

Oneiric Timescapes: History and Image-Affects in *Benign Land* and *The Séance of Blake Manor*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This communication intends to analyze the use of dreams as affective devices in two recent games about Irish history: *Benign Land* (Ntolas, 2025) and *The Séance of Blake Manor* (Spooky Doorway, 2025) from the point of view of historical game studies (HGS). Both games deal with the themes of colonialism, absent heritage, and historical trauma in the context of modern Irish history. Both games are explicitly inspired by *oíche shamhna* – the traditional Irish festival on which Halloween was modeled – and incorporate dreamlike experiences to represent the air of liminality and otherworldliness associated with this date. Yet, while *The Séance of Blake Manor* follows narrative and historical conventions, supported by a wealth of internal paratexts and references to historical sources, *Benign Land's* uncompromisingly oneiric character challenges HGS' analytical toolkit, which tends to categorize games according to historiographical criteria (Cf. e.g. Chapman, 2016; McCall, 2022).

This presentation will propose a methodology to investigate *Benign Land's* historical content in a way that embraces its sensorial and highly experimental structure alongside more commonplace historical signs. Subsequently, I will try to apply these principles to an analysis of *The Séance of Blake Manor*, to explore what effects an affective reading of the dreams featured in the game potentially have over its otherwise logical and familiarly structured narrative and gameplay loop.

Benign Land is a walking simulator set in Ireland at different points of the island's history, from the Neolithic to The Troubles in the 20th century. The player avatar is an unnamed entity that travels through time by crossing points where the veils between worlds become thin – not unlike the *aos sí* (or fairyfolk) of Irish folklore. Levels do not

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correspond to neatly defined historical periods, but rather otherworldly dioramas in which both material and immaterial heritage are collated in phantasmagorical fashion. The game contains almost no written words, befitting its origin as a multimedia installation.

In the first part of this presentation, I will propose that analyzing *Benign Land* not as a representation of history, but as a representation of *a process of dreaming about* history, allows us to better understand its historical messages – and how players might receive and make sense of them. Drawing from research on actual dreams, I will argue that *Benign Land* can be interpreted as a digital emulation of image-affects: visual images that “are not representation of things that we can see as observable facts but rather affects in visual attire” (Manley, 2018, 47). This allows the game’s levels – at first sight, a seemingly fantastic collage of different places and historical moments – to be interpreted via a Bergsonian conception of memory: a process of contraction of a virtual, multiple past into an experienceable present. The resulting associations eschew chronological ordering because they are not an “overlap of actual moments by means of a virtual dimension of pastness that coexist with each” and not a mere “juxtaposition of actual time points” (Al-Saji, 2004, 218). This process of contraction is indissociable from affect, because virtual memory “borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized”. (Bergson, 1919, 163).

Although games are not – and should not be confused with – dreams, Bergsonian and Deleuzian-inspired theorizations of dreaming show a surprising consonance with existing work in games studies. The idea that games narrative, like dreams, can be understood as “rhizomatic interconnect[ions]” that “challenges conventional notions of time” (Manley, 2018, 67) can be found as far back as the early days of narratology (Ryan, 2006). Souvik Mukherjee (2017) has shown that the temporal recurrence of the act of respawning and/or retrying in games can also be understood in Bergsonian terms, in which the sum of our experience with the game stands for Bergson’s concept of the multiple “virtual”, and each playthrough (or attempt) stand for one possible actualization.

Investigating these processes of memory-making and time manipulation is of great interest to any kind of game analysis. However, it holds particular importance to historical games and HGS. It compels us to investigate modes of engagement with history beyond the realm of ‘pure’ facts and the narrative expectations of historiography. *Benign Land* is a successful example of game that encourages one such mode. In particular, its minimalist, sensorial approach to memory transmission brings to mind reflections on the epistemic role of affect in historical reenactment and other forms of ludic and game-adjacent experiences. (Agnew, 2007; X-MEM Team, 2023).

In the second part of this presentation, I will attempt to apply these principles to an analysis of *The Séance of Blake Manor*. The production is an information games (Smith Nicholls, 2025) set during the Irish Celtic Revival, when Gaelic mythology and history were appropriated by a (mostly Anglo-Irish Protestant) intellectual elite inspired by spiritualism, symbolism, and nationalism (Fennell, 2025, 350). Unlike *Benign Land*, the game follows familiar narrative conventions and has a clearly stated historical agenda, supported by internal paratexts like knowledgeable NPCs and in-game books in the manor’s library. As such, it stands as an example of a widespread logic of historical game design as a deliberate, and ostensive, act of musealization or curation (Vandewalle, 2024; Baillie, 2025).

Yet, one specific plot point invites a different mode of engagement with history. At one point, the game reveals that most of the characters – including the player avatar – suffer from a recurrent collective dream. This nightmare performs an important narrative role, connecting the game’s fantastical elements (spellcasters, mediums, and otherworldly creatures from Irish mythology) with its stated message about the legacy of English colonialism in Ireland. Inspired by my analysis of *Benign Land*, however, I will argue that, if we analyze *Blake Manor’s* collective dream – and its gameplay repercussions – as a representation of a *process of dreaming about* history, we arrive at different associations that reveal cracks and frictions in the game’s timescape, both in terms of its use of time-related mechanics and – perhaps more importantly - in its otherwise surefooted historical message.

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