

# You Mean It's Only a Game? Rule Structures, the Magic Circle, and Player Participation in Pervasive Mobile Gaming

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## Abstract

As pervasive gaming becomes more common, the question of what boundaries and rituals make up play attains greater importance. While commonly-held conceptions of play formulate it as delineated, rigid, structured, and characterized by a stringent set of symbolic boundaries, pervasive mobile games push at the walls of the demarcated magic circle and, in the process of seeking multiple theoretical transgressions, pose questions about the implication of players and non-players in games that can mask their status as such. This paper prods the ethics of transgressing the player/non-player divide through the analysis of several pervasive games and the design frameworks of their creators.

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As may not be apparent from other presentations I have done on the subject of video game theory, there are some topics of discussion, some terms, some conceptualizations that are relatively undisputed in the domain. One of these elements is the understanding of the existence of what has been called the “magic circle.” Not simply the material and physical place of play but also the conceptual and symbolic structure that surrounds the play world with, to quote Salen and Zimmerman, the “formalized nature of the game mak(ing) the magic circle explicit” (2004, p. 99). 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. If, for example, a player breaks the rules or cheats, the result is a total breakdown of this symbolic structure.

Some scholars, such as Marinka Copier (2005), have balked at the concept of the magic circle when it is applied to more problematic types of games such as pen and paper RPGs, in which human game masters may at any time shift rules, making it an exception to the fixity of rules found in the majority of games. Nevertheless, Copier does state “the space of play is not a given space but is being constructed in negotiation between player(s) and the producer(s) of the game but also among players themselves” (p. 8), an understanding that supports the conceptualization of the strength of the symbolic structure that I am proposing here. It is

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important to note that the concept of the magic circle ties into some other relatively agreed-upon elements of game theorization, including the distinction between play and games, which further emphasizes the rigidity of boundaries in gaming.

Allow me to delineate what I mean by ‘rigidity of boundaries’ by briefly recapping how play and games have been described in the works of Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (1967). Within these works, the concepts of play and game are complexly intertwined. According to Huizinga, 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. Indeed, game theorists, both classical and current, understand boundaries around games as rigid. For instance, Huizinga argues that rules are vital 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 Caillois 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”. Elliot Avedon’s (1971) definition of games includes the conceptualization of them as being “confined by rules” (p. 405). For Salen and Zimmerman, 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. Much of ludology is preoccupied by questions of rule structures and game spaces, and Aarseth (1997) claims 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.

This emphasis on the rule formations and zone demarcations that distinguish games from play is notably absent, however, in the theory and design practices of pervasive mobile games. These 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. In the remainder of this paper, I discuss these boundaries and the transgressive nature of mobile games to date, and focus on one particularly tricky ethical area that comes to light- the design of player and non-player participation and interaction.

These questions were originally generated by my work as a research associate with the Mobile Digital Commons Network. To describe this research group as interdisciplinary is an understatement. Spanning four institutions across Canada and including dozens of academics, artists, designers, engineers, and administrators of varying experience, with interests ranging from policy to immersion to graffiti to nature walks, MDCN is unique in that it included in its creation a reflexive body solely for the purpose of evaluation. Working within this evaluation arm, my colleagues and I were constantly operating within a space between theory and practice, and ethical questions abounded. As the network turned its focus onto developing a new mobile game on Mount Royal, Montreal, Canada, the question of what we could learn from other

pervasive mobile games and the way they function arose. As a student of video game theory, I was taken aback by the differences between ‘traditional’ video games and these neoteric mobile games.

Pervasive mobile games, which are conceptually driven by the idea of playing with and within everyday spaces, technologies, and objects, are directly oppositional to the understanding of the magic circle and of the nature of play and games I have already reviewed. 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. They often shine a new light onto urban environments while at the same time playing with expectations of play spaces and especially player roles.

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 games. 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” at the O’Reilly Emerging Technology Conference, pervasive games can bring awareness to often 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 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 transgressive 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 Computer-Human Interaction 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, or 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 are 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 a 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 its design framework challenge the boundaries that underlie classical game theory. Not only does playing a game on city streets without any visible mark of your status as a game player rather than citizen challenge the concept of a demarcated “play world” distinct from the world of productive work, but 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 rule-driven 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 that 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 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 and his co-authors 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 belonging to the game designers.

The authors of this design framework 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 they argue 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 ringing 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 *Punk’d*-style prank or a social science experiment.

To conclude, it is evident that the mutable magic circle that characterizes pervasive 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 I have reviewed arguing for non-player inclusion is their consistent focus on the primary, aware players and their enjoyment rather than on the implicated non-player. It is a shocking lack of ethics that these people and their involvement is not questioned. A variety of the mobile games out there, such as <Tag>, *CatchBob!*, *Feeding Yoshi*, and *Pac-Manhattan*, blur 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 plotted.

The inclusion of non-players into a game is a conscious design choice just as much, for instance, as the intentionality in Jenny Chowdhury's art installation "The Cell Atlantic Cell Booth" where she disrupts the flow of traffic around her. The difference between art and gaming cannot be more explicit than in this instance, and it highlights the fallacy of Benford and his co-authors 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 game. In sum, while breaking frames is one of the motivating factors in many pervasive mobile game projects, and while the magic circle may become more mutable and flexible if not liminal in these instances, the boundary between player and non-player must remain at this time intact for all ethical designers.

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