Ethical and Practical Look at Unaware Game Participation

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[Abstract]

Many pervasive games involve people who are not aware of the game that is going on. We look into some examples of games with strong such features, in order to understand the problems and opportunities of such designs. We also discuss the ethics of unaware game participation, as these games may have a major impact on both aware and unaware participants.

[Introduction]

Pervasive games are games that compromise Huizinga's [1] magic circle of gameplay by going into unforeseen spatial locations, by interlacing with players' ordinary lives and by involving more or less aware outsiders with the gameplay [7, 10]. Often this merging of game and ordinary life is done in pursuit of a seamless experience where players are not aware where the game begins and ends.[1]

In this paper we discuss the perspective of outsiders, people who are unaware of the game, but who are nevertheless influenced by it. We can expect that many, perhaps most, pervasive games do somehow affect people outside the game: In *Botfighters* the unaware experience might comprise of seeing players run on a street, in *Go Game*[2] the non-player might be a spectator to a performance staged by the players and in *Prosopopeia*[3] the non-players might end up chatting about game fiction with the role-players without realizing the fabricated nature of the event.

The perspective of the unaware participant is very difficult to capture. In this article, we are however able to report on one such study carried out at Gotland University in the aftermath of an experiment with a reality game. The game *Vem gråter*[4] was organized by a group of students as part of a course in alternate reality games. As the game events were staged at the university or in its vicinity, the setting made it possible to contact some observers and get their first-hand account of the experience.

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[1] E.g. in *Prosopopeia* [2, 8] and in *The A.I. Game* [3, 4].
[2] www.thegogame.com, also McGonigal [4, 5].
[3] 3 See [2, 8].
[4] "Who's Crying"

Pervasive Games

Alternate reality games are games that seek to generate an ambiguous game experience; the player is given the feeling that the game is a part of his ordinary life. In alternate reality games ambiguity is generated and supported by contextualizing the play in the ordinary lives of the players; by staging the game in urban areas and interlacing it with the everyday life of the participants. Prominent commercial alternate reality games include titles such as *Majestic*, *The A.I. Game*, *I Love Bees*, *Perplex City* et cetera [12]. Jane McGonigal [3, 4, 5, 6] has studied this style of game design, pointing out that there is a significant group of enthusiasts finding this style of game design thrilling and pleasurable.

The outsider awareness of the game increases as they begin to suspect the fabrication, going through the following three states [9]. In *unaware state* the game experiences are completely unnoticed or are interpreted as everyday phenomena. In *ambiguous state* the experiences produced by the game are too obvious or closely related to each other to be ignored, but there is no obvious frame of reference that would reveal them as parts of a game. In *conscious state* the context of game is accessible, and the gameness of the experience is evident.

An important design feature of alternate reality games is that they subtly and carefully disclose their gameness. Usually this is pointed out early on in the game, or even in the player signup phase. For instance, all webpages associated with *The A.I. Game* were dated 50 years into the future, so they could not be mistaken with ordinary reality.

By contrast, *reality games* aim to produce ludic content without informing the unsuspecting participants about the gamic nature of the fabricated events. It can be argued that reality games are not games, as they are not 'played' willingly nor voluntarily, but rather resemble e.g. candid camera shoots [7]. Salen and Zimmerman [11] for instance discuss lusory (playful) attitude and protective frame of artificiality regarding the games. The lack of this protection or separation makes the reality gaming experience much more raw and uncontrolled. Reality games keep the players in the ambiguous state without letting them to conscious state. Thus, they are a good research case in trying to understand ambiguity in all pervasive games, as unaware and ambiguous experiences are often an inevitable byproduct of pervasive gaming.

Case: Vem gråter

Vem gråter was planned to be a week-long sequence of mysterious poltergeist-events staged within the Gotland University premises, in winter 2005 – a project work on a course on pervasive gaming. We got the opportunity to study *Vem gråter* after the game had concluded, by interviewing players, organizers and university staff.

