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Re-enactment and its information practices; tensions between the individual and the collective

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Re-enactment and its information practices; tensions between the individual and the collective

Re-enactment
and its
information
practices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the practices used by Australian re-enactors to achieve authenticity, a communally agreed measure of acceptability in the creation of an impression, the dress, behaviours and accoutrements of the period, through the concepts of serious leisure and information practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Re-enactment is a practical, information-based performative activity. In this paper, the research styles and decision-making processes developed and employed by its enthusiasts to create authentic impressions are examined through an ethnographic case study.

Findings – The re-enactors are identified as “makers and tinkerers”, in Stebbins’s categorisation of serious leisure. Research, documentation and the sharing of information, knowledge and skills are common practices among re-enactors and acknowledged as integral to the processes of creating an impression to a collectively agreed standard of authenticity. Re-enactors’ “making” includes not only the creation of the impression but also the documentation of their process of creating it. They prize individual knowledge and expertise and through this, seek to stand out from the collective.

Originality/value – Although communities of re-enactors are often studied from a historical perspective, this may be the first time a study has been undertaken from an information studies perspective. The tension between the collective, social norms and standards that support the functioning of the group in understanding authenticity, and the expert amateur; the individual with specialist skills and talents, encourages a fuller investigation of the relationships between the individual and the collective in the context of information practices.

Keywords Behaviour, Communities, Authenticity, Leisure activities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The concept of serious leisure, developed by Stebbins, has been incorporated recently into a number of studies of everyday life information seeking (ELIS). These studies of leisure-related information practices include those of gourmet cooks (Hartel, 2010), hobbyist collectors (Lee and Trace, 2009), online museum visitors (Skov, 2013) and knitters (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007). These studies add to the understanding of ELIS, with its variety of approaches and theoretical perspectives. According to Kari and Hartel (2007), research into information behaviours in leisure activities should increase because of the importance of these pleasurable activities to everyday life experience.

This study is concerned with the information practices of people engaged in the serious leisure pursuit of living history and historical re-enactment (hereafter referred to as re-enactment, although strictly speaking re-enactment and living history are slightly different activities), and in particular, how they understand the concept of authenticity. Following McKenzie (2003), the term “information practices” is preferred over “information seeking” or “information behaviour” in order to include the range of activities observed in this study. The study takes a collectivist approach, acknowledging the importance of Buckland’s (1991) notions of context and consensus



in deciding on authoritative information. It adopts an information practice approach, described by Talja (2006) as a “sociologically and contextually oriented line of research” (p. 123) and by Savolainen (2007) as a collectivist approach, focusing on individuals as members of groups who carry out certain activities.

Serious leisure

592 Serious leisure is the term given to activities which involve “significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, experience or skill, and, indeed, all four at times” (Stebbins, 2009, p. 625). Although such activities could lead to a career, Stebbins separates serious leisure from work. This distinction is useful for people involved in historical re-enactment in Australia. Whereas in the UK or USA, many people involved in historical re-enactment have a career in a related area such as museum curation, tourism, heritage and conservation or even martial arts, so that their knowledge and skills have been developed through formal education and in the work place, in Australia, there are very few opportunities to forge a career in this field and thus the activities remain as hobbies.

According to Stebbins (1992, p. 12), hobbyists can be divided into five categories: makers and tinkerers, collectors, liberal arts hobbyists, activity participants and players of sports and games. The importance of information practices for hobbyists can be identified through the studies of these practices. The gourmet cooks who were the focus of Hartel’s (2006, 2010) studies can be categorised as “makers and tinkerers” whose information practices include: living a gourmet lifestyle; expressing culinary expertise; staying informed and inspired; preparing to cook something special; using information, such as recipes, to cook; gathering and organising the resources that support the development of culinary knowledge (Hartel, 2010, p. 851). The members of the public library knitting group studied by Prigoda and McKenzie (2007) are also “makers and tinkerers”; they engage in active information seeking, scanning and browsing, information encountering, networking and information seeking by proxy (p. 109). The social context of the group activity is significant for these information practices, leading both to experience of the pleasurable leisure activity and to the performance of “family-based caring work”, such that Prigoda and McKenzie (2007) argue that the information practices and the content of social interactions are mutually constitutive (p. 110). The collectors of rubber ducks studied by Lee and Trace (2009) are either casual collectors, social collectors or serious collectors and it was found to be almost impossible to separate their information needs from their need for the object – the duck (p. 633). Their information practices include: exchanging information with other collectors, chatting on a specialist forum, searching online auction and second-hand sites for unusual or rare items, demonstrating expertise and gaining background knowledge about collectable ducks. These activities can be seen as “an interrelationship between information and object needs, information sources and interactions between collectors and their publics” (p. 633). The online museum visitors studied by Skov (2013) could be categorised into all five of Stebbins’s categories, although all were also categorised as either collectors or as liberal arts enthusiasts. The information practices for collectors were described as follows: building specialised personal archives, contributing to shared archives and sharing information with peers. The information practices of liberal arts enthusiasts included collecting information on a time period and browsing exhibitions and collections. Both categories of hobbyist used personal channels of information, largely based on informal contacts. Private book collections were important, especially as a source of authoritative information, although web-based information, especially using

visual elements, was used by all participants, and searches for information were purposeful.

