'This Is Not a Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play

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ABSTRACT:
The increasing convergence and mobility of digital network technologies have given rise to new, massively-scaled modes of social interaction where the physical and virtual worlds meet. This paper explores one product of these extreme networks, the emergent genre of immersive enter-tainment, as a potential tool for harnessing collective action. Through an analysis of the structure and rhetoric of immersive games, I explore how immersive aesthetics can generate a new sense of social agency in game players, and how collaborative play techniques can instruct real-world problem-solving.

KEYWORDS
massively-multiplayer gaming, virtual reality, collective intelligence, extreme networks

INTRODUCTION

Within three hours of the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, a primarily American group of online gamers known as the Cloudmakers had gathered in their usual forum, a public message board. Their discussions began, like so many others around the world, with reactions of shock, prayers, and speculation. By day's end, however, the tenor of the Cloudmakers' conversations had shifted dramatically. In sharp contrast to the feelings of confusion, fear, and powerlessness that seemed to overwhelm public and private discourse in America during the first 24 hours after the attacks, many of the Cloudmakers' (then) 7332 members began advocating a startlingly confident and organized response to the threat and mystery posed by the day's events. Posts with subjects like "The Darkest Puzzle" and "Cloudmakers to the Rescue!" argued passionately that a game-play mindset was, for them, an appropriate and productive way to confront the stark reality of 9/11.

"We can solve the puzzle of who the terrorists are," one member wrote [3]. Another agreed: "We have the means, resources, and experience to put a picture together from a vast wealth of knowledge and personal intuition"[43]. One Cloudmaker suggested: "Let's become a resource. Utilize your computer & analytical talents to generate leads" [7]. Someone else implored: "We like to flout [*sic*] our 7,000 members and our voracious appetite for difficult problems, but when the chips are down can we really make a difference?" [22]. The Cloudmakers, who proudly identified themselves in member profiles, home pages and email signatures as "a collective intelligence unparalleled in entertainment history," were on the case — a very *real* case — despite the fact that their previous problem-solving experience as a group was limited solely to the virtual puzzles of a wholly fictional, massively-multiplayer Web game known as "the Beast".

Some Cloudmakers noticed a potentially unsettling slippage between virtual play and real-life terror in their response to 9/11, but most initially dismissed this concern. "What's being proposed is beyond the game we've played," one player conceded, "but you must admit that the spirit is the same" [7]. Another wrote: "Since I found out about this today, I could do nothing but think of the CMs group…. I AM IN NO WAY ATTEMPTING TO MAKE LIGHT OF THE SITUATION. However … this sort of thing is sorta our MO. Picking things apart and figuring them out" [29]. For many, working closely with the Cloudmakers group had profoundly affected their sense of identity and purpose, to the point that a game mentality was a natural response to real-world events. One post explained: "When I first heard of the events I went to this state of mind automatically… I did it without even thinking. It's really just become of a state of mind" [30]. Another player wrote: "I'm a Cloudmaker. What I do best is look at the world like a Cloudmaker. Perhaps that's taking group identity to the next step…. But I've been permanently changed by the Game" [22].

After two days, however, the five co-founders of the Cloudmakers group felt that the 9/11 game play had been taken too far. Following on the heels of a few disgruntled posts, they released an official announcement asking members to cease any attempts to "solve" 9/11. "The Cloudmakers were a 'collective detective' for a *game*. Remember that," the moderators advised. "It was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was *narrative*…. *This is not a game.* Do not go getting delusions of grandeur. Cloudmakers solved a story. This is real life"[17]. A flurry of concurring posts appeared. "The references to this as a 'puzzle' and the thought that this group could 'solve' this make me sick. Even if the people posted with good intention. This is not a game" [27]. Another player lamented: "The game was just that --- a game. not real. therefore it didn't really matter in the real world. It was what we did for fun. this is not fun, this is LIFE…. Everyone should have had the sense to keep out of what we don't really understand" [32]. With these messages, the Cloudmakers' early sense of empowerment and desire to act was lost. "Let's put a stop to this nonsense for good. We can't do anything… [we are just] a bunch of anonymous people on an unsecured website… So stop popping up every time a crime occurs and suggesting that we could possibly do anything about solving it" [18].

In this paper, I want to explore two aspects of the Cloudmakers' unusual responses to 9/11. First, what was it about the particular game the Cloudmakers had played that enabled them to respond with such initial confidence to events that were, for most of the country, at least temp-orarily paralyzing? Second, what was it about the context of the Cloudmakers' forum that made it possible to forget and to debate the reality boundaries of an event as serious as 9/11? These two questions are best answered, I believe, by looking at the aesthetics and rhetoric of the new genre of networked entertainment spawned by the Cloudmakers' game, the Beast. This genre, known most frequently as "immersive gaming," but also dubbed by its players as "unfiction" and "collective detecting," is best known by its reliance on cooperative game play and its constant insistence: "This is not a game."

