of the Daye*, is a self-conscious knowledge base with articles on a range of historical subjects related to Sealed Knot activities. The pieces are often footnoted and provide bibliographies, and the purpose is to add further historical texture to the entire process. Yet it is combat re-enactment that is the most popular re-enactment activity; there are some 6,000 members of the Sealed Knot, mostly involved in staging battles. The fact that so many people choose to

spend their time re-enacting and performing combat—particularly (in the UK) the traumatic civil wars of the 17th century—rather than, say, scientific experiments—suggests a need to invoke a patriarchal positivist logocentric historical model, as well as a desire to reinvent the self as Subject (and Subject to a history that is flawlessly executed and narratively complete). War may be bloody and chaotic in reality, but re-enacted it enables the combatant safe progress through history to a wished-for and satisfactory conclusion.

British umbrella organisation the National Association of Re-enactment Societies emphasises the transformative quality of the process—'To take You out of the present and into the past!' (NARES 2005a). The individual engages in an escapist leisure pursuit, but one with an educational aspect: 'With this outlet from hum-drum life, the re-enactor has a unique freedom to roam the centuries—to explore the intricacies of our ancestors [*sic*] minds and habits. Thus, for the individual or the family, re-enactment allows a unique exploration of life, unconstrained by the present' (NARES 2005b). In this version of the past history is used as a space away from the present, an escape into the 'fact' of the past. It gives 'freedom', an 'unrestrained' experience of the past. However, this neoliberal ideal of leisure time is circumscribed through the appeal to verisimilitude. The need, for instance, of members of the Sealed Knot society to manifest their various allegiances by agreeing to join a *particular* regiment or order is a way of ordering a response to history, of turning it into a structured experience. The regiments are historically verifiable, but the regiments they join are 21st century simulations of these entities.

Re-enactment, crucially, has a performative educational purpose. The Sealed Knot's primary purpose is 'the performance of public re-enactments of Battles, Sieges and other events of the period with a view to educating the public and encouraging an interest in our heritage' (Sealed Knot 2005a). This rhetoric situates re-enactment within the portfolio of 'Living History' as an educative performance, an accurate and verifiable version of history. It is possible to place the phenomena in performance theory terms, arguing that the postmodern play involved in dressing as a Cavalier soldier might seem to undermine any fixed conception of 'historical' or 'social' identity. Yet equally an appeal to historical realism is inscribed in the process. The Sealed Knot warn that 'mixing seventeenth and twentieth century clothing styles is unacceptable when performing re-enactment events in front of any audience' (Sealed Knot 2005b). History is a role, but it is not particularly open to interrogation—the 'verifiability' issue makes history something with inflexible rules and specificities. The tyranny of historical actuality orders and disciplines this activity. The dynamic is between 'authenticity' of

representation and the factuality of the history being presented. There is a drive toward the importance of performance and education (and the two being combined) which rests on this guarantee of authenticity. At the same time, though, the re-enactors are performing and portraying historical figures (and therefore divorced from the ideological or material implications of their actions). So this is on the one hand a set of leisure activities with particular rules and on the other a serious, authentic performance that educates and delights.

History here also interacts with discourses of 'leisure' as something on the one hand useful (the educative aspect) but also something undertaken in non-work time (weekends, evenings). The re-enactor is teacher and hobbyist. They are familiar—they talk to you—but othered—they dress differently. The dynamic here between audience and participant is incredibly complex and fluid. Furthermore, the audience is generally on holiday or out of work bounds—and also outside of an institutional framework for their historical experience/education. Culture here is something out of institutional bounds, in some ways ordered but also part of a leisuretime activity.

Re-enactment, then, prefigures such historical media as reality television history and computer game first-person history in that it offers a range of *experience* within history and a complexity of consumption. It enfranchises the audience, whilst also subjecting them to a viewed history, history as a performance and story (and a story with particular narrative rules overseeing events). The audience's gaze empowers them (and their ability to walk or look away extends this) and gives them a certain interpretative authority. However, the re-enactor also takes on a power role in this relationship, as they have the authority of 'verifiable' truthful history on their side. Whilst one may walk away from a performance it still happens; furthermore, if you choose not to be educated, then you cannot engage with the discourse of humanist perfectibility and understanding that is implied in the entire process. If you are not interested in your heritage, then you disenfranchise yourself from your national story and identity. This humanist drive to understanding the nation through history is common in contemporary history teaching at all levels.

However, this national story is relatively monolithic. It seems to invest in a transcultural notion of shared history that ignores ethnic difference or cultural complication. Re-enactors generally tend to shy away from historical controversy and complication—although one might cite Clairséach Óir who re-enact the Irish War of Independence whilst other Irish groups re-enact World War I.[1] Another Irish group, O'Neill's

Company, are based in Carrickfergus Castle and re-enact the 1640s, again not an uncontroversial period. Ireland is perhaps a peculiar case; certainly Irish history is superficially more related to the political present. There are, though, also companies that simulate the American War in Vietnam. In general, however, re-enactment societies present themselves as non-political groups. Given this, though, the concept of the 'enemy' in these activities is interesting. On the one hand the enemy is foretold by history, on the other the enemy is part of your organisation—a truly recognisable other. Those joining the Sealed Knot choose to be a 'Roundhead' or a 'Cavalier' and their subsequent re-enacting identity is diffracted through this definition. The problematic notion of civil war—fighting a recognisable enemy other—is in some ways a virtue for re-enactors of the 1640s as it allows each side to perform victories and 'win' particular local battles without considering the bigger historical picture; the enemy is folded into the entire holistic 'experience'.

