ilovebees: Playing and Designing in Real-Time

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Down the Rabbit-Hole
"After a fall such as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling downstairs!"

The Game
We begin with the previews for the films Spiderman 2, I, Robot and King Arthur released in the summer of 2004. They are preceded by a trailer for the video game Halo 2. At the end of the trailer is a final screen displaying the console the game was developed for: the Xbox. But there is something odd about the www.xbox.com URL at the bottom of that last screen. For a brief second or two it wavers and another URL can be seen: www.ilovebees.com. Then the Xbox URL reappears.

We found out that it has to be a dance.
We make a move, and they make a move.
- Elan Lee

The Design
ilovebees is not a video game. It was never on sale. And if you didn't play it from July 13 to November 4, 2004, you've missed your chance. Nevertheless, this alternate reality game (ARG), taking place in the real world in real time, was played by thousands of people all across the US.

The game was designed at 42 Entertainment, the people behind an earlier ARG called The Beast. Both games were viral advertising campaigns. The first was created to promote Steven Spielberg's film A.I. and the second was created for the video game Halo 2.

A core design principle of ARGs is called TINAG (This Is Not a Game). Fact and fiction blur. In-game actions can cause real-world events; and the games can react to those who play them. It's often not possible to differentiate what is part of an ARG, and what isn't.

ARGs don't announce themselves with colorful posters in retail stores. There are no ads on gaming websites. They arrive in the dead of night like Mr. Dark's traveling carnival, unexpected and possibly unsettling. They depend upon word of mouth, and the astuteness of strangers.

The "rabbit hole" (a reference to the beginning of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland), aka the "trailhead," is the point of

entry into an ARG. It is subtle, mysterious: a doorway to the unknown, uncovered apparently by accident.

Through the Looking Glass

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

The Game

The rabbit hole in the Halo 2 trailer is only one of two.

In the wake of The Beast a community of fans and avid game players has grown up around ARGs. The terms used in this chapter are being coined and debated. They design their own ARGs for each other to play, much the way the video game industry was born. Websites are created to track their efforts.

These are a first generation of experienced bloodhounds with their eyes open and their noses to the ground. They are a critical element for the success of another large-scale ARG.

Their beginning of gameplay consists of physical objects in the real world: jars of honey sent to various members of the ARG community, who will hopefully be able to sniff out the trail of a white rabbit. Particularly since inside the jars are letters that can be arranged to spell out things. Not typical components of most honey jars. What do they spell? I LOVE BEES.

Two groups are therefore targeted: gamers interested in the upcoming sequel to the original Halo; and savvy ARG players who, in the wake of The Beast, are building their own games, and keeping their radar sweeping for more.

The Haloites and the ARGers leap.

The Design

There are three major dangers with rabbit-holes. The first is that they can be mistaken for actual reality. While most players recognize they are willingly suspending their disbelief, civilians, stumbling into the web of an ARG, may fail to realize it's a game, and respond as if it is all too real.

The second is that the rabbit hole may be too subtle, and be missed entirely.

And third: People might enter the rabbit hole as expected, but fail to recognize their role in the ARG as active players.

Fly in the Honey

"Curiouser and curiouser!"

The Game

Curious parties falling through the rabbit holes find themselves at an innocuous website called Margaret's Honey. But as can be seen by the screenshot, it is immediately apparent all is not right.

The legitimate website is immediately corrupted by a mysterious intruder. And unless you're on a date, the line above the timer counting down is particularly ominous.

Players go to the blog of the website's owner, Dana Awbrey, where she asks her readers to find the source of the hacks inflicting her site. The non-ARG Halo players believe the hack consists of messages from Halo characters and Bungie is responsible for the site. ARG players start identifying the first hints of the story behind the intrusion.

It has to follow the rules of life.

- Elan Lee

The Design

There are two factors to be considered in writing story for games: 1) the story itself; and 2) the delivery of that story.