Historical re-enactment, an ethnographic performance which interprets the past and adds to the collective memory of modern society in an educative way, meets the definition that Stebbins (1992) gives for “serious leisure”. It is a cultural phenomenon whose participants give over their time and resources to maintain their involvement (Strauss, 2001, p. 147; Strauss, 2002, p. 99; Horwitz, 1998). Some people consider it an exploration of authoritative reality in the quest for an “authentic experience” (Strauss, 2001, p. 147). Studies of information practices may contain a performative element. Davies (2008) and Olsson (2010) both explore the practices of actors as they create performances of plays, making sense of text in an embodied, social process. Lloyd (2007) is concerned with the ways of knowing of firefighters, who must make connections among and between people, documents, equipment and their bodies, in order to perform effectively as firefighters.

The hobby of re-enactment mainly involves weekend events held a several times a year, varying in size from a handful to hundreds of participants (Strauss, 2002, p. 99; Decker, 2009, p. 278). In Australia there are two main forms of event; the public show, where re-enactors and their campsites are display pieces with activities designed to entertain and educate the (often paying) public, and the private or immersion camp, where groups retreat to the forest for several days and attempt to immerse themselves in history and authenticity: wearing period clothes, eating period food, sleeping in period tents and undertaking period activities. Participants in both forms of event are expected to present an overall “look”, referred to as an impression. According to Strauss (2003), “impressions are created through donning period dress, emulating period behaviour, and brandishing period accoutrements and weaponry” (p. 150).

Significant for engagement in the hobby is “documentation”, providing community-accepted provenance for clothing, food or activities undertaken. Community acceptance and consensus are integral to the creation of a knowledge base within the community. While differing interpretations can be argued amongst participants using logic, documentation and opinion (Decker, 2009), it is through community consensus of implicit knowledge that impressions are judged and notions of authenticity expressed (Strauss, 2001, 2002).

No study has been undertaken of re-enactors and their processes of making judgements about authenticity from an information practices perspective. The majority of scholarly work concerning re-enactment and living history has focused on its usefulness from a historical point of view, and the cultural concerns which affect the hobby. This study seeks to redress this imbalance and to use an information practices approach to explore authenticity and the way it is understood by re-enactors. Its focus will be on the creation of the impression, the clothing and accessories required for involvement in a living history activity.

Authenticity

In the world of re-enactment, authenticity is a currency of status and a mark of competency. This key term, authenticity, is used with several different meanings. Umberto Eco (1987) suggested that the very nature of reproducing something means it can never be truly authentic. He compares the museum exhibit described by a scholarly curator, giving a cognitive experience of the piece, with one where the displays are an indecipherable fusion of original and re-creation, of antique and facsimile pieces. In this case, the exhibit creates what Eco calls a hyper-reality which

overwhelms the senses and confuses our interpretation of signs and signifiers, so that we are no longer sure what is the real and what is the substitute. Thus, they become one and the same and the value, the authenticity, is in the plausible experience of life in the past. Strauss and Gapps take a different perspective. Strauss (2001) recognises that re-enactment brings people into a world of hyper-reality where the re-enactor is able to achieve the ultimate goal of the re-enactor, a kind of suspension of belief (p. 147), a state which Strauss refers to as authentic experience. Gapps (2003) prefers the phrase “authentic verisimilitude” (p. 67). He noted that “Authenticity is not used by re-enactors as a term for an original idea or mentality, it is a reference for a perceived proximity to an original” (Gapps, 2003, p. 67), because often even physical objects from the period cannot be considered entirely reliable sources of information because the passage of time fades dyed colours, allows leather and cloth rot to nothing and erases implicit knowledge.

The striving for “authentic verisimilitude” is central to re-enactors. In the context of re-enactment, many clubs and groups establish the degrees of authenticity permissible at the events and meetings they participate in (Australasian Living History Federation, 2011), establishing an approach which contains an element of pragmatism and drawing a line under what is acceptable. An example is the Rules for the XVIARC Australian Medieval Convention, held 22-26 April 2011, set by the host group Danelaw (NSW). They encompass four levels of authenticity:

- (1) Museum quality: design, materials and methods are identical to those of the time and place one is attempting to represent. As an example this would involve copying an original garment down to the last stitch.
- (2) Acceptable quality: having one or more variation from museum quality, which does not significantly detract from its use in historic representation. This might allow garments with a modern material lining or synthetic thread, but which has the exact look of the original.
- (3) Marginal quality: having one or more variations from museum quality or subject to questionable interpretations of historic fact, which significantly detracts from its use. The use of incorrect weight material, change in design or fit which are noticeable on close inspection or incorrect materials for buttons, falls into this category.
- (4) Unacceptable: anything which is clearly unquestionably wrong, ie polyester materials, modern shirts, wrist watches, chromed metals, mobile phones, stay-brite buttons.

Participants in such an event are expected to be aware of the levels of authenticity set by the host group and to conform to them. Newcomers to the group may be accorded a degree of latitude in their first year of membership.