By analyzing the design and rhetorical structures of the

immersive genre, I hope to demonstrate how games like the Beast challenge two popular notions about the absorbing, virtual realities of 21st-century digital entertainment: first, that they are primarily escapist; and second, that they cause players to disengage with offline communities and problems. I intend to show that immersive gaming is actually one of the first applications poised to harness the increasingly widespread penetration and convergence of network technologies for collective social and political action.

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

The Cloudmakers group was founded on April 11, 2001 by a 24-year-old, Oregon-based computer programmer named Cabel Sasser[1], one of thousands of movie fans who had started to notice a series of digitally distributed clues and narratives that seemed to be some kind of game, but one without clear rules, objectives or rewards. Sasser and others first discovered the game when they spotted a provocative credit ("Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist") in a trailer for Steven Spielberg's 2001 film *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* Salla's name, when "Googled", revealed a complex network of Web sites, many dealing with the technical, social and philosophical problems of artificial intelligence and sentient machines, and all of which were set in year 2142 A.D.

48 hours after Sasser launched the Cloudmakers, there were 153 new members in the group investigating these mysterious sites. When the game ended on July 24, 2001, the Cloudmakers group had grown to 7480 members who had scribed a total of 42,209 messages. The Beast's producers (Microsoft and DreamWorks) now estimate that more than one million people from around the world played the game, many of whom formed large online groups. The Cloudmakers, however, were the most organized and high-profile collective, working literally around the clock; some players complained of losing not just sleep, but also jobs and friendships. The Cloudmakers provided new players and other online collectives with important tools for grappling with the game's complex narrative — it eventually evolved into three core mysteries and a dozen rich subplots about nearly 150 characters — and for navigating the game's vast Web presence, nearly 4000 digital texts, images, flash files and QuickTime videos in total.[2] These tools included a 130-page walkthrough guide of the Beast, written by 18-year-old Cambridge student and Cloudmakers co-moderator Adrian Hon, and a nearly perfect online archive of ephemeral and offline game content, such as audio recordings of voice mail messages and digital photographs of clues left in public bathrooms in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

The Cloudmakers' work, and game play in general, consisted of tracking and interpreting plot developments and evidence that circulated mostly through Web sites and emails, but also through phone calls, faxes, television and newspaper ads, as well as occasional real-time and offline events. Players were also charged with cracking complicated and time-consuming puzzles that variously required programming, translating and hacking skills, obscure knowledge of literature, history and the arts, and brute computing force. The diverse skill and knowledge base required to solve the game's problems, as well as the magnitude of its unwieldy plot, made cooperative groups like the Cloudmakers absolutely necessary.

Web designer Elan Lee, the Beast's lead producer, explained in a lecture at the 2002 Game Developers Conference: "We created strings of puzzles that no single person could solve on their own, and we found to our delight it was working. The audience was forming teams, sharing ideas, writing applications, posting theories, arranging group meetings, programming distributed-client password crackers, creating art" [23]. Lee and his team did not predict, however, how wildly successful the collective intelligence would prove as a distributed problem-solving network. The following anecdote, related by Lee, puts into perspective the amazing productivity and ingenuity of the game's players:

> What we quickly learned was that the Cloudmakers were a hell of a lot smarter than we are, and that really kept us on our toes… Here, I'll show you this. [He shows a slide entitled 'Beast Beat 1', a puzzle schedule.] Now, there's a color key here for puzzles: hard, easy, not so hard, etc. [Pointing to different colors] These were the puzzles that would take a day, these were puzzles that would take a week, and these puzzles they'd probably never figure out until we broke down and gave them the answers. So we built a three month schedule around this. And finally we released. [Pause] The Cloudmakers solved all of these puzzles on the first day [23].

In response to this shockingly efficient collective play, the game became even more challenging and sprawling, and the producers raised the bar set by the Cloudmakers by requiring even more cooperation. For example, clues required to access important game files were distributed separately at live events in multiple cities, and groups were required to assign players in each region to attend the events, where they communicated in real-time with players at home to piece together the necessary data.

In addition to pioneering collective play on a massive scale, the Beast created new, and arguably more effective, means of virtual immersion. In contrast to immersive artworks that try to create realistic sensory experiences and meaningful interactivity in an artificial setting (as explored in Oliver Grau's 2003 book *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* [15]and the 2002 collection *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* [33]), the immersive aesthetic proposed by the Beast sought to use *natural settings* as the immersive framework. Rather than creating virtual environments that were (hopefully) realistic and engaging, the Beast's producers co-opted real environments to enable a virtual engagement with reality. For them, "immersion" meant integrating the virtual play fully into the online *and* offline lives of its players.

