

Play or Else:

A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming



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Why play?



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Why play?

Or else what?



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Why play?

Or else what?

What is ubiquitous gaming?



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What should a performance studies approach to ubi-gaming look like?

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ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

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pareidolia n.

the erroneous or fanciful perception of a clear pattern or meaning in something that is actually random or ambiguous.

ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia n.

the erroneous or fanciful perception of a clear pattern or meaning in something that is actually random or ambiguous.

Case in point →



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as prayer:



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as prayer:

Please let my proposed (conspiracy) theory of ubiquitous gaming (the game is everywhere) not be an erroneous or fanciful perception.



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as invocation:



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as invocation:

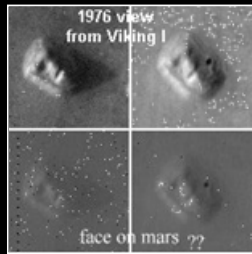
“ceci n'est pas un pareidolia” was adopted in February 2004 as the new mantra for the Cloudmakers...



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as invocation:

... a particularly hard-core group of ubiquitous gamers known for perceiving games everywhere, even when they are adamantly told, "This is not a game."



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

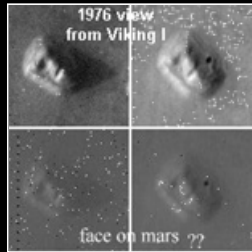
pareidolia as blessing:



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as blessing:

(Walter Benjamin suggested that 20th-century alienation of the individual was a result of a rational distaste for perceiving "sensuous correspondence.")



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

pareidolia as blessing:

(He suggested that the cure for this alienated condition would be a more free and unfettered mimesis, that is, a more joyful perception & construction of meaningful correspondences.)



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

Surrealist painter Magritte adjures us not to confuse mimetic representation with reality...



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

Surrealist painter Magritte adjures us not to confuse mimetic representation with reality... that is to say, not to misperceive signs as things.



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

Surrealist painter Magritte adjures us not to confuse mimetic representation with reality... that is to say, not to misperceive signs as things. (*Pareidolia* is the *reverse* misperception: things as signs.)



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

The pervasive and intentional confusion of things as signs and signs as things is the fundamental state of ubiquitous gaming.



ceci n'est pas un pareidolia.

The pervasive and intentional confusion of things as signs and signs as things is the fundamental state of ubiquitous gaming.

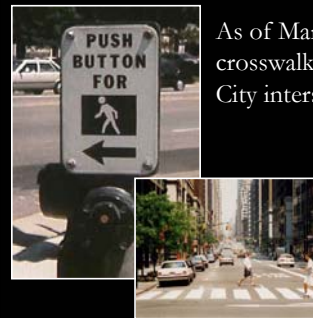
Public pareidolia: massively multi-player (mis)recognition



pedestrian power



pedestrian power



As of March 2004, there were **3250** crosswalk buttons at New York City intersections:

pedestrian power



As of March 2004, there were **3250** crosswalk buttons at New York City intersections:



*To Cross Street
Push Button
Wait for Walk Signal*

pedestrian power



With no public notice, **more than 2500** were deactivated by 1990. Their physical shells, however, remained in place, unchanged.



pedestrian ~~power~~ placebo



With no public notice, **more than 2500** were deactivated by 1990. Their physical shells, however, remained in place, unchanged.



pedestrian ~~power~~ placebo



“Many trusting souls believed the well-worn buttons actually worked, but the rare promise of control over their pedestrian lives turned out to be an exercise in futility.”

(New York Times 02.27.04)



pedestrian ~~power~~ placebo



“Any benefit from them is only imagined.”

(New York Times 02.27.04)



pedestrian pareidolia

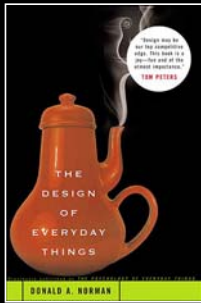


“Any benefit from them is only imagined.” *(New York Times 02.27.04)*

What are the benefits, if any, of imagined benefits?



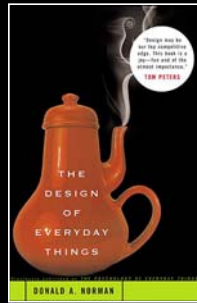
Imagined Benefits: or, to put it another way...



Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*

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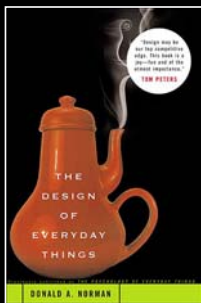
Imagined Benefits: or, to put it another way...



“The human mind is exquisitely tailored to make sense of the world. Give it the slightest clue and it goes off, providing explanation.” - Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*

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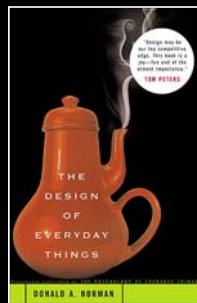
Imagined Benefits: or, to put it another way...



“We base our mental models, our conceptual models of the way objects work, on whatever knowledge we have, **real or imaginary.**” - Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*

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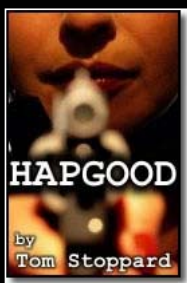
Imagined Benefits: or, to put it another way...



“[...] **People are free to let their imaginations run free** as long as the mental models they develop account for the facts as they perceive them.” - Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*

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Imagined Benefits: or, to put it another way...



“Niels Bohr lived in a house with a horseshoe on the wall. When people cried, for God's sake Niels, surely YOU don't believe a horseshoe brings you luck!, he said, no, of course not, but I'm told **it works even if you don't believe it.**” - Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood*

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What is ubiquitous gaming?

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What is ubiquitous gaming?

ubiquitous computing + digital **gaming**
network culture

Ubiquitous Computing

computers come out of the closet ...



Ubiquitous Computing

and off the desktop ...



Ubiquitous Computing

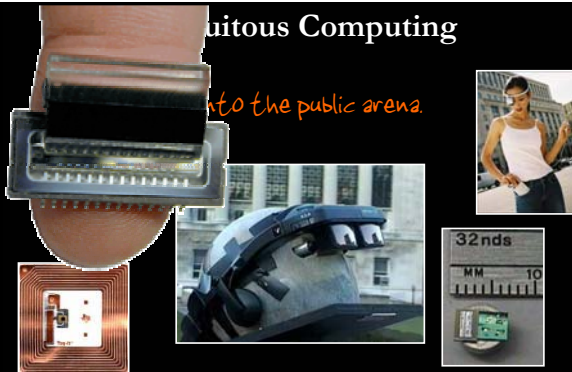
... into the public arena.



(laptops, PDAs, cell phones, digital cameras, MP3 players, portable games, e.g.)

Ubiquitous Computing

... into the public arena.



(embedded sensors, RFID tags, augmented reality, wearables, smart dust, e.g.)

Ubiquitous Computing



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Ubiquitous Computing



“Magritte’s Ubi-pipe of the future?” proffers Rich Gold of Xerox PARC’s Computer Science Laboratory

Ubiquitous Computing



Ceci n'est pas une pipe → *Ceci n'est pas seulement une pipe*

Ubiquitous Computing



Ceci n'est pas une pipe → *Ceci n'est pas seulement une pipe*

The computers *will* be everywhere.

The objects *will* be magical.

Your fanciful perception of meaningful engagement *will not* be erroneous. (at least, in many cases)

Ubiquitous Computing



Ceci n'est pas une pipe → *Ceci n'est pas seulement une pipe*

Success in a ubicomp world = the ability to perceive and to interact imaginatively with the individual nodes in a new pervasive network of technological opportunity.

Ubiquitous Computing → Gaming?



Ceci n'est pas une pipe → *Ceci n'est pas seulement une pipe*

The game *will* be everywhere.

The everyday objects *will* be magical within the game.

Your fanciful perception of meaningful ludic engagement *will not* be erroneous.

Ubiquitous Computing → Gaming?



Ceci n'est pas une pipe → *Ceci n'est pas seulement une pipe*

Success in a ubigaming world = the ability to perceive and to interact imaginatively with the individual nodes in the new pervasive network of **ludic** opportunity.

What is ubiquitous gaming?



"You're in control": the first digital game for public urinals

(MIT Media Lab 2003)

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What is ubiquitous gaming?



"You're in control": the first digital game for public urinals



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What is ubiquitous gaming?



