Submission for the Embarrassing Interactions Workshop: Playing with Embarrassment

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Abstract
We are interested in embarrassing interactions as part of wider research that explores digital games in our public spaces through a lens of play. Embarrassing interactions are an important feature of play and an inevitable facet of pervasive games. In this abstract we discuss several inspirational designs where a wide range of play includes opportunity to explore, manage and leverage embarrassment. We describe our method for creating more "playful" games and discuss the type of interactions we expect to experience and capture. We then describe how these interactions are embodied in our design exemplar i-dentity and introduce our latest work and our early results.

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play,playful design,game design,ludic enagagement

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

Introduction
Embarrassing interactions can be an enjoyable and humorous consequence of playing co-located games with other people, for example, in our game intangle

Figure 1. i-dentity: a digital game based upon childhood play.

(with Exertion Labs [5]) players follow suggestive computer-generated vocal instructions. These instructions ask players to touch one another's controllers while weaving their bodies together in awkward entanglements. However, embarrassing interactions remain relatively under-explored in the HCI community and in game studies.

Benford [1] is one author that has touched upon embarrassing interactions while exploring pervasive games in real world spaces. Benford suggests that social embarrassment should be managed as part of mitigating the risks in pervasive games in the real world. The PLEX framework [8], was created to help interaction designers understand how playfulness could help create designs that promote meaningful and memorable experiences for users. It expands a previous framework of pleasurable experience by considering characteristics of play from video games. The PLEX framework was designed around positive experiences of play. However, its few negative characteristics such as subversion, suffering and cruelty leave space for embarrassment. Lucero [8] reveals how they considered other categories - even suggesting shame as an additional resource for design.

Games have often regarded embarrassing interactions something that is to be avoided [7]. However, where games have explored embarrassment (such as in Music Embrace [12]) we find compelling play. In the body space games defined by Segura [10] embarrassment is encountered as a result of play that involves the users' body movements. Players enjoying Segura's BodyBug have found that playing with this device can be an excuse to perform embarrassing movements, allowing children to dance badly and explore new movements that they might otherwise have avoided [10].

The authors of these games share a common goal by aiming to allow "flexible and adaptable rules" [11]. This goal can also be described as striving to create technologically supported games [9] – where our games need not have a complete game engine, rather the game engine is completed with the rules brought by the player. We believe that it is this flexibility and its associated ambiguity that gives the players opportunity to be self-expressive, imaginative and free-moving, providing the potential for embarrassment.

Methodology

As part of wider design led research into digital games in our public spaces we are using a lens of play [15] to develop new theories and find insights. This lens of play is helping unpick games by looking at the characteristics of play (such as those described [13]) and by considering the difference between gamefulness and playfulness. This distinction was first introduced by Caillois who placed play on a continuum between ludus and paidia [2]. Ludus (or gamefulness) consists of formal play which is bounded by rules and has defined winners and losers. In contrast, Paidia (or playfulness) and our focus for design, is typified by activities that involve improvisation, expressiveness, spontaneity, and uncontrolled fantasy (described [8]). Using this lens we are buildings new games for our public spaces that help connect the physical world with the digital world. As such, we are interested in embarrassing interactions since we should 1) manage there occurrence to mitigate risks, 2) use them as a design resource to inspire novel interactions.

Figure 2. intangle: A game about taking liberties.

Figure 3. The Wild Man game with an artist's impression of one digital experience.

i-dentity – a platform for exploring body space play

The body space game i-dentity (see Figure 1) [6] was created in the Games Jam at CHI 2013 in collaboration with Exertion Labs. The authors of i-dentity were inspired to merge digital and traditional play by the new games movement [3] and Head Up Games [11].To play i-dentity you have to spot the odd-one-out based on watching the real world movement of several players. These players are acting together and copying the movement of a secretly nominated player amongst themselves who is attempting to hide by moving with the group. The player observing the game (the interrogator) can only find the odd-one-out by asking the players to attempt actions as a group, for example, they might ask the group to "hop on one leg". Every time the hidden play moves, all the group's controllers light up based on that movement, thus helping to conceal the hidden player's identity. Embarrassment is an interesting aspect of the game's gameplay. However, in keeping with the flexible nature of supported technology games, the interrogator can tailor the amount of potential embarrassment they place on the recipients by either calling out outlandish suggestions, or alternatively by keeping the actions tame. Similarly, the players are able to bend rules; we have seen players refusing to act out sillier suggestions.

The core software behind i-dentity has also been used for a further game intangle [5] (see Figure 2). intangle was designed to explore agency in computer games - we suggested that designers can facilitate varying levels of body contact through the design of shared controller interactions to introduce new types of gameplay. In contrast to i-dentity, intangle causes embarrassment from the outset as players are instructed to perform tasks such as "reaching under each other's legs", and "linking pinkies". We hypothesized during its creation that players would choose to exercise their agency, while conversely taking the agency away from other players. Similarly, the amount of embarrassment encountered by players could be unevenly spread.

As in Segura's body space games we find that embarrassing interactions are an embodied consequence of the play in both of these games. We hypothesize that this platform can identify the causes, conditions, processes and forms of embarrassment in our games, and how embarrassment impedes adoption of and engagement with interactive systems. This platform is highly suitable because we designed around the Sony PS3 Move Controllers and PS Move API (thp.io) source code. The controllers were created to be playful, aesthetic and tangible, as illustrated in the game J.S. Joust by Wilson [14].

Work in progress

A deeper understanding of embarrassing interactions is particularly important for games that are played in our public spaces since they are not only experienced between players, but also by spectators. In our current work we place particular emphasis on play that challenges our expectation of what behaviour is appropriate in our public spaces. In our Wild Man Game we have developed a mobile phone experience (pictured Figure 3) that lets visitors experience a heritage site from the perspective of a "wild man". The

The Wild Man game asks players to involve themselves in wild and sometimes embarrassing play, for example,

creeping around, dancing expressively or even mimicking the call of wild animals. In our early results, we find that our game provides an interesting hook to the site and a convenient alibi for behavior that challenges the social norms of these spaces.

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Bio

After completing an undergraduate degree in Software Development, Gavin worked in the games industry for 12 years as a designer and lead programmer. Gavin now publishes to the indie label BaaWolf. Gavin is undertaking his PhD final year researching how playful pervasive games can change our relationship with public spaces.

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