To achieve this kind of immersion, the game designers' main strategy was to employ everyday network technologies as virtual reality devices. The Beast eschewed the kind of special technology we normally associate with virtual or augmented reality, such as wired gloves, headsets or goggles, and interactive programs or simulators. Instead, the Beast's alternate reality required no tool or vehicle for interaction outside of player's ordinary, everyday experience. The game called players

at home, faxed them at work, interrupted their favorite television shows with cryptic messages, and eventually even mailed them packages full of game-world props and artifacts via the United States Postal System. The Beast recognized no game boundaries; the players were *always* playing, so long as they were connected to one of their many everyday networks.

This kind of immersion made the game world less of a "virtual" (simulated) reality or an "augmented" (enhanced) reality, and more of an "alternate" (layered) reality. For four months, players had to adapt to interfacing with the 2001 real world and the 2142 game world at the same time. Success in the Beast therefore required developing a kind of stereoscopic vision, one that simultaneously perceived the everyday reality *and* the game structure in order to generate a single, but layered and dynamic world view. (In his 2000 book *The Information Bomb,* Paul Virilio outlines a similar kind of perspective, or "'field effect," in which the actual and the virtual combine to produce a new kind of "relief," or dimensionality [43]) This stereoscopic vision was at work, I believe, when one Cloudmaker expressed the following frustration with the moderators' pronouncement that 9/11 was real while the Beast was not: "For more than three months, this *game* was a very real world. It largely took place in Manhattan (just like 9/11), for Pete's sake." [36]. This player's stereoscopic perception of New York City's landscape yielded a merged terrain, rather than separate perceptions of a play and a real Manhattan.

Although the pervasive elements of the Beast (phone calls, PDA downloads, emails, faxes, etc.) were the most hyped immersive component of the game, the proliferation of diegetic sites on the Web was actually the largest and arguably most affecting component of the immersive experience. The vast majority of game content was distributed via the Internet, on the Web sites of fictional characters, corporations, news services, and political action groups, as well as a fictional psychiatric clinic, weather bureau, coroner's office, and so on. These sites featured every functional hallmark of nonfictional sites, including pop-up warnings advising of software upgrades, banner ads for fictional companies, incredibly deep links (many sites featured dozens of internal pages) and limited password access for sensitive areas of private or government sites. Nowhere did these pages admit to being part of a game; even the source code and Whois information was rigorously monitored to eliminate any information that might link game content to its producers. Aesthetically, technologically and phenomenologically speaking, there was no difference at all between the look, function or accessibility of the in-game sites and non-game sites.

In this sense, it is reasonable to argue that *nothing about this virtual play was simulated*. The computer-driven alternate reality the Beast created was make-believe, but every aspect of the player's experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real. Hacking into the in-game coroner's office's fictional Web report, for example, was identical in practice to the process of hacking into a non-game coroner's office's Web site. This stands in stark contrast with other kinds of massively multi-user role-playing games such as The Sims Online and Everquest, in which the digital display of virtual worlds is clearly simulated and, although absorbing, a totally different mental and physical experience of being and acting than everyday life.

The Beast also engaged the players' sense of "real time" to create a more powerfully immersive experience. The game's internal plots adhered strictly to an external clock and calendar so that plot developments corresponded precisely with the passage of time in the players' lives. The puppetmasters used a variety of temporal clues, including the header content of faxes and emails from game characters and the datelines of articles posted to in-game news sites, to indicate that midnight in the real world was midnight in the game, Tuesday in the real world was a Tuesday in the game; and April 13 (2001) was April 13 (2142) in the game.

Finally, two unusual marketing and distribution tactics heightened the effectiveness of the Beast's design strategies. First, the game was never announced or advertised. Instead, its players were expected to stumble onto it by accident or through word of mouth. Many, but not all, immersive games continue to be produced this way today, and fans of the genre have created Web communities like Collective Detective and the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (ARGN) to investigate and alert fellow players to promising leads that *might* turn out to be games. (There are a lot of false alarms.) "Learn instantly about new games as they are discovered," the ARGN newsletter promises, highlighting the ongoing and cooper-ative detection efforts required by the subtlety with which puppetmasters embed the games in everyday life [1].

Even more confoundingly for the Cloudmakers, once the Beast was discovered, the producers refused to acknowledge that it existed. For more than two months after players stumbled onto the Beast, its creators and sponsors completely stonewalled the press, which was questioning everyone associated with the film *A.I.*. Lee recalls: "Whenever anybody asked about the game, the answer was always 'no comment.' … We had to push it as an experience that never admitted that it existed" [23].

