

WHAT WOULDN'T ROBIN DO?: THE HACKER AS OUTLAW IN *CONQUESTS OF THE LONGBOW: THE LEGEND OF ROBIN HOOD*

Kevin Moberly, Old Dominion University
Brent Moberly, Indiana University

For Alicia McKenzie

Christy Marx ends the introduction to the user manual for her 1991 game *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood* by imploring players not to steal her work.¹ Citing reports of “THOUSANDS of copies of my game being pirated and sold” overseas, Marx writes that “it’s infuriating to think that all my hard work is being stolen out from under me in this way.”² “It’s not much different,” she adds, “than someone stealing my purse.”³ Although Marx’s frustration is understandable, it is nevertheless difficult to ignore the apparent irony of inviting players to “live the legend” of what the back of her game’s box promotes as the “most intriguing and enduring outlaw of all time” and in almost the same breath asking them not to thieve.⁴ This irony, though, is more complicated than it might initially seem. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Robin Hood was frequently invoked as a mythical archetype for the pranksters, vandals, and other assorted misfits who comprised the then-nascent hacker movement and who were, at least for a time, romanticized as a rebel vanguard against an inevitable and impersonal digital and corporate future.⁵ Since then, Robin Hood has enjoyed cameo after cameo in popular, academic, and even legal debates about the causes and consequences of computer crime—a tendency that is still very much current.⁶

Yet while these accounts invariably glamorize the exploits of the hackers they profile, they also express a marked sense of ambivalence about the anarchistic spirit of youthful rebellion that is imagined as motivating these exploits. Often written for non-specialist audiences, they employ the specter of the hacker-as-outlaw as a means of simultaneously dramatizing and personifying the anxieties that lie at the heart of the complex question of how to integrate the revolutionary

¹ *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood* (Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1991); Christy Marx, *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Game Manual* (Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1991).

² Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 5-6.

³ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 5.

⁴ *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Game Box* (Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1991), back cover.

⁵ On the origins and development of the mythos of the Robin Hood hacker, see Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America, and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 181-201; and Mark Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric in the Digital Age: Insiders and Outsiders in Democratic Politics* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 135-164. For contemporary discussions of Robin Hood as a mythical archetype for would-be hackers, see Hugo Cornwall [Peter Sommer], “Code Busters,” *Sinclair User Magazine Annual 1986*, January 1986, 14-16; and John Drake, “An Interview with Hugo Cornwall, a British Hacker/Author,” *2600: The Monthly Journal of the American Hacker*, February 1987, 4-5, 11, 15.

⁶ For example, Andy Greenberg’s 2020 *Wired* profile of the troubled security researcher Marcus Hutchins invokes Robin Hood in characterizing the more “philanthropic” of the two hackers who played key and, as it would turn out, calamitous roles in Hutchins’s early development. See Andy Greenberg, “The Confessions of Marcus Hutchins, the Hacker Who Saved the Internet,” *Wired*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/confessions-marcus-hutchins-hacker-who-saved-the-internet/>.

potentials of digital high technology and its practitioners into the existing social order. These accounts thus rehearse a familiar narrative. In keeping with the long tradition of Robin Hood in folklore and popular media, they invoke the precedent of Robin Hood and his legend as means of formulating an approach to the uncertainties of the present (and by implication the future) through the example of the past. In doing so, they collapse many of the otherwise sovereign binaries that are imagined as separating the two: the difference between the young and the old, the modern and the medieval, and the criminal and the hero—the difference, in short, between disruption and continuity in all their disparate forms. The result is more of the same: a version of the hacker-as-outlaw whose heroic potential is expressed in terms of his capacity to use the high-tech tools of the present in service of a moral order that is imagined as intrinsic to the heroic past.

Conquests of the Longbow implicates players in a similar contradiction. Although its marketing materials entice players with the prospect of becoming Robin Hood, the game itself enlists them as curators of his legend, rewarding them not for their ability to “live the legend of the longbow” but rather for the extent to which they are able to reproduce through their own gameplay a version of Robin Hood that corresponds to Marx’s authoritative vision of Robin and his age.⁷ Elsewhere and at length, we discuss the implications of this imperative for players as historians in their own right, which is to say as Marx’s allies in what she frames as the larger project of “mix[ing] legend and history” and, in the process, recovering a quasi-historical but nevertheless still current Robin Hood.⁸ Here, though, we want to consider the implications of this charge for players as Marx’s explicit adversaries: the putative hackers whom she explicitly accuses of wanting to hijack her work for their own profit in her discussion of software piracy. Accordingly, we examine the way that the puzzles, riddles, and quests associated with *Conquests of the Longbow*’s copy protection schemes successively implicate players in the sort of corporate, cultural foreclosure that so rankled many of the early digital activists who originally turned to the figure of the Robin Hood hacker as means of making their concerns legible to the broader public—namely, the game’s sequestration under the guise of copyright and intellectual property of materials that have long been in the public domain.

Our goal, however, is neither to condemn Marx nor disparage her work. After all, she was not the first to attempt to capitalize on Robin Hood and his legend—not by a long shot and not even in 1991, which saw the release of the feature film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, as well as the concurrent release of two other Robin Hood-themed computer games.⁹ Moreover, Marx’s concerns about software piracy are not without merit. Explicitly framed as a question of labor, they reflect an awareness of what Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter describe

⁷ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

⁸ Moberly and Moberly, “Nine Men’s Medievalisms: *Conquests of the Longbow*, Nine Men’s Morris, and the Impossibilities of a Half-Forgotten Game’s Ludic Past,” in *Pleasure and Leisure in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Toys, Games, and Entertainment*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 729-734; Christy Marx, “A Game is Born...,” *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Hintbook* (Coarsegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1992), 4.

⁹ Aside from Sierra’s title, the other two Robin Hood-themed computer games published in 1991 were *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Salt Lake City, UT: Sculptured Software, Bits Studios, 1991) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Cambridge, England: Millennium Interactive Ltd., 1991). For an overview of these games, see Thomas Rowland, “‘And Now Begins Our Game’: Revitalizing the Ludic Robin Hood,” in *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 182-84.

as the larger material realities that contributed to the rise of hacking and hacker culture at precisely the historical moment when Marx published her game.¹⁰ We are interested instead in the related question of how Marx produces continuity from contradiction. Specifically, we want to explore the implications of the way that, working through the puzzles and riddles associated with the game's copy protection, Marx asks players to validate their privileged position as modern, high-tech consumers via their ability to use the criminal potentials of the game's digital technology to produce a version of the ostensibly low-tech truth of Robin Hood and his legend. Taking a cue from the way Kathleen Kennedy medievalizes hackers and hacking in her book-length study, *Medieval Hackers*, we use the example of *Conquests of the Longbow* to broach the larger methodological question of how the past is not just enclosed but foreclosed—of how it is reproduced as fixed, certain, and legible in the process of understanding and thereby addressing the uncertainties of the present.¹¹

* * *

Although hackers have long been associated in the popular imagination with an obsessive (if not outright manic) ludic potential, their association with Robin Hood would come somewhat later, as a response to what Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter describe as the “criminalization of activities that were once considered legitimate and vital for the development of computer networks.”¹² In the 1970s, the ludic potential of the hacker was celebrated as a radical new productivity, one that was imagined as collapsing the otherwise inviolable boundaries between work and play. “Computers,” Stewart Brand wrote in *Rolling Stone* in 1972, “are coming to the people. That’s good news, maybe the best since psychedelics.”¹³ In Brand’s telling, the imminent computer revolution was not so much planned as a side-effect of the “low rent” computer game *Spacewar!*, which was surreptitiously programmed on the hulking corporate and research mainframes of the day by the engineers and technicians charged with their upkeep.¹⁴ These “hackers,” as Brand called them, were inveterate “computer bums,” self-taught, often obsessive and antisocial types who were brought together by their fascination with technology, the extent to which their duties afforded them “plenty of time for screwing around,” and, of course, the allure of blowing each other up in *Spacewar!*.¹⁵ Accordingly, Brand presents *Spacewar!* as a “parable” for any number of off-the-books endeavors that anticipated what Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, quoting Allucquère Rosanne Stone, describe as the “play ethic” and the culture of “divergent thinking” that would become a defining factor of the high-tech workplace.¹⁶

If, however, the 1970s had *Spacewar!*, the 1980s had *WarGames*, the 1983 feature film in which a young hacker (played by Matthew Broderick) infiltrates a military supercomputer, nearly triggering World War III in the process.¹⁷ As Kevin Moberly writes, *WarGames* both draws on

¹⁰ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 201-17.

¹¹ Kathleen Kennedy, *Medieval Hackers* (New York: punctum books, 2015).

¹² Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 86.

¹³ Stewart Brand, “Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death among the Computer Bums,” *Rolling Stone*, December 7, 1972, 50.

¹⁴ Brand, “Spacewar,” 51.

¹⁵ Brand, “Spacewar,” 51. For a concise history of the word “hacker,” see also Kennedy, *Medieval Hackers*, 9-10.

¹⁶ Brand, “Spacewar,” 58, 51; and Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 87.

¹⁷ *WarGames*, directed by John Badham (MGM, 1983).

and inverts many aspects of Brand's portrayal of hackers.¹⁸ The film, for example, explicitly identifies Broderick's character as a gamer, but portrays his propensity towards hacking as rooted in a desire to steal the games he wants to play rather than improve them.¹⁹ Likewise, the film associates hacking with phone phreaking, spoofing, cracking, and a number of other illicit activities that before that point had been largely regarded as distinct from hacking.²⁰ *WarGames* is, in this sense, an expression of many of the anxieties that accompanied the large-scale introduction of personal computers into middle-class households in the 1980s, particularly anxieties about the effects of the tech industry's culture of divergent thinking on otherwise well-adjusted but impressionable adolescent boys.²¹ Accordingly, antics that were once tolerated and even unofficially encouraged in the relatively cloistered institutional settings of corporate and university research labs took on a much more sinister turn, especially after a series of highly publicized attacks against poorly secured governmental and private-sector computers.

By 1983, concerns over youth hacking had become so acute that *Newsweek* devoted the cover story of that year's back-to-school issue to the problem.²² As the title of the article—"Beware: Hackers at Play"—suggests, hacking, which had once been seen as an innovative and relatively harmless form of play, was increasingly viewed as a much more fraught undertaking, "the shadowy side," as the article's authors put it, "of the computer revolution" and a harbinger "of more trouble to come."²³ The article details the exploits of Neil Patrick and his Milwaukee-based 414 hacking group, who were arrested in July of the same year for allegedly breaking into computers at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and over 50 other systems in the United States and Canada. In a move calculated to raise the hackles of its white, suburban readership, the article opens by noting that the club's name "parod[ies]" the practice of "Milwaukee's tough, inner-city youth gangs [which] take their names from the city's numbered streets."²⁴ The article then compares Patrick and his peers to "marauding teenagers... joy riding along the silent telecommunications highways that link thousands of large, sophisticated computers in banks, universities, corporations and government installations all across the country."²⁵ The article's authors, though, do not ultimately condemn Patrick and the other members of his group, but instead characterize them as erstwhile "Explorer Scouts" who soon became addicted to the "game" of hacking and were led further astray by the example of *WarGames* and a media largely enraptured by hackers and their exploits.²⁶ "By and large," the article's authors write, "hacking remains an adolescent phenomenon, a rite of passage in the computer age" undertaken by "bright, young" and "generally benign, almost naive males" and generally abandoned by early adulthood.²⁷ The article continues, however, by warning readers that hacking has the potential to be much worse: an

¹⁸ Kevin Moberly, "Codifying Crime: A Hacker's Guide to Computer Crime," in *The Computer Culture Reader*, ed. Judd Ethan Ruggill, Ken S. McAllister, and Joseph R. Chaney (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 143-47.