Vem gråter created a series of events with hidden clues allowing the participants to dig deeper into the mystery, a ghost story based on historic events concerning Sweden's and Gotland's role in the second world war. The game comprised of the following elements:

- **A set of ghost events**, carried out at the university, including a tape recorder hidden in a ventilation shaft, sending out sounds of a crying child, a tower of furniture built overnight, and coal scribblings on a wall. The installations were staged late in the evenings when the premises were relatively empty.
- **An actor pretending to be 'Spiricom-Thomas'**, an occult investigator. He appeared at a couple of occasions in the university and in some cafés.
- **Two web sites**, 'created by' Spiricom-Thomas and a local ghost hunter society.

- **Announcements at university bulletin boards.** Two of these were from Spiricom-Thomas and the third announced a fake seminar on parapsychology.
- **A set of hidden clues around the town**, intended for the people solving the riddle.

All events and clues were supposed to point towards a final scene concluding the game. For numerous reasons this final event was never staged. These game elements were also the only possible way of learning that there was a mystery puzzle; there were no invitations or possibilities to sign up. Rules of the game were not explained anywhere.

The game did not work out as intended. Instead of students or teachers, the maintenance staff of the university turned out to be the main audience. In their frame of interpretation, the historical and ethical perspectives of the ghost story were lost, and the game elements were interpreted in the frame of vandalism instead of the frame of playfulness or mystery. Thus, the police and local newspapers became also interested.

Contextual States

In our research it soon became clear that the vast majority of bystanders had never noticed anything at all, or interpreted their experiences as ordinary life. Thus, we only interviewed six people, and only one of these people was actually a student trying to solve the puzzle as intended by the organizers.

The game managed to keep many participants in the ambiguous state for the most of the time. The ambiguous state is a labile, transitional state, which most people try to resolve by making assumptions regarding truth behind the events faced. Summarizing our interviews, we ended up in four prototypical interpretations for *Vem gråter*:

1. **Ghosts are real.** This was the interpretation implied in the game design, although the organizers did not intend this interpretation to be made. This interpretation did not show up in our interviews.
2. **The ghost investigator is dangerous and mentally unstable.** This interpretation accepts that Spiricom-Thomas exists, but he is crazy and potentially dangerous intruder instead of any kind of an investigator. This interpretation was not intended by the organizers but became widespread among the university staff.
3. **Students are making pranks.** This interpretation indicates that the students are making trouble at the school. This interpretation prevailed among the staff, even after the true nature of the events was uncovered.
4. **Someone has created a cool adventure.** This ludic interpretation is the driving force of alternate reality gaming. It requires an understanding of the fact that the events are fabricated, even though they become more engaging through ambiguity. The player is thrilled by the fact that he does not know what is going on or what could happen next.

Obviously the professional role and personal history strongly influence the interpretation made. In the case of *Vem gråter* a younger, game-oriented audience would probably have been more inclined towards an adventurous interpretation, while in the eyes of a janitor already frustrated with students, the same events appear as vandalism. In order to enjoy *Vem gråter* the observer had to make the cool adventure interpretation. However, the second and third interpretations were dominant.

Spiricom-Thomas Story Spin

The university administration quite quickly figured out that a student group must have put up the posters[5]. However, the other game elements were not immediately thought to be planted by students, but rather by the external person Spiricom-Thomas, who had been visible in the student cafeteria a couple of times.

This suspicion was interpreted as potentially dangerous, and measures were taken to protect the university staff from the potentially dangerous person lurking in the corridors.

> *We thought that he was not well, and there is an uncertainty when a person is psychically ill how they act, and since we have personnel here in the evenings we had to take action immediately.* (Head of the janitor staff)

> *They had not made the connection between the parapsychology investigator and the game, so they thought that he was a schitzophrenic psychopath who had been attracted by the game... they thought that they had to deal with a real psychopath.* (Teacher at the game design education)

According to one of our informants, some women had got in contact with *Kvinnojouren*, a phone service for harrassed women, expressing fear for the person playing Spiricom-Thomas.

