

pLAYERS

A research proposal to better understand the cultural effects of casual play on a mix reality world in order to better integrate ubiquitous system design.

Note: In addition to this application, you may find my portfolio of work, resume, bio, and a copy of this proposal on my website: <http://anitawilhelm.com>.

Research and Career Objective Overview

My interests lie in exploring the layers that exist between the real and virtual. As these lines become more and more blurred, systems hold intrinsically more influence on cultural and societal development allowing designers to increasingly direct discourse.

Gaming and performance theory offer tools to understand creation of narrative, reward, and other directional mechanics. Embedding these lightly within system design helps to increase usage and shape user behaviors. Combined with a deeper understanding of the cultural dissonance between virtual and real-world play, these mechanics can be used to design ubiquitous systems that positively and powerfully shape societal performance. Particular to my interest is applying this integration to the fields of casual learning, urban negotiation, and socially conscious behavior change.

In relation to the advancement of my own career, adding both cultural awareness and playful mechanical tools to my practice, I hope to shape future generations through both teaching emerging design practices in university settings and continuing my professional practice through innovative research design projects.

Areas of focus: Casual Games; Ubiquitous Computing; Pervasive Games; Alternative Reality Games; Service Design; Transmedia Storytelling; Participant-Observer Methodologies; Rapid Ethnography.

I. What is Reality? [From the Point of View of Wallpaper]

[In the smoking room of some café in Berlin, Germany:

Wallpaper layer #1: It's stuffy in here, I feel like a worthless piece of bologna.

Wallpaper layer #2: Oh be quiet! At least you don't have to smell like an astray and darken like the circles under a drunkard's eyes. You have the good life, you get to stay preserved, protected by me, and covering this wall forever!

Wallpaper layer #3: <blink> Are you two at it again? Try living a drag and drop away from a trash can. <sigh>]

In order to begin to construct a theoretical frame in which to ground some of my interests, examination of the classic philosophical question, "What is real?", must first be explored. In his book "The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses", game designer Jesse Schell discusses realities composition by reinforcing that game designers' key goal is to create an *essential experience*. Using the clichéd Zen proverb "If a tree falls and no one can hear it, did it make a sound?", he articulates, "Game designers only care about what *seems* to exist. The player and the game are real. The experience is imaginary—but game designers are judged by the quality of this imaginary thing, because it is the reason people play games." [1]

Jane McGonigal tackles the same question, defining it through the eyes of ubiquitous computing by defending the meaning of Rich Gold's essay "This is Not a Pipe", which questions hidden digital affordances embedded in everyday objects. She postulates, "the ubicomp era finds as its main attraction that which we cannot perceive, but rather must *engage*: the *inner life* of the digital systems." [2]

Both points of view converge, to define the main crux of reality, lying in the participants' perceived experience of participation. That is to say, performative engagement with the system defines each player's reality. *[In the world of wallpaper, each layer's argumentation of its experience is valid to its own perception.]*

Continuing, as the layers of digital connectivity permeate our lives, the environments or contexts which hold our perceived reality continue to multiply. "Embedding *systems* rather than *semblances* within nearly any context. It is not the mimetic references or cognitive concepts that ubicomp wants to proliferate; it is rather interactive experiences and phenomenal affordances that will be made pervasive." [2] Jane postulates, here, that participants engaging in the invisible connectivity of ubiquitous systems are performing in a parallel reality. Some participants within shared environments may be cognizant of the unseen affordances of the physical object, while others may only perceive the tertiary form facade. "In other words, there are two kinds of participants: those who are cognizant of the underlying play-aspect of an interaction and those who see only the surface ordinariness of the interaction." *[The patrons, unaware of the wallpaper network within the café observe its visible pattern, but have no idea that the wallpaper can talk.]*

Only those aware of the networked system have knowledge of a "secret" experience. The rest of the culture remains unaware, unless by chance a shared experience of something within the system reveals to an "ordinary" person a hint about this "secret" world. In this way, she argues, as we build digital layers into our physical environments, we are creating bifurcated participant realities and because of this we are challenging our notion of built environment and social culture. She concludes, the work of "ubiquitous computing, then, is a process of tacitly challenging the environmental and socio-contextual categories for their respective modes of interaction." *[A man in the café thinks he hears a voice...]*

II. Current Landscape: Our Schizophrenia

In the years following Jane McGonigal's dissertation and Jesse Schell's book, there have been significant advances to our digital landscape. Primarily, the mobile ecosystem has evolved with the development and deployment of new smart phone OS systems. These systems have allowed third-party developers to deploy mobile content at adoption scales far surpassing any traditional handset manufacturer. We have seen applications like Foursquare, Scvngr, and other locative play experiences take advantage of this advancement to begin to layer pervasive games onto casual everyday spaces. Secondly, a socio-cultural site called Facebook has established an online identity for approximately 500 million active users (July 2010), which is approximately one person for every fourteen in the world. [3] The scale of this phenomenon, while controversial in some realms, is astounding and unignorable as the basis for a world-wide social graph.