¹⁹ Kevin Moberly, "Codifying Crime," 144.

²⁰ Kevin Moberly, "Codifying Crime," 144.

²¹ Kevin Moberly, "Codifying Crime," 145-48.

²² William D. Marbach et al., "Beware: Hackers at Play," *Newsweek*, September 5, 1983, US edition, 42-46, 48.

²³ Marbach et al., "Beware," 43, 42.

²⁴ Marbach et al., "Beware," 42.

²⁵ Marbach et al., "Beware," 42.

²⁶ Marbach et al., "Beware," 43, 45, 42.

²⁷ Marbach, et al., "Beware," 45.

“addiction,” that, if not quickly “domesticated,” could easily lead its young devotees into just the sort of criminal mischief of which Patrick and the other members of the 414s stood accused.²⁸ “Deterrence,” the article’s authors conclude without apparent irony, “is not going to be easy ... as long as the media glorify hackers like the 414s as the Robin Hoods of the information age.”²⁹

As this fleeting cameo at the end of “Beware: Hackers at Play” suggests, Robin Hood had become by the mid-1980s a fairly frequent presence in debates over the ethics of hacking, with proponents of hacking and hacking culture “recasting,” as Mark Rolfe writes, “the first hackers as Robin-Hood style activists committed to a political vision of the internet.”³⁰ Among the most notable of these commentators was Steven Levy, who, in his 1984 book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, promoted the archetype of the ethical hacker as an explicit answer to what he perceived as increasingly negative portrayals of hackers and hacker culture in the mainstream media.³¹ Following Brand, Levy portrays hackers as technically gifted misfits with decidedly ludic and anti-authoritarian tendencies, especially vis-à-vis the “Computer Priesthood” that, at least in his telling, continually sought to monopolize scarce computing resources for its own bureaucratic and self-serving purposes.³² At the same time, though, Levy depicts his subjects as equally as invested in what he labels as the “Hacker Ethic”: “a philosophy,” he writes, “of sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost to improve the machines, and to improve the world.”³³ This ethic, according to Levy, was not derived from the overdetermined and excessively codified “bureaucratic bullshit legalistic crap” that had long empowered the computer priesthood but was rather a side effect of the near-monastic devotion of the hacker to his machine.³⁴

As Rolfe writes, Levy’s Hacker Ethic would prove to be a significant rhetorical intervention, one that reimagined hackers as digital activists and endowed their seemingly manic ludic potential with an inherent moral authority that had been heretofore lacking.³⁵ Consequently, Levy’s Hacker Ethic would also put its subjects at the fore of what Graham Seal postulates as a much larger late-twentieth-century “redaction of the outlaw hero, this time in cyberspace.”³⁶ As Seal writes, the outlaw hero has long been celebrated in folklore as an explicit foil to excessively legalistic, self-serving, or otherwise illegitimate modes of official authority.³⁷ In these narratives, the outlaw hero embodies a traditional, if not intrinsically natural, “unofficial” authority that “has long since been eroded by the official apparatus of statute law, legislation, and the mechanisms of the powerful” but nevertheless enjoys a much more widespread popular mandate.³⁸ Inevitably masculine, the outlaw hero frequently resorts to tactics that challenge established social norms and

²⁸ Marbach, et al., “Beware,” 45.

²⁹ Marbach, et al., “Beware,” 48.

³⁰ Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 135.

³¹ Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 136-141. Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Dell, 1984; repr. Penguin Books, 2001). Citations refer to the Penguin Books edition.

³² Levy, *Hackers*, 188, 19, 25-26; and Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 138-39.

³³ Levy, *Hackers*, 7. For the full definition of Levy’s Hacker Ethic, see his *Hackers*, 39-49. On the reception and wider popularization of Levy’s Hacker Ethic, see Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 145-50.

³⁴ Levy, *Hackers*, 264.

³⁵ Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 148-49.

³⁶ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 196.

³⁷ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 197-201.

³⁸ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 199.

are more often than not declared illegal by the powers that be.³⁹ Such desperate measures, though, are not indicative of character flaws on the part of the outlaw hero but instead testify to the inherent righteousness of his cause and the extent to which the official order has been subverted and corrupted by those arrayed against him.⁴⁰ According to Seal, the outlaw hero is “rarely... a deliberate figure of political rebellion,” but rather “a reasonably appropriate male lawbreaker and the wider web of economic and political problems lead to his acceptance and presentation as a figure of revenge, rebellion, and protest.”⁴¹

While Levy does not invoke the tradition of the outlaw hero as an explicit precedent for the hackers whom he profiles in his book, others proved more than willing to associate the figure of the hacker with any number of historical and legendary outlaws, including the outlaws of the American Wild West and, of course, Robin Hood.⁴² In her 1984 book, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Sherry Turkle, for example, explicitly links the allure of hacker to the “fantasy of an electronic Robin Hood”:

People are deeply ambivalent towards computers. For many, they have replaced Ma Bell, or ITT, or even the CIA as the symbol of things too big, too complex, too impersonal ... Computers are perceived as the medium for an automated intrusiveness and violation of privacy, and they are perceived as a medium of mystery. In the hacker, people see someone who holds a key to the mysteries and is willing to defy the establishment to open them; there is the fantasy of an electronic Robin Hood.⁴³

In a 1987 interview with *2600: The Monthly Journal of the American Hacker*, Peter Sommer advances a strikingly similar explanation for the success of his 1985 *Hacker's Handbook*. When asked whether hackers could possibly defend “against computer bureaucracy and having files built up on pretty well everybody,” Sommer responds “one of the reasons why I think there is so much room in people’s hearts for the hacker is that they believe that the hacker is going to provide that sort of defense which you were describing.”⁴⁴ Sommer then invokes King Arthur and Robin Hood as precedents for hackers as contemporary “folk heroes” in the wider public imaginary:

I actually wrote a piece for one of the papers about ... folk heroes arising, for example King Arthur is a very potent figure, Robin Hood is a very potent figure ... King Arthur is going to be [the] one and future king. Robin Hood, you know not a great deal is known about Robin Hood, but the great thing was that he stole from the rich to give to the poor and that probably is why he is remembered.⁴⁵

³⁹ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 188-89.

⁴⁰ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 198.

⁴¹ Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 198.

⁴² Levy does not invoke Robin Hood by name in his original text, nor does he mention him in his afterwards to the 1994 and 2010 versions of his work. Others, though, explicitly link Levy with the tradition of the Robin Hood hacker. For example, a contemporary *PC Magazine* review of Levy’s book describes Levy’s hackers as “freedom-loving, irreverent geniuses with a social conscience, modern-day Robin Hoods...”; see Robin Raskin, “Hacker Heroes, and Corporate Battles,” *PC Magazine*, July 23, 1985, 263. On Levy’s sympathies with the 1960s cultural revolution, see Rolfe, *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric*, 135-136, 153-155.

⁴³ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 235.

⁴⁴ Drake, “An Interview with Hugo Cornwall,” 15.

⁴⁵ Drake, “An Interview with Hugo Cornwall,” 15. The phrase “a piece for one of the papers” refers to Sommer’s 1986 *Sinclair User Annual* article, “Code Busters.”

“I think it is this idea,” Sommer continues, “that the hacker can somehow fight back, that’s the reason why non-hackers admire them so much.”⁴⁶ Although Sommer is decidedly more skeptical than Turkle as to whether “hackers are sufficiently good or sufficiently powerful or sufficiently able to combat” the evident problems of “the computer age,” he nevertheless concedes that “every now and then though what a hacker can do if he is very lucky, [is] expose the stupidity [of] some of the power that is held on computers and maybe just enough that there is that element of defense that you’re looking for.”⁴⁷

To the extent that the fantasy of the hacker (as formulated by Brand) is at its heart one of ludic agency, then the fantasy of the ethical hacker (as formulated by Levy) is one of selective, expressly moral and political ludic agency. As an amalgamation of these impulses, the fantasy of the Robin Hood hacker locates the qualified agency of the ethical hacker in a well-established mythos of ludic resistance and reform. As Thomas Rowland writes, Robin Hood has long been implicated in a distinctive tradition of anti-authoritarian playfulness.⁴⁸ While this tradition certainly celebrates play for its own sake, it also insists on play as a significant source of social and political change and renewal. Accordingly, the fantasy of the Robin-Hood hacker is explicitly that of continuity, one that restages the uncertainties of the digital age as much more romantic elements of any number of venerable, intertwined, and inherently relatable traditions. The hacker’s domain is that of software and silicon, logic gates and binary math, mainframes, networks, and other technologies and concerns that are beyond easy representation, at least to the general public. The myth of the Robin Hood hacker, however, makes these elements legible; it transforms them into the electronic equivalents of the wilds of Sherwood Forest, “the frontier of post-modernism” where, as Seal writes, “the ancient imperatives of resistance and power can be seen in action.”⁴⁹

* * *

Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood attempts to square contemporary and decidedly postmodern versions of its titular hero with his more traditional incarnations by effecting a digital return to what its marketing copy describes as the “splendor of 12th century England, from the grime of Nottingham to the vibrancy of Sherwood.”⁵⁰ One of three Robin Hood computer games published in 1991, it differentiates itself from its competitors by offering players a more “authentic” version of what its box art trumpets as “the legend of the Longbow.”⁵¹ This is more than just marketing hyperbole. As Marx details in the introduction to *Conquests of the Longbow*’s hint book, she spent a considerable amount of time researching the historical and fictional precedents for the characters, settings, and events that feature prominently in her game.⁵² The end result of her efforts is a game that speaks both to the general public and to those who might be more familiar with the corpus and context of early Robin Hood ballads and tales—a game that stages Robin Hood’s eventual restoration to his rightful place in society against a recognizable

⁴⁶ Drake, “An Interview with Hugo Cornwall,” 15.

⁴⁷ Drake, “An Interview with Hugo Cornwall,” 15.

⁴⁸ Rowland, ““And Now Begins Our Game,”” 175-76.

⁴⁹ Seal, *Outlaw Legend*, 194.

⁵⁰ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

⁵¹ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

⁵² Marx, “A Game is Born,” 6-9.

