

Playing with reality: Frame valuations and the 2012 alternate reality game

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Abstract

Alternate reality games (ARG) are a relatively new type of game that distributes game content across several media without explicitly identifying that content as part of a game. While players benefit from this aesthetically immersive experience the type of game has the potential to cause confusion over the status of its dispersed content as real or as part of a game. This thesis offers a case study of the *2012* game. The case is contextualized within the disciplines of media studies and games studies, in a wider digital culture where the ubiquity of technology converges to user experience design. A theoretical framework based on Charles S. Peirce's semiotic, supplemented by Erving Goffman's frame analysis and James J. Liszka's transvaluation theory is used to explain the ARG's problematic relation to the experience of reality.

Acknowledgements

Joseph Ransdell (2002) argued that the metaphysics of modernism separates things – Aristotlean substances – that bump against each other but never overlap. In other words, you are you, I am myself, and this thesis is itself another substance. According to this modern metaphysical position, the relationships between things count for little since they are without substance. Correspondingly, my relationship to this thesis either lies within me or within the thesis itself (or in some unknown ether of life). This view leaves us with the modern conundrum of meaning: should we privilege the author's intended meaning, or the reader's interpretation during the reading of this thesis? As Ransdell eloquently argues, Peircean semiotic allows for both, breaking down the modernist isolation chambers by suggesting that meaning, fallible and continuous as it is, is found in the manifestations experienced in the thesis. The meaning of this thesis is what you and I (and hopefully others) find in it. In other words, all of the above. My purpose in summarizing Ransdell's argument is to emphasize the relationships (although largely ignored by modern metaphysics) that have come together in creating this thesis. It is by no stretch solely my contribution. Aside from the scholars read and cited, and the professors having taught me, every aunt and uncle, every friend and acquaintance, every family member and stranger that has encouraged me have contributed to its "substance" through me. Like the butterfly that causes the tornado half-the-world away, every influence, every relationship I have experienced, have contributed to my composition process as it occurred. There are, of course, a great many people that I am thankful for their help in realizing this undertaking. I would like to thank Professors Peter Richter, Irwin Slopach, Brahm Canzer... Professors Kim Sawchuck, Leslie R. Shade, Peter C. van Wyck, Rosemarie Schade, Maurice Charland and Rob Danisch (Dr. D) for putting me on this path that I enjoy so much. Thanks go to Professors Bart Simon and Lynn Hughes (and classmates) for the opportunity to take part in the Digital Games Studies and Design course at Concordia University.

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Legend

A.I. – Artificial Intelligence
ARC – Aerospace Robotics Corp.
ARGs – Alternate reality game
Blog – web log
CF – Charlie Frost
CHA – Cultural and Historical Analysis
CPI – Cultural Preservation Initiative
CP – *Collected Papers* of Charles S. Peirce
CT – Corruption Theorist
EA – Electronic Arts
E.A.R.T.H. initiative – Education & Awareness Regarding Threats to Humanity
EP (1 or 2) – *Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Volume 1 or 2)
GPS – Global Positioning System
HCI – Human-Computer Interaction
HEI – Human Excellence Initiative
IGDA - International Game Developers’ Association
IHC – Institute for Human Continuity
IPerG – Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming
MMOG – Multi-Massive Online Game
NASA – North American Space Agency
NEM – *New Elements of Mathematics* by Charles S. Peirce
OSH – Operation Safe Haven
PG – Pervasive game
PoB – Performance of Belief (player “This Is Not A Game” mantra)
PM – Puppetmaster
PSA – Public service announcement
TINAG – This Is Not A Game
UG – Ubiquitous game
UX – User Experience
XEROX’s PARC – XEROX Palo Alto Research Center

Chapter One

2012 ARG Scare

In early November of 2009, NASA issued statements to reassure the world was not ending in 2012¹. The NASA statements appeared needed to dispel what seemed to be increasing belief in the cataclysmic prophecies attributed to an end of the Mayan calendar cycle. The Mayan long-count calendar is coming to a close at the winter solstice in 2012 with myths and prophecies about what will happen afterwards. In one of the statements, written by NASA senior research scientist, Don Yeomans, Yeomans rectified claims that a planet discovered by the Sumerians, called Nibiru, is headed toward Earth (“2012 - Scientific Reality Check” 2009). The statements further corrected the misguided and pseudoscientific claims that a galactic alignment is to occur on December 21st 2012, with catastrophic repercussions. The NASA statements also set right fears of an impending destructive rotation of the Earth’s magnetic polarity and an imminent threat from giant solar storms.

Given the context of highly reported environmental calamities such as tsunamis, hurricanes, mudslides and earthquakes and near continuous media reference to climate change, it’s understandable that a level of commotion could arise from the ancient doomsday prediction. However, it was the marketing ploy for the Sony Pictures’ film, *2012* (Emmerich 2009) that had generated a buzz around watercoolers and on social media websites. The creators of the dystopian blockbuster deployed an elaborate alternate reality game (ARG) in January of 2009 that was played over the year to promote their film.

¹ See “2012: Beginning of the End or Why the World Won’t End.” Frequently Asked Questions. NASA. 6 Nov. 2009. <http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html> ; “World won’t end soon, NASA assures.” *The Gazette*. 10 Nov. 2009; “2012 – A Scientific Reality Check.” Feature. NASA. 10 Nov. 2009 <http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/yeomans20091110.html>

Perhaps the ARG, a relatively new type of game not commonly discernable, succeeded in creating a fear in some of the plausibility that the doomsday prediction based on the Mayan calendar was a legitimate concern. A comparative situation to the variegated receptions² by listeners predisposed to fear of the 1938 broadcast of H.G. Wells' (1898) *War of the Worlds* on the relatively new medium of radio (Cantril 1940/2005). More likely though, the buzz generated was from people, like Yeomans, trying to dispel and convince the real (and imagined) dupes that the 2012 prophecy was a hoax. The relative few aware of (and playing) the game however, were enjoying the hype as these reactions contributed to the game's unfolding.

An alternate reality game privileges a narrative that is spatially and temporally distributed through a variety of media. It is what media theorist Henry Jenkins describes as a "transmedia story [that] unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole"(2006/2008, pp. 97-98). ARGs employ transmedia strategies but unlike Jenkins' conception that portrays each transmedia text as a completed story within the wider fictional universe, ARGs tend to disperse bits that are meaningful when brought together - resembling a transmedia jigsaw puzzle of sorts. More complete, a special interest group of the International Game Developers' Association (IGDA) offers this definition of ARGs:

Alternate reality games (ARGs) tell stories through narrative elements that are distributed across various platforms. These game variables are carefully concealed from players until appropriate moments determined by the game designer(s). Game play involves players working collaboratively through email, phone/sms contact, real-time interactions and extensive online engagement. Players generally react to narrative cues that are projected across numerous forms of media. These include media technologies that are not traditionally associated with games that, unlike ARGs, rely on a single platform for communication (eg console games). In doing so, ARGs make players step outside the restrictions of mono-genre game boundaries.

² Cantril argues that the broadcast's realism duped many listeners' existing "standards of judgment" (p. 68) that let them suppose it was a legitimate newscast. He argued there were many different types of receptions to the broadcast based on listeners' education, psychological and emotional disposition and listening context.

Instead of requiring the player to enter a fictional game world, ARG designers attempt to enmesh the game within the fabric of the player's real world by harnessing as many media technologies and interfaces as possible. By doing so, ARGs expand the frame for the game beyond the computer monitor or television screen, effectively making the entire world the 'game board' (Mez and Bono 2008).

Alternate reality games therefore use the conventions of some video game genres but translate these beyond the screen to the 'real' world³ (Figure 1). Video game designers, for instance, encode elements of the world (essentially, a fiction) to be seen and played on a screen with challenges that the player must overcome as either an avatar or a character, for the game to progress. ARGs borrow and invert this game logic from the adventure video game genre but translate it using several media and disperse it into the real world. Players can experience the game world as part of their life for the duration of the game.

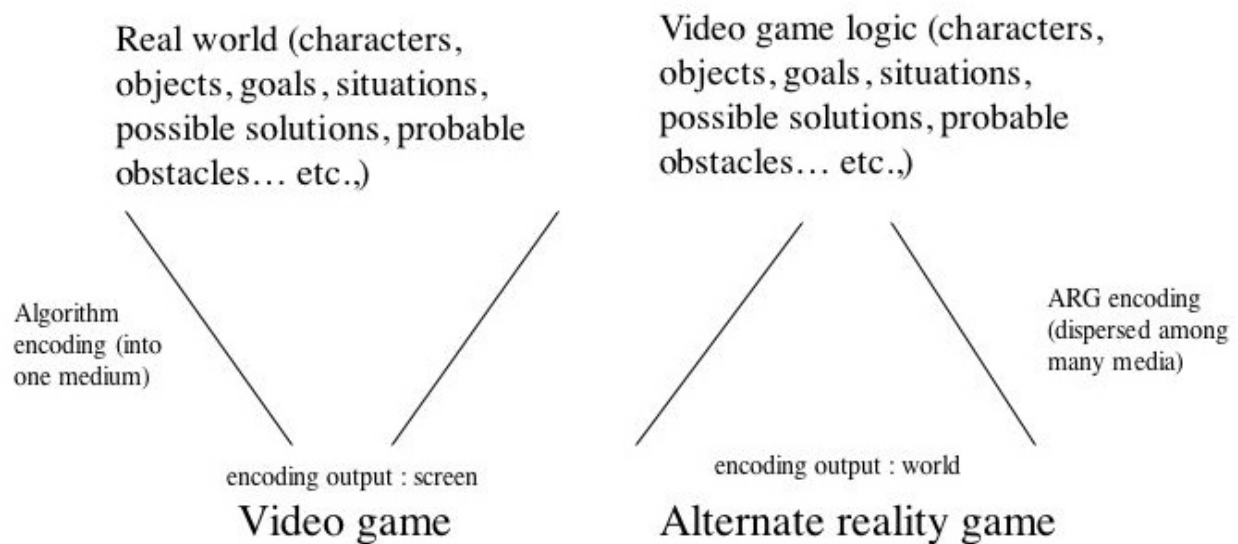


Figure 1: ARG inverse relation to video games

³ I present, here, an inversion of the video game's "violent" logic of "dicing of everything analog into the digital" that McKenzie Wark (2007: 023) refers to. This model should not be misconstrued with gameplay that requires player action.

Alternate reality games are a product of media and gaming transitions. Media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz, (1986) for example, argues how the use and development of electronic media has coincided with changes in social organization. He makes a convincing argument by recording the changes in social organization such as the blurring of notions of public and private and the separation of social from physical place, that technological advancement and our use of technology reinforce each other – amplifying proliferation. Greenfield (2006) has similarly argued that technological transition comes with changes in worldview that are sure to disturb the mores and conventions we have become accustomed to. My point is not to direct the reader to technological determinism of social behavior that is always present in society (Wyatt 2008). However, whereas Meyrowitz's wrote about the electronic transition that saw the proliferation of television and personal computers in every household, Greenfield writes about this transition from a point much further down-river. Greenfield argues of the transition from the proliferation of desktop computing to the gradual embedding of computers in everyday items with personal computers disappearing from within the environment. Manuel Castell's *Rise of the Networked Society* (1996) notes this ongoing transition of decentralized computing in the adoption of networking logics that have become evident with the increased use of the Internet.

Technological changes traverse disciplinary boundaries and games studies are no exception. We observe this in the importance of the gaming industry and the proliferation of not only games, but the manner in which they are played. With the general transition toward embedded computing and network logics come changes in the nature of product design away from merely material products to user experiences and interaction design (Buxton 2007). There is increasing focus on human computer interaction (HCI) and user experience (UX), from experience design away from material product design. Innovations in the form of ergonomic

controllers, Wiimotes, and Guitar Hero are exemplary, as are ARGs. This changed focus in design parallels games studies' focus from games as mere texts and material objects to a fascination with games as spaces of experienced interactivity. However, with such transitions challenging assumed knowledge, new capacities of literacy are required and new interrogations of what we thought we knew must be undertaken.

I therefore situate alternate reality games in a digital media and gaming, or, ubiquitous gaming (McGonigal 2006; 2008) context purposely to emphasize the transitioning digital ecology as the contextual space of ARGs⁴. McGonigal argues a concept of “ubiquitous gaming” as stemming from Mark Weiser’s (1991) coinage of ubiquitous computing. Her use of “ubiquitous games” and “pervasive games” requires an incumbent digital culture⁵. Having matriculated from the (digital) media networks of the last twenty years, ARGs host other traits such as instances of collective participation and the use of network logics, with media modalities in their expansions that stem from media proliferation.⁶

Since their debut in 2001, alternate reality games have been perceived as disruptive of common concepts of reality because of their concealment as games. That is, Gregory Bateson’s (1955) “metacommunication message” that should announce that ARGs are games is

⁴ Some qualification is perhaps required regarding my use of the contentious term “ubiquitous games” because of a disagreement over its meaning and the meaning of “pervasive games” fed by, what I conceive as, misunderstandings. It is not within the confines of this thesis that I wish to argue the semantics of both terms (For an overview of this debate see McCrory & Judge 2000; McGonigal 2003b; Montola 2005; Montola, Waern, and Nieuwdorp 2006; Nieuwdorp 2005; and McGonigal 2006, 2007b, 2008).

⁵ One reason for my use of ‘ubiquitous gaming’ in relation to ARGs is to emphasize the requirement of an established digital culture akin to Mark Weiser’s (1991) “ubiquitous computing.” And still another reason for upholding ubiquitous games stems from Peirce’s ‘Ethics of Terminology’ (EP 2.263) that calls for the prevention of vernacular usage of philosophical or specialized terms.

⁶ Some might disagree with this reasoning and may refer to games that were not considered digital, citing, for example, the movie *The Game* (Fincher 1997). I would suggest that Michael Douglas’ use of mobile phone and cable technology in the movie situates it in digital times with media networks. However, would this, or other examples, be considered ARGs if they do not require collective problem-solving? Given McGonigal’s (2008) classification, collective problem solving differentiates ARGs from pervasive games since a digital culture must exist.

deliberately “obscured” (McGonigal 2003a, p.2).⁷ Away from the watercooler discussions, the ARG genre has provoked discussion of its embeddedness; its “dissimulation” (McGonigal 2006; McGonigal 2008). The genre is said to destabilize the status of knowledge and our conceptions of authenticity through its partial erasure of game-marking traits and its use of authentic non-game media (McGonigal 2003a, 2003b; Taylor and Kolko 2003; Montola & Jonsson 2006). ARGs, in this way, are like a disguised secret agent among a crowd of people where only a few know of his existence. While those aware search for clues to catch him, others unaware and unsuspecting bump into him, having phatic (Jakobson 1960) exchanges, without ever doubting his disguised identity until his fake moustache becomes crooked. The genre has been described as “reality hacking” by some (Stenros et al., 2007, p. 124) and has been said to “co-opt” reality (McGonigal 2003b, p. 3; Taylor & Kolko, 2003, p. 503) and “exploit” public behavior (Benford et al. 2006, p. 427). It is what sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) calls an “exploitive fabrication” (103) since one group uses others in their fabrication that is troublesome to the interests of at least some of these others. “The computer-driven alternate reality the Beast created was make-believe, but every aspect of the player’s experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real” (McGonigal 2003b, p. 3). These expressions suggest the rather insidious status that ARGs have as a genre and their disruptive relationship with “reality.” Reality, of course, is never explicitly defined in these expressions because, as Goffman puts it, “we often use ‘real’ simply as a contrast term” (1997, p. 161). What is implied is that the game is phenomenologically experienced as real – what Goffman refers to as “engrossment” (p. 138). The metacommunication of the game that distinguishes it from the non-game realm is missing or

⁷ McGonigal (2003b) “erasure of any and all metacomunication” (p. 4) is later mitigated in (2003a) saying that following TINAG aesthetic, these games attempt “to obscure the metacommunications that might otherwise announce, ‘This is play’” (p. 2).

“muted” (Harvey 2006b, p. 6) until it is not. It is the ARG-genre’s problematic relationship to reality that this thesis explores.

Theoretical Location

The argument presented through this project is set in an interdisciplinary context of digital media studies and games studies (ubiquitous gaming). The proliferation of digital media technologies is paralleled with the development and growth of computer and video games⁸. Given alternate reality games’ recent beginnings, their development has been nothing but symbiotic⁹ with these fields. However, issues of modal fragmentation and meaning-reception in media studies hinder the understanding of the ARG, as do issues of game identification and meaning-location in games studies. The thesis therefore proposes semiotics as an underlying theoretical location that translates the issues found in each respective field into a common language, that of their signs.

Research Question

Given the difficulty in media studies and in games studies to suitably explain the effect generated by alternate reality games, this thesis provides a semiotic framework for answering the research question: *What explains the ARG’s problematic relation to the experience of reality?*

Operationalization

In order to address the ARG’s relationship to reality, I use a detailed analysis of a case based on the 2012 alternate reality game. The case studied is viewed from a semiotic perspective (Deely

⁸ Alexander Galloway (2006), for instance, refers to video games as an “action-based medium” (p. 3) in its own right. Mary Flanagan (2009), for her part, has argued that games are a social technology (p. 9).

⁹ I refer here to promotional ARGs like “I Love Bees,” and, “Last Call Poker” or Henry Jenkin’s (2006) example of the “transmedia” experience of “Metaurchins” as examples.

1990a). This methodological approach is appropriate given its consideration of interdisciplinary overlap between media studies and games studies, its ability to overcome the problems of the respective disciplines and its appreciation for varied audiences.

Structure

In the first half of the next chapter, I situate alternate reality games in a context juxtaposing exigencies in media studies and games studies. Developments in media studies, the proliferation of digital technologies and escalating cultural importance of computer and video games have contributed to a fertile milieu of “ubiquitous gaming” (McGonigal 2008) where ARGs have flourished. I provide a brief survey of media studies and games studies. The second part of chapter two is dedicated to an overview of the literature on ARGs in order to situate the present thesis and concludes with the rationale of this undertaking.

Chapter three offers the explanation of the conceptualization and theoretical framework used. The chapter provides an overview of Peircean semiotic, frame analysis (Goffman 1974) and transvaluation theory (Liszka 1990) that is used to conceptualize the object of study as well as its possible effects. During this chapter, I demonstrate how this framework overcomes the problems revealed in Chapter two. The chapter concludes with a conceptual understanding of alternate reality game.

In chapter four, I explain the methodology used. A comparative assessment of the methodology with other similar projects reveals its worthiness for the task at hand as well as its limitations. The chapter offers the steps taken to generate a satisfactory corpus of the 2012 ARG artifacts and the coding tools and procedures developed and used for the analysis

I then proceed to the analysis in the fifth chapter. Some of the artifacts collected are first presented to confirm that they constitute an alternate reality game. I then carry out the analysis of the case using the framework provided, presenting some preliminary results.

The sixth and final chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the results. In this chapter, I also present an evaluation of the thesis and its findings as well as possible directions for further research.

Ubiquitous games

Alternate reality games intersect the fields of media studies and digital games studies. Before reviewing the literature specific to alternate reality games, a brief historical background of media studies is warranted. A brief overview of games studies is subsequently presented, as is a survey of emerging gaming literacy, followed by a review of the literature pertinent to alternate reality games.

Media Studies Background

In the earlier days of modern media studies research¹⁰, Shannon-Weaver's model of communication was originally developed to increase the efficiency of telegraphic and radio communication and has identified media practices. As John Fiske (1990) explains, a conception of redundancy emerged as a possible solution to messages distorted by non-technical means. Redundancy, in a communicational sense, referred to "that which is predictable or conventional in a message" (p. 10) rather than the vernacular understanding of repetition. It was conceived that messages with higher levels of redundancy were more easily understood and had less tendency to be misunderstood. Conversely, "a message that is completely unexpected, or that is the opposite of what would be expected, will need saying more than once, often in different ways" (pp. 11-12).

Redundancy provides a method in clarifying the message to circumvent misunderstandings and the repetition of content, to increase transmission of its intended meaning in the receiver. Not only was redundancy important in reducing the cost of information in the emerging global telecommunication infrastructure (Winseck and Pike 2008) but Shannon and Weaver's research proved valuable to the war effort. By introducing and using procedural conceptions, those aware

¹⁰ I draw an arbitrary limit to modern mass media studies to exclude the study of rhetoric.

of the practices in use were better able to understand the sender's intended message. As a cost-effective (and meaning-effective) approach to disseminating information, Fiske (1990) subsequently links the growth of the advertising and the popular culture industries to this procedural approach to communication. In both industries, which rely heavily on mass media to disseminate their messages, redundancy facilitates efficient broad audience reception.

The increase in and proficiency in the use of media (we can speak here of mass media) lead to some changes in conceptualizing the media landscape. The audience reception movement in academia¹¹, for example, challenged the direct or procedural communication model, which resulted in a more nuanced appreciation of mass media reception. The former model denied the receiver any agency and was criticized for conceiving the audience as cultural dupes. Proponents of audience reception studies challenged the privileged status of the intended meaning of the sender. Meanings were thought to be negotiable and dependent on power structures within and out of the message text. To account for divergent meanings, texts were argued to be polysemic with no necessary, or fixed, meaning to the message sent. Debate ensued within media studies since critics argued audiences were not free to assume any meaning to messages. Condit, (1989) for example, questioned the idea of the polysemy of texts (cf. Fiske 1986; Hall 1980; Morley 1980; Radway, 1986). She conducted interviews on an abortion case of the television drama, *Cagney & Lacey* (1985), between pro and anti abortion viewers and found that

There were, nonetheless, important elements in their responses which lead me to suggest that the term 'polyvalence' characterizes these differences better than the term 'polysemy'. Polyvalence occurs when audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations (p. 106).

¹¹ See Fish (1980), Lewis (1991), and Atkinson & Hammerly (1994).

Condit's argument suggests that a message's denotated meaning – the meaning most likely intended by the sender and which employs redundancy – is received by the audience but its interpretability into something meaningful is not exclusively found in the media text nor exclusively found in the audience member.

Concurrently, the notion of who constructs the text and the static conception of the context were also challenged. In his analysis of the fragmentation of contemporary culture brought upon by an increase in broadcast media outlets, Michael C. McGee (1990) has argued that meaning is not arrived at in such a linear fashion. He puts it this way:

the fragmentation of our American culture has resulted in a role reversal, making interpretation the primary task of speakers and writers and text construction the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics (p. 274).

Context, for McGee, is integral to the meaning of texts¹². Texts, he argued, are not finished products in need of interpretation but are “understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made,” referred to as, “fragments” (p. 279). He argues that fragments of texts (and contexts, themselves texts,) are pieced together to generate meaning.

Condit's and McGee's arguments underline Mihael Bakhtin's earlier arguments on intertextuality¹³. Texts are not simple, linear, isolated artifacts but include various influences from which they derive and constitute their meaning. Bakhtin (1986/2010) argued that texts are always composed of such varying influences. As he put it, “there are not nor can there be any

¹² See also Fish (1980) “Is there a text in this class?”

¹³ Intertextuality depending on the source, is attributed either to Bakhtin or to Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin's (cf. Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, p. 378) arguments on intersubjectivity lead to the new coinage and concept of intertextuality that Kristeva argued. Gerard Genette (1997), for his part, introduced several types of ‘transtextualities.’ See Chandler (2004, p. 203), Colapietro (1993, pp. 122-3), Kristeva (1980), and Petrilli and Ponzio (2005, p. 378) in the bibliography.

pure texts” (p. 105). He believed in the “interconnection of all ideas (since all are realized in utterances)” (p. 104). No text is an island for the speaker must have learned it from someone to be able to use it in a manner that another will understand its meaning. He argued that

any speaker [...] is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others’ – with which his given utterance enters into a kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (p. 69)

Intertextuality consists in the interconnection of complete texts and text fragments which all have a history before a present text is written or read¹⁴.

More recently, media scholar, Henry Jenkins (2006), notes a similar tendency in his discussion of convergence culture. Jenkins argues that social and technological changes in media and their uses have changed how people interact with media. The separation of audience from producer of media content is no longer evident since audiences have the technology and desire to produce content while producers (commercial media outlets) now monitor their audience behavior and tendencies. Jenkins links the proliferation of media (access to technologies and content with the production of technologies and content) to a reduced dependence on in-medium redundancy:

The old Hollywood system depended on redundancy to ensure that viewers could follow the plot at all times, even if they were distracted or went out to the lobby for a popcorn refill during a crucial scene. The new Hollywood demands that we keep our eyes on the road at all times, and that we do research before we arrive at the theater (p. 106).

¹⁴ The dialogic action of texts in which intertextuality consists is analogous to Harold Bloom’s central argument in his *Anxiety of influence* (1973). In it, Bloom argues that the poet becomes inspired to write poetry as a result of reading other poets, yet the poet develops anxiety over his originality due to their influence on his work.

What is implied by Jenkins is that there is a change in the audience's resources¹⁵ and *new Hollywood's* concurrence to gratify them by changing predictable formats and circumventing traditional dramatic cues. He defers to digital literature scholar Janet Murray's (1997) "navigational viewer" (cf. Jenkins 2006/2008, p. 121) and EA's executive, Neil Young's, "additive comprehension" (p. 127) in explaining this change. In her seminal exploration of the evolution of media, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray (1997) demonstrates the tendency of media to become transparent and used innovatively once their use has become culturally normalized. Murray introduces the notion of a "navigational viewer" that enjoys piecing together different parts of a story making multiple arrangements with the pieces (p. 257).

In the literature above, the reader may notice the gradual trajectory of media messages, from being conceived as bits of information in a process of efficient transmission without extrinsic meaning, to meanings found in the structures of production and consumption of the message, to the fragmentation and intertextual meaning-making of media messages, to the emerging interest in transmedia research. This trajectory lays the foundation from where alternate reality games have surfaced. Media studies offer insight into the media elements of the genre, but as we will see in the next section on Games Studies, the new field challenges these "colonizing" (Aarseth 2001) textual approaches.

