A Real Little Game:
The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play

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ABSTRACT

Ubiquitous computing and mobile network technologies have fueled a recent proliferation of opportunities for digitally-enabled play in everyday spaces. In this paper, I examine how players negotiate the boundary between these pervasive games and real life. I trace the emergence of what I call "the Pinocchio effect" – the desire for a game to be transformed into real life, or conversely, for everyday life to be transformed into a "real little game." Focusing on two examples of pervasive play – the 2001 immersive game known as the Beast, and the Go Game, an ongoing urban superhero game — I argue that gamers maximize their play experience by *performing* belief, rather than actually believing, in the permeability of the game-reality boundary.

Keywords

Pervasive play, immersive games, gaming reality, performance studies.

INTRODUCTION

Last March, I had the opportunity to give a brief talk on the topic of pervasive play at an international colloquium for digital researchers, engineers and artists. [1] As I hurried through my PowerPoint presentation — as usual, at least a few slides too many — my tongue started to have trouble keeping up with my laptop. Despite the difficulty, I ventured on in pursuit of my immediate goal: to convey to the audience the often overlooked difference between the general category of *pervasive play* and the more particular sub-genre of *immersive games*. Pervasive play, I explained, consists of "mixed reality" games that use mobile, ubiquitous and embedded digital technologies to create virtual playing fields in everyday spaces. Immersive games, I continued, are a *form* of pervasive play distinguished by the

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[1] 030303: Collective Play, a research colloquium organized by the Center for New Media at the University of California at Berkeley and co-sponsored by the University of California Digital Arts Research Network and Intel Research Labs, March 3, 2003.

added element of their (somewhat infamous) "This is not a game" rhetoric. They do everything in their power to erase game boundaries – physical, temporal and social — and to obscure the metacommunications that might otherwise announce, "This is play."

Shortly after I finished this opening explanation, slides advancing but tongue retreating, verbal disaster struck. I opened my mouth to say "pervasive" while my brain stuck on "immersive," and out popped a hybrid moniker: "*perversive* gaming." The slip was met with knowing chuckles, and I was struck by the aptness, in my audience's eyes, of the accidental phrase. *Perverse*-ive gaming. *Yes*, I imagined many of them thinking, *there is definitely something perverse about pervasive and immersive play.*

In that moment of inauspicious neologizing, I was reminded of the often cynical and occasionally downright alarmed responses I receive when discussing these games with colleagues. I have learned from their reactions that there is already a stigma attached to the more intense forms of immersive and pervasive play, despite the genres' nascent status. Among many media critics and scholars, there is a growing suspicion of the unruliness of unbounded games and a wariness of their seemingly addictive and life-consuming scenarios. One of my colleagues, after hearing me out on the subject for several hours, dubbed immersive games "schizophrenia machines," ostensibly designed in their sprawling and all-encompassing format for the sole purpose of turning previously sane players into paranoid, obsessive maniacs. Over the past year, I have encountered some variation of this cynicism and apprehension at every digital culture and gaming conference I have attended and each talk I have given. "There are actual mental illnesses with exactly the same behaviors and thinking patterns as the players you describe," was the first comment I fielded after one public lecture[2]. Another audience member asked me later, concerned for the players apparently lost in a play trance, "Do they ever wake up from these immersive games?" The words "delusional" and "scary" have come up in my post-talk conversations too many times to count, and no fewer than four new media researchers have contacted me separately to share their concerns that the immersive genre could eventually transform into a commercially, religiously or politically motivated *Ender's Game*, in which players would unwittingly find themselves aiding the real life interests of duplicitous, self-serving factions[3]. Most recently, and much to my dismay, my research on immersive games was cited in a legal paper as evidence of the potential liabilities of massively-multiplayer games whose aesthetic is "too real." The paper's authors warn, "Some players become so 'immersed' in the games […] that they forget that it is a game," and speculate about a variety of public policies that might become necessary to protect such overzealous gamers from their own misguided belief [6, p. 29].

Each of these consistently uneasy reactions develops out of the same underlying premise: *Given: contemporary gamers are a particularly credulous lot.* The perceived potential "perversity" of pervasive and immersive play, it seems to me, is

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[2] "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play" at the Melbourne Digital Arts and Culture Conference, hosted by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, May 19 – 23, 2003.

[3] The central conceit of Orson Scott Card's classic 1985 science fiction novel *Ender's Game* is that children who are told by government officials that they are playing a video game simulation are actually, in reality, waging a massive, deadly war with real casualties and consequences.

predicated on this notion that players are prone to falling for the games' dissimulative rhetoric. The gamers, in other words, are too easily persuaded by the games' realistic aesthetics and aspirations. They wind up *believing* in their play too much for their own good.

It's not hard to understand why this sentiment surfaces so often. Comments by many of the players in media interviews and on public bulletin boards, comments that I myself cite frequently, do much to fuel the perception that the "schizophrenia machines" are succeeding in their efforts to prime and capitalize on their audience's eagerness to believe. "I'm going to catch myself still looking for patterns and riddles in my daily life months from now," one player posted at the conclusion of a game, describing a mindset that could easily be interpreted as paranoia [26]. Another immersive fan wrote, "We normal, intelligent people have been devoting *outrageous* percentages of our days, weeks, months to a *game*" and described the experience of playing an immersive game as kind of loss of real-world consciousness: "You find yourself at the end of the game, waking up as if from a long sleep. Your marriage or relationship may be in tatters. Your job may be on the brink of the void, or gone completely. You may have lost a scholarship, or lost or gained too many pounds" [36]. The same player subsequently published a "recovery guide" for her fellow deeply immersed players, but it is important to note that she ultimately was more interested in extending, rather than recovering from, the game play: "Now here we are, every one of us excited at blurring the lines between story and reality. The game promises to become not just entertainment, but our lives."

Another player's comments seem to prove the power of the immersive genre's hallmark disavowal:

> The words "THIS IS NOT A GAME" in the closing credits has me concerned about our involvement with this game. I've been toying with the idea lately, with all the ideological specs going on, that the game is a little closer to home than a lot of us realized, expected, or are willing to accept […]. The more we gather and learn about this fictitious world, the more uneasy I become […]. I'm disturbed to think that, one day, possibly sooner than we think, this game may become more real than we ever imagined [8].

These remarks demonstrate a high awareness of, and arguably a keen receptiveness to, the "this is not a game" (TING) rhetoric on the player's part.

But should we accept these testimonials at face value? How effective are immersive games' TING aesthetic and rhetoric *really*? How much do pervasive players *genuinely* believe in the realness of their game, and the game-ness of the real?

