Critical Potential on the Brink of the Magic Circle

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the problem space of forbidden games: games not only on the border of games and reality, but explicitly referencing the double-coded nature of that boundary—in other words, games that use their status as "only a game" as a strategic gesture. It asks three key questions: what does it mean to be a forbidden or "brink" game, what is the function of these works, and, perhaps most importantly, to what extent do they have critical potential. To answer these questions, a methodological approach is drawn from functional systems theory, as read primarily through the work of Niklas Luhmann. Through this approach, I demonstrate the importance of these games in relation to the separation of games and reality, and suggest the strength of such works lies in their ability to both observe and critique everyday life.

Author Keywords
magic circle, forbidden games, brink games, Luhmann

THE PROBLEM SPACE OF FORBIDDEN GAMES

What makes up the boundary of a game and what occurs at that border? The question comes from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who suggest that answering these questions brings us closer to understanding "the paradoxical artificiality of games and the way that games relate to the real-world contexts that they inhabit" [21]. This paper takes up this question with regard to certain games that call the fringe of the magic circle their native home: "forbidden" games[1]. What is so forbidden about forbidden games (or forbidden play within games)? Is the idea of transgressing the game/reality border so contentious, so…*forbidden*? Perhaps a new term is needed— I would like to suggest *brink* [2] better captures the play of instability and anticipation of the position and its liminality, in contrast to definitions based on relational position or normative status. Where Salen and Zimmerman have questioned what occurs when the boundary of the magic circle is *blurred* between the game and life [20], my question, and the question of forbidden or brink games, is exactly the opposite. It looks to when and where the recognition of this conflict is foregrounded. It looks specifically at games that embrace the contested space at the boundary of games and life—pairing "it's just a game" with a knowing wink.

These games need not be as exotic or socially contentious as the label "forbidden" implies. Take, for example, the game *Twister* (Hasbro). Anyone familiar with the game knows the rules of *Twister* are simple: one team spins a two-handed dial on a coloured wheel; players on the opposing team must match the configuration dictated by the dial on a large plastic mat covered with coloured circles using various parts of their body: *right foot blue, left hand red*. The team that wins has the last contorted player standing after all others have fallen. These are the *explicit* rules of the game. Of course, anyone who has played *Twister* understands this is not the whole story. The popularity of *Twister* lies in its forbidden play or brink status: the framing of the game allowing the temporary reinscribing of rules of intimate social distance. In real life, only intimate partners get this close. But in *Twister*, we are only playing the game. Wink.

Consider the Syrian videogame *The Stone Throwers* (2000). Players take up the role of a young Palestinian standing in front of the contested Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, armed only with stones. The player must defend the mosque against advancing Israeli soldiers. Upon inevitably losing the game, the player is presented with an image of a dead Palestinian boy, and the message: "Well maybe you have killed some of the Israeli soldiers in the computer world, but this is the real world…Stop the killing of the innocents in Palestine before the game is really over" [20]. Perhaps not the most sophisticated message or play on boundaries to an external audience— but placing the game in context,

[1] The origin of the term "forbidden games" is somewhat murky: Salen and Zimmerman make reference to forbidden play [21], while Gonzalo Frasca [8] specifically uses the term forbidden games, with a nod to the 1952 film of the same name.

[2] The brink defined as 1) any extreme edge; verge; 2) a crucial or critical point, esp. of a situation or state beyond which success or catastrophe occurs [3].

Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference

with an audience made primarily of middle eastern youth, the game stands in sharper relief to reality. Alternately, take a game such as Traffic Games' *JFK Reloaded* (2003), where you play out a game scenario with explicit and specific reference to actual historical figures—not real within the game, all too real outside of it. Could "non-fiction" games such as these be considered brink games? At what point is it more than "just a game?"

APPROACH TO MIXED REALITIES

Games involving forbidden play "raise fundamental questions about the artificiality of games and their relationship to real life proper" [20]. This suggests they have critical potential—that they have something to say back to games, or something to say to society. To take a closer look at this issue, I will turn to functional systems theory, as read primarily through the work of Niklas Luhmann. Because of its primary focus on systems this study will be primarily descriptive, attempting to study functions (what these games do), not intentions, complex normative values or player agency. The goal of this approach will be to look at brink games within the broader subsystem of games, and to an extent within larger social systems. I will also attempt to contextualize this approach within a larger discourse surrounding the definition, boundaries and critical potential of games. Why this approach, in an area as value-charged as "forbidden games"? I am specifically interested in attempting a normatively-restricted approach to a research site that evokes strong value positions. These value positions may serve to obscure the functioning of brink games and forbidden play within larger systems.

