

## MASKS

Bowie's 'Andy Warhol, silver Screen, can't tell them apart at all' is now true as a general statement about hypermodernity, despite the fact that Warhol himself reportedly didn't like the track much at all. What we think a mask means is what it means, 'countering illusion with illusion', now that we've entered what Simon Critchley refers to as a 'post-philosophical era'.<sup>128</sup> Meanwhile, on the Internet, we may have reached what Max Read called 'the Inversion' in a 2018 editorial on the NYMag, 'Everything that once seemed definitively and unquestionably real now seems slightly fake; everything that once seemed slightly fake now has the power and presence of the real'.<sup>129</sup>

Berlusconi once said, 'What is on TV exists, what is not on TV does not exist'. In his book, *Inventing Russia*, Arkady Ostrovsky writes about how the Kremlin took this one step further, so that things that did not exist could appear on television, through the alchemical power of the image. All political figures engage in a form of *kayfabe*, and we participate as relatively minor Demiurges (creators of reality) in the realm of social media. We must remember the way that Russia has reinvented itself through myth and media, detailed in Ostrovsky's book, which should be a touchstone in any study of current events in the US and UK as well as post-Soviet history. Though American history is equally unique in its trajectory, there are considerable overlaps with the propaganda strategy of right-wing outlets like Fox News or Infowars, and post-Soviet media, which we may discover is not entirely incidental. Whatever the outcome in the US of the Mueller investigation, we can recognize the political dangers presented by interactive media, combined with the freedoms that are risked in trying to manage them.

The methods used in creating alternate realities is also quite familiar to anyone with a background in Alternate Reality Games, which arose in the early "Net" and zine culture of the 1980s and 1990s at the hands of people such as Joseph Matheny. However, and this is absolutely essential, the intent of these works was to broaden the scope of creative possibilities, and was never in any sense to further political objectives. Here is what he said in 'Transmedia: Who Invited the Lobsters Anyway?':

As one of the developers of the literary style now referred to as Transmedia, and it was started as a literary style, regardless of how Johnny-come-latelys and interlopers may attempt to spin it these days, I am here to tell you that it was never intended as yet another marketing gimmick. Hands down, no exceptions, not part of the plan. Transmedia and its immediate predecessor, Alternate Reality Gaming are hybrids of traditional literary narrative, video game story arc, web enabled interactivity and real-life role playing games like LARPs. The original intention was to broaden and open up the storytelling process to mediums outside of the traditional publishing platforms, i.e. text/images. It was part

## MASKS ALL THE WAY DOWN

1 Borges, part George Coates, part *The Game* (the movie with Michael Douglas)  
2 and part other things.

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4 This method included playing characters online, interacting IRL, and generating  
5 a self-consistent world of media that support this ‘alternate reality’. Method is  
6 ethic-agnostic, as methods and symbols can always be re-appropriated by new  
7 actors. This isn’t to say that Putin’s media network consciously co-opted ARGs  
8 (though he has indicated to me that it’s not outside the realm of possibility), but  
9 rather that ARGs were a response to changing mediums, which gov-corp media  
10 machines have also come to adapt to. Consider this excerpt from a 2015 *New*  
11 *York Times* article that reported on the now infamous Internet Research Agency,  
12 which ran numerous Kremlin disinformation campaigns:

13  
14 The Columbian Chemicals hoax was not some simple prank by a bored sadist.  
15 It was a highly coordinated disinformation campaign, involving dozens of fake  
16 accounts that posted hundreds of tweets for hours, targeting a list of figures  
17 precisely chosen to generate maximum attention. The perpetrators didn’t just  
18 doctor screenshots from CNN; they also created fully functional clones of the  
19 websites of Louisiana TV stations and newspapers. [...]

20  
21 It must have taken a team of programmers and content producers to pull off.

22  
23 And the hoax was just one in a wave of similar attacks during the second half  
24 of last year. [...] Again, the attention to detail was remarkable, suggesting a  
25 tremendous amount of effort.<sup>130</sup>

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27 Many of Matheny’s most popular transmedia narratives, such as *Ong’s Hat* and  
28 *El Centro*, were active parodies of conspiracy thinking, at most raising the spectre  
29 of all the fictional possibilities posed by the ‘unknown unknowns’, yet they were  
30 often quickly adopted by conspiracy theorists, much to his consternation. People  
31 still hunt the pine barrens of New Jersey for the fictional *Ong’s Hat*.

32 In 2004, the signs were clear for those who knew where to look. Now we are  
33 *in* it. These are topsy-turvy times in even the most literal sense, so this can only  
34 serve as an instructive example. The potential for the creation of entirely fictional  
35 individuals is not new, but the danger of this being automated in video, image/  
36 text, and even audio, as so-called ‘Deepfakes’ is absolutely real. If the US govern-  
37 ment wasn’t already as fully committed to this game of asymmetrical cultural  
38 warfare as much as the Kremlin, it was purely because their position made these  
39 tactics seem unnecessary. The future is likely to include yet more layers of fictional  
40 narrative, not less.