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The Liminal Magic Circle: Boundaries, Frames, and Participation in Pervasive Mobile Games

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While the emphasis in traditional game theory has been on the rule formations and zone demarcations that distinguish games from play, mobile games tend to deliberately and thoughtfully blur the lines, not just between games and play but between a game and an experience, as well as between places of play (the "magic circle") and places of everyday life. Mobile games often create moments of liminality as they are driven by the idea of playing with and within everyday spaces, technologies, and objects. In this brief paper, I will discuss these boundaries and the liminality of mobile games to date, and focus on one particularly difficult ethical area- that of player and non-player participation.

The concepts of play and game are complexly intertwined. According to Johan Huizinga (1950), games can be found on a continuum between the two poles of *ludus* and *paidia*. *Ludus* (frequently understood as a pure game) is characterized by the corseting of exuberance with deliberate and arbitrary conventions that require the player to demonstrate effort, skill, patience, or intellect. Chess is often upheld as a pure *ludus* game. *Paidia* (or pure play), on the other hand, is characterized by a shared, ritualistic principle that is found in gaiety and improvisation, as is the case with children's games, with less rigorous boundaries and rules guiding moments and places of play.

Confusion often arises when discussing the *play* of *games*. For the purposes of this essay, I am discussing games in the sense of *ludus* and play as a verb to describe people who are taking part in games. When I refer to the magic circle, I am describing the place where a particular game takes place, with

the "formalized nature of the game mak (ing) the magic circle explicit" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 99) rather than the physical constraints of a location necessarily. Within the magic circle, it is the arbitrary rules of the game that direct actions and behaviors, and entry into the magic circle is predicated upon acceptance of these rules. When a player breaks the rules or cheats, there is a total breakdown of the magic circle, indicating that for game theorists the boundaries around games are rigid.

Further evidence for this understanding of firm boundaries is provided by seminal games theorist Huizinga, who argues that rules are important as they are what bind the play world and determine what is acceptable in the boundaries of the game. When they are challenged, the play world collapses. Both Huizinga and Roger Caillois (1967) conceive of play occurring within certain limits of time and space, with a distinct beginning and end, and within its own designated spaces, such as playgrounds, tennis courts, bowling alleys, and stages. These spaces become what Huizinga calls "temporary worlds" (p. 10). Elliot Avedon's (1971) definition of games includes the conceptualization of them as being "confined by rules" (p. 405). For Salen and Zimmerman (2004), game design is somewhat more fluid, and can be driven by the mathematical logic of rules or by the experiential and social schema that foregrounds the player's interactions with the game and the other players. Ludology, the label which currently largely denotes those who study video games, is preoccupied by questions of rule structures and game spaces, and ludologists claim that video games are constructed upon these mechanisms rather than those powered by representational, visual, or textual engines. In other words, the rigidity of boundaries is an understanding and conceptualization of games that has prevailed even in current game literature.

Liminality, on the other hand, is a concept that refers to states of ambiguity, imperceptibility, intermediacy, and, as Vincent Mosco (2004) describes it, a "sense of betwixt and between" (p. 32). Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1966) introduced the idea of the "liminal moment", which are instants of passage which allow the emergence of new cultural signs, symbols, and

meanings. One classic example of a liminal moment is that of a wedding ceremony, which allows for the passage between single life and married life and all their attendant cultural baggage. The liminal, then, is a concept tied to ritual, which has in turn been linked to games by their formal similarities, especially in terms of the set of structures that demarcate each (see Huizinga, 1950). Just as liminal moments are engendered by moments of passage between ritual, they are also created when the boundaries that constitute the magic circle are shaken or transgressed.

Mobile games, which are conceptually driven by the idea of playing with and within everyday spaces, technologies, and objects, may create moments of liminality. Instead of remaining entrenched in the prevailing understanding of games as structured by limits, boundaries, demarcations, and confinements, mobile games tend to leave behind the familiar and ritualistic cultural symbols and meanings contained within the magic circle and traverse into new terrains of gaming.

Indeed, mobile gaming is very rarely about simply playing games on mobile devices. Even the exploration of mobility is only one basic element of the majority of these. Rather, many of these games act as entryways into thinking about quotidian elements of everyday life in novel ways. As Julian Bleeker (2006) noted in his presentation on “Pervasive Electronic Games” (as recapped on the “We Make Money Not Art” blog), pervasive games can bring awareness to oft-ignored objects and subjects, ranging from debris to welfare housing developments, and inspire new perspectives on people, objects, experiences, and places typically taken for granted.