"You're in control": the first digital game for public urinals



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What is ubiquitous gaming?

"You're in control": the first digital game for public urinals



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What is ubiquitous gaming?

"You're in control": the first digital game for public urinals



(MIT Media Lab 2003)

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Case Study: The Beast

A mission statement for the Beast:

"The instant you click on a link your phone should start to ring, your car should only drive in reverse, and none of your friends should remember your name. And nothing admits that it is not real."

— Elan Lee, lead designer for *The Beast*

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Case Study: The Beast

The modus operandi of the Beast:

“This experience extends beyond the ‘fourth wall’ of your computer monitor into every communication device you own; phone, fax, email, snail mail, pagers, cell phones, newspapers, television, and movies. You will have to use each of these devices to seek clues – and, even scarier, the clues will seek *you* out via each of these devices. The game can reach you anywhere.”

— Elan Lee on *The Beast*

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Case Study: The Beast

Design for **collective play**:

“We created strings of puzzles that no single person could solve on their own, and we found to our delight it was working. The audience was forming teams, sharing ideas, writing applications, posting theories, arranging group meetings, programming distributed-client password crackers, creating art.”

— Elan Lee, lead designer for *The Beast*

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Case Study: The Beast

Collective play → emergent **collective intelligence**:

“So we built a *three month* schedule around this. And finally we released...”

— Elan Lee, lead designer for *The Beast*

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Case Study: The Beast

Collective play → emergent **collective intelligence**:

“So we built a *three month* schedule around this. And finally we released...”

...the Cloudmakers solved *all* of these puzzles on the *first day*.”

— Elan Lee, lead designer for *The Beast*

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Networks become tools of engagement

“The 7500+ people in this group ... We sit back and look at our monitors, and our keyboards...our window to this vast collective consciousness... we are not alone. We are not one person secluded from the rest of the world...kept apart by the technology we have embraced. We have become a part of it through the technology. We have become a part of something greater than ourselves.”

(Post from *Cloudmakers* message board)

Networks become tools of engagement

“The solutions do not lie in the puzzles we are presented with, they lie in the connections we make, between the ideas and between one another. These are what will last. I look down at myself and see that I, too, have been incorporated into the whole, connections flowing to me and from me, ideas flowing freely as we work together, as individuals and as a group, to solve the challenges we are presented with. The solution, however, does not lie in the story. We are the solution.”

(Excerpt from editorial on the *Cloudmakers* home page)

Networks become tools of engagement

“We're about to break up the most intelligent group of folks ever assembled - we could have built the atomic bomb if the solution was put to us in code.... I'm going to catch myself still looking for patterns and riddles in my daily life months from now.”

(Post from the Cloudmakers message board)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase I: Confidence and mobilization arise from conceptualizing the terrorist attacks as a puzzle

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase I: Confidence and mobilization arise from conceptualizing the terrorist attacks as a puzzle

“9/11... the darkest puzzle?”

“Cloudmakers to the rescue!”

“We can solve the puzzle of who the terrorists are.”

“If we put our collective conscious together, we can find the perpetrators of this crime.”

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase I: Confidence and mobilization arise from conceptualizing the terrorist attacks as a puzzle

“We have the means, resources, and experience to put a picture together from a vast wealth of knowledge and personal intuition.”

“Let's become a resource. Utilize your computer & analytical talents to generate leads.”

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase I: Confidence and mobilization arise from conceptualizing the terrorist attacks as a puzzle

“We like to flaunt our 9,000 members and our voracious appetite for difficult problems, but when the chips are down can we really make a difference?”

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase II: Self-aware negotiation and defense of the slippage between games and reality

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase II: Self-aware negotiation and defense of the slippage between games and reality

"What's being proposed is beyond the game we've played, but you must admit that the spirit is the same."

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase II: Self-aware negotiation and defense of the slippage between games and reality

"Since I found out about this today, I could do nothing but think of the CMs group.... I AM IN NO WAY ATTEMPTING TO MAKE LIGHT OF THE SITUATION. However ... this sort of thing is sorta our MO. Picking things apart and figuring them out."

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase II: Self-aware negotiation and defense of the slippage between games and reality

"When I first heard of the events I went to this state of mind automatically... I did it without even thinking. It's really just become of a state of mind."