In *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco's classic tale of computer-fueled paranoia and a game-gone-real, the narrator confesses anxiously, "I believe that you can reach the point where there is no longer any difference between developing the habit of pretending to believe and developing the habit of believing" [14, p. 386]. But this paper is about that very difference, the essential and stubborn distinction between an intentional *performance* of belief and belief itself. It is about the reasons why contemporary gamers of immersive and pervasive entertainment alike, in my opinion, *affect* such a powerful credulity — "This is not a game" — in the course of pervasive play. To be clear: I believe that the widely assumed credulity and so-

called "psychological susceptibility" of immersive and pervasive gamers is, in fact, a strategic performance on the part of the players. And it is my goal to prevent the mistake we as researchers will be making if we fail to recognize the conscious, goal-oriented and pleasurable nature of this affected belief – let alone the very fact that it is affected.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner proposes that there are two kinds of play: "make believe" and "make belief" [40, p. 35]. The former, he argues, carefully protects the boundaries between what is real and what is pretended, while the latter intentionally blurs them. Using this dichotomy, Schechner frames the issue of performance, play and belief as a question of reflexivity: "To what degree does a person believe her own performance?" [p. 181] In make-believe games, he suggests, players *pretend to believe*; in make-belief games, players willfully "forget" or deny their own performance and thereby enable themselves to *believe for real*. But I want to resist this emphasis on the degree to which players are conscious of their performance, as if this self-awareness were a kind of psychological safety net always in danger of falling (or being intentionally tossed) away. I propose, instead, that the frame of representational play remains visible and sturdy to players in even the most believable performances of belief. Scholars and critics are far more likely to be convinced by the players' performances, I would argue, than the players are to be convinced by their games. As critics, historians and theorists of new genres of play, we should be much more wary of this interpretive trap than of the games themselves. Instead of asking to what extent players come to believe in the fictions they perform, we should ask: To what ends, and through what mechanisms, do players *pretend* to believe their own performances? And instead of focusing on the risks of real belief, we should investigate: What are the specific pleasures and payoffs for gamers of feigned belief in a play setting? What motivation do we attribute to the fans' widespread practice of exaggerating or fictionalizing their own experiences of the games to each other and to the media? And how do these practices of performed belief influence players in their everyday, non-game lives?

To address these questions, I offer an analysis of the belief structures in a community of gamers who take traditional suspension of disbelief much further than the typical fan of fiction-driven art. I will examine how these pervasive players create an active pretense of belief that enables, heightens and prolongs their play experiences. It is a bittersweet virtual belief, I will argue, a *simulation* of belief borne from virtual play and pointing, like virtual reality, to the unmet promise of experiencing its real counterpart. I will show that this habit of pretending to believe does not slip into actual belief, but rather that *longing to believe* in the face of *the very impossibility of believing* is a core contradiction that drives many pervasive games. I call the production of this unfulfilled desire to believe for real "the Pinocchio effect." But like *Foucault's Pendulum*, a tale that traces its origins to Biblical times, this story of feigned and wished-for credulity goes back many years, to the birth of an earlier immersive art form: the cinema.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE "CREDULOUS SPECTATOR"

When cinema first burst onto the screen at the end of the 19th century, stories of spectators mistaking cinematic images for reality abounded. The most oft-repeated tale concerned Lumière's short documentary *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895), numerous screenings of which allegedly devolved into "mass panic" and "collective hysteria" [45, p.1]. Dozens of anecdotal accounts described

patrons screaming and fleeing theaters in droves, apparently afraid that the on-screen locomotive was about to run them over. Firsthand narratives were the most vivid: "The image came nearer and nearer; it was rushing straight toward us… closer and closer! … A huge steel monster! … It was hurtling towards us! It was terrifying! Straight at us! AT US! A piercing scream, Oh! … OH! … Panic! People leaped up. Some rushed towards the exit. Total darkness" [45, p.3]. Originally reported in the press and later canonized in early film histories, these stories helped to define film as a dangerously immersive medium, capable of seducing rational audience members into foolish belief and producing an astonishing incapacity to distinguish the imaginary from the real.

But were the first film viewers tricked by cinema's realistic aesthetic, as the *Train* narratives suggest? Or was there a more complicated, perhaps even complicit, psychology at play in the spectators' seemingly credulous response? It took nearly a century for film scholars to ask such questions, and when they did, the myth of the naïve audience soon toppled.

Historian Tom Gunning was the first to reconsider the factuality and literalness of terrified *Train* accounts, arguing: "We cannot simply swallow whole the image of the naïve spectator, whose reaction to the image is one of simple belief" [19, p. 820]. Gunning rejected the idea of an audience cowed by the cinema's then unprecedented illusionist power, proposing instead that spectators were engaged in a sophisticated, self-aware suspension of disbelief. By feigning belief during their first filmic encounters, Gunning suggested, viewers framed their own experience, willfully playing along with the director. "The spectator does not get lost," he argued, "but remains aware of the act of looking," taking meta-pleasure in consciously admiring the filmmaker's masterful use of technology [p. 823]. Gunning coined the term the "[in]credulous spectator" to account for this deceptive performance of belief; spectators keep the "[in]" hidden and present only the "credulity." Today, like Gunning, the vast majority of film scholars reject the once-prevalent notion of panicked, passive, and hyper-receptive audiences. They recognize, instead, that the earliest filmgoers were playful and intentional participants in the creation and maintenance of cinematic illusion.

Film studies' rewriting of its primal myth offers a powerful and timely lesson to the discipline of games research. The world of digital gaming now has its own myth of the credulous spectator to contend with, one that misrepresents the experience of contemporary players and unnecessarily feeds public and academic anxieties about the hyper-immersive and boundary-blurring qualities of pervasive games. It is my intention, therefore, to dispel this 21st-century version of the *Train* anecdotes, beginning with a close reading of the popular accounts of player reception in the most critically acclaimed and widely played pervasive game to date: the 2001 campaign known as the Beast. Conceived by lead producer Jordan Weisman as a viral marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, the Beast launched the immersive genre[4], and with it, the popular conception that pervasive players are always in danger of confusing art with real life. As the first widely received game of its kind, and creating as it did the first encounter the vast majority of its audience had with pervasive play, the Beast

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[4] Subsequent immersive games include MetaCortex (2003), Acheron/L3 (2003), Chasing the Wish (2003), Push, Nevada (2002), search4E (2002), BMW's :K: (2002), and Jawbreak (2001), and Electronic Arts' The Majestic (2001).

serves as a perfect parallel for Lumière's early vehicles of the "aesthetics of astonishment" (to borrow another term from Gunning). Why players were astonished by the Beast, and how players' *astonishment* came to be perceived as *actual belief,* are the two central questions I want to ask about the myth of the Beast's reception.

TAMING (THE MYTH OF) THE BEAST

What was the nature of the Beast that so engaged its audience? It, like all subsequent immersive games, was designed to integrate itself fully into the offline lives of its players. Its main technique for doing so was to employ everyday digital technologies as virtual reality devices. The fabricated world and simulated experiences of immersive games are created not through special screens, wired gloves, joysticks or goggles, but rather through cell phones, PDAs, fax machines, WiFi networks, conference calls, e-mail, and the World Wide Web. Put another way, the "platform" of this kind of play, also known as "unfiction" and "alternate reality gaming,"[5] is everyday life itself. The designers of the Beast pioneered this strategy of distributing game play through otherwise mundane interfaces, shocking more than one million players by calling them at home, faxing them at work, scribing unauthorized e-mails from their accounts, sending them packages through the U.S. Postal Service, embedding clues in national television commercials, and proliferating more than 4000 digital files across a series of fictional Web sites. No matter where Beast players turned, the game found them, to the point that players looked for the game everywhere — everything became a potential clue or plot point.

These new multi-modal techniques of immersion generated terrific media buzz, with hundreds of enthusiastic articles appearing online and in magazines and newspapers worldwide. Much of the praise bestowed upon the Beast focused on, in the words of *The New York Times*, how "completely real" the game seemed [21]. BBC News called it "a complex illusion of reality"; *USA Today* suggested it "blurs the line between fiction and reality"; and Tech TV described the game as "hyper-immersive" and "frighteningly real" [51, 28, 15].

In the press, this intense realism soon became associated with a kind of believability. Reporters frequently linked the effectiveness of the Beast's realistic aesthetic to a potential susceptibility among audiences to confuse the game with reality. A writer for the *Kansas City Star* warned readers: "The game so perfectly mimics real sites, you might assume it's for real" [7]. A game critic for *Joystick101* agreed: "It is important to stress that the sites are *dissimulative*, that is, feigning to be real sites … Some of the sites could easily be misconstrued as real" [1]. One writer alluded to the classic credibility test for A.I. programs: "This world talks back. Put to the Turing test, it could pass" [22]. Since a passing grade in the Turing Test means a human user has been fooled into believing that he or she is conversing with a real person, rather than a cleverly written computer program, the implication of the Turing Test allusion is clear: the Beast's digital dexterity could easily trick its players into mistaking the artificial for the real.