Games Studies Background

Games Studies as a field of inquiry is relatively new. An exhaustive survey of the definitions of games is beyond the scope or interest of this thesis. Attempts at defining what a game is at an ontological level has virtual become a game of its own. Nevertheless, I will survey the main

¹⁵ Examples of changing audience resources include the Internet and increased specialty channels like TMZ.

contributions in order for the reader to understand the problematic nature of games and to indulge my arguments approach to games as relational and teleological.

Perhaps the most cited work on games, digital or otherwise, is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938). In it, Huizinga argued that playing games holds a privileged place in the evolution of civilization. His identification of the characteristics of play is worth repeating here:

a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world a disguise or other means (p. 13).

Not only is play a pre-cultural phenomenon for Huizinga, it has helped established civilization by providing a space where cultural norms and mores can be practiced and understood without serious consequences. Huizinga wrote well-before digital media and video games yet his most important contribution is in describing the concept of the magical circle of play which continues to be cited, even if contentiously¹⁶. He argues,

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off before hand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the Temple, stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (p. 10)

The importance of this passage should not be undervalued. Isolating the object 'game,' in this approach is dependent on the concept of the magic circle. His account holds a dualistic bias that locates play as of the mind, with the "consecrated spot" undistinguished from the physical

¹⁶ For a better understanding of the different views on the magic circle, see Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Walther 2003; Niewdorp 2005; Montola 2005; Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Arsenault and Perron 2009; Consalvo 2009b included in the bibliography.

environment. Yet these ideally or materially marked off are all “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” That is, they do not negate the rules of the ordinary world¹⁷ (cf. Consalvo 2009a) but are spaces identified as purposely constituted for a particular type of action. Isolating the object ‘game,’ in this approach is dependent on the concept of the magic circle.

Roger Caillois, (1958) another prominent games scholar offers in his book *Man, Play, and Games*, a distinction between child’s play – the free, imaginative, unorganized behavior without wining or losing conditions he refers to as “*paida*,” and the organized, rule-based playful behavior found in games that he calls “*ludus*.” Both terms are best understood as a spectrum with *paida* and *ludus* occupying the extremities. Among this spectrum of play, he identifies four descriptive sub-categories: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), andilinx (vertigo). For Caillois, the manifestation of each respective sub-category influences the game’s experience. He therefore defines a game as play that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive yet regulated and make belief (pp. 9-10)

In *The Grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*, Bernard Suits (1978/2005) offers an analysis of games in a dialogic parody of Plato’s *Phaedo* using the Aesop’s fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Rather than proposing a definition of a game, to which its instances would be compared against, Suits argues that there are three necessary conditions for an activity to count as a game: a goal to be achieved regardless of its being part of a game, what he calls the prelusory goal; rules that inhibit the most efficient means of achieving the prelusory goal; and a “lusory attitude” – a voluntary willingness to submit to the rules in order to attempt to achieve

¹⁷ Consalvo (2009b), who has studied games through cheating, argued Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle is a fallacy (does not exist) because players use out-of-game information and extra-game contexts and knowledge to inform their play. I don’t interpret Huizinga’s concept as excluding the ‘ordinary world’ but rather as a space ‘within’ it. In this sense, the playing of a game includes the possibility of cheating using out-of-game information even if the rules of the ‘temporary world’ asks players not to.

the goal. Suits uses content analysis to show the similarities in experience of what he calls games, however, this method has been challenged and dismissed by several philosophers (p. 9).

The impossibility of isolating the action constitutive of play (qua game) ontologically has allowed recent game scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) to argue that the rhetorical approach of inquiry determines the object: “The rhetorics of the play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than study directly by them” (p. 8). He provides an analysis of seven rhetorics of play, including play as child behavior and rhetorics of play as animal behavior. These “ideological rhetorics” (p. 8) as he refers to them, are like the colored lens of the researchers, each with their own colors and each with their version of the object based on this lens. Sutton-Smith concludes:

because forms of play, like all other cultural forms, cannot be neutrally intercepted, it is impossible to keep ambiguity from creeping into the relationship between how they are perceived and how they are experienced (p. 216).

His argument is that researcher bias like the field or discipline the researcher comes from, determines what is valuable and what is excludable in research on play and therefore taints the results with relativity.

It is perhaps for this reason that in the first issue of the *International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Espen Aarseth (2001) is so adverse to the “colonising attempts” (sic) from other fields and called for the creation of this new discipline or field¹⁸ for the study of video and computer games. Aarseth is weary of games being studied as narratives or simple media texts. “Games are both object and process; they can’t be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played.” (2001). His argument follows that of Gonzalo Frasca (1999; 2003) who advocated the creation of ludology and its separation from narratology:

So far, the traditional -- and most popular -- research approach from both the

¹⁸ Whether he conceives games studies as a discipline or as a field is not determined as Aarseth uses both terms.

industry and the academy has spent a considerable [amount of energy treating] video games as extensions of drama and narrative. While this notion has been contested (especially by Espen Aarseth) and generated a sometimes passionate debate, the narrative paradigm still prevails. My goal in this essay is to contribute to the discussion by offering more reasons as to why the storytelling model is not only an inaccurate one but also how it limits our understanding of the medium and our ability to create even more compelling games. The essential argument I will explore is that, unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation (2003, pp. 221 — 222)

The debate between the virtues of using a narratological approach or a ludological approach continues to plague the field of games studies. On the one hand, and contrary to Aarseth's insistence, games can be read as texts and listened to in a meaningful manner. Yet, as Frasca (1999) puts it, doing so "limits our understanding" of the genre. Much of the contempt games studies scholars hold against narratological approaches, such as semiology, lies in the separation of the real and the fiction when both are present in games, to an extent. While games can and many times do hold important narrative components, the action of the player occurs in real life.

The emphasis in the experiential nature of game playing¹⁹ is behind the ludological turn games studies scholars profess. According to Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig Peuter (2009) this shift in focus to experience is a development of *Empire*. (Hardt and Negri 2000) In their neo-Marxist view of the place of video games in *Empire*, Dyer-Witherford and Peuter argue that immaterial and affective experiences are at the heart of console and computer video games. They argue that digital games, are of the "affective" type of "immaterial labor" that Hardt and Negri suggest:

Health services, for example, rely centrally on caring and affective labor, and the entertainment industry is likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affect. This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction,

¹⁹ The focus on experience is not confined to games studies either. There is a similar 'turn' in the design industry with a shift to experience design (see Buxton's *Sketching User Experiences* 2007) and in what Gilmore and Pine (1999) have termed the "experience economy."

excitement or passion. Categories such as ‘in-person services’ or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labor, but what is really essential to it are the creation and manipulation of affect. Such affective production, exchange, and communication are generally associated with human contact, but that contact can be either actual or virtual, as it is in the entertainment industry (p. 293).

As industrial society matures and transforms into an informational economy, processes of post-modernization have a qualitative impact on labor. Whether video game play can be seen as a type of labor is beyond the scope of this paper²⁰ but the point is that the one of the impacts of *Empire* is a focus on the manipulation of affect, which they propose as being done through video games.

The shift in focus to affective, experiential elements in games studies has supported distancing games studies from narrative or textual approaches. The representative elements of games, such as the story or the game’s mimicry of real phenomena, are deemed secondary to the interaction between the player(s) and the game, where meaning is produced. It has even been argued that games studies are in a post-representational period²¹ where textual methods and structuralism are of little use.²² For example, David Myers has written on computer games and semiotic on various occasions. (1991; 1999; 2003; 2006) Myers uses a bricolage of semiotic theories including biosemiotic and structural literary semiotics. Unfortunately, his arguments are plagued with the problem of infinite regression of representation – a problem he is aware of (1999, p. 153; 2006, p. 49). Myers posits representation as dyadic and semiotic as “that which represents something else” (1999, p. 152). In doing so, he does not account for divergent meanings in the experience of computer games.

²⁰ Professor Bart Simon made an interesting argument on the relationship of videogames, banality, and the grind, that suggests some gaming should be construed ‘outside’ of a capitalist perspective.

²¹ Professor Bart Simon, classnotes. 2010.

²² Of course, this assumes representation to be re-presentation; a generic copy of something original whereas in Peircean semiotic, “representation” is a vital element in the semiotic process. The difference will be argued further below.

The debate has led to arguing this issue based on each approach's treatment of interactivity, which itself is a problematic concept given electronic (hyperlinked) texts. Lev Manovich (2001) argues old media and art can be understood as interactive, making the concept unhelpful (cf. Arsenault and Perron 2009; Galloway 2006 n. 4, p.128) Bernard Perron (2002) argues that it is not just about the accomplishing of interactive tasks, Caillois' *ludus*, which narrative also holds but also the immersion of *paidia*. He suggests exchanging interactivity with gameplay (Perron 2002, p. 308) as a more useful concept already in use.

Others, cognizant of this problem, have tried moving past it by focusing on various elements specific to video games, design rules being the predominant focus (Salen and Zimmerman 2005; Juul 2005). Jesper Juul (2005) focuses on the rules in games and the fictional world that constitute them. He notes that games have a relationship to what is outside the game but his claim that games are *half-real* seems to miss the point that fiction is reality subject to rules as much as games are.²³ Alexander Galloway (2006) defines games as an activity defined by rules in order to reach some goal. He circumvents analysis of games however, and focuses on "gaming" – the interplay between organic and inorganic machines (p. 2).

Bo Kampman Walther (2003), adding to Caillois from a more recent technological context, argues the orders of complexity between non-play, play, and game from a systems theory perspective. Identifying Caillois' *paidia* and *ludus* in terms of relations as "play-mode" and "game-mode" respectively, Walther's model (Figure 2) hints at the relationality of games. In similar fashion and closer to our subject, Eva Nieuwdorp (2005) takes-up the concept of the magic circle reconceived as the interface for pervasive games using Walther's approach.

²³ Juul argues that games are made of rules (real) in a fictional space (not-real) and are therefore merely half real. My position is that rules are real, including the rule that makes fictional space possible: the rule that it cannot be real. A position I find pertinent in the context of this thesis on ARGs.

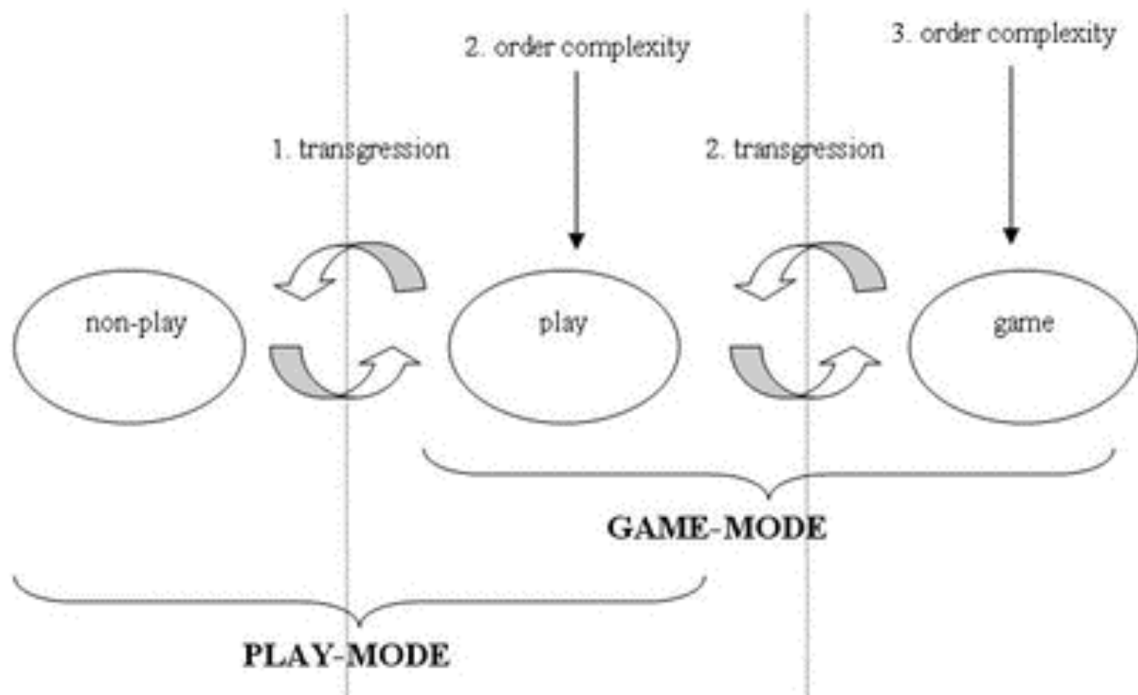


Figure 2: Walther's diagram of "play-mode" and "game mode."

In Walther's (and by extension, Nieuwdorp's) conception we see how games are relational and not monadic. That is, players' experience of games is determined by their actions with regard to a game. The game is not a plastic box with a microchip nor is it the algorithmic code of the console. Conceiving it so is a materialist fallacy. A game is not a monadic object identifiable a priori. It becomes a game as a player experiences it, transgressing orders of complexity with his purposeful action. Similar to media studies there remains contention regarding the location of the meaning of a game: in the game designer or the player. Reference to the game as a material object is problematic because materialism cannot account for the playability of the game that is essentially required. Just as problematic is the insistence of games studies to treat particular instances of games as games but not acknowledging that the definition of games comes from generality (general experience).

Gamer / audience conventions

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003, p. 145).

While the academic isolation of what a game is is being contested, gaming nonetheless experiences growth in social circles (Edery and Mollick 2008). Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) remind us that metaphors allow us to understand and experience one thing in terms of another. In line with social constructionism (Burr 1995/2003) the way a person thinks, the very concepts that provide meaning for him, are provided by the language he uses. (p. 8) The implications are important because the language used draws attention to something while hiding something else. Metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) argue, create a reality rather than a way to conceive of a preexisting reality. For example, in *Gamer Theory*, Mackenzie Wark (2007) proclaims the advent of the gamer. “Games are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace” (020). Wark uses gaming as a metaphor for life, translating the world into gamespace, rendering all actions gamic, and transforming everyone into a gamer. In this metaphor of gamespace, media are playfully manipulated. However, Wark’s metaphor omits the reality that not everyone is a gamer, or at least is aware that he or she is a gamer. As Ian Hacking (1999/2003) reminds us of social constructions, “[they] need not have existed, or need not be at all as [they are]” (p. 6).

Of course, the “life as game” metaphor is nothing new. Stephen Carse (1987) also conceptualized life as a game. Carse depicted existence as a long and “infinite game” with “finite games” that one accomplished throughout one’s life. The two perspectives have some overlap. For example, Carse’ infinite games, like Wark’s SimEarth, are both conceived as “sandbox” games, (Juul 2005, p. 67) that is, without a win condition. However, what is different between

them – and what Wark and this thesis intimate – is that the cultural context of game playing has changed, and its players with it.

Games scholar Eric Zimmerman (2008) asks "what does the world look like from the point of view of gaming?" (p. 24) We have briefly discussed this perspective in the works of Carse and Wark above, but Zimmerman's point is to argue that "gaming literacy" is becoming necessary for meaningfulness in the changing cultural context. He describes this new literacy through three interacting elements: the understanding of complex and changing interrelations and functions; engendering a ludic-based attitude that sees the world's structures as opportunities for playful engagement; and an openness to design as a space where meaning can emerge but is not determined (pp. 27-28). ARGs require the "gaming literacy" to which Zimmerman refers. ARGs demonstrate "the mischevious [sic] double-meaning of 'gaming,' (p. 25) the playful activity and the exploitive act of taking advantage of others.

My point is not to suggest that gaming has become a way of life but to show an increasingly popular manner in which games are related to experience. This reveals a gaming habit or convention in the use of extra-game or unnecessarily ludic media. Not everyone is a gamer, but the relationship to video games, spoiling, literacies lie on a continuum from hardcore proficiency-seeking massively multi-player online game (MMOG) power gamers (Taylor 2009) to the middle-level casual gamers (Juul 2009) to non-gamers with unlimited shades between depending on a person's acquired proficiencies, natural abilities and access to media symbols in general.

More pertinent, transmedia specialist, Christy Dena, (2007) wrote an online essay arguing why ARGs should not be considered hoaxes. She argues that ARGs and hoaxes share a "creative heritage" but are not as similar as to call them synonymous. While the aesthetic of presenting

something false as reality is common to both, Dena argues that ARGs do not intend to deceive like hoaxes, making the two genres different. The *Blair Witch Project* (1999), for example, was portrayed as a real documentary. It was nonetheless transmedia in that it used a website²⁴ and a book²⁵ to corroborate this portrayal, but its intention was to deceive its audience in accepting its status as real to ensure suspension of disbelief. Her essay reveals how producers' removal of references to the fictional nature of the ARG is not done to deceive but to entice participants²⁶. ARGs players, she argues, tend to be proficient in new media literacies including the sharing of information with others seeking a common goal, the skills to assess information credibility, and the ability to network (Dena 2007). These players find the cues that refer to fiction. Dena cites the example of *the Beast's* (2001) rabbit hole in the trailer for the film *A.I.* (Spielberg, 2001) and the fact that the game narrative unfolded forty years into the film's setting. These neo-literate players at times find faults in the game but perform as if they hadn't in order to maintain the narrative (McGonigal 2003a). In this sense, Dena argues that unlike a hoax which requires people to consume it as reality, ARGs ask players to participate in maintaining the illusion.

After some reaction to this first essay, Dena (2008b) presented a follow-up essay. She sets out to answer four questions regarding ARGs and hoaxing, all of which deserve our attention: are ARGs hoaxes, why are they referred to as hoaxes, why are some experienced as hoaxes and why most are not experienced as hoaxes? To the first question, "Are ARGs hoaxes?" she answers no because the puppetmaster's intention in creating content that is phenomenologically real is not to deceive but to entertain. For the second question, she posits

²⁴ Found at <http://www.blairwitch.com/>

²⁵ Stern, D.A. 1999. *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier*. New York: Penguin Books.

²⁶ A practice made popular by Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*. Anna McCarthy argues that the ethical implications of this form of deception of participants influenced social scientist Stanley Milgram's experiments where subjects were deceived into thinking they had electrocuted another participant by following commands, then told they had not. See McCarthy's (2005) "Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt and me: Postwar social science and the 'First Wave' of reality TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*, (eds.) Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette. Pp. 23-41.

several answers. ARGs, according to Dena (2008b), are sometimes called hoaxes because of a lack of terminological differentiation on the part of the utterer. Other times, they can be referred to as such simply for dramatic effect. She notes that some ARGs have been experienced as hoaxes which have “[tarred] all ARGs with the same brush.” But the main reason she argues why they are referred to as hoaxes is that some people equate the TINAG aesthetic as a method of hoaxing. She argues

There is this belief that ARGs have absolutely NO FICTIONAL CUES both inside the content and around the content. But it seems that drilling down and looking at why most ARGs have not been experienced as ARGs renders that TINAG assumption false.

In answering why some ARGs are experienced as a hoax, Dena suggests that sometimes people will “not distinguish a work of fiction without paratextual cues.”²⁷ She explains,

When I look at videos and websites of works that have been regarded as hoaxes (ARGs and non-ARGs) it is pretty clear to me that they are a work of fiction. But that is because I have developed fiction-identifying skills.

Dena’s point is not that she can tell the difference, but that fiction-identifying skills are learned. She admits that not everyone has this same level of efficacy when encountering an ARG. Dena argues that most ARGs are not experienced as hoaxes because there remain cues to the ARG’s fictionality. She refers to the importance of in-content cues and extra-content cues (paratextual). We observe a historical example of this importance in Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s (1999) account of Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s biographic work, *Marbot* (1981). Hildesheimer, a German writer, wrote a well-received biography of Mozart. Several years later, he published the biography of a fictional gentleman named Marbot, employing a similar style and literary conventions. Schaeffer

²⁷ Gerard Genette (1984) developed the concept of “paratext” as the information outside of the text itself, but that helps shape the readers’ understanding of it, such as its title or its genre (cf. Consalvo 2009a, Chapter 1, Section 1, para. 8). Consalvo (2009a) uses the term in her analysis of games to include the game industry advertisements, strategy guides, gaming magazines, blogger reviews along with any useable information in the game’s periphery. (Chapter 1, Section 5, para. 2)

(1999, p. 111) points out that the concealment of paratextual markers had readers convinced that Marbot actually existed. More poignantly, without these cues, who can say definitively if *Marbot* (1981) was a failed work of fiction or a hoax (Schaeffer 1999, p. 136).

Dena notes two “in-content clues” that ARGS tend to show is their setting in known fictional worlds and their use of “unrealistic statements of truth.” She gives the example of The Metacortex ARG which was based on the software company in the film, *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999) “players should pick up the hint that this existing fictional software company that self-proclaims to be the world’s leading software company.” However, in-content clues may be overlooked or masked. Dena also suggests some paratextual clues may reveal fictionality. Here, she refers to the need to access ARGS through existing fictional worlds (or the inability to access the ARG without entering an existing fictional world), or through other player.

It is clear that there is often an early clue that it is a work of fiction within the content (eg: set in a fictional world), but due to issues of judgement it is perhaps better to rely on the path people take to an ARG, how they discover it. That is: accessing it through an existing fiction or through players. In many cases even the ARG community benefit from the fiction paths that PMs create. So, as we can see, the belief that the TINAG philosophy means PMs take out all the clues to fictionality (which is something I argued for a while) is false. However, the cues to fictionality are in many cases outside the work, in paths created by PMs and players (Dena 2008).

According to Dena a hoax must have the intention of deceiving those for whom it is targeting. More importantly, it brings two things in contact without pre-existing conventions for identifying. ARGS do not subscribe to the hoax genre. On the contrary - are not intended to deceive its target audience. However, ARGS have their own rule, the TINAG aesthetic, which shares an important relationship with the audience of the genre. Let us look first at the genre’s prospected audience before addressing its design philosophy.

42 Entertainment, the company that produced some of the first and most successful ARGs (*the Beast*, Lee, 2001; *I Love Bees* 2004; Peters 2005), portrays the world as its platform. The company's conception of the audience for its campaigns is thus a valuable starting point in understanding the ARG audience (Figure 3). The company designates three audience types, based on their level of participation: casual participants are described as the broadest audience type with a modest level of interaction, usually online, that tend to look for a guide to explain the ARG and engage with it through this relative passive consumption; active participants are the audience members that will engage with the ARG experience at their own pace but will interact with the game more than the mere passive audience members; finally, enthusiastic participants are "deeply engaged in the experience" with a high level of interaction with the content, online and offline, and who may provide more content to the experience. (see Figure 1; below). Several other ARG audience conceptions use similar audience stratification (Szulborski 2005; whitepaper 2006; Brackin 2008; Dena 2008;).

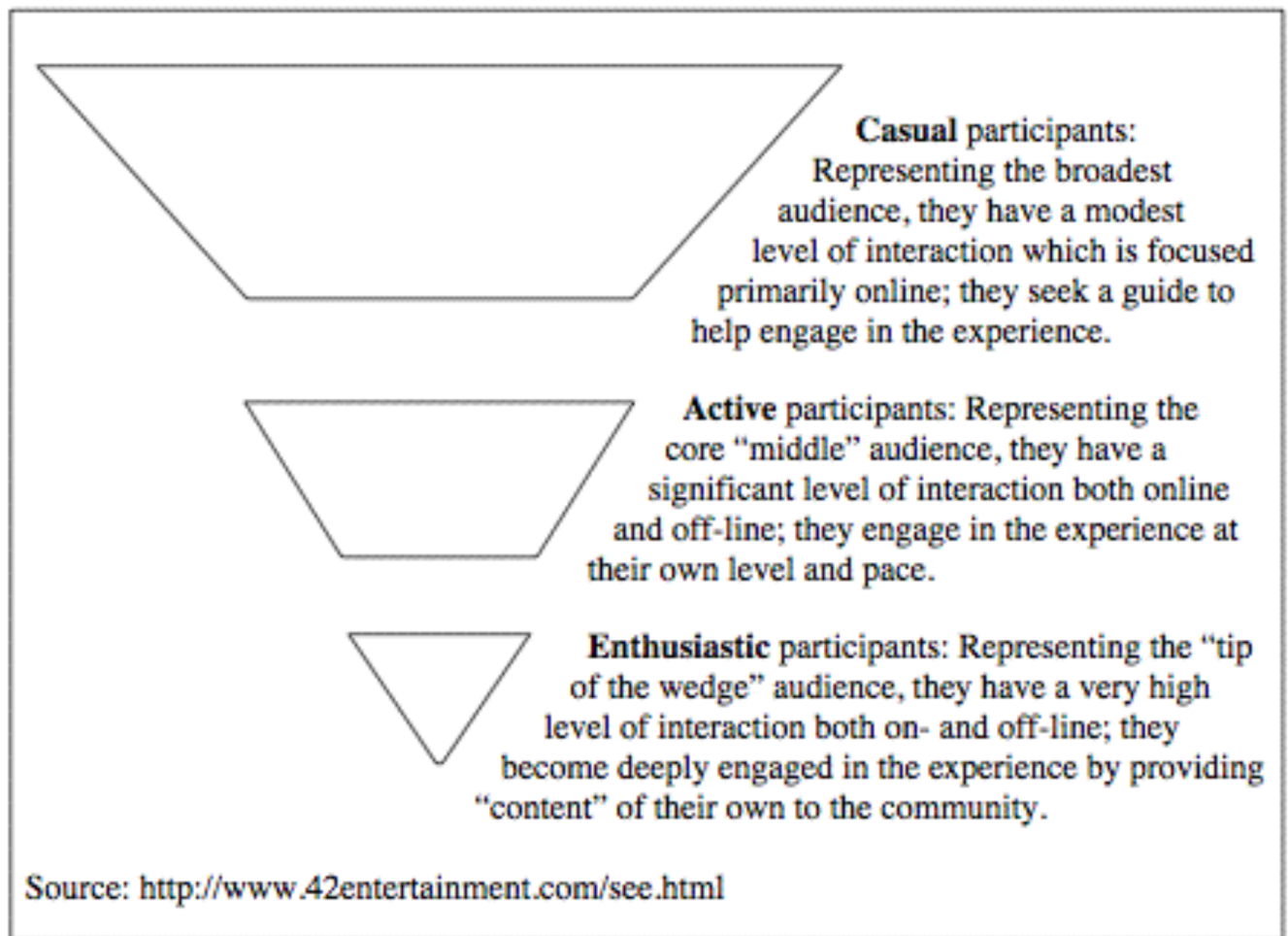


Figure 3: 42 Entertainment’s conception of the audience.

