[visklek] – Playing with Games

We live in an anxious world where there is a lack of trust in the communication in public places. A common way forward is to design against crime and thereby attempt to create a feeling of safety. We have chosen a different approach: to create a non-anxious system that puts trust in the user and allows her to act and to communicate.

The project [visklek] aims at creating a public place that allows for social interaction and an exchange of personal stories between strangers in Växjö, Sweden. Trough the use of a traditional children's game, network technologies and other channels of communication, we create an ambiguous and open system for user appropriation.

Our conclusion is that there is a need for play, since while playing you can break the rules of the every day life, thereby become aware of norms and try to find your own *tactics*.

Author Name
Kristina Lindström
Interactive Institute
kristina.lindstrom@tii.se
Åsa Ståhl
Interactive Institute
asa.stahl@tii.se

INTRODUCTION TO [VISKLEK]

We believe that communication in public places is anxious and diminishes participation. [visklek] is an attempt to see how the characteristics of play can be used to make people want to engage in communication in public places. We have conducted a case study of a system that highlights the contrast between anxiety and trust.

Visklek is a traditional children's game with worldwide equivalents (Chinese whispers in British English, Telephone in American English or Broken telephone in Spanish). It is known to most of us as a game where you sit down in a circle and one person starts whispering a sentence to the next, who then passes it on to the next person until it eventually reaches the last person in the circle. The last person says the sentence out loud. Usually the whole group bursts into laughter since the form and content has changed profoundly. This highlights the transformation of information - be it news or gossip - on a daily basis in our lives. With [visklek] our aim was to move this childish game from the private sphere into the public sphere and thereby invite people to communicate and to have fun. We wanted to explore how we, through a game and several channels of communication, could create a shared social space – a public living-room on several platforms for strangers to meet in and interact.

The game started with young people's subjective and personal stories being told and recorded in different places around Växjö in southern Sweden. We asked them to become tourists in their own neighbourhood, in order to see their everyday life with new eyes. Then posters, flyers, answering machines and other modes of communication were used to create a *visklek* between various places and people in Växjö, Sweden.

The rules we created were a combination of how the *visklek* game is played and social norms around the use of answering machines: a person calls a phone number found on a poster and hears a standard message with instructions of how to play [visklek]. A message connected to the picture on the poster is played out to be heard, memorized, repeated and recorded. The next person who participates hears the latest version of the message and that is how a new story is constructed. After four calls the game starts all over again. This way a lot of different chains of repeated and retold messages were created by the participants. We call them chains of whispers.

[visklek] is a collaboration between The Interactive Institute studio [12-21] and Växjö Art Gallery. The project was exhibited at Växjö Art Gallery during the summer of 2004.

While this can be seen as an art project, we as project managers Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström, decided to not present ourselves as artists since we wanted to encourage active participation and emphasize interaction between the participants. The art connection is to be seen only as a secondary component in the concept of [visklek]. Without participants there is no game and it is while playing the game the "work of art" takes form. We did not want to make people function as artists, but to create something that would allow people to participate in the creation of their own stories – to blur the boundaries between the producer and the consumer.

Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström are researchers at The Interactive Institute, Studio [12-21] in Växjö. Both of us have previous experience of working with installation arts and have a background in working with young people and media: Åsa as a journalist at a current affairs program at Swedish Radio and

Kristina as an interaction designer working with an Internet community at Swedish Public Service Television.

INITIAL WORKSHOPS - COLLECTING STORIES

In early February 2004 we, Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström, arranged five workshops with about twenty mid-teenagers from various areas in the Växjö region. During the workshops the participants were asked to make a postcard, consisting of a picture and a message. The content was to come from their everyday life and surroundings, as if they were tourists at home. We wanted to collect everyday stories and in this way get a sense of life in Växjö. All of the short stories from the postcards were recorded onto a minidisk by the author on site at the specific place that they were talking about.

Figure 1: Workshop at Panncentralen in Växjö February 2004

We chose five of the recorded stories, and placed them on five different answering machines which were accessible to the public via the telephone. The stories were chosen to represent diversity in both content and form. The messages ranged from seven to twenty seconds. Some were very straight forward, like a slogan, such as one about a sign where the text saying "centre" is put within quotation marks. Others meandered through long sentences, such as one about the first time a teenager tried smoking. We then made five posters, each referring to one of the answering machines, with the picture from the postcard and with the simple question: "Do you want to play [visklek]? Call 0470- 794621". Posters were put up in and around Växjö – although it was difficult to find places where we were allowed to post them without breaking any regulations. We discovered that there are many billboards for commercial advertisements, but not many for non-commercial purposes where the public could communicate.

Växjö is a small but fairly cosmopolitan town of about 76 000 inhabitants, with an expanding international university and several large companies and industries. After about two months in progress (spring 2004), [visklek] had received about 1000 calls, all very different and marked by each and every participant's words, voice and tone.