A number of societies take it upon themselves to actively portray the 'enemy'. The World War Axis Re-enactment Society (WARS) is an umbrella group of British organisations that portray German troops. For instance, one society portrays the 2nd SS aufklarungsabteilung ('reconnaissance') battalion of the 2nd SS Panzer division 'Das Reich'; another portrays the HG Flak Abt – Herman Göring Division. Society websites distance themselves from right-wing and racist politics; the first rule of WARS is 'never perform a Nazi salute, even as a joke' (WARS 2005). That said, the drive toward authenticity is still key: 'Members will not be accepted with long hair, pony tails and full beards. This is due to WARS trying to portray German soldiers of the period' (WARS 2005). Practitioners often speak German to each other, and their kit is as authentic as possible. The dynamic is between 'authenticity' of presentation and the factuality of the history being presented. Yet it is an authenticity compromised by ideology. By denying the practitioner the historical motivation of Nazism such re-enactment emphasises that this exercise is a game or role, and gets us no nearer to understanding the past; in fact, it enables an othering, a distancing of the past. What WARS acknowledges is that we can understand the fact of the past but not the motivation of the practitioners. This is scripted performance, the inhabiting of a 'role' rather than empathic recreation.

This presenting of knowledge is often as prescriptive and problematic as any taxonomising museum, yet is presented as 'experience' rather than 'education'. It is no longer scholarship but 'learning', an ongoing lifestyle decision. Yet re-enactment also offers enfranchisement, a complexity of historical interaction which is missing in much academic or 'official'

history. The complex set of discourses circulating within the re-enactment experience offers us interesting paradigms for thinking about other, newer forms of populist historical consumption. The interaction of re-enactors and their audiences with the past is a crucial paradigm for contemporary historical consumption. They present an 'authentic' inclusive or participatory history which lacks the messy 'edge' of events. MTV's *Jackass* recently interestingly undermined the whole process by introducing a dwarf dressed as a dragon to a medieval fayre, filming him being chased by a knight—they also have a strain of medieval combat japes, including BMX jousting and gladiatorial tennis, which suggests that the romance narratives that maddened Don Quixote are still ironically alive. Furthermore, the gleeful mindless violence of the *Jackass* approach (and the updating of conflict) rejects the coded, commodified version of the past to be found at medieval reconstruction sites or in the formalised revisiting of the past found at a Sealed Knot performance. It is random and violent, and this is both compelling and—at the risk of overanalysing them—more real (or less disciplined, in a Foucauldian sense). Reconstruction of the 'official' kind is interested in presenting a sanitised, closed version of warfare, of avoiding the unpresentability of war. Re-enactment of the past—discovery, presentation and categorisation of any text and narrative—is concerned with avoiding the fragmentary process of war and with demonstrating the ongoing value of rationality and completeness. Re-enactment history seems enfranchising but it also presents an inflexible positivism and an oppressive subjectification—wars are still won by the same people, and the good soldier is he who unquestioning obeys the orders of history. Combat is turned into narrative, a linear story of nationhood rather than a complex development.

Reality History

The perceived popularisation of history by television has been much criticised by academic historians of all hues. Those interested in the authenticity of historical truth have derided the perceived dumbing-down of historical experience, concentrating on errors and problems of interpretation. Richard J. Evans' is something of a typical view on this side of the argument: 'conveying history to a broad audience inevitably involves a degree of simplification or, in the case of Hollywood films, even downright distortion' (Evans 2002, p. 15). 'Truth' is too complex to be communicated to a wide audience; the process of communicating to a 'broad' audience itself *inevitably* simplifies the message. Implicit in this argument is a sense that real history should be left to the professionals.

The issue such historians have with popular media is that they don't have the complexity to present an accurate picture of the past, they are necessarily circumscribed, simplified and straightforward. There is an underlying need to control the production and interpretation of the past (he claims a kind of trickle down effect where popular history 'rests on the foundation of detailed research'; Evans 2002, p. 13). Crucially, for Evans the problem is that 'truth' is distorted through simplification (which seems counterintuitive in many ways).

At the other end of the methodological spectrum, the fears of theoretically minded historians are summed up in the comment of Tristram Hunt when he claims: 'The creation of coherent narratives is one of the lead virtues of television history' (Hunt 2004, p. 95). Hunt praises the achievement of, amongst others, Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* and Kenneth Clarke's *Civilisation*: 'Whether one agreed or not with the ideological agenda the programmes nonetheless constituted engaging, authored narratives which engrossed millions of viewers with their historic take' (Hunt 2004, p. 96). The problem, some historians might counter, is that the ability to agree (or not) with their ideological agenda was not an option for those millions of viewers, who were not presented with a multitude of viewpoints, but a *fait accompli* complete with authoritative guide. You are rarely invited to, for instance, question or interrogate what you are told. The passivity foisted upon the viewer in this instance demonstrates the problems innate in using television as an educative medium. Clarke's teleological positivistic series presented the march of civilisation as a movement from one cultural canonical achievement to another in a kind of join-the-dots history of western civilisation; Schama's series was more open to historical subjectivity but still presented a grand sweep version of history. These series present history as narrative, as progression, as progress. Crucial to Hunt's point is the notion that television can enhance historical understanding—in a factual and possibly experiential sense—but he is still defending history as a definable discipline with rules and edges, a story to be told. All that television does is allow greater understanding of this story, and a certain empathy from that further understanding.