The conception of the audience that informs 42 Entertainment’s creative campaigns reflects a wider tendency of involvement. For example, in her book, *Cheating* (2009a), Mia Consalvo explores the behavior and belief of players with regards to cheating. Her work suggests that various levels of participation are also tied to the audience intention to interact with game texts. Through ethnographic research on *Final Fantasy XI* (Square Enix 2002), she notes how players seek to develop “gaming capital,”²⁸ essentially, the knowledge, experience and rank of a player that is accrued in the player’s interactions with games, information about games and

²⁸ Consalvo (2009a, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 3) reworks Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “social capital” – the non-economic forms of knowledge and skills that allow an individual to gain a higher status within a community – and applies it to the resources and abilities a player amasses through play, research in game guides and publications, and taking part in the gaming subculture.

the industry, and other players (Consalvo 2009a, Chapter 1). Gaming capital is amassed as players learn the intricacies of the game through play, or, through the abundance of “paratextual” information (Chapter 1, Section 1, para. 5-6). Consalvo delves into this side of the industry to show the many resources outside of the game that (active and enthusiastic) players access like gaming magazines, strategy guides, and mod chips, and how this normative behavior influences the ethics of gameplay.

For the more motivated players, gameplay is no longer merely about what is on the screen but includes a broad spectrum of information and experiences out of the game, what Gerard Genette (1980) calls “extra-diegetic.” He referred to the world of characters in a story as diegetic compared to the world of the narrator which he termed extra-diegetic. The paratext industry shapes gamer expectations. Players can look up paratextual information, such as cheat codes of a given game either online or through magazines and books, in order to circumvent the grind – the repetitive, uninteresting and purely instrumental gameplay to level-up faster.

The searching for extra-content or paratextual clues is not new. Video games have a history of secret or hidden messages. In 1979, Atari released the game *Adventure* which contained, what is now referred to as a virtual Easter egg (Consalvo 2007; Dyer-Witherford and Peuter 2009). At the time, the company did not credit programmers for their work on games. According to Dyer-Witherford and Peuter (2009), the company refused to credit programmers in order to circumvent labor disputes and increased production costs (p. 11). Warren Robinett, the [lead] programmer of *Adventure* hid a secret message – a credit to himself as programmer – in the code such that only when players performed a specific action, the message was revealed. The game was released without Atari’s knowledge of the virtual Easter egg, and the game documentation therefore did not hint at its existence.

Nor is the search for paratextual clues isolated to the motivated among the gaming community. Jenkins' (2006) account of participatory culture and the "spoilers'" search for information on the television reality show, *Survivor*,²⁹ is a prime example. Hardcore fans, called "spoilers," try to obtain accurate information on the secretive denouement of the show where contestants are eliminated periodically until the finale. A community of *Survivor* enthusiasts share whatever tidbit of information and share theories about who will be left and in what order participants will be voted off.

Consistent with these arguments, Dena (2008) introduces the embedded structures promote different levels of entry and interaction with the game as "tiering." Tiers are materially observable points of entry inside a work or across various works (p. 42). As she explains, " tiers provide separate content to different audiences and in doing so facilitate a different experience of a work or world" (p. 43). They can be "producer-tiers" designed to produce player action or "player-created tiers" that complement producer-tiers, which Dena attributes to "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006). Tiers can be used to attract players according to audience preferences of media, artform, skill or knowledge-set, level of interaction. Dena further classifies tiers according to player type: from casual to hard-core; puzzle players, story players, and real world players (i.e. powerplays). Her argument extends the view of the audience (Figure 3) proposed by 42 Entertainment, an advertising company acclaimed for its promotional ARGs.

Alternate Reality Games

A genre has a set of characteristics identifying it. Insofar as a phenomenon has these characteristics and does not stray, it can be identified as being of a certain genre. A phenomenon

²⁹ Jenkins also analyzes a transmedia experience called *Metaurichins*, which has been referred to as an ARG

that self-identifies with a particular genre, either explicitly through statement/claim or implicitly by adhering to the genre's characteristics, is making a promise (Jost 2003): that it will satisfy the exigencies of the genre as well as the expectations of the players which ensue from the promise. In order to confirm that the *2012* movie experience was, in actuality, an alternate reality game, we must set out the traits located in the genre.

Narrative and Ludic Components³⁰

Alternate reality games have a dominant narrative element (Szulborski 2005). The game's narrative is scattered across several texts and media, typically blogs, game websites, billboards, etc., where the back-story and the characters are introduced with the real-time unfolding action of the game (Whitepaper 2006, pp. 32-33). Accordingly, the narrative is not contained in a diegesic package but includes extra-diegesic elements. Martin and Tom Chatfield (Whitepaper, 2006) explain,

Alternate Reality Games take the substance of everyday life and weave it into narratives that layer additional meaning, depth, and interaction upon the real world. The contents of these narratives constantly intersect with actuality, but play fast and loose with fact, sometimes departing entirely from the actual or grossly warping it - yet remain inescapably interwoven (p. 6).

The narrative is not only dispersed across texts and media channels, it is also diffused with fiction and non-fiction. Its ludic aspect is produced by this juxtaposition (Jost 2003). It relies on audiences' ability to solve and link cryptic intertextual and intermedial clues that may appear non-fictional. While intermedial clues are hidden among several types of media such as websites, radio, telephone, newspaper, mobile phones, and so forth, intertextual clues like resembling phrases and text structure are disseminated among more than one text. Unlike

³⁰ The merging of narrative and ludic traits under one section is not intended as an agreement with the wider debate on games. My purpose in combining the two is merely to reflect their reliance on one-another in ARGs.

traditional narrative types where the audience is invited to observe and enjoy the development of a plotline, ARGs position the reader as a potential character within an unfolding story that does not explicitly identify itself as a story. The attentive audience is given clues and instruction unidentified as such. If followed however, these clues and instruction move the story forward and the audience is rewarded with another segment of the plot with other clues and instructions. The genre takes advantage of the increasingly fragmented media landscape to inconspicuously seed its clues thereby concealing its existence to the casual audience.

Collective nature of ARGs

An important consideration is offered in the literature regarding the genre's collective nature (Dena 2008, McGonigal 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2008; Taylor and Kolko 2003; Whitepaper 2006). McGonigal (2003b; 2008) mobilizes Pierre Levy's (2007) notion of "collective intelligence" to underline the aggregate variety of knowledges required to solve the diversity of puzzles. She notes the collective identity that forms when player generated groups, like the Cloudmakers, form. She draws attention to the established norms for behavior within the community, "feigned belief in the game therefore becomes essential to acceptance in the community of players, and an outwardly directed performance of belief assures inclusion" (McGonigal 2003a, p. 15). McGonigal also argues the importance of the collective experience in "power plays," those "real-world, live action, performance-based missions" (2007, p. 2).

Expansions

In his exploration of the edge of the Magic Circle, Markus Montola (2005) sought to define pervasive games³¹ in terms of their spatial, temporal and social dimensions³². He argues pervasive games should be understood as expanding the magic circle in at least one of these dimensions:

- Spatial expansion refers to the ambiguously-defined location of the game. (2005, p. 1)
Pervasive Games often do not include demarcations indicating in- or out-of-play areas. Players are potentially always in a play area.
- Temporal expansion refers to the ambiguity of the gameplay sessions. (2005, p. 2) The beginning and ending of the game, as well as cues during the game reminding the player that she is in play, can be undefined.
- Finally, the social expansion of the genre confuses the distinction of players and non-players. At times, non-players can influence gameplay and players can become spectators.

Montola's expansion framework establishes three dimensions that can make a game appear ambiguous and rightly explains the blurring of the game-marking features of ARGs by their expansions. However, ARGs are characteristically collective and rely on media networks, a fact which remains implicit in the expansion framework.

This Is Not A Game

Let's return to the ARG-genre's central convention: the *This Is Not A Game* (TINAG) design philosophy. Near the end of the trailer for the movie *A.I.* (Spielberg, 2001), the phrase "This Is

³¹ A reminder that Montola conceives of ARGs as pervasive games, since they make use of expansions. While I disagree with his terminology, his expansion framework is nonetheless valuable in understanding ARGs.

³² See also Montola, Warren, and Nieuwdorp (2006); Montola, M., Stenros, J., & Waern, A. (2009).

Not A Game” appears, acting as a rabbit hole into the ARG known as *the Beast* (Lee 2001). The phrase was adopted and perceived by the players as being constitutive of the game. Its disavowal is an allusion to Rene Magritte’s artwork “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (*The Treachery of Images*, 1926). In his analysis of Magritte’s work, Michel Foucault (1983/2008) conceives of the painting as a calligram since “the calligram never speaks and represents at the same moment” (p. 25); it separates the reader from the viewer. In a similar fashion, we can say that TINAG separates the player from the audience. Sean Stewart, the Lead Writer for the Beast, explains the phrase’s importance:

One of our key slogans for the Beast was, This is Not a Game. We wanted to write characters that were more like people than the characters in video games. We wanted the phone numbers in the game to work like real phone numbers; the emails to feel like real emails; the websites to present as real websites. This fetish for verité has real costs and consequences, and nobody has chafed under the restrictions more than us (Stewart 2001).

But a distinction must be made between the phrase and its acronym. Brooke Thompson, a contributor to ARGNet, the online community of ARG players, explains the distinction

While ‘This Is Not A Game’ is owned by the players, ‘TINAG’, a derivation of the mantra, is owned by the puppetmasters and metaheads (game designers and players that focus on the larger genre issues). However, the distinction between the way that the phrase is used by the players (as a mantra) and the puppetmasters (as a philosophy) is frequently misunderstood. (Thompson 2005)

The players, she explains, use the expression to remind themselves that they are taking part in the game without admitting to playing a mere game – what McGonigal (2003a) has termed “performance of belief.” TINAG, on the other hand, is considered the game design philosophy expressed by Elan Lee, Lead Developer of *the Beast* (2001). Three rules were followed when designing and implementing the ARG: puppetmasters were not to tell anyone that it was a game; puppetmasters were not to define the game space; and finally, they were not building a game (Thompson 2005). These conventions epitomize the ARG genre. In this fashion, Magritte

would agree that ARGs have an ontological *resemblance* to a game but have phenomenological *similitude* to life.³³

Rationale for research

A research project such as this is well suited to the contemporary setting. Societal consumption of ever-changing media technologies and the continued growth of gaming in all its guises present us with a need for developing literacies, which, the post-modern awakening to networked society (Castells 1996; Galloway and Thacker 2007; Greenfield 2006) reminds us, requires that we include stakeholders of different backgrounds and valuation systems. Falling far short of this I intend this research project to serve several modest purposes.

This research is intended to redress claims that “reality is broken” (McGonigal 2010; 2011) and to temper sensational portrayals of ARGs as disruptive of reality (Benford et al., 2006; Harvey, 2006b; McGonigal 2003a, 2003b; Montola & Jonsson, 2006; Stenros et al., 2007; Taylor and Kolko 2003). As this case study indicates with its reference to the NASA media intervention, it offers a similar problematic relationship between the alternate reality game and the experience of reality. This thesis will provide a theoretical framework to explain this problematic relationship.

As Consalvo (2009) suggests, digital games have escaped the screen and this is made more apparent with games like ARGs that use gaming logics off the screen. I hope PM, game and transmedia designers find this research useful for understanding design choices and their effects. To my knowledge, only IPeRG has covered ethics of pervasive gameplay (Montola, M., Waern, A., Kuittinen, J., & Stenros, J. 2006). This research does not take a normative position and is not an axiomatic investigation, but will inform the conscientious designer. This research is

³³ Everaert-Desmedt (2006, p. 33 n.7) claims Foucault (1973, pp. 61, 65, 67) repeatedly inverts the two words/definition.

all the more appropriate given the wider interest in experience design, experience economy and affective labor.

Given the skepticism toward semiotic in the field of games studies (Aarseth 2001; Frasca 1999; Dovey and Kennedy 2006), this project's use of semiotic as part of its theoretical perspective attempts to remedy the unfortunate metonymy of equating linguistic-based semiology with triadic semiotic – what John Deely (1990) often refers to as the part-for-whole, or, *pars pro toto* fallacy (Deely 1986; 1990a; 2009) – that continues to detract researchers from appreciating the contribution semiotic brings to the field.

Finally, the 2012 ARG remains a potent example of a year-long transmedia venture. This research, if nothing else, offers an additional case study to the emerging interest in researching alternate reality games, transmedia, pervasive game and ubiquitous games research.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used to explain the problematic relation between ARGs and the experience of reality will be composed from the pragmatic semiotic of Charles S Peirce (1839-1914), supplemented by Erving Goffman's (1974) frame analysis and J.J. Liska's (1990) semiotic concept of transvaluation. The theoretical framework used will suitably address the interdisciplinarity of accommodating media and games studies but more importantly, it will address several issues previously raised: first, it will suggest how reality is experienced; second, it will offer a critical explanation of the relation between ARGs and the experience of reality; third, given the skepticism towards the usefulness of semiotic in game studies literature, the framework will contend with the pervasive objection that games are non-representational (Frasca 1999; Aarseth 2001; Juul 2005; Dover and Kennedy 2006; Simons 2010). Finally, it must address what a game is and explain the meaningful limits of a game. Let us proceed to explain the framework, stopping along the way to explain the various issues discussed.

Semiotic, the study of the action of signs, proposes a useful perspective for understanding the challenge set out by this thesis. According to American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), a pioneer of semiotic and the father of American pragmatism³⁴, a sign is a triadic relationship:

A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the sign (CP 2.228).

³⁴Peirce was also the founder of American philosophical pragmatism, which he later renamed pragmaticism (CP 6.490) to distance his philosophy from the misinterpretation of his original coinage. Unlike other conceptualizations of pragmatism, the pillar of Peircean pragmaticism is the determination of an interpretant.

A sign, he argues, is something that stands to someone for something in some respect. The triadic relationship between the sign, its object and the interpretant is called semiosis – the action of signs (CP 5.484). The relationship between the sign, the object, and the interpretant, Peirce argued, is irreducible and triadic as each exists only in relation to the others and none have a separate existence beyond logical analysis. Much like a game, semiosis is a process that involves time. It requires a(n) (embodied) *player*³⁵ to activate the process, the end of which is never absolutely identical or fixed³⁶. Unlike the structural semiology of Saussure (1966), neither Peircean semiotic nor a game is a static unit³⁷. The latter involve the passage of time and change, which is another reason supporting the use of a Peircean approach.

For Peirce, sensations direct attention not to themselves but to what they represent. They function semiotically. More importantly, the generation of interpretants occurs instantaneously as the presence – the ‘thisness’ or haecceity (cf. DiLeo 1991) – of the object is sensed. The world is known through the way it appears or is manifest in signs. Our grasp of what is real is both mediated and direct (Andacht 2008 p.2). That is, we can only know through the action of signs. For example, when one touches something, a table let us say, an interpretant of the object is generated based on this and on past experiences, allowing the recognition of the sense as being of the object ‘table’. One grasps the sensation to be a sign of the table with little delay between the sensation and the understanding of it.

³⁵ Player here is used very broadly akin to Peirce’s “quasi-mind” (CP 4.551).

³⁶ The generation of interpretants does not end with one absolute answer. It is an ongoing process “a sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign in which it is more fully developed” (CP 5.594).

³⁷ Saussure’s conception of a sign constituted by a signifier and a signified – elements that are bound together like the two sides of a coin – is as useful as considering a game as gamepieces (signifier) and play (signified). In Peircean semiotic, a third element is required: the game-rules (interpretant) that are followed (or not) by the player.

In 1867, Peirce published an article on three universal Categories that form an essential contribution to his thought. These Categories were developed alongside his semiotic and his pragmatism. He came to call them, respectively, Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness:

Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else. Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third. Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other (CP 8.328).

We can see how this relates to the makeup of the sign. The sign is a First. It is without reference to anything else, a mere qualitative being like sensation. The object of the sign is an element of Secondness. We experience the resistance of it, its actual presence against ours, but it is without meaning. The interpretant generated from the sign is an element of Thirdness. Together, the triad of a First (sign), Second (object) and Third (interpretant), form a meaningful sign. An exhaustive explanation of his many trichotomies is well beyond the scope of this project, but I find Peircean scholar Nathan Houser's (2005) logical explanation of their relationships well-argued. He wrote:

the form of perceptual judgments is that of an elementary proposition, where in the place of the predicate we find the cognition of a feeling (firstness), and in the place of the subject we find an indication (secondness) of the object to which the firstness applies, and in the judgment itself we "bring together" in a complex thought (thirdness) the cognition of the feeling with the indication of the object. Thus, in perceptual judgments, we have a basis for the higher forms of inference, induction and deduction, by which we can generate the encyclopedia that constitute our full intellects (p. 462).

We can see how sensation, action and thought – Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, respectively – are connected demonstrating continuity between mind and matter, which Peirce calls the doctrine of "synechism" (CP 6.103). Furthermore, the growth of signs is unidirectional with Thirdness functioning as a mediator of the other elements before it.

The generation of an interpretant, an example of Thirdness, should not be confused with an individual's thought-out act of interpreting a literary text, for example. "Interpretation, according to Peirce, "is merely another word for translation" (EP2.388). That is, when someone interprets something, this person understands a sign in terms of another system of signs (cf. CP 4.127). The interpretant is like the rule of sign translation (CP 5.484). The interpretant is the "proper significate outcome of the sign" (CP 5.473). That is, it is the effect or response that a sign generates through the process of semiosis. The effect can be mental (CP 1.564), but not necessarily so (CP 5.473). For example, someone yelling "Watch out!" (sign) as a warning (object) may cause another person to imagine something, to become frozen in fear or to immediately jump to the floor (or a combination of these interpretants)³⁸. The person's behavior is a reflex or habit that has been formed through prior experiences as well as the result of an interpretation of the warning.

For our purposes, the interpretant can be of three types, each corresponding respectively to the Categories: the immediate interpretant, which is a qualitative unanalyzed effect that functions to let the interpreter know that it is a sign to be translated; the dynamical interpretant which is the actual, embodied effect on the interpreter but without meaning (CP 5.475); and the final interpretant which is the rule-like effect of the sign that carries meaning which every interpreter will come to if they sufficiently analyze the sign. The final interpretant is "understood as the means by which a sign becomes connected or interrelated into a system of signs, that is, translated 'into another system of signs' (CP 4.127)" (Liszka 1996, p. 27). While interpretation and the (logical) interpretant share a kinship, they are not interchangeable since the

³⁸ Peirce would further classify these reactions respectively as a "logical interpretant;" as an "emotional interpretant;" and as an "energetic interpretant" (EP2: 409).

former is analogous to sign translation while the latter is analogous to the rule of translation to be employed.

Real experiences & experiencing reality

Reality is a difficult conception to grasp. As we noted, Goffman argued that the real is rarely defined but used as a contrast term (1974, p. 560). He was acutely aware of the problem that what may at one time appear to be, may eventually turn out to be false, a fiction or illusion. He was distrustful of claims that reality could be easily defined. He wrote:

[There has not been] much success in describing constitutive rules of everyday activity. One is faced with the embarrassing methodological fact that the announcement of constitutive rules seems an open-ended game that any number can play forever. Players usually come up with five or ten rules (as I will), but there are no grounds for thinking that a thousand additional assumptions might not be listed by others. Moreover, these students neglect to make clear that what they are often concerned with is not an individual's sense of what is real, but rather what it is he can get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by; and this can be something he can claim is really going on and yet claim is not real. One is left, then, with the structural similarity between everyday life neglecting for a moment the possibility that no satisfactory catalog might be possible of what to include therein and the various 'worlds' of make-believe but no way of knowing how this relationship should modify our view of everyday life (1974, p. 6).

As time passes, so does reality change making it implausible to account for everything. But additionally, reality contains virtually limitless subsets of imagined worlds that influence the behaviors of people. One must only imagine a visit to Disney World to understand the many realms or fictional worlds that modify real behavior.

Peirce held a similar position, "the real world cannot be distinguished from a fictitious world by any description," (CP 2.337) yet his pragmatic semiotic allows him to argue how we differentiate the two in experience. He argues

It has often been disputed whether Hamlet was mad or not. This exemplifies the

necessity of indicating that the real world is meant, if it be meant. Now reality is altogether dynamic, not qualitative. It consists in forcefulness. Nothing but a dynamic sign can distinguish it from fiction. It is true that no language (so far as I know) has any particular form of speech to show that the real world is spoken of. But that is not necessary, since tones and looks are sufficient to show when the speaker is in earnest. These tones and looks act dynamically upon the listener, and cause him to attend to realities. They are, therefore, the indices of the real world (CP 2.337).

Reality is experienced through indexical signs. This is not to say that all indexical signs are of reality or that fiction is without indexicality. Rather, there is an actual connection between the indexical sign and its (dynamical) object. Unlike the iconic sign, which merely has a likeness of its object, which may or not exist, the dynamical object of the indexical sign must exist, even if only as a figment of the imagination. Hamlet is real in the sense that we may argue about him, but he does not exert his existence on us beyond the character Shakespeare developed. Reality, in Peircean semiotic, includes the possibility of fiction. Peirce puts it this way:

a proposition [or sign] whose falsity can never be discovered, and the error of which therefore is absolutely incognizable [sic], contains, upon our principle, absolutely no error. Consequently, that which is thought in these cognitions is the real, as it really is. There is nothing, then, to prevent our knowing outward things as they really are, and it is most likely that we do thus know them in numberless cases, although we can never be absolutely certain of doing so in any special case (EP1: 52).

We can say that the object of a true sign is real. However, experiencing something real is not necessarily the truth for what one experiences as real could be a fabrication or a lie, itself real. This is especially salient for ARGs that try to generate a “real” experience while actually being a real game. The indexical sign which shares a contiguous relation to its object indicates reality and it is these dynamic signs that help us know when we are discussing what is real. Yet the realistic aesthetic of ARGs co-opts these signs – uses indexical signs as they would be used if they were not part of a game. The intention to use these signs to entertain corresponds to what Goffman (1974) calls "benign fabrications" (p. 87).

Another relevant aspect of Peirce's pragmatic semiotic regarding reality and truth is that he equates, logic with semiotic since both are ways to get at the conditions of truth (NEM 4:331). The truth is found in the independence of the real from our thoughts. He saw the real as "something upon which our thinking has no effect" (CP 5.384). Peirce spent a considerable amount of time on the matter. He asks,

and what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. [...] The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition -- the real and the unreal -- consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to re-affirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied (EP1: 520).

We see how, like Goffman (1974, p. 560), Peirce defines the real as a contrasting term: "when we discovered that there was an unreal." Yet there is much more. For Peirce, the real is communal, continuous, and we almost always have an imperfect understanding of it. For if what is real is independent of what I think and what everyone else thinks, than truth must be found where all our thoughts converge. Our understanding is always an approximation since a sign does not stand for its object in all respects, but in some respect.³⁹ Convergence becomes a mark of truth and a true real object must be true until it is proven otherwise. This is crucial to understanding ARGs since, upon their initial deployment, their parts may be misconstrued as part of regular media. What at one point may be seen as a real (legitimate) public payphone

³⁹ Recall Peirce's definition of a sign "the sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the sign" (CP. 2.228).

ringing⁴⁰ can later be found to be part of a game or a setup. Given time, inquiry and communal reification, we come to a clearer, truer, understanding of the game.

Peircean symbol

For the purposes of this thesis, Peirce's detailed classification of signs is not necessary but an understanding of his second trichotomy is needed given our object of study. Peirce described three ways in which a sign can refer to its dynamical object: as icon, index and symbol. The icon (sign) observes a relation of likeness or resemblance to its object. The sign functioning as an index involves a contiguous relationship between itself and the object. The sign functioning as symbol affords the sign a law-like relation to the object. For Peirce,

A symbol is a [sign] whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent lies in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted. [...] Thus the mode of being of the symbol is different from that of the icon and from that of the index. An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience. The being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied. Namely, it will influence the thought and conduct of its interpreter (CP 4.447).

A symbol is like an agreement about a potential future, "it is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious" (CP 6.156). It reverses the order of means to end making a future end seem to come before the present means. We observe this in symbolic behavior where the behavior (the means) is purposely performed in order to convey a message (end). It is from our purpose that we come to the means we have previously seen produce the desired end. Liszka (2007) argues the relationship between purpose and meaning:

it is through the ability to predict that we are able to realize our purposes (CP 5.427). Purpose requires the ability to muster means towards an end, and that

⁴⁰ This was one of the strategies in the ARG, *I Love Bees* (see McGonigal 2008), where GPS coordinates for public payphones were given to players who were required to answer.

requires us to be able to predict that those means will reliably result in those ends: if we do such-and-such, then such-and-such will likely result—and this is the essence of experimental phenomena. Thus, true propositions affect our purposes. In the end, then, meaning is tied to purpose (pp. 637-8).

The symbolizing agent must have envisioned a desired end, a purpose, and the means to obtain that end. The meaning or purpose is strengthened to the extent that the means of achieving a desired end are successful. As Peirce explains:

no sane man doubts that if I feel the air in my study to be stuffy, that thought may cause the window to be opened [...] what determined it to take the particular determination it did was in part the general fact that stuffy air is unwholesome. When my window was opened, because of the truth that stuffy air is malsain [sic], a physical effort was brought into existence by the efficiency of a general and nonexistent truth (EP2: 343).

Note that the vision of the desired future – an unstuffy study – precedes the means of implementing that end in the ‘real’ world.’ Games, for example, similarly function like symbolic signs since players act according to the way they believe they will win (broadly conceived). In this way a symbol is like an agreement: it is an assumption or supposition where the future comes to stand for the present. The habit evoked by the symbol is conventional or law-like but without necessity. It is fallible. That is, because it is a future-oriented habit, it is impossible to definitively predict all the instances to which it will apply. For example, opening the window may not relieve the stuffy air of the study if there is no wind. Therefore, the symbolic act of opening the window (the means) may not necessarily result in an unstuffy study (end) much like a player may guess wrong about which actions are needed to win (broadly conceived) and bring a game to its conclusion. Perhaps more salient for ARGs, people may construe a game artifact as being real when it is actually part of a game.

