Why Reenact a War? The Living History of War
By: Sean Doyle.

Reenacting—sometimes called Living History— is a communal hobby. It is a shared experience that many people engage in. A reenacting group will have a historical era or period that they portray. War reenacting is a popular subgenre of reenacting. For many people reenacting is an escape to an exotic and fantastical past. Impressions— as reenactors call them— are the total sum, or the product of a historical costume and a historical persona. Reenactors fine tune their impressions to fit their setting and the role that they play in the reenactment. Reenacting is a global phenomenon, and reenactors the world over seek to recreate aspects of a diverse array of historical periods and events. From large reenactments of the U.S. Civil War where hundreds of Europeans convene in Germany to relitigate 19th century battles,[135] to reenactors in the US simulating the guerilla style fighting of the Soviet

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[135] Radio Free Europe. Posted 2019. *Rebel Yell: Europe's Biggest U.S. Civil War Reenactment*. YouTube video. Retrieved November 29, 2024.

Afghan War in the mountains of the American Southwest, people love reenacting combat and the military life the past.[136]

People reenact historical events for many reasons. Reenactors seek to recreate authentic experiences and materials, practice historical crafts and skills, and share in these activities with other members of their community. Reenacting is also a role-playing exercise and people enjoy escaping their own identities and lives to experiment with fictional personas to explore a historically themed Scenario. People chose to reenact war because of their personal interests in military history, a desire for action and adventure, or even just an enjoyment of camaraderie. All reenactors seek to combine the experience of wearing a costume and wielding props, with role-play and a sense imagined historical identity, to create a sense of hyper reality that feels like a connection to the past.

Historian Gergory Hall breaks reenactment into three different spheres: extension of the tourism industry, living historians, and exercisers of hyper reality.[137] The first segment of reenactors in the

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[136] Oxide. Posted 2023. Panjshir *Offensive.* YouTube video. Retrieved November 30, 2024.

[137] Hall, Gregory. 2016. "Selective Authenticity: Civil War Reenactors and Credible Reenactments." Journal of Historical Sociology 29, no. 3 : 413–436.

tourism industry are often tour guides, or reenactors who perform public demonstrations of historical materials, practices, and battles. These reenactors focus on performing to attract audiences, and Hall argues this leads them to adopt the most milquetoast unoffensive interpretation of history that they then present as an authentic experience. Secondly, living historians are also often tour guides but have their own added flavor of also being historical interpreters, they act as an educational supplement, a kind of interesting gimmick to intrigue audiences at museums and historic sights.[138] Hall specifies that these reenactors focus on using their impressions as a visual aid while instructing in the field of public history. The third category, the experiencers of hyper reality, are defined as those looking to engage in a historically themed hobby with little regard for the deeper historical aspects of reenacting.[139] This genre of reenactor is largely concerned with looking cool and playing war with friends more than recreating reality. History to them is what feels and looks bad-ass. It is more of a historically themed pastime than an attempt to engage with the past through reenactment in any meaningful way. But, all three types of

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid.

reenactors still seek to a common sense of immersion, to look the part, and to enjoy their hobby with others in their community. All three types of reenactors to some degree experience a mental shift to hyper reality while engaged in living history, the authentic feeling that they seek IS a feeling of hyper reality. The sense of immersion that reenactors often say they feel, is hyper reality as well.

Hall writes of authenticity and its core position in reenacting. He examines the complex nature in which reenactors derive the sense of authenticity that they strive to achieve. He writes, on a broad level, what makes these events important are what the reenactors focus on as authentic as well as its incorporation within the reenactment.[140] Hall describes how reenactors create a "reconstruction" of past events. The past cannot be fully and faithfully recreated by reenactors therefore there is a negotiation between many competing factors that lead to what reenactors regard as a more or less authentic experience.[141] Reenactors are looking for some degree of immersion, even if that immersion is imperfect.

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[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.