Luhmann based his theory of social systems on concepts from biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela[3]. Luhmann describes social systems as autopoietic and operatively closed—reproducing and sustaining themselves from within without intervention from other systems. In contrast to most social theory, Luhmann sees the fundamental element of social systems as not individual agents or actions, but communications (emerging in the unity of information, context, and understanding). Systems and subsystems within them are seen to operate under a specific value logic, or binary code (e.g. the code for the legal system may be justice/injustice; the science system truth/nontruth). Society hangs together, as it were, by virtue of the structural coupling of its systems, and their mutual observance and/or agitation. Observation itself is a selection of what to observe and is constructed of a distinction (a marked state) and an indication (the selection of said marked state over its unmarked environment). As such, self-observation plays an important role in the continual boundary maintenance and differentiation for any system; a persistent definition of self and other (although every process within the system functions to sustain the whole). Self-observation is limited, however, in two key ways. First, an observer can only observe one side of a distinction at a time (one can't observe what one is simultaneously not observing). Luhmann addresses this issue through the concept of re-entry: allowing for a representation of the distinction to become part of the system (although only *as* a representation). Second, observations are limited by their confinement within a frame of reference. However, a higher level, second-order observation may occur through the observation of the frame and marked states of a first-order observation (although this second-order observation in turn has its own blind spot) [22]. Luhmann has related second-order observation to deconstruction [16], and sees this meta-observation as a process of self-description in modern society.

Bo Kampmann Walther (also drawing on the work of Luhmann) presents a case for a functionalist approach to game on the whole, noting the logico-formalistic configuration of games can be regarded as a differentiated subsystem operating as autopoietic with its own code and border. For Walther, "what is at stake here is a certain capacity for structuring domains of meaning through the interconnection of elements and through specific functional form-operations" [24]. A functionalist account of games presents a higher level view of the system operations emerging from individual play events. I would suggest a significant role (and place for critical engagement) for these works lies in their functional and structural properties within the larger process of differentiation between games and everyday life, in addition to the conditions of design, play and reception.

FORBIDDEN GAMES (AND OTHERS ON THE BRINK)

Salen and Zimmerman use the term "forbidden play" with particular reference to works that permit and/or encourage normally taboo behaviour. Games incorporating forbidden play, in essence, run rules from each "reality" in collision to each other, challenging the integrity of the boundary between worlds. Commonly, this means drawing out implicit social rules by putting them in conflict with implicit game rules. Although the same structure could be produced through explicit rules[4], there may be design considerations in keeping this variation rare—specifically the surprise and delight at realizing the rule conflict is a major appeal to the game, and players tend to be more aware of explicit rules (both internal and external to the game). This staging allows play with social rules at a reduced risk, removing much of the prohibition behind breaking the taboo [21]—it is after all, "just a game."

However, it is not enough just for the rule sets to collide—as is shown through another Salen and Zimmerman

[3] With additional theory drawn from Talcott Parsons and George Spencer Brown (among others).

[4] And in fact games conflicting with explicit legal rules (i.e. illegal actions) is a somewhat popular suspense trope.

example, *Scrabble* (Hasbro). They describe the example of permissible words in *Scrabble* including words taboo (and offensive) outside the space of the game, but permitted by the rules of *Scrabble*, given in *Scrabble,* word *meaning* is largely irrelevant [21]. Yet *Scrabble* is not considered an example of forbidden play, or brink game. It is not enough for rules to just conflict—this conflict needs to be an integral part of the game/play. It is a *knowing* (or self-observing) conflict. It is implicit that the words in *Scrabble* mean nothing—there is nothing mentioned in the game rules about word meaning (aside from the requirement that the word *have* meaning), and the meaning of words does not affect score. However, you could choose to play *Scrabble* as a brink game, by ignoring this implicit rule, and playing off the conflict between real world and in-game meaning: perhaps by sending strings of suggestive or offensive words to your opponent. Of course, you're not really being provocative or rude… it's "just a game." In this way, discovering conflicting implicit social and game rules can allow "forbidden play" in games not specifically designed as brink games.