ARGs by their very nature are crossmedia storytelling dynamos, allowing players to uncover bits and pieces protected by puzzles, or hiding in plain sight. Storytelling can be delivered by snail mail, magazines, email, websites, tweets, video, photographs, props, phone calls, faxes, billboards, light shows, rock concerts, flash drives, chalk markings, paintings, t-shirts, live actors, spotlights, sky writing, hieroglyphics carved in stone, even a chapter in a book like this one. Any communication medium is fair game.

The world is the canvas of the ARG, and its colors are infinite.

Artificial Life

"I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life!"

The Game

The ARGers begin to shift the Haloites from idle speculation to puzzle-solving. Before long they will join together in one hive mind.

And this focusing of resources is matched by the expansion of the ilovebees cast list: Melissa, AI marooned in the present day when her spaceship crashes, was sundered by the accident into The Operator (The Sleeping Princess calls her the Queen); the Sleeping Princess (a remnant of the child who was forced to give up her life so that her consciousness would become the AI); SPDR (Spider, an emergency repair program); and the Seeker (called The Pious Flea), a hitch-hiking program that destroys SPDR when SPDR tries to eliminate it).

The "puzzles" that introduce these cyber-characters are straightforward: text messages from these entities delivered as fragments in images and the HTML code itself. But on August 10 the countdown reaches 0, and the next phase of the game begins.

The Design

The hive mind aka collective consciousness aka cooperative intelligence aka swarm intelligence is a phenomenon that designers have struggled with since the game Senet in 3100 BC. There will always be more players of any game than its developers. And the sheer number of players guarantees they will be smarter than the developers, so the developers must work that much harder to stay ahead of them.

We released the first puzzle, which was meant to take a day, and they solved that. And then they solved the puzzle for the next day… After the first day had elapsed, they had solved all three months' worth of content. We looked around the room in a panic… what do we do tomorrow?

- Elan Lee on "The Beast"

In ARGs, for the first time, we see games that take on the hive mind on its own terms. Sometimes the magic works. Sometimes it doesn't.

Puzzles are the traditional choke points in ARGs. Making early puzzle solutions simple to solve empowers players. It draws them in. Designing puzzles that take a team composed of neuroscientists and strippers should slow the pace down a bit, particularly if they're all in the same room. Harder puzzles give designers breathing room till players catch up. ilovebees would eventually require knowledge of Sanskrit.

Once a video game is boxed, designers can hopefully relax awhile and study

Once a video game is boxed, designers can hopefully relax awhile and study European sports car ads. Developers of MMOs of course, have no such luxury; they're already committed to new content the sooner the better. That real-world real-time stuff is no joke. ARG designers have to be ready to turn on a dime. It's far too easy to underestimate the intelligence of the hive mind. And real life always has tricks to play.

Axons to Grind

"So many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible."

The Game

Axons begin to go live. Axons, as those neuroscientists will be happy to tell you, once they've said their farewells to the strippers, are nerve fibers projecting from a neuron that conduct electrical impulses away from it. Something like… messages… on wires?

Columns of paired numbers appear, looking suspiciously like latitudes and longitudes. And the coordinates seem to mark locations of payphones. Remember those?

We found this awesome website with hundreds of thousands of payphone locations, [but] maybe 5% of the payphones were actually working. So we hired teams and teams of college students, bought them plane tickets and said, "Go to these cities and find payphones."

- Elan Lee

And then there are the times when you might want to be standing by one. Sure enough, each week, once new riddles are solved, certain clues are properly interpreted and necessary code words established, payphones begin to ring across the land for those lucky enough to locate them. And a whole new set of characters emerge in these phone calls. Their story, set in the 26th century, begins to reveal the threat of an alien Covenant invasion. Can players from our time prevent it?

The Design

Audio recordings play a significant role in the storytelling set in the Halo universe of the future. Indeed 42 Entertainment refers to the game as a "radio drama delivered to consumers over an unlikely broadcast medium: ringing payphones."

