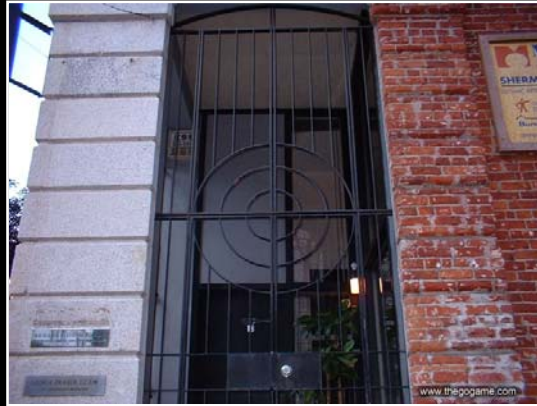


The Runaway Game: Spectacle and Performance in Public Play



JANE MCGONIGAL

Department of Performance Studies / Center for New Media
University of California at Berkeley, USA



2 Emerging Strains of Public Play

PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

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Examples of
Pervasive Play:

Can You See Me
Now? (2003) by
Mixed Reality Lab
and Blast Theory

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Examples of
Pervasive Play:

Botfighters (2000 -
present) by It's Alive

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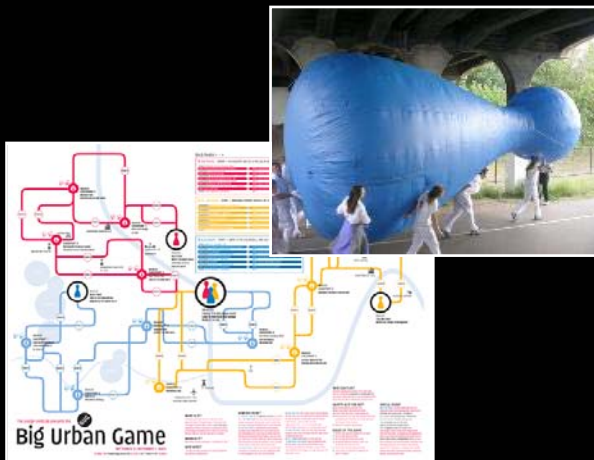
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Examples of
Pervasive Play:

**The Big Urban
Game** (2003) by the
Design Institute

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Examples of
Pervasive Play:

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

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Informal Pervasive Play:

Flash mobs (2003), geocaching
(2000 – present)



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Examples of
Immersive Play:

The Beast (2001) by
Microsoft



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Examples of
Immersive Play:

Majestic (2001) by
Electronic Arts.



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Examples of
Immersive Play:

Search4E (2002 -
2003) by Second
State

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

TIPS? CALL 1 888 S4E 2345

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How do you design a PERSVASIVE game?

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How do you design a **PERVASIVE** game? Ask players to:

- USE **mobile & embedded** technologies in novel ways:
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(WiFi, GPS, cell phones, RFID tags, sensors, e.g.)
- FOR **location-specific** and **context-aware** challenges
and interactions
- TO CREATE **mixed, augmented, or adjacent** realities

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PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

How do you design an **IMMERSIVE** game?

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PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

How do you design an **IMMERSIVE** game? Ask players to:

- USE **new media & network** technologies in **everyday** ways: (email, WWW, cell phones, blogs, e.g.)

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PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

How do you design an **IMMERSIVE** game? Ask players to:

- USE **new media & network** technologies in **everyday** ways: (email, WWW, cell phones, blogs, e.g.)
- FOR **unbounded, unframed, open-ended** play
- IN SERVICE OF achieving a **massive** goal or solving a **sprawling** mystery **cooperatively**

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- IN SERVICE OF achieving a **massive** goal or solving a **sprawling** mystery **cooperatively**
- TO CREATE **alternate** realities or “**unfiction**”

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IMMERSIVE

What design features do the two genres share?

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PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

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- An “everyday” quality (everyday spaces and/or everyday technologies)

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- An “everyday” quality (everyday spaces and/or everyday technologies)
- They are “**digitally-enabled**”, rather than digital
- They ambiguously juxtapose **in-game** elements with **non-game** elements
 - frequent confusion that encourages incorporating non-game elements into

play

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What design features do the two genres share?

- They are played in out the “**public eye**”
 - for a **live** public audience (pervasive), OR
 - for a **mediated** audience (immersive), OR BOTH...
- generating spectacle and significant opportunities for player performance.

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The myth of the Beast



a promotional campaign for the 2001 film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*

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The myth of the Beast

Much of the praise bestowed upon the Beast focused on, in the words of *The New York Times*, how “completely real” the game seemed. BBC News called it “a complex illusion of reality that leaps off the screen into your everyday life”; *USA Today* suggested it “blurs the line between fiction and reality”; and Tech TV described the game as “hyper-immersive” and “frighteningly real.”

The myth of the Beast

A writer for the *Kansas City Star* warned readers: “The game so perfectly mimics reality, you might assume it's for real.” A game critic for *Joystick101* agreed: “It is important to stress that the game sites are *dissimulative*, that is, feigning to be real... Some of the game could easily be misconstrued as real.”

The myth of the Beast

One writer alluded to the classic credibility test for A.I. programs: “This world talks back. Put to the Turing test, it could pass.”

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.”