If we consider Hunt's comment from a theoretical perspective, though, an interesting complication emerges. Evans bemoans the loss of authenticity, the simplification; Hunt celebrates the creation of coherent narrative. I wonder whether in worrying too much about Hunt's desire to create 'master' narratives I underestimate the day-to-day normality of living in postmodern society. History on television creates stories, and we are completely aware of this. Indeed, the use of computer modelling,

re-enactment and familiar montage techniques in popular history demonstrates that it is a piece of televisual product rather than an authoritative text. If the programme is a collage itself, then the versions of history that it is presenting may be seen as fundamentally unstable. Popular consumption of history highlights an ability to interact with a complex number of discourses. Once it is on television it is also nothing more than another text, another story, another programme within the scheduling multitude. This multiplicity is what is feared by Evans—history being turned into stories, into Schama's '*A' History of Britain*. The historian becomes mere storyteller rather than storymaker or author; the viewer is a passive consumer. On the other hand one might argue that the phenomenal popularity of history in the late 1990s was a desire for comforting metanarrative in a post-postmodern, multicultural, directionless, fragmented United Kingdom.

In this debate 'reality' history has played something of a marginalised role. Those most accused of 'popularising' historical presentation have often striven to disassociate themselves from such approaches; and those who have considered it haven't looked at it in depth. Given that as a programming tool it makes a clear contribution to the history profile of most TV channels, this distancing is interesting. Reality history is lowest common denominator television, re-enactment television inviting the viewer to identify with the ordinariness of the protagonist—and in many ways this clashes with the clean lines of Hunt's 'coherent narratives'; it certainly troubles the role of the academic or television historian as gatekeeper of cultural product and historical fact.

In an essay on 'Television and the trouble with history' Schama attempted to differentiate between what he terms 'historical reality television' and 'television history':

> [historical reality programmes] sometimes seem as through they are in that same enterprise [television history], but actually they're not, since our involvement with the characters depends on us knowing that they are really 'like us', or that, in so far as they can be made unlike us, the agency of that transformation is social and material—washing with lye, tying a corset.
>
> (Schama 2004, p. 29)

On this model 'historical reality television', or what I term 'reality history', is not history—and should be distanced from academised television narrative history. The only difference between us as viewers and those we see is 'social and material'. The experience of the audience is significantly and importantly different due to the involvement of people 'like us' in 'reality history'. A notion of ontological interaction should be divorced from television history.

In its place, Schama posits a mystical version of the 'poetics of television history' as a transformative experience that is grounded in a kind of alienation from history:

> Poetic reconstruction, if it is to work, needs to lose the characters, and by extension, us, who are watching them, entirely within their own world without any inkling of their return trip to the contemporary.
> (Schama 2004, p. 29)

This reads like transcendent literary criticism from the 1950s (and the escapist rhetoric of the NARES quoted above), a divorcing of visual experience from the lived world which somehow puts television history *outside* of history. It also ensures a model of history—or 'their own world'—as performance at a distance, something watched and apart from one's own experience. The protagonists are 'characters', and the whole thing plays into tropes of dramatic narrative. The model of the consumption of history here is passive, an audience observing rather than acting; for all Schama's celebration of the popularising potential of television for history he still wants to be the man in charge of telling us how things were.

Quite apart from the various political and consequential issues involved in Schama's formulation of the difference between 'reality' and 'television' history it seems that he misses the historiographical significance of 'reality' in contemporary consumption and transmission of history. Whilst criticising those who would denigrate populist television history he himself participates in the creation of a kind of hegemony that firmly positions the historian as the gatekeeper to the past. Schama's attempt to distance his practice from the hybrids of reality history suggests to me a certain anxiety about the role of the historian as master-of-narrative.

It seems to me that the fundamental significance of reality historical television is the fact that the people in it are 'like us' rather than idealised and crucially subjective reconstructions. Whilst all historical presentation is contingent and subjective, 'reality history' at least acknowledges this and pursues its enfranchising agenda refreshingly free of the totalising claims of 'authenticity' that lie behind Schama's claims. I want now to sketch out some ideas about how the involvement of 'ordinary' people in historical representation affects our received ideas of history.

The shift towards 'reality' TV enacts a shift in the role of the audience, enfranchising the viewer. This model relies upon reality TV figuring a movement within television from it being a medium of transmission to one of consultation, a crucial interactivity empowering the viewer. Where Reithian BBC models conceived of the educative power of television as a

transmitter of information, contemporary television experience is more fragmented and far more interested in participation. Interactivity is the key word of the digital TV revolution, for instance. A greater sense of choice, interaction and control are fundamental to the way that television channels now present themselves. The audience is increasingly empowered. Reality TV is the ultimate expression of this, as the ordinary person is made extraordinary, either through makeover or public vote. Reality TV suggests that anyone could become a *Pop Idol*—and millions tried—and suggests some kind of meritocratic system where the viewer is enfranchised, possibly part of the process and so therefore crucially invested in the conclusion.