Historian Patrick McCarthy writes that, authenticity is outwardly based on iconographic representation—what a person wears and manipulates.[142] He refers to reenactors impressions as costuming, and that what reenactors strive for [is] an iconic identity between their activities and those of their time period.[143] There is an aesthetic immersion that reenactors create for themselves and others. In other words, there is a look and feel that they try to capture. There is an environment of historicity created through careful attention to detail when creating an iconographic representation of the past, that brings forth near instant subconscious recognition of thoughts and feelings of an era.[144] An American Civil War Union reenactor stated, "If you ever want to see a bunch of middle aged heterosexual dudes freak out about fabric, then go to a reenactment."[145] He is expressing the great attention and care that reenactors go to in order to perfect the iconographic image

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[142] McCarthy, Patrick. 2014. "'Living History' as the 'Real Thing': A Comparative Analysis of the Modern Mountain Man Rendezvous, Renaissance Fairs, and Civil War Reenactments." ETC: A Review of General Semantics 71, no. 2 : 106–23.

[143] Ibid

[144] Ibid.

[145] McCarthy, Patrick. 2014. "'Living History' as the 'Real Thing': A Comparative Analysis of the Modern Mountain Man Rendezvous, Renaissance Fairs, and Civil War Reenactments." ETC: A Review of General Semantics 71, no. 2 : 106–23.

of their impression, going so far as to debate the appropriate type of wool or cotton twill used in historical costuming.

The opposite of the authentic experience that reenactors are searching for is called farb. The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military defines the concept of farb as a derogatory a military reenactor who behaves in a 20th-century manner during reenactments.[146] In common parlance, a farb also refers to pieces of inauthentic or anachronistic props, costuming, language, or manners. A farb gives reenactors a phony, inauthentic feeling that detracts from the overall experience of the reenactment. Farbs clash with the iconography of the era and break the immersion and the illusion of participating in the past. The goal of the reenactor is to limit farbs and "inaccuracies" as much as is reasonable and feasible, to maximize immersion. Farbs distract from hyper reality, they snag on the mind and imagination of the reenactor, reminding them that they are locked in the present, unable to truly experience the past beyond a simulation.

Much of the culture in reenactment is centered around the material culture of the past. In many ways it is this material culture that is the most reproducible aspect of the past. The thoughts and feelings of

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[146] Oxford University Press. 2002. "Farb." In Oxford Reference.

the people of the past can be studied and interpreted but cannot be recreated the same way a pair of boots can be crafted in a faithful reproduction. The authenticity of material culture itself is also a negotiation. Reenactors must choose whether reproduction materials or only original materials are adequate.[147] The further in the distant past a reenactment event is set, the rarer and more historically important the artifacts of that time become. Material elements used in historical reenactments are in nearly all instances divorced from the cult of physical authenticity that predominates in museums; although many serious reenactors may own an actual rifle, saber, or uniform dating to the civil war era, they will hardly ever use these artifacts during battle reenactments.[148] Therefore great care and attention is placed into recreation of artifacts, in an attempt to replicate the functionality of the original examples. A potent replicated object catalyzes a statement of divided selfhood differentiating the true inner self from the performed role.[149] The act of donning the costume of the historical impression,

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[147] Hall, Gregory. 2016. "Selective Authenticity: Civil War Reenactors and Credible Reenactments." Journal of Historical Sociology 29, no. 3: 413–436.

[148] Auslander, Mark. 2013. "Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic 'Living History' Reenactments." Signs and Society 1, no. 1.

[149] Ibid.

creates a separation between the reenactor and the person that they are portraying.[150] However, some people find it easier to make the mental jump to hyper reality through a change in setting and physical tangible change from any of the materials ubiquitous in the present era.

Reproductions and recreations are a vector of arts and crafts. In a short video titled, "Turning a rusty M1 helmet into a WWII US Navy Beach Battalion helmet for reenacting!", YouTuber World War Wisdom gives a helpful tutorial on how to repaint an old helmet for an impression of American Naval Landing Battalion sailor from WWII.[151] He shows other reenactors some helpful tips on what correct colors of paint to select, how to get a clean line around the brim, and how to add just a bit of wear and tear, for that well used look. World War Wisdom asserts that small handmade alterations and details, adds a depth and a sense of authenticity to the iconography of the impression. Donovan Gbric writes, for the blog of his Soviet Reenactment group, a comprehensive guide to distressing a weathering their uniform. He displays original World War II photos as examples and describes

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[150] Ibid.