Melanie Dawson presents interesting examples of forbidden or brink games in relation to the parlour culture of the late 19th century. One example, "Genteel Lady" involves the repetition and extension of a ridiculously formal and complex phrase, that is continually appended with a list of "lavish" items. The successful player is the "Genteel Lady." Although the game ostensibly mocks the formalities and extravegances of gentility, it also retains the goal of this status as the game's winning state. "Blind Mans Bluff" and other appropriated tactile children's games situated adult, sexualized preferences in an acceptable, permissible context; allowing for the expression of these desires against the backdrop of what could then be seen as malleable rules subject to reconfiguration and inflection. Such games were not only an opportunity to go against the social code, but also an affirmation that the participants' desires were not truly bound to such codes in the first place. Dawson further asserts these games not only tested players' relation to cultural life, but provided a means for the measurement and recognition of abstract aptitudes, gave a sense of agency and control, required self-reflection, and allowed for the testing and rethinking of social conventions [7]. However, Dawson clearly demonstrates the ambivalence of this brink gameplay, finding "[e]ven as games encourage socially deviant acts, they simultaneously recognize a middling culture's investment in genteel decorum, and in large measure, they build up on its importance as an ideal as well as a subject of debate" [7]. The "forbidden" act's status as subversive in turn reinforces and justifies the implicit rules being subverted, and the construct of the game often holds up the legitimacy of these very social structures.

A more recent digital work, Jennifer Chowdhury and Mehmet Sinan Ascioglu's 2007 *Intimate Controllers* project, demonstrates the integration of peripherals with forbidden or brink play. The work consists of game controllers incorporated into undergarments so that gameplay necessitates physical interaction with these "intimate" zones. Such work illustrates the particular nature of a brink game in creating focal tension between in-game (basic arcade play) and extra-game realities. One of Chowdhury's stated design goals was to create video game play that would center around sensuous interaction with a play partner [5]. However, like the parlour game examples, the nature of the implicit/explicit rule conflict is not necessarily this straightforward. *Intimate Controllers* not only reinscribes the controller as the body, but also the body as controller: in an attempt to make game play intimate by bringing in the reality of a sensual body peripheral, it in turn objectifies the real world intimate partner as a mere control device. Furthermore, in demarcating a space of subversion (the female breasts and male genitals of a heterosexual partnership) and manner of brink play, the work dictates an ideologically particular subjective perception of intimate space.

Salen and Zimmerman emphasize the potential for this type of play to serve as a challenge to the rigid distinction between life and game realities, "permitting hidden desires, nutty behavior, or even normally criminal actions" [21], and at the same time, protecting players from social sanction. Forbidden play in games creates distance in which (otherwise) unacceptable acts are contained and sanitized, allowing for the expression of impulses but at the same time safeguarding players by limiting this expression [21]. From Dawson's work, we can also see the potential for these brink games to end up legitimizing the very structures they critique; and from Chowdhury and Ascioglu's project, we can see the potential for such works to carry ideology in their demarcation of boundaries. I would argue, however, that the link between the reframing and ordering of social context and the sanitization of this behaviour should not be left unchallenged. For example, we may say that art, too, reframes reality, but in contrast we do not necessarily accept *as a given* art sanitizing desire.

AN ACT APART

Almost every contemporary definition of games makes some reference to the idea of games as "set apart" from reality[5]. There are several versions of this claim, ranging from the strict insistence on their separation, to an argument for the fundamental intertwining between all games and the

[5] This is not to say the issue of safety and separation, as exclusive properties of games, should be taken as a given. Some play is also quite dangerous (mountain climbing is a commonly cited example); consequential (impacting, for example, wealth, psychological health and/or social status); and non-play can also be approached with a lusory attitude (stock market) and/or seen as "set apart" from life or identity (as is sometimes the case with one's work) [2,6,13,18]. Even Huizinga grants the sense of being *in the game,* as a bond, continues even after the game is over [12].

real world. I will recap these definitional elements only briefly, as the broader issues of game definition have been more than adequately explored in other works [13, 14, 21].

