

‘Hey! You’re not supposed to be here!’: Simulated Trespass and Intrusion in Virtual Playgrounds

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INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on studies of transgression in gaming to explore the appeal of game environments which are narratively contextualized as ‘forbidden zones’ – that is, spaces in which the player is positioned as an intruder, risking punishment from a higher authority or more powerful entity. The player’s ability to enter such spaces is an example of what Torill Elvira Mortensen and Kristine Jørgensen have termed the ‘paradox’ of transgression in games, in that it is difficult to conceive of the player having truly trespassed or broken a rule in a context where the game itself expressly permits (or even demands) that they enter a forbidden zone. That these spaces exist also seems to be in tension with the popular conception of games as media which afford an ‘escape’ from reality, as evidenced by the trend toward open-world game environments that aspire to an illusion of unprecedented freedom. And yet forbidden zones exist in abundance, often alongside or within open-world environments (eg. the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise (Ubisoft, 2007-2023), *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020)).

Clearly, simulated trespass serves both a gameplay and a narrative purpose: on the one hand, it creates barriers for the player to overcome, and therefore opportunities to triumph; on the other, it represents a challenge to the status quo within the fictive construct, a traditional means of moving plot forward. However, both of these requirements could be fulfilled by positioning the player as a steward of the space in question, repelling an invasion (as in many famous early titles like *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980) and *Defender* (Williams Electronics, 1981)), or by having them dispute territory of ambiguous ownership (as in *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) or almost any run n’ gun or 4X title). There is value, therefore, in considering the specific aesthetic appeal of player-initiated intrusion, particularly in terms of its potential to provoke imaginative, moral and intellectual reflection, which some theorists consider to be the true locus of player agency (Stang, 2019). In doing so, I also mean to explore the link to a broader social agency, and the idea that there are aspects of games and gameplay

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that lend themselves more readily to the cultivation of skeptical, emancipatory and consensus-challenging practices (as proposed by Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford in their paper, 'Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society').

To this end, attention should be given to the justifications which are offered to and accepted by the player for breaking societal rules in fictional settings – for, say, invading private dwellings or interposing themselves in situations where they are unwelcome – and the extent to which these justifications situate the individual as someone either opposed to or representative of the surrounding system or hierarchy. Unlike the kinds of transgression examined by Mortensen and Jørgensen, simulated trespass rarely seeks to trigger disgust, shame or extreme discomfort. Nor can it be said to be inherently gratifying to the same degree as gore, violence and graphic sexual content (the explanation for which, it is often argued, is neatly supplied by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque (Bjørkelo, 2022)). I argue that the principal attraction of simulated trespass is instead that it answers a deeply felt distrust toward territorial boundaries and those who have the power to maintain them, by permitting the player to take on the role of one who, so to speak, 'looks behind the curtain', who pierces an illusion. The implications of such acts have a bearing on class politics and other social divisions within and without the world of the game.

As well as reflecting on examples from contemporary video game titles, this paper will take advantage of my own practical experience in designing digital and non-digital games which take place partly or wholly in forbidden zones, and consider the themes and messages that can be incorporated into a work by positioning the player as a trespasser. The topic of the paper is, in fact, informed by the realization that I have a strong tendency to favour settings and scenarios which produce this outcome; in one case, the player is repeatedly forced to take on the role of intruder through a fantastical narrative conceit, and the focus of the ensuing gameplay is on transforming the act of intrusion into a productive and positive social interaction. In another work-in-progress, the player eavesdrops at an upper-class party, making poems out of overheard snippets of conversation. And in the very first text-based adventure game I wrote, going back two decades, the player acts out the role of the Imp of the Perverse, feeding the story's protagonist (a thief) a series of self-destructive impulses.

As Mortensen and Jørgensen argue, there is a long tradition of transgressive art. Games, however, do more than any other medium to implicate their audience in acts of transgression, and to thereby encourage them to recalibrate their sense of what kinds of transgression are justified in what circumstances. Acts of trespass have strong historical associations with emancipatory movements due to the way physical boundaries are used to reinforce unjust power disparities, and simulated trespass therefore has a role to play in reminding us of the sociopolitical significance of certain forms of intrusion.

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