Many articles made a similar point about the game's convincing aesthetic by comparing the Beast to the famous 1999 Web campaign for the fake documentary,

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[5] Two central hubs for immersive games, for example, are www.unfiction.com and www.argn.com, the Alternate Reality Gaming Network.

The Blair Witch Project, which invented the practice of employing dissimulative Internet pages as a marketing tool for movies. An *AdWeek* article proclaimed of the Beast: "If *The Blair Witch Project* was the shot heard around the interactive world, then *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* is D-Day," while Fox News reported: *"Blair Witch* may have started it all, but *A.I.* has certainly raised the bar" [4, 12]. By invoking the *Blair Witch* campaign, these articles conjured up audiences tricked into believing a digital back story is real, for as *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan observes about *Blair Witch*, "The original's Web site fooled many viewers into thinking that its tall tale of three young people who disappeared tracking a legendary witch was true" [47]. Likewise, film 'zine *Truth in Cinema* noted: "Millions of moviegoers were fooled into thinking the original *Blair Witch Project* had really happened, and all it took was an Internet site" [39]. Many articles about the Beast explicitly accorded a similar credulity to its audience by linking the game to *Blair Witch*. For example, a *Wired* feature commented: "The *A.I.* Web marketing campaign is not the first kind to fool people with its authenticity. Web sites devoted to *The Blair Witch Project* caused such a stir" [9]. The history of the Beast, and the subsequent birth of the immersive genre, thus has become a story of caution and urged restraint: Don't be fooled, and please don't believe in the game. Just as stories of fleeing filmgoers cemented for nearly a century the identity of the cinema as a monolithic machine working on, not with, its passive, credulous viewers, popular accounts of the Beast's reception now characterize the sub-genre it invented as dangerously immersive, and its players as terribly naïve. As a result, digital cultures writer Steven Johnson speculates in a high-profile article about "games without frontiers" for *Slate* magazine that an unpleasant and lingering "existential doubt" would soon overwhelm pervasive players, characterized by the increasing difficulty of knowing, "Is this real or is this immersive media?" [27].

This new mythology of the credulous spectator would have us believe that without the proper precautions, anyone one of us may wake up one morning, stumble onto a game embedded in our nonfictional environments, and *accidentally* become immersed by its particularly persuasive aesthetic and rhetoric. Indeed, the notion of an "accident" strikes me as particularly fitting here. What are the encounters between player and pervasive game if not a spectacular (psychological and phenomenological) train wreck with massive(ly multiplayer) casualties? It is as if Lumière's locomotive has come back to haunt us, steamrolling off the screen and over the cognitive faculties and reasonable sensibilities of its unwitting victims – that is, of course, its audiences. And once again, the players perform an important part in sustaining this mythology, adopting, for instance, the term "rabbit hole" to describe "the initial site, page or clue that brings someone into the game" [48]. This allusion to *Alice in Wonderland* evokes an *accidental* fall into an alternate world and suggests that players have far less agency in the experience of immersive gaming than records of their actual game play suggest.

Clearly, some kind of emergency response on the part of contemporary games scholars is necessary. But before I attempt to tame these hypercredulous myths, I want to note that the recent collision (or collusion) of turn-of-the-21st century games history with turn-of-the-20th-century film history marks an important shift in critical writing about the tendency for deep immersion to occur during play. Discussion of immersion in gaming is neither unusual nor new, of course; in fact, it is decidedly ancient. Herodotus, for example, suggests in his 430 B.C. *The*

Histories that the ancient Greeks invented dice, balls and other gaming equipment in order to provide a strategically immersive distraction for their nation's starving masses. In the midst of famine, Herodotus' (his)story goes, the rulers of Lydia implemented a countrywide policy of eating only on alternate days, hoping that their new games would be immersive enough on the non-eating days to make the citizens forget their hunger. Herodotus notes: "In this way they passed eighteen years" of presumably otherwise unbearable conditions, immersed in pleasurable play [20]. More than two and a half millennia later, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi took up Herodotus' tale, true or not, as evidence of "an interesting fact: people do get immersed in games so deeply as to forget hunger and other problems" [11, p. ix]. He asked: "What power does play have that men relinquish basic needs for its sake?" This question about the immersive powers of play became the seed for Csikszentmihalyi's subsequent seminal investigation of flow, the "optimal" psychological experience of "becoming one" with an activity. Csikszentmihalyi hoped, through his research, to increase opportunities and tactics for experiencing this kind of immersion not just in games, but also in a "more playful" everyday life. (Perhaps, in this sense, Csikszentmihalyi was a forerunner of today's pervasive play theorists.) And today, many educators seek to take advantage of the immersive potential of games to increase student motivation and engagement in the classroom. Literacy researcher James Paul Gee, a leading proponent of granting digital games a more prominent role in the academic arena, argues: "Kids often say it doesn't feel like learning when they're gaming - they're much too focused on playing. If kids were to say that about a science lesson, our country's education problems would be solved" [17]. Here, games' immersive properties are seen as tools that can be deployed to productive ends. Immersion in play, according to Gee, can and should be harnessed as a means of addressing cultural challenges.

The desirability of immersion in contemporary gaming, however, is not always assumed. In many genres, extreme immersion has been heavily (and perhaps sensationally) criticized as an anti-social addiction (think Dungeons & Dragons, Everquest). But even when perceived negatively, immersion in games nevertheless has been seen as a conscious, if ill-advised, *choice* to surrender to the pleasures of narrative, role-play or well-defined goals and limits. This *voluntary* decision may be influenced by individual player personality and psychology, and certain games might be classified as more likely to trigger the decision to "abandon reality" in favor of a play, but some degree of free will is almost always assumed. This adherence to a model of voluntary immersion is evident, for example, in many recent popular and scholarly articles on addiction in the non-pervasive genre of massively multiplayer role-playing games. These articles tend to use similar language and tone in addressing the issue, analyzing "the emotional motives that prompt them to play a game excessively" or "motivational factors that explain why some players choose to play too much," while offering strategies for "resisting the temptation" of the games, [3, 50, 41]. The wording used here is key to establishing player responsibility for immersion; motive, choice and resistance all represent factors of *conscious* decision-making.

My point is that whether positive or negative, these historical and contemporary perspectives on immersion in non-pervasive game play never raise *credulity* as a factor. "Real" belief is never an issue. The mythology of player reception in the Beast and subsequent writing about the pervasive genre therefore demonstrate a

significant departure from the typical model of voluntary immersion via their introduction of belief to the equation. According to the myths, after all, pervasive players do not realize that they are abandoning reality. Rather, they are mistakenly convinced, as supposedly were the earliest filmgoers, that they are still in the realm of the real. If the audience does not *choose* to be immersed, but rather is *tricked* by a slippage of virtual and real into forsaking the latter for the former, immersion becomes a trap, rather than a preference. By stripping immersion of its consciousness, our notion of play itself as voluntary —long a hallmark of all major definitions of play (see Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith, just to name a few) [6] — is radically changed, if not altogether abandoned.