In fact, not once, throughout all of this, did the game ever admit that it was a game. No rules were ever published, no prizes were promised, and no game creator stepped into the public spotlight to take credit for what was fast becoming an Internet phenomenon. (Hundreds of articles about the game appeared in print and online in April, May and June 2001, including dozens of stories in high-profile publications like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*.[2]) In fact, since the intention of its producers was to pretend that the game did not exist, the Beast was never given an official name. For months it was referred to by players and reporters generically as "the *A.I.* game"; much later, players adopted the puppetmasters' own nickname for the game, "the Beast," which according to Lee stuck after its producers noticed that the original design specs for the game required an ominous total of 666 digital files.

All of these immersive strategies reached a climax in May 2001, when the cryptic disavowal "This Is Not a Game" flashed briefly in red letters across the screens of millions of prime time television viewers, carefully embedded in a national commercial for the film *A.I.* This message has since become the mantra for both

players and developers of immersive entertainment. To "TING" a game now means to explicitly deny and purposefully obscure its nature as a game, a task that has become increasingly difficult as immersive players grow more savvy about TING techniques. One of the most interesting post-Beast developments in the immersive genre has been the unusual TING methods devised by games that, unlike the Beast, *do* at first announce and publicize themselves as games (usually to attract a paying player base) and then, only later, try to destroy the game-reality boundaries. Electronic Art's immersive *Majestic*, for instance, was launched in August 2001 with a huge amount of press and fanfare (not to mention an official name). A few days after the official start of *Majestic*, however, its registered players received an email announcing that the game had been postponed indefinitely due to an accidental fire at game headquarters. Players' disappointment at this announcement evaporated, however, when phone calls and instant messages from an anonymous source began claiming that the *Majestic* fire was arson and part of a larger and dangerous conspiracy. Thus began the "real" game, which had cleverly destroyed everything that claimed to be a game in order to immerse players more credibly in its fictions.

This erasure of any and all "metacommunication," to use Gregory Bateson's term for the frame markers that alert players to a game's gameness, is an unusual development for the practice of play [2]. Historically, play has been defined in large part by its ability to signal a representational "space apart," even if its boundaries were sometimes blurred or its consequences occasionally leaked into real life. Jay David Bolter and Richard Crusin, however, discuss in their 1999 book *Remediation* the long history in art and media practice of immersion through an "interfaceless interface" that seeks to "erase itself so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium" [4]. Immersive play clearly falls within this tradition, but I believe that it represents an unusually successful erasure that is unprecedented if not in aim, then in effect. The ubiquitous nature of contemporary networked multimedia technologies has created in society, arguably for the first time, an everyday environment whose interface is consistently and pervasively identical to one of its art forms. This close identity in design and function enables an immersive aesthetic in games like the Beast that is much more powerful and persuasive than the immersive efforts of the so many other arts that have previously attempted the interfaceless interface.

IMMERSIVE VS. PERVASIVE

Given the immersive genre's reliance on digital networks, we should ask: Could the dramatic modes of immersion and collective play associated with the Beast and its successors be achieved by other kinds of networked games? I would like to consider briefly the genre of mobile, pervasive gaming in order to argue that the effects I have described are so far unique to immersive games.

Immersive entertainment, a primarily American phenomenon, is often elided with the pervasive gaming models that are currently popular in Europe and Asia. Pervasive entertainment, which combines Web fictions and multiplayer communities with mobile texting and global positioning technology, includes the annual worldwide Nokia Game and Supafly and BotFighters, produced by Swedish game company It's Alive. Despite the functional similarities between the two genres, however, the structure and rhetoric of European and Asian models of pervasive entertainment are fundamentally at odds with the immersive and collective goals of games like the Beast.

Consider, for example, the mobile and massively-multiplayer Nokia Game, which in November 2002 was played by more than a million people in 25 countries. Although the adventure-themed Nokia Game claims in press releases to "investigate the borders between fiction and reality," it also promotes itself with the slogan: "In reality it's a game" [35]. On one level, this statement emphasizes the location-based aspects of pervasive entertainment. The Nokia Game, like the Beast, is played "in reality," that is, in everyday, real environments with players' ordinary, everyday tools. On another level, however, this slogan also firmly positions the Nokia Game experience as a game; consider the paraphrase, "*Really*, it's a game." As opposed to the Beast, there is no real effort to disguise the game's gameness. This is especially evident in the design of the digital documents associated with the Nokia Game, most of which prominently feature the Nokia logo, a link to "The Nokia Game" home page (with explicit objectives, rules and prizes clearly stated) and legal disclaimers. All of this peripheral information serves as a constant reminder that a game is being played.

