

# A Real Little Game: The Pinocchio Effect in Pervasive Play

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## ABSTRACT

Mobile digital technologies and networks have fueled a recent proliferation of opportunities for pervasive 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<sup>1</sup> for digital researchers, engineers and artists. As I hurried through my PowerPoint presentation — as usual, at least a few slides too many — my tongue started to have difficulty keeping up with my laptop. My first goal during the talk was to establish the difference between the general category of pervasive play and the more particular 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 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

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<sup>1</sup> 030303: Collective Play, a research colloquium organized by 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.

my brain was 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, despite the genres’ nascent status, a stigma attached to the more intense forms of immersive and pervasive play. There is a growing suspicion of the unruliness of unbounded games and a wariness of their potentially addictive and life-consuming scenarios. One of my colleagues, after hearing me out on the subject for several hours, dubbed immersive games “schizophrenia machines,” seemingly designed in their sprawling and all-encompassing format for the sole purpose of turning previously sane players into paranoid, obsessive maniacs. I have encountered this sentiment at every conference I have attended and every lecture I have delivered in the past year. “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 talk<sup>2</sup>. An audience member asked me later, concerned for the players apparently lost in a play trance, “Do they ever wake up from these immersive games?” Another researcher approached me afterwards to share her concern that the immersive genre could eventually transform into a politically-motivated *Ender’s Game*, and that the players, unable to distinguish reality from the game, would unwittingly aid the real life interests of some not-so-nice factions.

These reactions each suggest to me that the potential “perversity” of pervasive and immersive play, as a concept, is predicated on the notion that players are falling for the games’ dissimulative rhetoric. The gamers, in other words, *believe* in the games too much for their own good. Comments by many of the players fuel this perception. “I’m going to catch myself still looking for patterns and riddles in my daily life months from now,” one player wrote at the end of a game, describing a mindset that could be interpreted as paranoia [18]. Another immersive fan noticed, “We normal, intelligent people have been devoting outrageous percentages of our days, weeks, *months* to a game. [...] 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.” [25]. She subsequently published a “Recovery Guide” for her fellow deeply immersed players, but ultimately seemed 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 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

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<sup>2</sup> “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.

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 [5].

But should we accept these testimonials at face value? How extreme was the players' immersion? How much did they 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, 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" [9]. 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, 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 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 pervasive gamers' affected belief — let alone the very fact that it is affected.

This paper offers 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 "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 19<sup>th</sup> 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" [31]. 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" [31]. 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 naive 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" [12]. 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 [12]. 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 game research. The world of digital games now has its own myth of the credulous spectator to contend with, a myth that both misrepresents the experience of contemporary gamers and unnecessarily feeds public and academic anxieties about the hyper-immersive qualities of pervasive games. It is my intention, therefore, to dispel this 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the *Train* anecdotes, beginning with a close reading of the popular accounts of player reception in a 2001 game known as the Beast. Conceived as a viral marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, the Beast launched the immersive genre, and with it, the popular conception that immersive gamers are always in danger of confusing art with real life.

Immersive games are designed to integrate themselves fully into the offline lives of their players, and the main technique for doing so is to employ everyday digital technologies as virtual reality devices. The fabricated world and simulated experiences of immersive games are created not through special wired gloves and goggles, but rather through cell phones, fax machines, conference calls, e-mail, and the World Wide Web. The Beast pioneered this strategy, 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. It seemed that no matter where Beast players turned, the game was finding them, to the point that players saw 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 [13]. 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” [35, 19, 10].

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” [4]. A game critic for Joystick101.org 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” [14]. Since a passing grade in the Turing Test means a human has been fooled into believing that he or she is conversing with a real person, the implication of the Turing Test allusion is clear: This was a digital game that could easily trick its players into mistaking the artificial for the real.

Many articles made a similar point by comparing the Beast to the famous 1999 Web campaign for the fake documentary, *The Blair Witch Project*, which invented the practice of employing dissimulative Internet pages as a marketing tool for movies. An *AdWeek* article proclaimed: “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” [2, 8]. By invoking the *Blair Witch* campaign, these articles conjured up audiences tricked into believing a digital back story is real. As *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan observed 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” [33]. 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” [28]. Many articles about the Beast explicitly accorded a similar credulity to its audience by linking it to *Blair Witch*, such as the *Wired* feature that 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” [6].

The history of the Beast, and the subsequent birth of the immersive genre, has become a story of caution: 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 viewers, the myth of the credulous Beast audience now characterizes the genre it invented as dangerously immersive, and its players terribly naïve.

#### **PERFORMING BELIEF**

At first glance, it seems obvious that the Beast 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 robots and sentient houses. How could anyone be confused?” [personal interview].

Elan Lee, lead designer for the game, concurs. 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. “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 gaps appeared between the game’s “big talk” and the realized immersive effects, the audience collaborated in suturing the game world ruptures.

The first major moment of rupture in the Beast occurred when a player discovered an oversight in the game Web pages, which 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” [20]. 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<sup>3</sup> 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 detracts from the enjoyment of the game. It’s simply akin to reading ahead in a novel” [15]. 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 [7]. 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?" [32] 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" [17]. 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 Microsoft was behind the Beast. Lee, a Microsoft employee, 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' [20].

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" [3]. Another wrote: "Please - If you dig up the name of another puppetmaster, don't post it on the board. Keep it to yourself" [29]. 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 my inbox rendering it virtually unusable. PLEASE STOP! I can't give you any answers, I can't get you in touch with the puppet masters, and I can't tell you where this is headed. [...] Thank you for your understanding, Doug [26].

Lee 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 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.” The successful email hackers apparently wanted to keep the curtain firmly in place, and after they felt they had gone too far, they protected other players from the non-immersive information they had gleaned. 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.”

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’ [20].

The player in question never reported this very interesting incident to the larger community of players. I interpret this selfless silence (after all, it would have made a terrific story!) as one player’s effort to protect his fellow fans from any further game world ruptures. But silence, as it turned out, was not enough in this case to stave off the immersive-busting effects of the player-actor encounter. The 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. Through brute force, they solved the missing third of the password, 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.

Another game event dubbed “the Mike Royal incident” reveals that the players’ immersion was not as intense as it may have seemed to outsiders from their 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” [34]. 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” [16]. 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” [34, 16]. Again, we see a meta-pleasure at work in the players’ response to the puppetmasters’ innovation in game play. The clear visibility of the puppetmasters’ work behind the curtain did not lessen the players’ enjoyment, but rather heightened it – just as long as the audience played along, winked back at the puppetmasters and pretended to believe.

### 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 [22]. 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 the desire for the formal call to action, direction, and the sense that others are working toward the same goal.

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 cell phones and wireless Internet. The following anecdotes are not meant to represent as systematic and thorough a study as my work on the Beast, but rather are here 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 [23].

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! 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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