Figure 2: Posters in Växjö

The five original messages:

- Se hur den gamla gubben sträcker sig över buskarna för att ta ett av våra plommon. Då vill jag bara springa ut och sparka bort hans käpp. (Look how the old man reaches out over the bushes to nick one of our plums. That's when I want to run out and kick his stick away.)

*- Macken och pizzerian vid rondellen. Centrum som egentligen inte finns. (*trans*: The gas station and the pizzeria at the roundabout. The town centre that is not really there.)*

*- Vid en bensinmack krockade två bilar och de bråkade med varandra. Jag fattade inte mycket. De var blattar och pratade på sitt eget språk. (*trans*: At the gas station two cars smashed and they had a fight. I didn't understand much. They were foreigners and used their own language.)*

*- Sent på natten när jag och två andra vänner sitter fast på stationen efter att ha missat sista bussen, så ser vi en räv gå över gatan med en anka i munnen. (*trans*: Late one night when me and two friends are stuck at the station after missing the last bus, we see a fox crossing the street with a duck in its mouth.)*

*- På den här bänken satt jag och tjuvrökte för första gången. Jag hade med mig en filosofibok, vatten och tandkräm för att ta bort tobaken, kex för att ta bort tandkrämen och ett paket Marlboro. (*trans*: I sat at this bench the first time I tried smoking. I had brought a philosophy book, water and tooth*

paste to take away the smell of tobacco, biscuits to take away the smell of tooth paste and a packet of Marlboro.)

Once the workshops were held we handed over the process of playing to the participants: [visklek] became a stage where participants could act in a given situation. The foundation for the participatory process is inspired by Cultural Probes which is a method created by William Gaver, Anthony Dunne and Elena Pacenti [6]. Cultural Probes is a method where artefacts are used as conversation pieces between the designer and the user in order to encourage the user to see his or her everyday life from a new angle. The users are engaged in playful activities to gather clues about their everyday life. The information is then used by the designer as inspiration in the design process. The postcards in the [visklek]-workshops worked as probes for collecting stories. The [visklek]-system could also be considered a Cultural Probe in the sense that it works as a conversation piece. What makes it different from a traditional Cultural Probe approach is that the communication goes on between the participants, independent of the designers.

The [visklek]-system kept a track that can tell us what times the calls were made and if they were made from a mobile phone or not. Apart from that, the recorded messages are the material we base this paper on. We wanted the participants to be anonymous, just like in most public places, unless they wanted to disclose their identity themselves. Instead of asking what they thought of playing, we focused on their actual use of the [visklek]-system.

Figure 4: [visklek] at Växjö Art Gallery 2004

The project was exhibited at Växjö Art Gallery during the summer of 2004. The concept of the exhibition was to create a room full of whispers. Numerous of headsets hung from the ceiling, and the visitors could sneak up to one of them to listen more closely to the stories created by the participants. Posters,

flyers, postcards and notes from the workshops were exhibited in another room, so the visitors could get a glimpse of the process of how the stories were collected and how the project was presented to the public.

PLAYING

[visklek] is based on the willingness of people to play by telling stories about themselves and their own town. We wanted people to play [visklek], to play with their own stories, and to play with each other.

Social psychologist Johan Asplund [1] argues that play is unorganised – it is open and uncertain. It does not follow rules that are preset. The ability to change the conditions is one of the essential aspects and qualities of play. He emphasises the importance of response from those who are playing. Instead of the expected response something new will happen. For example: If I respond to my hand as if it was a telephone, then it is a telephone. If I respond as if I am my mother I am my mother. It is not the world that decides my response, my response rules the world. Like many other activities play is connected to time and place. But Asplund argues that play is not connected to any *specific* time or place. You can play whenever you want and wherever you want. When you start playing, time becomes playtime and place becomes a playground. Asplund distinguishes between the goal-oriented play (sports) which is more competitive than the kind of play described above. The essence of the non-goal oriented play, as we understand Asplund, is the dimension of unpredictable response between players, and the way these responses constructs new momentary norms and rules.

However, there are many other ways of defining play. Some people argue that play is an important form of learning. Pramling-Samuelsson [11] argues that the way we think of play has changed from being an activity separated from work and studies, to a conception of play as a form of learning. This idea of learning by playing has been criticized for being a manipulative way of teaching. If this is true: what will happen to play as a privilege - the right to not be useful, to have experiences that are rewarding in themselves, that belong in the presence instead of being held hostage to hypothetical future rewards?

Our definition and use of the word play is essentially Asplund's: it is fun, it is happening now, there is no focus on a future reward, it is depending on the response of the participants and it is based on the desire to change the rules and allow for the unexpected.