Goffman's frame analysis

At this point it is beneficial to turn the reader's attention to sociologist Erving Goffman "frame analysis" – the examination of the organization of experience in terms of framing mindsets (1974, p.11). In developing his framework, Goffman suggests a vocabulary that maps efficiently onto our project at hand although only a portion will be used here. His sociological approach was conceived as an experiment in understanding the social organization of experience. He sought to answer the question, "what is it that's going on here?" (1974, p.8) This seemingly simple question is problematic when we consider the various levels of interpretation. He explained,

I start with the fact that from an individual's particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth (1974 p. 10).

Goffman specified that he was not attempting to develop a framework about how we structure social matters (1974, p.13). Rather, he looked to the experience a person has in a social context. It is worth noting that he draws his focus on experience, his deference to experience, to William James' "pragmatism" (1974, pp. 2-5) – an offshoot of Peirce's rechristened "pragmaticism" (CP 6.490).

While Goffman refers to, and credits, Peirce's longtime friend and fellow pragmatist, William James, (1974, pp. 1-5) Goffman's frame analysis employs a pragmatic perspective that is more similar to Peirce than James. For while he agrees with James' pragmatic approach in formulating the question, "under what circumstances do we think things are real? The important thing about reality, [James] implied, is our sense of its realness in contrast to our feeling that some things lack this quality" (1997, p. 150). Yet Goffman is also critical of James' response,

which attributes a privileged status to the “realm” of the senses. This status implies a separation of perception between the senses and cognition, an implication Goffman tries to circumvent (1997, p.150), which makes his position to come nearer to the one argued by Peirce. As was argued above, Peirce believed reality to be perceived through the existential link of the indexical with the mediating judgment of the symbol, which makes this perception fallible. He objected to dualistic views of reality (see above, CP 2.337). While Peirce’s pragmatism is based in experience, it emphasizes the mediated and directedness of perception (Ransdell 1997). That is, physical and mental phenomena are not distinct as Cartesianism posits, “though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular” (CP 7.570).

Peirce’s philosophy of pragmatism suggests that all meaning is derived from this triadic process of semiosis. In this irreducible logical process, the object determines the sign and the sign determines the interpretant, which is the sign’s “proper significate effect” (CP 5.473). That is, the interpretant is the convention of action or habit generated by the sign during the process. Central to Peirce’s pragmatism, meaning is found in this action:

In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception (CP 5.9).

The meaning of a conception or symbol includes all the possible interpretants it could generate if it is found to be true. Thomas Alexander (1990) differentiates this view of pragmatism from that of Peirce’s friend, William James, whose iteration emphasizes ‘sensible effects’ (p. 327).

Alexander argues that James’ version is contingent on the individual, whereas Peirce’s emphasizes the generation of interpretant over time and is therefore, communal (pp. 327-328).

Pragmatic semiotic as an account of inquiry nonetheless relates it to the one who inquires. It treats him as in the midst of the world, viewing not the whole but some aspect of it, in light of some body of belief, from some point of view or perspective. Peirce proposes an embodied perspective where the individual comes to know the real through the experience of signs, contiguous to reality. We make perceptual judgments not based on merely one input but on all signs experienced, imparting importance on grounds indexically motivated, that is, we differentiate between such things as sound levels and tone, shades and odors. The interpretant is formed from all inputs but our purpose selects which is the ground. Halton (2004) emphasizes these characteristics in Peirce when he refers to the evolutionary need for the hunter-gatherer society's "attunement" to the environment and the "self-originated experience" of inquiry (p. 98). This is fallible since there are countless ways to interpret a given sign. Halton notes that perception requires an active mind. We notice not just what is there, but what we look for; and what we look for is determined by our purpose. In the same situation, people with different motives may interpret signs differently. The need to take into account the standpoint of the observer, to remind oneself that how the world appears will depend partly on how it is, but partly also on the position from which one observes it. This is why Peirce believed in fallibilism⁴¹ of knowledge and underlines the importance of continued inquiry within a community of inquirers (EP1: 52).

To start, Goffman's basic unit of action – the single 'doing' that can be described – is called a "strip" of activity⁴² (1974 p. 10). He defines the strip as, "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity, including here sequences of happenings, real or fictive, as seen

⁴¹ Fallibilism is the doctrine that knowledge is never absolute (CP 1.171). Peirce believed in the continuous and evolving nature of signs, which consequently, can never be absolutely known with certainty.

⁴² Peirce has used a corollary term, "an occurrence," as "a slice of the universe" (MS647).

from the perspective of those subjectively involved in sustaining an interest in them” (p. 10). To this, Goffman adds a concept of the frame:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify (pp. 10-11).

Goffman’s conception of a frame appears substitutes “situation” with his notion of a strip. What is also important in both definitions is his emphasis on “our subjective involvement in them.” I take that to mean a purposive, intentional involvement. This excludes those who experience a strip as an unnoticed, background occurrence.

Goffman argues that a framework that renders “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (p. 21) is a “primary framework.” It is the basic unit of meaning. For example, consider a strip such as a student in a classroom raising her hand. We can assume that the child is performing this action within this context in order to get the attention of the teacher. Assuming so, we have defined the strip of action according to our conventional understanding of grade school “principles of organization that govern events” (p. 10). The strip, now identified in accordance to these principles becomes framed within the primary framework of grade school behaviors. This, of course, is the result of our intentional attention, or “subjective involvement” in the strip of activity.

The next conceptual tool from Goffman is keying – a metaphor of musical tone (p. 44). In applying a key, the strip remains as such, but the meaning of the frame is somewhat altered for those perceiving the keying. They add a layer of meaning to what is “actually or literally occurring” (p. 47). Goffman defines the key as

the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this

activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying (pp. 43-44).

Keyings show that the meaning of an activity is not found merely in the activity itself, but is constituted as well by those who hold an intentional perception of the activity. A keying is to metaphor what literalness is to a strip. For example, a bystander observing from a park bench sees a young man pick up a five dollar bill on the street. The bystander frames the strip as an anecdote about having good luck. However, the leaving of the bill might be a practical joke by a friend hiding in the nearby bushes. In this case, the friend has keyed the exact frame of activity differently, as a practical joke. Once the friend reveals himself and his ruse, the observing bystander would likely understand the keyed frame – from a strip of ‘good luck’ to a strip of a practical joke that duped the man into thinking he had good luck – having now a more distinctive awareness of what was going on. Because of the possibility of rekeying frames, Goffman proposes to think of “each transformation as adding a *layer* or *lamination* to the activity” (p. 82).

Note that Goffman’s approach is not without criticism. In his book on role-playing games, *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Fine (1983) criticized Goffman for not ‘recogniz[ing] “flickering involvement,” (p. 196) and, oscillating character of engrossment [...] people easily slip into and out of engrossment⁴³” (pp. 182-183). Fine therefore focuses on the extent to which different frames are stable as players add or remove laminations and the relations among the framed selves of the individual (p. 183). He finds Goffman only superficially leads the reader to an understanding about the social order before moving on to other concepts. Despite this, Fine supports Goffman’s arguments for situating make belief in the “real” (1974, p. 247). Fine’s arguments are valid although the differences between the respective engrossments and contexts of Goffman’s own account and Fine’s descriptive work tend to reduce the redundancy of up-

⁴³ Engrossment, we have seen, was defined by Goffman as voluntarily cutting oneself off from other realms of experience (Goffman 1997, p. 158).

keying and down-keying in Goffman's work. Where possible I will try to identify the oscillation of engrossment.

Let us consider the similarities between frame analysis and semiotic. As we saw earlier, the process of semiosis is also concerned with the generation of meaning. A strip is pure action that is yet to be interpreted. It is strictly physical, prescinded or detached from any lamination: "any raw batch of occurrences" (Goffman 1974, p. 10). A strip shares the Peircean object's factual, actuality:

Actuality is something brute. There is no reason in it. I instance putting your shoulder against a door and trying to force it open against an unseen, silent, and unknown resistance. We have a two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance, which seems to me to come tolerably near to a pure sense of actuality. On the whole, I think we have here a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is. I call that Secondness. (CP 1.24)

A strip is an analytical unit applied to everyday experience. For example, an observed strip involving a sailboat passing along the horizon is essentially phenomenal, composed of the reflection of the sun on the water and the ship (and all other visible objects) with the acoustic reverberations of these observed elements coming in contact with the observer's senses. These elements like Peircean Secondness exert their existence against the observer. Yet functioning as objects, they also generate meaning, therefore, are semiotic in their being.

To frame a strip is to imbue it with meaning, to make it a sign⁴⁴. Frame analysis, like semiotic, is not a descriptive but an inquisitive enterprise that seeks to account for what meaning can be found in a certain experience. As we saw the 'front end' of any sign – the markers delimiting the strip – is arbitrary but purposely chosen. Goffman refers to these markers as "brackets" (p. 251) or "episoding conventions" (p. 251):

⁴⁴ We can replace sign here for the type of sign it is: a symbol. Imbuing a strip with meaning is to refer to its object according to some convention of meaningfulness. A sign that refers to its object through a relation of convention is a symbol.

These markers, like the wooden frame of a picture, are presumably neither part of the content of activity proper nor part of the world outside the activity but rather both inside and outside (p. 251).

It is important to note that the relational aspect of the brackets of frames is neither inside nor outside of the framed activity. Brackets act like Peirce's indices, "like a pointing finger exercises a real physiological force over the attention, like the power of a mesmerizer, and directs it to a particular object of sense" (CP 8.41). Brackets direct attention to the strip of activity enclosed. They function symbolically as a rule that allows certain interpretations while excluding others. For instance, a role-playing gamer taking on an accent 'brackets' what she is saying allowing the others to know she is speaking diegetically. In this instance, the accent functions symbolically, assuring the others that the utterer does not really wish them dead.

Another affinity between frame analysis and semiotic is how Goffman's laminations are similar to the generation of an interpretant in Peirce. Goffman's notions of laminations (primary frameworks, keys, re-keyings, etc) function as identifiers of codes/cultural conventions: "in reference to key I [Goffman] use the term 'convention,' not merely 'rule,' because here it is probably best to leave open the question of necessity, obligation and interdependence" (fn. p. 44). Both are based on a convention to describe meaning in a framed activity or sign if certain conditions are met. Both laminations and interpretants are analytical ways of referring to purpose and meaning.

To summarize, framing a strip of activity into something meaningful is like conceiving the strip of activity as a sign. Given that strips or doings are analytical units detached "from the stream of ongoing activity," (1974: 10) they must be made meaningful through a primary framework, (that can further be layered through additional keyings) which is like the interpretant of the semiotic process. In both frame analysis and semiotic, there is an arbitrariness in their

respective processes in that the framing could be otherwise and has no necessary relation to the activity of the strip. Like the perception of signs, brackets are arbitrary and purposeful in that those with a sustained interest in them generate them. By purposefully bracketing a strip and laminating it, the framed strip functions as a symbol.⁴⁵ We have seen that a symbol is constituted of any number of icons, indices or other symbols that if they come together will make this symbol. Using Goffman's frame analysis is useful since we are concerned with the experiential element of ARGs and reality. With semiotic we can conceive these framed experiences as symbols.

Correspondingly, ARGs, like other games, can function as a symbol in an ongoing process of semiosis. As a symbol, the ARG is constituted by any number of icons, indices or other symbols – like framed strips for instance – that if they are purposefully brought together will make this symbol. For example, a video game is any number of signs in the semiotic process that will let us know it is the game. ARG artifacts or game pieces are distributed among several media with a design aesthetic used to inconspicuously conceal their status as ludic. With this framework we can therefore further appreciate the distinction between the framing of game pieces as real or ludic since our conception of ARGs, according to the pragmatic maxim, is the sum of its conceivable practical consequences.

Liszka's transvaluation

Finally, I will be using the semiotic concept of transvaluation that Liszka (1989) developed in his critical study of myth. He argued that myths follow a system of conventions and evolve through time according to the values of the culture that hosts them. Myths, in semiotic terms, are

⁴⁵ A strip can also function as an icon or an index. For example, a game may resemble another procedural activity in fulfilling an iconic function just as its soundtrack can bring one's attention to it by executing an indexical function. For our purposes though, strips generate interpretants.

symbols like games; they are signs that refer to their object through a relation that is law-like. Their pragmatic function is to organize action even if that action is only in thought, such as the generation of interpretants. “Symbols grow” (CP2.302). That is, they become more determinate in their restriction on action. Liszka argues that symbols grow through a process of transvaluation. This process melds Peirce’s semiotic with Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1966) linguistic semiology⁴⁶. However, unlike Saussure’s approach, Peirce did not explicitly formulate value in his semiotic (c.f. Hausman 1979). As Hausman put it in his analysis of the relation of value to Peirce’s universal Categories,

However, it should also be observed that normative science⁴⁷ as Peirce sees it is dualistic in the sense that it is concerned with two mutually exclusive orders of its data, that is, value or what ought to be, and disvalue or what ought not to be. The dualistic character of normative science allies it with Peirce’s second category which Peirce took pains to preserve from being overcome by the third category. This suggests that what is normative resists reduction to any one of the categories and that it must be sustained indefinitely, just as Secondness cannot be overcome in any assignable future moment (p. 209).

Value, while important in his semiotic is not generalized but is dynamically performed at every instance making it irreducible to any Thirdness, or habit. Peirce’s pragmatic semiotic assumes an embodied experience contrary to the abstract assumptions of structuralism. Saussure, on the other hand, argued that differences in value permitted the sign’s existence (1966, pp. 114-115). Having already discussed Peirce, I will now visit some of Saussure’s arguments regarding value.

According to the French structural linguist, the value of a sign is found along two axes of its system of meaning: a syntagmatic dimension and an associative dimension (p. 123)⁴⁸. Along the syntagmatic dimension, a term acquires value because of its difference to the terms before it,

⁴⁶ The confusion of treating semiotic and semiology as the same comes from Pierre Guiraud’s (1975) *Semiology*, among others. For a differentiation of semiology and semiotic, see Deely (1990a).

⁴⁷ Peirce classified philosophy into three branches based on his Categories to be phenomenology, normative science (which includes esthetics, ethics, and logic/semiotic, respectively) and metaphysics.

⁴⁸ Peirce formulated them as breadth and depth, respectively (Liszka 1989, p. 19).

or after it, or both (p.123). For example, the letters “c,” “a,” and “t,” when combined together in this syntagmatic sequence, give the meaning of a four-legged furry animal that purrs.

Combining the letters in another syntagmatic order, say “c,” “t,” “a,” offers another meaning dissimilar to the former, with less value in our linguistic system.

Along the associative plane, or paradigmatic dimension (Barthes 1964/1967, p. 58), a term acquires value from its difference with other similar terms to which it can be compared. Whereas the syntagmatic dimension is concerned with the combination and positioning of elements, the associative dimension is one of selection and substitution. Along its associative axis, we would find cat, feline, kitten, and so on. The value of the difference between using “kitten” rather than “cat” allows a difference in meaning.

Liszka (1989), citing the works of others before him, clarifies how difference is organized through value:

The paradigmatic and syntagmatic organization of distinctive features should not be viewed, on the one hand, as simply a series of binary, dyadic oppositions or, on the other hand, as a bundle of distinctive features; rather, as Jakobson had already recognized as early as 1932, and something which Andersen (1974) and Shapiro (1983) have argued more recently, the organization of opposition is made more coherent through a process of valuation, characterized in terms of markedness on the paradigmatic level and by rank on the syntagmatic one (p. 62).

Valuation, he argues, can be isolated in terms of markedness on the paradigmatic axis, and in terms of rank on the syntagmatic plane. By markedness, he refers to the valuative relation between the two poles of an opposition that establishes an asymmetry between them. The terms become marked or are unmarked depending on this asymmetry. Citing Linda Waugh’s (1976, p.89) argument, Liszka conceives a priority of the unmarked term over the marked term such that “the unmarked term in opposition tends to be learned earlier by children while the marked term tends to be learned later” (p. 63). In terms of the Shannon-Weaver communication model

discussed earlier, unmarked terms require less redundancy to be understood while marked terms tend to require redundancy to make their meaning clear.

Liszka identifies this process of valuation in Peirce's symbol. As I have explained above, the interpretant is a convention or rule for interpreting a sign during the semiotic process. In this process, Liszka conceives the interpretant as sign translation⁴⁹. Acknowledging the importance Jakobson places on the translative function of the interpretant, he explains "translation is really a set of rules for combination and selection of elements into hierarchical wholes which, in turn, serve as combinative parts for more complex wholes"(p. 51). That is, the interpretant offers the rule or habit for making sense of the sign through its syntagmatic rank and paradigmatic markedness. Yet since a habit or convention can't be expressed as a set of particular instances, it needs to be symbolized⁵⁰. By successfully negotiating the two, Liszka argues an interpretant "understood valuatively" (p. 57). That is, "transvaluation, which, with the elaboration of value as a markedness relation, makes clearer the connection among translation, purpose, and value" (p. 57). By linking the interpretant as sign-translation, with valuation as markedness on the paradigmatic plane and rank on the syntagmatic plane, Liszka's concept of transvaluation helps to identify valuation as the purpose of the sign user⁵¹.

The action necessary to 'fix' the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic is valuation by the person experiencing given the purpose this person is tending to. But as Condit (1989) argued, signs are polyvalent. Their meaning can be valued differently. Transvaluation occurs when the value of a sign is or has become ambiguous – if all valuations are plausible or if no valuation

⁴⁹ As a corollary, Goffman (1974) conceives keyings or laminations as the "transformation" of strips (pp. 78-81).

⁵⁰ This is why Peirce argues a sign or symbol can be interpreted only by another sign or symbol: "but a sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign in which it is more developed"(CP 5.594).

⁵¹ Goffman does not go into explaining the role of value in *Frame Analysis* (1974) aside from a passage (1974 p. 562) where he discusses his belief in the normative function of myth. I assume he would not object to Liszka's semiotic of myth.

stands out as the best suited given the inquirer's purpose. As Peirce the lexicographer⁵² explains while discussing prefixes,

the preposition trans will be used so as to be equivalent to contra-red-ultra, or (what is the same) recontrultra, so that A will be in a relation 'trans-x' to B, if, and only if, there is an x-relation in which A stands to whatever individual there may be to which B stands in that very same relation (CP 3.575).

He follows with the example: "A transloves B; that is, loves whatever may be loved by B" (CP 3.575). Transvaluation considers all possible valuations but privileges none, which requires the sign user to make a valuation not based in habit but according to purpose as best as can be discerned.

Liszka relates this to Rene Girard's (1972; 1978; 1982; 2000) mimetic theory of violence. Once the sacred becomes ambiguous (i.e.: the reason for its 'sacredness' or valuation becomes questionable) a crisis of valuation occurs that requires violence to reestablish order. For Girard, this suggests the intimate relationship between the sacredness and violence of the scapegoat (1972; 1982; 2000). A monarchy can be used as an example. In a kingdom the balance of value is such that the King is sacred, requiring ritual and conventions that maintain this sacredness. The King holds the power to pass laws and to enforce them. The peasants, on the other hand, are the undifferentiated surrogate victims that experience the sacrifice (i.e. limitations to freedom) that the laws generate. They hold value but less so than the individual king. Yet should the kingdom's economy fail to a point where the peasants can no longer eat or sustain themselves, whether by mismanagement or natural famine, the king's sacredness may become questionable and a revolt may ensue. The blamed king may become the surrogate victim or scapegoat for the ills of the people. According to Girard's theory, the value of the king and the valuation of the people become ambiguous requiring violence to reestablish order. In this case, violence could

⁵² Peirce was a lexicographer as well, having written many entries for the *Century dictionary* and the Baldwin (1901) *Dictionary of philosophy and psychology*.

result from the peasants' attempt to dethrone the now profane king, or, as the king enforces his will on the rioting people⁵³. The valuation shifts between the king and the people. Where neither is more valued than the other, violence must raise one and lower the other. For our purposes, Hausman's (1979) analysis of value with respects to the Categories (above) is insightful as it suggests transvaluation is where the second normative science, ethics, exerts its independence – its violence in Girardian sense – and refuses to be overcome by the habit of Thirdness.

Transvaluation, we see is a process of determination (Liszka 1990). Determination, in this context, is a logical process whereby the interpretant becomes more developed. Peircean semiotic presents us with a convergent theory of truth whereby the object represented generates a wave of successive interpretants each more determined than the previous one. Since the dynamical object is what determines the sign and consequent interpretants, we eventually develop a more determined notion of it. Transvaluation, in this process, provides the 'determining' function once ambiguity occurs. It considers all possible interpretants but assigns the markedness and rank of each to determine which is most suitable given the purpose at hand.

ARGs are relatively unknown and the realistic design aesthetic is such that some who experience an ARG (in whatever manner) may, momentarily, not know to value it as a game rather than as real life experience. The valuation of frames as ludic or real may momentarily become ambiguous until the violence of the player's purposeful assertion of the ludic status. Given the ambiguity of a ARG in such a context, the new valuation by the inquirer will be added to the *sum of the practical consequences that might conceivably result* from the experience of that game thereby adding to its pragmatic meaning (CP 5.9). Furthermore, as the community

⁵³ Similar relationships are observed in Consalvo's (2009a) accounts of the cheater, Jenkin's (2006) discussion of the spoiler and the ARG player. Respectively, each is like the sacred king having a higher valued relationship to his or her own domain compared to others of the same domain (like the peasants). Each respectively risks a violence from the others who feel comparatively disadvantaged.

progresses, it evaluates, corrects or maintains the interpretants of signs, or in this case, games. Pragmaticism therefore accepts fallibility from the community in determining interpretants, but the continuous nature of sign evolution will eventually lead the community to truthful interpretants over time. That is, with enough inquiry, one will find which are game pieces and genuine experiences.

Finally, we saw that we organize frames, or signs, along the paradigmatic axis in terms of markedness (laminations) and along the syntagmatic axis in terms of rank (bracketing). This organization is carried out in terms of a purpose or intention. When Goffman asks, for example, “what is it that’s going on here?” he frames the strip of activity experienced according to its coordinate positions of rank and markedness, relative to his experience of it. As Liszka (1996, pp. 32-33) has it, the frame determines the coordinate organization along the axes relative to the means; the means are determined relative to the frame and the coordinate organization realizes the frame in terms of the means. (Liszka 1996, pp. 32-33)

Transvaluation provides a way of understanding purpose in framed action or symbols. As we saw, the intentional description of a symbol involves the triadic relationship of purpose, means, and result where the semiotic correlates are the object, the sign and the interpretant, respectively. Recall here Peirce’s symbol in opening the window to his stuffy study. That is, the purpose (object) determined the means (sign) relative to the result (interpretant) while the means (sign) is determined relative to the purpose (object) and the means (sign) realizes the purpose (object) in terms of the result (interpretant). In a framed experience, we saw that the strip, bracketing, and lamination refer to the object, the sign and the interpretant, in that order. So the intentional

description of a framed experience involves the strip (as object or purpose) determining the bracketing (as sign or means) relative to the lamination (as interpretant or result). while the bracketing (as sign or means) are determined relative to the strip (as object or purpose), just as the bracketing (as sign or means) realizes the strip (as object or purpose) in terms of lamination (as interpretant or result).

As noted above, this framework must also overcome some other issues. Let us now deal with the argument against using semiotic because games are argued to be non-representational and continuously changing (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 99). This likely stems from a misconception of literary semiotic as being the whole of semiotic. It is what John Deely refers to as the *pars pro toto fallacy* that haunts semiotic (Deely 1986; 1990a; 2009). Proponents of this view of semiotic argue that the representation of the icon or avatar on the screen or board may well *represent* someone or something but games are not these material objects or algorithms that constitute them. Unlike the representation in narrative, games have winning conditions (Frasca 1999). Representation is presumed to be visual and the focus is given to the onscreen narrative that is being displayed as the game progresses – *representation* as a generic copy of something real. Proponents argue that a game is not experienced until it is being played – that it is an “action-based medium” (Galloway 2006). The visual assumption is that tokens or avatars that ‘represent’ (in some likeness) something or someone do not necessarily represent that act of playing which makes the game be (Frasca 1999). Advocates of the non-representational (and so-called non-semiotic) nature of games view representation in opposition to reality.

Peirce himself addresses the objection of “mere representation” in a lecture before students

at Harvard on 16 April, 1903, “[Our nominalistic friends] will go so far as to say that it is *mere representation*, --the word mere meaning that to be represented and really to be are two different things; and that this formula has no being except a being represented” [emphasis added].

(EP2.181-182) Peirce holds a privileged status for representation. In regards to his three categories of experience, “representation,” is analogous to Thirdness, “quality,” and, “relation,” analogous to Firstness and Secondness respectively (CP 1.555). Semiotic holds that reality is immediate and represented, even if fallibly so. While any real object may be said to exist, we can only know it through its production of a sign of itself (object) that produces an interpretant. For Peirce, we only know the world outside and inside our minds through signs. Since semiosis is a process and the ground of the real object is what the sign will represent as the significate (or represented object), the interpretant will be of the real object in that existential respect. A real object therefore, is represented by sharing an existential or contiguous relationship with its significate. As we have defined earlier this is an indexical sign. It is direct in its existential manifestation of that ground and represented in semiosis even if fallibly so. Fallibilism haunts our knowing of the real object since we know it only through the ground, all other inferences coming from our past experiences and conditional projections that take the form of the interpretant. So we see how a Peircean perspective does not consider representation as a mere copy or knock-off of reality. As Andacht (2008) eloquently puts it, in this semiotic perspective “you can have your representations and the world they (fallibly) convey too.” (1)

As the literature demonstrates, the definition of what a game is has been one of the most debated topics of the young field. (Aarseth 2001) Since it is not the material (or code) but the *playableness* that determines it, what is a game? Where does the game begin and end?

A game is a symbol in an ongoing process of semiosis. We consider it a symbol by its ability to evoke a habit or interpretant. The symbol 'game' incorporates all the interpretants that the object 'game' generates. Semiotically, it is therefore not material as Games Studies scholars point out, but is rather a habit of interpretation, if certain conditions are met; specifically, that there be winning conditions, that it will generate a feeling of enjoyable engrossment, and it is voluntary.