> *It was this amateur researcher, the actor, who went around and made contact with the students, that was perceived as scaring in particular by women... one woman at Kvinnojouren at Gotland has received a lot of phone calls from scared women, she told me about this...* (Woman aware of the gameness of the events)

The student group was however highly sceptical towards the idea that Spiricom-Thomas was actually able to scare anybody. The following cite is from the interview with the developer team:

> *R4: These rumours that were spread that this Thomas would be a threat against people, I found that almost shocking.*
> *R2: And it was strange.*
> *R4: He was acting, and I don't know if it was due to bad planning or something like that but...*
> *R1: and some of it might be rumours spreading...*
> *R4: A tad excentric, but not to the extent so that he actually acted as 'off' as people claimed towards the end.*

It is quite possible that the students are right in this. After all, a simpler explanation would have been to immediately suspect the students (which they already knew were behind some of the posters) to be responsible for the whole set of events. But as we will see from the following quote, the university staff had an independent incitement to end up in a 'lunatic' explanation. The head of the janitor staff described his thoughts at the first encounter with the events – a tower of chairs in one of the classrooms – the following way.

> *...we have a student here, who used to be a student, who hangs around here and is not entirely well, but we have still let him hang around here because he wants to be here and we have some staff that have some contact with him. But then we thought that it was him*

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[5] The posters contained a web address to a server with an IP address from within the university.

who was fooling around, because he likes this particular room. He is often there and just stands in the dark, so our first thought was that it must be him. But it turned out that he had nothing at all to do with this. (Head of janitor staff)

There was thus an incidental connection between one of the very first observations made by the janitors, and a person who was mentally ill. When the university staff started to connect the events to the appearance of Spiricom-Thomas, they were already mentally prepared for the 'lunatic' interpretation of the events.

Vandalism

A largely unforeseen problem was that the game was, to a very large extent, perceived as vandalism by the university staff. Installations such as scribblings and piled chairs were considered messy, unpleasant and potentially dangerous to clean up. Also, they were seen as purposefully scary. To some extent, the staff continued to look on the events as vandalism even after the game had been outed as a reality game.

> *This is about our profession and our job, it is not acceptable to create this kind of situations for us, not from the perspective that this is our working environment.* (Head of janitor staff)

This reaction should have been foreseeable, but the student group was only semi-aware of the problem even at the time of the interview. The problem was recognized in conjunction with the wall scribblings, as these were reported to the police.

Case: Prosopopeia

Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll[6] was a pervasive larp about players being possessed. In a nutshell, the players were expected to role-play themselves in Stockholm mostly identical to ours, where they were possessed by ghosts of deceased people. For 52 hours, the players mixed role-playing themselves and the possessing ghosts, going on with their everyday lives while simultaneously role-playing ghosts walking in the world of living. (See [2, 8]).

In a sense, every player of took the role similar to that of Spiricom-Thomas, engaging in pretence play with unsuspecting people. As *Prosopopeia* was a role-playing game, the players could have long, intricate and credible discussions with outsiders as part of the game. As they could never know where the game ended and began, they had to often interact with outsiders in game business. *Prosopopeia* was an alternate reality game in the sense that it was contextualized in the everyday lives of the players, but this feeling was empowered by the fact that it was thus contextualized in the everyday lives of the unaware outsiders. According to the players, perceiving the routines of the ordinary world, with the heightened perspective of the game fiction, created an intense feeling of *Prosopopeia* being more than a game.

The following citation from player feedback illustrates a typical encounter in the game. The players met a complete outsider whom they thought to be a part of the game, even after the game when writing their research debriefs.