[151] World War Wisdom. Posted 2023. *Turning a Rusty M1 Helmet into a WWII US Navy Beach Battalion Helmet for Reenacting!.* YouTube video. Retrieved November 29, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHybd-FCBhw.

different ways to match the look and get that iconographic aesthetic of a soldier on the front lines (2024). These kinds of artistic, craft details are key to recreating the iconography of the past setting the makes a mental state of hyper reality far easier to achieve.

Reenactors often create imagined personas through which they imagine themselves living through these past events.[152] Not physically in the past but mentally, as they seek to find some sort of "historical" experience. Reenactors all engage in roleplay to some degree. Within the simulation of the reenactment, living historians attempt to react to the scenario before them. Sociologists Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust discuss the social interactions and liminal thinking of roleplay and imagined identities.[153] Persona's are fashioned in the liminal boundaries between interaction with other players during the course of the game, they continue, this liminal condition is generic to all [role-playing games] and obligates participants to actively negotiate distinctions between persona, player and person.[154] Role-players create an alternate

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[152] Hall, Gregory. 2016. "Selective Authenticity: Civil War Reenactors and Credible Reenactments." Journal of Historical Sociology 29, no. 3: 413–436.

[153] Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. 2004. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." Symbolic Interaction 27, no. 3: 333–56.

[154] Ibid.

persona that is both an extension of their self, and a separate identity that they use to navigate the historical simulation and interact with other reenactors.[155] There is an understanding among many reenactors that they cannot truly reproduce the mind space of someone like a Union Soldier in the US Civil War on campaign,[156] and reenacting as a role playing hobby is instead commonly viewed as a form of leisure.[157] Crucially the structure of the reenactment, is segregated from the ordinary monotony of everyday life.[158] A Radio Free Europe documentary highlights a middle aged European working in the insurance industry, who reenacts as a Union Officer of the American Civil war. He is shown commanding troops in the field, marching a head of his men, with his drawn saber in hand, a far cry from cubicles and fax machines.[159] The past is an exotic place, where things are

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[155] Ibid.

[156] Braeder, A., K. Esmark, T. Kruse, C. Nielses, and A. Warring. 2017."Doing Pasts: Authenticity from the Reenactors' Perspective." Rethinking History 21, no. 2: 171–92.

[157] Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. 2004. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." Symbolic Interaction 27, no. 3: 333–56.

[158] Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. 2004. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." Symbolic Interaction 27, no. 3: 333–56.

[159] Radio Free Europe. Posted 2019. *Rebel Yell: Europe's Biggest U.S. Civil War Reenactment*. YouTube video. Retrieved November 29, 2024.

different, and people are free to imagine themselves in roles and situations that are alien to their real lives.

Historian and reenactor Joyce Thayer writes of how she creates what she calls a composite character, in this case a Kansas woman who disguised herself as a man and fought in the US Civil War. She writes, in general composite characters . . . represent groups of ordinary people who did not individually leave enough primary sources from which to fashion an interesting narrative.[160] She explains how there were only a small few Kansas women known to have participated in the war as combatants, but that she combined the known experiences of other women disguised on the front lines, and the recorded experiences of other common front-line experiences of men in the Civil War.[161] "I've portrayed common soldiers from both sides, as well as a few officers. Now I look for roles that challenge and broaden my understanding of the period," says an American Civil War Reenactor.[162] He expresses his desire to contextualize the war through his impression, to experience an approximation of the war for himself. This gives some room for an

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[160] Thierer, Joyce M. 2010. Telling History: *A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Pearson, Jason. 2008. "Hello, I'm a Civil War Reenactor!" VICE.

authorial self-insert, some space for the individual reenactor to put a version of themselves into a historical scenario. Waskul and Lust would concur, writing that role-players often find it difficult to play a . . . persona that is entirely fictional.[163]

In a VICE TV documentary on two civil war reenactors, two Confederate reenactors assert that the American Civil War was not about slavery, and that slavery was not a cruel institution.[164] Historians of Black History like Carol Anderson would dispute both these assertions, countering that the South succeeded to preserve the institution of Slavery and that American Chattel slavery was an institution of unparalleled cruelty and violent oppression of enslaved African peoples. With such a great emphasis on the iconography and accuracy of their visual impression, fundamental aspects of history like the causes of the American Civil War seem to often fall through the cracks. These types of role-playing farbs should also break the immersion of reenactors, and this issue is at the core of much of the criticism of reenactors. These are the sort of perfect examples of the

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[163] Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. 2004. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." Symbolic Interaction 27, no. 3: 333–56.