Another barrier to player immersion in the Nokia Game is its reliance on mini-flash games to advance plot and player status. These games, played on cell phones or the Web, have a *symbolic* diegetic meaning — for instance, a player manipulates an avatar through a flash environment to earn game world points that translate into game currency, or a player investigates a mystery by clicking on different parts of a 360-degree, traversable photographic image to "grab" objects and reveal pop-up information. This kind of symbolic interface clearly demarcates game from reality. The difference in player experience in the pervasive gaming vs. immersive entertainment can be summed up as the difference between interacting with a signifier (the Nokia Game) and its signified (the Beast).

But what about the multi-player component of pervasive games? Does it produce immersive-like collectives? While many cooperative Web communities assemble annually around the Nokia Game to share hints, tips and archive game files, ultimately the collective activity is limited both by the design and rewards of the game. Unlike the Beast, there is no reason an individual couldn't play the entire Nokia Game from start to finish, *interacting* but not *collaborating* with other players. Its scope in terms of the skills, time commitment and personal resources required are limited enough to make feasible a team of one. Meanwhile, with high-value prizes like expensive integrated digital equipment at stake, incentive for cooperation is inherently limited.

Having considered the differences between immersive and pervasive gaming, I now would like to take a closer look at the effects of TING-based immersion and collective play on user agency and subjectivity.

THE LINGERING EFFECTS OF IMMERSION

How effective were the immersive tactics of the Beast? When the game ended in July 2002, Cloudmakers moderator Andrea Phillips, a 26-year-old software designer from New York, published a recovery guide for her fellow, deeply immersed players. She wrote:

> You find yourself at the end of the game, waking up as if from a long sleep. Your marriage or relationship may be in tatters. Your job may be on the brink of the void, or gone completely. You may have lost a scholarship, or lost or gained too many pounds. You slowly wake up to discover that you have missed the early spring unfolding into late summer.… yet now here we are, every one of us excited at blurring the lines between story and reality. The game promises to become not just entertainment, but our lives [34].

Clearly, there is some ambivalence here about the power of immersive aesthetics. Phillips acknowledges that the game led players to neglect important aspects of their ordinary lives, and yet she counters her concerns about this neglect with a kind of exhilarated anticipation for the day that the game world will become an ongoing and meaningful part of everyday life.

This "promise," as Phillips describes it, helps explain one of the most intriguing and lingering effects of TING immersion tactics: a tendency to continue seeing games where games don't exist. For example, in October 2002, the Web site 8March2003.com was identified as a potential game in postings to several immersive entertain-ment bulletin boards. As a result, gamers flooded the site with visitor traffic and inquiries, and its owner was forced to replace his home page with a "This is not a game" disclaimer [5]. As you can imagine, an audience that is quite used to being told "This is not a game" does not back off easily, and they are currently still investigating the 8March2003 (non)game.

Sometimes, however, the desire of immersive fans to see a game where none actually exists brings one into existence. One striking example of this successful will-to-game occurred when the fall 2002 game of Push, Nevada ended prematurely with what was generally considered by players to be an unsatisfactory solution. A team of 961 players operating out of Collective Detective and known as "Shove" were particularly upset; they didn't think that the final solution of the game was as intricate or inventive as the ones they had brainstormed themselves. One player wrote: "What a slap in the face of those of us who spent months tracking every little detail and following up on odd tidbits. We were smart enough to figure the mystery out. We were savvy enough to find every single clue that was laid. Our collective talents completely overwhelmed the ability of the puppetmasters to control their own game" [12]. Another lamented: "It's been a pleasure working with you guys. I only wish the contest had been worthy of us… I feel like I'm doggedly trying to make some meaning where none exists" [11].

This dissatisfaction soon merged in an odd way with the players' overall faith in the immersive genre. Many Shove members took the shallowness of the final solution as a sign that there was actually more game than met the eye. "I can't help but think about how awesome the ending of this 'Series' *could* have been," one player wrote. "I know, I know, you're all saying, 'It's Over' but Man! this Immersive Stuff is very addictive" [6]. Rampant and playful hypothesizing subsequently erupted about the possibility that the officially announced game was just a *decoy* for the "real" game, to which only the most diehard immersive gamers would be privy. So when ABC announced on October 28, 2002 that the game was "officially over," Shove responded with the message: "IT'S NOT OVER DAMMIT" [25]. Another player wrote: "The GAME IS STILL AFOOT.… NOW GET BACK TO WORK!!" [26]

Shove essentially proceeded to hijack the game and continued to play, despite the fact that Push, Nevada's own puppetmasters had abandoned it. Even though there were no new clues, Shove players found some. Although there was no clear path to follow—an assistant director of the Shove team admitted "I'm totally confused as to what will happen next" [16]—the players were excited about their extended play. "Thank god," one wrote, " it looks like the game continues." [37].