There is some significant crossover between the world of 'reality' production and historical programme making. For instance, BBC's *Restoration*, now in its second series, is produced by Endemol, the company responsible for *Big Brother*. In the programme viewers vote for which historical building they feel should be saved. Celebrities endorse buildings and the 'winner' is granted a huge amount of money and a high profile. This kind of historical restitution presents the reclamation of heritage as the responsibility of the historically enfranchised individual rather than the community. Another example of this would be the recent *Great Britons* series, in which celebrities made extremely personal films about the various candidates in order to canvas votes in what was essentially an historical popularity contest. Yet this is not 'reality history' but more a crossover between reality formatting and historical discourses. The key difference between *Restoration* or *Great Britons* and much 'reality history' is the lack of human involvement within the process, and the interactive element of the programme. The phenomena I'm trying to pin down here is less interested in the competitive element (and thus the viewer interaction is less invasive).

Reality TV history in this sense is more about experience. For instance, BBC1 has recently finished off *Destination D-Day: The Raw Recruits* which trained a group of volunteers to simulate the Normandy landings. The diaries of these volunteers reflect the rhetoric of personal achievement which is crucial to these reconstruction programmes:

> Jamie Baker: Practising the beach raid today, it was easy to imagine we were going to the Normandy beaches on D-Day. Bullets would have ricocheted off the boats, people would have died before they even got ashore. It would have taken a lot of bottle to do. Focusing on this puts any personal problems I have into perspective. People can do amazing things. The impossible can be achieved.
>
> (BBC 2005a)

BBC1 has also produced in recent years *The Trench* which 'recreates the experience of the 10th Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment in the autumn of 1916 on the Western Front' (BBC 2005b). Volunteers from Hull and East Yorkshire spent 'two weeks in an authentically constructed trench system in northern France'. Quite why anyone would want to do this is beyond most people—in fact, the gap between reality TV and history was demonstrated when members of the Trench squad refused to do various authentic things in the name of entertainment (volunteers on *Destination D-Day* also refused to do certain activities). Famously, volunteers on *Surviving the Iron Age* didn't, refusing to carry on with the experiment in social archaeology. The inability to withstand the privations of the past put viewing figures through the roof. The space opened up between then and now is as interesting as the experiences of then—in fact, the notion of historical difference, or perhaps historical comparison, is crucial to the appeal.

Is this a return to historical notions of 'empathy'—the creation of a narrative history connecting factual evidence constructed through the re-enactment of consciousness? Collingwood argued for a sense of re-enactment to understand historical events, to impugn plausibility to actions. What appears to be happening in some ways in this reality history is the attempt to 'put yourself in their place' and the creation of a problematic empathy and experience. There is a gesture at empathic authenticity in the BBC programmes—the contestants in *The Trench* are drawn from the same geographical area, as if that should have any relevance to the activity given contemporary population migration. The volunteers were trained and then expected to perform certain duties and tasks. There were no winners, and the entire point of the show was about recreating circumstances and gaining some kind of anomalous experience. There was an attempted emphasis on 'connection' to history, and through this a gesture towards a more profound understanding of the experiences of the past. This kind of re-enactment presents history as experience, a set of ontological skills that can be learned and mimicked.

In 1999 Channel 4 screened *The 1900 House* and the follow up *The 1940s House* as a 'living experiment' in difference and social flexibility:

> A modern day family is transported back to 1900 to live for three months in a house restored to the exact specifications of the era. For three months they live without electricity, refrigeration, shampoo—all the comforts we take for granted.
>
> (Wall to Wall 2005)

These programmes are an extension of re-enactment in that they go past simply hobby into lifestyle—the participants have to live in a particular

way, to act in particular ways and that very experience (the difference between that experience and contemporary life) is the purpose of the 'experiment'. We emerge blinking into first-person history, history constructed through experience—but this experience is still othered as the audience is both involved (these people are just like you and I) and differentiated (they are doing something we can't recognise). The very point of the programme is the dissonance between their everyday contemporary normalness and the odd historical things they are being asked to do. There is no classic 'reality' element—no interactive poll or prize—so the audience (which was huge) is passive. They are required to recognise and to see the difference between now and then, contemporary and historical. *The 1940s House* moved the focus away from economic or technological definitions of historical difference to recognisable tropes of rationing, blackouts, and air-raids. Again, though, the emphasis was on historical difference and comparison: 'how do they wash their hair?'; 'how do they cope with such problems?'

Channel 4 followed these two big hits with *The Edwardian Country House*, an experiment in class that demonstrated the massive shift in social attitudes since 1905, and the strange social experiment that was *Regency House Party*. *The Edwardian Country House* put one family at the class mercy of another—one played a set of aristocrats, the other their servants. Again the focus was on difference—'what does a mangle do?'; 'why can't they just talk to each other?'—but with a social edge. New rules are learned, new cultural and social languages pointed out. Human interest, that staple of reality TV, is crucial. *Regency House Party* was a kind of *Fantasy Island* in a stately home, a cross between Jane Austen and *Blind Date*. Admirably building on the premise that sex, courtship and relationships are pretty much the same now as in the early 19th century, just with slightly different guidelines, the programme put six men and women together and watched what happened. The rules of engagement were more formal (although one of the 'lessons' learned along the way was that relationships between the sexes nowadays are as formalised and ritualised but in different ways). There are further programmes exploring education (*That'll Teach 'Em*) and the army (*Escape to the Legion*). In all these cases there is a pseudo-scientific basis ('how will people cope with the privations of the past?') which is melded to a soapy human interest element.