A game does not require a particular structure in order to be conceived as a game. We identify it as such an activity when the interpretant signs it generates lead us to this conclusion. Peircean scholar Joseph Ransdell (2002) is illuminating about this point:

A sign's simplicity consists only in its achievement of a unification of factors of very diverse sorts across the history of the process of which it is the momentarily salient "front end" [...] the entire corpus of Plato's dialogues can be regarded as a single or unitary sign representing any of a number of different things, such as, say, the level of intellectual sophistication reached by the Greek intelligentsia in the 4th Century BC, or the way of thinking of the philosopher Plato [...] it is up to the signs themselves to bring about such a convergence in the sign-interpretant process, and if they cannot do it there is no remedy except that of adding some more signs to it in hopes that the further semiosis they contribute will bring that end about. But if there is no such tendency to convergence to that end then there is no unitary interpretant; and if there is no unitary interpretant there is no unitary sign after all. Hence if, conversely, the sign as a whole *is* unitary, i.e. really is *a* sign, there is a real tendency to an end in the sign itself--that is, in the semiosis process

Like a jigsaw puzzle, the 'front end' that we identify as being the game (or puzzle) is the product of the many signs (pieces) that converge to a unitary whole. In this case a symbolic sign, through its law-like function influences us to conceive of those many signs as being part of a whole game. For example, *Plants versus Zombies* is understood to be a game because its multitudinous signs, from the emotional interpretants of joy, to the energetic interpretants of player action, to the logical interpretants of puzzle solving, converge together, with the other signs like the soundtrack and previous experiences to allow us to understand it as a game.

In conceiving the meaningful limits of games, games scholars have deferred to author theory and reception studies.⁵⁴ On the one hand, author theory states that the game is what the game designer intended. The meaning of the game, the interpretants that it generates, are what was intended by the game designer in designing the game. The game object is said to be complete when the designer decides it. In videogames, for example, they argue that the game's programming determines the game. This tends to be challenged by the audience studies advocates who argue that the players are free to make the meanings of the game as they wish, - a polysemic view if you will - and players may add content to the game, thereby circumventing the designer's intentions and limits. On the other hand, these reception scholars further claim that it is the players that activate the algorithmic codes that make the game "go" and the players' decisions determine the game experience (as much as the author of the code). And they would add that sometimes, the code and author has little to do with the player's experience of the game. For example, while the player of Guitar Hero must press the buttons in the manner coded by the programmer, the experience of playing tends to be dominated by the mimicry of being a rockstar in the company of other players. These claims will be met with the rebuttal that the designer was needed first for the object to exist and that meanings and the limit of the game are dependent on the author.

Semiotic posits another way. As we have seen in the semiotic process, the dynamical object determines the sign, and the sign determines the interpretant. The game or object has an existence of its own apart from the designer and the player. The designer's intentions are conceived as part of the game insofar as they are manifest in the game, much like the player's meanings exist in relation to the game's manifestations. A game is a symbol. That is, it will be

⁵⁴ Fullerton (2008) smoothly avoids this argument in the literature by referring to both 'sides': "the game designer [like an architect or screenwriter] plans the structural elements of a system that, when set in motion by the players, creates the interactive experience" (p. 2).

conceived as a game if certain conditions, its potentialities, are met. In designing the game experience, we may say that the designer predicts or imagines which features (or potentialities of the object) will stimulate a player to experience it as a game. Similarly, the player is in service to the game in actualizing its potentialities by engaging with it in a certain way. The meaning of the game, if we adhere to the pragmatic maxim, will therefore include all the practical consequences imaginable of that game over time.

Conceived this way the limits of the object ‘game,’ are continuous. The game (either conceived as a general object ‘game’ or as a particular game like Pac-Man) is semiotically a continuous process that never ceases to generate interpretants independently from the designer or the player. Even if a game is not being played, knowledge of it stems from the interpretants that its object generates through signs. We tend to regard a game like *Pac-Man* to be a finished product, but this is merely an arbitrary presumption. The particular object that is the game of Pac-Man, semiotically speaking, is not limited to a material packaging at a particular time since, by virtue of its generation of interpretants over time, the symbol grows, including the new interpretants in the conception of what Pac-Man is. For example, Pac-Man began as an arcade game but has since been transformed to include an animated cartoon series and a General Mills cereal.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ In 2004, New York University students deployed their iteration of *PacManhattan*, a pervasive game in Washington Square Park using the city grid and GPS (Lantz 2007, p.262).

Methodology

In deciding which method is appropriate, I felt a case study would offer the necessary depth of description and analysis needed for this undertaking to be a credible portrayal (Jackson, Gillis & Verberg 2007, p. 457). This research could not take the form of an ethnographical, player or puppetmaster observation, nor could it be a rhetorical analysis of the variegated texts that constituted the ARG media deployment. These methods emphasize the player, puppetmaster, or game text at the detriment of their interplay. The research interest herein is with the experience of the ARG and its potential for creating uncertainty regarding the reality status of its content. This may or may not include both, players and puppetmasters, and may include non-players/bystanders' experience of the game-text. These three types of people have a relation to the ARG by their experience of it, but none of these relations to the game-object can be privileged as the sole truth about the game activity. Focus groups and other audience/player research methods were similarly rejected because they privilege one type of experience in relation to the game.

A case study of the alternate reality game used for the promotion of the film *2012* (Dir. Emmerich 2009) is used. The weakness of this method is in determining the constraints that are used to create the object of study (Creswell 2007, pp. 74-75). Including too little or too much will be reflected in the research findings. Yet for the purposes of this thesis, I provide the limits of my inquiry to events occurring during a specified period of time. In adopting a Peircean (or pragmaticist) semiotic perspective, I assure the transferability of results (Jackson, Gillis & Verberg 2007, p. 458), but also acknowledge the fallibilism of any current state of knowledge since the perspective presumes that knowledge is a continuous process (Ransdell 2002).

Sample Collection and Selection

The data was collected from the trailer release in January 2009, to two weeks following the film's debut of November 13, 2009. This timeframe is judged sufficient as it corresponds to the deployment of the ARG, its denouement, and a period during the subsequent disclosure with the film's release. The ARG continues to generate interpretants even after this arbitrary period, as this thesis exemplifies, but this timeframe presents an arbitrarily-determined finished process.

The sampling strategy used to create an appropriate foundation of knowledge on the *2012* alternate reality game was nonrandom but purposive, and sequential (Neuman, 2007, pp. 346-347). To share my audit trail (Jackson, Gillis & Verberg 2007, p. 459), I searched for puppetmaster-created and audience-created content as an enthusiastic player (42 Entertainment) would in order to obtain as complete an experience as possible. My search revealed much content that could pass as within the diegesic game-world and I have noted it where I deemed it meaningful. The search began using the two most advertised websites, www.thisistheend.com, and, www.ihc.com. These sites were suggested through the movie's teaser and during a subsequent Google search of "2012" at the time. The search proceeded with identifying 2012 ARG-related websites, such as the two above, and backtracking in their content to locate potential "easter egg" leads, referred to as "trailheads" or "rabbitholes" by ARG players, (Szulborski 2005; Whitepaper 2006). Leads included references to characters or diegesic content that appeared incomplete and hyperlinks. During this search, some 2012 non-game related content was also found. The publishing or posting dates of content, content referencing the film, the game, or characters, or views regarding content explicitly part of the ARG, were used to evaluate whether the content was produced for, or directly tied to, the ARG. The search was repeated three times since new content or rabbitholes could likely emerge during the game. The

last search took place after the film's release once the game concluded. To the best of my knowledge, all of the 2012 ARG content has been collected. Again, this is not to say that the sample is a complete one of the semiotic process of the ARG, but that it is sufficiently representative for our purposes.

To avoid the problem of disappearing content (Bryan Alexander, Whitepaper 2006, pp. 13-14), I saved copies of each of the web pages where it was possible. The main website, www.ihc.com, did not permit saving since the site was constructed using Flash. I therefore transcribed the content of each individual web page and noted the pictures and hyperlinks each displayed. Saving copies of this content was deemed needed in the event that any content disappeared following the game's end. Phone numbers and email addresses, as well as required physical tasks such as the possible interception of packages, have ceased and are no longer accessible. Yet traces of these elements/tiers of the game are mentioned in other artifacts, like the main web log (blog) www.thisistheend.com. I made notes on these individual evanescent elements of the ARG, some of which I did not experience. At present, the online content was not removed. The actual analysis, therefore, has been conducted on my experience of the actual web content and not on the saved copies.

Coding & Procedure

Data on the ARG was collected and subsequently coded into strips according to their demonstration of the genre's four characteristics: instances of performed belief (McGonigal 2003), TINAG design philosophy, Expansions, and collective intelligence. When analyzing the data, I attempted to conceive myself as the three types of people (player, puppetmaster and bystander) and noted differences in experience. Spaces where confusion was plausible were

noted. The strips are analyzed according to their paradigmatic and syntagmatic effect, given the ARG characteristics they demonstrate. As Genvo (2009, pp. 140-141) shows us, Caillois' typology of games is useful in describing the paradigmatic axis of games and is here used when referring to the strips' paradigmatic association. However, Caillois' typology is not necessary for revealing the transvaluation of the strip.

Below, I present four strips that are representative of at least one characteristic, describing each strip and the characteristics being demonstrated. In choosing the strips I have arbitrarily presented 4 that can plausibly be experienced by players, puppetmasters and non-players alike⁵⁶. I suggest that they are presented arbitrarily because they can be reduced further and there is no necessity for the strips to be experienced in the manner that I present them. However, the strips are manifest in the experience of the game. We are interested in the qualitative experience found in the game rather than individual receiver experiences. I provide an analysis of each strip in terms of its syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation to the game and then the transvaluation of the strips.

The reader should note that the ARG characteristics tend to overlap and that labeling an example as demonstrating one characteristic does not preclude it from demonstrating other characteristics. For example, calling the phone number given to "help [the IHC] locate Dr. Ulfert so [it] can serve him with due process for libel and breach of contract," can be argued to demonstrate all ARG characteristics. Neither the IHC website nor the respondent to the telephone call allude to the phone line being used for the purpose of a game. The website proposes the telephone number as a legitimate contact point and the respondent acts as a

⁵⁶ Since ARG strips are cast into media environments it seems apparent that even those unaware of the ARG's ludic nature may become exposed to some of them. I use the terms non-player or bystander comparatively against 42 Entertainment's audience schema. The terms merely denote persons of less awareness of, and involvement in, ARGs and with the 2012 ARG in particular.

representative of the organization, thereby demonstrating the TINAG design philosophy. Additionally, the act of calling the phone number is a gamic action where the player performs a belief that the number will work. Furthermore, the phone call not only demonstrates the spatial distance between the caller and respondent, it also demonstrates the social and temporal expansion of introducing the respondent into the caller's social sphere at the time of calling. The labeling of an example as demonstrating a particular characteristic merely suggests that the characteristic may be found, among others, in the example given. Likewise, experiences of collective intelligence provoked by the ARG tend to fall into PoB characteristic since mainly players and puppetmasters are involved. Additionally, instances showing collective intelligence are only accessible through online traces since the actual interception and decoding of content occurred mainly in the United States. This should not prevent us from finding meaning in them.

Finally, the reader should also note that referencing a diegetic (Genette 1980) quote or artifact will be done in reverse order. For example, when citing the Corruption Theorists' (henceforth **CT**) blog entry of December 31, I will use "(31 Dec., **CT**)."

Case analysis

The search found, among the online game artifacts, 7 “in-game” web sites, 3 of which used social media to disseminate its “orphaned kernels”⁵⁷ (Dena 2008b, p. 50). It used the social media Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Delicious, Digg, Stumble Upon, Tumblr, Blogger, and entries on popular websites like eBay and Google Books. A complete list of 2012 ARG artifacts found is offered in Appendix A.

At the heart of the 2012 ARG is the narrative interplay between 3 web logs (blogs), a website and the movie. In total however, the ARG is an aggregate of media artifacts and play. (see Appendix A) Below I offer a brief reconstruction of an idealized version of the ARG narrative. That is, the game need not be experienced as I here describe it. Rather, it suffices that the strips described are to be found in our object. Returning to Peirce’s divisions of the interpretant may be used to explain this nuance. The interpretant, as we saw, can be further divided with respect to the Categories as the immediate, the dynamic and the final interpretant (cf. Liszka 1996, pp. 25-26; CP 8.314). The immediate interpretant is the initial feeling that the sign generates in the user. It is devoid of interpretation as such because it is purely felt and unanalyzed. It is purely based on the characteristics of the object. The dynamic interpretant, on the other hand, produces an effect on the individual such as action or thought but offers no meaning: only effects. The final interpretant is the habit of interpretation that links the sign to the interpreter’s available system of signs allowing the generation of meaning (cf. Liszka 1996, pp. 25-26). While the first two interpretants run parallel to the immediate and dynamical object respectively, there is no final object to pair off with the final interpretant because the final

⁵⁷ A modification of Chatman (1978: 53) “Kernels” : Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths. . . . Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic. (cf. Dena 2008b)

interpretant is a future consequence of the object and the product of semiosis. The final interpretant of the ARG will be ameliorated over time as more signs of the ARG are found.

Many interpretants are possible of the manifestations of our object but I present just one strip for each genre-defining characteristic. The reader is reminded that the ARGs use of many media modalities creates a non-linear narrative whereby players and audience members come across the ARG artifacts in various (perhaps less linear) sequences and within different contexts that make this version an ideal one.

While it is stressed that an audience member can enter the narrative at any time during its unfolding and gather fragments of the narrative among its many “tiers” (Dena 2008b), this narrative reconstruction will follow from the theatrical trailer’s call to audiences to “Google search: 2012.”

Given the fallibilist appreciation of our semiotic perspective, it will not be possible to describe in full detail the entirety of the game experience. Not only would such a rendering of a complex experience be an abstraction and reduction of its experience at best, it would raise questions of chronological order, interpretation and so on that cannot be adequately answered without omniscience. Rather, I offer a description of examples of ARG characteristics [potentialities] found in the game and how each contributes to the unmarking of associations and the de-ranking of combinations. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the effect of transvaluation on the framing of these examples.

Earlier, I explained the concept of transvaluation that Liszka proposes for the study of myth as a type of symbol. A symbol, we saw, is a sign interpreted to represent its object in terms of a habit or rule, with the object constraining (or rather, logically determining) the interpretant (or rule). The object corresponds to the end, the sign to the means and the interpretant to the

purpose. Liszka's concept approaches the sign translation rule of the interpretant as a valuation in terms of markedness at the paradigmatic level and in terms of hierarchical rank at the syntagmatic level. The relationship between strips develop along two axes: the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. The strips, or orphaned kernels, as Dena (2008b) calls them, function through a syntagmatic organization. That is, they use a grammar of combination and presence to be ordered that is determined by the object. Like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece, each syntagm, is joined together to form the larger sign that is a more completed image of the puzzle. Likewise, the kernels are combined together to complete the larger alternate reality game being played. Along the paradigmatic axis, strips are associated to others with something in common. That is, the strip can be associated to a real occurrence, fictional occurrence or ludic. Therefore, the sign user makes combinations and associations of the ARG tiers in a manner as to make sense according to the sign user's understanding of these and their context. The translative function of the interpretant, accordingly, identifies valuation as purposeful with regards to the sign user in light of the object. Let us now proceed to the analysis of our case.

IHC (website): TINAG design

When searching "2012" on the Google search engine, as the theatrical teaser suggests, one inevitably comes upon the link to the website of the Institute for Human Continuity (IHC).⁵⁸ Whether one follows the link is entirely another matter but since we are concerned here with manifestations of the ARG, let's assume that the link is followed. We will further assume that it is followed by not only one kind of person, like a player of varying degrees suggested in 42 Entertainment's model, but also by the non-playing bystander. The link leads to a professionally designed website (<http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org>), similar to science websites like

⁵⁸ The link to the IHC following a Google search on October 25, 2009, was positioned in first place among other links.

that of NASA. Immediately, the professional style of the website and the website's domain, ending in ".org," offer an allure of authenticity. The website is comprised of several pages detailing the organization's structure, its initiatives, and its progress; from the disasters visually simulated in the ongoing research of the E.A.R.T.H. Initiative, to the Operation Safe Haven's floating or subterranean cities, to the Cultural and Historical Analysis groups' correlations of apocalyptic prophecies among different faith communities.⁵⁹ The website's elaborate initiatives and the detailed organizational structure comprised of 20 directors⁶⁰ for each facet of the global organization contribute to its realistic appearance.

As we saw earlier regarding the TINAG design philosophy, Lee proposed three criteria that constitute this approach: the ARG must not identify itself as a game, there must not be an identifiable gamespace and it must not look or feel like a game (Thompson 2005). Among some of the other demonstrations of TINAG design, the website offers a history to the IHC⁶¹, with its origins attributed to a New Zealand summit in 1978. The details of the history, along with the black and white photographs of the summit building, the lab and one of the scientists, give the appearance of authenticity and demonstrate the TINAG design as well as the temporal expansion, into the past, of the game narrative.

An option offered to the visitor of the website is to register for the IHC's survival lottery. A digital counter indicating the participants already registered is found on several of the website's pages. A simple demographic form requires completion. Once registered, a virtual ticket appears onscreen including the participant's information and participation number⁶².

⁵⁹http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org/?hs317=2012_TheIHC&fbid=2zC3SKljPT3#/initiatives

⁶⁰http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org/?hs317=2012_TheIHC&fbid=2zC3SKljPT3#/staff

⁶¹http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org/?hs317=2012_TheIHC&fbid=2zC3SKljPT3#/history

⁶² I should point out that like most agreements online, a legal disclaimer regarding Privacy Rights requires acceptance before the registration is accepted. However, I admit that I did not read the disclaimer. While the contents of the disclaimer could have exposed the game, that there was a disclaimer did not since one should customarily expect such a disclaimer whenever volunteering personal information online. Interestingly, the



Figure 4: IHC Lottery Ticket

By filling out the registration form, the puppetmasters obtain contact information to send IHC press releases to participants thus appearing like an existing organization. The press releases not only support the TINAG design but extend the game beyond the control of the participant (i.e. press releases will appear in the participant's mailbox at times not chosen).

But while the IHC website is well crafted in its adherence to the TINAG design philosophy, there are several hints, or breaks, in its design which requires participants to

registration form italicizes 2012 : “[] Yes. I’d like to receive email updates on the latest events and news surrounding The Institute For Human Continuity and 2012.” See http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org/?hs317=2012_TheIHC&fbid=2zC3SKIjPT3#/lottery

overlook for coherence' sake.⁶³ For example, the website offers a hint in the form of a hyperlink to another game website, Charlie's Blog⁶⁴:

About the IHC

Unlike the man on the corner preaching about the apocalypse carrying the *ThisIsTheEnd.com* sign, the Institute for Human Continuity is dedicated to scientific research and public preparedness. After more than two decades of rigorous research from the worlds top astronomers, mathematicians, geologists, physicists, anthropologists, engineers, futurists... we know in 2012 a series of cataclysmic forces will wreak havoc on our planet. The IHC has developed a number of initiatives to prepare the world for this inevitability. [italics added]

In itself, the link to **ThisIsTheEnd.com** does not correspond to what an organization as large as the IHC would include. It is rather an intertextual clue beckoning observers to overlook and perform as if this were normal.

Despite minor fissures in the TINAG design implementation, a strip of activity that involves a brief exploration of the IHC website suggests that the design philosophy was adhered to. We saw earlier that this strip may be conceived syntagmatically and paradigmatically and that the syntagm is a principle of organization defined by opposition and absence whereas the paradigm is a principle of organization defined by similarity and selection. The syntagm here is the strip of exploring the IHC website. Added to other experienced syntagms of the ARG, at this time absent, we get closer to the constituents of the larger, *whole* game.

As a syntagm of the larger game, we notice that the fissures in the TINAG design seem to surface where clues are offered to other pieces of the game – other syntagms. The example noted was in the link to **ThisIsTheEnd.com**. While the TINAG design philosophy tries to conceal the game's nature as a game, it must nonetheless provide clues to the other syntagms that constitute the game. The TINAG approach has little effect on the syntagmatic level in that it

⁶³ Jane McGonigal refers to these breaks as "pinocchio effect" (2003a). These are unwanted disjunctures that point to the game during its playing. These are not like the header: "Part of the 2012 Movie Experience | 2012 In Theatres November 13" and the links to the other sites and to Sony Pictures, which appeared once the game concluded.

⁶⁴http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org/?hs317=2012_TheIHC&fbid=2zC3SKIjPT3#/about

relates to other syntagms by contravening its own rules. The syntagmatic ranking is left unchanged so that the player can proceed to the following syntagm and continue the game.

Paradigmatically, however, the TINAG characteristic only hints at its ludic nature through peripheral association. That is, rather than making the claim that acknowledges its being a game, it requires this identification to be solved by the hidden clues. While perusing the website, for example, its authentic appearance as an institution makes keying it as ludic less evident. The purpose of TINAG is to mask the game and therefore to portray the ludic paradigm as indeterminate or concealed. The TINAG aesthetic contributes to the concealment of the ARG as a game because it makes the content's keying ambiguous.

We see from this strip that the TINAG design is operative at the paradigmatic level. It conceals what would otherwise be marked as a game. The design philosophy has little effect syntagmatically in that it cannot hide that it is one part of other, non-present, syntagms that make up the game. Doing so would mean players would not know how to proceed in the game. Interestingly, the TINAG design fails along the syntagmatic axis in order to generate a clue that there is more to be done. In our example above, the TINAG design failed to unmark the link to Charlie's blog by permitting the camel-cased link to appear on the institution's website.

Having analyzed the design aesthetic's effect on the syntagmaic and paradigmatic axes, let's look at another strip.

Billboards: Through expansions

A person, either walking or driving by, it does not matter, notices one of the game's billboards. (See Appendix B) There are two different types of billboards, both with blue-grey backgrounds and orange spray-paint graffiti. I will focus on the most ambiguous one because of its demonstrations of TINAG design and expansions but mainly for its role in players' performance

of belief. The billboard centers the IHC name with “2012” above it. Below are 8 iconic scenes of potentially threatening environmental calamities (tidal waves, lightning, volcano eruption and palm trees in what appears as a hurricane). What is peculiar about the poster is orange spray-paint graffiti which reads, “The Mayans warned us! You heard it from Charlie Frost” (23 July, CF). The billboard is displayed within an urban setting where billboards are common.

What is of importance to us is not the billboard as a medium of advertising in contemporary society, but the billboard as a piece of the game. It is public but not publicly recognizable as part of a game. As a billboard, the gamepiece is intended to attract the attention of passers-by. On the one hand, the viewer is presented with the advertised organization, the IHC. On the other hand, the orange graffiti attracts the gaze. What is so important as to vandalize the billboard (especially with a message that is not merely a tag of the graffiti-artist)? Who is Charlie Frost? Since the 2012 ARG makes extensive use of the Internet, it is not a stretch to speculate that the billboard is intended to direct curious viewers to the Internet to look up keywords such as Charlie Frost, 2012, and the IHC, all of which will lead the curious viewer to an online trailhead for the ARG. As such, it offers a superimposition of the gameworld onto the phenomenologically real world. As people come across the billboard, the fictitious IHC is presented with a public, quasi-real status as an organization that, like others, employs billboards in their marketing strategy. In one stroke, the billboard makes present and simultaneously hides the company – that is, normalizes it, making it verisimilar amidst the urban landscape of other real organizations regardless of its actual truth status.

The billboard therefore follows the TINAG design philosophy elaborated by Elan Lee: as a game-piece, it does not present itself as such. It is merely an advertisement for the IHC much like other billboards promote the logos of other companies in urban neighborhoods. Nor does

the billboard delimit a game space. In this sense, the billboard is also an example of the 2012 ARG's spatial expansion. According to Charlie's blog⁶⁵, several similar billboards appeared in various cities throughout the United States and abroad. The blog specifically references and offers photographs of billboards in Chicago (6 Aug., CF), Italy, Mexico, Spain (26 Aug., CF), and in New York (2 Sept., CF).

The social and temporal expansion elements of the billboards are made more obvious from the standpoint of a player or someone with prior knowledge of the ARG – the billboard's paratext. For someone with sufficient paratextual awareness, the billboards' reference of the IHC, 2012, and Charlie Frost (and the graffiti reference to the address of Charlie's blog on the billboards in Italy, Mexico, and Spain), as well as Charlie's slogan "you heard it first from Charlie Frost," indicate that the billboard is a gamepiece. What impresses the knowledgeable viewer is that the billboard is present in his or her surrounding, and this, at a time when the viewer is not seeking to interact with the gameworld. Not only is the billboard freed from the virtual space online where the fiction originates, it is freed without consent. It invades the viewer's social world on the games' own time, over several weeks. This enhances the person's experience of the illusion and facilitates the performance of belief.

The billboard example reveals how the ARG makes a gamepiece ambiguous. It resembles and is experienced like a billboard that has been subject to graffiti. The billboard offers no clue about its being a game-piece. On the paradigmatic level of analysis, its mimicry of a real organization is hidden from the unaware viewer who may not know that it is a game-prop. Because of its adherence to the TINAG philosophy, the billboard is concealed as a game-piece. It is indistinguishable as a game-piece in that it resembles other billboards, it is found in an urban area where commercial signs could be expected and it functions as an advertisement.

⁶⁵ Henceforth abbreviated as CF

On the syntagmatic level, the billboard's companion game-pieces are scattered spatially and temporally. Since spatial and temporal immediacy are higher ranked when combining experience, the billboard as a game-piece is de-ranked over space and time. While the billboard qua game-piece has entered the social space, other syntagms of the game are spread such that the passing observer may not rank them together as part of a game. For the player, however, the billboard is a reminder that he/she is still in play, even while on the way to work or walking a dog because the intention to play grounds the player's combination of the syntagms. The experience of the billboards emphasizes the expansions of the game and demonstrates how the syntagms of a game, normally immediately present, are spatially, temporally and socially displaced.

