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How to Embarrass Yourself in Public Unashamedly

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Figure 1: The design goal. Image cc-sa-nc by Victoria Picking

Abstract

Play can open adults to novel experiences and behaviors, yet fear of embarrassment often keeps them from engaging in play, particularly when observed by others. This makes embarrassment a crucial design consideration for pervasive play.

Author Keywords

Play; frames; public settings; embarrassment

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Research

In contemporary Western societies, to play as an adult is to expose yourself to the suspicion of neglecting your adult responsibilities [7]. Adult play is appropriate at most with children as part of their edification or peers on a gaming night at home. It is definitely not appropriate in most public settings. To play as *an adult in public* is to break social norms in the eyes of others and thus, to risk *embarrassing* oneself. Embarrassment is the social emotion triggered when people act inappropriately or incompetently for a given context, fuelled by a sense of spoiling one's identity, hurting one's standing in the eyes of others. It keeps people in line with the norms of the given context [1,2]. Thus, (fear of) embarrassment presents a fundamental social-psychological hurdle to pervasive play.

Evidence suggests that embarrassment does impede pervasive play [4]. Yet events like the annual global No Pants Subway Ride[1] or public play festivals like Igfest,[2] Come out and Play,[3] or PlayPublik[4] show that adults can and do play in public, and apparently quite unashamedly so. How? What are the social-psychological-material processes and features that produce or minimize (fear of) embarrassment, and how can designers use them to better engage people and use play's ability to open them to new experiences and behaviors? In a word: How to embarrass yourself in public play – and enjoy it unashamedly?

In past work, I have studied the social norms of leisure play contexts and how contexts reproduce these norms [3]. I surveyed existing work on embarrassing interactions in HCI. [4] I theorized – from a Goffmanian, Symbolic Interactionist perspective – when adult play is legitimate, and what strategies people (can) use to create *alibis for play* or otherwise make play less embarrassing. [5] And I shared and tested these strategies on stage with designers. [6] In future work with participants at the workshop, I hope to create pervasive play interventions that minimize and maximize embarrassment to validate design principles for designing (non)embarrassing interactions.

Figure 2: The villain.

Superpowers

- **Applied game designer**. I've had my fair share of creating games and running events that involved some form of public adult play.
- **Micro-social-psychologist**. I understand how social contexts and subjective behavior and experience intertewine and how to study that interaction.
- **Player**. I ordered at McDonalds in larping gear, jumped from windowsill to pedestrian crossing with a camera on me, and pretend-made out with a stranger in a pretend shed. In short, I can draw from rich personal experience across play genres.

Inspirational Library

- Richard Schechner. 2006. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, London,

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[1] http://improveverywhere.com/missions/the-no-pants-subway-ride/

[2] http://ludocity.org/wiki/Igfest

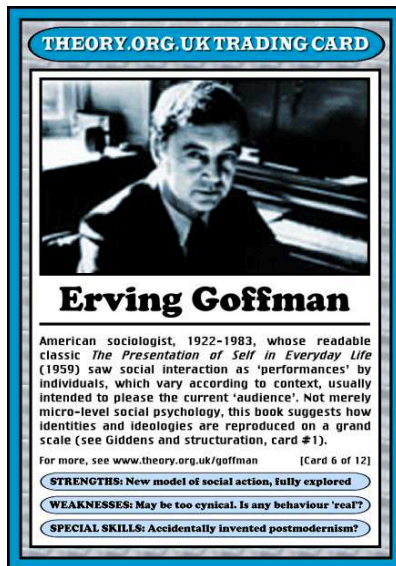[3] http://www.comeoutandplay.org/

[4] http://www.playpublik.de/

Figure 3: The hero. Image © theory.org.uk

Routledge. Because matters of roles, staging, spectatorship, audience, ritual, play are essential to pervasive play, and performance provides a valuable lens and super-category to theorize them.

- we are circumstance. 2010. *Our broken voice*. http://wearecircumstance.com/project/our-broken-voice/. Because this "subtlemob" or invisible flashmob illustrates how audio interfaces can create streams of interaction unobtrusive and invisible to co-present others.

- May Flanagan, Suyin Looui. 2008. *Massively Multiplayer Soba*. http://www.tiltfactor.org/game/massively-multiplayer-urban-games/. Because this serious alternate reality game illustrates how to design such that-game rules and actions at the same time have in-the-world meanings and effects.

References

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3. Sebastian Deterding. 2014. Modes of Play: A Frame Analytic Account of Video Game Play. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hamburg University. Retrieved from http://ediss.sub.uni-hamburg.de/volltexte/2014/6863/

4. Sebastian Deterding, Andrés Lucero, Jussi Holopainen, Chulhong Min, Adrian Cheok, Annika Waern, and Steffen Walz. 2015. Embarrassing Interactions. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI EA '15). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2365-2368.

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6. Sebastian Deterding. 2014. *Hacking Shyness: Designing for Social Interaction.* Alibis for Interaction 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfk1q7z2FKk

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