Nottinghamshire backdrop while reintroducing elements that were once central to but which generally get omitted in more recent versions of the Robin Hood storyline.

Conquests of the Longbow, however, is ultimately more interested in continuity than recovery. Although the game promises players the chance to relive Robin Hood's Middle Ages, it nevertheless insists on a Robin Hood (and a medievalism) that is recognizable to contemporary audiences. In general, the game satisfies these contradictory impulses by taking relatively familiar elements from contemporary depictions of Robin Hood and dressing them down as medievaesque versions of their present selves while simultaneously glossing over details that might be potentially alienating to contemporary audiences. For example, the game renders Nottingham's infamous "Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem" pub as it might have been in the twelfth century—a grungy hole in the cliffs of Castle Rock named, appropriately enough, the "Trip to Jerusalem Pub"—even though the earliest documentary evidence for the pub's existence dates from the eighteenth century.⁵³ In much the same way, the game restores much of the anticlericalism that was central to early Robin Hood ballads while at the same time omitting Robin Hood's counter-balancing religiosity, rendering him not as the subject of faith or organized religion, but of the Druidic magic that, at least as the game would have it, still lingers in the depths of Sherwood Forest.⁵⁴

Marx takes a similar approach to Robin Hood himself. Drawing on J. C. Holt's *Robin Hood* and Maurice Keen's *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, she portrays him as a conundrum—a quasi-historical, quasi-folkloric figure who, as she acknowledges, probably never existed, "at least, not under that name."⁵⁵ Likewise, she acknowledges that many of the characters with whom Robin is often associated probably also never existed.⁵⁶ Marx, however, is also careful to point out that there is some historical evidence for aspects of Robin Hood's legend, particularly for Friar Tuck, who, as she writes, "didn't come along until after 1417 when perhaps not so coincidentally a certain real-life bandit by the name of Robert Stafford continued his outlaw ways under the title 'Frere Tuk.'"⁵⁷ Marx thus argues that it is best to approach Robin Hood as neither a historical figure nor a complete fiction, but as an amalgamation of the two: a "distillation of history and wish fulfillment and just the plain human desire for a good rousing story with a likable hero."⁵⁸ Accordingly, she argues that Robin Hood is a product of history—that in all of his various guises and in his ever-changing cast of accomplices and antagonists, he is an expression (or, in her words, a "distillation")

⁵³ On the history of the Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem Pub, see Harry Gill, "The Old Inns of Brewhouse Yard," in *Transactions of the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire, 1909*, ed. by John Standish (Nottingham: The Thoroton Press, 1910), 13:57-69. For a longer discussion of the game's treatment of contemporary Nottingham Robin Hood landmarks, see our "Nine Men's Medievalisms," 700-703.

⁵⁴ On Robin Hood's religiosity in and the anticlericalism of the early Robin Hood ballads, see Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 152-53; and Sean Field, "Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories," *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 1 (2002): 6-22.

⁵⁵ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁵⁶ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁵⁷ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 7. It should be noted here that many contemporary Robin Hood scholars dispute the identification of Robert Stafford as the original "Frere Tuk," noting that given the circulation of Robin Hood ballads at the time, it is likely that Stafford borrowed rather than invented this alias. See J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 58-59; Keen, *Outlaws*, 202-4; and Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 11. As we will discuss later, Marx's decision to cite this detail is consistent with the antiquarian approach that largely informs her historiography and creative process.

⁵⁸ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

of the fears and the desires of the various eras that have claimed him as their own. “Throughout the ages,” Marx explains, “Robin Hood as folk hero, as noble outlaw, as skilled archer and clever trickster, has been shaped to fit each age that loved him. We continue to do so in our books, TV and movie versions. And that’s the way it should be.”⁵⁹

Yet, rather than exploring the postmodern implications of Robin Hood’s historical contingency, Marx ultimately cites it as evidence of the opposite: what she describes as his “eternal” and “unchanging essence.”⁶⁰ “Robin,” she writes,

isn’t eternal because of which disguise he adopts or how he happens to meet up with Marian or whether he wears green tights or studded leather or any of the new embellishments we add to his tales.

He lives on because he captures our hearts with his unchanging essence—he fights the good fight, laughs boldly in the face of danger, defies corrupt authority, and outwits his enemies to escape and fight again. Every age of humankind has a need for that kind of hero.⁶¹

The result is an ostensibly new-and-improved, digital version of Robin Hood that ultimately conforms to what Richard Clouet and Stephen Knight describe as the nineteenth-century view of Robin Hood and his circumstances.⁶² Taking a cue from the way that Robin Hood appears in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and was subsequently adapted in mainstream cinema and children’s literature, *Conquests of the Longbow* presents Robin as a victim of oppression and tyranny—a hale, hearty, and otherwise honest yeoman who has been driven from his home and lands by the deprecations of Prince John, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and their cronies.⁶³ Robin, as such, appears as a kind of proto-middle-class figure—a displaced landowner who does not identify with the aristocracy or with the poor, but who nevertheless possesses an inborn nobility of purpose.

Taken together with the other members of his rag-tag band of outlaws, Robin thus embodies the spirit of “Merrie Olde Englande” in its most primordial state—which is to say, camping out, drinking ale, and telling ribald stories amidst the ancient, towering oaks of Sherwood Forest. Accordingly, Robin does not rob from the rich and give to the poor because he wants to overthrow the monarchy, dismantle the church, or because of any other species of revolutionary fervor. Robin instead seeks to facilitate a return to the natural, social order upon which the notion of a “Merrie Olde Englande” is predicated. In other words, he fights to restore Richard the Lionheart to his rightful place on the throne as a means of perpetuating the historical continuum that, in the context of the game, is imagined as connecting the Druidic, pagan past of ancient England to the high-tech present of the player via the expedient of a digital version of the Middle Ages.⁶⁴ As becomes clear from the mixture of early medieval illumination styles and hyper-

⁵⁹ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 7.

⁶⁰ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 7.

⁶¹ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 7.

⁶² Richard Clouet, “The Robin Hood Legend and its Cultural Adaptation for the Film Industry: Comparing Literary Sources with Filmic Representations,” *Journal of English Studies* 3 (2001-2002): 38; Knight, *Robin Hood*, 174-75.

⁶³ Clouet, “Robin Hood Legend,” 38-39.

⁶⁴ Here, Marx’s recourse to an imagined Druidic, English past echoes the yearning for a familiar and yet increasingly “antique” medieval past that, according to Keen, characterizes the early Robin Hood Ballads. See Keen, *Outlaws*, 128-44, esp. 134-5. We are grateful to Gayle Fallon for noting this connection.

modern illustrations in the game's manual, the digital medieval is thus a kind of medium that in and of itself is explicitly staged as both a test and an affirmation of Robin Hood's ostensibly timeless values.

Players are likewise not exempt from Robin Hood's high-minded principles. Despite the promises implicit in the game's marketing materials, they discover that Robin is an independent character with his own well-developed sense of morality and code of honor.⁶⁵ As Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone writes about Guybrush Threepwood, the hero of LucasArts's *Monkey Island* franchise, Robin Hood is also a "third-person protagonist who has his own personality and might even refuse players' instructions."⁶⁶ Players, as such, do not as much control as advise Robin Hood. At once connected to and separated from him by the affordances of the game's "no-typing, point-and-click interface," they tell him where to walk, how to spend his silver, who to talk to, what to attack, and so on.⁶⁷ Players quickly discover, however, that Robin is under absolutely no compulsion to obey their commands. Robin will not attack targets that he does not want to, nor will he interact with objects or characters in ways he deems inappropriate. Worse yet, he often chides players for making the request: "I've had enough sleep, it's time to be about and doing something," Robin responds if players click on the bed in his cave at the start of one of the days through which the game organizes its narrative. "There is nothing to see here," he says if they click on an object that Robin does not find interesting. "I don't use my bow against my friends," he tells players who have the temerity to order him to attack a fellow outlaw. Robin is thus as much an obstacle as an asset to players, an enigma whose proclivities and potentials must be successfully negotiated as they attempt to thwart Prince John and facilitate the return of Richard the Lionhearted.⁶⁸

The resulting cycle of request and refusal can be frustrating to players, especially to the extent to which it works to subvert their desire to directly identify with or, as is explicitly the case with *Conquests of the Longbow*, play as the game's main character.⁶⁹ Yet as Giappone acknowledges, this arrangement is not unusual for adventure games, which often deploy puzzles,

⁶⁵ *Conquest Game Box*, back cover.

⁶⁶ Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, "Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 15, no.1 (2015): para. 25, http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/bonello_k.

⁶⁷ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

⁶⁸ As Daniel Vella writes about video games in general, the relationship between players and the characters they control is often more fraught than it might initially appear. For her part, Giappone argues that this tension is especially pronounced in adventure games, which often deliberately distance players from their avatars in order to frustrate their progress through the game's narrative. Players, as such, are often constructed as the alter egos of their player-characters rather than as the player-characters themselves. Cast into a managerial (and, at times, adversarial) relationship with the characters they ostensibly control, players are free to advise the player-character about how and when to act but have no guarantee that the player-character will heed their advice. The player-character in adventure games is thus both an asset and an impediment to players, allowing players to act in and on the game world, but only in ways that correspond to the player-character's sometimes idiosyncratic understanding of what is proper and permissible. To an extent, controlling the player character in adventure games becomes an exercise in hacking in the sense that players must confront and bypass the constraints of the game's systems as they are encoded in and manifested through the player-character. See Daniel Vella, "'It's A-Me/Mario!': Playing as a Ludic Character," *Foundations of Digital Games Conference Proceedings* 8 (2013): 31-38; and Giappone, "Self Reflexivity," para 24. For an extended discussion of the way this mechanic plays out in *Conquests of the Longbow*, see Moberly and Moberly, "Nine Men's Medievalisms," 706-9.

⁶⁹ Giappone, "Self Reflexivity," para. 11.

red herrings, and, in her words, “detours and delightful dead ends” to disrupt and thereby prolong their relatively straightforward and limited gameplay.⁷⁰ This arrangement, however, also fulfills another function in *Conquests of the Longbow*. Accentuated by the detached perspective of the game’s third-person graphics, it underscores the technological and temporal gulf that separates players from Robin Hood.