"I'm a Cloudmaker. What I do best is look at the world like a Cloudmaker. Perhaps that's taking group identity to the next step.... But I've been permanently changed by the Game."

(From Cloudmakers message board posts on 9/11/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase III: Reinstatement of reality boundaries and capitulation of agency

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase III: Reinstatement of reality boundaries and capitulation of agency

"The references to this as a 'puzzle' and the thought that this group could 'solve' this make me sick. Even if the people posted with good intention. This is not a game."

(Cloudmakers message board posts from 9/12-9/14/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase III: Reinstatement of reality boundaries and capitulation of agency

"Let's put a stop to this nonsense for good. We can't do anything... [we are just] a bunch of anonymous people on an unsecured website... So stop suggesting that we could possibly do anything about solving it."

(Cloudmakers message board posts from 9/12-9/14/2001)

Gaming Reality: Cloudmakers play 9/11

Phase III: Reinstatement of reality boundaries and capitulation of agency

"The Cloudmakers were a 'collective detective' for a *game*. Remember that. It was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was *narrative*... *This is not a game*. Do not go getting delusions of grandeur. Cloudmakers solved a story. This is real life."

(Cloudmakers message board posts from 9/12-9/14/2001)

Play or Else: a performance studies approach



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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



“Perform — or else. There is no performance without **challenge**, without claims and contestations, demands and accusations, field tests and identity checks, as well as the occasionally untimely dare.”

Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else*

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



3 categories of the performance challenge in contemporary digital culture:

- organizational → effective
- cultural → efficacious
- technological → efficient

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



“The whole world's been framed as a high performance test site.”

Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else*

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



“Future researchers will take as given something we can only dimly perceive today—and then may be too horrified to admit:...”

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



“...Namely, that **all performance is electronic**, that the global explosion of performance coincides with precisely the digitalization of discourses and practices, and that this coincidence is anything but coincidental.”

Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else*

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach



“Performance will name the embodiment of digital virtualities [...] just as theater once actualized the virtual spheres of literary societies and ritual actualized those of oral societies.”

Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else*

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach

My intervention:

Ubiquitous gaming is **a challenge to perform**

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Play or Else: a performance studies approach

My intervention:

Ubiquitous gaming is **a challenge to perform**

If to perform (a la McKenzie) is to be challenged, then contemporary digital gaming is **a challenge to be challenged**.

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The Challenge to Be Challenged

Challenge: n. *a call to engage*

The challenge to be challenged is therefore:

- The challenge **to be engaged**
- The challenge **to perceive oneself as “hailed”**

Challenged: adj. *burdened with a difficulty or impairment*

The challenge to be challenged is therefore:

- The challenge **to create artificial difficulties**
- The challenge **to be intentionally inefficient**

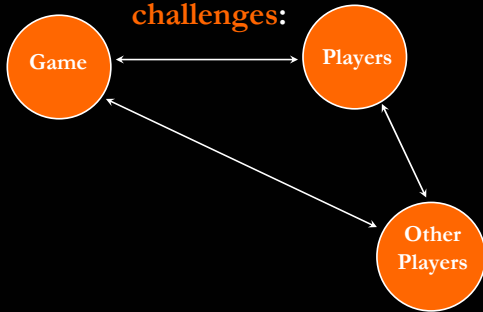
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Ubiquitous gaming is a **network of challenges:**