Leaving Facebook and the mobile ecosystem to be discussed in a different forum, I'd like to focus attention to the network of casual games which sits one layer up from Facebook. Zynga, the largest casual game provider, now has larger revenue than Electronic Arts and claims a title, *Farmville*, which is played by 10% of all Facebook users. [4] (Doing the math, 1 in every 140 persons in the world has milked a digital cow.)

Along with the Zynga phenomena, social MMOGS have increasingly scaled in the second half of the first twenty-first century decade. Bonnie Nardi, an anthropologist studying virtual worlds at UC Irvine, looks at the World of Warcraft through a socio-cultural lens. Her recent book, "My Life as a Night Elf Priest", observes that, "virtual worlds feel more authentically like cultures... because of the elaboration of space and objects." [5] A clear parallel between virtual worlds, such as WOW, and real-world cultures is evident. What I would like to examine, now, is what happens when we consider the notion of social networks as local worlds? Abstracting to a meta-layer, what happens if we consider Facebook to truly be a world-wide "culture" of its own? [*The man in the café is logged into Facebook. He posts on his friend's wall, "Dude... I think I'm going crazy. I'm hearing voices."*]

Assuming that Facebook now holds models of local social "worlds", can we parallel the next layer up in this digital space, to social impacts of play in our "real-world" communities? Recasting ubiquitous performance onto a "virtual culture" realm, Jane postulates about ubicomp that, "In order for the knowing players to rub up against a pool of non-knowing players, the game must take place in an environment and social context not typically associated with play. The structural elements... require it to be *out in the world*." In this way, would discovering a game through an ambient news feed alert constitute "rubbing up against" a game the same way seeing a person trying to listen intently to wallpaper muttering in a café might? If so, can we draw any parallel in the analysis of purely digital layering to better understand cultural patterns of social cohesion or shifts that begin to take place as we digitally layer our physical cultures with ubiquitous play?

III. Beyond Service Design: Shaping Narratives

Moving from theory into the realm of practice, discovery that additional network layers and ubiquitous touch points add more control to services becomes clear. As manipulators of the "hidden" powers of objects, digital designers, then, begin to hold responsibility for developmentally changing discourse. They increasingly become directors of a live play.

Jane states, "I think there is, in fact, a clear analog to the idea of metacommunication in computer culture: *interface design*, or the process of designing how a user will engage with a system." [2] In recent years the practice of *interface design* has scaled with the ease of production tools, to be revered in a larger context as *service design*. Designers now look across objects to design a *service*, which integrates into a user's lifestyle at multiple touchpoints.

Stepping outside of traditional design or system disciplines to consider more interactive narrative forms offers designers a new set of tools, to more deeply integrate their practice. For example, transmedia storytelling offers a perspective in which to embed ubiquitous design thinking throughout a system of services. [6] Service design, in many ways, is the current practice of incorporating similar principles into commercial design.

However, it fails to think about the service *explicitly* as a set of cooperative directive narratives. User scenarios have transitioned to “user journeys”, in practice, alleviating physical location and technological device from the set of brainstorming constraints and allowing designers to think of users’ contextual experience throughout their daily lives. Yet in practice it is rare that systems hold to these distinct contextual and temporal set of requirements.

By better understanding how to integrate these kinds of mechanics into the practice of digital service design, practitioners can design more fully for the intended lifestyle effects of their culturally released artifacts. Learning how to use narrative forms and reward mechanics, then, designers can better shape tools to intentionally drive “real life” practices. In this way, the system becomes less detached from the user, as the goal becomes even more tightly intertwined into their lifestyle and directive path. The designer becomes a lifestyle storyteller.

IV. My Proposal

Recognizing a “story designer” as the new form of digital experience professional, how can analysis of narrative and reward mechanics from casual games help create new ubiquitous experiences? Jesse Schell defines “game design” as the convergence of the fields of psychology, anthropology, and design. He says, “Ideally we would find ways to connect all the varied principles of design to each other through the common ground of psychology and anthropology, since ultimately, all design principles are rooted in these.” [1] Jane McGonigal further stresses the importance of the crux of these three practices, as the lines of perceived reality blur, she says, “games designers and researchers must attend more carefully to the insights of philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists who historically have explored play as an embodied, social and highly consequential ritual, always already grounded in the practices of everyday life.” [2]