As we discuss in our 2019 chapter, players are interpellated into the fantasy of the game as modern rather than medieval subjects: high-tech consumers whose purchasing power grants them privileged access to what the back of the game’s box advertises as “Sierra’s richest, most complex game yet.”⁷¹ Players, as such, are afforded a very different form of agency than Robin himself. Privy to the centuries of cultural, economic, and technological development that have ostensibly culminated in games like *Conquests of the Longbow*, their heroic potential does not lie in their skill with a longbow, a quarterstaff, or any of the other activities with which Robin Hood is traditionally associated. Rather, their agency is a function of their ability to use the affordances of the game’s digital technologies to achieve what, in her introduction of the game’s hint book, Marx describes as *Conquests of the Longbow*’s ultimate achievement—which is to say, to piece together something like a solution to the larger historical and cultural puzzle of Robin and his lasting appeal.⁷²

Players thus embody a very different model of criminality than Robin Hood—a point that Marx makes clear in her discussion of software piracy in the introduction of the game’s manual. She begins, for example, by thanking all the players “who wrote . . . to express your support and agreement that piracy is wrong.”⁷³ As Marx continues, however, it becomes apparent that not all of her correspondents subscribe to this view: “There were also long and lively letters examining the whole issue of software piracy and copying,” she admits, adding that “one writer pointed out that it’s something a company has to take into account, the way a store takes into account a certain amount of shoplifting.”⁷⁴ Marx offers more or less the standard rebuttal for this argument. Addressing players in the second person, she makes the point that software piracy affects them as much as her: “I don’t see anyone condoning shoplifting on that basis,” she writes. “So let’s say a company adds to the price of the product to cover the losses caused by thousands and thousands of copies being pirated. That means that you, who PAY for this game, are PAYING for those pirates. Hardly fair, is it?”⁷⁵ Marx then directly implicates players in the problem: “Refuse to allow or participate in piracy. It may be hard to say ‘no’ to a friend who innocently asks for a copy. Instead,” she urges them, “invite him or her over to play it with you and explain why it’s wrong to make copies.”⁷⁶

Coming at the end of the manual’s introduction, this statement is telling in its overt emphasis on the player’s responsibilities and its implicit appeal to their sense of ethics and fair play. Although Marx explicitly associates players with the crime of software piracy, she portrays

⁷⁰ Giappone, “Self Reflexivity,” para. 7.

⁷¹ Moberly and Moberly, “Nine Men’s Medievalisms,” 708; *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

⁷² Marx, “A Game is Born,” 4.

⁷³ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 5.

⁷⁴ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 5, 6.

⁷⁵ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁷⁶ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

their involvement as relatively “innocent”—a consequence of the inability of one friend to refuse another rather than of greed or deliberate malice.⁷⁷ What is more, Marx attempts to enlist players’ help in addressing the problem as a first step towards a greater ethical “awareness and enlightenment,” a course of action that, if followed to its logical conclusion, will ultimately bring justice to the individuals whom she represents as the primary victims of the crime: the “creative people [who] work for long periods of time to put these games together.”⁷⁸ Software piracy, she writes, is “not just a matter of being illegal, it’s a matter of ethics. It’s also a matter of respect for me, my artists, my programmers, my composer, and everyone else whose creative labors made the game possible in the first place.”⁷⁹

Here, Marx’s appeal to players’ ethics anticipates the way that the game constructs players themselves. As becomes abundantly clear from the messages the game displays if players command Robin to perform an otherwise-prohibited action, *Conquests of the Longbow* is not only predisposed but programmed to treat players with suspicion. This expectation is particularly evident in the way that the game positions players in relationship to the issue of violence, sexual or otherwise, against women. One of the most persistent and troubling motifs of the game, players encounter the specter of this violence early and often. In fact, the “click-thru” published at the conclusion of the game’s manual explicitly involves players in such an incident as a means of introducing them to the game’s controls.⁸⁰ The click-thru leads players to Watling Street, where they encounter a peasant woman running for her life from a gruff, mail-clad soldier who is described as having “lechery ... in his black heart.” When players attempt to intervene, the Sheriff’s man tells them that he is arresting the woman for failure to pay her taxes: “I’ve already paid thrice this week,” she protests. To which he replies, “Don’t worry, wench, I’ll take my payment in other than coin.”

Whether or not players succeed in rescuing the peasant woman (the manual’s click-thru ends before telling players what to do), they find themselves accused of a similar sort of lechery in their interactions with Maid Marian. Invariably described in terms of her incomparable beauty and barely repressed sexuality, Marian first appears in a dream vision and then in the flesh in Sherwood Forest, when players are tasked with rescuing her from a member of the black-clad, militant order of monks that Prince John has established in the nearby Monastery in the Fens. In both cases (and, in fact, every time her name comes up), Robin is not shy about expressing his desire for Marian. Yet if players attempt to act on this desire by clicking on her using the game’s hand cursor, Robin rebukes them: “I shall lay no hand on this lady until I know she wished it as much as I,” he says. Much of the same happens when Robin finally consummates his relationship with Marian. “Take more than one kiss, my beloved,” Marian says, pulling him to the ground. “Take everything I have to offer.” A suggestive image of her lying prone and looking up adoringly at Robin (and also the player) appears. The screen, however, fades to black, and the game displays the following message: “Well, what did you expect? A man and a maid deserve SOME privacy.”

While this moment is undoubtedly meant to be humorous, it nevertheless underscores two very important aspects of the way players are constructed in both *Conquests of the Longbow* and

⁷⁷ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁷⁸ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6, 5.

⁷⁹ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁸⁰ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 22-23.

Marx's discussion of software piracy. The first is that players are expressly not Robin Hood. Despite the promotional text on the back cover of the game's box, they are constructed as both distinct from Robin Hood and in many ways unequal. Players, however, are also not the Sheriff's man on Watling Street, nor the black-clad monk sent to assassinate Marian in Sherwood Forest, nor the Abbot of St. Mary's, who is likewise defined by his lechery and propensity for violence against women. By implication, players are also not foreign thugs who resort to software piracy as a form of international purse-snatching, but at the same time, they are not entirely innocent of the crime either. The second point is that the crucial difference between all these extremes is primarily articulated as one of experience. Unlike Robin Hood and Marx herself, who appear in both the game and its documentation as established figures, players are constructed as new in almost every category that matters—which is to say, new to the game, new to the technology of the game, new to the particulars of Robin Hood and his legend, and new to the way that these particulars play out in the space of the game itself. Players, as such, are constructed as in the process of becoming either Robin or Marx or their opposites as a consequence of their yet-to-be determined propensity towards crime and criminality—an underlying ethical orientation that emerges in the way that they approach the doubled problem of consuming the content and the technology of the game.

* * *

In this respect, *Conquests of the Longbow* represents a high-tech iteration of what Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl describe as one of the most persistent and contradictory forms of medievalist production: works of medievalism intended for children and young-adult audiences. As Pugh and Weisl write, the authors of such works have traditionally turned to the Middle Ages and, in particular, the ideals of chivalry and courtly love as a means of introducing boys to the obligations of manhood.⁸¹ In doing so, these authors often promote a version of the Middle Ages as an adult world that is invariably constructed in the idealized and necessarily bowdlerized image of what they imagine their contemporary young audiences as wanting.⁸² The result, Pugh and Weisl conclude, is that “literature and history originally composed for medieval adults is rewritten for post-medieval children, ostensibly to model exemplary stories of the past, but also to diminish the past: what was once the realm of men is now colonized by boys as a period of innocent and ennobling play.”⁸³

Knight offers a similar assessment of depictions of Robin Hood in children's literature in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Noting the proliferation of Robin Hood narratives meant for young readers in the first three decades of the twentieth century, he writes:

Stories about a boyish and English Robin Hood were felt to be appropriate reading for the young; the healthy activities of Robin and his friends, politically neutered as he largely was by his gentrification, were a model for young English boys and also, no doubt, girls. And if the coded phallic symbolism and the overt homosociality of the stories entertained the young readers in darker directions, that

⁸¹ Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 50-51.

⁸² Pugh and Weisl, 51-52.

⁸³ Pugh and Weisl, 50.

was hardly something that teachers were likely to be conscious of or blamed for in those days before depth readings of texts.⁸⁴

Although Knight portrays the bowdlerization of Robin Hood and his legend as largely unconscious, his point is well-taken. Whether deliberately or not, authors like Pierce Egan the Younger, Howard Pyle, and Louis Rhead (among any number of others) depict Robin Hood as emblematic of an older, timeless set of values through which the development of their young audiences in the present could be simultaneously directed and measured.⁸⁵

As Pugh and Weisl write, however, this is not necessarily a detriment, as works of medievalism intended for children and young adults are not as much concerned with the past as they are with the present and the future. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of such works is neither historical accuracy nor authenticity. Instead, they seek to inspire in their young readers what Pugh and Weisl describe as a “medievalized mode of reading, in which the space between past and present collapses and the two are bound together.”⁸⁶ In doing so, these works aspire to help their audiences “make sense of themselves in the alien world of the present, through the fantasy of the past.”⁸⁷ As Pugh and Weisl explain, “neither today’s children nor yesterday’s children are intrinsically innocent to the extent to which the past can pollute the present; on the contrary, the past allows children to consider their present lives, not through the perversity of an eternal innocence, but in the quest for knowledge—of the self and of the other—that constitutes one of reading’s greatest pleasures.”⁸⁸

Understood in this sense, Pugh, Weisl, and Knight’s approach to medievalist works intended for young audiences speaks explicitly to Marx’s project, which, building on contemporary anxieties about hacking and youth culture, similarly constructs the game’s otherwise naive audience as an ambivalent potential that can be systematically refined through older, heroic examples. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that an acute sense of separation informs almost every aspect of *Conquests of the Longbow*’s gameplay, including the forced, third-person perspective of its camera, the sometimes awkward mechanics of its point-and-click interface, and even the romance between Robin and Marian, which players are asked to facilitate but in which they are not allowed to participate. Following Pugh, Weisl, and Knight’s formulation, the challenge of *Conquests of the Longbow* is not simply to use the high technology of the game’s interface to collapse the otherwise insurmountable temporal distance that separates players from Robin Hood, but to do so in accordance with Robin’s ostensibly timeless values. As we discuss elsewhere, this imperative is perhaps most apparent in the various “arcade sequences” that players encounter at key points in the game.⁸⁹ Taking inspiration from what Rowland and Jeffery Singman describe as the fundamentally ludic heritage of the Robin Hood tales, these sequences consist of several arcade-style mini-games that are loosely based on many of the activities and contests that,

⁸⁴ Knight, *Robin Hood*, 174.

⁸⁵ Knight, *Robin Hood*, 175.

⁸⁶ Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 61.

⁸⁷ Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 62.

⁸⁸ Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 62.

⁸⁹ Moberly and Moberly, “Nine Men’s Medievalisms,” 708-9.

if not explicitly associated with Robin Hood, are at least relevant to the game's imagined Middle Ages.⁹⁰

The quarterstaves mini-game, for example, gives players direct control of Robin's actions as he faces off against a black-clad, "militant" monk whom he encounters on the road to Nottingham. The key to besting the monk lies in what the game's manual describes as players' "reflexes, timing, and visual skills"—their ability to use the mouse, the keyboard, or, if they have one, a joystick to land blows while simultaneously anticipating and parrying the monk's attacks.⁹¹ The quarterstaves mini-game, however, foregrounds the fact that the game's arcade sequences are as much moral as physical challenges. This becomes clear in the moments leading up to the duel, after players intercept the monk and demand that he turn over his robe and possessions. When the monk refuses, players are left with only one alternative: they select the bow-and-arrow cursor and order Robin to kill the monk. Robin, however, does not shoot but gives the monk one last chance to comply, which he again refuses: "I fear nothing but the judgement of God," the monk responds and then, by way of explanation, adds, "I loathe a dishonorable death, but you're a dishonorable foe." Robin is taken aback by this insult, but before he can object, the monk points out that the fight is hardly fair: "You have a longbow and I a staff," he says, "You call this an even match?"