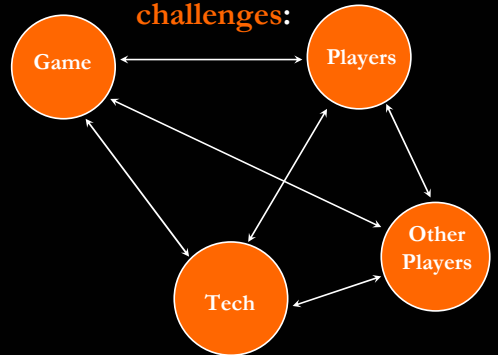
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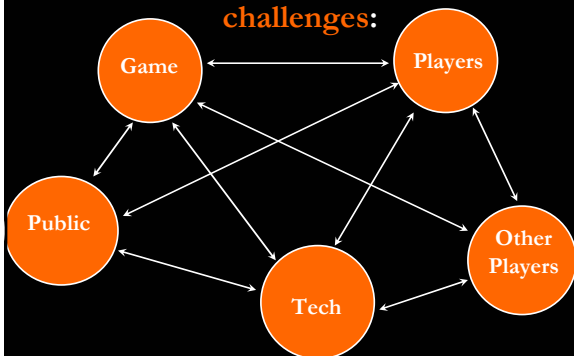
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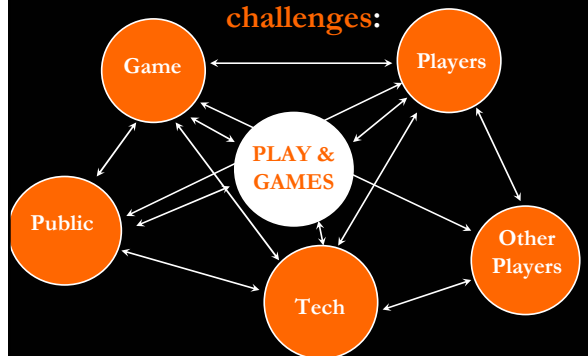
Ubiquitous gaming is a **network of challenges:**



Ubiquitous gaming is a **network of challenges:**



Ubiquitous gaming is a **network of challenges:**



“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if one of these nodes fails to meet the challenge to be challenged?

“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if a *player* fails to meet this challenge to be challenged?

- Play along, or else be **alienated**

“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if a *player* fails to meet this challenge to be challenged?

- Play along, or else be **alienated**
- Play along, or else be **bounded**

“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if a *player* fails to meet this challenge to be challenged?

- Play along, or else be **alienated**
- Play along, or else be **bounded**
- Play along, or else be **invisible**

“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if a *player* fails to meet this challenge to be challenged?

- Play along, or else be **alienated**
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“or else — what?”

Play (along) **or Else**: And what if a *player* fails to meet this challenge to be challenged?

- Play along, or else be **alienated**
- Play along, or else be **bounded**
- Play along, or else be **invisible**
- Play along, or else be **uninspired**

To meet this challenge, the player must become exceptionally skilled at perceiving the game everywhere.

Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

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Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

“You surely have encountered concern about the social effects of pervasive gaming ... What about players who can't distinguish between the game and the real world anymore?” – *Industry Leaders: An interview with Sven Hallen (It's Alive Games)*

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Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

“They invade your life and summon you to play even when you are offline ... It's not always easy to tell reality from fiction. Scary stuff.”- *BBC News Online*

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Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

“Players may find themselves experiencing an existential doubt – is it real, or is it immersive media?... That's the thing about games without frontiers. You never really know when you're playing.” – Steven Johnson, *Slate magazine*

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Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

“Do we really want a nation full of people who think that everything is a clue or an invitation to play? At best, that seems vaguely annoying. At worst, it sounds like widespread paranoia.” – participant in a pervasive play workshop at Intel's 2003 “The Meaning of Place” Forum

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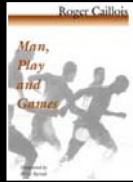
Not everyone likes ubiquitous gaming

“They seem to be some kind of schizophrenia machine, designed specifically to induce a mental breakdown.” colleague at the University of California at Berkeley's Center for New Media

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Historical Distrust of “Perversive” Play

“If play consists in providing formal, ideal, limited, and escapist satisfaction for powerful drives, what happens when every convention is rejected? When the universe of play is no longer tightly closed? When it is contaminated by the real world in which every act has inescapable consequences? Corresponding to each of the basic categories [of play] there is a specific **perversion** which results from the absence of both restraint and protection.”

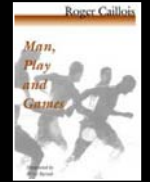


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Historical Distrust of “Perversive” Play

“The principle of play has become corrupted... [unless] the separation of the two universes remains absolute.”

“Their free expansion without check or convention... entails consequences which seem to be inordinately serious: Madness or intoxication...”



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The runaway (ubiquitous) game

The fear of the runaway game is the fear of **eroded boundaries**:

- Erosion of boundaries between game and life (pervasive)
- Erosion of boundaries between gamer and the game (immersive)



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The runaway (ubiquitous) game

Without boundaries to keep play in check, gamers will be either:

- fooled into thinking that the game is “real life”, or
- tricked into thinking that real life is “a game.”