One of the earliest and most influential definitions of games comes from Roger Caillois. Caillois states play is necessarily separate and mindfully isolated from life. He stresses within this space apart, "nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant…[once someone leaves the enclosure]. The game must be taken back within the agreed boundaries [in order to continue]" [4]. He further describes the game's domain as restricted, closed, and protected (safe): a *pure space*, accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or a free unreality, as opposed to real life [4]. Johan Huizinga reinforces this separation, although perhaps less militantly. It is from Huizinga's quotation that we derive the now ubiquitous phrase "magic circle":

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots [6], isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart [12].

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the results of this configuration as allowing one to "distort reality" and practice behaviour as if experimentally, uncoupled from real world repercussions [6]. Even as he argues for games duality, Thomas Malaby acknowledges the "artifactual" nature of games and their status as culturally produced artifacts *designed* as separate from everyday life—even as they are inextricably tied to it. This is a key distinction, as it acknowleges the intentional construction of the game/life dichotomy as instrumental. Notes Malaby, "[w]e should be very interested, in each case, empirically, in how that boundary is maintained, how it is violated, and so on" [18]. However Malaby goes on to dispute the basic "setting apart" of games overall, suggesting games are not only grounded in human practice but resonate with other domains of experience—they are dual, both mimicking and constituting the everyday. He argues the view that games are separate and safe constitutes an unwarranted exceptionalism that is not only not intrinsic nor universal to games, but participates in their marginalization. For Malaby, viewing games as divorced from daily life constitutes an untenable separation that in the end undermines games as a significant social phenomenon [18].

Others argue games oscillate between these two worlds, or constitute another mode or order of reality. Although Lizabeth Klastrup draws upon Caillois' definition in her work, she goes on to suggest the cultural fertility of games lies in their revelation of the character, pattern and values of society reiterated and negotiated through the game, adding: "The second-order reality nature of the game... makes possible a full-scale enactment of that which you might never dare if this was for "real" [14]. Jean Baudrillard describes games as a more radical simulacrum upon the simulacrum of reality (but one freely entertained and thus liberated from meaning and desire) [1]. From Alexander Galloway's reading of Adorno, we find quite another position: the view that games do not stand apart from production, but rather form an "afterimage" of it, and contain symptoms of deeper social processes [9].

Here too I would like to draw upon Luhmann's work, not on games, but on similar issues relating to the position of art in relation to "reality." Luhmann suggests a confusion of frames, such as between art and life, is always produced by an artwork, "the external frame reenters with work without—and this accounts for the appeal of the manoeuvre—being obstructed in its function of demarcating the work against the unmarked space of the world" [15]. He argues that the doubling of reality in art presents reality back to itself, allowing reality to be observed. Because we are dealing with similar issues relating to the projection of reality back onto itself (assuming games as a second order reality), this framework would appear to hold true for games as well. Luhmann does in fact note the doubling of reality in games, finding the reality of games distinguished (unproblematically) from everyday reality. This second reality creates an observer position for "real" life [17]. In other words, the "not real" game gives us a place from which to view everyday (non-game) life, in contrast, as real.

POISED ON THE BRINK

Luhmann does not see games as set apart as much as constituting another order of reality:

> Games are episodes. They are not transitions to another way of living[7]. But that does not mean that real reality exists only before and after a game. Rather, everything that exists does so simultaneously. The game always contains, in each of its operations, references to the real reality which exists at the same time. With every move it marks itself as a game; and it can collapse at any moment if things suddenly get serious [8]. The continuation of the game requires that the boundaries be kept under constant surveillance. [17]

[6] Without getting lost in the spatial imagery, it is also important to consider conceptual and social forbidden spots within the context of this description.

[7] A position echoed in the work of Victor Turner, who sees play, at least in modern culture, as *liminoid* (allowing respite) as opposed to *liminal* (transformative)[23].

[8] Here "serious" meaning simply external to the game.

Walther too marks how the oscillation between play and non-play makes up the integrity of the game against an external reality. He argues that games thus emerge from negative preconditions whose reference makes game play possible [25]. In fact, this boundary maintenance is a function of the autopoiesis of the game subsystem, and may in of itself carry over into second-order observation—an observing of its observing. Walther describes the tension of autopoiesis as a self-awareness of ontological insecurity translating into the management of the non-game as other:

> It is a fundamental sign of the game itself that the threat of a 'nongame' domain or a 'nongaming' situation is forever intrinsically tied to the construction of the game itself, and the players have to be aware of and even stay alert to this fact. Thus, a certain level of self-referentiality or, at the very least, a minimal awareness of the logical organization of play and nonplay is required. [25]

Although Walther implicates all games in presupposing the tension of keeping within play, brink games make explicit this tension. While the imperative to maintain the game is key in any game, in forbidden or brink games it takes on an additional quality given the potential to breach the bounds of the game itself. Brink games not only force the awareness of explicit and implicit game rules, but of implicit and explicit non-game rules as well. The act of conscious maintenance of the game at the boundary necessitates a shared social knowledge of what it means to play a game, and what constitutes the conditions of that system. Where normally the continual production of the game boundary emerges from the autopoiesis of the system, a brink game may recast boundary production as a communication event, with the potential to carry meaning.