The monk then challenges Robin to single combat with the quarterstaff. At this point, the game intervenes. A dialog box appears at the bottom center of the screen, giving players the choice to either click "aye" and consent to the duel or click "nay" and shoot the monk. The most expedient choice is, of course, to click "nay." Doing so not only saves players the trouble of the quarterstaves duel, which is somewhat clumsily implemented, but also spares them the tedium of the medievaesque dialogue that prefaces the bout. It quickly becomes clear, however, that this is not what the game wants. Robin has no sooner shot and killed the monk than an ominous series of chords sound, and Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet emerge from the surrounding forest. "Master!" Friar Tuck exclaims, "We heard the Monk issue his challenge and hurried to see you fight him." Robin responds that the monk was beneath his notice. "I've no time to waste on Prince John's lackey," he says. "Now I mean to take his robe." While this explanation might sound entirely reasonable to players, Will Scarlet is less than sympathetic: "It was a fair challenge," he tells Robin. "I would have fought him if you lacked the stomach for it."

Addressed more to players than to Robin himself, Scarlet's rebuke speaks to what Giappone describes as one of the central tensions in the adventure game genre—the desire, on the one hand, of players to progress through the game's content as quickly as possible and the imperative, on the other, to impede or interrupt their progress in order to make the game appear larger and more involved.⁹² Scarlet's rebuke, however, also speaks to one of the most common ways that hacking, gaming, and any number of other ostensibly delinquent aspects of digital culture are represented in the popular media—namely, the stereotype that a clever hack trumps all else, including inconvenient concerns about what "Beware: Hackers at Play" describes as the "conventional morality" of earlier generations.⁹³ Couched as it is in the question of honor, fair

⁹⁰ Rowland, "And Now Begins Our Game," 175-77; Jeffery Singman, *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 166.

⁹¹ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 18.

⁹² Giappone, "Self Reflexivity," paras 19-35.

⁹³ Marbach, et al., "Beware," 45.

play, and sportsmanship, Scarlet’s rebuke thus recalls much of the same values that Marx invokes at the end of her introduction to the game’s manual when she writes that software piracy is not just a “matter of being illegal” or a “matter of ethics,” but ultimately a “matter of respect for me, my artists, my programmers, my composer, and everyone else whose creative labors made the game possible in the first place.”⁹⁴ Which is to say, software piracy represents an injustice against what, in the larger context of both *Conquests of the Longbow* and the gaming industry itself, counts as the ultimate worthy adversary: the various designers and developers whose labor is congealed in the obstacles and puzzles players encounter—the scores upon scores of militant monks who seek to question, challenge, and, if possible, defeat players at every turn.

A similar dynamic is arguably also at play in *Conquests of the Longbow*’s copy-protection schemes. As with many other games published at the time, *Conquests of the Longbow* requires players to use clues printed in its game manual in order to pass key checkpoints in the game. Yet this is rarely a matter of call and response—of turning to, say, page thirteen and providing the third word in the fourth paragraph. In keeping with many of Sierra Entertainment’s other games, *Conquests of the Longbow* instead integrates its copy protection into its gameplay and puzzles. A case in point can be found in the full-color chart of twelve royal coats of arms that comprises the manual’s centerfold.⁹⁵ At first glance, these illustrations appear to be only tangentially related to Robin Hood and his legend. Taken from the “Tudor Atlas of 1611 [as] compiled and edited by John Speed,” they include coats of arms from various royal dynasties that played a part in British history up to the time of Richard the Lionheart, including “The Kings of Ireland,” “The Danish Kings,” and “The King of Man.”⁹⁶ The purpose of these illustrations, however, becomes clear on day eight of the game, when Marian asks Robin to deliver a coded scroll to Queen Eleanor’s spy who will be attending the Nottingham Faire disguised as a traveling scholar. Worried that Prince John will also have agents in the crowd, Marian tells players that Robin will be able to identify Eleanor’s spy by asking him to display a coat of arms randomly selected from one of the twelve printed in the manual. On the day of the fair, however, players discover that there are three different scholars wandering the Faire’s various stalls and attractions. While all respond similarly to Robin’s queries about the coat of arms, only one is Queen Eleanor’s man and therefore displays the correct image. The result is a tag-like mini-game in which players must not only identify the scholars from amongst the many NPCs who wander the faire, but use the game’s point-and-click interface to chase them through the crowds until they get close enough to ask them about the coat of arms.

Players encounter a more extreme version of this mechanic in the game’s gemstone puzzle, which occurs soon after they defeat the militant monk in the quarterstaves duel and obtain his robe and other possessions: a small, silvered flute and a red leather pouch containing nine distinct gemstones. Disguised in the monk’s robes, players travel to the Monastery in the Fens located in the marshlands to the southwest of Nottingham. Unable to cross the boggy ground, players use the militant monk’s flute to summon a small skiff piloted by a second, black-clad monk. When players arrive, they are greeted by a gatekeeper who demands that they prove their bona fides by producing what he refers to obliquely as the “tokens you bear for the guardian of the gate”—the silvered flute and the small red pouch of gemstones. The gatekeeper, however, is not satisfied by the tokens:

⁹⁴ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 6.

⁹⁵ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 12-13.

⁹⁶ Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 12-13.

“You must prove your knowledge of the lore of the gemstones,” he tells players, explaining that he will pose three riddles that they must answer correctly by selecting the corresponding gemstones from the pouch. “Here is your first riddle,” the monk says, and the game’s third-person interface fades away and is replaced by a mini-game in which the text of the gatekeeper’s riddles appears above a top-down view of the gemstones arranged haphazardly atop the open pouch. The mouse cursor appears as a large hand (presumably Robin’s) with a pointed finger that players use to select the correct sequences of gemstones. In order to do so, however, they must first consult the game’s manual, which contains a lavishly illustrated chart, complete with illuminated letters, that lists the various traits associated with each gemstone below a numbered image of the stones as they appear in the mini-game. Yet as players discover to their chagrin, the traits published in the manual do not match the exact phrasing of the gatekeeper’s riddles, but instead serve as a hermeneutic guide which players must use to select the correct sequence of stones based on context clues.

Conquests of the Longbow’s copy protection thus requires players to engage in a mode of gameplay that explicitly recalls the way that Marx describes her creative and critical methodology in the introduction to the game’s hint book. Writing that she is obsessed with the past and with the “Medieval time period in general,” she tells readers that she is “fascinated with the details of how people lived their lives, how they thought and acted, what they ate and wore” and “with ruins, by ancient writing and tantalizing hints of ancient knowledge.”⁹⁷ Accordingly, she describes her design process as an exercise in authentically reimagining Robin Hood through the artistic and scholarly expedient of “mix[ing] legend and history”—of studiously researching, copying, and ultimately reassembling the component pieces of centuries of cultural production to produce a version of Robin Hood and his particulars that is not only coherent and recognizable, but also somehow better: an improvement over everything that came before.

As Marx relates, this design process resulted in a wealth of materials above and beyond those that she ultimately included in the game, materials such as a wealth of preliminary sketches and treatments, some of which are included in *Conquests of the Longbow*’s hint book and “three 3-inch binders and two 2-inch binders ... packed full of hundreds of pages of documentation.”⁹⁸ Although the game’s manual is not nearly as thick nor involved as Marx’s binders, it nevertheless presents players with a similar conundrum: a somewhat disjointed collection of materials drawn from folklore, fiction, history, and any number of other sources. The game’s copy-protection schemes thus confront players with one of the central dilemmas that not only informs Marx’s creative process, but arguably also the larger debate over hacking and similar activities. This is, of course, the question that lies at the heart of Brand’s famous truism “information wants to be free”—the question of how to ethically produce value from knowledge that has become much easier to access as a result of advancements in digital technologies and distribution systems.⁹⁹ Taking a cue from Levy’s Hacker Ethic, the game’s copy protection schemes presents this dilemma as a heroic endeavor. Citing the threat of Prince John and his minions, *Conquests of the Longbow*

⁹⁷ Marx, “A Game is Born,” 4.

⁹⁸ Marx, “A Game is Born,” 16.

⁹⁹ Stewart Brand is widely credited with coining the phrase “information wants to be free.” For a discussion of the context of Brand’s use of the phrase and its wider implications, see Stephen Levy, “Hackers at 30: ‘Hackers’ and ‘Information Wants to Be Free,’” *Wired*, November 21, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/story/hackers-at-30-hackers-and-information-wants-to-be-free/>.

requires players to validate their right to participate in the mysteries of the game's imagined past via their ability to piece together something resembling a coherent answer to its challenges from the otherwise disjointed fragments of history, fiction, and folklore contained in its manual.

It is important to recognize, however, that the approach that Marx encodes as heroic and ethical through the game's copy protection schemes is much less radical than the types of interventions advocated by Brand, Levy, and other early digital activists. Rather than advocating an open sharing of ideas and content, she defaults to a version of authorial and artistic privilege that is grounded in what Ina Ferris describes as the underlying ideology that not only informs late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism, but which is arguably also present in many contemporary approaches to history.¹⁰⁰ This is the view that the past (medieval or otherwise) represents a game of sorts: an immense puzzle or riddle that, when pieced together, establishes the historian, artist, or game designer as both a modern and, perhaps more importantly, a moral subject—a kind of cultural critic who possesses the discernment, the intellectual ability, and, in Marx's case, the creative acumen to produce something like a coherent answer to the problems of the present from otherwise inscrutable “ruins and ... tantalizing hints of lost knowledge” from the past.¹⁰¹ The result is that knowledge becomes the providence of the select few who, regardless of technology, possess the requisite expertise to unlock secrets which would otherwise be lost to the unlettered masses.¹⁰²

Understood in this sense, the various puzzles and riddles associated with *Conquests of the Longbow*'s copy protection schemes reverse the temporal and ludic prerogatives of the game's arcade sequences. While the game's arcade sequences ask players to use the tools of the present—mouse, keyboard, and joystick—to demonstrate their mastery of a number of ostensibly medieval performances that have become synonymous with Robin Hood in the popular imagination, the puzzles and riddles associated with the game's copy-protection schemes require players to do the opposite: to use their contemporary knowledge of Robin Hood's medieval past to guide him to content and locations that are otherwise beyond his reach. Rather than immersing players in the performances that are advertised on the back of the game's box as comprising the “legend of the longbow,” the game's copy-protection mechanics demand that players engage Robin Hood in what is essentially a modern performance—a quasi-antiquarian methodology that, in keeping with the way Ferris understands the movement, requires players to piece together a coherent account of Robin Hood and his legend from the game's otherwise disjointed elements.¹⁰³ In both cases, however, the goal is the same. Following Pugh and Weisl's formulation, the game's arcade and copy-protection schemes require players to simultaneously work backwards from their position as modern subjects and forwards from Robin's position as a medieval subject to collapse the sovereign differences that are imagined as separating them.