> *First, there was a meeting on the cemetery, when a man came strolling by who obviously had something to do with the game. I appreciate the way it was handled. He introduced himself as passing-by, and waited for us to make a move, which we didn't. So he left. As I*

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[6] A collaboration of IPerG project and volunteers, June 2005. By Martin Ericsson, Adriana Skarped, Staffan Jonsson and others.

understand it, he had knowledge about the EVP-recorder, which we had problems with. Even if this was not a roleplaying-encounter, it worked fine. And it made me feel like it wasn't hopeless; someone was looking out for us. In this particular game it worked fine, as everything already made me feel part of a big conspiracy, and he fit in there too.

Many players were asked to conduct interactions of ghosts and unaware outsiders. For example, one ghost (and thus the player) was to shelter a real, homeless person, having been an activist working for the shelters for homeless in Stockholm. Another ghost had a message to deliver to the local Catholic monsignore. These outsiders were not chosen by the game organizers in any way, they had no connection to any homeless people or Catholics before the game, but it was assumed that the players could find the unaware participants on their own. These were some the most serious, intense and engaging tasks in the game, in a sense a 'price' ghosts had to pay for returning to life.

After the game, an ethical debate emerged on the message board of a Finnish role-playing magazine where the game was presented, to discuss the dilemmas unaware participation.[7] Especially attempt to involve a priest in the game heated up discussion. The following argumentation styles were used against *Prosopopeia*:

- People should not play pranks on others without their consent.
- Unaware participants are unwillingly commodified by the players.
- Wasting person's professional working time with a game is not right.
- Helping an unfortunate person in a fashion that secretly is a game actually exploits his plight.
- Games should not toy with events and things that are considered holy.

The game was supported by following arguments:

- Art, including *Prosopopeia*, is supposed to break borders, and thus games classifying as such should be allowed unaware participation.
- If the unaware participant has a positive experience or benefits from the game, the game is ethical.
- As all reality is constructed, game motivated fabrication is not any more wrong than the construction made by e.g. media and governments.
- Most of the people – professionals especially – play some kind of fabricated roles anyway in their interactions with unknown people. Gaming is no worse.

Commodification of time is an interesting sidetrack in the *Prosopopeia* discussion, as 'wasting' outsiders' time was seen as a bad thing. At the same time other discussants saw priest's professional time in terms of money and efficiency. Thus, a homeless hobo would be commodified involuntarily by the game, while working for money is voluntary self-commodification. Using the working time for the game can be seen as stealing that resource from the employer.

One interesting thing in *Prosopopeia* is that the most explicit tasks with outsiders (such as ones involving priest and the homeless person) were not executed by the players. Obviously such

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[7] Article was written by Markus Montola and published in *Roolipelaaja* magazine (www.roolipelaaja.fi). He also participated in the discussion in a moderatorial role, providing further information as needed. Some parts of the discussion were dominated by a misunderstanding as the participants assumed that the priest discussion had actually happened, but it was later on clarified that the player had autonomously decided to not perform the task.

playing is intense and requires effort, but the player with the priest quest also commented that he didn't perform the task since he found it unethical.

In both the cases of *Vem gråter* and *Prosopopeia* there was a clear undercurrent condemning the fabrication of reality for the purposes of gaming in particular. We assume that this is due to the informants' implicit assumption that games are always played for entertainment, ignoring the suitability of games for purposes of art, research, education and political commentary.

Ethics and Practics

The utilitarianist acceptability of a game with unaware participation depends on both the features of the planned game and also the execution of the plan – both on the intentions and on the results. A utilitarianist look at the ethics of *Vem gråter* obviously shows that the game caused feelings of nervousness, uncertainty and stress in the unwilling participants. However, as a failed experimental game it does not represent the whole of pervasive gaming or even the whole of reality gaming.

In an upcoming pervasive game *Cruel 2 B Kind*[8] the players have to kill other players with acts of kindness. As the players do not know their victims or the other players, they have to perform their signature act of kindness to random bypassers until they manage to hit their targets, the only people who know that the act of kindness is related to the game. In practice this might mean players wandering around, giving flowers to everyone they meet in order to give a flower to the target player, thus succeeding in the game.