Methodology

Re-enactment is a practical, information-based activity and in this study, the research styles and decision-making processes developed and employed by its enthusiasts to create authentic impressions are examined through an ethnographic study (Bryman, 2004). One of the authors (XY) is a re-enactor, involved in the living history community in Australia since 2004. She has often been an active member of several clubs concurrently and attended camps and events in many different period impressions. This exposure to a variety of clubs, events and individuals means that she is well-known and respected in

re-enactment circles, and is an active participant in re-enactor activities. This facilitated participant observation, a significant method of data collection. Data were also collected through an analysis of the web sites of living history organisations or groups of re-enactors and of the documentation supplied for participants at events; from specialised discussion forums and social media sites; and recorded accounts of re-enactors' practices. Data were also gathered through casual and guided conversations during the immersion activities held by re-large enactment/living history communities including the Australian Napoleonic Association (ANA) and the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), and from questionnaires administered via email to members of the Australasian Living History Federation (ALHF) who had expressed a willingness to record their practices for use in the study.

Participant observation was a major focus of data collection. Five major inter-club events were attended during 2011. Several inter-group training events, meetings and workshops, were also attended during the course of the year, and, while shorter in duration and smaller in attendance, were also useful opportunities to discuss authenticity and information practices. The original intention, agreed with event organisers and a number of re-enactors, had been to hold focus group discussions. However, in spite of the arrangements made, the dynamic nature of living history events meant that at the first event, "Con", it became evident that sustaining focus group discussions was impossible and thus these were not included at other events. People who had agreed to take part in focus group discussions were engaged singly or in small groups in guided conversations on topics related to their information practices and their perceptions of authenticity. Later, 20 of these people agreed to record their thoughts more formally through responses to an e-mailed questionnaire; only eight of these actually returned responses, but these provided a useful set of documentation for the study. Field notes were written up after each of the events.

A brief description of the five events attended follows. The first event attended was the Australasian Medieval Convention, 2011. Also known as "Conference" or "Con", this is a biennial event held during odd years on the Easter long weekend. It is an immersion event, meaning that no members of the public are in attendance, only re-enactors inappropriate clothing or "kit". XY gained approval to assist with managing the coffee shop[1], which put her in the centre of the village for the majority of the event and allowed her to watch interactions, overhear conversations and engage many different participants of different ages, interests and levels of experience in discussion.

The second event was Ironfest, an annual event held in May in 2011. It first began as a blacksmithing convention, although it is now one of the largest Napoleonic re-enactment events. Ironfest is a public show with activities planned around educating and entertaining the paying public. Even eating lunch is a display. For this event XY took part in an impression of a sailor in the British Royal Navy and joined the artillery on the field as the captain of a cannon crew. The tightly scheduled programme at Ironfest restricted data collection to participant observation only.

The third event was the Hyde Park Barracks Open Day (June 2011), an annual public show for educational entertainment. It has the novel aspect of taking place on an appropriately historical site, something that is very rare in the Australian re-enactment scene. This led to some very interesting discussions with other re-enactors regarding "tailoring" their authenticity to match the site, and with the staff who have access to clothing and other original items housed in the Barracks collections.

Winterfest (July 2011), also a public event, was the fourth event attended. This is small annual show which is currently hosted by Nova Hollandia jousting society in

Parramatta Park, Sydney. It attracts a strong mix amongst the re-enactment clubs of various focus and time-periods. Combatants analyse the various fight displays of the day, knowledge is shared as individuals and groups discuss and share recent or upcoming projects and the research, documentation and construction techniques they require(d), and events are planned or meetings held.

The fifth event, Beorgwic, is another immersion event, held every October long weekend. The event is hosted by the Ancient Arts Fellowship (situated in the Australian Capital Territory), and runs in a very similar manner to Con. Workshops are scheduled over the course of the weekend. Again, XY had approval to assist with the running of a coffee shop, which allowed her to converse with a large variety of people, many of whom sought her out to provide input to the study and gave her the chance to explore her analysis and interpretations with some participants, and to clarify concepts.

The data were initially analysed by the first author, and themes relating to authenticity and to aspects of information practices were identified using an inductive approach. The first pass of data analysis conducted after attendance at the second event also included coding for age, gender, experience, preferred period for re-enactment and a detailed analysis of information practices. This was useful in helping us to see strong similarities emerging in the data and allowed us to be alert for any instances of data which did not conform to emerging patterns. Attendance at the final event gave us the opportunity to present our analysis to re-enactors for their comments.

The approaches to data collection and data analysis helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The data were collected over a period of several months and in a variety of re-enactment settings by someone with experience of re-enactment and standing in some of the groups involved. The first author's engagement in the world of re-enactment meant that she was a trusted colleague and as more people got to hear about the study, she received active support and encouragement from them. The fifth event gave the opportunity for re-enactors to provide comments and feedback on the analysis and interpretation. Finally, the findings on authenticity were discussed with members of the re-enactment and museum communities.

Results

The study shows clearly the information practices of re-enactors, from their approaches to finding and using information and their reactions to the work of others to their central concern with authenticity. As hobbyists, they are clearly identified as "makers and tinkers" with their emphasis on the creation of elements of their impression, although some prefer to see themselves as "activity participants" concerned mainly with sword fighting. The results are presented in five sections, the first three concerned with aspects of information practice and the last two with authenticity. These results are drawn from field notes, the very full e-mailed responses, web sites and discussion forums.

Information practices and creating authenticity

Research, documentation and the sharing of information, knowledge and skills are all taken for granted by re-enactors. These practices are part of the way in which the community is formed and the ability to carry them out well is prized within the community. The comments of re-enactors in this study indicated that they are very aware of their information practices and can easily articulate the strategies they use to find information and the rules they use for judging the value of information as well as the end result – the impression.