¹⁰⁰ Ina Ferris, “Unhinging the Past: Joseph Strutt and the Antiquarian Poetics of the Piece,” in *Romantic Antiquarianism*, ed. Noah Heringman and Crystal B. Lake (June 2014), <https://romantic-circles.org/index.php/praxis/antiquarianism/ferris>, para. 6; Marx, “A Game is Born,” 4.

¹⁰¹ Ferris, “Unhinging the Past,” para. 14; Marx, “A Game is Born,” 4.

¹⁰² Moberly and Moberly, “Nine Men's Medievalisms,” 731-32.

¹⁰³ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover. Ferris, “Unhinging the Past,” para 6.

* * *

Conquests of the Longbow goes a step further, however. As with many other aspects of its gameplay, its copy-protection schemes also measure the technological aptitude of its players: their ability to use the affordance of the game's point-and-click interface to translate the ostensibly low-tech, "authentic" medieval materials reproduced in the game's manual into workable solutions to the challenges they encounter in-game.¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, it is not surprising that many of the ludic performances that inform the game's copy-protection schemes explicitly recall those that are often associated with hacking in the popular imagination. The gemstone challenge, for example, takes place in the context of a larger quest that requires players to break into the Monastery in the Fens and recover the Druid Hand Scroll for Maid Marian. In order to accomplish this task, players must first steal the credentials from a member of what is arguably the game's equivalent of Levy's digital priesthood: the order of black-clad militant monks that Prince John has established to further his dark designs. Hence, the quarterstaves duel on Watling Street, which not only allows players to spoof the identity of one of these monks by donning his black robes, but also provides them with access to what the gatekeeper explicitly describes as the "tokens" that validate the monk's identity—his flute and gemstones. Players must then use these tokens to defeat the initial two layers of security that protect the monastery and its secrets from illicit intrusions. In what is arguably the medieval equivalent of phone phreaking, they must blow the correct notes on the monk's reed flute to summon the small boat and its experienced guide to ferry them through the otherwise treacherous morass of the fens.¹⁰⁵ That accomplished, they must present both tokens to the gatekeeper in the proper order—first the flute and then the pouch of stones—to gain access to the gemstone puzzle. Implemented as a medievalized, low-tech approximation of the password-protection schemes that feature so prominently in accounts of hacking, this puzzle requires players to use the privileged information they obtain from another source, the game's manual, to crack the monastery's passcode and access to its secrets, including Marian's scroll, which players are ultimately able to obtain after engaging in numerous acts of what might be described as social engineering, including spilling a cup of wine on the Prior himself.

Marian's scroll in turn grants players access to what, in *Conquests of the Longbow's* hint book, Marx describes as the equivalent to the operating system upon which the ludic exploits of Robin Hood and his legend is predicated: "the forest itself."¹⁰⁶ As she acknowledges, the notion of the medieval outlaw is in many ways constructed through the parallel notion of the forest as a refuge that exists outside of and to some extent prior to civilization.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, Marx justifies her decision to incorporate Druidic elements into the game as a means of both acknowledging and affording players access to this potential via the expedient of Maid Marian. As she writes,

¹⁰⁴ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

¹⁰⁵ Early telephone hackers (or self-described "phone phreaks") discovered that they could make free long-distance phone calls by emulating the analog carrier signals employed by the automatic switches of the time. In one of the more celebrated of these exploits, John Draper discovered that a toy whistle contained in boxes of Cap'n Crunch cereal was able to perfectly match the 2600-hertz frequency signal that AT&T used to designate long-distance lines that were unused. On phone phreaking in general, see *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Phreaking," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phreaking>, last modified Mar. 16, 2025. On AT&T's use of the 2600-hertz carrier signal, see *Wikipedia*, s.v. "2600 hertz," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2600_hertz, last modified Sept. 4, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Marx, "A Game is Born," 9.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, "A Game is Born," 9-10.

The forest was the only thing that made the existence of a Medieval outlaw possible. An outlaw was literally that—a man outside the law. No law-abiding citizen was allowed to help an outlaw in any way.... There was nothing left except the forest.

The Druids worshipped many trees and had lots of forest lore that fit beautifully with my desire to make Sherwood Forest something more than a backdrop. And also gave me the special twist I wanted for Marian.¹⁰⁸

Symptomatic of the facility with which, in her own words, Marx “[mixes] history and legend,” the game allows players to literally and figuratively hack into what some scholars have postulated as representing the very roots of his legend: his long association with the folklore tradition of the Green Man.¹⁰⁹ In order to do so, however, players must engage in a critical and interpretive praxis that, as discussed above, has as much (if not more) in common with the way that Ferris describes the antiquarian approach to history than with the pagan rituals that Marian references when she dispatches Robin into Sherwood Forest to seek out the Green Man’s protection.¹¹⁰

This is specifically the case with the three riddles that the Green Man poses to players in return for granting them his aid. The staging of this challenge explicitly recalls the way that, according to Curtis Gruenler, riddle contests play out in *Piers Ploughman* and any number of other late medieval texts. The key to solving the Green Man’s riddles, however, does not lie in what Gruenler describes as the textual hermeneutics that inform these contests—an “enigmatic reading” that requires readers to demonstrate their “folly” and inadequacy in the face of the larger spiritual truths that inform the riddles and which the riddles are designed to teach.¹¹¹ The Green Man’s riddles are instead comprised of a series of disconnected clues that, while proffered in suitably medievaesque language, suggest no greater theological or moral connection above and beyond their immediate textual proximity. Accordingly, their solutions do not lie in any of the high-minded or romantic concepts that one might expect to encounter in a game about Robin Hood—ideals such as duty, honor, chivalry, or love. Rather, the solutions to the Green Man’s riddles involve only a handful of relatively pedestrian objects such as “fur,” “beehive,” “wood,” “cheese,” and “coin”

¹⁰⁸ Marx, “A Game is Born,” 9-10. As Valerie B. Johnson writes, greenwood-space in the Robin Hood narrative tradition is often gendered as exclusively male. To an extent, Marx’s explicit association of Sherwood Forest with Maid Marian is a departure from this tradition. At the same time, though, Marian spends much of her time in the game, to borrow Sherron Lux’s phrasing, “hedged in” by the forest. While Marx constructs the forest as the source of her agency, Marian can only exercise this agency through Robin Hood, and her eventual return from the wilderness to the “civilized” world of Richard’s court likewise depends on the outcome of Robin Hood’s efforts. See Valerie B. Johnson, “A Forest of Her Own: Greenwood-Space and the Forgotten Female Characters of the Robin Hood Tradition,” in *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21-39; and Sherron Lux, “And the ‘Reel’ Maid Marian?,” in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 158.

¹⁰⁹ Lady Raglan, “The ‘Green Man’ in Church Architecture,” *Folklore* 50, no. 1 (1939): 45-57; and Brandon S. Centerwall, “The Name of the Green Man,” *Folklore* 108 (1997): 25-33. On the Green Man in the Robin Hood tradition specifically, see Lorraine Stock, “Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood,” in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 239-249, esp. 241, as Stock observes that Centerwall offers a much more careful and nuanced affirmation of Raglan’s original conclusion.

¹¹⁰ Ferris, “Unhinging the Past,” para 6.

¹¹¹ Curtis Gruenler, “How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*,” *Speculum* 85, no. 3 (2010): 630.

that, when taken in context of the corresponding clues, are suggestive merely of a kind of medievalized consumer culture.

What is more, players do not provide the answers to the Green Man's riddles via anything resembling the dialogic process that, according to Gruenler, was integral to the way that riddles and riddle contests functioned in medieval texts.¹¹² Instead, *Conquests of the Longbow* requires players to input their answers through its Druidic hand-code interface, which transforms the palm and fingers of Robin's medieval hand into a digital interface: a matched keyboard and display that, with its green and white text, recalls the command-line interfaces that typified many early operating systems. The Green Man's riddles, as such, invert what Gruenler describes as the allegorical function of the medieval riddle in *Piers Ploughman* and many of the other texts he discusses.¹¹³ Instead of interpellating players into the larger theological or moral issues that intersect in Robin Hood and his legend, these riddles instead implicate them in the technologies that, as part of the game's copy-protection schemes, validate their right as modern, high-tech subjects to participate in the game's fantastic version of Robin Hood's medieval past in accordance with the critical and interpretive praxis that Marx promotes in the game's hint book.

The Green Man's riddles thus grant players something like command-line, administrative access to the power of Sherwood Forest via the codes—the Druidic names of its trees—published in the game's manual. This, in turn, allows Robin to interact with the natural world of the game, which is to say, with the underlying digital code through which *Conquests of the Longbow* invokes the forest and every other aspect of its gameplay, in a manner that is much more akin to what Levy and other advocates of hacker culture sought to redeem as the “true” performances that comprise hacking, as opposed to the sort of criminal undertakings that Robin must employ to gain access to the Druid Hand Scroll and its powers in the first place. The game's Druidic hand-code mechanic, in other words, allows players to use snippets of code to repurpose the underlying power and functionality of the forest in ways that are explicitly imagined as serving a greater social good.

* * *

Taken together, then, the quests and incidents leading up to and surrounding *Conquests of the Longbow*'s gemstone puzzle and its Druidic hand-code mechanic reprise a narrative trajectory that, by the time of game's release in 1991, had become synonymous with the hacker in the popular imagination due in large part to movies such as *WarGames*—a trajectory in which the youthful exuberance that leads the hacker figure to commit early, criminal indiscretions is transformed into something resembling social consciousness via a series of larger events in which he unwittingly finds himself implicated.¹¹⁴ The game, for instance, introduces Marian's quest to obtain the Druid Hand Scroll at the very moment when Robin's burgeoning romance with her requires him to employ his skills as an outlaw for a greater purpose than simply providing sustenance for his band of exiles in Sherwood Forest. Likewise, the subsequent quests in this chain and its associated incidents, including the gemstone puzzle and the Green Man's riddles, serve to validate Robin's

¹¹² Gruenler, “How to Read Like a Fool,” 592-93.

¹¹³ Gruenler, “How to Read Like a Fool,” 614-22.

¹¹⁴ As becomes clear in the climactic scene in *WarGames*, this narrative is as much about the socialization and redemption of the technology as it is the individual; by the end of the film, both Matthew Broderick's character and the networked W. O. P. R. mainframe are shown to be capable of not only learning valuable social skills, but of using these lessons to effect change in otherwise established, moribund institutions.

(and thereby the player's) access to the ostensibly timeless mysteries of the game first in the form of the Druid Hand Scroll and then through the hand-code ability itself. In doing so, the quests, puzzles, and riddles associated with the game's copy protection engage players in a larger didactic project, one that is explicitly designed to teach them how to use the otherwise criminal potential of the game's digital technology for the larger social good of restoring Richard the Lionheart to his rightful place on the throne and remedying the injustices of the Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John's other lackeys.

