

## **The (not so) invisible hand: Perceptions of game designers and the impact on play**

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### **Abstract**

Designing and operating alternate reality games (ARGs) is always a challenge. Controlling too much or too little of the gameplay impedes player enjoyment. In studying one particular ARG, I Love Bees (ILB), and player perceptions of the game designers, we revealed that it is possible for game designers relinquish direct control, but at a cost. Players often misread or misinterpreted game designers' intentions. These issues, however, were not necessarily detrimental to gameplay and may have increased player enjoyment.

### **Keywords**

alternate reality games; i love bees; game design; qualitative research

### **Introduction**

Alternate reality games (ARGs) are set in fictional worlds that overlay the physical world. They are played both online and in-person at cafes, malls, casinos, transit hubs, and universities. Using player-adopted tools such as web-based forums, players work collectively to solve game tasks and advance the game's storyline (Kim et al., 2008; McGonigal, 2008; O'Hara et al., 2008). Throughout the course of the game, designers simultaneously act as allies and adversaries, creating obstacles and providing resources to help players overcome these obstacles. They remain "behind the curtain" and typically invisible to players (Gurzick et al., 2011).

In this paper, we present results from an ongoing study of teaming and tasking in a massive ARG. This was guided by two primary research questions: How are the game designers discussed by players? Does speculation about the game designers affect player decisions?

### **Approach and Methods**

Our work is situated around virtual teaming in the ARG, I Love Bees (ILB). ILB is one of the earliest and most successful of the ARG genre, influencing the paradigm for future ARG design. Similar to other ARGs, ILB required the collective intelligence of its players to solve intricate puzzles that extended across the physical and online worlds. Players had to self-organize into teams to develop creative solutions.

An ARG fansite, Unfiction.com, hosted the Haunted Apiary message board that served as the primary communication hub for ILB players. This hub grew to contain more than 54,000 posts by over 2,700 players. Over the four months of gameplay, players organized the forum into six thematic threads.

We investigated the Haunted Apiary to gain insight into how ILB players perceived the game designers (called Puppetmasters). Using a grounded theory approach, we iteratively open-coded approximately 16,000 posts (30 percent of the total number of forum postings) to identify instances of player perceptions. This was a purposive sample of game events. Our coding passes revealed multiple critical incidents, four of which are described below.

## Findings

### *Interpreting Intentions*

Two critical incidents illustrate how players' misinterpretation of the Puppetmasters' intentions led them to incorrectly speculate and subsequently pursue two theories for obtaining information. In this first example, players debated whether the Puppetmasters intended for them to break the law:

*"I wonder, the way Dana keeps repeating ""Hotmail Hack"" (usually in brackets), maybe it's a hint that we're supposed to hack into Margaret's hotmail to contact the entity" (P128).*

In a similar vein, another group of players attempted to break into a Puppetmaster's voicemail account, speculating that the account contained information pertinent to advance the game's storyline. In both instances, players debated whether the Puppetmasters actually intended for them to break into the accounts. Opponents argued:

*"If part of the game was getting into the email account, they wouldn't have it at Hotmail" (P144).*

Whereas proponents chose to follow the hunch and attempt to hack the accounts:

*"I know everyone said to not try to get into her mailbox but why not. People should try 343 or 7777 or something that has to do with 7's" (P104).*

It was only after several failed attempts and an eventual message from the Puppetmasters to stop that the players realized they had misinterpreted their intentions.

### *Communicating with the Invisible Hand*

Upholding the "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1955) was important to some players. To maintain the illusion, players used the in-game characters as intermediaries to communicate with the Puppetmasters about game task challenges. For example, a player asked an in-game character to move a game task to another location:

*"I'm going to email the Sleeping Princess [in-game character] and see if we can't get a new phone put in there" (P958)*

Players also messaged the in-game characters to have game tasks removed all together. In one instance, players used the forums to ask the character Melissa to remove a game task from the Potomac Appalachian Trail Center because it was disturbing the people who worked there:

*"The [stewards] were glad to let us answer the phone so it [would] **stop ringing**. Apparently, it's been waking up their daughter during her nap each day, and as any parent here can attempt [sic], disturbing naptime is a critically bad thing. So, Melissa [in-game character], if you're reading this (and I will seek some other method of transferring this message), please **DO NOT BUG THESE NICE PEOPLE**" (P582)*

### *Mutual Illusion of Control*

In most cases, players believed they had very little control over the outcome or direction of the game. One player astutely compared player control to the experience of an amusement park ride where you are given a degree of freedom in steering the vehicle but you are ultimately tethered to the track:

*"We control the game about as much as we control those Autopia go-carts in Disneyland" (P367).*

Thus, while players believed they controlled how they chose to play the game, they did not believe they influenced the game's outcome or trajectory.

One area of contention was whether the Puppetmasters controlled out-of-game tools adopted to support in-game tasks. Players who believed the Puppetmasters held complete control over both in-game and out-of-game aspects argued against the adoption of tools that were not implemented by the Puppetmasters:

*“I would think that if the PMs wanted / needed a in-game irc channel, that they would create one themselves, and that its not up to the players to do” (P236).*

Conversely, players who believed the Puppetmasters controlled the game but not the players were apt to support the adoption of out-of-game tools, particularly as a means to separate in-game and out-of-game discussions:

*“We just wanted to keep the curtain down on #beekeepers.... and forming a second channel just seemed like the easiest way to do this and keep IG/OOG separate” (P204).*

The extent to which players perceive the Puppetmasters to control the game therefore impacts the types of activities they are willing to engage.

## Discussion

Our study examined player perceptions of Puppetmasters in the ARG ILB. Our results suggest that player perceptions have an impact on gameplay. Players viewed the Puppetmasters as controlling influencers who engaged with players only tangentially, and who managed the flow and structure of the gameplay with very little player influence. Players believed that while they had control over how they played the game, they did not control the outcome of the storyline.

Players also viewed the Puppetmasters as external (or out-of-game) influencers who were not part of the gameplay and therefore should not be addressed in-game. How players chose to communicate with the Puppetmasters illustrates this point. Rather than communicating with them directly about game task challenges, players maintained the illusion of the game by using in-game characters as intermediaries.

Speculation about the Puppetmasters further impacted player decisions. This was particularly evident in how players interpreted information provided by the Puppetmasters. In the two examples provided in the paper, players' misinterpretations led them to pursue two incorrect avenues for obtaining information.

Our findings suggest that helping organize heterogeneous players without direct control is possible but comes at a cost. While designers can influence the direction of a game, players may misinterpret their intentions resulting in unintended actions. This, however, may not be detrimental to the gameplay; rather it may increase player enjoyment by sparking creativity and discussions.

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