Figure 5: Workshop at K3, Malmö: Playing with Games

During a workshop, called Playing with Games, at the Department of Art and Communication, K3, at Malmö University, we saw in practice how response is fundamental to play and how playtime and playground can be constructed

anywhere and anytime. The assignment was to pick one object, one already existing game and one physical place and combine different characteristics from these elements into a new game. Most games that were constructed when the participants were sitting down with a pen and a paper ended up being goal orientated. Others that tried to actually play ended up with something quite different. The game was constructed while playing and the rules were open for a never-ending negotiation. When they started to play, time became playtime and the place became a playground.

In one case participants tossed a snuffbox between them and developed the idea that the one receiving the snuffbox should either: try to catch it and say a word that linked to the chain of words that had been said before; or not catch it, and still say a word. Since they responded to a snuffbox as if it was a ball, then it became a ball. What was a correct word in this context was not predictable to those watching, but somehow made sense to those participating in the game, even though they constantly changed the rules. During the workshop it became clear that it is difficult to come up with a new game without actually playing it. You will not be able to see the game appear and see how the rules change, until you actually play it.

Other games in the workshop were based on the thrill of allowing the participants to break norms concerning everyday behaviour. This could be connected to their private or public life. One game aimed at getting someone in a supermarket to give you a certain product without saying the name of the product. In this game you have to break some norms, but you still obey the basic structure of the place – to be a consumer. This way the situation is not so odd that it is completely unfamiliar, but it stands out and perhaps makes current norms become more tangible and clear.
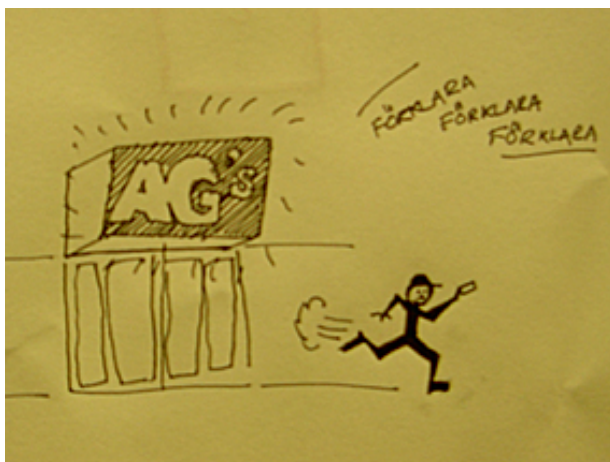

Figure 6: Workshop at K3 – Playing with Games

We saw a playful example on the London underground of how slight shifts in the normal structures and patterns makes you reflect on how fear of not doing the right thing in public can get to you. There was a sticker that said: "No eye contact: £100 fee". The graphic design on this sticker was very similar to the way the London underground communicates all kinds of information, such as what will happen to you if you are a fare evader. In this case someone attempted to make us, the travellers, think of how we interact with others during our tube ride. By pushing it a little bit too far it made us realise how rarely we look into others´, strangers´, eyes on the tube. The stickers made us think about social norms, and suggested that we break them.

Sheila Heti [7] writes in her article *Stealing Glances* about the anxiety of how to act as a pedestrian in Toronto, Canada. She emphasizes the problem of whether or not to engage in a momentary acknowledgement of mutual humanity: "When we look and look away, we reveal what we want — communion,

citizenry — and what we lack — communion, citizenry. It is not unreasonable to think the health of a culture can be judged by how many seemingly inconsequential encounters and experiences are shared among its citizens." In a city of transit users, her objection is, that eye contact becomes an irritation since it disrupts the work of getting somewhere. How can fleeting relationships be justified in a culture that values productivity?, she asks.

[VISKLEK] – A NON-ANXIOUS SYSTEM FOR PLAY AND USER APPROPRIATION

In [visklek] we have used the characteristics of play and applied it on a public communication system that connects people through misunderstandings. We wanted to create a game that is situated in the present as well as to create a system that allows for the unexpected - an open system for user appropriation. With user appropriation we mean that users find unintended and unexpected ways of using an object, place or, as in this case, a system.

Even though the [visklek]-system has social and technical limitations the rules are open for a never-ending negotiation. There is no supervision, no moderation, no facilitator that guides you in a specific direction - but to play with us.

In his book *The practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau [4] describes how people without completely breaking the premises such as law and urban planning, the *strategy,* of a certain place, they find new ways of using this place that encourage creativity and diversity. By engaging in non-intended activities, *a play with the machinery*, is created by its users. He describes this as *tactics.* As the ethnologist Elisabeth Högdahl [8] concludes in her book *Göra gata* tactics thus means, in contrast with the more static strategy, that you take an opportunity once it is there, you improvise and you manipulate the premises that are given. Perhaps you even change the premises – or at least you push it slightly aside.

When listening to the [visklek]-recordings we have noticed that some people call several times. At first they are anxious to do the right thing: to repeat the message as correctly as possible and follow the *strategy* of the game. After a while they start experimenting with the system to figure out how it works. Some make several consecutive calls. Some comment on the system and others play around with the stories. They use their own *tactics* by improvising and manipulating the premises that are given.