The programmes emphasise the normality and day-to-dayness of historical experience—they move away from Schama's narrative academic history—and enhance an understanding of a social view of bottom-up history consonant with post-1960s university historiography. The ability to question historical roles and inhabit a selection of personas enfranchises the

participant and by implication the audience. Reality history presents history as something ongoing, interactive and conflicting rather than fixed and monolithic. The interactive quality of these programmes suggests a move toward popularising the experience and understanding of national histories. Such programmes contrast clearly with programming such as Niall Ferguson's *Empire* series or Andrew Roberts' BBC2 series *Secrets of Leadership* which examined the 'leadership styles of four men who dramatically altered the course of history: Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, JF Kennedy and Martin Luther King' (BBC 2005c). Reality TV programmes emphasise a dynamic, interrogative history of lived experience and of everyday normality—the otherness of history is enacted through the lack of shampoo, rather than the temporal distance of events. Reality programming in this instance is empowering, enabling an engagement with historical narrative—and by extension national mythos—that is ordinary, day-to-day and accessible. The normal people are enfranchised into history. Yet in the end it is a social experiment in difference, and Marxist or leftist liberal histories emphasising the importance of the ordinary man is not the aim—these people don't change or influence history in the way that, say, Hitler did, but they reflect and live through it; History is projected upon them and they perform. Here is the absolute contradiction of the whole postmodern exercise—reality TV history demonstrates the flexibility of historical identities at the same time that it encourages a sense of historical otherness. History is at once crucially fragmented and simultaneously an othered discourse apart from our involvement, a game rather than an event. In contrast to other reality TV in which the ordinary person becomes the subject, reality history presents an elaborate drama of history with no particular objective. Reality history can challenge received ideas and imposed narratives of our past and heritage, but it replaces them with a muddle.

There is a crucial 'ordinary' involvement in history, and an audience investment in the story which is different from that of the audience for documentaries on *The History Channel* or Tristram Hunt's series on the civil war. History is presented as lived experience, as a set of familiar privations, as something not mythic and different but familiar in many ways, undergone by recognisable people. Reality history therefore presents us with a unique fissure in television history which has its roots in the re-enactment movement. It presents us with the interesting bits left in. History is lived experience, something messy and dirty and painful—not the airbrushed computer generated narrative sweep of *A History of Britain*. But it still presents history as a 'fixed' thing, as something inflexible. *The Edwardian Country House* presented history as something with rules that

could not be broken. The subject undergoing history is not permitted to dissent or interrogate their chosen role.

The other major type of reality television of the last decade has been the makeover.[2] Key to this experience is the notion of the guide, the leader and companion in the journey to moral (albeit individually tailored) revelation and transformation through consumption (Redden 2005). There are few historical makeover shows, and these in general relate to property—*Restoration* and *Period Property*. The key analogue between the makeover and historical television is the role of the expert/leader/historian in guiding us towards the finish line of personal achievement. In a far more subtle, classically humanist style than that of the makeover, television narrative history presents itself as entertaining education ('edutainment') that will lead to better understanding of oneself, one's nation, one's past—and so lead us to perfection of some kind. There is an existential self-realisation inscribed into the Reithian version of television history, just as there is in the 'experience'-led reality television shows. You better yourself, you garner and earn experience; in a neoliberal way these things make us better (for instance, Trinny and Susannah have recently published a book entitled *What You Wear Can Change Your Life*). Furthermore, the makeover transforms the individual through consumption; television history transforms the individual through experience. On the one hand narrative history presents a perfectibility of nation; on the other hand reality history presents a perfectibility of self through empathy.

First-Person Virtual History

I want now to turn to another model of historical experience—that enacted in contemporary computer games. Initially such games seem to offer a similar empowerment to that of reality history but I'm going to argue that this is ambivalent at best and illusory at worst. I want to consider how first-person shooters (FPS) or point-of-view games present historical experience. Such games have graduated from the first in the genre, *Battlezone* (1980), through early examples such as *Doom* (1993), *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and immensely successful franchises such as *GoldenEye* (1997), but the principles are largely the same. Such games dispense with an explicitly othered avatar body and instead use the screen as the viewpoint, in which the only piece of the player's virtual body visible is their weapon. The player is put in the position of performing a character whilst simultaneously seduced by point of view to identify bodily and wholly with this character. This can be disorientating in its scope—modern versions of these games enable you to have both a direction of movement control and a direction of

vision. I want to briefly consider the implications of point-of-view games in relation to some of the ideas about historical experientiality I have sketched out here already.

The games I'm particularly interested in are World War II FPS, in particular EA Games' *Medal of Honor* (1999). This suite of game was relatively unique when it was launched as it was a successful FPS which eschewed the fantasy element associated with the games, and instead relied on building an extremely believable background to the game.[3] The organisation and construction of the game invited the player to experience it as narrative. There have been several generations of *Medal of Honor*, ranging from secret resistance missions in France to the war in the Pacific. Based on missions undertaken during the Second World War, *Medal of Honor* puts the player in the position of the combat marine, and invites you to be part of a greater military framework: 'You don't play, you volunteer', goes the advertising hook. *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (2002), a recreation of the D-day landings, emphasises that this is 'your finest hour'. Claims for your experience range from 'Storm the beaches of Normandy' to 'Defeat the Nazi War Machine' (a second version invites you to 'Defeat the Japanese Empire'). The game builds a sense of linearity and historical direction through its landscape and gameplay. Further, the game is interested in selling a heroic individuality within the broader sweep of history, an existential neoliberal view of the soldier as freer than perhaps we might say they are: 'Can one man truly make a difference?' was the tag line for *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), with the assumption, of course, that they can.