The Shove members' refusal to accept the puppetmasters' game solution is evidence of an unusual empowerment conferred by immersive game play and collective detecting. The audience refused to defer to the producers, and the players felt authorized and entitled to step in when they believed that higher authorities had failed them. Could this kind of empowerment lead to a greater sense of collective agency in other producer-consumer settings, or in the political realm? As the Push, Nevada example demonstrates, the immersive genre is able to dissolve effectively not only the boundary between "game" and "reality," but also the boundary between "perceived game" and "real game," because the rhetoric of "This is not a game" is inevitably deployed whether something is an immersive game or not. Furthermore, for immersive players, their everyday lives and environments are so much a part of the alternate game reality that it is possible for TING "post-effects" to persist indefinitely in non-game life. This persistence was at work, it seems to me, in the Cloudmakers' early response to 9/11.

So what would prevent players from seeing more of the world as a game, and thereby translating their expectations and experience of high-impact interactivity and collective success to other non-game venues? The translation of game-inspired confidence and game-learned practices constitutes the main link, I believe, between immersive aesthetics and real-world action. In this sense, immersive games provide a heightened version of what Erving Goffman posits in his influential 1974 "Essay on the Organization of Experience" as the general "transformational nature of play." Goffman argues that games "transform serious, real action into something playful" and provide "a model, a detailed pattern to follow, a foundation" for later application to serious real-world situations [14]. Immersive gamers frequently operate in this mode, transforming game to reality and reality to game, choosing the interface that best suits their current problem-solving needs and experiential desires.

Another theoretical link between immersive aesthetics and social mobilization is suggested by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He writes:

"To make people believe is to make them act" [9]. The immersive aesthetics of the Beast inspired belief from its players, although certainly not a literal or naive belief that confused the 2142 A.D. fiction with present "real life." Rather, the game aroused an affective and self-conscious belief that enabled players to respond emotionally and viscerally to the needs and demands of each other and of the fictional world. This kind of belief demonstrated the capacity to provoke action, as many Cloudmakers acted in-game on the behalf of fictional political causes (players rallied, for instance, around a referendum to grant sentient machines human rights) and fictional people (players devoted an entire day, for example, to making live, real-time phone calls to in-game characters in the hopes of saving another character's life).

So why couldn't immersive gamers' lingering belief in the world as a "real game" lead to action on behalf of real world problems? In fact, numerous Cloudmakers have suggested real-world applications of their collective intelligence. For example, in October 2002, some members of the group temporarily turned their collective attention toward the real-life problem of the Washington, D.C. sniper, a serial killer who had left a tarot card with the taunt "I am God" at the scene of one of his crimes. One player summed up their mystery-solving approach: "Creep could be online… Anybody got a spider program and a network with spare resources ? Targets: Chat rooms focused on the D.C. area ? Tarot ? Shooting clubs ? One chance: anything super-strange from MMORGs ? Statements with a god-complex focus ?…. 'I am God' is a rare sentence. Find it with the right profile identifiers" [10]. This strategy drew on various methods developed by the Cloudmakers during the Beast, including combining technological resources to accomplish massive Web analyses; interpreting character clues to track down more information; and employing all of the networks available to them to interact with as many potential informants as possible. So during the Washington, D.C. sniper crisis, while Americans across the country followed the tragedies in the daily news, immersive gamers organized and took action to help. Although they did not actually solve the case (D.C. area police arrested two suspects several weeks later), this effort is yet another instance of the Cloudmakers seeking to apply their game-inspired collective intelligence to a real-world cause.

This desire to "play" real-world problems was formalized again by 70 alternate reality gamers in March 2003 when they launched a "Think Tank" case at Collective Detective with the intended purpose of "unleashing the collective effect of real world issues and challenging conventional problem-solving methods" [13]. The first problem posed as a Think Tank puzzle, just 3 days ago at the time of this writing, is corruption and waste in U.S. federal government spending. As one member of the Think Tank put it:

> The perfect kind of case for Collective Detective. First phase is research into sources of information. Second phase is research within the sources. Third phase is analysis of research to see what kind of correleations we can draw. Fourth phase, secondary research to help tie together the connections we find. Sounds like fun to me. Can also actually make a difference in how the country is run [13].