It is here the game began to fall into something of a grind: solve puzzles, find payphones, listen to pre-recorded audio files that were also unlocked online, so everyone could hear them. These files are broadcast by Melissa to try and explain her accident. Balancing challenge with frustration is of course a common element in video game design. Boxed games need to get it all right up front. ARGs can react to players, encouraging and incrementally rewarding them as necessary.

We started seeing blog posts and petitions titled "Oh, Please God No More Payphones."

- Elan Lee

On October 12th, players were ordered by Melissa to take pictures of themselves at payphones to help orient her in time and space. They met one another face-to-face.

On one call Melissa asked for musical talent. People took bands out there and camped out on curbs with guitars and played music for us. We were really touched by that.

- Elan Lee

Some lucky players picked up the phone to discover a live actor playing Melissa, who would carry on a conversation with them.

I dusted off my psychology training and dug up the concept of "random schedule reinforcement - any time a rat does something good, if you randomly decide to give it a treat, then it will do that thing all the time, never knowing if it will get a treat.

- Elan Lee

This personalizing of the game is a unique and essential element of ARGs, even more effective than staged events where developers play avatars or mobs in MMOs, because it occurs in the real-world.

So things were proceeding well. 20 hour days of puppetmastering were paying off. But what of someone who might come late to the party?

Previously on ilovebees

"'Have you guessed the riddle yet?' the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

"'No, I give it up,' Alice replied: 'what's the answer?'

'I haven't the slightest idea,' the Hatter said."

The Game

The story revealed by the axons features six major characters in four, then five, discrete storylines. Their connection to Melissa, the Sleeping Princess, to each other and to the events in the present, seems only to be the fact that Melissa is releasing their stories. But soon they begin to intersect. And the connective tissue begins to be revealed as Melissa, (named Durga by one of the characters).

But these bits and pieces of story are jumbled, open to interpretation and newcomers need to know what's going on, and how they can join in. Dana's blog helpfully provides the background they need, and keeps a running tab on "what we know so far:"

The Design

Word is spreading. On October 18th, as more and more interest is centered on the game, Wired runs a story on it with a link to the ilovebees website. Newcomers hit the site. Some come to check it out, then buzz by; others stay to play

Wandering, players moving through a gamescape with little or no idea of what they are meant to do, is a common design concern. Solo games provide journals in media appropriate to their setting; mentors and sidekicks to nudge and remind. For MMOs developers can publish updates as needed, hyping expansion packs or free new content.

ARG players are not avatars within a scripted drama. They play themselves. The game provides no journals. And as smart as the hive mind

may be, they may still need to be nudged and reminded. Happily, the solution for ARGs can be a synergy of both solo games and MMOs.

The updating should come organically from within the game's fiction. Dana, the poor human character in our present day, who was dragged into this increasingly convoluted story just as the players were, is the perfect conduit for both developer storytelling and player interaction with that story. She obligingly synthesizes all known facts for players both seasoned and fresh on her blog (journal).

And it's important for the players not only to keep up. They must be emotionally invested as well.

Death of a Sleeping Princess

"They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there's any one
left alive!"

The Game

Melissa (The Operator) becomes convinced that the Sleeping Princess, in league with the Pious Flea (a possible Covenant virus), is a danger to her and must be destroyed. Melissa can't do it alone, and the players have grown fond of her. Melissa threatens Dana's Aunt Margaret, the woman Dana created her website to honor. Dana is determined to protect her aunt. She asks for help in destroying the Sleeping Princess.

The players debate what they should do. In the end the Sleeping Princess, supposedly a "rogue process," is destroyed. But she does not go gently into that good night. Remnants of her memory are left behind embedded in the site's corrupted images. Between them and the latest audio files the stories of a little girl named Yasmine and the Sleeping Princess become one. Yasmine's voice becomes the Sleeping Princess' voice.