The game's visuals rely heavily on the *verité* documentary style of *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*. Similarly the game deploys tropes from a number of war films, interacting virtually in the perpetuation of certain historical simulacra along the way. For the beach landings the game particularly deploys the 'shock' aspect of the handset—which will rumble and vibrate as 'you' come under bombardment—to create an experience of the landings which is disturbingly messy, loud and disorientating. 'You' are required to crouch, jump, run; 'your' ragged breathing is constantly heard, there is constant bombardment and shouted instructions, and 'you' are under fire for most of the game. The game is heavily organised, however, and involves the player achieving targets either militarily or geographical (by moving through levels and killing enemies) in a strictly ordered fashion. The player can't skip through things or decide not to fight. They are required to enact and progress the story or it won't happen; this history won't move onwards without the player satisfying certain criteria, eliminating the correct enemies and staying alive. The player is therefore granted agency of some description within what is not narrative history but

simulation—although simulation that mimics narrative history such as film and documentary. The game is not actually interactive, being more a set of levels with increasingly complicated imaginative landscape. The game is a simulation that invites an experience of interactivity and control, but which manages somehow to create a balanced dynamic between a passive experiential model and an illusion of control. It embodies the conflict within gaming studies between game as narrative and game as simulation—this is, in many ways, both. Essential to the experience of the game is this balance between enfranchisement and narrative. The illusion of control is key to playing—you are at once a powerful figure but at the same time an avatar that can easily be destroyed; you are at once a small cog in the military machine and at the same time crucially important to the war. The experience of history is at once othered and simultaneously enfranchising—the war takes place around and above you, but your experience of history is fragmented, ontological and particularised.

Behind the jock rhetoric of *Medal of Honor* is something very sophisticated, the creation of a virtual landscape that becomes increasingly complicated in one of the latest incarnations of the game, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2003). Its view of history is—to say the least—unreconstructed: you fight relatively faceless Japanese soldiers, and the bombing of Pearl Harbour is called the 'Day of Infamy'. This version emphasises the notion of the individual to the conflict: 'you must claw and scratch to turn the tide of the War in the Pacific [...] you begin an odyssey through the critical battles of the early parts of the Pacific Campaign' (EA Games 2003, p. 9). The game allows you to unlock movies, win medals, see news footage and receive letters from home. A dossier tells you the background story of those you meet (one of whom is your brother), and of yourself. Online play allows you to engage in increasingly complex situations. You can fight others online in 'deathmatches', too. But the free levels are not part of the wider game—and again, if you choose to play with others you must work as a team to reach the various targets. Unlike, for instance, strategy games in which you might plausibly play well enough to change the course of history, this kind of (much more popular) 'shoot 'em up' is relatively unsophisticated in its version of events. You may pursue what seems to be your own mission, to mould or construct your own history—but crucially the element of interaction or recreation is lost. Your point of view is never your own, even if it looks that way. However, the games still encourage a notion of the importance of the individual to the conflict, a recognition of the foot soldier.

Call of Duty (2003), a FPS that built on the market for *Medal of Honor*, emphasises further this recognition of the common soldier. The games'

rhetoric is more inclusive, and less individualistic than *Medal of Honor*. The tag line for the game is 'no one fights alone'. The emphasis is on teamwork and a developing sense of alliance: 'In the war that changed the world, no man won it alone. Through the chaos of battle, ordinary soldiers fought—and died—alongside one another' (*Call of Duty* 2005). The game is more interested in filmic experience than *Medal of Honor*, attempting to tread a fine balance between celebrating the ordinary soldier and making that soldier's version of the war a set of cinematic clichés. The war is consciously turned into film, at once othering history and simultaneously making it recognisable, part of a pattern or language of cinematic tropes: 'Experience the cinematic intensity of WWII's epic battles including D-Day, the Russian Charge at Stalingrad and the Battle for Berlin—through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from an alliance of countries who together helped shape the course of modern history' (*Call of Duty* 2005). The ordinary soldier can make a difference in this game, but their ability to do so is somehow compromised by the 'cinematic intensity'—the game becomes film, becomes a controllable genre. Indeed, the game went well beyond its forbears in linking with Hollywood—the screenwriting talents of Michael Schiffer, writer of *Crimson Tide* and *The Peacemaker*, were brought in 'to further immerse players into the game and capture the cinematic intensity of WWII [...] bringing a closer personal identification with the game's characters' (*Call of Duty* 2005). Yet this emotional heft is blended with claims to authenticity—the second instalment, *United Offensive*, brought in military advisors to help create 'authentic portrayal of squad tactics, formations and battle situations' (*Call of Duty* 2005).