On the drawing board both *Vem gråter* and *Cruel 2 B Kind* are motivated by producing enjoyment and entertainment to unaware participants. However, despite the best intentions *Vem gråter* was read as a reckless prank or as scary acts of vandalism. We assume that the unaware experience of *Cruel 2 B Kind* will be a spontaneous rush of benevolence.

The question of unaware participation requires discussion what can be done in public space. Clearly, giving flowers at random bypassers in a park in order to succeed in a game is acceptable to the most of us. Scribbling on a wall is also acceptable, at least as long as the scribbler has the legal permission to do so.

The most of the time the nature of player-outsider interaction is impossible to exactly control by a game organizer. The game content emerging due to the friction on the edge of the magic circle is one important reason why the players have found socially expanded games like *Go Game* and *Prosopopeia* exciting and appealing [2, 4, 8].

Ludic Interpretation

Pervasive games should typically be designed to be ambiguously visible primarily to people that can be assumed to make ludic interpretations of the experience. Achieving this can be difficult; a janitor has a professional reason for taking game events seriously, while women and men react differently to mysterious stalkers in the night. Other factors that may inspire preferred interpretations include the choice of location (ambiguous clues of *The A.I. Game* were presented in the movie trailer), the choice of theme (*I Love Bees* had the flavour of honey farming), and the choice of aware players (small children are not perceived as scary).

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[8] By Jane McGonigal, who describes the design in http://avantgame.blogspot.com/2006/05/cruel-2-b-kind.html (ref. 9th of June 2006), to be played in *Come Out and Play* festival in New York, September 2006.

The thematic choices are important. Whereas a scary, depressing or even violent theme is often enjoyable in a contextualised game, the lack of contextualization makes the same theme very problematic in the unaware or ambiguous game context. As the protective frame of game or fiction is missing, a thrilling game inspires raw, unmediated fear in the participant. While it's possible that some people might enjoy of such an extreme experience[9], establishing a certainty on that prior the game is probably a practical impossibility. This is the key difference between *Vem gråter* and *Cruel 2 B Kind*, where the latter is likely to create a thoroughly agreeable athmosphere for non-players. Even selecting a non-scary theme will not in itself guarantee that the game is not perceived as scary.

Story Spin

The most serious problem with *Vem gråter* was the amount of story spin that was generated by the events. The major example is the interpretation of Spiricom-Thomas as a potential lunatic. The other example is the interpretation of the game event as a prank staged by the students to 'get even' with the school, and in general the organisational conflicts that the game exposed.

It is all too easy to dismiss these stories as the result of 'freak coincidences' with reality – in this case that there really was a mentally ill person related to the university and the students had a real reason to be disappointed with university management. But such coincidences are legion in reality and alternate reality games and form an essential part of the game aestethics. Even though the *Vem gråter* case is extreme, any game that offers ambiguous game experiences runs a risk of backfiring this way. The advantage of establishing Huizinga's magic circle around a game experience is that it manages to *keep issues out* of the game.

For accountability reasons, it is important that there is a person (or several) who is both able to justify the game design decisions afterwards, and take the responsibility for the game in case it backfires. In the case of *Vem gråter*, the lack of a clear responsible designer/producer created a lot of harm in the aftermath of the events, where the university, the game development education, and the students suffered.

Professionals

One thing that was perceived as particularly problematic in both *Vem gråter* and *Prosopopeia* was that the games approached professionals in their work. *Vem gråter* was perceived as an act of vandalism primarily because it became visible to professional staff at the university.

The primary motivation for this ethical standpoint is that professional time is money, and when involving them into a game you are wasting their employer's money. In *Prosopopeia*, this was aggravated by the fact that the person to be approached was a priest participating a religious ceremony, as that was seen as a potential insult on the religious community present.