A young girl called [visklek] several times with a couple of hours in between. She is surprised to hear her own voice and starts to laugh and tells her friends: "I heard my self! The last time I called was yesterday evening." Her friend calls immediately but is surprised to hear the original message and not her friend. So, by calling several times they have figured out the structure of the system.

A young boy repeats the story about a couple of friends stuck at the train station. At first he repeats it as correctly as possible but after a while he calls in again and makes it more nuanced by giving the people at the station names and we are told that they will remain best friends forever. The boy stays within the *strategy* of [visklek] but grabs the opportunity to add new words.

The open character of the system has allowed people to make their own interpretation of what it meant to participate in the game and some used more radical *tactics* than just adding new words. For example there was a group of young girls who used the answering machine as a private notice board during one evening - leaving private messages to each other and calling each other by name. Another girl advertised the loss of a coin at a certain street in Växjö and asked someone to pick it up for her – as if [visklek] was an advertising placard, exactly the kind that we were looking for, nearly in vain, when putting up posters. In those messages there is a hope for response from the

other players. Perhaps the girl with the coin did not believe that someone actually would follow her instructions but she wanted to challenge the participants and play with the system and the possibilities it had offered her. The system did not rule over the participants - the participants ruled over the system, just like Asplund describes play

This type of tactics or user appropriation is similar to the way a lot of young people approach commercials. Corporate businesses have realised that young people are critical to traditional advertisements. They know quite well what images, language and means a company uses to sell products and services. Advertisement companies try to produce entertaining short movies or other applications that they hope for to be sent back and forth between friends on the Internet, thus creating a sense of peer-to-peer communication. This is called *viral marketing*. But, just as with [visklek], young people find ways to appropriate commercials and the systems and artefacts that are available. They will edit and twist the message of commercials, and be quick to send their own version to their friends. They use the language and method created by the advertisement companies but turn it against them. They ridicule the advertisers and they also show that they are keen to set the agenda in an active way [10]. There is an example of that in [visklek]. A young boy calls in and sings a song that is widely known in Sweden as an advertisement for a company that makes car tyres. Then he calls again and repeats the song but with new words that mock the company and the message they want to spread. In a way he plays the game with himself.

[visklek] –as a place and space

De Certeau describes two important aspects of a city – the actual places and the spaces created by the people who use these places. The place is the material order. It implies an indication of stability. Space is a practiced place and is characterised by its fluid, abstract and momentous qualities. This could mean memories, experiences and uses of these places. To create a space requires that the user participates in the making and can only be so in a system that allows for appropriation. There are other definitions of place and space, but in this paper we will use this definition that is based on de Certeau and apply it on the [visklek] system. We argue that the system of [visklek] - the technological constraints and properties - could be categorised as a place even though it is not a physical place. The space is created by the participants when they make use of the [visklek]-place. This means the common memories, stories and experiences that are created around [visklek].

Like many urban planners argue, there is a need for places that are open for user appropriation. If we want to make the city alive and in constant transformation, we need places that allow the inhabitants to manipulate it. We argue, as Richard Sennett [11] does, that it is preferable with disorder to dead planning, since disorder demands activity and action by the individual. The city should be planned for changeable and varied use. Only then the actual use of these places can become important in the lives of the users. He addresses the importance of the unfinished – places or situations that can be appropriated by the users of a certain place. The same principle can be applied to communication systems in the town – in this case [visklek]. [visklek] is open-ended and an attempt to create what we call a non-anxious system that challenges the society of surveillance, control, prohibition and predictability.

Anxious design

Classical music is being played out loud in coach stations in Malmö, Copenhagen and Hamburg to prevent drug addicts from using these rooms as a shelter for the night. [3] Design Against Crime (DAC) promote designers to create things that are less easy to steal, things which do not create an opportunity for crime and violence [14]. Instead of designing *for*

something, this design is against certain behaviour in order to create a safer world.

Operation TIPS (Terrorist Information and Prevention System) is a system that enables the American people to report suspicious behaviour to the Government web site or by calling a toll-free hotline. The system is based on participation, but there is an obvious anxiety in communication since the system does not allow the participants to actually communicate with the public. The callers are asked to become surveillance cameras although they have no control of how the information is interpreted. Despite the fact that your action can have a major impact, this is a kind of communication where you can not be held responsible for what you say on the hotline. Once somebody has called in they can feel that they have done their duty as a citizen and the information will be processed by the Government. [9]

The examples above represent what we define as anxious design – design that tries to prevent crime as well as suspicious and unwanted behaviour by designing *against*. Even though TIPS is based on participation the purpose of the system is to eliminate unwanted behaviour, even though it might be hard to know exactly what that unwanted behaviour is. We regard this as a reactive way of designing. They react upon what they see in the society and create something *against* something. This is a defensive reaction and it is polarized between a right and a wrong behaviour. You, as a user of public places, are supposed to do the right thing. So, do not hang around in a coach station for too long and do not borrow a book on how to make bombs.