[164] VICE TV. Posted 2016. The Civil War Reenactment: *VICE DOES AMERICA (Clip)*. YouTube video. Retrieved December 5, 2024.

reenactor experiencing hyper reality that the historian Hall was writing about. They use their authentic iconography to legitimize a form of personal, internalized propaganda, that reinforces their own beliefs about the historical figures that they feel sympathetic for. Their in-period personas reflect their personal views on the politics of the war that they reenact and reinforce their connection to their idealized Confederate past through the hyper reality of reenactment.

War is dramatic, reenacting battles provides an opportunity for action, beyond what one finds in daily life. A reenactor of the American Revolution explains his decision to portray a British soldier saying, "generally speaking at these [reenactments], we are always the aggressors, he continues, we get to roll in and we get to knock down fences, we get to smash through fences, storm redoubts, we get to burn stuff on the odd occasion."[165] War reenactments simply provide an even greater escape from daily modern life. Where non-war reenactors largely engage in the same daily tasks as they in their real personal lives (just with archaic tools and techniques), war reenactors get to indulge in some friendly violence and mutual combat, albeit without as much

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[165] Chris the Redcoat. Posted 2020. *"Why British?" A Redcoat Reenactor's Most Frequently Asked Question.* YouTube video. Retrieved November 30, 2024.

personal danger. The distance from acceptable everyday conduct increases the sense of hyper reality when playing out violence through reenactment.

Many reenactors are veterans and actively serving military personnel who enjoy mock battles. In a VICE documentary about Vietnam War reenactors, a retired US Army soldier explains that he missed the camaraderie of the military, and that he enjoyed the connections he had made in his reenactment community.[166] Vinh Nguyen was a Veteran of the Vietnam war and fought for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN),[167] the military of the US collaborationist government in South Vietnam. He became a reenactor of the Vietnam war in South Carolina, where he portrays both American Military forces and ARVN forces. In an interview he expresses that his desire to reenact reminds him of the sacrifices made by anti-communist Vietnamese, and that he views reenacting as a way to continue the ideological battle against communism in Vietnam.[168] When I put up that

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[166] VICE. Posted 2013. *Reenacting the Vietnam War (Part 1/2)*. YouTube video. Retrieved November 29, 2024.

[167] The New York Times. Posted 2014. *Re-enacting the Vietnam War | Op-Docs*. YouTube video. Retrieved December 5, 2024.

[168] Ibid.

poncho tent, and the rain falls on it, it brings back memories of when I was a soldier says Nguyen, expressing a deep nostalgia for his time during the war.[169] His nostalgia is its own form of hyper reality where he can escape to a world where the South can still win.

Reenactors all seek a deeper connection to the past. They achieve this in many ways and must negotiate the focus of their efforts in what they can realistically portray and recreate, always balancing authenticity with the practicality of approximation. Furthermore, war reenacting is a scenario based role-playing function in which the participants engage as actors in a simulation. The Iconographic recreations of the material culture of the past, are expressed through costuming and uniforms and props such as weaponry and field gear. Farbs are the inauthentic and anachronistic aspects of the present that poke holes in the immersion of the reenactment simulation. They disrupt the feeling of hyper reality that reenactors of all stripes and persuasions seek.

Reenactors are able to build thriving communities around an appreciation and interest for history, even the people who just want to play John Wayne still chose to reenact history because they are drawn to

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[169] Ibid.

something about the past. It is why reenactors have sought to imagine and engage with the hyper reality of the past. Reenactors can as a community create this compelling simulation of history, where they can imagine themselves and each other beyond the confines of our own time. People reenact war and combat because it is a fun way to enjoy and think about military history, to engage with that fascination of past conflicts, and taste just a little sample excitement of battle by taking on the role of a soldier and playing out mock combat action. Where one can feel swept away by the narrative in the book of a brilliant historian, imagining their recreation and interpretation of the past, reenactors delve into hyper reality through the act of physical reproduction in an attempt to immerse themselves in history.

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