PSA: Performance of Belief

Several strips were identified where players acted as if the game was real. For example, players lobbied to be the next President and even offered Youtube video concession speeches! Others bid on a Naaczaal ticket sold on eBay⁶⁶ in order to be ensured a space on the secret survival shuttle. Some, not all, people that contacted Charlie on Facebook avoided discussing his real identity as Woody Harrelson. Performing belief is mainly associated with players since non-players are not performing. These instances require the player not merely to suspend disbelief but to act as if the game is not fiction. They are not mere actions but validating performances where the ARG invades becomes parasitical of the real.

⁶⁶ The ticket sold for \$240! The seller, however, respected the game's fiction and the real by stating that the money would go to a charity.

Another (potential⁶⁷) public invasion of the ARG is the result of a 33 second commercial in the form of a public service announcement (henceforth PSA) by the IHC, reported to have aired on television. A description is in order here to explain the experience of it. During the first 2 seconds, the Columbia Pictures iconic screen is juxtaposed with a Mayan calendar with a voiceover only beginning once the iconic screen is gone. A Mayan temple and calendar follows this, with computer generated images of the orbiting Earth and a solar flare, and the voiceover claiming how the Mayans predicted and science confirmed a "solar occurrence" is to happen in 2012. The nondiegetic soundtrack playing in the background changes from an urgent sounding score to one evoking grace and prestige. The transition occurs with the appearance of the IHC logo screen, scenes of a glass-paned futuristic building and various industrial construction initiatives that the voiceover attributes to the IHC's preparation for the "inevitable." The IHC website address appears in the lower foreground where it remains for the rest of the ad. The score and voiceover subsequently lead to a scene of hundreds of people gathered together followed with close-up shots of smiling parents with their child, emphasizing the IHC's mandate of ensuring that *everyone will have an equal opportunity at survival*. The commercial ends with the IHC logo screen. For the final 3 seconds, the PSA breaks frame again and includes the Centropolis and Columbia Pictures logos as well as a customary "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" disclaimer. The mere five seconds of metacommunication that bracket the PSA generate the plausibility that viewers may not have caught the ad's film status.

Whether it has aired or not has an effect on the potential reach of audience, but the PSA remains valuable to the current analysis. Like the billboards discussed above, the PSA could be noticed by a person, knowledgeable or not of the 2012 ARG that would experience a similar

⁶⁷ I qualify this as 'potential' because after close scrutiny, the identity of the person that posted this information is the same as the person that posted a video question to the IHC. It is likely that this person is an actor playing a fictitious character and that the reported airing of the PSA is an attempt to augment player performance of belief.

invasion of a game piece in either a game or non-game context. Whether the PSA was publicly broadcast or not does not remove the appearance that it might have aired to those coming across it either through Youtube⁶⁸ or Charlie's blog (31 Aug., CF). For instance, the player following the 2012 ARG much like the Internet surfer stumbling upon the Youtube PSA, are both led by the TINAG design to believe, truthfully or not, that the PSA aired. For some players, this would seem plausible given the film's advertising budget, knowledge of expansions and TINAG design philosophy. For the uncritical non-player, there is likewise no reason to doubt that the PSA was aired.

The PSA offers an example of how the performance of belief plays a crucial role in the ARG. On the syntagmatic level, the PSA is a syntagm that can be attached to any other of the game's syntagms with little effect. Its rank is unchanged since it can be experienced at any time without effect. On the paradigmatic level, the players' performance of belief augments the plausibility that the PSA aired but more importantly, increases the PSA's effect.

The feedback generated by the PSA along with this characteristic plays with reality. For example, several Youtube videos surfaced to discredit the PSA and draw attention to it as a hoax or ruse⁶⁹. Comments were left by various indignant people expressing their incredulity that others were being duped into thinking the content was real. These paratexts which, in Peircean terms, are so many interpretants of the PSA are present in the margins of the video and are experienced with it. Yet, should we not anticipate this type of response in the gameworld as well? Were these non-players arguing that it was a hoax or were they players performing as if they were non-players dispelling it as a hoax? The social media spoilers on Youtube and Facebook that perform an action that draw attention to the game's fictionality can also be viewed

⁶⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9NDcOes16Q&feature=related>

⁶⁹ This form of feedback was noticed on the social media sites where the game provided space for commentary, such as Charlie's Facebook page.

as diegetic even if this is contrary to the spoiler's attempts. Another way of looking at this is to assume that our destruction in 2012 is declared real. Would we not see detractors attempting to discredit such a prophecy? More insidious, the performance of belief in ARGs has an effect on the paradigmatic by concealing the mimicry of the players. In all of these instances, those performing belief know that their action constitutes in-game and in-fiction action despite their portrayed ambivalence to its ludic nature. We see here how the PSA's broadcast status could be argued to be real or to be part of the fictional world of the ARG. The players' performance of belief contribute to an unmarking of the players' actions as gamic and their contribution to making the game appear more real, in this case, is rewarded by a better fiction.

Document Interception: Through collective involvement

Several collective tasks required completion for the 2012 ARG to progress. Resolving collective challenges for the game to proceed like the gathering of documents, we can assume, involves only players and puppetmasters and not those unaware that may or may not witness the interception. Experiences of collective involvement are a collaborative type of performance of belief (henceforth PoB). In one instance following peoples' registration at Comic-Con, some players were mailed one of ten different types of pyramids with a Mayan code. Players had to share with others to make sense of the code found on each of the mailed pyramids. These tasks not only require that players exchange information but that they also collaborate in decoding the cryptographic clue.

Let us consider another strip for our analysis. The players are asked to help Dr Ulfert and the Corruption Theorist intercept secret documents in cities throughout the United States.

Totaling 840 locations across 15 major US cities, Dr Ulfert and the Corruption Theorist plausibly state that they cannot be present at all of the exchanges and request the assistance of players:

How You Can Help The old adage says ‘Two heads are better than one.’ How much better then, are a dozen heads, or a thousand, all working together? I need assistance in uncovering the truth, but I also want allies. I want people who can bear witness to what I find and get the message out. I guess I’m also a fan of another adage, ‘There is safety in numbers.’ (31 Aug., CT)

Dr Ulfert, who still has access to the IHC’s messaging system sends the registered players a list of times and GPS coordinates where the exchanges are to take place. The intercepted documents are written in a numerical code that players must decode (25 Sept., CT)

In this participatory strip, we must assume that participants are players or puppetmasters, the former performing belief while the latter upholding the TINAG aesthetic. We may also assume that there may have been bystanders who happen to be at the specified locations and spaces and who experience the interceptions in one manner or another. We are less concerned with the latter group since the interceptions were nothing spectacular that would make a bystander question it.

However, the exchanges among players in sharing and decrypting the contents of the intercepted documents revealed instances of collective intelligence (Levy 2007). On the syntagmatic level, it is not only the actual interceptions that function as syntagms that can be attached to any other of the game’s syntagms but the communication *between* players. Like expansions, these communications invade the players’ real world. The player cannot decide if, when, nor how another player will make contact to ask for, or offer, their intercepted document. Nor can the player control the speed of the others’ decoding of the documents which may or may not influence the game’s speed. Like expansions, instances of collective play have an influence on the syntagmatic rank of the strip. On the paradigmatic level, the players’ performance of

belief and the puppetmasters' adherence to the TINAG principle increases the realistic aesthetic thereby augmenting the player's enjoyment.

Summarizing analysis

We saw that signs are determined representations of ongoing processes. They are determined in that they can be any representation generated by the object represented. Signs are made meaningful by the triadic action of semiosis. In this process, the sign stands for its object in some capacity in the form of an interpretant. With regards to frame analysis, a frame is an interpretant of the strip of activity (object) that is being framed (sign) in some respect. The framed strip under observation is determined in that it is part of an ongoing process, of which the framed strip is merely a representation of it in some capacity much like the ones reviewed in this case of the 2012 ARG.

As Perron argues (2003) games are not to be considered apart from their experiential context. By conceiving games based on experience from the embodied point of view this semiotic approach moves away from text (structural) to the experience (pragmatic). Not everyone has, or will, experience all the tiers nor has, or will, experience in the same order and in the same context. For example, only the most inquisitive of players may have found the "Google books" entry of *Farewell Atlantis*, the science fiction novel that a central protagonist of the movie published. Nor will everyone appreciate that the book's 'Foreword' was written by the "real" science fiction writer Carl Sagan. But as a semiotic object it was created with a tendency to an end, and, given enough time and inquiry, it will manifest that end.

We also saw that a strip of activity is framed according to our meaningful organization of it. Without this framing, the activity is without determined meaning (i.e. without an interpretant). We also noted that framing makes strips meaningful, but does not necessarily provide the full

meaning. Keyings are our way of attributing an ontological status or genre to the strip of activity made meaningful by framing.⁷⁰ The three laminations that are of interest to us regarding alternate reality games are the real, the ludic, and fiction. So, for example, when we observe a strip of activity – say, a man making a telephone call on a public payphone – we give it meaning by framing it according to our belief that the man seeks to contact someone at the other end. Of course this meaningful activity can be attributed another lamination or keying, if the man is on a television drama show. In this case, the strip of activity is made meaningful as an act of long distance communication to another, but keyed as fictional since the man is understood to be a character in the episode playing.

We saw that we organize frames, or signs, along the paradigmatic axis in terms of markedness and along the syntagmatic axis in terms of rank. This organization is carried out in terms of a purpose or intention. When Goffman (1974) asks, for example, “what is it that’s going on here?” (p. 8) he frames the strip of activity experienced according to its coordinate positions of rank and markedness, relative to his experience of it. In Liszka’s (1996) terms, the frame determines the coordinate organization along the axes relative to the observer’s means; the means are determined relative to the frame and the coordinate organization realizes the frame in terms of the means (pp. 32-33). That is, we saw that billboards, posters, and videos making the ARG a publicly media experience, observers include players of varying degrees of participation and bystanders that do not know about the game.

For players, the TINAG aesthetic’s concealment provides realism within the fiction. We saw this with the IHC’s convoluted website that appeared professional due to its details. We realize from considering this strip that the TINAG design is operative at the paradigmatic level.

⁷⁰ I do not suggest here that framing and keying are necessarily sequential. These actions can occur so fast as to be perceived as the same thought process.

It conceals what could otherwise be recognized as a game. The purpose of TINAG is to conceal the game and therefore to make the ludic paradigm indeterminate. Players must search harder to break through its façade. The design philosophy has little effect syntagmatically in that it cannot hide that it is one part of other, non-present, syntagms that make up the game. However, like the camelcase link to Charlie's blog, inconspicuously woven into the organization's communication, it offers a position from which to look for intertextual game clues since the syntagmatic organization cannot be hidden if the game is to progress. Doing so would mean players would not know how to proceed in the game.

Similarly, in examples of the performance of belief, the TINAG aesthetic continues its effect however, it is supplemented by players performing as characters within the fiction. For example, a player bids on the eBay auction for a ticket aboard Naaczal constituted an in-game and in-fiction action allowing narrative coherence. The PSA's broadcast status, we saw, had players' pretending the fictional world of the ARG was real. The players' performance of belief contribute to an omission that the players' actions as gamic. Just as the TINAG aesthetic affects the paradigmatic level by concealing the experience's status as a game, PoB by the players also affects the paradigmatic level by concealing the players' actions as ludic. Non-players that experience a strip of the ARG are either duped by the TINAG's realistic aesthetic, or, if they are not, are duped by the players who seem to have been duped.

That strips are framed with meaning is a function of paradigmatic organization. We saw how framing strips is done according to a primary framework. For our analysis we have been using a primary framework of reality, or truth. Is the IHC real? Are the billboards and posters real? Are other people *really* buying into the IHC's PSA? By concealing the ludic nature of the strips, the TINAG and PoB elements effect the paradigmatic organization by obscuring this

primary framework. Ontologically, games are already difficult to prescind⁷¹ because they rely on meta-communicational cues. ARGs further complicate their identification by concealing the conventions that tend to be used to identify them as games. When faced with an unqualified situation or strip, syntagms will be ranked in the most meaningful way in terms of a purpose. By dispersing game strips across several media the combinational relation of the syntagm (to other dispersed syntagms) is diluted making them less apparent for purposeful combination and the hierarchical rank is decreased. Compared to a video game, for example, which includes a combination of algorithmic elements and player action that constitute its syntagms of experience, we can say that the videogame ranks the sequential relation of its syntagms in a much higher position than the ARG that disperses its gamic elements over a period of months, at different times, in different media, and in different geographical space. Whereas the videogame ranks its syntagms in such a way as to ensure their combination for gameplay to proceed sequentially, the ARG's dissemination across several media platforms and over time ranks them lower because it does not ensure that all tiers will be experienced by the player synchronically.

Spatial, temporal and social expansions along with tasks requiring collective involvement lower the hierarchical rank of syntagms within the experience of the game by scattering combinatory elements (game pieces) while the TINAG design and player PoB, conceal the game as such along the paradigmatic axis by purposefully concealing the game's meta-communication. This is significant in that the rules, or interpretants, establish the relations of rank and markedness. By contravening these rules at the paradigmatic level, ARGs expose themselves to criticism⁷². One only has to look at the countless comments on the IHC videos to understand

⁷¹ Prescission (to prescind) is a form of abstraction when two concepts are so closely connected that it is hard to imagine one without the other although we can suppose one without the other. A common example is like imagining color without space (cf. CP 4.235).

⁷² Violence in a Girardian sense or ethical valuation in a Peircean manner described above.

how people criticized the videos, especially after having inquired and understood that the videos were part of an ongoing game. After this violence, transvaluation re-establishes order for those involved in that the mediascape now includes the possibility of media⁷³ being used in an undisclosed game.

⁷³ Media here is intended broadly. Examples in our case study include Youtube online videos, conference booths, Google Books, online commercial sites like eBay, posters and billboards, websites, blogs, newsletters and various social media

Conclusion

This thesis explored the relationship between alternate reality games and reality. I began by asking how ARGs play with reality. The literature reveals various accounts of this, usually from a phenomenological point of view. These views tend to sensationalize ARGs as influencing reality when in fact the games really affect perceptions based on audience's varied relation to the game. Like the signs described in the semiotic framework above, different inspections of this thesis will find different meanings in it. An exhaustive account of the meanings in this thesis is virtually impossible however, I will review those parts that were manifest and, I hope, satisfactorily argued.

ARGs are a type of ubiquitous game that requires an incumbent digital media society and gaming culture. The game uses mass media and social media to distribute/deploy the game-pieces. It does so to exploit the transvaluation of those who experience it to generate confusion for its audiences. I argue how alternate reality games generate transvaluation of the rules of mass media's portrayal of reality and fiction and it is this resulting crisis that is exploited for promotional purposes. The answer I arrived at is that ARGs are games where the ambiguity in valuation accounts for how it plays with reality. That is, ARGs rely on the varying valences the audiences make of the tiers in order to generate confusion. They are aimed not only at audiences "enthusiastic," "active" and "casual" described by 42 Entertainment, but also unaware bystanders that experience tiers, associating them to other non-ARG syntagms and non-ludic paradigms. At best, the latter experience the content as media noise in the mediasphere; at worst, those predisposed to accept uncritically experience the content as real (opposed to ludic) diffused across media.

This methodological approach was deemed appropriate given its consideration of an

interdisciplinary overlap, its ability to overcome the problems of the respective disciplines and its appreciation for varied audiences. It offers credibility, transferability, repeatability and neutrality. However, a few unexpected problems with this research were revealed during the sample collection. First, conducting research without knowing the upcoming twists of the ARG puts the researcher in a position that may ‘reveal’ or draw attention to the game’s nature, thereby ruining the realist aesthetic the research depends on. Second, prepping a design to simultaneously follow the nonlinearity of the ARG proved difficult at times. Posting from a particular individual was at first presumed to be from a non-player. After finding another post from the same alias but in a different, unrelated section, the status of the individual was blurry. The individual could just as well be performing belief or, could be a puppetmaster. Trying to ascertain the individual’s legitimate status was impossible during the game because of the TINAG aesthetic and This Is Not A Game philosophy. After its conclusion, I was unable to confirm the individual’s status with Andrea Philips, one of the game’s designers. While this problem carries a minor impact on the overall thesis, it suggests the convenience of researchers to establish close ties with a PM, which can only be actualized prior to the game because of the game’s disavowal philosophies.

Several relationships were found between the four ARG’s characteristics and frame transvaluation. The TINAG has an effect on non-players by concealing the game as a game. For active players, TINAG’s concealment provides realism within the fiction but also offers a position from which to look for game clues since the syntagmatic organization cannot be hidden if the game is to progress. Performing belief is mainly associated with players since non-players are not performing. Yet there is effect on players. In performance of belief, TINAG continues its effect on non-players, but PoB actions contribute to the realism of the fiction by performing as

characters within the fiction. Non-players unknowingly risk being duped by the TINAG's realistic aesthetic, or, if they are not, risk being duped by the players who act from within the diegetic fabrication. The ARG effects the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. Along the paradigmatic, the TINAG and PoB function to mask the ludic nature (paradigm) of the ARG while expansions and the tasks requiring collective problem solving affect the syntagmatic organization by scattering game pieces lowering the hierarchical rank of syntagms within the experience of the game.

As Liszka (1989) pointed out, the transgression of previously stable hierarchies results in a Girardian crisis where the valuation of the hierarchy becomes ambiguous. In the case of ARGs, we can see how the media artifact which is normally addressing a broadly conceived media audience, is now addressing players. The enthusiastic ARG player, like Jenkin's (2006) spoiler and Consalvo's (2009a) cheater, holds a privileged position. In a Girardian sense, each is sacred. Each has amassed a superior level of (gaming) capital in some respect compared to the average person. The enthusiastic player, like the spoiler and the cheater, has amassed collateral knowledge through paratextual information and media literacy, so she can identify the ARG game pieces despite the TINAG aesthetic. She knows the game exists and captures the paratextual resources to identify it concealed among the medias. Like the king, the spoiler and the cheater, ARG players can also "spoil" the game for others and risk violence⁷⁴ if they are too detrimental to others. However, ARG players want to share their findings but only to make the game proceed, such as it occurs during instances requiring collective collaboration.⁷⁵

Non-players, on the other hand, tend to spoil by drawing attention to the game's fiction. ARG players are aware of the color-shaded tint that ARGs project on the world. Those unaware

⁷⁴ Violence is meant broadly as something that one's will cannot overpower.

⁷⁵ This was well-argued and documented by McGonigal (2008).

overlook, question, or draw attention to the hue of shades they experience. This was most evident in the large number of Youtube ‘spoilers’ trying to convince imagined dupes that the 2012 ARG and the IHC are not real.

Transvaluation, we see, enables to account analytically for a conflict where what was once valued in a given way has become indeterminate. In the case of framing, the possible (trans) valuations of either real or fiction are equivalent. That is, both framings are plausible even though for the moment, the unaware player cannot offer satisfactory proof that the 2012 myth IHC are fiction and the violence that they portrayed as real. ARGs, we can say, exploit player versus media audience transvaluation. The problematic relationship of ARGs to the experience of ‘reality’ is actually the disruption of the common valuation of the authenticity of media; the media’s role as non-ludic.

The presence of rules for playing games leads to generalizable habits. These habits are not causal but are the result of following the rules. Rules, as Liszka (1989) has argued, allow us to evaluate if something is done according to the rules that introduce value and criticism. ARGs put those rules in crisis, which leads to transvaluation to reestablish order in the system. The 2012 ARG was a puzzle waiting to be solved. But a puzzle is only a puzzle if someone believes it requires solving⁷⁶. The player must search out and make the connections. The design characteristics of ARGs presuppose intentionality. Whereas the media text with ample redundancy is produced to make its meaning known to most, the ARG is produced to make its meaning hidden to those that do not intentionally seek it. By design, ARGs ensure that bystanders do not make the same connections to the game as players do. This can result in audiences (bystanders and others from the ranks of players) criticizing or being indignant when

⁷⁶ Peirce similarly argues that “it is the nature of a sign, and in particular of a sign which is rendered significant by a character which lies in the fact that it will be interpreted as a sign. Of course, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (CP 2.308).

learning that the media they rely on is used as part of a game. But ARGs cause commotion by having fiction in what was conventionally accepted as real. I suggest that this indicates an assumption in Game Studies that a player (or players) is required for a game to be experienced but that bystanders are either observers aware of the occurring game or dismissed as unimportant. This poses problems for games that conceal their status as ludic, yet are played in public among bystanders. How is bystander experience measured?

At its most basic reading, this thesis provides a case study of an alternate reality game. The general audience will find in this, evidence that a type of game occurred in 2009. For media scholars interested in the use and evolving trends in the sphere of media, this thesis presents a media phenomenon occurring during the technological transition from the proliferation of media at the onset of the 21st century. As a relatively unknown genre using mass media in ways that deliberately contravened conventional assumptions, ARGs were on the vanguard of this transvaluative crisis. In part, the level of media literacy and familiarity with paratexts given the proliferation of new media contributed to the genre's ability to be unrecognized as a game. Consequently, I speculate that as interpretants for media messages become more determined by including the possibility of ARGs, reality, we can say, also becomes more determinate.

I believe game developers and ARG practitioners curious to understand the nuances of transmedia⁷⁷ games will benefit from the understanding of the experience of the genre's characteristics that this thesis argues about. More saliently, given the understanding of the ARG's role in transvaluation, we avoid condemning the genre altogether on ethical grounds (Harvey 2006) and we can attend to the ethical implementation of its parts. For example, down-scaling expansions by increasing syntagmatic rankings may be found to allow players the

⁷⁷ There seems to be a shift in the community regarding the use of 'transmedia game' in place of the term 'alternate reality game.'

appreciation of a well-designed TINAG while limiting variance in transvaluation. This understanding will benefit game designers in their design choices.

Another important contribution that the thesis makes is to promote the relevance of semiotics in the field of Game Studies. Unlike other approaches, semiotic's emphasis on experience circumvents the 'real versus fiction' or 'real versus virtual' dualisms. This offers the benefit of a unified perspective that treats all phenomena on an equal basis.

Closely tied to this, user experience designers may benefit from the acknowledgement of bystander experience. ARGs engender evaluation of the mediasphere. The ambivalence of ARGs towards the conventions of truth in the mediasphere concerning the nature of its disseminations results in a crisis⁷⁸. However, I have refrained from arguing an ethical view since ARGs reestablish the possibility of discovering something from reality by subverting pre-existent symbolism and generating a new set of conventions. ARGs are symptomatic of a broader phenomenon, an ambiguity in our understanding of games and the diverse levels of media literacy. Transvaluation and transvaluated crisis suggest a need to modify the dominant PM stratification of audience exemplified by 42 Entertainment. This is especially pertinent within the increasing interest in interaction design and the experience economy. Not everyone shares the same level of digital media literacy.

The 2012 ARG-generated controversy had more to do with the change in use of technology and lagging media literacy than the environmental doomsday scenario predicted in the sensationalized myth of 2012. But disturbing media conventions and game conventions, the ARG artifacts were less easily identified as fictional and ludic whether the audience believed in the artifacts' realism or not. Those that have heard rumors or buzz regarding 2012 come to the movie with an understanding that it is fiction, but sometime prior to its release, the fiction

⁷⁸ See Harvey (2006)

invaded reality. The fallibility of any kind of knowledge about which semiotic posits may have deceived some at first but with investigation would likely lead to discovering the ludic nature of the mediated game piece. Whether the prophecies are correct or false does not change the fact that transgressing conventions is likely to cause some confusion. Yet, truth and the real will confirm themselves over time if we look for them. In the meantime, we'll just have to wait and see if the Mayans really got it wrong.

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Appendix A – List of 2012 ARG artefacts

- 3 Facebook accounts (excluding 1 fan group): IHC, Charlie Frost, Jackson Curtis
- 7 “in-game” websites
- 3 weblogs totaling 101 posts and 45 youtube videos (excluding promotional movie trailers and teasers): Charlie Frost, Soren Ulfert, Corruption Theorist
- Several “in-game” press releases
- Several activated E-mails addresses, phone numbers to call (including a voicemail to hack) and contact forms
- Comic-con booth with promotional “in-game” postcard, bags, t-shirts
- 840 locations across 15 major US cities with longitude/latitude coordinates for intercepted cryptic documents and engineering schematics
- 2 different kinds of “in-game” streetposters/billboards in US cities and Italy, Mexico, Spain
- “in-game” lottery tickets
- small Mayan pyramids (10 different ones total)
- and a pickle recipe

Websites

The Institute for Human Continuity (Fictitious multinational organization)

<http://www.instituteforhumancontinuity.org>

News Done Right (Fictitious news agency)

<http://www.newsdoneright.com/>

Aerospace Robotics Corporation (Fictitious company website)

<http://www.aerospaceroboticscorp.com/>

Farewell Atlantis novel (Fictitious book release and publisher websites) GoogleBooks entry)

<http://www.farewellatlantis.com/>

<http://www.hudsoncameronpress.com/FarewellAtlantis/>

(GoogleBooks entry)

http://books.google.com/books?id=3MoTRijXNbwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=farewell+atlantis&ei=sI9wSo_QFIPYlAT919zqDg#v=onepage&q&f=false

Naaczaal Ticket sale (character websites)

<http://www.isabellastsimon.com/>

<http://www.naaczaaltixforsale.com/>

(Ebay listing of ticket: sold for \$240 US)

<http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=230395817328&viewitem>

Weblogs

This Is The End (Charlie Frost blog)

<http://www.thisistheend.com/>

After the IHC (Soren Ulfert blog)

<http://sorenulfert2012.blogspot.com/>

Corruption Theory (Prof Meyers blog)

<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/>

Images collected from the 2012 ARG



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (Comic Con - IHC Election?!)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> Comic Con - Packing for 2012



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (23 July)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (23 July)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (28 July)

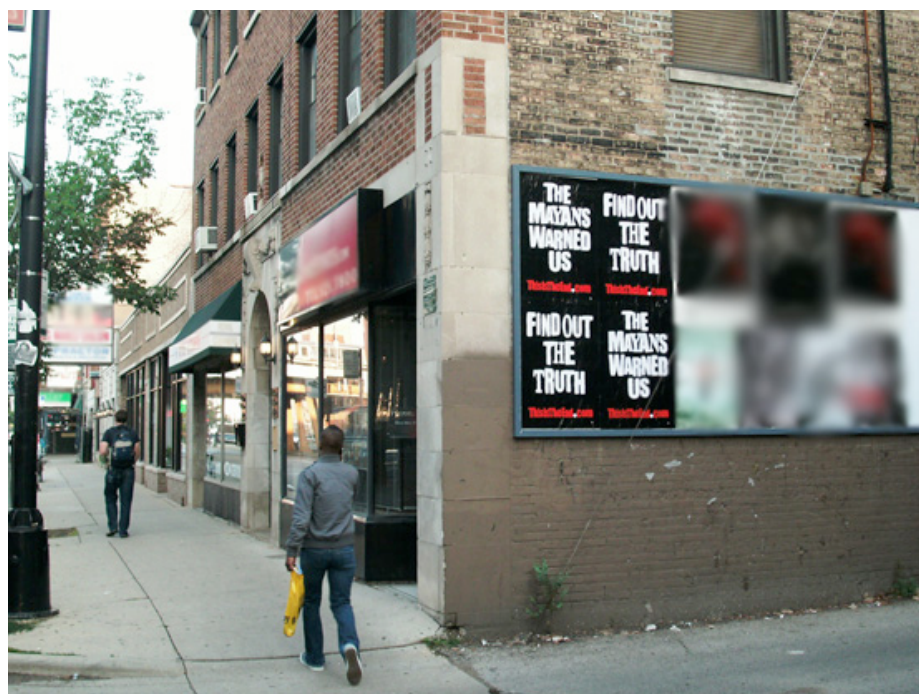




<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (31 July)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (4 August)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (6 August)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (7 August)

LOOKING FOR THE LEADER OF THE POST-2012 WORLD



Please login or register below.
Forgot Password?