So where does this new paradigm of involuntary immersive play leave us? In good company, I would argue — at least from an art historical perspective. While gaming prior to the Beast has eluded the interpretive trap of equating immersion with belief, most other representational media and art forms in their earliest incarnations have not. In his expansive survey of immersive art throughout history, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Oliver Grau observes how, again and again, new media consistently have been received initially as "deceptive" arts, "a danger to perception and consciousness," potential vehicles for "mass propaganda" that would take advantage of their bewildered audiences [18, p.64-5]. Panoramas, cinema and head-mounted virtual reality displays fit into this lineage of concern over an induced indiscernibility of the real and the virtual; so too, now, does pervasive play.[7]

These concerns, Grau notes, were eventually put aside when viewers failed, in each previous incarnation of the immersive debates, to be so susceptible, or reality so easily reproducible. But their continual emergence is a symptom of a fundamental distrust of the power of mimesis (which, of course, dates back to Plato's concerns about theater) and a failure to understand reception of immersive media. Therefore, I see an examination of media credibility and player credulity in pervasive gaming as an opportunity to drive a wedge between the frequently intertwined notions of a realistic, immersive aesthetic and concomitant audience belief. By debunking the seminal myth of the naïve immersive gamers, we can stage an intervention in the centuries-spanning cycle of suspicion and hysteria over progressively immersive and mimetic media.

PERFORMING BELIEF

At first glance, it seems obvious that the Beast, the source of the foundational tales of immersive player credulity, should be entirely incapable of fooling anyone. Sean Stewart, a fantasy/science fiction author and lead writer for the game, always laughs when I ask him about players mistaking the Beast for reality. "The game is set in the year 2142 A.D.," he has reminded me more than once. "There are killer

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[6] Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that one of the few noted theorists to propose that play is not necessarily voluntary is Richard Schechner, who, as previously noted, also argues for the potential of real belief in play. I find this correspondence quite telling of the underlying connection made by many between the ability to perceive play/life boundaries and the degree of overall agency experienced by a player.

[7] As I have argue elsewhere [x], however, the debate over immersive gaming moves beyond the issue of the credibility of the image (or sensory experience in general), which is Grau's primary concern, to questions of a larger phenomenological credibility. The phenomenological persuasiveness of pervasive play includes the embedded (rather than hermetic) aesthetic; the unfolding of narrative in "real time"; and the use of everyday, rather than specialized, technologies and equipment.

robots and sentient houses. How could anyone be confused?" [personal interview].

Elan Lee, lead designer for the game, agrees. According to Lee, the immersive experience of the game was always intended to be reflective and conscious, enjoyed on a meta-level. "It was a delicate balancing act to make sure the game and the meta-game worked in synchronicity," Lee said [personal interview]. Players were never meant to believe the "This is not a game" rhetoric, he explained, but rather to be baited by it. "It was obviously a game," Lee said. "There was nothing we could do about that. What we could do was make it a game with an identity crisis. If I know it's a game, and you know it's a game, but IT doesn't know it's a game, then we've got a conflict.

"The idea from the start was to be provocative, to talk a big game and behave outrageously," Lee said of his team's plan to ignore the standard practices of metacommunications in game play. "It's hard to ignore something that is so obviously not playing by the rules. We all believed that it's a part of human nature to deal with something like that by showing it who's boss. We expected the players to prove us wrong, to fight back." Much to their surprise, Lee and his collaborators discovered that the audience had no intention of fighting back. Instead, players embraced the game's "This is not a game" bravado and buttressed it with their own performed belief. When often-sizeable gaps appeared between the game's "big talk" and the realized immersive effects, the audience collaborated in suturing the game world ruptures. In other words, the players actively supported and protected the game's belief in itself.

The first major tear in the Beast's "This is not a game" fabric occurred when a player discovered an oversight in the game Web pages, which contained the majority of the game's narrative and purported to be created separately by a wide range of different game characters, corporations and organizations. Lee described the elaborate measures taken to prevent these sites from being non-diegetically linked: "We had to scour HTML source to ensure that nothing identifying was present. We had to register Web sites using fictitious names with functioning email addresses. We had to ensure that each Web site had a different look and feel so that no one would guess they were created by the same person" [29]. Within two weeks of the game's launch, however, a resourceful player using the nickname "Monkey Stan" entered a public chat room and posted a list of 22 game sites, only 6 of which had been discovered by spotting clues or solving puzzles. The other 16 had been found by using a WHOIS lookup, a Web search that finds out information about the owners of domain names and discloses all of the other domain names that the targeted registrant owns. Lee and his team had failed to anticipate this trick and had registered all of their sites under the same name. By performing a WHOIS on one of the known game sites, therefore, Monkey Stan obtained a list of *all* of the registered game sites, shattering the illusion that the Web pages were independently created, owned and maintained.

Many players[8] reacted to Monkey Stan's revelation with anger and resisted his decidedly un-immersive tactics. One wrote an essay on his "Philosophy of Discovery": "I'll say it right out - I think that any use of WHOIS whatsoever

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[8] In this paper when I speak of the players of the Beast, I am speaking primarily about a Yahoo! Group of nearly 8,000 gamers who formed the online collective known as "the Cloudmakers," which was the largest and most organized audience for the Beast.

detracts from the enjoyment of the game. It's simply akin to reading ahead in a novel" [23]. Most Beast players were in agreement, and it was not just a matter of wanting to play by the rules. "Let's all try not to peek behind the wizard's curtain for this one," wrote one player, and the rest of the audience quickly adopted the metaphor of the wizard's curtain to encourage a feigned naïveté among participants [10]. On a discussion post that lists only the game sites discovered without WHOIS, a writer asks: "Is that all we have so far, in front of the curtain?" [46] The same desire to smooth over the rupture was expressed by another player: "It seems to me that this is a self-contained universe - just follow the links as they are presented" [25]. The construction of the game world had become visible, but the audience chose to ignore its seams and to indulge in the pleasures of believing in it.

The active disavowal required to maintain the game's credibility was reinforced by a later discovery that the Microsoft corporation was behind the Beast.[9] Lee, a Microsoft employee at the time, describes how the truth was uncovered and the players' subsequent reaction:

> You may have heard about one of our mistakes with [Microsoft executive] Doug Zartman. To register foreign domain names, we had to use his real name, and players tied them back to him, and in turn to Microsoft... It was interesting to watch the board, because for a few hours they were appalled: 'Oh my god! Bill Gates is behind this! Bill Gates is trying to control our minds! Aahhhh!' But then afterwards, it was like: 'But, you know, I'm okay with that... I'm just going to ignore Microsoft. I know I wasn't supposed to know that, so I'm just going to let it lie, and pretend I don't know it' [29].

Again, players chose to ignore the rupture of the game reality and to continue playing *as if* : as if the puppetmasters (the players' nickname for immersive game producers) had not been revealed, as if there were no singular corporate identity responsible for the entire game universe. One player urged: "Let's put aside the fact that perhaps, under the surface of the game lies an unsavory plan to get the majority of players to purchase additional software, game players, books and DVDs" [5]. Another wrote: "Please - If you dig up the name of another puppetmaster, don't post it on the board. Keep it to yourself" [42]. This ability to deny, bury and forestall disenchanting information is a testament to the audience's complicity in maintaining the Beast's illusion of reality.

The Zartman incident didn't end there, however. Lee and his team were toying with new strategies for distributing game information, and one day they decided to create a Hotmail account under Zartman's name and send the following message to players:

> Hello all, This is a plea for your understanding. Over the last few weeks I've been bombarded with email. I know that my name appears on the registration for some of the sites, but this is getting ridiculous. The increased popularity of the game constantly brings new waves of users to

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[9] Microsoft intended to release a trilogy of Xbox and PC games in 2001 and 2002 tied to Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, including *'A.I.' Puzzler,* a collection of more than 130 *A.I.*-themed puzzles designed by Alexei Pajinov, the creator of *Tetris*. Microsoft funded the Beast in order to create an audience for its forthcoming *A.I.* games; the relative box-office failure of the film, however, led Microsoft to cancel its plans, and these games were never released.