This odd combination of historical and military 'authenticity' allied to Hollywood rhetoric is immediately clear in *Battlefield 1942* (2002). The WWII version is reliant on film, but it is in the *Battlefield Vietnam* (2004) chapter that the game takes things beyond pastiche into downright quotation—the opening sequence of helicopters is played out to the *Ride of the Valkyeries*, for instance. This game, whilst strategic, returns to a sense of individual input: 'the outcome of the battle depends on the choices you make' (*Call of Duty* 2005). The player is enfranchised but at the same time put into a recognisable chain of signifiers—performing a role (a similar cultural echo is found in *Vietcong: Purple Haze* (2004)). The 'freedom' allowed the player is compromised by the generic rules put into place before the game has even started. A new strategic FPS, *Brothers in Arms* (2005), promises 'unprecedented authenticity' and is based on a true story. The attention to detail is lavish: the game includes 'historically accurate and detailed battlefields, events and equipment recreated from Army Signal Corps photos, Aerial Reconnaissance Imagery and eyewitness accounts'

(*Brothers in Arms* 2005). This combination of authenticity and film suggests that the games are actively investing in a notion of 'narrative' and historical actuality, but the blending of 'factual' history and cinematic trope creates an interestingly blurred space of identity. The consumption of history is both academic and fictional. The experience of the game is both narrative and simulation, part of a fixed set of signifiers and part of the sweep of history. The player attains objectives and completes missions, but with a new emotional connection and intensity (*Brothers in Arms* portrays the squad leader as thinking of his men as his 'family', and the title consciously evokes *Band of Brothers*). You are engaging in re-enactment, simulation, a game and history all at the same time. The games expect a complexity of understanding and response from their players, and the ability to inhabit multiple identities and experiences when engaging within the gaming platform is taken for granted.

The online community is incredibly important to these games. At any one time around 2,000 players are engaging with *Battlefield 1942*, for instance. Gamers arrange themselves into regiments, communities, with the same fervour and attention to detail of the re-enactment community. Regiments practice weekly, talk tactics; there is a sense of involvement and ownership. Names include 'New World Order', 'The Honor Squad', 'Doom Soldiers', 'RuffNecks', 'Screaming Eagles'. These organisations are taken extremely seriously, and deploy tropes learned from the games and from the rhetoric of war films, again folding back into postmodern historical experience. The 'Screaming Eagles' website has this call to arms:

> I feel that with a clear goal in the heat of combat, a well balanced platoon has a much higher chance of survival and victory than an enemy that has greater numbers yet is disorganized. For these are our two most important goals, even outweighing mission tasks. Survival and Victory. They shall be ours.
>
> (Screaming Eagles 2005)

These communities also sustain the scholarly and mainstream academic element of the games—the *Brothers in Arms* website includes a 'historical forum' with links to museums, new books, maps, and information about weapons.

History in these games has become a masculine backdrop to a leisure activity (there are no female characters and the demographic of players is resolutely male). The games are in and of themselves, relating to little else. The skills you learn are untransferable; you can't even use them in other games often. There is nothing to be learned from this kind of history, no information to be gleaned; yet there is still an ontological kick to be got out

of it, an involvement in historical discourse. The games are keen to stress the legitimacy of their view of the past, emphasising the 'authenticity' of their weaponry and uniform whilst suggesting that the player uses the games to 'experience the powerful realities of war'. These games are not that far away from re-enactment in their regimented enfranchisement of the individual within their historical nexus.

Games can also provide a space for contested historical narratives to flourish. American Vietnam games are in many ways enacting this historical amnesia, effacing the complexities of the situation in order to present a heroic sweeping narrative teleology. Other American games, for instance, mimic the actions of Special Forces in Iraq (*Conflict: Desert Storm* I 2002 and II 2003, although they are not FPS).[4] *Conflict: Desert Storm* II casts you 'Against the Might of a Tyrant' in combat to deal with some 'Unfinished business' from the 1991 war (*Desert Storm* 2005). These games both shore up a sense of national identity (freedom fighting) and immediate resolution, whilst engaging in an Orientalist creation of the Middle East as an exotic, barbaric place. There are Hizbullah FPS games online, and Islamic Jihad games allowing you to act as a Palestinian freedom fighter (Galloway 2004).

The similarity in superficial structure between FPS games and reality history TV where arbitrary tasks are imposed upon the participant to propel the action is striking—and might suggest that reality history TV in some measure eschews narrative and embraces normative simulation in the same way that computer games do. In reality history TV the participants are our avatar, our recognisable but othered representative in a historical landscape that is at once familiar and simultaneously outside of our experience.

In FPS games the projected self is virtual, an unseen avatar allowing you to engage with and in some ways understand history. Indeed, the experience is as 'realistic' as possible. The player is invited to be part of history, a wittingly small part of a teleological move towards the present. Taking their lead, in some way, from the edutainment first-person history experience as presented in re-enactment and living history, history in gaming and television terms presents at once a complexity of historical experience and a tightly organised, inflexible model of history. In reality TV history the avatar is recognisably human, someone familiar—importantly, someone 'ordinary'. Games, too, allow a first-person investment in an ordered history. Both types of experience suggest an investment in dynamic models of history, an economy of historical desire drawn inexorably toward the tension between 'experience' and 'authenticity'. 'Play' and variously controlled models of interaction frame contemporary consumption of history as cultural product and economic experience.