EMAIL: PASSWORD:

The Leader of the Post-2012 World Election

The Institute for Human Continuity is taking our next big step in ensuring that the end is just the beginning. We're holding an election for the Leader of the Post-2012 World.

- You may enter until 5:59 pm PT on September 8, 2009.
- We want to find the best of the best, regardless of formal education, political connections, or name recognition.
- In Phase 1, all applicants will try for the best scores in a few games designed to measure leadership abilities.
- In Phase 2, up to 12 Top-scoring candidates will be asked to submit videos, pictures and slogans by 3:00 pm PT on September 25, 2009.
- In Phase 3, the candidates will campaign for the most votes in our election, ending Nov. 3.
- Everyone has a voice and a vote.

Registration

* = Required Fields

* NAME: FIRST LAST

* BIRTHDAY: MONTH DAY YEAR

* EMAIL:

* ADDRESS: STREET

* ADDRESS: CITY STATE ZIP

* PHONE: GENDER: ☐ MALE ☐ FEMALE

* PASSWORD: * CONFIRM:

☐ Yes, I'd like to receive email updates on the latest events and news surrounding The Institute for Human Continuity and 2012.

☐ Yes I would like to receive more information and special offers from Mobilismo. I understand and agree to Mobilismo's Privacy Policy.

☐ Yes I would like to receive more information and special offers from Marriott. I understand and agree to Marriott's Privacy Statement.

LOOKING FOR THE LEADER OF THE POST-2012 WORLD



Strategy

A keen sense of strategy allows a great leader to fluidly predict what others may do and take action accordingly. Even beyond warfare, the skill for strategy helps in negotiating any conflict. game tests your ability to formulate a winning strategy and see through to completion.

Player Computer Last

Score

0

<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (12 August)





<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (6 August)



August 31, 2009

Today, the final challenges have gone up in our search for the Leader of the Post-2012 World. If you haven't yet registered for the contest, [it's not too late](#). You can still complete all of the previous week's challenges.

Go to [TheIHC.com/election](#) now to register or continue playing. Don't delay – this phase of the election ends September 8, 2009 at 5:59 pm PT. I also want to stress that even once you have completed your game board you can still recruit advocates until this phase concludes.

Up to 12 finalists will receive a Sony PS3, and the Leader of the Post-2012 World will win a trip to Cancun. For the Official Rules of The Leader Of The Post-2012 World Election Contest, [click here](#).

Thank you again for participating in this election. Because of you and others like you, we can be confident that the end is just the beginning.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]
Communications Director
The Institute for Human Continuity
[Redacted]

Twitter: @TheIHC

<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (1 September)

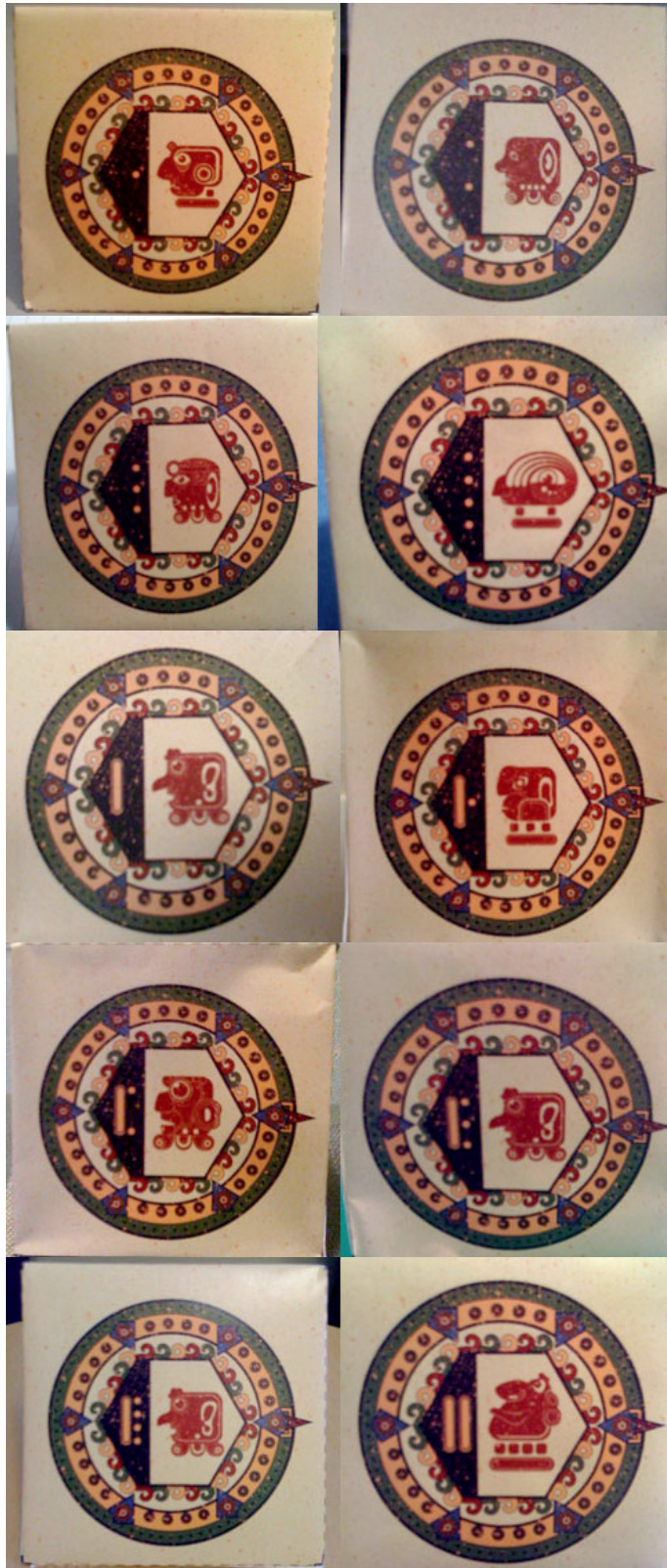




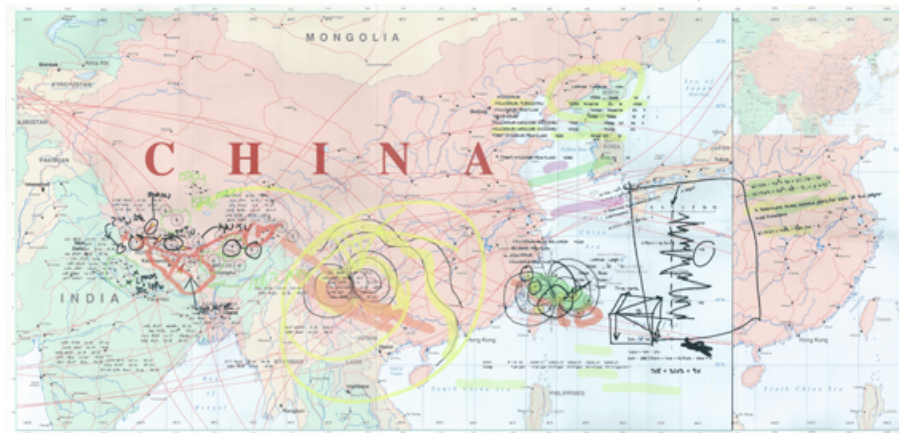
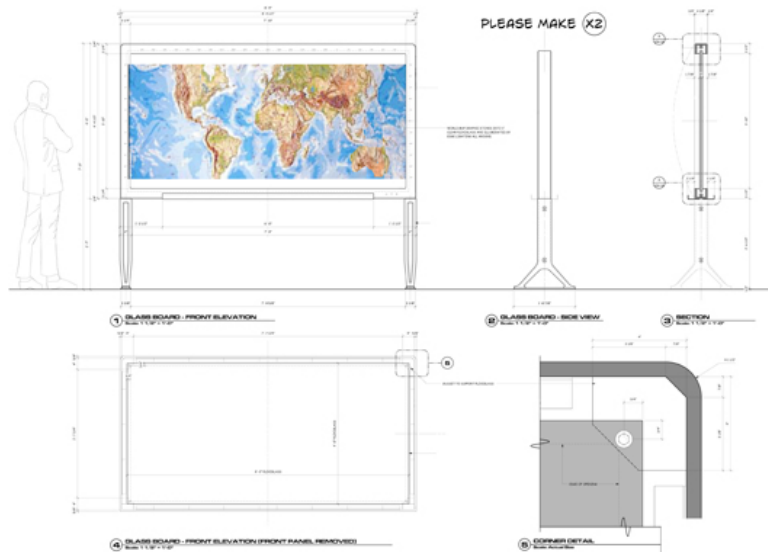
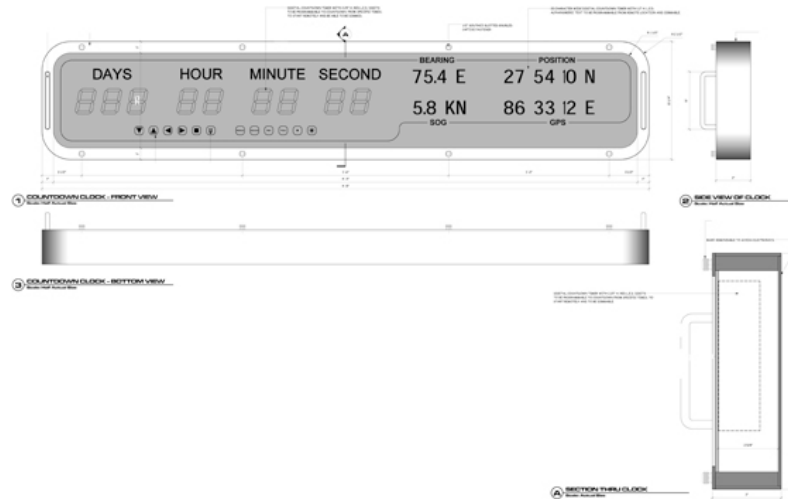
<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (2 September)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (3 September)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (9 September)



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> ("Everybody Loves a Package")

OBITUARIES

DOUGLAS MEYERS

Scientist dies in fishing boat accident

MIAMI, FL. — Renowned scientist Douglas Meyers passed away suddenly while on a recreational fishing trip.

According to the police report, Meyers, 50, was in an anchored 14-foot john boat off the coast of Florida. Authorities believe Meyers became entangled in kelp or seaweed after the wind on his seat broke, sending the scientist into the Atlantic.

Meyers, whose family members described as an avid fisherman and a good swimmer, was found near Miami and brought to shore at 8:20 p.m. An autopsy will be performed today to determine an official cause of death.

Professor Meyers was an employee of [redacted] well known for leading the [redacted] Program. More recently, he has been in the public eye for his role in [redacted] the disclosure of government [redacted] Data to the public.

Over the last three months he has been serving as a key witness in [redacted] case brought by The Board of Scientists to force federal agencies to regulate carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases as pollutants.

The Professor was last seen leaving the Court on Friday at the end of the week's proceedings. He was expected to attend a university scholars dinner that evening as a guest speaker, but never made it to the event.

Services are expected to take place next week.



PROFESSOR MEYERS



<http://www.thisistheend.com/> (11 November)

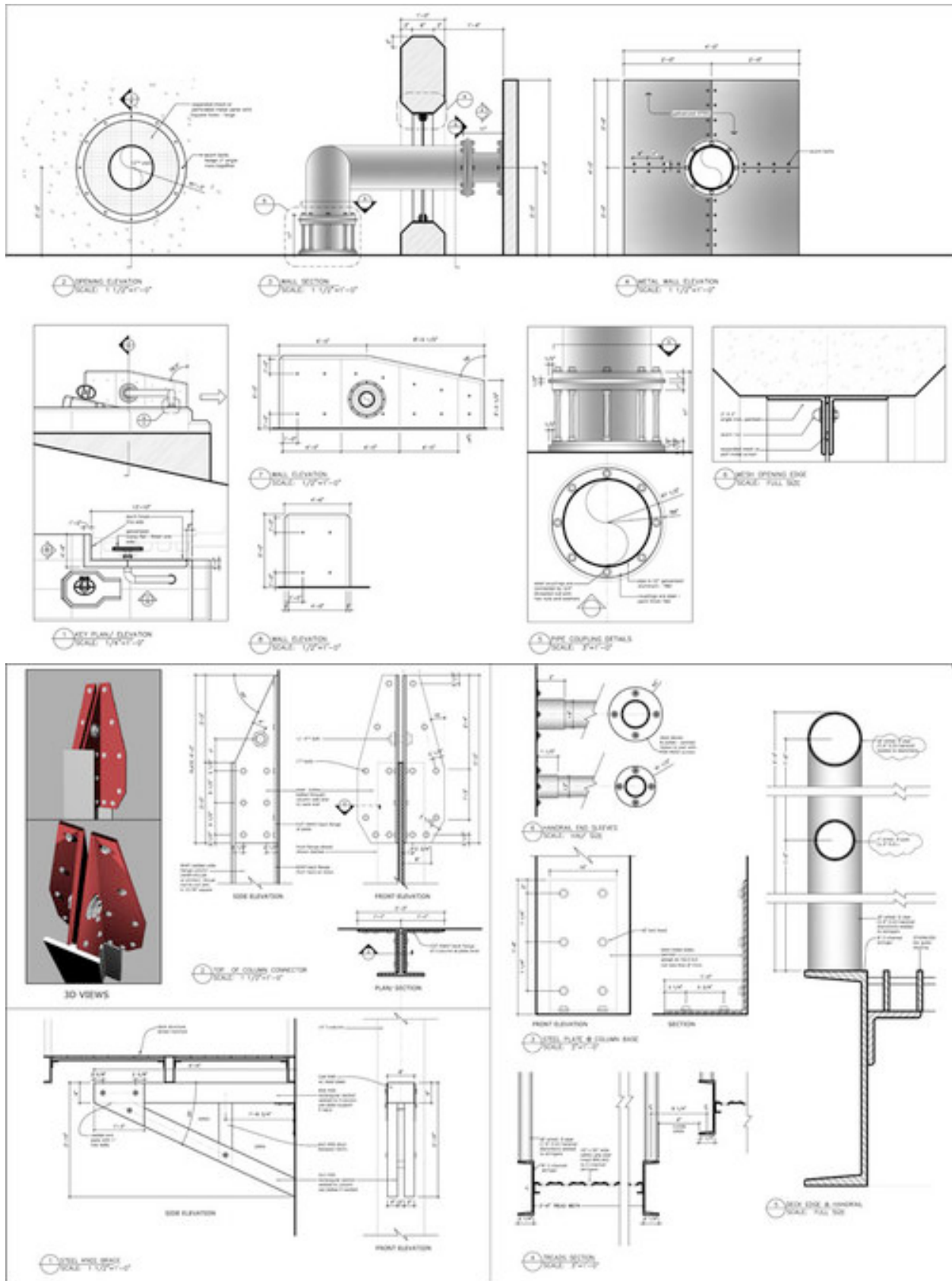
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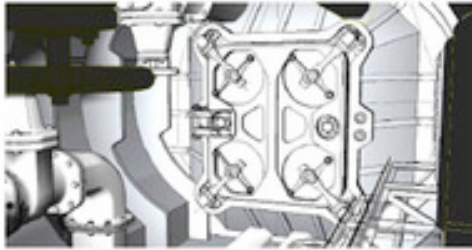
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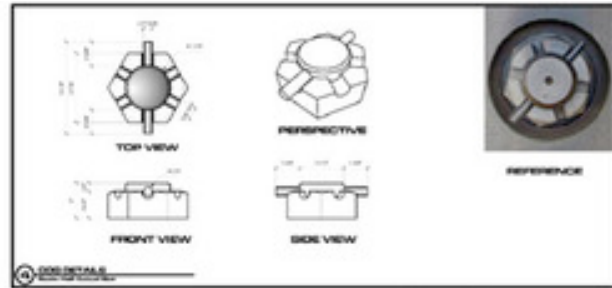
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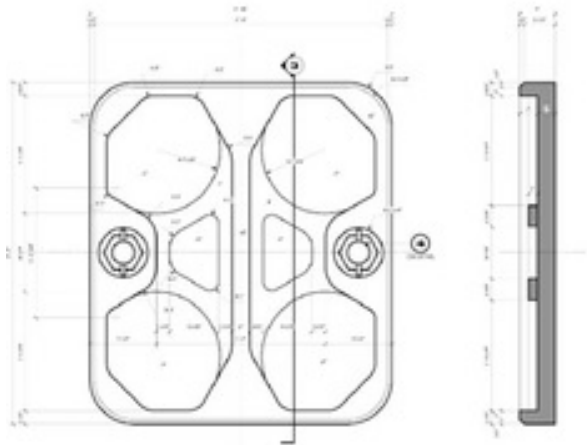




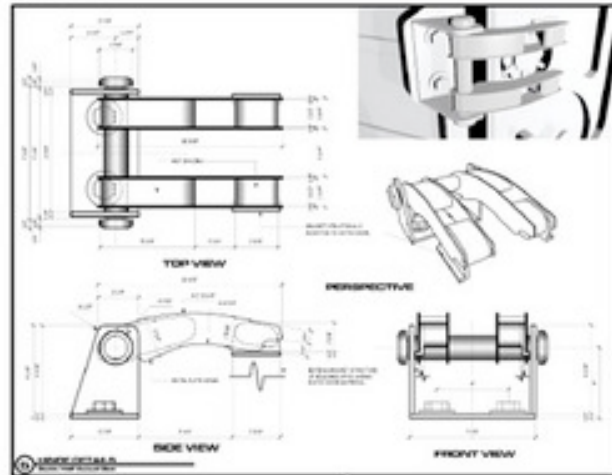
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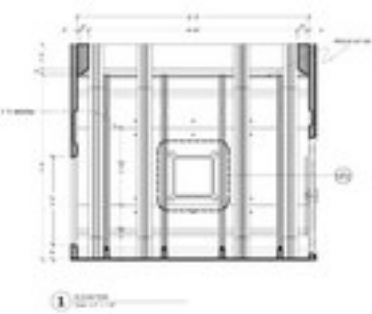
④ CASE DETAILS



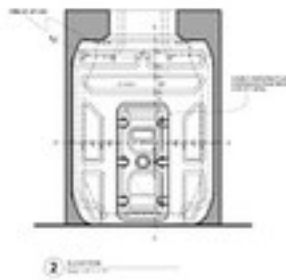
② WATCH CASE ELEVATION



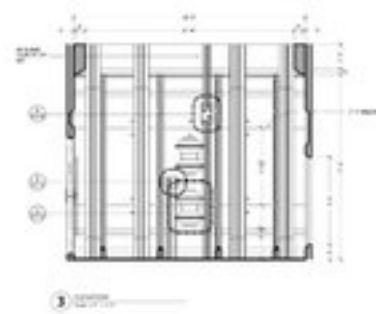
⑤ CASE DETAILS



① ELEVATION



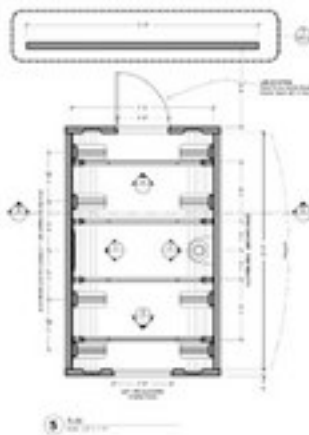
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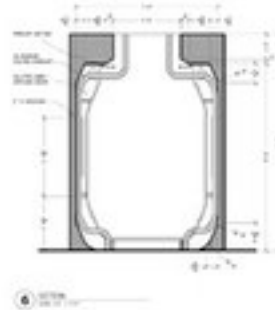
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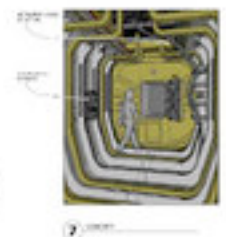
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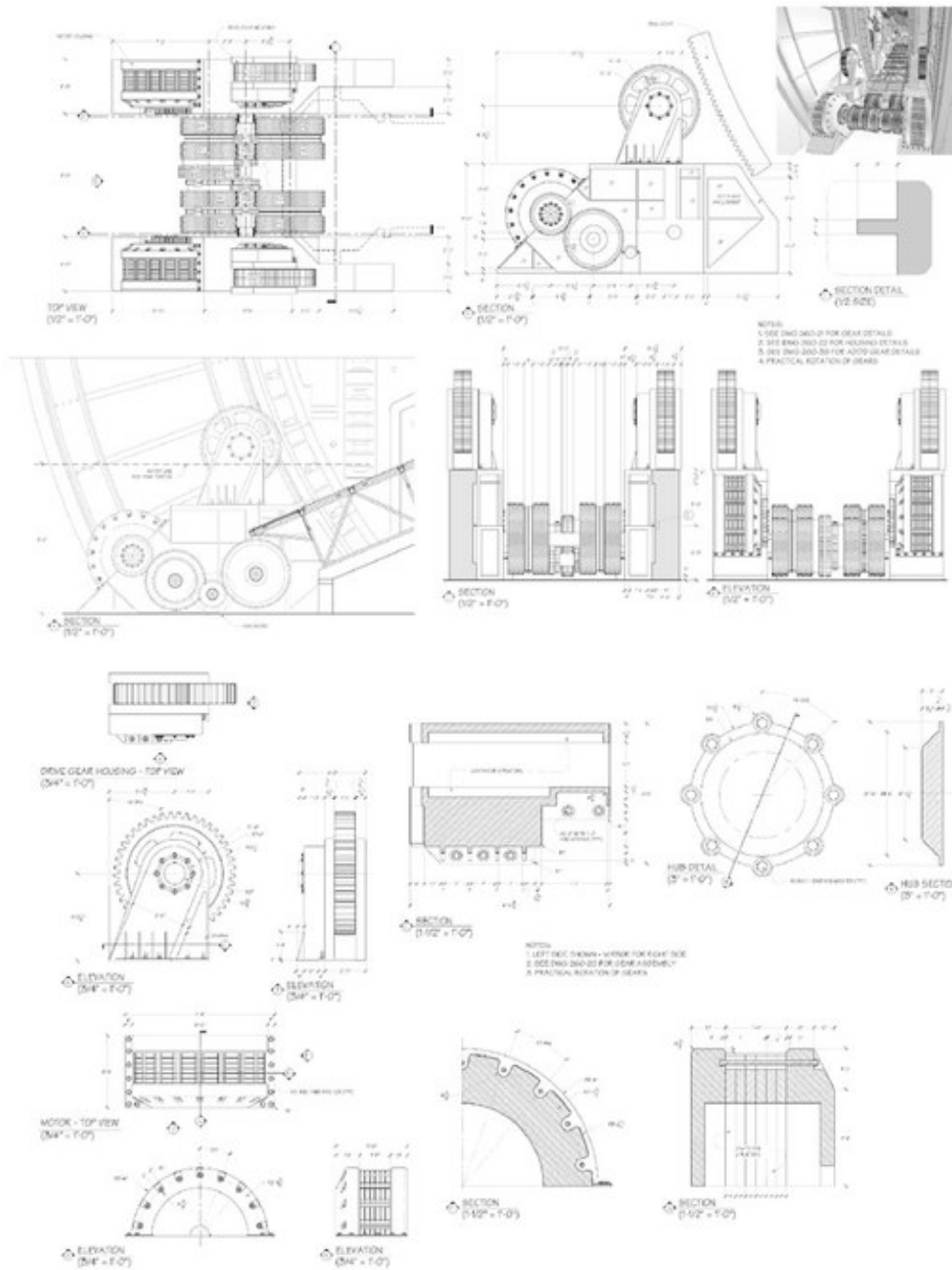