My scholastic background stems from a bachelors degree in cognitive science and psychology from the University of Michigan. From there I moved into the field of Human Computer Interaction, focusing specifically on mobile interaction design in my graduate studies. During my graduate work at the iSchool, University of California, Berkeley, I was a researcher for Garage Cinema Research. My efforts focused on participatory metadata acquisition through the use of mobile technology, namely camera phones. [7]

Sparked from the basis of this research, I created a social-mobile pervasive game as my final masters thesis project. [8] The game was a framework for exploring the city and daily paths in a new light by completing photo based challenges and sharing them with different degrees of friends. In many of our focus groups, the different content scope and interaction capacities proved to build a light, yet, meaningful interaction for our users. Many of them commented on perceiving their daily commute paths differently, or simply looking at the city and their social interactions through a new lens. We changed their daily paths.

As a finalist in VERTEX, a Stanford-Berkeley Innovation competition, the game capture the attention of a venture capitalist and we accepted a small investment which helped sustain our work for the next three years to try to produce a live commercial product. As the mobile ecosystem proved to grow slower than many expectations, we eventually returned the platform to its roots and placed a limited version of the system in production for use as a children’s learning tool in the Liberty Science Center, just outside of New

York City. As one of the first National Science Foundation grants of its kind to support informal learning through augmented mobile interactions, it was built for use as a challenge-based tour guide and collaborative learning tool. We removed the participatory creation of challenges and allowed the Science Center complete control over the narrative of their participants' experience.

I have since been a speaker, advisor, designer, manager, and mail delivery specialist for mobile and ubiquitous system projects. My research, entrepreneurialism, and mobile service design skills have continued to be cultivated through my professional work in new product design and design research laboratories.

Having roots in psychology and experience design, I would now like to focus my efforts on an anthropological game perspective, while at the same time applying my findings to the practice of pervasive system creation within the realm of ubiquitous and mobile design.

Considering these two goals, I propose my theoretical and cultural study work to be methodologically grounded in participant-observer methods and centered around casual game exploration. How have casual games, which live virtually, like Zynga titles, shaped learning, discovery, digital cultural formation, and virtual community cohesion? Drawing a parallel to the physical world, is there a difference between the mechanics and effects in creating new relationship ties and cultures in the virtual spaces, compared to how historical "real world" cultures used play for ritual and community creation?

In practice, applying findings of this work, I would like to further explore how to integrate mechanics such as narrative and light goal achievement actions into ubiquitous design projects. Exploring the details of how virtual casual games differ from physical ones, can we use appropriate detail of mechanisms like storytelling and reward to enhance everyday ubiquitous systems and create more engaging applications for enhanced learning and lifestyle management? As more objects become interconnected how can we leverage playful mechanics to more fully shape experiences, which better incorporate the parallel realities of our layered world?

University of Southern California offers me a very rare opportunity where I can explore the intersection of these ideas. Should I be accepted to the iMAP program I hope to gain access to foundational game and narrative theory within the School of Cinematic Arts. As well, however, with the program's intention of cross-disciplinary integration, I hope to seek cultural resources to further hone my exploration of the social impacts of casual games. In this realm, social and cultural studies work being done in cooperation with Annenberg through Professors Henry Jenkins and Anne Balsamo are of particular interest to me, as is anthropological work researchers like Mizuko Ito have performed. Ultimately though, being a digital designer and having the desire to build systems, I'd like to apply this intersection of game and cultural theory to new design projects within the Mobile and Environmental Media Laboratory. Here, I'd like to create systems that incorporate casual game mechanics specifically with directive narrative intentions around informal learning and urban negotiation (extending ideas from my previous work at UC Berkeley), as well as exploring socially conscious behavior change which can be shaped from playful lifestyle rewards. Faculty members, such as Scott Fisher, Anne Balsamo, Henry Jenkins, and Andreas Kratky, as well as the programs flexibility and interdisciplinary nature, makes it a unique fit where I hope to be able to execute the cohesion of these ideas.

V. Conclusion

Ubiquity is dissolving the line between real and virtual. As cultures learn to cope with this integration, we must keep our minds and eyes open to exploring and discovering new experiences, since it's possible that the walls may very well talk one day. It is through this kind of playful discovery of what is real, that we are able to learn the affordances of digital adoption and promote success in our newly forming cultures.

Jane McGonigal ultimately postulates, "Reality is broken, why aren't game designers trying to fix it?" I'd like to add a layer, "Reality is unseen, let's use games to help people discover it." [*The man, leans back in his chair and rests his head on the wall, in despair. The wallpaper gently pulses, lets out a coo, and he notices a message appear on his screen, "You're not going crazy. Name this tune!" And he begins to hear the gentle whisper of "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" (Stevie Wonder, 1973) in chorus emerging through the layers of wallpaper.*]

References:

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