Breach

> If play consists in providing formal, ideal, limited, and escapist satisfaction for these powerful drives, what happens when every convention is rejected? When the universe of play is no longer tightly closed? When it is contaminated by the real world in which every act has inescapable consequences? [4]

As suggested by this (somewhat alarmist) Caillois passage, the idea of breaching the bounds of the magic circle is an essential part of the narrative of the brink game. Bogost argues that games, ideological and extrinsically subjective, both draw from and rupture into the world. He suggest a gap in the magic circle allowing both players and ideas to freely pass. This is later articulated as a breach in the boundary:

> [For] the magic circle to couple with the world, it must not be hermetic; it must have a breach through which the game world and the real world spill over into one another. The residue of this interaction infects both spheres, causing what I earlier called simulation fever, the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation.[2]

For Erving Goffman, this breach of the boundary is alternately termed "flooding out" or breaking frame, and is a product of the tension between the external and the reinscribed reality in the game [10]. Goffman presents this in terms of the unwanted and unwelcome destruction of the game. However, rather than assigning this negative value to the breach, we can also look to the ways the threat of breach adds an important element of interest and surprise. So while Walther, too, notes the inherent danger of being " 'caught' in reality," he acknowledges a simultaneous fascination in this possibility. So while breach presents an "aggressive intermission" threatening to "terminate the privileges of play" and releasing its unfortunate victims back into the non-game [24], there is an inherent excitement found in teetering on the very edge of the game world.

The kissing games put forward as examples by Salen and Zimmerman[9] can also help us examine the issue of breach. They note that kissing games provide the frame that sanctions otherwise weighty or disapproved social interaction, within a structure that nonetheless controls this interaction—"never going far enough to threaten social order" [21]. The point at which kissing in "Spin the Bottle" becomes "real kissing" (although of course it never is entirely unreal kissing, which is entirely the point) is the breach point of the game—the collapse into the non-game world. What makes the game exciting is the tangible threat of this breach; the heightened tension the game provides by taunting collapse. The ambiguity surrounding breach becomes the common business of its players, as they assess *how real not-real needs to be* to result in the collapse of the game into its other. Because of the prominent threat of breach, forbidden or brink games necessarily integrate this observation into the game in a way other games do not.

THE CRITICAL POTENTIAL OF BRINKSMANSHIP

By asking to what extent forbidden or brink games have critical potential, I mean to interrogate the ability of such games to launch an effective critique of games and/or society. From the perspective of functional systems theory, I have suggested games are products of autopoiesis within a larger social subsystem of games—a testing of the bounds of the magic circle as a function of continuing boundary maintenance. In a closed system, simply as a function of differentiation between systems, forbidden or brink games are useful in that they reduce complexity and reinforce the stability of games overall. We can argue it is only the edges of the structure that define a centre (as Luhmann notes, the

[9] Originally drawn from Brian Sutton-Smith's *Kissing Games of Ohio* [21].

form of a system being the difference of system and environment [16])— when games are defined it is commonly in reference to *what they are not* (i.e. games are *not* work, games are *not* make-believe, games are *not* stories); and as such, the most interesting and contentious examples thus exist on the edge of the magic circle (is Maxis' *The Sims* a game? Is Russian Roulette a game?). But this does not implicate forbidden or brink games in particular, only games on the border. What forbidden or brink games do *specifically* is draw attention to the border, and implicate it in their unfolding. In doing so, they destabilize immersion and force reflection on the construct of the game: the explicit and implicit rules and goals. This requires observation of both the game and non-game, marked and unmarked states. As such, a brink game forces second-order observation that includes the game frame. In ways, they are more game than the games set back from the boundary, as they additionally self-critique what it means to be a game. But perhaps more importantly, by pulling back the frame of observation, they also reveal the non-game social rules that are implicated in the game.