Thus, while *Conquests of the Longbow* asks players to variously spoof, crack, and hack their way into the particulars of Robin Hood and his legend, it does so in the name of the larger historical and interpretive project of putting the past back together as it should have been—of restoring, repairing, and replacing otherwise missing or stolen pieces of the past until something approximating its lost truth has been achieved. It is important to recognize, however, that the overarching goal of much of this quasi-historicist play is not to repair the past, but to validate the relationship between the player and the timeless values that, as a kind of code, are imagined as connecting past and present in an unbroken continuum. Understood in this sense, what is at question is the player's relationship to the problem of the present via the exemplars of the past. In *Conquests of the Longbow*, this is the problem that troubles both Marx's introduction to the game's hint book and her discussion of software piracy in the game's manual—namely, the problem of how to use the ostensibly revolutionary affordances of the game's digital high technology to exploit the aesthetic, economic, and cultural potentials of Robin Hood and any similar traditions while simultaneously preventing this technology from being used for the opposite purpose.

The answer that Marx offers represents a return in and of itself: a retrospective mode of gameplay that requires players to work backwards from what, in the game's manual, Marx represents as our current state of knowledge about Robin Hood and his legend in order to piece together an outcome that is in many respects never in question—the restoration of Richard the Lionheart to his proper place on the throne and therefore in history. What is more, the game asks players to affect this restoration through a kind of quasi-antiquarian textual practice, one that, in keeping with Ferris's understanding of the movement, asks players to demonstrate their status as privileged, modern, and arguably high-tech subjects through their ability to piece together coherent answers to the riddles of the past based on clues that they discover in its otherwise disjointed remnants.¹¹⁵ In so doing, *Conquests of the Longbow* implicates players in what Pugh and Weisl describe as a “*coeval*” relationship with the past—a relationship that, as they write about medievalism in children's and young adult literature in general, is designed to “help [players] make sense of themselves in the alien world of the present, through a fantasy vision of the past.”¹¹⁶

Conquests of the Longbow thus engages players in a quest for continuity. As exemplified by the anachronistic spectacle of Robin's medieval hand transformed into a command-line interface, the game asks players to collapse the sovereign difference between the past and the present—to use the emerging and implicitly youthful potentials of the game's high technology and the ethos of divergent thinking implicit in its associated hacker-like performances to reproduce what Marx represents as the authentic version of Robin Hood and his “Merrie Olde Englande.”

¹¹⁵ Ferris, “Unhinging the Past,” para. 6.

¹¹⁶ Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 61-62. Here, Pugh and Weisl are drawing on Catherine Brown's work, “In the Middle,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 553.

Staged through the game’s puzzles, its arcade sequences, and its copy-protection schemes, the result is not exactly a “medievalized mode of reading” but what we argue is a medievalized mode of play—a mode of ludic engagement that, in keeping with Pugh and Weisl’s formulation, scores players on their ability to produce something resembling progress in the present tense of the game from the lessons of Robin Hood’s legendary past.

* * *

Conquests of the Longbow makes this expectation explicit in its concluding moments. Captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham after a long winter, Robin and his men are spared execution by King Richard, who returns just in time to put a stop to the proceedings. Confronted with conflicting accounts of Robin’s deeds, Richard orders that a trial be held to determine Robin’s relative innocence or guilt. In the animated sequence that follows, Maid Marian and many of the minor characters in the game appear—or fail to appear, if players fail to protect them—to testify about the various deeds and misdeeds that players committed in the course of raising Richard’s ransom. Their testimony in turn determines which of the game’s possible endings players receive. In the best-case scenario, Richard awards Robin Marian’s hand in marriage and dubs him the “Earl of Huntingdon,” while in the worst-case scenario, Richard condemns him to the gallows. The other cases fall between these extremes according to the extent to which players satisfy the game’s ethical objectives.¹¹⁷

In its final moments, then, *Conquests of the Longbow* restages one of the scenes that has become synonymous with accounts of the hacker-as-outlaw-hero in popular culture: the legal proceedings in which the hacker’s otherwise clandestine activities are revealed and adjudicated, and through which the hacker is either condemned or reintegrated into the existing order. In the strictest legal sense, such proceedings rarely exonerate the hacker, as the facts of the case are seldom in question. Yet as with the trial that concludes the game, what is more often at question is the relative criminality of the hacker’s misdeeds. Take, for example, the case of one of the most famous Robin Hood hackers, Mark Abene, who operated under the pseudonym Phiber Optik.¹¹⁸ In 1993, Abene pleaded guilty to single counts of conspiracy and breaking into the Southwestern Bell computer system, although he and the four other members of the Masters of Deception hacking group were allegedly also involved in several other serious incidents, including a 1989 attack on a critical New York City Schools computer system and “a scheme,” as *Time* magazine reported, “to create their own bogus credit bureau that would—for the right price—alter people’s credit histories.”¹¹⁹ For Abene’s supporters, though, such shenanigans were of secondary importance to his role as an outspoken advocate for digital reform, a “techno savior” who dared

¹¹⁷ For example, if players save Marian and obtain the full amount of Richard’s ransom, but mistreat or otherwise fail to aid the game’s minor characters, then Richard offers Robin a job as Royal Forester but explicitly denies Robin’s request to marry Marian: “She is a noble lady,” the king says, “and you are only a yeoman. I cannot grant this request.”

¹¹⁸ *Time* magazine, for example, described Abene as “a digital Robin Hood” in its 1995 piece on his release from prison. See Joshua Quittner, “Hacker Homecoming,” *Time*, Jan. 23, 1995, 61. For an overview of Abene’s stint as the hacker Phiber Optik and his subsequent career as a security researcher, see Wikipedia, s.v. “Mark Abene,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Abene, last modified Jan. 26, 2025. For a contemporary account of Abene’s participation in the hacking group Masters of Deception, see Michelle Slatalla and Joshua Quittner, *Masters of Deception: The Gang that Ruled Cyberspace* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995).

¹¹⁹ Trip Gabriel, “Reprogramming a Convicted Hacker: To His On-Line Friends, Phiber Optik is a Virtual Hero,” *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 1995, 25-26; Quittner, “Hacker Homecoming,” 61.

speak truth to power and was subsequently martyred for his efforts.¹²⁰ Abene explicitly embraced this role upon his release from federal prison in 1995: “I haven’t been corrected or reformed,” he famously declared. “In my opinion, there was nothing wrong with me in the first place.”¹²¹

Yet, despite his lack of remorse, Abene was ultimately reintegrated into society. In what is now a relatively standard trajectory from hacker-as-outsider, outlaw-hero to hacker-as-establishment-figure, Abene leveraged his “legend” into a career as a cyber-security consultant, serving the same interests of which he was so outspokenly critical. Much of the same happens in *Conquests of the Longbow*. Despite the fact that Robin refuses to repent for his offenses against the crown, all but the worst of the game’s possible endings see him reintegrated into the system that oppressed him. Likewise, the deciding factor in each of these outcomes is how Robin’s actions are received by the public and represented afterwards. Indeed, the question of whether Robin receives a noble title or a position as Richard’s Royal Forester does not depend on whether he rescues Marian, raises the gold for Richard’s ransom, or comes to the aid of the game’s other minor characters. These are fairly obvious choices and ultimately determine whether or not Robin will face the gallows. Robin’s earldom, however, depends on a number of seemingly minor interactions—for example, on how well he compensates the various travelers on Watling Street for their possessions, or how many coins he gives to the beggars at Nottingham Faire, or how effectively he assists various peasants. While such decisions have little or no discernible effect on Robin’s immediate prospects or the game’s overall narrative trajectory, they have a significant impact on his legend, or, more specifically, on the game’s final accounting of players’ performances of Robin’s legend, which, in keeping with the spectacle of contemporary hacker trials, plays out in narrative form at the end of the game, as witness after witness appears (or fails to appear) to testify to Robin’s endeavors on his or her behalf.

Players’ seemingly inconsequential decisions also have an outsized effect on the social structures and political institutions that comprise the game’s imagined version of twelfth-century Nottingham. For example, if the game ends with Robin’s execution, then the Sheriff of Nottingham, the Abbot of St. Mary’s, and the Militant Prior are largely exonerated of their crimes and maintain their positions of privilege. Conversely, if players achieve the game’s ideal ending, then the Sheriff is arrested for treason, the Abbot and the Prior are exiled, and Little John and Friar Tuck are appointed as the Sheriff of Nottingham and the Abbot of St. Mary’s, respectively. The game’s other endings produce a mixture of these results, again according to the choices players make in the game.¹²² *Conquests of the Longbow* thus makes in its final moments much of the same point that Marx makes at the conclusion of her discussion of software piracy in the game’s manual. By explicitly linking Robin’s fate to that of his allies and adversaries, the game foregrounds the fact that the decisions players make in the process of consuming the game have unforeseen

¹²⁰ Gabriel, “Reprogramming,” 26. See also, Julian Dibbell, “Phiber Optik Goes to Prison,” *Wired*, April 1, 1994, <https://www.wired.com/1994/04/phiber-optik-goes-to-prison/>. As Joshua Quittner, co-author of a popular account of the Masters of Deception and their exploits, told the *Washington Post*, Abene was “kind of the poster boy for the digital underground because he was arrogant, because he said what he thought, because he talked to the press.” See Paula Span, “Modem Operandi: Phiber Optik, the Bad Boy Hacker, Out of Stir and On-Line,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 1995, B4.

¹²¹ Span, “Modem Operandi,” B4.

¹²² For a complete account of the game’s various endings, see MrWhitman, “Ending Variations Conquests of the Longbow,” *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZf8_K67MuQ, Aug. 21, 2011.

consequences not only for friends who innocently ask for a copy of the game, but for any number of people whom players have not even met, including but certainly not limited to all of the designers, programmers, and composers whose labor is congealed in the game.