> my inbox rendering it virtually unusable. PLEASE STOP! I can't give you any answers, I can't get you in touch with the puppetmasters, and I can't tell you where this is headed. […] Thank you for your understanding, Doug [37].

According to Lee, he planned to plant game clues in Hartman's fake email inbox and then bait players into hacking into the account. He leaked hints to Hartman's password and waited for a player frenzy to erupt. Instead, there was absolute silence on the player bulletin boards. "We know from tracking statistics for a fact that several different players successfully hacked into the fake Zartman account," Lee said [personal interview]. "We were monitoring it closely. But none of them acted on it or talked about it with the rest of the players." He surmised, "It seems they thought they had gone too far, accidentally done something real. They backed off." Their failure to pursue the Zartman course of action reveals that players were, in fact, respecting a game-reality boundary, even as they played along with the idea: "This is not a game." They clearly had not slipped into genuine belief in the game, for they self-regulated their actions in accordance with what they considered to be "fair play" within a game. Furthermore, the successful email hackers apparently wanted to keep the curtain firmly in place for other players, and after they felt they had gone too far, they protected their co-players from the non-immersive information they had gleaned. In this way, they took up the work of the puppetmasters, helping to hide the protective frame even as they knew it remained firmly in place.

The players' reactions to a slip by an actor during a live game event further illustrates the heroic efforts players were willing to undertake to support the Beast's producers in providing a more immersive experience. Lee recalls:

> We thought, since we wanted this game to be real, we should have a live event… but we forgot something crucial about the rules of life: there is no off switch. At the end of the night, our actors had to go home, and one of our players decided to follow the actor home. He was doing nothing wrong; he was doing everything right! He did exactly what we had encouraged him to do, and we'd totally failed to plan for that. Ultimately, the actor had to break character and say: 'Look, I'm sorry, I'm an actor, please don't follow me' [29].

The player in question never reported this amusing incident to the larger community of players. I interpret this silence as either selfless, one player's effort to protect his fellow fans from any further game world ruptures, or embarrassment, a realization that he had not been playing "by the rules" and had therefore spoiled the game's "This is not a game" effect. In either case, the awareness of the game-as-game always remains intact.

But silence about one actor's admission, as it turned out, was not enough in this case to stave off the immersive-busting effects of the multi-city player-actor encounter. Another actor was so flustered that night, he took with him with an important piece of game evidence needed by players to solve the next major puzzle. Players in two other cities were relying on that particular piece of information in order to complete a password, and when the material evidence went missing, the audience was faced with a dilemma: Wait for the puppetmasters to discover the mistake and acknowledge the rupture, or act quickly to solve the problem on their own? The players chose the latter route and created a program

that acted as a distributed client server password cracker. This program allowed the players to join computing forces and use brute force, rather than the intended clue, to solved the missing third of password. They accomplished all of this before the puppetmasters had time to process and react to the actor's error. Two months into the game, players were taking on increasing responsibility for their own immersive experience, leaving the game designers out of the problem-solving loop.

Which is not to say that the players were unreceptive to or unappreciative of the puppetmasters' efforts to repair damage to the game's "This is not a game" credibility. On the contrary, they were thrilled when their own immersion-maintaining efforts were noticed and built into the game structure. One example that highlights what Stewart calls this "collective creating by the seat of our pants" occurred a month into the Beast, when a player noticed the duplication of a stock photo in two different game sites [personal interview]. The player posted his observation online: "The photo for Svetlana Cellini [a human character] is in the Belladerma catalog [for robots] - what is the significance of this?" [35] Within the fictional universe, it initially was very difficult for players to explain diegetically the appearance of the human character Svetlana, whose photo had appeared on one of the very first sites as a corporate employee, in a later robot catalog as a "Sex bot" for sale. One player chalked up the discrepancy to "duplication of stock photo" and reminded the others: "Sometimes they [the puppetmasters] screw up and make mistakes" [38]. But the original poster, and others, insisted on giving the game world the benefit of the doubt. They chose to believe (or chose to pretend to believe) that there was a diegetic explanation for the double Svetlanas, and opined a number of theories. Stewart, who was carefully monitoring game play, noticed this development and acted quickly. He said: "We had to write what I think was one of the better little side stories for the whole game: Svetlana and the step-self. The new storyline explained that some robots were being built to replace certain individuals" [44]. Stewart admitted to his audience in a live chat after the game had ended that "players spotting a re-used stock photo forced us to write The Step-Self thread", and this revelation was met with delight on the discussion boards. One player wroter: "I think it's just fascinating that the ENTIRE Svetlana subplot (thestepself) was created just because one of us noted that the same stock photo was used at Donu-Tech and Belladerma! Talk about creating art by the seat of your pants" [16]. The players clearly took pride in having pushed the limits of the game and found pleasure in the moment of rupture that they themselves had produced. This pleasure, of course, was only possible when the Beast was over. During play, the players collaborated in covering up the mistake, just as they did the WHOIS and Microsoft ruptures. Much of their final delight, then, lay in the writers' ability to forestall their detection of that rupture. This was meta-play and meta-pleasure, a delight in the game makers' unprecedented immersive efforts. The players were celebrating tactics that made it easier to play along, easier to perform the deepest immersion.

Another game event dubbed "the Mike Royal incident" reveals that, even as players celebrated the puppetmasters' skill and ingenuity in pioneering a new immersive aesthtic, the audience's immersion was not as intense as it seemed to outsiders observing the players' performances of credulity. In the Mike Royal incident, players called what they thought was an in-game phone number only to find a "real, live person" claiming to be a security guard at the other end. A player

said of her phone conversation with Royal: "He sounded pretty rattled through some of it, just like a real security guard might if you told him something like that. It made me wonder if I had the wrong number for a minute" [49]. Similarly, another player reflected: "We first thought that this couldn't possibly be in-game since none of the phone numbers we'd called before were answered by real persons" [24]. In this case, the one time when perhaps the simulation was most convincing, players did not interpret it as the realness of the game. Rather, they immediately assumed they had strayed outside the bounds of the game, accidentally involving a "real" (non-game) person. This confusion indicates that for the players, the rest of the game was always transparently virtual, a context which ironically led players to doubt the most effective illusion. The Beast became, for a brief moment, too real to be believed. Later, however, many players reported that the Mike Royal incident was far and away their favorite moment in the game. The same player who was initially confused by the realness of the live phone call notes later, "This is freaking awesome - interacting with the game in a totally cool way," while another player wrote: "It's hard to describe exactly the excitement of all of this while it was happening […] it was a real triumph of the game" [49, 24]. Again, we see a meta-pleasure at work in the players' response to the puppetmasters' innovations in game design.

Besides the creative use of new media and network technologies, what did this innovation consist of? From a design perspective, according to Lee, the challenge was not only technological. His team also had to walk a fine line between "immersive" and "overwhelming." "Even though we you don't want to admit that it's a game," Lee says, "you still need to have an 'off switch.' The players need to be able to see that 'off switch' without you shoving it in their faces, and you all need to be able to pretend that it's not there at all" [personal interview]. How does the game maker create an immersive experience credible enough to inspire this kind of elevated make-believe, but not so credible that it creates anxiety in its audiences?

Michael J. Apter, a psychologist who studies adult play, proposes that pleasure in play is dependent upon a sturdy "protective frame" around a perceived challenge [2, p. 22]. According to Apter, this frame assures the player that real world problems cannot intrude on play and that the game will have no real world consequences or effects. A kind of guarantee in the vein of Bateson's metacommunications ("Don't worry, this is only play"), it allows players to enjoy what would in everyday life be experienced as painfully frustrating or disturbingly risky. Apter uses a three-part analogy involving a crowd, a tiger and a cage to make his point, an analogy that I find quite relevant to immersive game design. An empty cage, Apter suggests, will produce boredom in a crowd of spectators; a tiger without a cage will produce anxiety; and a tiger in a cage will produce a pleasurable excitement. This pleasure, for Apter, represents the safe arousal we experience during play.