The vandalism interpretation is an example of the practical problems caused by not negotiating with the local staff for staging of a reality game. There are also strong reasons to inform officials such as police and fire brigade prior to a game event that they may get informed about. Even games that appear to have consent of all parties might end up involving outsiders. One example of such safe-sounding but possibly risky game was *Kidnap*, where a consenting participant was kidnapped for 24 hours by a group of artists.[10]

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[9] In pop culture, David Fincher's movie *The Game* (1997) suggests that some people might enjoy such fear at least in retrospect, after the game is over and the ambiguity is cleared.
[10] By Blast Theory www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_kidnap.html (ref. 9th of June 2006).

Reality Fabrication

In *Vem gråter* interviews we asked the informants if they found this type of gaming ethically acceptable. The answers varied from clear 'yes' over "it is not acceptable to scare people" to clear "no". Some interviewees motivated their 'yes' from a post-modern perspective: As the world consists of a web of fabricated realities, reality gaming could make people aware on how they were fooled. This educational perspective of shaking people awake was seen as a justification for pervasive gaming. This opinion was also voiced in the online discussion on *Prosopopeia*.

> *I find the genre acceptable, the basic form that forced people to think again, when you get to know that aha, this was not completely real and here I have been, believing it to be real.* (Student in the development team)

One of the interviewees in the *Vem gråter* study expressed an almost opposite opinion:

> *What I react against in this is that there is somebody who creates deliberate deceptions, and then can stand at the side and think 'ha, ha look'...* (Woman aware of the gameness of the events)

The crucial issue is that to deceive somebody, there must be somebody who is 'in the know' and for that reason has power over the people who are being deceived. From this ethical standpoint, the whole genre of alternate reality games is compromised.

Conclusion

It's obviously impossible to unambiguously encourage or discourage games featuring unaware participation, as the designs and their implications vary greatly. The same event that provides an appealing game experience to one person can be deeply problematic for another person. When exposed to the idea, some people will take a strong ethical standpoint against it whereas others find it unproblematic and attractive. We hope that the discussion above sheds light to different sides of the argument, and shows some problematic and recommendable game structures. This paper is not our final word in this ethical discussion, but part of a work in progress.

As McGonigal [5] notes, many pervasive games tend to shift the focus from free play within the lusory constraints towards becoming actors playing their part in a vision dictated by the game designer. Both *Vem gråter* and *Prosopopeia* are excellent examples of this. Thus, the responsibility of the organizer is heightened.

Much of the responsibility also falls on aware players of pervasive games, as they stand on the thin line between game and non-game. Often the game-life interactions are emergent, chaotic, surprising and uncontrollable – thus it's not feasible to plan for all the scenarios in the game design. As the *Prosopopeia* priest example demonstrates, the players are able and willing to use their own judgement during the game. As decades of experience in *Killer*[11] groups and and among urban role-players has taught, the players can be trusted to use common sense, and the players must also be expected to take responsibility of their actions [13].

Finally, many pervasive games and gamelike activities should be perceived as art or political commentary in addition to being seen as games, based on their motivation, purpose and design.

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[11] Assassination games, such as *Killer: The Game of Assassination* written down by Steve Jackson in 1981, are played among outsiders. In *Killer* the outsiders are witnesses and obstacles, who are to be avoided while conducting real-world murders of other players with water pistols.

Especially the issues of public space and privacy have been commented in many pervasive games. The artistic games perhaps transcend a need for clear, utilitarian valuation and are subject to artistic critique instead. As we look at the fear caused by a nightly wanderer or the way student art is interpreted as vandalism, this justification becomes more understandable: Perhaps we need, as a society, some boundary-breaking games allowing us to play in public spaces, meet the most unlikely of people and perhaps give some candy to strangers. Unaware participation has a strong potential to be a powerful solution instead of being a problem, even though we have featured problematic scenarios in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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