For Luhmann, the function of games (if they can be assumed to operate, as leisure pursuits, under a binary value code of entertainment/non-entertainment within the mass media system), lies simply in destroying superfluous time [17]—perhaps not the most promising position for presenting a critique of society. I would propose there is some movement within the media system to suggest the possible differentiation between games and leisure in some contexts (for example, initiatives such as Games for Change, documentary/newsgames, and educational/training games). In these cases, games may operate under a code of information/non-information typical (well, at least traditional) to the news media. Luhmann has further suggested that mass media performs a second-order observing and describing of society [16], which may open a place for games in terms of this process. Working within operative closure, games cannot impact other systems (such as art or politics) directly, but this should not imply games cannot comment on and observe other systems—they commonly do. However, this model may suggest limits to their potential ability to agitate for change in these external systems, particularly if they are seen to operate under the code of entertainment rather than information. Brink games, however, in forcing second-order observation of the game/life boundary, may be situated in a more empowered position for social critique, since at the level of meta-observation, their impact can extend beyond games and into society's own self-description.

For Csikszentmihalyi, "[w]hat play shows over and over again is the possibility of changing goals and therefore restructuring reality [6]." Games may be the vehicle for reversing the goals and rules of everyday life (along with, for example religion, art and sport), or forge a rigid, ordered worldview. He cautions:

> The problem with institutionalizing alternative realities in art or in games is that they become *co-opted by the system*, subordinated to the prevailing world view. The paramount goals and rules maintain their status as the reality, playfulness is confined to the playground, from where it could never mount a serious challenge to real life. Emasculated, playfulness is allowed controlled expression through the safety valves of art and games. Thus playfulness has no chance to add its creative contribution to evolution; *it becomes a homeostatic mechanism rather than an agent of change*. [6] [emphasis added]

It should be noted that this ambivalent assessment comes from the perspective of the player, rather than the system. As internally-situated observers of reality, it is fair to say brink games (as a subset of all games) risk co-option, or at very least dismissal. However, by virtue of second-order observation, brink games open up the possibility for creating fissures in the foundations and structures of non-game realities implicated in the play by allowing for a higher level reflective stance that is not isolated within the game.

FURTHER INQUIRY

One difficulty with this methodological approach is that a system level view of brink games is, on the whole, divorced from insightful analysis of game players as subversive agents. This is not to say such an analysis isn't essential. More work needs to be done exploring issues of agency and the impact of these games on social imagination. These investigations may also be able to draw on wider understandings of the uses and significance of *breach* (for example, in social constructs). What this approach has demonstrated is the importance of brink games in maintaining the structure of games as the articulation of the differentiation between games and everyday life, while simultaneously casting doubt back onto the nature of reality in the "real" world. This includes the ability of brink games, perhaps like art, to critique culture and society as second-order observers of socio-cultural systems.

While this paper hasn't specifically looked at Alternate Reality (ARG) or Pervasive Games, these areas might provide valuable insights into forbidden play and game design leveraging the game/reality brink. It would be interesting to look at brink games in relation to a work like 42 Entertainment's *Last Call Poker*[10] . However, that is not to say that ARGs are necessarily brink games. ARGs that create entirely self contained worlds would be different than games that explicitly reference the bounds of the game with a double coded "just a game" claim. By contrast, many ARGs in fact deny this claim: their mantra is "this is *not* a

[10] Particularly the game's use of poker-based "wakes" in real American cemeteries.

game." Obviously, there would be some movement between these two positions, and arguably one could play a closed ARG with particular attention to the reality breach within the game. In particular, Alison Harvey's reference to the ethics of using non-player participants in ARGs [11] may be an important consideration for forbidden play in such games.

Brink games offer an interesting design proposition for digital games; particularly games in which social relations between players are central. There is also an opportunity in this design space to use the idea of the brink as the core for social issue and activist games, rather than focusing exclusively on content. Games projects such as *Intimate Controllers*, non-fiction and activist works such as *The Stone Throwers* and *JFK Reloaded*, and ARG strategies such as found in *Last Call Poker,* are ideally a start in drawing critical focus to the relationship between modes of reality. Such works are "just games" in a way clearly highlighting they are not just games—a useful insight in the link between games and everyday life.

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