The irony, of course, is that none of the game's multiple endings produce anything resembling justice for the game's primary villain, Prince John. Although it is clear that Maid Marian, Queen Eleanor, and King Richard are all very much aware of his treachery, he is never put on trial nor called to account for his actions. In fact, he ends the game in much of the same way he begins it, as a shadowy, off-screen presence whose dark ambitions simultaneously threaten the ostensibly natural social and economic hierarchies that constitute the game's version of "Merrie Olde Englande" while also paradoxically validating these hierarchies by inspiring Robin Hood and his compatriots to take corrective action. It is tempting, in this sense, to read Prince John as a metaphor for what Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter describe as one of the principal culprits behind the scourge of software piracy: high-tech capitalism itself, particularly as it is manifested in the mainstream gaming industry. As they write, the gaming industry is directly responsible for producing many of the symptoms that Marx cites in her discussion of software piracy. On one hand, it incentivizes the highly skilled, creative work of Marx and her fellow designers as a means of selling not just the games themselves, but the hardware that the games require, as well as any number of related products, such as *Conquests of the Longbow's* hint book. Yet on the other hand, the gaming industry also actively cultivates the hacker-as-gamer mystique as a means of securing a cheap source of what Tiziana Terranova and Julian Kücklich describe as the "immaterial labor" or "playbour" that many game studios have come to depend on for testing and promoting their products.¹²³

As Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter write, it is therefore not "surprising that some members of this labor force, inculcated in the work-as-play ethic, come to treat property itself as a game":

Gift-economy pirates make software commodities into the counters in a contest of technological wits, where score is kept in terms of "bragging rights" in much the same way as arcade-game players might seek to top their rival's scores. A business that seeks technologically to commodify play can hardly be too surprised by the emergence of countercultures that technologically play with commodities.¹²⁴

Likewise, they argue it is not surprising that software piracy flourishes in many of the overseas markets that the gaming industry has come to depend on to produce the technologies it sells at a premium to Western audiences. The economic disparities that make this arrangement so appealing for many sectors of high-tech production have, in turn, created the situation that Marx obliquely references when she laments that "THOUSANDS of copies of my game [are] being pirated and sold" overseas in a black market that provides this large and newly formed population of skilled tech workers access to the products and services they produce but otherwise cannot afford.¹²⁵

¹²³ Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 39; Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precariou-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>.

¹²⁴ Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 216.

¹²⁵ Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 213-15; Marx, *Conquests Manual*, 5.

Of course, one can argue that the fact that none of the game's endings lead to justice for Prince John is a matter of historical and fictional continuity—that given Marx's commitment to remaining true to Robin's traditional depiction as a symbol of localized resistance to political oppression who is ultimately unable to affect wider reforms, it is impossible for the game to imagine such an ending. However, if one approaches Prince John in the way that we urge above—as a metaphor for the paradoxical ways in which high-tech capitalism voraciously seeks to identify new markets and sources of cheap labor and more thoroughly exploit older ones—then the corollary argument is that it is likewise impossible to imagine an answer to the systemic inequities of high-tech capitalism as they play out in mass-media accounts of hackers and hacking. To cite the promotional language on the back of the game's box, it does not matter how cleverly, how creatively, or how morally players comport themselves as Robin Hood. The material realities of high-tech capitalism are, like Prince John himself, historical inevitabilities.

We argue, however, that this is ultimately less a failure of imagination than methodology. In keeping with Ferris's critique of antiquarianism, it is a consequence of starting with what appears in the present to be the correct answer and working backwards from that point to piece together the otherwise disconnected fragments of the past until something resembling historical truth is produced.¹²⁶ Or put another way, it is a matter of starting with the most likely suspect and retroactively working backwards from that presupposition to reassemble the available evidence into something that, correctly or not, resembles justice. While this method often produces something like a sense of closure or conclusion, it only does so through the expedient of foreclosing any possibilities or potentials that might suggest otherwise. The result is less a matter of history than of character—a version of the present as past that, staged as a riddle or puzzle, is designed to validate the relationship between the subject and what is variously constructed as the truth.

Conquests of the Longbow makes this point explicit in the moments immediately following King Richard's verdict, when players who fail to reach the game's ideal ending are confronted by a green-clad minstrel that chides them for leaving a fair amount of Robin Hood's legendary capital unclaimed: "Truly a sad and pathetic experience," the minstrel laments if players' actions lead to Robin's execution, "[b]ut I know you are capable of doing far, far better!" Likewise, if players achieve the Royal Forester ending, the minstrel sings, "[Y]ou have fared nobly, though you failed to win Lady Marian's hand or a noble title," before adding, "[b]ut all things are possible. May you fare better still in your next attempt as Robin Hood!" In both cases, the minstrel's parting verses offer players a didactic challenge, an invitation to relive the "legend of the longbow" until they finally get it right.¹²⁷ At the same time, though, the minstrel does not tell players exactly how to rectify their missteps. As with the gemstone puzzle and the Green Man's riddles, living the "legend of the longbow" is thus not a matter of rote compliance or call-and-response objectives.¹²⁸ Rather, the game represents it as an expressly hermeneutic challenge, an encrypted version of a bygone and glorious past that is recoverable only to those who can demonstrate themselves to be worthy masters of the high-tech tools of the present. Or, as the back of the game's box puts it, to those

¹²⁶ Ferris, "Unhinging the Past," para 6.

¹²⁷ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

¹²⁸ *Conquests Game Box*, back cover.

who possess the requisite “logic, creativity, and moral judgement” to recreate what was never really in question: a version of the past as prerequisite to the needs of the present.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Badham, John, dir. *WarGames*. MGM Home Entertainment, 1983.
- Brand, Stewart. "Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death among the Computer Bums." *Rolling Stone*, December 7, 1972.
- Brown, Catherine. "In the Middle." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 547-74.
- Centerwall, Brandon S. "The Name of the Green Man." *Folklore* 108 (1997): 25-33.
- Clouet, Richard. "The Robin Hood Legend and Its Cultural Adaptations for the Film Industry: Comparing Literary Sources with Filmic Representations." *Journal of English Studies* 3 (2001-2002): 37-46.
- Cornwall, Hugo [Peter Sommer, pseud.]. "Code Busters." *Sinclair User Magazine Annual 1986*, January 1986.
- Dibbell, Julian. "Phiber Optik Goes to Prison." *Wired*. April 1, 1994, <https://www.wired.com/1994/04/phiber-optik-goes-to-prison/>.
- Drake, John. "An Interview with Hugo Cornwall, a British Hacker/Author." *2600: The Monthly Journal of the American Hacker*, February 1987.
- Ferris, Ina. "Unhinging the Past: Joseph Strutt and the Antiquarian Poetics of the Piece." In *Romantic Antiquarianism*, edited by Noah Heringman and Crystal B. Lake. *Romantic Circles*, June 2014. <https://romantic-circles.org/index.php/praxis/antiquarianism/ferris>.
- Field, Sean. "Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories." *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 1 (2002): 6-22.
- Gabriel, Trip. "Reprogramming a Convicted Hacker: To His On-Line Friends, Phiber Optik is a Virtual Hero." *New York Times*. January 14, 1995, 25-26.
- Giappone, Krista Bonello Rutter. "Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 15, no. 1 (2015). http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/bonello_k.
- Gill, Harry. "The Old Inns of Brewhouse Yard." In *Transactions of the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire, 1909*. Vol. 13, edited by John Standish, 57-69. Nottingham: The Thoroton Press, 1910.
- Greenberg, Andy. "The Confessions of Marcus Hutchins, the Hacker Who Saved the Internet." *Wired*, May 12, 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/confessions-marcus-hutchins-hacker-who-saved-the-internet/>.
- Gruenler, Curtis. "How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*." *Speculum* 85, no. 3 (2010): 592-630.
- Holt, J. C. *Robin Hood*. 2nd ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.
- Johnson, Valerie B. "A Forest of Her Own: Greenwood-Space and the Forgotten Female Characters of the Robin Hood Tradition." In *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media Performance, and Other New Directions*, edited by Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson, 21-39. *Outlaws in Literature, History, and Culture* 2. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Keen, Maurice. *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Kennedy, Kathleen. *Medieval Hackers*. New York: punctum books, 2015.
- Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.
- Knight, Stephen. *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

- Kücklich, Julian. "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry." *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005). <https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>.
- Levy, Steven. "Hackers at 30: 'Hackers' and 'Information Wants to Be Free.'" *Wired*, November 21, 2014. <https://www.wired.com/story/hackers-at-30-hackers-and-information-wants-to-be-free>.
- . *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*. New York: Dell, 1984. Reprint, Penguin Books, 2001.
- Lux, Sherron. "And the 'Reel' Maid Marian?" In *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, edited by Thomas Hahn, 151-160. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000.
- Marbach, William D., Madlyn Resener, John Carey, Richard Sandza, Michael Rogers, Jennet Conant, and Susan Agrest. "Beware: Hackers at Play." *Newsweek*, US edition, September 5, 1983.
- Marx, Christy. "A Game is Born..." In *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Hintbook*, 4-17. Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1992.
- . *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood*. Sierra On-Line, Inc. DOS/Amiga. 1991.
- . *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Game Box*. Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1991.
- . *Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood Game Manual*. Coursegold, CA: Sierra On-Line, Inc., 1991.
- Millennium Interactive Ltd. *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Millennium Interactive Ltd. DOS/Atari/Amiga. 1991.
- Moberly, Kevin. "Codifying Crime: A Hacker's Guide to Computer Crime." In *The Computer Culture Reader*, edited by Judd Ethan Ruggill, Ken S. McAllister, and Joseph R. Chaney, 137-158. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Moberly, Kevin, and Brent Moberly. "Nine Men's Medievalisms: *Conquests of the Longbow*, Nine Men's Morris, and the Impossibilities of a Half-Forgotten Game's Ludic Past." In *Pleasure and Leisure in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Toys, Games, and Entertainment*, edited by Albrecht Classen, 695-734. *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture* 23. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019.
- MrWhitman. "Ending Variations *Conquests of the Longbow*." *YouTube*. August 21, 2011. Video, 20:05. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZf8_K67MuQ.
- Pugh, Tison, and Angela Weisl. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Quittner, Joshua. "Hacker Homecoming." *Time*. January 23, 1995.
- Raglan, (Lady) [Julia Somerset]. "The 'Green Man' in Church Architecture." *Folklore* 50, no. 1 (1939): 45-57.
- Raskin, Robin. "Hacker Heroes and Corporate Battles." *PC Magazine*, July 23, 1985.
- Rolfe, Mark. *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric in the Digital Age: Insiders and Outsiders in Democratic Politics*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Rowland, Thomas. "'And Now Begins Our Game': Revitalizing the Ludic Robin Hood." In *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, edited by Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson, 175-188. *Outlaws in Literature, History, and Culture* 2. New York: Routledge, 2017.

- Seal, Graham. *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America, and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Sculptured Software and Bits Studios. *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Sculptured Software and Bits Studios. NES/Game Boy. 1991.
- Singman, Jeffrey. *Robin Hood: The Shaping of a Legend*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Slatalla, Michelle, and Joshua Quittner. *Masters of Deception: The Gang that Ruled Cyberspace*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995.
- Span, Paula. "Modem Operandi: Phiber Optik, the Bad Boy Hacker, Out of Stir and On-Line." *Washington Post*. January 13, 1995, B1, B4.
- Stock, Lorraine. "Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood." In *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, edited by Thomas Hahn, 239-49. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010.
- Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.
- Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.
- Vella, Daniel. "'It's A-Me/Mario!': Playing as a Ludic Character." *Foundations of Digital Games Conference Proceedings* 8 (2013): 31-38.
http://www.fdg2013.org/program/papers/paper05_vella.pdf.
- Wikipedia. "2600 hertz." Last modified September 4, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2600_hertz.
- . "Mark Abene," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Abene, last modified January 26, 2025.
- . "Phreaking," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phreaking>, last modified March 16, 2025.