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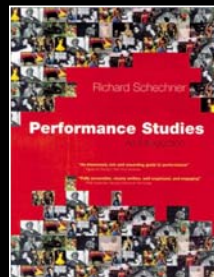


→ “Worst case scenario”:

The gamer never stops playing.

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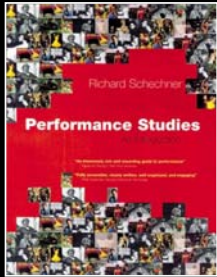
Performance and Belief



Richard Schechner proposes that there are two kinds of play: “make believe” and “make belief”

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Performance and Belief

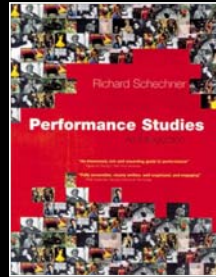


Richard Schechner proposes that there are two kinds of play: “make believe” and “make belief”

“make believe” carefully protects the boundaries between what is real and what is pretended;

“make belief” intentionally blurs them.

Performance and Belief



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?”

Performance and Belief



“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.” – *Umberto Eco* (*Foucault's Pendulum*, 1989)

There is an essential and stubborn distinction between an intentional *performance* of belief and belief itself.

As a performance of belief in play, it is a mimetic rendering of the world as a game.

It is the intentional pareidolia of ludic structure.

Performance of Belief for others

To be accepted into the networked “magic circle of play,” we must perform our belief in the game world to other players and to the game’s creators.



Performance of Belief for others

Suspension of disbelief:

- solitary,
- passive, and
- internal.



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Performance of Belief for others

Suspension of disbelief:

- solitary,
- passive, and
- internal.

Performance of belief:

- social,
- active, and
- external.



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Performance of Belief for self

CLAIMING THE GAME EXPERIENCE:

- How do players reconcile the emotional “truth” and “real” affective impact of games with their virtual status?
- How can they own their virtual successes as part of their real identity?

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→ the desire to act as if games are “real”

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Performance of Belief for self

SUSTAINING THE GAME EXPERIENCE:

- How can players find clear objectives, clear and sustained feedback, community and agency in real life?
- How can players be as effective and engaged in real life as they are in games?

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Case study: The Go Game



The Go Game
(2001 - present) by
Wink Back, Inc.



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“How do you succeed in the Go Game?”

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):



“Assume everyone’s part of the game until they tell you they’re not, and even then, you just have to refuse to believe them.” – *The Shortshoresmen*

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“How do you succeed in the Go Game?”

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“You have to adopt the attitude that it doesn’t matter who or what is really in the game. You have to think and act as if they are, because otherwise you’ll be too self-conscious and never finish the missions. As long as it’s all in the game, even if it’s not really, but you’re just pretending it is, you can do anything.” – *Team Clark Nova*



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“How do you succeed in the Go Game?”

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“You have to swallow the whole neighborhood up into the game, whether they want to play along or not.” – *Orbit Club Comets*



“Act as if the whole world is playing with you. If you’re convincing enough, they will, and that’s how you win.” – *Team Clue*

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“How do you succeed in the Go Game?”

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“My team practices playing in real life, we try to see everything around us as if it were a Go Game clue [...] A lot of what you fool around with in the real games turns out not to be the game anyway, so it turns out there’s not as much difference between playing real games and just playing in real life as you might think.” – *Team Secular Hedonists*



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The persistence of the Go Game

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“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.” – *Team Clue*



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The persistence of the Go Game

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“It haunts your experience of the place, you feel more comfortable with the space, like you could do anything there.” – *Call of Cibulu*



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The persistence of the Go Game

From player interviews (7/03 – 10/03):

“The whole neighborhood is transformed for me. 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.” – *Team Clue*



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QUICKFIRE CONCLUSIONS

- Ubiquitous gaming: THE GAME IS EVERYWHERE.
- Opportunities for meaningful engagement are pervasive.
- Ludic immersion is in off-line, real-world communities and events.
- The game has real material, social and political impact.
- Performing belief, and inviting pareidolia, are strategic and productive actions.
- A game is a mimetic representation of (inter)active potential. It is a rendering of the world to correspond to ludic structures.

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QUICKFIRE CONCLUSIONS

The challenge is not: *Shall we play a game?*
The challenge is this: *Shall we perceive a game, together?*

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Play or Else:

A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming



Thank you.