Natalie Jeremijenko, BIT Engineer, [9] distinguishes between the *closed world* view of the world and the *open world* view of the world. The *closed world* view is based on an outside and an inside, an enemy and a non-enemy. She describes how President George Bush exemplifies this view in his (in)famous words "You are either with us or against us." But of course most people are neither with Bush nor are they with the terrorists. And just because you borrow a book about how to make bombs, it does not mean you are a terrorist. Like de Certeau describes we can not identify the consumer by the product or services she/he uses, but by what she/he makes or does with them.

It could be argued that these systems of control and prohibition creates a feeling of safety but we believe that anxious design reflects and creates an everyday fear that lingers over public life. Sharon Zukin [13], professor of sociology, describes this "politics of everyday fear" as a threat to public culture. By creating an image of unsafe streets we keep people away from public places and turn them away from seeking the art and the skills needed to share public life.

[visklek] is more of a pro-active reaction. Instead of designing against, [visklek] uses the characteristics of play to encourage non-anxious communication and participation. Since we live in more or less the same world, we react upon the same circumstances (anxiety in the public sphere and so on), but we act and open up for a non-safe situation and expose the vulnerability of activity and communication. [visklek] is an attempt to create a non-anxious system that stand in contrast to these anxious systems. The non-anxious systems are not design *against*. Instead they put trust in the user's ability to make choices and open up for a possible activity and/or interaction with other participants. In a non-anxious system you, as a participant, make space.

Non-Anxious systems

A non-anxious system could be described as a place, virtual or physical, where the users can choose tactics and appropriation in an active way according to their own understanding of what it means to participate in the system.

By inserting the [visklek]-system that is non-anxious in an anxious world, we hope to challenge contemporary norms

regarding public life and take a standpoint in the current norm regarding design in public places which tries to prevent misuse, misunderstandings and alternative interpretations of the system. Since the system completely depends on participation we, as facilitators, also put things at risk. What if nobody wants to participate? Although we proclaim that there is no way to misuse the system, since the system allows for misunderstandings and failures, we would be personally disappointed if people called in only to say f-words.

[visklek] is non-anxious in the sense that the system is designed to trust its users even though we know that they will try to manipulate it and play around with it. One could argue that Russian Roulette is an extremely non-anxios system, but [visklek] is not an attempt to create hazard games which decides over the participants' destiny for a moment. The purpose is to put things at risk by creating a system for others to appropriate. Of course there is a difference between being non-anxious when going as a tourist to a war zone area, and being non-anxious when giving a speech to an audience. [visklek] allows clashes, misunderstandings and alternative interpretations since the structure prevents most interactions from having cumbersome consequences.

The ability to reach out to a broad public with [visklek] is limited since there is only one person who will hear each message and it is up to that person to choose whether or not to pass the message on. For example, a teenage boy says "cock" in a very dark voice. The next caller who is a young girl repeats the word "cock" but in a non dramatic way. Her reaction to his attempt to be provocative unarms it and makes it sound a bit funny, not to say silly. The next person is the moral gatekeeper. Will she/he pass the latest message on or will she/he make it less provocative, spread the word or be quiet? No participant knows in advance.

If someone chooses to tell a completely new story the game can continue anyway. One story about a boy who smokes for the first time turns into a story about someone smoking marijuana and ends up being a story about the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson and his private life with his new wife whom he is living with. It seems by the tone of the speakers' voice, that she has found a way to ridicule the power, and to exercise power herself. She reads out from something that resembles a text connected to a picture, probably published in a news paper. This shows how the participants have total control over the information in [visklek] at the same time as it shows how the game can continue even though someone chooses to break the structure of the game by telling a completely new story. Since we did not want the game to be alienated from the original messages the game starts all over again after four calls.

In social interaction – as in a conversation or a phone call - silence is usually considered embarrassing and can make you uneasy. The system is designed without a time limit for how long a message can be, and silence does not disrupt the recording. In [visklek] there are an uncountable number of callers who do not say anything. This could be considered a failure but the silence recorded on the answering machine before they hang up is a contribution for others to respond to as well. You can hear background sound, such as several friends standing close to the phone and discussing how to play with [visklek], a car passing by, someone calling a name and so on. This information that was not intended to be a part of the game becomes a part of the game when the next person who calls in includes it in their story.

At one point there is a caller who does not say anything but is listening to some kind of ambient music in the background. This music is recorded on the answering machine. The next caller-in understands the music as the message and decides to hum/sing the tune she just heard. The same thing happens when the click sound from someone hanging up is repeated and becomes a part of [visklek].