The Design

The fact that the players had at this point spent weeks painstakingly assembling a story set both in the present and in the future makes its success as a story all the more remarkable.

The beauty of ilovebees is that it appears to be an intricate web of complexity. Yet in the end it is revealed to be quite simple. It is the delivery that was far more complex than the narrative. This is as it should be. We deal in games here after all.

The story of the film The Usual Suspects seems on the surface to be highly complex, yet it is quite simple. But the film is little more than a clever puzzle once the solution is revealed.

ilovebees is rife with puzzles. Yet it also takes the time to be something more.

Creating story and characters who come alive when rescued from scattered fragments is a delicate archaeological task. The constant dialogue between the developers behind the curtain and the collaborative will of the players requires constant tweaking and massaging to maintain Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief.

From the reactions I saw from the players, they really liked the stories and really got into them.

- Elan Lee

In the end the solution of puzzles is not enough. Emotion, human emotion, must be invoked. The death of a "rogue process" became the death of the memories of a child who had already given her life once to become the AI of a spaceship of the future.

We Get to Play Halo 2 Five Days Early?

"Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it."

The Game

The last audio files give us the ending in the future. All of the main characters band together to try and shut-down a Covenant device from Melissa's ship. Unfortunately it sends a message to the Covenant revealing the Earth's location. Each of what should be concluding scenes of the story is interrupted by the Covenant's arrival. And from here on in, it's Master Chief's fight.

With the help of the Pious Flea, Melissa is able to reconstruct herself. And we learn that the Sleeping Princess was not destroyed, but re-integrated into Melissa once again in the future. Then a final message from Melissa informs us that the Flea was indeed the Covenant virus. And the original SPDR program gets its revenge by destroying the Flea.

So there is a happy ending of sorts in the present. The future is still up for grabs.

ilovebees players are invited to take part in training exercises on November 4th to prepare them to battle the Covenant. DVDs containing material from the game and other promotional materials are handed out.

Halo 2 is released on November 9th, 2004.

The Design

It would be well to remember here that ilovebees was financed and created as a viral advertising campaign for a first person shooter. The fact that thousands of players invested months of their lives, not to mention hundreds of gallons of real gasoline, is a testament both to the

strength of its developers and its genre: that still bleeding edge that is the alternate reality game.

In the end however, it became time to tie the fiction of ilovebees back into its original purpose. There was some grumbling in the end that while the end of the story results in the beginning of the massive Covenant invasion of Earth, the end of the game resulted in some players getting a chance to play Halo 2 a few days before it was released.

Also irritating was that the event was opened up to non-ilovebees players, who felt that after all their hard work, the training exercises should have been their reward alone. To add insult to injury some organizers had never heard of ilovebees.

So at last creativity and commerce collided as they sometimes do, and we are left to analyze the pieces.

Playing and Designing in Real Time

"," the King said gravely, "."

Taken by itself, ilovebees is an incredible accomplishment.

Working often in the dark, with little knowledge of more than the broadest outlines of the story they must link to, the developers of ilovebees created a game that was in the end every bit as satisfying to its fans as Halo 2 was to its fans.

The challenges of designing in real time, and trying to keep one step ahead of the hive mind, are a fascinating extension of what video game and MMO designers accomplish in the digital world. What sets ARGs apart is that the game is played out between designer and consumer on a level playing field. And everybody is out there together.

All of our design work, all of our careful planning and flawless execution, can't prepare us for the slings and arrows of outrageous reality: players who are as tenacious as we are devious; the vagaries of geography and weather; the mutability of tools that break; and yes our own mistakes. There are bugs in ARGs as surely as there are bugs in every garden except probably Eden.

Those who design these games of alternate reality must be as light on their feet as tap dancers; as flexible as sideshow contortionists; and as tireless as marathon runners. The clock keeps ticking. The players keep playing. And it isn't until the game is finally done, that they can finally stop.

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Developer quotes are from Elan Lee, Director/Lead Designer of ilovebees.

Heading quotes are from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

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