During a discussion of other pervasive games currently in development by Lee and his collaborators, I related Apter's analogy to Lee, curious for his perspective. I offered my own interpretation: that perhaps the central goal of successful immersive game design is to communicate to players that a cage is in place, while making it as easy and likely as possible for the players to pretend that they don't see the cage. In other words, I suggested, give the audience a tiger, build a sturdy

and always visible cage, but give the crowd both the means and the incentive to say, "What cage? I don't see a cage" even as the spectators are oohing and aahing over the cage's lovely gilt design and breathtaking size. This slight twist on Apter's analogy resonated deeply for Lee. "It's a really beautiful way of describing many of the thoughts I've had for such a long time," he said, vowing to keep it in mind during future projects [personal correspondence]. The key to immersive design, we agreed, is to realize that the clear visibility of the puppetmasters' work behind the curtain does not lessen the players' enjoyment. Rather, a beautifully crafted and always visible frame for the play heightens (and makes possible in the first place) the players' pleasure – just as long as the audience can play along, wink back at the puppetmasters and *pretend* to believe.

MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY

Before addressing the post-game payoffs of collective, feigned belief, I want to explore briefly two aspects of the players' performance of credulity: why such a performance becomes absolutely necessary in the course of immersive gaming, and the striking resemblance between gamers' "make-believe-I-believe" play and traditional, realistic acting methods.

That such intense make-believe play should become an important part of a hyper-realistic medium like the immersive game should come as no surprise if we accept philosopher Kendall L. Walton's central argument in *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of Representational Arts* [50]. Walton proposes that the central activity of receiving all representational arts, including painting, theater, and literature, is participation in a game of make-believe. According to Walton, all art objects — such as filmstrips, novels, sculptures, dramatic texts and live actors on a stage — function as *props* that define the rules, actions, objectives, and themes of play for their audiences. These props tell us what we are to pretend to believe, for how long, and what mechanisms we have at our disposal for displaying our make-belief to other participants. This added element of "display mechanisms" substantially differentiates Walton's notion of make-believe play from traditional theories of suspension of disbelief. The basic concept of "willful suspension of disbelief," first coined by English poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his 1817 *Biographia Literia*, describes a psychological practice that remains *entirely* internal to the reader, viewer, or listener. No external communication of that suspended disbelief is required. It is a mindset, rather than an action. In games of make-believe, Walton points out, mindset is not enough: participants must convey an active belief to their fellow players. To demonstrate the thought process that leads from internal suspension of disbelief to external performance of belief, Walton cites radical psychologist R.D. Laing's poetic exposition of game play dynamics: "They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game" [50, p. xvii]. For Walton, the "possibility of joint participation" is one of the chief allures of make-believe [p.68]. Feigned belief in the game therefore becomes essential to acceptance in the community of players, and an outwardly directed performance of belief assures inclusion. This "playing at not playing a game" fits perfectly, of course, with the Beasts' "This is not a game" rhetoric. We may see the collective play of the immersive genre, then, as simply making explicit what implicitly occurs among audiences of all collectively experienced art forms.

Although Walton does not use the word "performance" to describe audience members' external displays of pretended belief, his theory of reception as play exhibits strong theatrical leanings. For nearly a century, finding physical and verbal ways to express a sincere belief in a dramatic scenario has been taught as one of the basic principles of realistic acting. For instance, Constantin Stanslavski's hugely influential theory of the "magic if" ask actors to think and to act *as if* the circumstances of the dramatic scene were real. Stanislavski's advice, it is important to note, is oriented toward an *external* display. He is concerned with the gestures, actions and expressions that will communicate to the audience a feigned (quite literally, performed) real belief in the character and given circumstances of the play. This "magic if" therefore requires the same kind of theatrical belief we see at work in make-believe and immersive gaming — that is, a legible, outward expression of *as if I believe* rather than an internal attempt to believe *for real.*

This preference for an "as if" belief appears consistently in modern schools of realistic acting. A prime example is the classic 20th-century actors' training text *Acting is Believing*, in which Stanislavski-trained director and acting coach Charles J. McGaw proposes that "acting is literally a matter of 'make-believe'" [32, p. 7]. The kind of belief necessary for actors to develop, McGaw argues, is quite similar to belief in play; in fact, he stresses the importance of acknowledging, in the words of theatrical director Max Rheinhardt, the actor's "ever-present realization that it is only play" [p.46]. So it is not a "for real" that belief that overtakes the actor, as McGaw's title might seem to imply, but rather a conscious and strategic performance of belief that retains its mimetic frame. To this end, McGaw urges us to attend to the difference between what is perceived as "real" and what is felt to be "true", emotionally and phenomenologically, in performed belief:

> Neither the child nor the actor is concerned with reality — with the actualness of the things about him…. He knows, too, that the situation is not real and that he is not really the character he is playing. Toward all of these he maintains the same attitude. Toward all of these unreal factors he says: 'I will act as I would if they were real.' And his conviction in the truth of his own actions enables him to believe also in the *truth* (not in the *reality*) of his cardboard crown [p. 8].

As McGaw notes, what "feels" real may be as experientially valid as what "is" real, although there may be some frustration involved at the apparent discrepancy between perceived truth and observed reality. This tension, created by a mimetic experience that is both not real and yet true at the same time, plays an important role in what I have come to call "the Pinocchio effect." How do players, on a stage or in a game, reconcile what they know to be feigned with what they feel to be real? To explore this paradoxical sense of simultaneous fulfillment (our play is true) and lack (our play is not actual), I would like to turn back to the Beast and examine the desires to play "a real little game" that pervasive play generates in its audience.

THE PINOCCHIO EFFECT

The *Pinocchio* story makes a particularly fitting allegory, I think, for pervasive play. After all, the impetus for the Beast — and thus the entire immersive genre — was Spielberg's *A.I.*, a futurist Pinocchio tale. (*A.I.* is the story of a robot that dreams of becoming a real little boy.) The Beast's puppetmasters, a term that also evokes *Pinocchio*, masterfully played with this intertextual reference in their game design,

for example, registering domain names to "Ghaepetto," the toy maker in the original *Pinocchio*. The puppetmasters' most poetic and revealing gesture to *Pinocchio* came in the form of a flash movie portraying the death of a major game character, Eliza. An A.I. program with false memories of having once been an embodied little girl, Eliza was beloved by the Beast's audience. Shortly before her demise, which by all player accounts was an unexpectedly profound experience, Eliza granted the game players a parting gift. She promised them, "I'll give you a little something. I'll give you a fairy blessing," as sparkly blue dust rose out of her avatar's hands. This blessing, of course, is the same magic that in *Pinocchio* could turn a puppet — or in the case of the movie *A.I.*, a robot — into a real little boy. "I can do that," she tells the players, slowly fading away, "because I'm real, I'm real, I am real." Her final words: "I *was* real."