Sometimes the silence triggers people to tell a new story, it offers a possibility to revive the game. A young girl calls in and hears only silence. She tells her friend: "there is no message on the answering machine". The friend calls in and says: "there is no message on the answering machine, except from digging thoughts, filled with gasoline and oil. A large tank lorry which actually is an excavator." It is told in a dreamy voice, poetic somehow. And it is a twisted description of the system and the story emerges in the silence left by someone else. A young boy who calls in is confused by the silence and comments upon that: "Here's nothing but silence. I'm not sure if anybody will hear this. But I might as well take my chance and say that NN, I love you the most in the whole world." His tactics is to grab the opportunity to fill the gap of silence and to make a love letter out of [visklek], while he spells out his reflection of the system itself. Consciously or unconsciously he knew that he was part of a system where he could communicate something to the public.

The structure of [visklek] allowed for non-anxious communication. Silence, love letters and provocations was communicated for others to respond to. Since the participants respond to the given place, the others' tactics and the system itself a kind of community is created.

[VISKLEK] – A PUBLIC LIVING-ROOM

With the technology of today new forms of communication and interaction are possible. Text messaging, ICQ, e-mail and other technologies have become integrated in many peoples' lives and changed the way we communicate and form personal relations, mostly private relations. In [visklek] we wanted to use network technologies to create a communal feeling, a public place, where strangers could meet. Still few participants played the game while physically being in a public place.

The track that is kept by the [visklek]-system discloses that many people called [visklek] from their land line, not from their mobile phones. This might be because the home is a common place for friends to meet in, and we have noticed that a lot of young people called while spending time with friends. They could have called from the street where they saw the poster, but instead they chose to go home and made their calls. Even though they are in a private setting they wanted to be part of something public, so they call [visklek]. The paradox is that although they are performing in a public place, they can hold on to the feeling of a safe and private environment. The [visklek]-system make it possible to blur the boundaries between the private and the public.

One of the key elements in [visklek] is that we mixed the public sphere with things that have a private connotation, such as answering machines and games. A small juxtaposition of norms, for example the common ways of using telephones and the girl who asks others to pick her coin up, makes current norms stand out and become clearer to us. Perhaps this makes us see how bound we are to norms. Since [visklek] is a game you are allowed to break rules and norms which make it easier to go beyond them. Part of the experiment with [visklek] was that if people chose to take care of these opportunities it might be possible to change current norms or at least try out new approaches to public life.

By combining the private and the public we create an ambiguous situation that might be hard to grasp at the same time as this ambiguity opens up for various interpretations. A woman that we talked to at the exhibition expressed the anger she had felt after calling [visklek]. She told us that she had seen a poster in a record store. She really did not know what to expect but she got curious and decided to make a call. When she reached [visklek] she could not understand what the young girl on the answering machine was saying and got angry and frustrated and hung up. This type of ambiguity is often avoided in traditional HCI (Human Computer Interaction.) William Gaver [5] on the contrary argues that it could be viewed as a

resource in design. By creating ambiguity in the relation between the user and the artefact the user is encouraged to be active and engage in the meaning making.

Of course there are situations where ambiguity should be avoided. If your design is more goal orientated it might not be suitable, but if you, as in this case, are designing for social interaction and play there is room for more than rational and user oriented design. The concept of [visklek] is based on ambiguity – misunderstandings and uncertainty. That is what makes it fun. A fox becomes an elk and a duck becomes a sandwich. Sometimes the misunderstandings are based on words that sound similar and some times words get mixed up just because they both are, for example, animals. Despite an ambiguous situation people try to make sense and sometimes people hear what they expect to hear.

The characteristics of interaction

Encounters created in [visklek] are random and unpredictable. There is an obvious uncertainty in [visklek]: you never know whose voice you will meet when you call in and you never know who will react upon your message.

One of the original messages tells of a teenager who is in her house. She sees an old man who is reaching out, over a hedge, to nick a plum in her garden. She says that all she wants to do is to go out and kick his stick away. This particular girl was reluctant and stubborn during the workshops, but later on it turned out that she was the most active in participating in [visklek] herself. Ironically an old man with a crackled voice called in and was supposed to repeat "…I want to go out and kick his stick away…" On the first call this man does not understand what to do and says so on the answering machine. Then he calls back and plays the Chinese whispers the traditional way. In that moment there is a bridge between the stubborn teenager and the elderly man.

We argue that even though these encounters are brief, anonymous and one of a chance they can still be worthwhile Encounters between strangers are unlike the meetings of friends, family members or acquaintances. Like Zygmunt Bauman [2] describes: "Meetings of strangers is an event without past. More often than not, it is also an event without future - a story in all probability 'not to be continued', a one-off chance, to be consummated in full while it lasts". Just like play these meetings are enough in them selves and there is no need for future rewards. The anonymity allows people to express things they might not have expressed otherwise – like the young boy who decides to express his love for a girl.