Player produced META-NARRATIVES:

Player produced META-NARRATIVES:

“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.” - from an oft-quoted essay by a player of the Beast, published online during the 2001 game

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Player produced META-NARRATIVES:



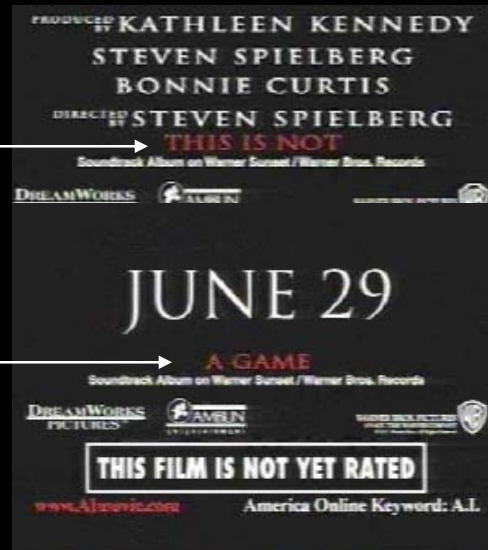
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Player produced META-NARRATIVES:

“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 [...]



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Player produced META-NARRATIVES:

“...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 another player editorial published during the 2001 game



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Play again? Y/N



Former immersive gamers have joined forces to “game” real life problems:

- 9/11
- Washington, D.C. sniper attacks
- East Coast serial pet killer
- Corruption in U.S. government spending & contracts

Play again? Y/N



"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."

Play again? Y/N



"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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PERVASIVE

IMMERSIVE

PERVasive

+

ImmERSIVE

=

PERV-ERSIVE*

pervasive play: any pervasive or immersive game that makes the non-playing public nervous.

*a cheeky neologism by Jane McGonigal

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Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

What makes non-players nervous about pervasive play?

Games that are too **sprawling** (too pervasive)

Games that are too **realistic** (too immersive)

Games that are too **persuasive** (too credible)

Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

“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)*

Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

“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)*

“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*

Contemporary Distrust of Perverse Play

“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 & Research Conference

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“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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Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

“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

Contemporary Distrust of Pervasive Play

“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

“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

Contemporary Distrust of Perverse Play

“Have you considered the fact that there are actual mental illnesses with exactly the same behaviors and cognitive patterns as the players of these immersive games? [...] Is it possible that they suffer from some kind of psychosis?” – audience Q & A at the Melbourne *Digital Arts & Culture* 2003 conference

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“Do these games just tend to attract people who are already prone to delusional thinking, or do they make them crazy from scratch?”- participant in an *030303: Collective Play* Colloquium breakout session

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Contemporary Distrust of Perverse Play

“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

Contemporary Distrust of Perverse Play

“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

“It sounds just like *Ender’s Game*.” – too many people to name

The runaway game

The fear of the perverse, or runaway, game is the fear of **eroded boundaries**:

- Erosion of boundaries between game and life
- Erosion of boundaries between gamer and the game



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The runaway game

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

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



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The runaway game

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

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



→ Worst case scenario: **The gamer never stops playing.**

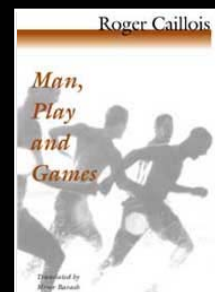
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Historical Distrust of “Pervasive” Play

“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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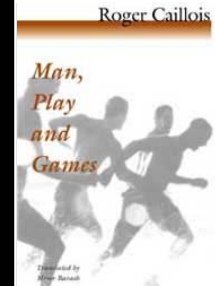
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Historical Distrust of “Pervasive” Play

“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...”



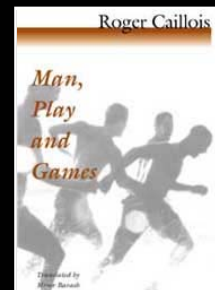
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Historical Distrust of “Pervasive” Play

“Excessive mimicry results in inordinate, inhuman and irremediable excitations, a kind of frightening and fatal attraction...”



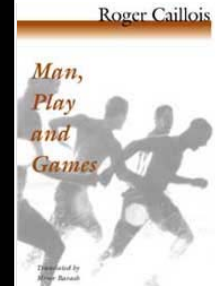
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Historical Distrust of “Pervasive” Play

“In societies ruled by simulation, when the spectacle borders on trance... where there is no sharp dividing line between fantasy and reality, the subject has gradually donned a second, chimerical, and all-pervasive personality which claims exorbitant rights with respect to a reality with which it is of necessity incompatible.”



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Play, performance and belief



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.

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Play, 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?”

Play, 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)

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.



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Performance of Belief for others

Suspension of disbelief is:

- solitary,
- passive, and
- internal.



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Performance of Belief for others

Suspension of disbelief is:

- solitary,
- passive, and
- internal.

Performance of belief is:

- 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 for games to be “real”

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?

Performance of Belief for self

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→ the desire for real life to be “a game”

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“How do you succeed in the Go Game?”

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



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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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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



Sometime today during the conference, a person known only as the Speaker will approach you. We don't know what the Speaker looks like or what the Speaker will say to you; we know only that it is the Speaker who will initiate the encounter.

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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



It is imperative that you find and identify the Speaker, because he or she has a special gift for you. If you are among the first six players to discover the Speaker, you will receive an invitation for you and a friend to play as our guests in any future Go Game.

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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



How will you know if you've found the Speaker? The Speaker will give you your reward **ONLY** if you respond *immediately* to his or her initial overture with a **lavish compliment**. The more extravagant the compliment, the better.

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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



To avoid blowing his or her cover, the Speaker will initially deny being the Speaker, so you may have to be persistent. Only when the coast is clear will the reward will be delivered.

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Your Mission Today: Find the speaker



Remember: The Speaker could be anyone, and he or she has been instructed to be as subtle and unobtrusive as possible. So you'll have to be generous with your compliments today, because the Speaker is out there, and anything *anyone* says to you could be your chance to solve the mystery: Who is the Speaker?

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