To get a sense of the information strategies and sources used by re-enactors, people were asked to describe the way they would go about making an element common to any impression, a pair of shoes. The confidence with which re-enactors described the research process indicates that they are familiar with it and are also aware of key sources of information. There was a remarkable similarity in the descriptions given by re-enactors from different groups and club, so that the process here is presented as though it were a single process, linear and direct. The need to be flexible, to backtrack and re-interpret was expressed by participants as a key aspect of the process. Some people were very systematic in their information processes and others less so.

Three types of information were commonly given as being needed in the documentation process: substantiated documentation of the shape of the shoe; the materials from which the shoe was made; and the manufacturing techniques from the chosen period.

The preferred sources of information about objects were primary materials such as extant objects: grave finds, museum pieces, physical objects that could be measured and analysed. However the rarity of these physical objects, especially in Australia, has led to a need to use secondary sources. High-level secondary sources such as statues, paintings and written descriptions from the period were also important. Many re-enactors in the study were able to describe a hierarchy in their preference for sources. This is illustrated in the following comments:

The best way is to use multiple sources: to identify a statue and an illumination, a written description and a painting, with all sources from the same time period and preferably the same geographical area, and to compare them to find a consensus of details before beginning the process of re-creating an item (Field notes).

As much as possible, I would like to use primary sources (actual artefacts) but when not available the use of secondary documentation (carvings, effigies, illuminations etc) is sufficient, if the detail is clear enough. [W]ritten documentation can be used if the description is very precise and is supported by other forms of documentation (QR2).

The need for supporting documentation and consensus of sources was an important theme, echoed by all participants. For common items such as clothing, participants showed a preference for using multiple sources and for more than one type of source. These sources of information are found in museums and art galleries, but online sources such as web sites and museum photo galleries are extremely important. Scholarly books, historical documents and advice from experienced colleagues in the group were all mentioned as being important.

Participants described in detail their research processes:

I prefer to look firstly at items that have been found/preserved from the time, and secondly at artistic versions (paintings, carvings etc.), which, on seeing artistic representations of people in outfits that are still around (Elizabeth I's clothing, for example) can be nearly photographically accurate (QR8).

[I prefer to] find a pictorial source, compare dimensions to other items in the source and compare against similar artefacts which have been found if applicable. [... A] sculpture [...] gives a better idea of the three dimensional aspects (QR5).

For some, the process did not stop with the analysis of primary and secondary sources but continued with the documentation of their own processes, which then become resources for others:

I tend to make quite close copies of original items for myself (on a couple of pairs of my shoes [...]) I can document every single stitch), and more freestyle interpretations for other people,

taking stylistic elements from several similar items from the same period and geographical location and apply the skills I learned making the copies to create something individual, but consistent with the originals. I like to think it's a copy of an item that the archaeologists haven't yet found. I'm mostly kidding myself but have been right twice (QR3).

For some, the documentation process was not complete until the finished item had been matched against the community's criteria for authenticity:

Care should be taken to ensure the appearance and function of the item match the desired level of authenticity as there is some absolute crap out there that I wouldn't wish on anybody. Things like 17th century latched shoes with pegged soles – pegged heels is accurate but the soles couldn't be done until the machine to do the pegging was invented shortly before the American Civil War (QR3).

Participants were also aware of the difficulties inherent with using particular sources of information. To quote one participant:

Manuscripts and other representations in art tend to be skewed by the artist who might not have actually seen the things they are depicting, so it can be very difficult to tell what is real or "artist impression". Missing bits of equipment or even wrong depictions are common (QR1).

Another noted: "I avoid using modern day interpretations from primary or secondary documentation, unless it is clearly supported by the actual documentation. The Osprey series of books have artistic interpretations which don't always resemble the supporting documentation of the book" (QR2). Knowing which of the many books is reliable can be something of a challenge: "knowledge can be gained from reading books, but wisdom is gained by determining which books to read" (living_history Yahoo! group, 30 Oct 2007). Most clubs and many individuals build their own collections of useful sources specific to their period(s) of interest.

The social aspects of information use

The community of re-enactors is very much about the sharing of knowledge. The relearning of skills from the past is prized within the community. Field notes show that most popular skills are fighting and sewing but other skills mentioned include the ability to cook over an open fire, to work with leather and wood (particularly with period tools) to make items like shoes and chests, to weave or dye, to play games and learn songs or poems from the chosen time.

Experienced members of a club often act as mentors for newer members. "I made my kit using methods and materials those three guys [experienced members/ group leaders] told me were correct" (Field notes, Beorgwic, October 2011). Others act as mentors through the internet. The Leatherworking Reverend publishes a blog dedicated to historical objects and reproductions, period techniques and methods, and the interpretation of evidence (<http://leatherworkingreverend.wordpress.com>, 2011).

Participants spoke of the importance of peer opinion in helping them create their knowledge, with some using "discussions with people I know from the living history community" (QR6) or "learned friends" (QR7) as their first stop for researching an item, while others expressed a desire to teach and even impress their peers through online communication or "show and tell" at an event (Field notes, Con, April 2011).