In Eliza's death scene, it is important to note the pathos evoked by her final plea to be perceived as real. Just like the game that kept insisting, "This is not a game," Eliza wanted nothing more than to transcend her digital limitations. This scene was the one place in the Beast where the unfulfilled desires of the game to be real were acknowledged. Throughout the rest of the game, its bravado remained intact; here, however, players were given an opportunity to reflect on the longing of the virtual to be real. The generation of this desire, and the concomitant consciousness of the impossibility of its ever being achieved, is what I call "the Pinocchio Effect." Pervasive games, at their heart, are the dream of the virtual to be real. And if pervasive games are the dream of the virtual to be real, then they are also the dream of the players for the real to be virtual. For many gamers, the experience of play promises qualities rarely attained in non-game life. What if all of real life were as engaging, offered as many opportunities to make a difference, delivered as much affective impact, and generated as strong and bonded a community as pervasive play? I would like to suggest that players' complicity in the game's self-professed desire to be real is best understood as a mirror desire for their real life to be more like a game. Having experienced the pleasures and agency afforded by the Beast, perhaps its players would choose to use Eliza's blue fairy blessing to turn their everyday existence into "a real little game."

Elsewhere, I have described in detail the phenomenon I call "gaming reality," in which fans of pervasive play approach major real life problems such as unsolved crimes, the prevention of terrorism and political graft as if it were an immersive game [33]. Gaming reality is an example of the conspiratorial storytelling style of pervasive games producing a performed slippage between games and reality. While these players do not actually believe the real life problems they tackle are games, they feign belief in order to create formal opportunities for intervention and collaboration.

Sean Stewart, who penned the sprawling narratives that made Beast players feel as if the game were everywhere, speculated about the pleasures and spillover effects of conspiratorial storytelling. "Conspiracies […] do what other escapist art does, make the whole world really about the main character, reinforcing the sense that we alone are player characters, and everybody else, as we always suspected, are bit players, pawns and NPCs [non-player characters] in the story of our lives," Stewart said, drawing on his background as a director for live-action roleplaying games [personal interview]. What makes conspiracy tales so effective in giving their audience members a sense of centrality and agency in everyday life, Stewart explained, is how easily they transfer to the non-fictional world:

> A protagonist in a comic book can draw Excalibur, where you can't. But you can peer suspiciously at the world around you for patterns. That is, of all the kinds of romance, the conspiratorial lends itself, I think, most easily to a second person transference. This really could happen, or is happening, to YOU, in a way a fantasy quest or James Bond novel can't. [...] James Bond is in another, higher, purer realm, to which, if you had vast skills, you could aspire. But the conspiracy is inherent in your real surroundings.

Gaming reality, when read as an example of players' literal belief, has contributed greatly to the distrust of the pervasive genre. I want to reiterate here, however, that this gaming of reality is not the work of psychologically impaired audiences, as many of my fellow games researchers have suggested to me. As part of the Pinocchio effect, it is instead a desire to believe that life *can be* a game, a desire for the advantages a game mindset confers on its players. For as Elan Lee once pointed out to me, a playful frame of mind alone is often not enough to inspire confidence or spur action. He explained:

> The importance of a game is the formality. It's a lubricant in that it provides structure in a way that most people are not comfortable performing without. It's strange because there's nothing to stop them from doing these things without the game, but having the other people playing with you, or the secret that you're in on, or the hint for the next puzzle, or the instructions telling you what to do next makes everything okay. You can do anything. Because there is something out there that needs your unique help. The formal game is the call for help [personal interview].

The desire for life, then, to become "a real little game" is actually the desire for the formal call to action, direction, and the sense that others are working toward the same goal.

I would like to propose that this drive to discover real life problems in direct correspondence to fictional play is not strange or delusional, but rather a perfect illustration of what digital theorist Pierre Levy identifies as a fundamental aspect of our experience of contemporary virtuality. Levy's notion of the virtual recalls McGaw's discussion of the real and the true. Levy accepts that virtual experience is not necessarily "unreal" or "untrue," much as McGaw accepts that play can feel real and therefore be true, if not actual. He argues in *Becoming Virtual* : "The virtual should, properly speaking, be compared not to the real but to the actual" and that "virtualization tends toward actualization" [30, p. 24]. In other words, it is natural that a virtual experience should foster interest in developing multiple real-world, or actual, counterparts. For as Levy further notes, "Actualization proceeds from problem to solution, virtualization from a given solution to a (different) problem" [p. 27]. I would like to suggest, then, that we read the immersive players' efforts to game reality as a brilliant example of Levy's virtualization. The game's solution, to work collectively together via distributed networks and digital interfaces, is translated into a set of potential problems: What else, the players asked, can we solve or accomplish this way?

URBAN SUPERHEROES

Because the Beast and its conspiratorial "This is not a game" rhetoric represents such an extreme genre of pervasive play, I also would like to discuss briefly a few

examples of the Pinocchio effect in a more typical genre of pervasive play: the urban superhero game, which asks players to complete timed missions in city environments, communicating directions and clues via mobile telecommunications technologies (for example, text messaging and Wireless Application Protocol).

Like immersive gaming, urban superhero (USH) play has generated its own set of spurious tales of excessive player credulity. And from these tales, a parallel concern for the games' psychological impact has entered the popular discourse. Dubbed by the press as "games without borders" and "games without frontiers," the *pervasiveness* of USH play is seen by many critics as a kind of *persuasiveness* [51, 27]. They "invade your life and *summon* you to play even when you are offline," one reporter writes, bestowing upon the USH games a kind of power to hail and to seduce its audience [51, emphasis mine]. As a result, the same writer notes, "it's not always easy to tell reality from fiction. Scary stuff." The specific threat USH games pose to their players' ability to make a "healthy" distinction between games and reality is therefore not so much an unprecedented realistic aesthetic, as in immersive games, but rather the USH's disregard for geographic and spatial game-life boundaries. And Steven Johnson, who also raised the specter of a creeping existential doubt among immersive gamers, warns: "That's the thing about games without frontiers. You never really know when you're playing" [27]. Once again, the critic declares that the audience does not "really know"; once again, the contemporary gamer is characterized primarily by her confused credulity.

What evidence is there to support this characterization? What urban legends compel media critics to describe USH games as "scary" and the source of "existential doubt"? One clue is offered by Sven Halling, the CEO of the Stockholm-based company It's Alive, a frontrunner in USH game design. One of the breakthrough games in this genre, a location-based first person shooter called *Botfighters*, has faced an international reception that includes a frequently expressed anxiety about players losing touch with reality and losing themselves in the game. Although Halling does not share this anxiety, he faces it frequently in interviews. One reporter insisted: "You surely have encountered concern about the social effects of pervasive gaming," asking Hallen: "What about people suddenly running out of an office meeting because they have been hit by an SMS [short messaging system] bullet, or players who can't distinguish between the game and the real world anymore?" [43] Interestingly, in a different interview with Halling, the same myth resurfaces in a slightly less sensationalized form: "There are these *partially fictional* stories of people both in Sweden and Japan ducking out of business meetings because… they've discovered that they're about to be hit and they need to respond" [13, emphasis mine.] Halling's interviewer notes that while the action described may in fact be the truth, the psychology of the players involved has been fictionalized. More likely than players losing their ability to distinguish between game and life, he proposes, is that the game "is far more important [to them] than boring stuff that's being discussed in the meeting." Nonetheless, Halling notes, many countries are too worried about the potential psychological effects of pervasive play to adopt games like Botfighters: "In countries like Austria or Switzerland, they like the game, but they don't dare launch it. They feel it might be dangerous."

Can we deconstruct these myths of the dangerous credibility of pervasive games, much as I have attempted to do for the immersive subgenre? I believe we can. The following anecdotes about urban superhero games, however, are not meant to

represent as systematic and thorough a study as my work on the Beast. Rather, I share them to suggest the broader implications of how performed belief can be not only pleasurable during the game, but also persist in real-life scenarios. This is the area where my next major research effort will take place; for now, it will suffice to gesture to a few of what I consider to be some very exciting player experiences I have observed in this early stage of my investigation.