Through this interaction between the participants a net of random and momentary relations is created among those who chose to play [visklek]. In [visklek] there is no obvious way of catching up or establishing closer relations between the participants. [visklek] belongs in the present and the encounters are one of a chance. There is really no way of knowing who that old man who keeps calling in is. The encounter between the participants in [visklek] is like a glance at somebody you might not know.

There was no ambition that the feeling of belonging to a community should last very long. This is illustrated by two participants who try to interpret the system and give it a slogan.

First a young girl calls and says:

- Call [visklek]. Ring ring! Just as cheap as a regular phone call. Ring ring!

An old man calls and makes his own slogan or interpretation:

- Hi. This is [visklek]. I'm calling to listen to someone I don't know. I hope that my feelings will be passed on to the next person who calls. Bye bye.

We also argue that the connection between the participants is enhanced by the fact that the encounters are unique and exclusive. Every time you call in you have the exclusive possibility to hear and interpret the message left by the latest caller-in. Although it can be heard by others in an exhibition later on, there is only one person who can respond to what happened last time somebody interacted with the system.

The grapevine

[visklek] has a strong local connection. The stories are created by young people in Växjö, the stories are about experiences in Växjö and the posters put up in the town showed pictures that people in Växjö might recognise.

We have used different media that enables us to reach out to a broad public. Some people will notice the posters in the town, others will notice the flyers in the cafés and bars and yet others will hear it through the grapevine. It has become clear that the young people who were engaged in our workshops from the beginning have become [visklek]'s ambassadors spreading information about the game to friends and family. One girl who heard about the project from one of the workshop members also adapted the role as an ambassador and put the phone number in her mobile phone and invited her friends to play by using her phone or sending information about it to them in a text message. Ethnographic studies made by Alexandra Weilenmann and Catrine Larsson [12] show that teenagers use mobile phones collaboratively, in the way they share the phones and the content. This means that it is common to pass around phones in a group and let others brows through text messages and address books. They argue that the notion of the mobile phone as a purely personal device is not valid among teenagers. The information is often shared, read out loud and made public in various ways.

When you listen to the [visklek]-recordings it is evident that they were often made collectively. One time a group of friends played from different phone numbers and different physical locations, making comments to each other and calling each other by name. Sometimes groups of friends were playing, took turn who would be the next one to call. While one person was calling you could here the others in the background making comments and bursting into laughter.

As time went by rumours of [visklek] spread and the game helped to create a community between the participants – strangers who might never have met if it was not for [visklek].

CRITICAL CONCERNS

We argue that play has no future goals and that the rules are open for a never ending negotiation. But, what happens to the game if everyone breaks the rules? Will it still be fun?

There are different ways of breaking the rules. If you for example add new words or sentences you do not break the rules but you play around with them. Whereas if you incorporate the click sound in your message you play with the rules concerning information: what is information and what is not? On the other hand, if you make [visklek] into a private notice board you have made the system more goal oriented and betrayed the game. You also exclude the other players. To be able to continue the game it has to be graspable for the other participants. That is what makes appropriation difficult within a community.

We also found out that the [visklek]-exhibition at the Växjö Art Gallery did not work very well in creating the feeling of a community since the art institutions are loaded with symbolic obstacles and norms that telephones, answering machines and posters do not have. Not everyone feels at ease in the white cube, just as well as not everybody feels at ease with participatory cultural expressions. But the essence of [visklek] was the participation and that part was lost during the exhibition.

One of the main features of the *visklek* is that you most probably will burst into laughter when you hear how the

sentences have changed while the information has travelled through ear and mouth. When calling [visklek] you will not hear the end result. You will have to wait until the exhibition. Some participants have told us afterwards that they were eager to go the exhibition to hear the end result, but for most people the time span between playing and listening was too long. Perhaps that is why quite a few people called several times. They wanted to se how the story had developed. So, the structural design of the system was a catalyst for people to keep on calling in.

[visklek.se]