They can also allow people to take back spaces they feel have perhaps become too sterile, political, or commercial to truly interact with, in ways that are less illegal and more playful than, say, vandalism. In other instances, like the MDCN Mont Royal game in development, these games allow players to discover more about their environment in new ways that are more engaging than a tour or a touristic brochure. In many ways, these fluid games tend to not only operate

with shifting boundaries but act to shift the boundaries of the real world for players.

Nevertheless, the generation of these liminal moments in gaming through the shifting of boundaries come with an attendant set of complex ethical questions, especially in relation to the inclusion of non-players in a game. In his presentation at CHI 2006, Stuart Reeves used the example of the game "Uncle Roy All Around You" to argue that mobile games played in public challenge the frames that are part of the traditional game. He argued, as others have, that what makes mobile gaming interesting is exactly how it pushes the boundaries of gaming, the "frame of the game".

In the proceedings to this presentation (Benford et. al., 2006), the authors refer to a novel design framework in computer-human interaction in which the primary user is the performer and those who spectate the game the secondary users. By spectators, the authors refer not simply to those who watch moments of the game but those who become implicated in it through the primary user, such as those that are asked for directions or, indeed, if they are the mysterious Uncle Roy. Within this framework, the secondary user plays an important role in the play of the game, and their impact is argued to depend upon whether they "*hide*, *transform*, *reveal* or even *amplify* different combinations of the performers' *manipulations* of the interface and their subsequent *effects*" (p. 7, author's emphasis).

This framework, and the extension that the authors propose, operates under the understanding that there is indeed a transition between being a spectator and a performer. Yet, the concept of the performance frame, the primary concept the authors' focus on, is meant to be a contract between performers and spectators that resembles that implicit understanding between the same roles in theatre. According to the authors, this unspoken contract is reinforced by a set of rituals, conventions, and structures both physical and intellectual that allow for continuous feedback between the performer and the spectator. In addition, based on the above-described understanding of the magic circle of play, the authors propose framing roles for the performer and the

spectator, conceiving of the former as a frame constructor and the latter as a frame interpreter.

Clearly, this game and design framework challenges the boundaries that underlie classical game theory. Not only does playing a game on city streets without any visible mark of your status as game player rather than citizen challenge the concept of a demarcated “play world” distinct from the world of productive work, the inclusion of non-players and the understanding of them as able to become pulled into the game runs in direct opposition to the theorization of play as free but set, pleasurable but kept intact by the acquiescence of all players to the arbitrary perfection of the play world.

These secondary players do not commit to the magic circle, and their very inclusion contradicts the assertion that play cannot be forced upon you. Outside of the ethical questions the implication of unaware players begs, game designers must question whether they are assuming the pleasure of these players when for them the decision to enter the magic circle is not as a transparent as it is for the primary user. These conceptualizations also beg the question of the differences between the impromptu audience of a street game and the spectators of theatre. How can the creators of pervasive mobile games create the needed structures, rituals, and conventions that will convey to audiences their role in the game?

Benford et. al do distinguish between audience members and bystanders, noting that spectators in the audience are aware that there is performance frame and are interpreting the actions of players as performance, while bystanders are not aware of or are aware to only a limited degree, of a performance. This difference, however, is not supported by any external structures in this framework, it is simply a chance distinction based on the individual circumstances of each person. The authors also note that game designers must address the increased possibilities of such spectators due to the situation of these games in public settings, and this is where they begin to blur the lines of the magic circle. Instead of proposing methods by which to address and accommodate the differences in knowledge and perhaps even willingness

between non-players, they argue that these disparities offer up novel potentialities for manipulation of the performance frame.

These manipulations include extending the fictional world of the game by implanting deliberate boundary ambiguities into the game and by "implicating or even involving bystanders" (p. 8) in play. This includes structurally allowing players to turn to non-players for game content (as in when a game instructs a player to query a random person). Another tactic is the reverse, wherein the real world expands, with bystanders being played by performers, and items that are suggested to belong to others actually belong to the game designers.