Despite the optimism reflected here, it is far from clear at this early point in the genre that the astonishing effective-ness of immersive gamers in a collective play environment can transfer to the real world as successfully as their game-play mindset. The *objective* impact of immersive play, we might say, has not yet caught up with the *subjective* changes produced by immersive aesthetics. But as Victor Turner observes, the emergence of new goals through game play can be an event of major real-word consequence, regardless of how or if those goals are met: "The wheel of play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality" [42]. Acknowledging, then, that the full extent of immersive gamers' ability to "make a difference" remains to be seen, I want to continue to explore the subjective changes that already have produced both a profound persistence of game vision and the goal of collective, real-world action.

SUBJECTIVE EFFECTS OF COLLECTIVE PLAY

I have already suggested how immersive aesthetics may engender a proclivity for real-world action. But what role does the collective play mode of immersive gaming have on agency and mobilization, other than providing a network of potential resources and collaborators? This question is best addressed, I believe, by examining what Cloudmakers have written about their subjective experience of collective play.

During endgame, countless Cloudmakers reflected on their new collective identity. The following eloquent message-board meditation by one Cloudmaker is representative of the strength and sincerity of many players' emerging sense of community and connection:

> The 7500+ people in this group ... we are all one. We have made manifest the idea of an unbelievably intricate intelligence. We are one mind, one voice ... made of 7500+ neurons… We sit back and look at our monitors, and our keyboards...our window to this vast collective consciousness... we are not alone. We are not one person secluded from the rest of the world...kept apart by the technology we have embraced. We have become a part of it through the technology. We have become a part of something greater than ourselves [41].

For many Cloudmakers, this experience of emerging intelligence was the highlight of the game. In a Cloudmakers' editorial entitled "When the Media Is the Message", player Barry Joseph, a thirtysomething Manhattan-based Web producer, commented: "I'm less interested in the details of the game than in the game play itself; the unfolding of the answers IS the narrative that has me hooked… a meta-narrative" [20]. In another editorial "Meta Mystery," Maria Bonasia, a twenty-something Massachusetts-based playwright, discussed "the possibility that this Game might, would, *could* produce what we've been wrangling with all along: an (admittedly low-level) sentient artificial intelligence… this would blow my mind - and completely blur the line between entertainment and philosophical and technological advances in our modern society" [5]. Another player speculated about the emergence of a distributed collective intelligence on the message boards: "Cloudmakers are organic, yet using their brains in a gigantic parallel-processing venture, like SETI@home

on a wetware scale" [28]. At the game's end, many players cited their favorite moment as the day Jeanine Salla, the Beast's fictional A.I. researcher, added a new paper to her online curriculum vitae: "Multi-person social problem-solving arrays considered as a form of artificial intelligence." The name of the paper was followed by a link marked "DEMO," which took users to the Cloudmakers' home page. "We are now officially a scientific experiment!" one player observed [38].

All of these Cloudmaker reflections indicate that the Beast was highly successful in making digital networks more meaningful to its players. Although many Cloudmakers were incredibly tech-savvy before beginning the game, as evident by their ability to navigate the massive digital systems of the game and to create a wide variety of digital documents and applications in support of the game, the Beast changed their subjective experience of that technology. In the editorial "The Integrated Game," Cloudmaker Eric Ng, a 21-year-old student in Los Angeles, observed: "From a marketing perspective, the promotional campaign waged by the 'Puppetmasters' for the movie *A.I.* can be considered an average success… From a social engineering perspective, however, it is amazing" [31]. He writes: "No longer is it just a matter of finding and solving puzzles, if that was ever the point…. We have become a part of the game, just as the game has become a part of us. We have become integrated, interacting and communicating." For immersive gamers, ordinary digital networks became human networks with the capacity to accomplish amazing feats. This subjective experience of emergence cemented the Cloudmakers' collective identity and changed the players' notions of what network technology could be used to accomplish. The affective and cognitive impact of witnessing, and in fact *being*, an emergent phenomenon is directly implicated in the gamers' shift to real-world, collective actions enacted through those same ubiquitous networks.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF EMERGENCE

The long-term subjective effects of collective game play require us to consider not only the positive aspects of emergence in the immersive genre, but also the potentially negative consequences. While I have taken a generally optimistic attitude about the possible social and political applications of collective play, I want to pause for a moment to address the latent dangers inherent in any especially ambitious model of collectivity, as well as to gesture to other work that has tackled issues similar to those explored in this paper. Are collective intelligences potentially reactionary, rather than (r)evolutionary? Might collective intelligence, operating as a kind of emergent "hive mind," manifest itself as a more perilous mob mentality? And if, as de Certeau notes, "to make people believe is to make them act," who has the capital and ideological leverage to decide what gamers believe?