Conclusion

Keith Jenkins wrote in *Rethinking History* that 'the past and history are different things' (Jenkins 2003, p. 7). This article has attempted to understand how this disjunction works in contemporary popular culture. The 'postmodern turn' of the 1980s and 1990s led to many professional historians attempting to 'defend' history. They strove to legitimate their own approach to the discipline, and emphasised that their ability to discern historical truth was not affected by the new theorists. Similarly, as we have seen, the 'popularising' of television history has seen a number of programmes derided for their inability to deal with complex 'truths'. In many ways it is a question of legitimation and access—you can't be an historian without certain skills, and these are hoarded and defended. The responses to on the one hand theory and on the other populism both suggest an anxiety about repositories of truth and knowledge and who controls them. The problem with populism is broadly the problem of postmodernism—it diverts us from the investigation and presentation of a 'truth' into a far murkier realm where 'pure' history interacts with all kinds of destabilising mediums. Populism and postmodernism both produce multitudes, a diversity of meaning. Postmodern theory derides one sole meaning; television produces innumerable, uncontrollable meanings—and spins off into the web, into publishing, into dedicated history channels.

Is the increased complex fragmentation of populist historical experience that I have sketched out here simply an unconscious acknowledgement of the diversity of understanding? Is it simply a symptom of postmodernity? Does 'narrative'/cinematic/filmic experience interact with our cultural/social/generic understandings in order to present simply one more historical experience-as-narrative, rendering history as another set of readymade identities or behaviours that we can consider? We recognise the tricks of the narrative, the story—and we aren't fooled. This is just another version of a story that conflicts with, for instance, our own experience of visiting Flanders, or the fact that we live near a Norman church. We know games aren't 'real' but it is important that they are 'authentic'. If, as Lyotard claims (1979), postmodernity is both incredulity to metanarratives and eclecticism of experience, haven't we got both? We know that *U-571* plays with history but we still go to see it; games simulate a history we'd rather not actually take part in; history on television is edutainment, faction, a film with a broad sweep and sophisticated Computer Generated Image (CGI) effects or a reality show with soapy elements, another TV genre to be flicked through, another television show tie-in book to buy. These experiences expect and demand a flexibility of interaction, a range of

epistemologies. Audiences can pick and choose their historians, their history channels, their historical styles and are sophisticated and enfranchised enough (through the web, libraries, games, interaction) to do so. They are sophisticated and pragmatic enough to understand that truthful 'History' doesn't exist, but that the past-as-experience is merely entertainment. The metanarrative that is one truthful history is exploded in multicultural multifaith capitalism—in a postmodern world, or rather in postmodernity, our experiences are already fractured, fragmented.

Is it the case with reality television and television history that society has simply ignored the worries of the academy? Audiences have simply circumvented the figurehead, the traditional historian and gone straight for the human interest, the experience, the social experiment—the law of the free market has led us to Schama, rather than AJP Taylor, to reality TV rather than the university. Audiences can choose what they hear, learn, understand, and this notion of choice is inscribed into the entire process of historical experience. No one considers that they are going to get the whole story; no one presumes to tell the whole story. Or is it simply abdicating our responsibility to not interrogate the globalised capitalist victory I'm writing of here? History is another set of currencies, a set of formulations. Yet, for instance, it is one discourse which is consciously used to frame arguments about staying out of Europe; it is a discourse used by the far right to celebrate a national identity steeped in empire and glory (Daddow 2004). This plurality of history leads to the excessive protecting of certain tribal or ethnic histories and the fetishisation of, for instance, working class white culture. David Irving can 'pervert' history to deny the Holocaust, and claim such postmodern theories as cover (although the law can intervene). Certainly the emergence of the three types of historical experience I have considered here has not been audited by professional historians, and this lack of engagement with populist media suggests a shirking of a wider public duty.

History has become commodity, something to be fetishised like anything else and something that is product. The fears of historians that populism erodes historical authenticity are the anxieties of a discipline seeing the blurring of its own definition into a set of postmodern performances and multiple discourses. Is this enfranchisement? Is the multiplicity of contemporary historical experience worth celebrating or do we lose the individual within the mass consciousness and therefore efface our own identity? History as an area of scholarly inquiry will have to respond to this 'virtual', hyperreal or performative turn as it did to the cultural or to the linguistic (which in many ways has foregrounded contemporary worries

about the malleability of history-as-text). Virtual history is already upon us with digitised archives, with CGI effects in documentary and games blurring the line between fact and fiction. History is interwoven with culture and therefore is experiencing the same complications as any discourse in its interface with the complex technologies of postmodernity. New media and new technologies diffuse our identities and our notions of self both in terms of our mediation of culture and our definition of the past. The media I have briefly considered here tell us much about ourselves and much about our relationship to, and valuing of, historical knowledge. They offer a series of populist versions of history that suggest a multiplicity of experience but also a deep sophistication in reading and responding to historical discourse. Popular histories do not represent the standardisation of history as unified product so much as they reflect the complexity of contemporary cultural interface.

Notes

[1] Re-enactment is a live political issue in Ireland, as witnessed by the annual re-enacting of the Battle of the Boyne. The problematic importance of the Boyne for a politicised sense of connection to the past is emphasised by Simon Schama at the conclusion of the *A History of Britain* episode 'Revolutions'.

[2] I owe my discussion of the 'moral' aspects of the makeover to Guy Redden.

[3] Famously, *Medal of Honor* is more 'authentic' than the German government is happy with due to the reproduction of swastikas in the gaming landscape. In Germany the swastika is only allowed to be reproduced in historical materials; this led to the game being placed on the index of youth endangering media in 2000.

[4] Indeed, Sony applied to copyright the phrase 'Shock and Awe' on the day the United States invaded Iraq (the application was subsequently withdrawn).

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