GAMING REALITY

In January 2002, four players of the Go Game — an urban superhero game produced by Wink Back, Inc. that bills itself as a combination of Mission Impossible, performance art and scavenger hunt — rushed into the lobby of San Francisco's posh, downtown Hilton Hotel. They were on a mission, sent to them via a cell phone: Scale a massive overpass with limited public access and hang a banner with the three-word political message of your choice. This team, known as the Pop Shop Squad, chose the phrase "Go Make Art" to adorn their 8' x 5' cloth banner. But how to get to the overpass? The players scoured the lobby for a clue or a friendly face, and before long someone who looked like a hotel worker approached them. "Can I help you?" he asked. The members of the Pop Shop Squad smiled knowingly at each other. They had found an ally, no doubt a "plant" that had been sent there to help them in their mission. The team had already encountered two plants that day, one of whom had welcomed them into the backseat of his car to help navigate them more quickly through the city. So the team explained its mission to this "hotel worker" — the players knew, of course, that he was not *really* an employee, but rather an actor hired by the Go Game. When he initially declined their request for assistance in getting to the overpass, the Pop Shop Squad persisted. They wouldn't give up, because they knew plants were sometimes directed to be coy and to play hard-to-get. Finally, after much persistence, the "hotel worker" secreted the four players away to an employees-only hotel exit that landed them exactly where they needed to be to finish the mission.

After the four-hour game had concluded, I asked the Pop Shop Squad what had been their favorite experience that afternoon. Without hesitation, one member replied, "Definitely the weird guy who was the plant in the hotel. We were wandering around forever before that trying to figure out what to do. We were sure we would lose the mission" [personal interview]. I had written the game the Pop Shop Squad had just finished playing, and I was quite confused by their answer. "What plant in the hotel?" I asked. I hadn't written a part for a hotel plant. In fact, there was no hotel mission scripted into the game. Her teammate didn't notice my confusion and added: "That guy was so funny! A plant in the hotel was a really good touch. We wouldn't have known what to do otherwise" [personal interview]. I quickly realized that the Pop Shop Squad had mistaken a real hotel employee for a plant and, in their mistake, found an alternate solution to a difficult puzzle. (As the game writer, I had envisioned them accessing the overpass through a local Chinese cultural center.) When I explained what must have happened to the players, their faces lit up. They loved it. They had projected the game onto reality, and reality had conformed to their game expectations. "We'll have to try that whenever we run into a problem," a third teammate said, laughing [personal interview]. And yet my conversations with hundreds of the more than 4,000 people who have participated in the Go Game in nearly 20 cities across the United States lead me to think that if the player was half-joking, then he

was also half-serious. Players consistently report, months after participating in a Go Game, that they cannot re-enter a game neighborhood without feeling a kind of charge and expectation that the people and places will, in fact, "Wink Back" at them. Ian Fraser, lead writer, and Finnegan Kelly, lead designer, founded the company Wink Back, Inc. in 2001 with a mission statement that reflects this "wink, wink" interplay:

> By utilizing the latest in wireless technology and building upon people's intrinsic need for fun and connectivity, the Go Game seeks to become the first truly compelling application of the wireless web. Our game encourages players to realize the magic and creativity that surrounds them daily, and to see their world as the enriching playground it can be [34].

This statement perfectly captures the core philosophy of pervasive games: Everyday environments can and should be places for group play. But the Go Game, like many pervasive models, is interested in more than just providing specific opportunities for play within the games themselves. It also encourages players to "Look again," the Go Game's earliest motto, in their daily lives, to see the inexhaustible and often overlooked opportunities for play that already surround them on an everyday basis.

The opportunity to extend a gaming mindset to non-game situations is built structurally into each Go Game. Each team receives missions that require players to misread "real" (non-game) people, places and objects as a part of the game. For example: "Some time today you will be approached by the Speaker. The Speaker could be anyone, anywhere… all we know is that the Speaker will say something to you. It could be anything, and you'll only know it's the Speaker if you form a circle around him or her and dance wildly..." or "Sometime today you will find the Mystery Key. It won't look like a key, but it will work some kind of magic when you encounter a locked door later in the game. So make sure you take with you any unusual objects you find along the way…" With this built-in ambiguity, teams must approach everyone and everything with a game mindset. When encountering a person, a team must assume he or she is a plant; when finding an object, a team must assume it is a prop to be deployed creatively. These missions require teams to affect a confident belief, to act *as if* the game is everywhere and everything at all times.

This encouragement of a kind of paranoia is, of course, the same play paradigm that has earned immersive games the nickname "schizophrenia machines". But as many teams discover, and as I hope to document more thoroughly in future writings, sometimes approaching the "wrong" person or item can be extremely productive and pleasurable. By approaching real situations with the *Pinocchio* mindset – "this is a real little game" – players can find new agency and creativity in their everyday lives.

This past July, as an experiment, I invited Elan Lee to participate in a Go Game in Seattle. He and I have discussed my theories on pervasive play and the Pinocchio effect on numerous occasions, and I wanted to give him the opportunity, as the lead designer of such an influential work in the field of pervasive play, to give me his perspective as a player for the first time. Would the creator of the "this is not a game" phenomenon find himself in the middle of a "real little game"?

Lee told me afterwards about a number of reality-game slippages his team experienced in the course of the game. He and his five teammates spent twenty

minutes, for example, attempting to engineer a pile of junk they found in a parking lot next to the handwritten sign "Assembly Required," and were pleased that when they finally found the "right" configuration, a plant appeared. "We were so excited that we solved the puzzle!" Lee said. [personal interview] The pile of junk, of course, was not part of the game and there was no "correct solution"; I was very impressed, however, that they had managed to make meaning out of what was a previously meaning-free collection of random packing materials and old car parts. Later in the game, they sat lotus-style, chanting mantras and humming for what Lee described as "a really, really, really long time," waiting for "spiritual guidance" (as a clue had directed them) from a man they mistook for a plant. When he failed to respond in any noticeable way (because, of course, he had no idea what was going on), the team realized that the lesson they were to learn was *patience* – a perfectly wonderful (mis)reading of the (non)game scenario! By finding a signal in the noise, they had effectively turned another nongame problem into a real little game.

Weeks later, I followed up with Lee to find out if the Go Game had left him with any lingering traces of the Pinocchio effect. I asked him if he had been back to the Seattle neighborhood where the game had been played. "Yes!" he said. "And it was very evocative, I found that I had a lot of really good memories about the place, a lot of knowing what's down corners that I wouldn't otherwise know what's down, stories to tell people I brought there. I didn't expect that sense of intimacy." But the game had left him with more than memories. "It was the sort of experience where when I went back, the whole time I half expected crazy groups of people to be dashing about madly, even though I knew the game was gone," he said. "It haunts your experience of the place, you feel more comfortable with the space, like you could do anything there." For Lee, the neighborhood was transformed by the game. "I know it better, I have lived here, it is mine, I know it better than you do, I can make it come to life, I can make anything happen here.

"The Go Game confirmed a lot of what I suspected and tried to deliver in the Beast," Lee said, "which is that the best games make you more suspicious of, more attentive to, the world around you. They make you seek out the pieces of something you're already a part of. But first they must make you a part of it."

I agree with Lee. The best pervasive games *do* make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings. A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. The more a player chooses to believe, the more (and more interesting) opportunities are revealed. In conclusion, I choose not to see pervasive players' performed belief as a kind of paranoia or dangerous credulity, but rather as a conscious decision to prolong the pleasures of the play experience and to apply the skills acquired in gaming to real life. And as any puppetmaster will tell you, even in a real game, the audience is always already responsible for its own immersive experience. It is a small leap for a player to make, therefore, from crafting play out of a game to creating a real little game out of everyday life.

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