Clubs also hold workshops to teach basic skills to new members. Inter-group immersion events such as Con and Beorgwic also have workshops on topics such as forging, tablet-weaving, naalbinding (a Viking technique similar to crochet), embroidery and more. With the help of the internet even more is possible. Naalbinding, for example,

can be learnt from videos on YouTube, techniques and hints discussed on online forums, and sources and research shared by re-enactors from across the globe.

Information practices and performance

A number of events in the re-enactor's calendar are public events, which by their nature are performances, even of mundane activities such as eating. "At the Hyde Park Barracks Open Day, skills such as splicing and knot work were put to use repairing the Barracks display of hammocks" (Field notes). At Ironfest:

[...] activities are planned around educating and entertaining the paying public (even eating lunch is a display) [...] The largest display of the day is the early afternoon 'Battle of Lithgow', when the French and British-Ally armies meet in a haze of blackpowder smoke and brightly coloured jackets. Units are drilled in formation as described by military manuals from the Napoleonic wars, and all are armed with appropriate weaponry from swords and bayonets to muskets, rifles, mortars and cannon (all of which are only loaded with blanks, for obvious safety reasons) (Field notes).

Club events may also provide opportunities for a performative information practice, as field notes from the Australasian Medieval Convention show:

While it's great that I have gotten to the point where I can pull stuff out of my [re-enactor's] wardrobe and I'm ready for an event, it is always nice to be able to wear something new, to show off the new skills or doco [sic] I've acquired. Especially at big events like Con where I meet new people from all over, it's a chance to make the best first impression by wearing my nicest or most accurate gear (Field notes, Con, April 2011).

Being able to document the accuracy of kit is something to be proud of, especially if the item is something a little bit different from the generic. It is a chance to show off research skills, and potentially also showcase skill at handicrafts. Even a simple hand-sewn linen dress can feel like a ballgown because "you made it yourself", and more so if worn beside a machine sewn cotton drill tunic or a polyester crushed velvet cape (Field notes, Con).

Participants in the guided conversations noted that an impression could give an indication of the re-enactor's sense of self. For example, "a cotton drill tunic paired with a pair of workboots can signify either a stick-jock (that is, someone who is there only for the fighting rather than the historical immersion), or a brand new recruit who has not yet developed the skills or knowledge to kit themselves out accurately" (Field notes, Ironfest). Similarly, a participant at Winterfest noted a brand new piece of plate armour custom-made to fit (which on average costs AUD\$15,000 for a whole suit) could indicate a fanatic who lives and breathes their chosen period (fourteenth century or later for plate), or simply someone with a large disposable income who wants to feel invincible on the combat field. It is the peripheries and the social positioning of the observer which allows them to discern the difference in each case (Field notes, Winterfest, July, 2011).

Understanding authenticity

As anticipated, all participants in the study considered an understanding of authenticity was central to engagement in a community of re-enactors, and processes of research and documentation were an integral part of determining authenticity. From time to time, re-enactors noted that at one level, authenticity must always be utopian, because they themselves as modern humans are so different from their historical counterparts and the world in which they live is marked by progress and its transformations.

Authenticity was understood in several different ways. The most common references in discussions were to the expectations or requirements of the groups they belonged to for authenticity in dress and other behaviours, even though they might find such requirements irksome. To belong to certain clubs or attend certain events there is a minimum standard of authenticity to be upheld and so for some individuals that was the only motivation to be authentic:

I don't like the documentation part of the hobby, but I like the guys [in my club] and if that's what I have to do to play with them, then that's what I do. But that's why I sometimes go to the SCA [Society for Creative Anachronism] events instead, because they're much more relaxed about that sort of stuff and it's just about having fun and less about the formal history side (Field notes, Con August 2011).

I'm happy for [other] people to hand sew everything so long as they don't insist on me doing that (QR4).

A participant (Winterfest, July 2011) explained that some groups, such as Companie of Knights Bachelor (CKB) in Queensland, have a strict process for new members to ensure they uphold the authenticity standards of the club. In the case of CKB this includes a checklist of clothing and items that must be collected for the chosen impression, mandatory workshops and a review panel of experienced club members who will then assess the recruit and their kit at the end of their probationary period. A consequence of having "rules" is that there will always be those inclined to rebel against them. Some participants, who were less interested in "making and tinkering" and more interested in aspects of sword fighting and other forms of combat, noted that they saw authenticity as a barrier to entry (whether to a club or to an event), or an arbitrary rule that was designed to prevent them from having fun (Field notes, Con, April 2011).

Authenticity was seen to exist in the need to accurately represent the past at shows so as to educate the public:

If the item is for educational purposes or a paid display [...] then it is important to be as authentic as possible including tools [used to make the item] (QR6).

Authenticity within the context of living history was commonly understood to be an integral part of re-enactors identity within the community. Although probably influenced by the rules of the group or events, this notion of authenticity was related not only to the impression, but a small number of re-enactors related authenticity back to themselves and their performance:

Authenticity is the closest I can be to an accurate representation of the people, and celebrating the lives of the people from the time and place I am representing. They were just as smart and inventive and their lives were as fulfilling as people today (QR8).

Finally, some participants saw authenticity as a mindset, an approach to the "problem" rather than simply a way of expressing the physical verisimilitude of re-created items to the originals. This is best summed up in the statements that:

Authenticity is often confused with accuracy and misunderstood to be a measure or attribute of an object, rather than a philosophical approach to re-enactment (QR3).