In his 2002 book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution,* Harold Rheingold notes the ability of pervasive technology to inspire moblike behavior. He relates one troubling anecdote:

> A story in the summer of 2001 revealed an unpleasant side to e-tribalism: Police arrested five teenage members of "Mad Wing Angels," a virtual motorcycle gang that met via texting, included members who didn't own motorcycles, and had never gather in one place at the same time. The leader had never met the four Tokyo girls she ordered to beat and torture a fifth gang member who asked permission to leave the group [39].

Rheingold identifies this mob mentality as an aberration, however, and suggests an alternative to the "hive mind" model. He explains: "The crosswalk works on the scramble system. Every time the light turns green, 1500 people cross from 8 directions at once, performing a complex, collective, ad hoc choreography that accomplishes the opposite of flocking; people coordinate with immediate neighbors to go in *different* directions" [39]. This scramble system, Rheingold suggests, preserves diversity in motivation, action and reaction, precluding single-minded or uncritical moblike behavior.

Rheingold's scramble system bears a strong resemblance to Pierre Levy's prescription for a socially responsible, politically diverse collective intelligence. In his 2000 book *Collective Intelligence*, Levy argues that collectivity is not necessarily synonymous with solidity and uniformity. He writes: "Cyberspace provides us with the opportunity to experiment with collective methods of organization and regulation that dignify multiplicity and variety" [24]. According to Levy, "Far from merging individual intelligence into some indistinguishable magma, collective intelligence is a process of growth, differentiation, and the mutual revival of singularities." For Levy, communities like the Cloudmakers not only avoid degenerating into mobs, but also are fully able to thwart a totalitarian or otherwise oppressive hijacking.

In his 1999 book *The Radical in Performance*, Baz Kershaw identifies the suspicion of collectivity as a decidedly post-modern problem: "In the post-modern, notions of the common good are frequently viewed, paradoxically, as potentially coercive. Anything that smacks of collectivism… is treated with suspicion," leading to "the death of community and loss of agency" [21]. Kershaw asks: "What are the most effective ways for performance to redress the collapse of confidence in collective action, especially on a global scale?" He settles, notably, on "an aesthetics of *total immersion*" as the most viable mode for collective empowerment. Although he is envisioning a theatrical practice, there is a clear parallel to the immersive gaming genre. Not only do they both operate through an immersive aesthetic, "through which spectators become wholly engaged in an event," but also the ultimate effect of both is to "create access to new sources of collective empowerment, especially through the forging of a strong sense of community." I would like to suggest that it is through the theoretical frameworks offered by Rheingold, Levy and Kershaw that collective gaming be considered for its radical political potential and creative, generative possibilities of multiple social formation and interaction.

Finally, I would like to point out that while engineering an immersive game requires a considerable investment of time and energy, it is not a costly art form. The grassroots immersive gaming scene today is thriving, with many players creating popular, smaller-scale versions of the Beast to suit their own ends and interests.

While there is certainly the unappealing possibility of an immersive game being produced for, say, the U.S. government (for the same ideological purposes of *America's Army*, for instance), there are also ample opportunities and audiences for multiple, independently-produced immersive games to explore a variety of goals and belief systems, and thereby to inspire grassroots, rather than hegemonic, action.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with two Cloudmaker messages that I hope encapsulate the variety of claims I have explored regarding immersive entertainment's ability to mobilize networked collectives. First:

> We're about to break up the most intelligent group of folks ever assembled - we could have built the atomic bomb if the solution was put to us in code…. I'm going to catch myself still looking for patterns and riddles in my daily life months from now" [19]

This writer demonstrates both the widespread player sentiment that their immersive gaming groups are capable of accomplishing virtually (and really) anything, as well as the lingering immersive effects that make possible continued collective play in the real world. And second, another endgame message about the impending breakup of the Cloudmakers: "We need to do something. This isn't just about the death of a character anymore, this is about our future, all of us [40]. The urgency of the Cloudmakers regarding their future and their desire to play as if there are serious and real consequences will provide, I believe, a great opportunity in the near future for ambitious and successful social and political action. The genre's repeated disavowals that "this is not a game" is more than a catchy tag line; it is a call for further study, development and deployment of immersive gaming's experiments in collective intelligence and self-directed social networks. One Cloudmaker summed up the feelings of many fellow players, as well as my own: "The game is now over… *the game has just begun* [31].

[1] All of demographic information I provide in this paper reflects the ages, occupations and locations of the players at the time the game began in April 2001.

[2] For a CD-ROM archive of original game content, the Cloudmakers' work, and surrounding media coverage, email a request to the author at: janemcg@uclink4. berkeley.edu.

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