A Real Little Game:
The Pinocchio Effect in Pervasive Play

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Perverse-ive

(from the root word "perverse," meaning, "not good," as in "perverting proper values or practices"

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WHAT THE HECK IS PERVERSIVE PLAY?*

*not yet found in any of the taxonomies, typologies or frameworks of Espen Aarseth, et al.

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Pervasive

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Immersive

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Perv-ersive

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The "-ive" is important; it implies transformation

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CATEGORIES OF UBIQUITOUS PLAY

Pervasive gaming   *Immersive gaming*   *Perversive gaming*

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Mobile play in everyday spaces
- Mixed reality; mobile, embedded, and location aware technologies
- LOCAL scale
- Typically multiplayer, competitive play
- *Noderunner*, *Botfighters*, geocaching, *Can You See Me Now?*, flash

The Whirling Dervishes: Flash mobbing downtown San Francisco

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A genre of pervasive play that denies its gameness
- A.K.A. "unfiction," "alternate reality gaming"
- Blurred boundaries, no metacommunications: "This is not a game"
- Everyday technologies
- GLOBAL scale
- Usually massively multiplayer, collective play required
- The Beast, *Push, Nevada*, Acheron, MetaCortex

"Shhh … it's a secret that we're playing a game."

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Any kind of pervasive or immersive play

that makes non-players nervous

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that makes non-players nervous

What makes people nervous?

•Games that are too sprawling (too pervasive)*

•Games that are too realistic (too immersive)*

•Games that are too persuasive (too credible)*

*perhaps these "perverting influences" are the "dark underbelly" of play that Brian Sutton Smith and Eric Zimmerman want us to explore?

…LEST YOU THINK I AM MERELY IMAGINING THIS PROBLEM…
(The Top 10 Comments about Perversive Play)

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8. "Some players become so 'immersed' in the games that they forget that it is a game […] public policies may become necessary to protect players from what we might consider 'dangerously immersive' games." – a legal paper at the 31st annual Telecommunications Policy &

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7. "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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7. "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*

6. "In countries like Austria or Switzerland, they like the game, but they don't dare launch it. They feel it might be dangerous." – Sven Hallen, It's Alive Games

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5. "Do we really want a nation full of people who think that everything is a clue or some kind of invitation to play? At best, that seems vaguely annoying. At worst, it sounds like widespread paranoia. Why would we want games that encourage such a dangerous and disruptive rejection of reality?" – participant in a pervasive play workshop at Intel's 2003 "The Meaning of Place" Forum

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4. "Have you considered the fact that there are actual mental illnesses with exactly the same behaviors and thinking patterns as the players of the kind of games you're talking about? Wouldn't you agree that what the gamers are calling play is really just varying degrees of psychosis?" – audience Q & A at the Melbourne Digital Arts & Culture 2003 conference attendee

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3. "The important question is: Do these games just tend to attract people who are already prone to mental illness, or do they make them crazy from scratch?"- participant in an 030303: Collective Play Colloquium breakout session

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2. "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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1. "It sounds just like *Ender's Game*." – too many people to name

WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A PROBLEM.

Perversive play: an inevitable descent into madness?

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WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A PROBLEM.

Perversive play: an inevitable descent into madness?

If a game is

> too sprawling (too pervasive);

> too realistic (too immersive); or

> too persuasive (too credible),

PLAYERS WILL BELIEVE IN THE GAME TOO MUCH FOR THEIR OWN GOOD. They will either

> Be fooled into thinking a game is "real life", OR

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> Be tricked into thinking real

…BUT DON'T BLAME THE CRITICS OR THE ACADEMICS
Players enthusiastically contribute to the perception of perversity:

"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 […] Yet 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." —a player of the Beast

Follow the footsteps… ephemeral clues embedded in everyday spaces.

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…BUT DON'T BLAME THE CRITICS OR THE ACADEMICS

"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."-*from a player-written editorial published on the first central immersive gaming*

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…BUT DON'T BLAME THE CRITICS OR THE ACADEMICS

Former immersive gamers have attempted to "game" real life crimes and tragedies:*

- •9/11
- •Washington, D.C. sniper attacks
- •East Coast USA serial pet killer

*for a a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play" (McGonigal 2003)

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Prompting other players to turn the rhetoric of immersive play back on itself:

"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. [We] solved a story. This is real life."

"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)*

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How do you succeed in the "Go Game"?

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

"See the game everywhere, even where it isn't."

"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."

"Follow the signal. If you lose the signal, turn all of the noise around you into a signal and pretend it means something and then don't let anyone tell you it's just noise."

Is this man part of the game, or not?

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 a clue […] A lot of what you fool around with in the real games turns out not to be the game anyway, so I think there isn't much difference between playing real games and just playing in real life […] except that the real games end and the pretend ones can go on forever."

Random papers left behind, or important clue?

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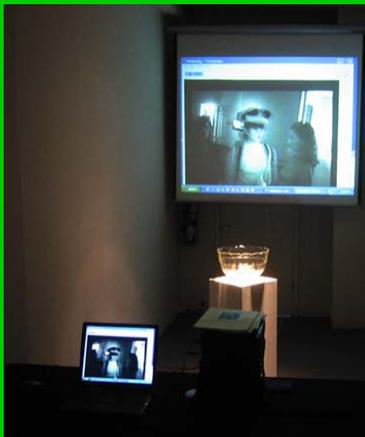
"What game? We're not playing a game."

Players wonder what, if anything, they are supposed to do with the giant troll.

How could something this interesting NOT be a part of the game?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CREDULOUS SPECTATOR

Digital projection: An earlier "perversive" art form?

•Collective hysteria at screenings of Lumière's short documentary *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895)

•Historical distrust of emerging mimetic arts and immersive media as "deceptive arts" that "pose a threat to consciousness and perception" and, through their hyperpersuasivness may be used as "vehicles for mass propaganda with unprecedented and inexorable success" (See Oliver Grau's 2003 *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*)

STAGING AN INTERVENTION

Performance theorist 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.

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?"**

STAGING AN INTERVENTION

"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." –the narrator in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*

My arguments:

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

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"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." –the narrator in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*

My arguments:

- •Contemporary gamers of immersive and pervasive entertainment *affect* a powerful credulity — "This is not a game" — in the course of pervasive play, but do not actually suffer from this credulity.

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- •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.

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My arguments:

•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.

WHAT IS A "PERFORMANCE OF BELIEF"?

Suspension of disbelief is:	Performance of belief is:
•solitary,	•Social,
•Passive, and	•active, and
•Internal.	•External.

To be accepted into the magic circle of play, we must perform our belief in the game to other players.

WHAT IS THE PINOCCHIO EFFECT?

Pinocchio is first and foremost a story of desire.   It is the desire of the artificial to become real, of the "play object" (a puppet) to become life itself, "a real little boy."

Pervasive and immersive play is first and foremost the *desire* of gamers for their virtual play experiences to become real, and for real life to become a "real little game."

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•*How do we reconcile the emotional "truth" and "real" affective impact of games with their virtual status?*
•*How can we own our virtual successes as part of our real identity?*

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•*Confidence*
•*Agency*
•*Permission*
•*Clear objectives and procedures for action*
•*Feedback*
•*Community*

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The generation of this desire to believe in the permeability of the game-reality boundary, a desire that is NEVER FULFILLED, is the Pinocchio Effect.

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