There will always be a variation from the original by a small amount, whether due to interpretation of materials, form or how it was created there will be differences. [...] (QR5).

Judging authenticity

It was clear that all participants in the study made judgements about authenticity. Some used the rules of the group they belonged to and others had developed their own

personal scale for judging authenticity. The most detailed responses come from the e-mailed responses and those will be used here, as they echoed the responses gathered through guided conversations and recorded in the field notes:

No object you create will be authentic or not [authentic]. I have a scale of authenticity where some point along the scale it will become acceptably authentic. There are different minor scales which make up the main authenticity scale:

- * Form
- * Function
- * Materials
- * Persona and Ideological concerns
- * Creation

[...] My decision on Authenticity is primarily based on form because in many cases this is the information we know most about. It allows variation and experimentation while maintaining links to sources. If it looks reasonable it passes. An example of variations of the scale is the use of hidden machine stitching. [...] [Items which are] Acceptably Authentic in my opinion share the majority of the same form and function as the original (QR5).

Another participant described the criteria he uses to determine physical authenticity as though he had created them, but the similarities with the earlier example are clear:

There are different levels of authenticity, but if the object: Has the same physical characteristics (appearance, size, mass, materials) to normal appraisal (no electron microscopes, please)- Functions identically to the original Then I consider it to be an authentic reproduction. To be truly "authentic", it would have to be an original item, but most of these are unavailable, and may no longer be able to function (QR7).

Both of these respondents make reference to levels of authenticity, a sliding scale that allows for balancing variation and sacrifice while still maintaining "acceptable levels" of authenticity. Some re-enactors were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure authenticity:

To be authentic, an item has to be made in such a way that it looks like the original with the same materials (or similar where the original is unavailable), to the same sort of specification. I have bought a copy of a 1623 patents [book] from the UK to ensure this on one item and made it well enough that my peers make impressed sounding noises (QR3).

Others were willing to consider sacrifices. Examples given include using a sewing machine for internal (and therefore unseen) seams because of physical or time constraints, or using modern glue due to availability and/ or to improve the durability of the item.

Participants were clearly aware of the significance of understanding cloth for the creation of an authentic impression. Participants noted, for example, that cotton is often seen at events, but to a practised eye it is obviously cotton and therefore not authentic:

Seeing too many GPs [General Purpose army-issue boots] wrapped in gabardine can [detract from the ambience] (QR3).

Some participants were also aware of the way cloth was made in times past and took this into account in making their impressions in the quest for authenticity:

The width of cloth differs depending on the style of the loom, so I cut my patterns to replicate the width of the cloth used at that time. It's not perfect, but other than hand-weaving it myself,

which I don't have the time or the knowledge to do, it is only noticeable to people looking inside the seams of my clothing (QR8).

In the past, one of the ways to show wealth was not only the quality of fabric clothing was made from, but also the yardage required, such as full skirts and overly long or baggy sleeves. Field notes reveal that re-enactors still wear their status in their clothing, which is one of the key ways in which the performative aspect of re-enactment is analysed by members of a group. Clothing also gives an indication of a re-enactor's approach to authenticity. Using synthetic substitute fabrics such as rayon (artificial silk), polyester (only invented in the last century), or even cotton in an inappropriate time period or weave speaks of someone who has missed the integral motivation of living history. Similarly, wearing appropriate fabrics in modern colours shows a disregard for authenticity. While extant clothing in authentic colours does not exist due to the temporary nature of natural dyes (which tend to fade quickly in sunlight), dye recipes and processes have been re-created to a point where it can be known exactly what sort of colours were available in a particular period. Whatever the reason for choosing inappropriate materials for creating an impression, such a decision is immediately clear to the serious re-enactor, as a participant in the study noted:

I don't consider a Dark Age helmet made of aluminium, or [...] a woollen tunic hand-stitched and of a period colour but of a 'snow angel' design authentic. Authenticity, for me anyway, also touches on appropriate items for the social status, locality and period being re-enacted. I don't expect a person who is re-enacting a Dark Age peasant to be wearing silk, a kimono or 19th Century footwear (QR2).

Re-enactors consider lack of research or disregard for it sloppy and, emphasising the collective nature of the knowledge that goes into creating an impression, sloppiness in an impression was seen to have an effect on the community:

I [...] don't hold other people to my own standard of authenticity [...], I'm happy for them to make their own arrangements about authenticity with the hobby. It isn't my job to judge other than when I'm the best campsite adjudicator, but really poor efforts can detract from the ambience and therefore affect my enjoyment of what we collectively do (QR3).

Re-enactors are also aware of barriers to authenticity. Although the literature suggests that the biggest barriers to authenticity in impressions are often thought to be time and money (cf. Strauss, 2001), participants made a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable authenticity. Field notes show they were keen to emphasise safety concerns, and focused on what they saw as acceptable exceptions to authenticity. Some exceptions, such as the wearing of glasses or use of ventolin puffers or other first aid requirements, are acknowledged and ignored. Other safety-based exceptions require effort on the part of the re-enactor. For example, thanks to preserved manuals of skill-at-arms and other forms of documentation it is possible to re-create weapons to a high degree of accuracy and to be precise about how they were used. However, these items and the fighting manoeuvres of the period were specifically designed to kill or maim in the most efficient manner possible. In living history, while the weapons are metal and made to the same specifications, they are blunted and regularly checked for burring or damage that could cause injury. Blows are pulled so that the opponent feels only a portion of the force on contact, and the "kill" is a sporting acknowledgement of that contact because death only lasts for the length of each bout (Field notes, Winterfest, July 2011).

