Play or Else:
A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming

Why play?
Or else what?

What is ubiquitous gaming?

Play or Else:
A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming

Why play?
Or else what?

What is ubiquitous gaming?

Play or Else:
A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming

Why play?
Or else what?

What is ubiquitous gaming?

Play or Else:
A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming

Why play?
Or else what?

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

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgare.com

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_ →

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

**pareidolia as invocation:**
“_ceci n’est pas un pareidolia_” was adopted in February 2004 as the new mantra for the Cloudmakers...
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.”

pareidolia as blessing:
(Walter Benjamin suggested that 20th-century alienation of the individual was a result of a rational distaste for perceiving “sensuous correspondence.”)

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.)

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 une pipe.”

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

“Ceci n’est pas une pipe.”

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

“PUSH BUTTON FOR 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

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

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.”

(From the New York Times 02.27.04)

“Any benefit from them is only imagined.”

(From the New York Times 02.27.04)

What are the benefits, if any, of imagined benefits?
Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*

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*

"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*

"[…] 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*

"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*

What is ubiquitous gaming?
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.

Ubiquitous Computing

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

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 → 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

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

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)

What is ubiquitous gaming?

“You’re in Control: the first digital game for public urinals”

(MIT Media Lab 2003)

What is ubiquitous gaming?

“You’re in Control: the first digital game for public urinals”

(MIT Media Lab 2003)

What is ubiquitous gaming?

“You’re in Control: the first digital game for public urinals”

(MIT Media Lab 2003)

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
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

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

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

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.”

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

“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)

“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 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)*

"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)*

"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**

"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)

---

**Play or Else: a performance studies approach**

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Jon McKenzie’s *Perform or Else*

---

**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.”

---

**Play or Else: a performance studies approach**

3 categories of the performance challenge in contemporary digital culture:

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

---

**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*
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:…”

—Jon McKenzie’s *Perform or Else*

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.”

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.*

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*

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 intentionally inefficient*
Ubiquitous gaming is a network of challenges:

Game

Players

Other Players

Tech

Public

PLAY & GAMES

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com

Ph.D. Qualifying Lecture janemcg@berkeley.edu www.avantgame.com
“or else — what?”

Play (along) or Else: And what if one of these nodes fails to meet the 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

• 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

“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)*

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*

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*

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

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
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.”

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…”

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)

Æ “Worst case scenario”: The gamer never stops playing.

Performance and Belief

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

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?”

“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.

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.

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?

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

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?

Æ the desire to act as if real life is “a game”
Case study: The Go Game

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

“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

“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

“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

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
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 Cthulu

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.

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

Play or Else:
A performance studies approach to ubiquitous gaming

Thank you.