Benford et. al are not ignorant of the risks in what they propose in their manipulation of the performance frame. They note the variety of uncomfortable situations this may lead to for the non-player, including humiliation and annoyance, as well as the inappropriate actions the player may take, not realizing that these non-players are being unwittingly included in the action. This awareness, however, does not deter the authors from discussing the excitement and dramatic tension generated by playing with non-game or supposedly non-game elements, an understanding of the status of non-players as akin to that of inanimate objects, which can be highly empowering to manipulate.

They conclude their discussion of this framework with the argument that the risks surrounding the blurring of the boundary between performer and spectator can be managed by the "safety harness of careful orchestration" (p.10). By this the authors refer to the manner by which the game designers lead their players through the world and manage their interactions, both through initial design and through a behind-the-scenes control room. It is vital to note that their safety harness is built solely for their participants.

Benford and his colleagues are not alone in their sentiments towards bursting the membrane between player and non-player. Montola and Waern (2006) write that pervasive mobile games hold a "social expansion" potential, by which they are referring to the ability to include non-players within the game. They note that this may lead to "very engaging experiences" (p. 1), but neglect to mention for whom. Their argument is also flawed in that they do not distinguish

between accidental spillovers such as someone being disturbed by a cell phone ring and someone deliberately being followed by a game player. Instead, they argue that in the socially expanded game, the lines between spectator and bystander are totally blurred, and not even the players may know who has explicitly acquiesced to the magic circle of the game and who is simply waiting for a bus.

While later in their paper the authors state that all players must feel that it is acceptable to leave the game, they also find that many people when being invited into the game may not realize for a great deal of time that they are involved in a game. Thus, if a game intrudes upon a person within a public space, they may refuse and then presumably leave the place, but it is acceptable within this framework that the person not be aware of a game for some time. If the non-player does not know she is in a game, it is not for her a game at all, and it is very important for designers to consider whether it is acceptable to subject someone to an experience that is likely to feel somewhat akin to either a Candid Camera-type prank or an experiment.

To conclude, it is evident that the mutable magic circle that characterizes mobile gaming presents a number of questions for the designers of these games. And yet what is absent from these discussions of boundaries, frames, and participation are explorations into ethics. Ethically, theoretical discussions into the nature of the symbolic or suggestive structures that surround these public performances are insufficient. While playing with everyday life and pedestrian objects, technologies, and practices can be enlightening, empowering, and enriching, and can expand the ritualistic spaces of play to include nearly any zone, play must still be a state that is entered into *explicitly*. Just as an artist may not use the likeness of a passerby for her work (or so we are taught within university production courses), game designers cannot ethically decide to utilize random people as pawns in their games. Of course, when games are played out in public spaces where a variety of activities may be taking place concurrently, it is inevitable that they may attract attention or alternately have a player interact with a non-player.

The distinction that is vital here however is the nature of this as unscripted in the design of the game. A striking similarity in the two articles we have seen arguing for non-player inclusion is their consistent focus on the primary, aware players and their enjoyment rather than on the implicated non-player. The way these people and their involvement is not questioned ethically is a shocking lack. A variety of the games that have been posted to the EMU resource nest for reference, such as <*Tag*>, *CatchBob!*, *Feeding Yoshi*, and *Pac-Manhattan*, play with the boundaries between play and non-play spaces, taking back or imbuing new meaning into city streets, urban monuments, wi-fi hot spots, and university campuses. On the other hand, they all operate successfully without the intrusive implication of non-players. While a young man eagerly feeding his Yoshi may accidentally bump into a passerby, this is not a desired effect, scripted moment, or intentional activity. It is possible but not scripted.

The inclusion of non-players into a game is conscious design choice just as much as the disruption of the flow of traffic around her was intentional in Jenny Chowdhury's *The Cell Atlantic Cell Booth* video. The difference between art and gaming cannot be more explicit than in this instance, and it highlights the fallacy of Benford et al. (2006) in suggesting that mobile game players are just like mimes who implicate their audience in their acts. Perhaps over time this will change, but currently there are simply no structures and no conventions for the audiences of pervasive mobile games, which means that these 'unwitting' secondary participants may never understand what is happening when they are being drawn into a mobile gaming. In sum, while breaking frames is one of the motivating factors in many mobile game projects, and while the magic circle may become more liminal in these instances, the boundary between player and non-player must remain intact for all ethical designers.

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