Participants noted that unacceptable inauthenticity is often directly related to a lack of effort, whether purposeful or unknowing. Being new to the movement is generally an

accepted reason for having low-standard impression because re-enactors understand that it takes time to build knowledge and gear, and new recruits often wear a mish-mash of clothing borrowed from multiple people in their club while they explore and expand their interests and decide on their focus. However, this is a finite excuse. Some members never move past this stage, perhaps not enjoying either the research or the craft aspect of the hobby and so may make kit based on what they remember someone else wearing or using a pattern they have not bothered to verify. Some are simply guilty of not knowing enough about their chosen period to discern accuracy, and so are taken advantage of by less scrupulous merchants, from whom they buy equipment or other elements of the impression. Others may have the knowledge, but deliberately choose lower levels of authenticity whether for ease or lower costs or simply because they do not value authenticity as a concept (Field notes, Beorgwic, October 2011).

Discussion

Participants in the historical re-enactments and living history events observed for this study are clearly engaged in serious leisure which is rich in information practices. Overwhelmingly, they see themselves as “makers and tinkerers”, although many also could be seen to be “activity participants” in the categorisation established by Stebbins (1992, p. 12). The rules for participation in club and inter-club events reinforce this emphasis on “making”, setting an impression that meets the standards of the community as a pre-requisite for involvement. This study has clearly shown that “making and tinkering” in the context of historical re-enactment has two processes and two outcomes. These processes are the research processes to determine what parts of the impression should be and the development of skills to turn that knowledge into the practical item. The outcomes are the documentation of the background to an item and the processes of its creation and the item itself.

The types of sources which re-enactors use for their research have parallels with those used by other hobbyists (Hartel, 2010; Lee and Trace, 2009; Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007; Skov, 2013). However, re-enactors appear to differ in one significant way from other hobbyists: they document their practice of making and expect to share this documentation with others. They may recognise themselves as “expert amateurs”; members of the community who share information, learn together and critique one another for the development of a specialised knowledge base within their chosen hobby (Kuznetsov and Paulos, 2010). This is not to say that other hobbyists do not share information and skills. The knitters in Prigoda and McKenzie’s (2007) study “shared a pattern visually [...] as well as orally” (p. 105) but there is no evidence that a knitter documented her own pattern and shared that documentation. The gourmet cooks in Hartel’s studies are not situated in a group, they are individuals usually in a family setting and their focus is on personal information management. Their “home-made binder [which] symbolizes their repertoire and accomplishments” (Hartel, 2010, p. 868) is likely to form part of a family’s tradition and heritage. Re-enactors often want to go beyond the personal with their documentation, and add to a collective store of knowledge, with their status as “expert amateurs” (cf. Kuznetsov and Paulos, 2010) making this documentation part of institutionalised cultural heritage rather than part of a process of inter-generational guidance in the tradition of handcraft guilds (Schofield-Romschin in Prigoda and McKenzie’s, 2007, p. 105).

Re-enactment is claimed to be a performative activity and it is easy to see performance in the public displays. However, understanding “performance” in this way minimises our opportunities to see that performance is more than this for re-enactors.

Unlike Olsson's theatre professionals (Olsson, 2010), for whom purposive information seeking especially in formal information systems was relatively unimportant, for these re-enactors the performance is as much in a demonstration of research skills and documentation, as in the ability to portray someone from another era. In other words, a key performative aspect of re-enactment is "authenticity".

The quest for authenticity was a driving force for most participants. The rules about what is important and how things should be done were strongly expressed and this emphasis was similar to that found in other studies, which took an historical perspective. Participants spoke at length about the importance of clothing, matching the finding that authenticity of clothing is a central concept of any living history impression (Strauss, 2001). High levels of authenticity are often seen as a mark of status (Gapps, 2003), and so it was in this study, with many comments about knowledge, expertise and skills, and the importance of club members or others as people admired or looked up to for their pursuit of authenticity. Even among those participants who "did their research" and who strove to gain relevant skills, authenticity was recognised as unachievable because, physically, we cannot be completely authentic when re-enacting (Handler and Saxton, 1988; Strauss, 2001; Gapps, 2003). This realisation underpins Gapps's use of the phrase "authentic verisimilitude". On the other hand, unacceptable standards of authenticity in the impression was looked down on, and, as Strauss found, is was seen to result from lack of research, lack of effort and sometimes a cavalier attitude (Strauss, 2001, 2002).

There were also a few people who expressed an aversion to requirements for standards of authenticity, these participants were only interested in a very narrow facet of re-enactment (usually combat), and did not seem to understand how other people could enjoy aspects that they personally did not (Strauss, 2001; Decker, 2009). In this study, these negative opinions were only encountered in passing during participant observation, with those who volunteered to take a more active role in the study, for example, as key informants, voluntarily placing their emphasis on the importance of the pursuit of authenticity and on their sense of identity in the community.