During the autumn 2004 a web based version of [visklek] was developed - [visklek.se]. By one single phone call the participants can play [visklek], just like before. They can also create a new game by calling another phone number and add a story of their own for others to play with. The chains of whispers that are created by the participants are available at [visklek.se]. At the site anyone can follow the game, either by browsing through old messages or by listening to the game in real time. When someone calls, a phone on the webpage starts to twinkle and the message on the answering machine is played out loud.
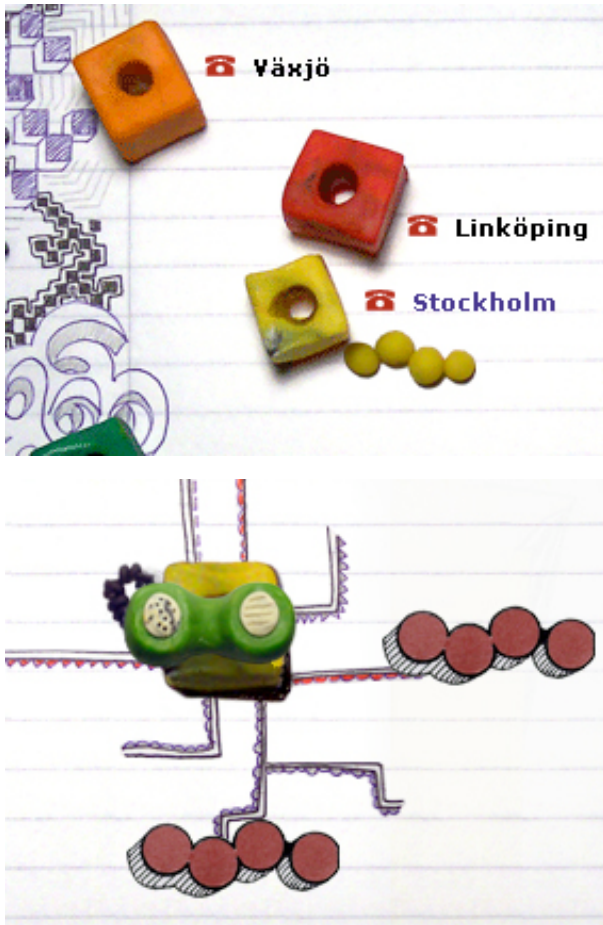

Figure 7: [visklek.se]

The main difference between [visklek] and [visklek.se] is that the material is now constantly available to the large public.

Natalie Jeremijenko argues that the structure of participation is crucial to make a system truly participatory. One important factor is that the information produced by those who participate should be publicly readable and interpretable. One could argue that [visklek] was readable and interpretable for the public – they could either call and listen to at least one message at a time, or visit the exhibition. But, by enabling people to listen to the material at any time and while the game is being played, the system becomes more open and the feeling of community is enhanced. The system becomes more open-ended - it has no

certain beginning or end. In [visklek] the project was divided into three stages; collecting stories, playing, and the exhibition. At [visklek.se] these activities become more integrated. Since anyone can add an original story for others to play with there is no predefined hierarchic order between the participants – those who tell and those who repeat. You can take on different roles every time you decide to play – tell, repeat, listen or even download the files and use it for something completely different. This is a test to see how non-anxious we can make it, without losing the participants interest.

CONCLUSIONS

It would be bold to argue that [visklek] has had a huge impact on the public life in Växjö, but some people took the opportunity to communicate in this virtual public living-room and to create space according to their own tactics.

We live in an anxious world filled with anxious design which reflects and creates a lack of trust in the public sphere. The playful engagement in [visklek] shows us that there is a need for a more playful and non-anxious approach to public places. When playing a game you do not know what to expect from the other respondents and you have to let go of some anxiety. This means that in a game it is almost inevitable not to break established norms and to appropriate the situation or system. The whole concept of playing is basically to establish new norms.

As our examples have shown, the users' tactics while interacting with the system are varied. Some were eager to play it along the lines of the children's game with a correct repetition of what they heard, others played with the system. Those who called in several times figured out how the system worked, bit by bit. The more confident they became, the more they dared to play around and appropriate it. So, at the same time as we played with people in Växjö, they played with us and the system.

By contrasting the predominantly anxious modes of communication in the public sphere with [visklek] it becomes easier for people to see and break the structures of the public places. [visklek] is a non-anxious system for social interaction, based on collaborative storytelling, where we allow for diverse opinions, stories and uses. There is no moderator to supervise or guide the participants. Instead they collectively set the norms; act like moral gatekeepers, set the tone for others to respond to, or change the premises of the place. If they change the rules too radically it becomes hard for others to grasp it and it stops being fun.

Despite our aim for an open system we argue that there has to be some limiting characteristics if you want people to participate. Most people will agree that it is terribly difficult to start writing a text when the screen is blank or the paper still white. But once there is something written there is at least something you can respond to. Even those who choose to tell a completely new story quite often had some reference to the story they just heard. Since play is to respond, it is crucial that there is something to respond to in [visklek]. In this case it is the stories that we collected during the workshops and the traces that the last caller left, even if it nothing more than the click sound from someone hanging up.

The [visklek]- exhibition did not allow participation the way we wanted it to, it was too static, and apparently those who had participated earlier by calling [visklek] were more interested in playing than listening. The time span between playing and listening was too long. It became clear that if the participatory action in itself is fun there is no need for future rewards or a higher goal, such as becoming a part of an exhibition. There was no price to win, no honour to gain and no fame to expect. To play and interact with others is enough in itself, even though the interaction is quite limited. In [visklek] there is no way of catching up or developing deeper relations between the participants. Still they found it worthwhile to participate in the

game. We conclude that they wanted to communicate with others in this public place and make it their common space.

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