The practices for information seeking and use underpinning the research processes for the re-enactors in this study were so commonly shared that the steps described by the eight participants who completed the questionnaire administered by email produced a description of finding and interpreting information to make a part of an impression that could be consolidated into a single approach. This study also indicated that some people are very systematic, others less so, but all recognised that there was a need to revise and re-think throughout the process of making an impression. It is the constant revision and improvement of an impression that makes a good re-enactor (Strauss, 2001, 2002) and it is this ability to revise and re-think that is a hallmark of an information literate person.

The common approach to the information research process and to the standards for judging authenticity may be due at least in part to the practical and "get on with it" nature of re-enactors (Agnew, 2007, p. 303). It also emerges from the strong social bond and sense of community. However, an emphasis on commonality may overlook a tension that was noted throughout this study, and that is the tension between the individual and the collective. On the one hand, it could be argued that the value systems in voluntary activities are weak, because they are related to a hobby and thus are completely discretionary since not everyone shares the same aim and values. Some participants noted that they did the minimum to be accepted by their club; others

indicated that they were willing to put in the effort for research and learning skills that they did not necessarily value because the companionship of other re-enactors was something they did value. On the other hand, the very process of acknowledging authenticity in an impression and the granting of status to those who are able to achieve high levels of authenticity in their impressions or who develop and share expertise clearly sets some members of the community and their practices apart from others. In this respect, they differ from McKenzie's knitters with whom they share a number of information practices. The knitters, it is suggested, share the values and traditions of a guild, a collaborative cultural structure. Re-enactors also differ from Hartel's gourmet cooks, whose focus is similarly to some extent of passing on knowledge and skills to a younger generation. Skov's collectors who are users of online museum collections acknowledge that they tend to collect information for its own sake; they do not share it and may not even use it to add to their own private collection. Lee and Trace's collectors of rubber ducks, whose pursuit is individualised, have no little focus on sharing the findings of their research.

It is difficult to explain the reason for this tension between the collective and the individual. Community acceptance and consensus is acknowledged as being integral to the creation of a knowledge base within the re-enactment community. Yet, the privileging of the sense of the individual is most noticeable in the way that participants talk about themselves and their processes. Even though experienced members of the re-enactment community in this study are aware that the research and documentation practices of others are very similar to their own, they nonetheless speak as though they are the only ones carrying out these practices and proudly identify occasions where they have gone beyond what might normally have been expected of them, such as QR3's comment that he bought a copy of a 1,623 patents book from the UK to ensure authenticity on an item and the field note comment about being able to advise a museum curator at the Hyde Park Barracks about some mis-interpretations in explanatory notes on exhibits. This tension has also been noted in a study of knowledge management professionals in Saudi Arabia (Dulayami and Robinson, 2015).

It may be that in this study the tension resides in the very purpose of re-enactment and the search for authenticity. In this quest for authenticity, re-enactors adopt historical practices of skills and knowledge and thus become specialists in their chosen period or field. In this process, some of them move beyond the realm of the hobbyist; they are still engaged in serious leisure, but their practices are closer to those of the historian or museum curator. It is through immersion and obsession with their chosen serious leisure hobby that re-enactors implement and enhance their own information practices. Nevertheless, the culture of learning and peer mentorship opens doors to implicit knowledge, and sparks the drive to develop expertise through each individual's constant search for new information and improvements for their skill set and to be in a position to add their knowledge to the formalised and institutionalised knowledge base, for example, through advising museum curators or placing their documentation in research libraries. This may be the seat of the tension, because some seek to be both part of the collective (the amateurs) and an individual (an expert) at the same time.

Conclusion

This study has shown that re-enactment is about the exercise of information practices. The achievement of authenticity is about a sound and thoughtful exercise of these practices, and Gapps's authentic verisimilitude emerges from good practice. The living history community is filled with amateur experts who are driven in their pursuit of

a potential utopian objective. This drive has resulted in a constant push to improve the authenticity of historical impressions as an individual, as a club and across large parts of the community as a whole. The peer mentoring and community aspect of this community has led to a constantly expanding wealth of knowledge which is shared and interacted with on a regular basis, with an emphasis on learning and interpretation by individuals as well as the collective.

At the same time, the way that re-enactors talk about the process of doing the research necessary to create a new item for their impression, the confidence they have, the language they use, all seem to suggest that this is an individual activity, where they bring knowledge and skills to bear. While some scholars may be critical of the positioning of these skills of research and documentation as a set of transferable skills belonging to the individual, preferring to see it as an example of a sociotechnical (Tuominen *et al.*, 2005) or a social (Lloyd, 2010) practice, nonetheless, participants in this study saw them very much as a set of personal skills which enabled them to develop expertise and thus gain status within the community.

The concept of information practices has been very useful in exploring the workings of a community of re-enactors, enabling emphasis to be placed on the collective, social norms and standards that support the functioning of the group, yet at the very centre of these practices sits the expert amateur, bringing with it a tension that encourages a fuller investigation of the relationships between the individual and the collective in the seeking and use of information, as Bawden and Robinson (2013) have suggested in a different context.

Note

1. Coffee has been justified as appropriate for events such as this because of the time period cut-off for Con being seventeenth century, which is when coffee was becoming popular in Europe. It was of course consumed by the Arabs from much earlier in history which is the justification used by twelfth Century Crusader re-enactors who would have travelled to the Holy Land. Some re-enactors also profess that their caffeine intake is in fact an OH&S requirement and therefore an allowable oversight in authenticity (Field notes).

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Further reading

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