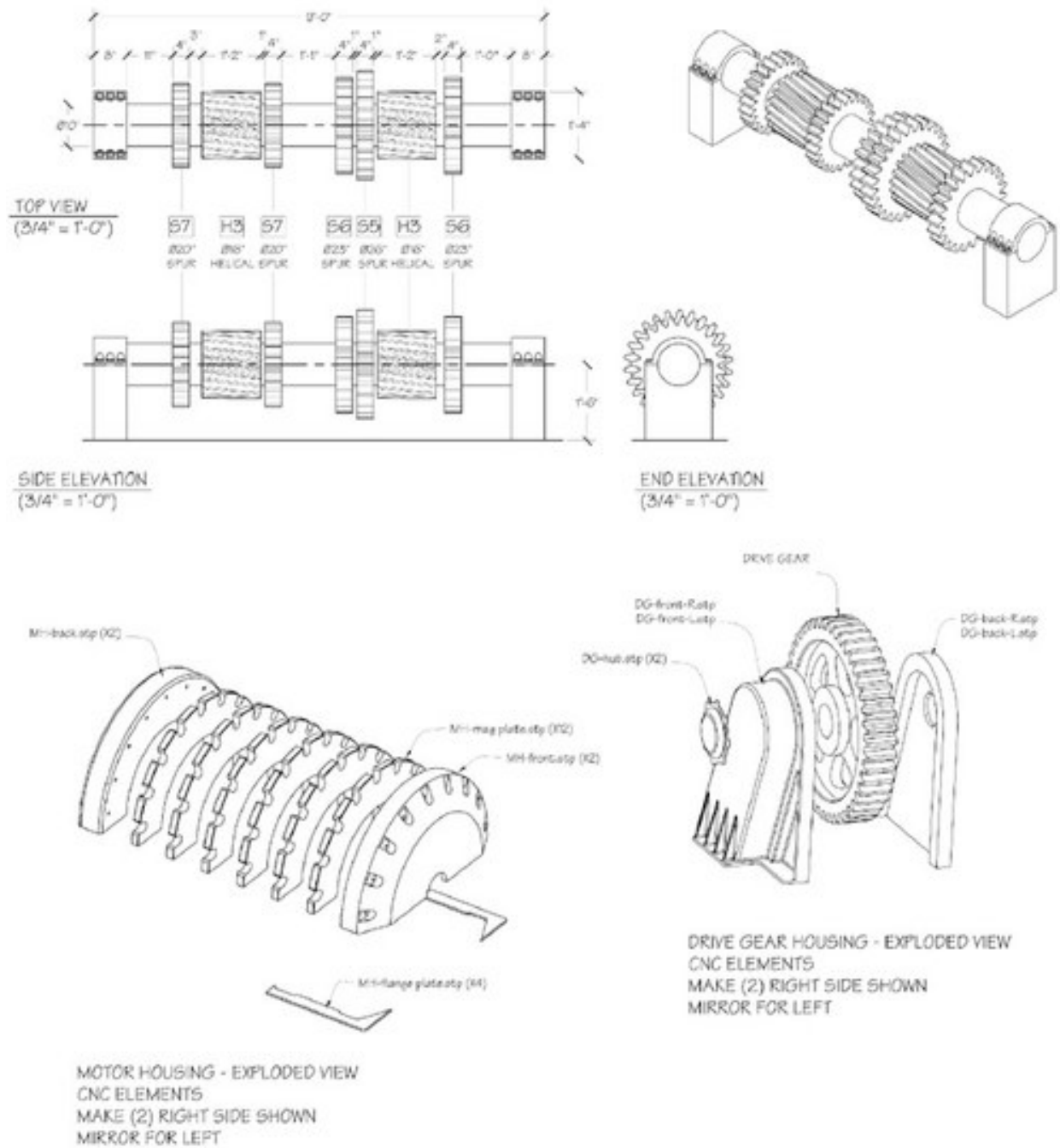
⑥ ELEVATION



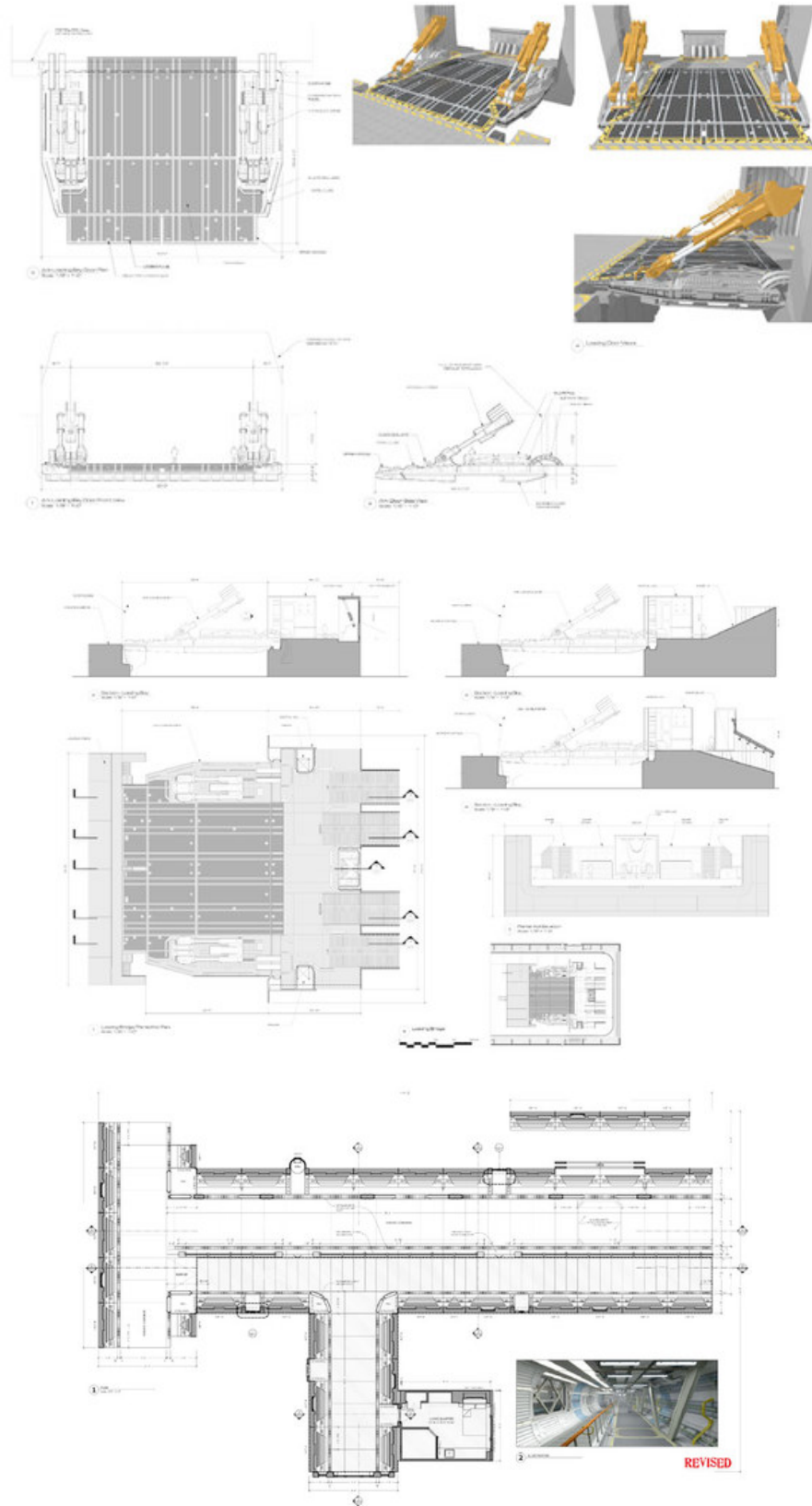
⑦ ELEVATION

<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (8 October)

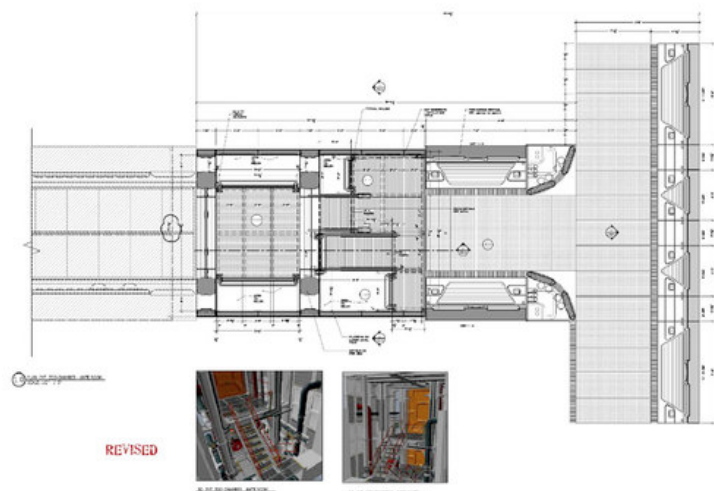
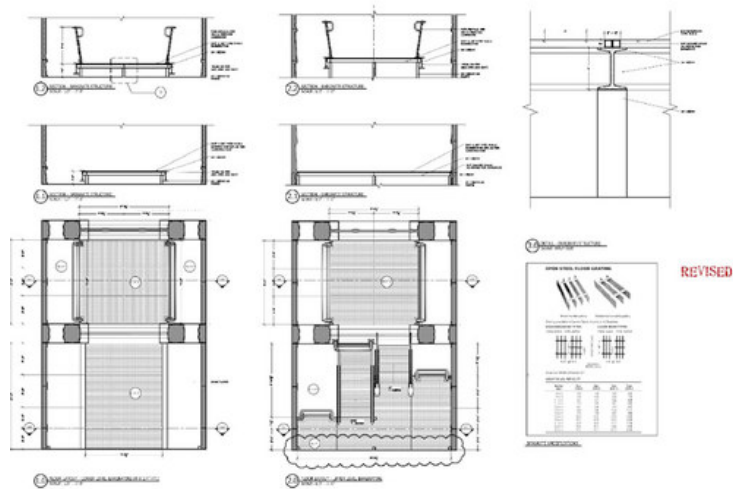
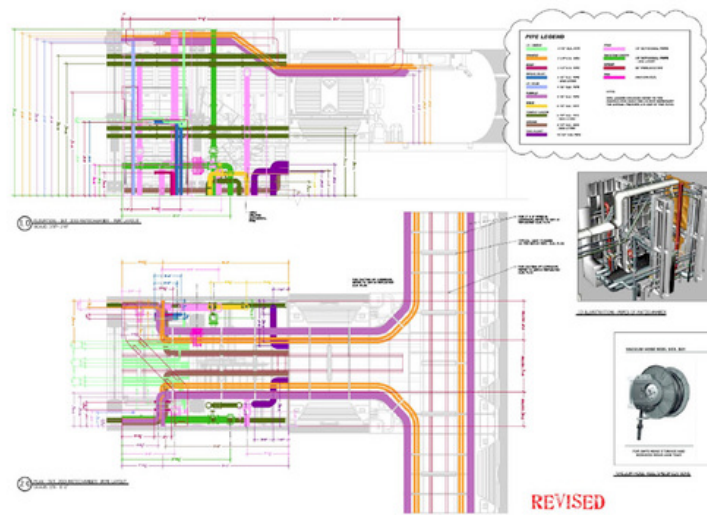




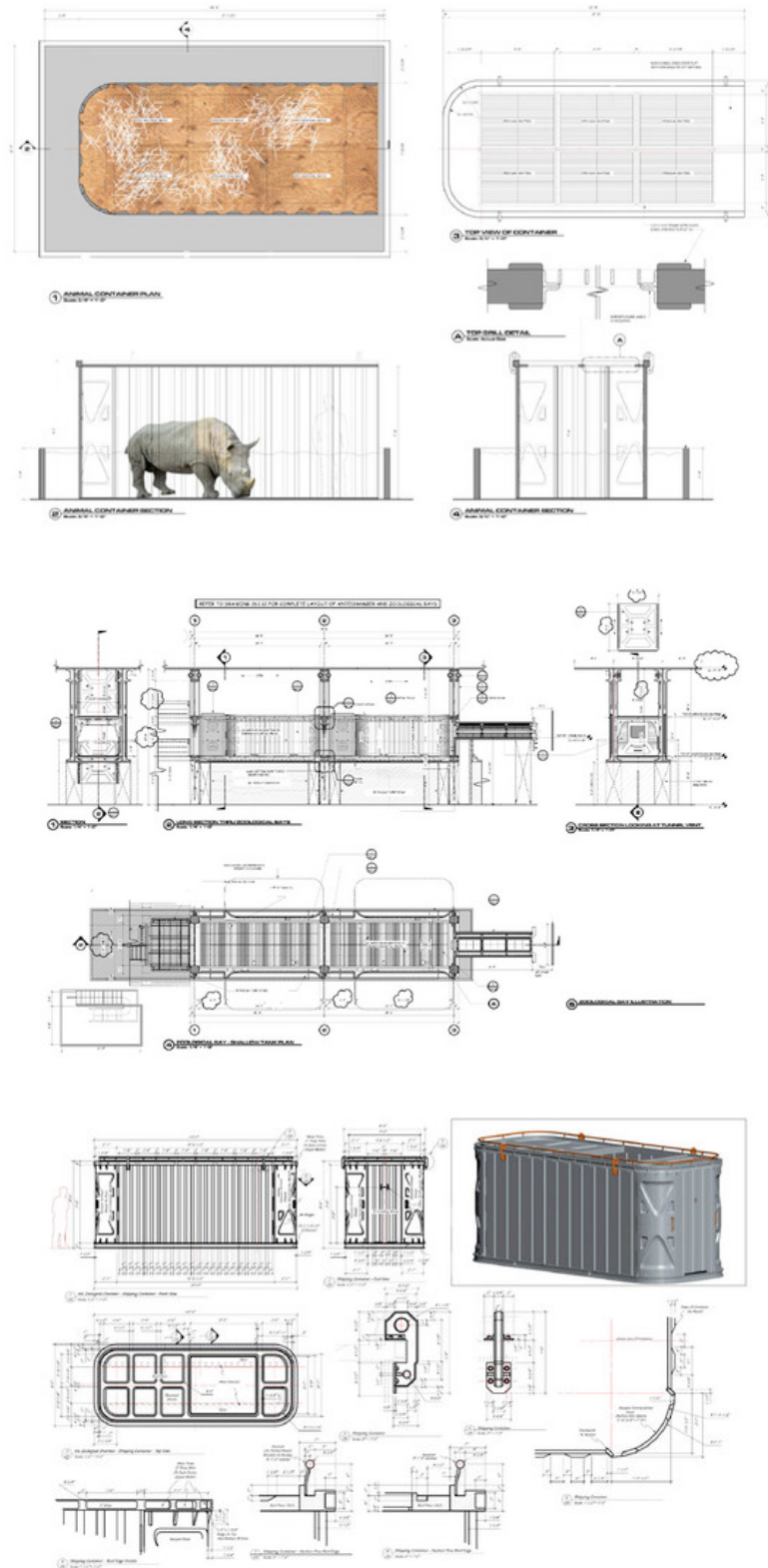
<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (12 October)



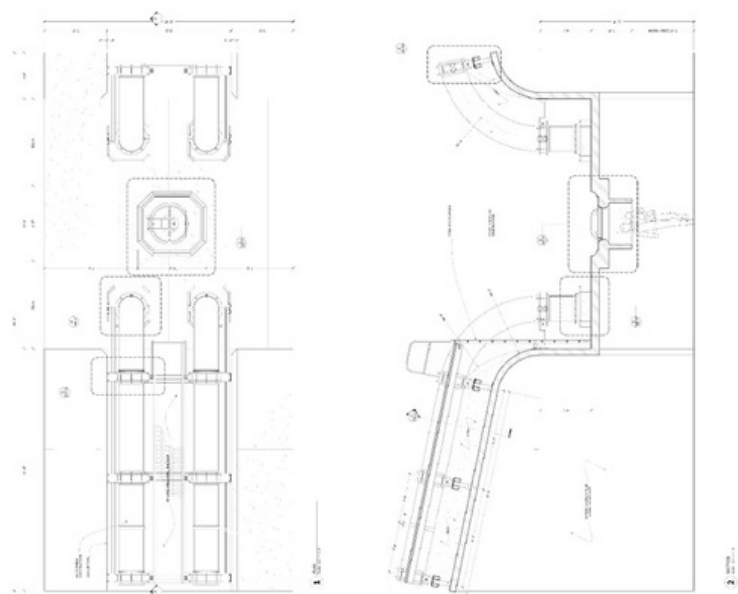
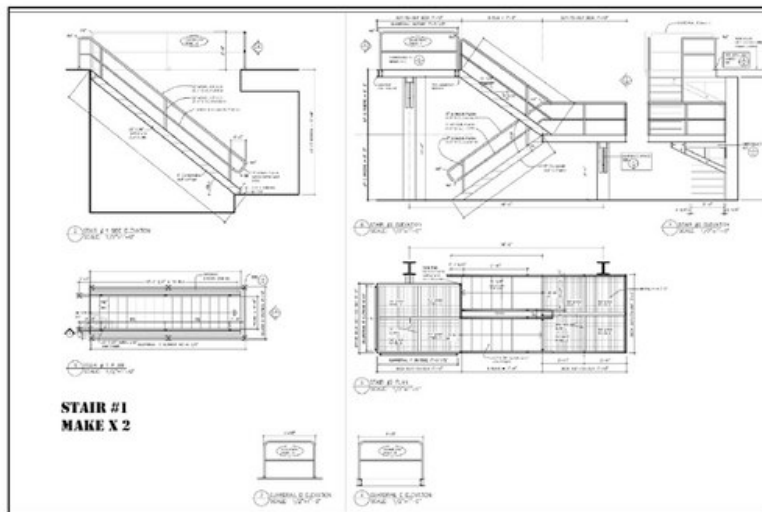
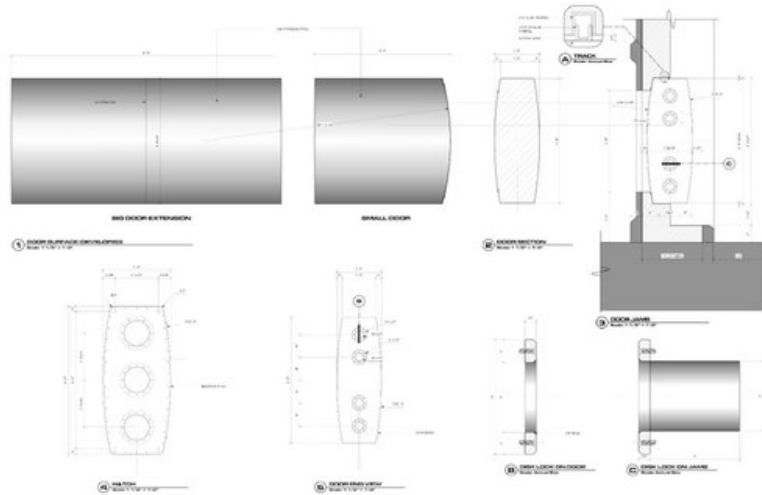
<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (15 October)



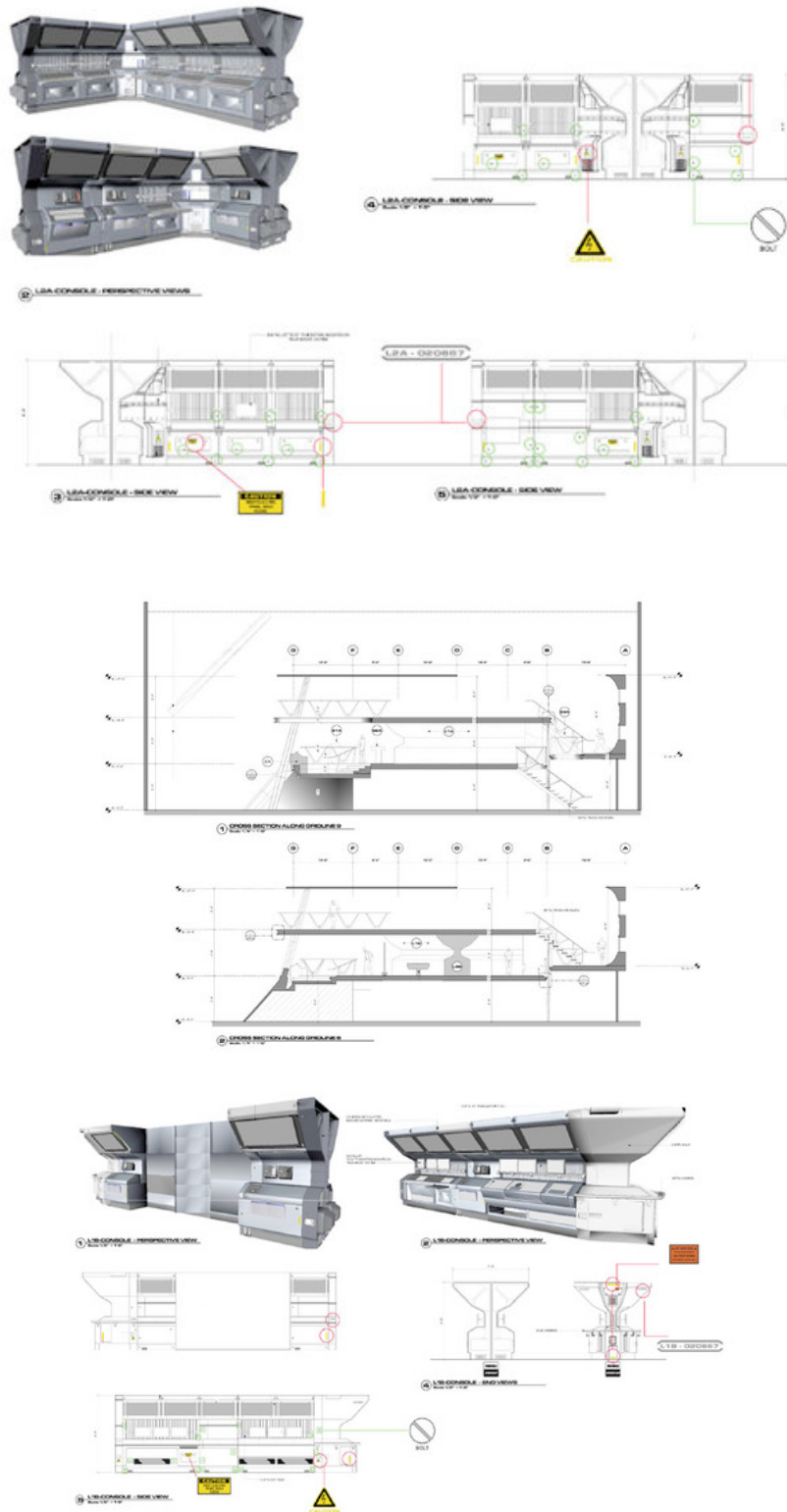
<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (16 October)



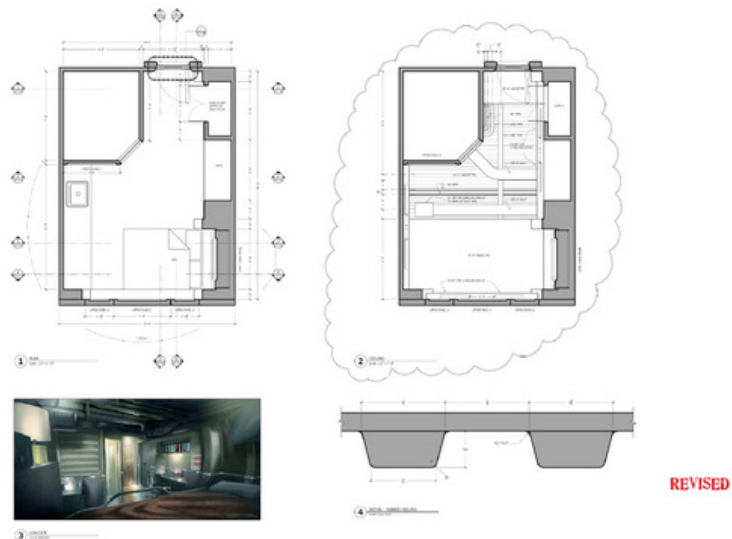
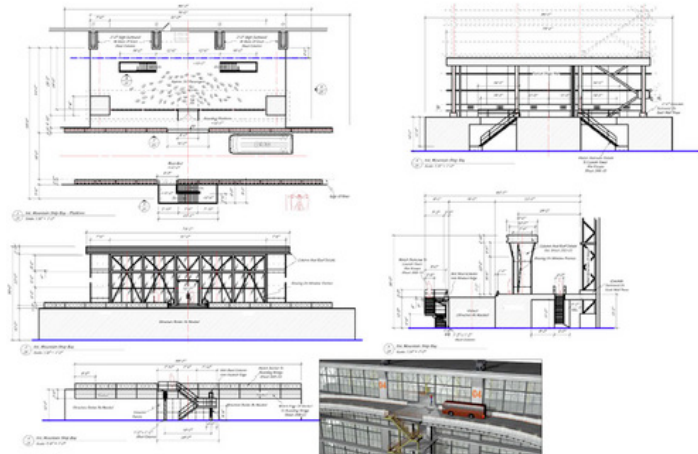
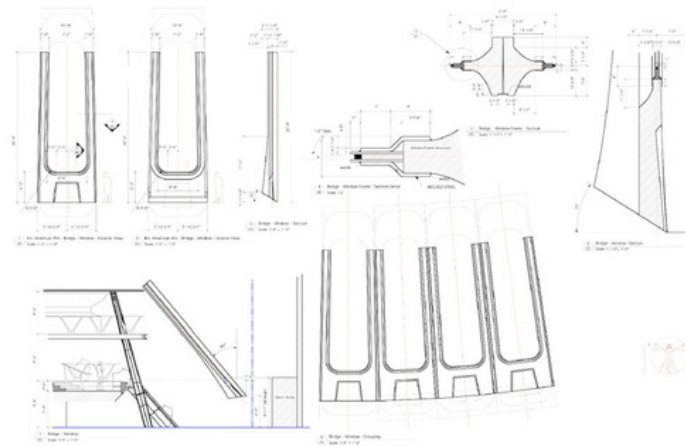
<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (20 October)



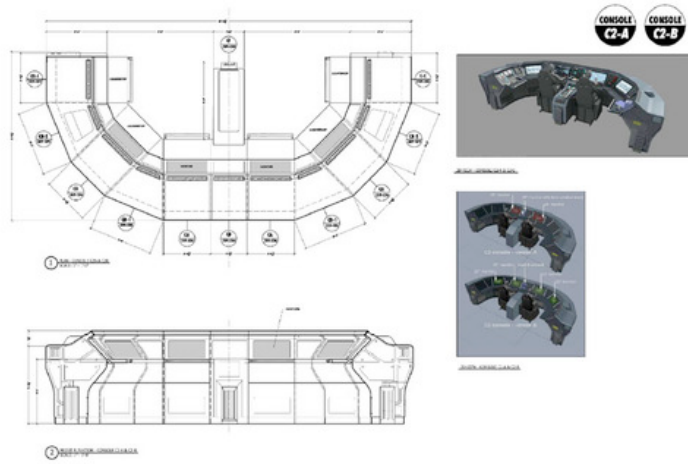
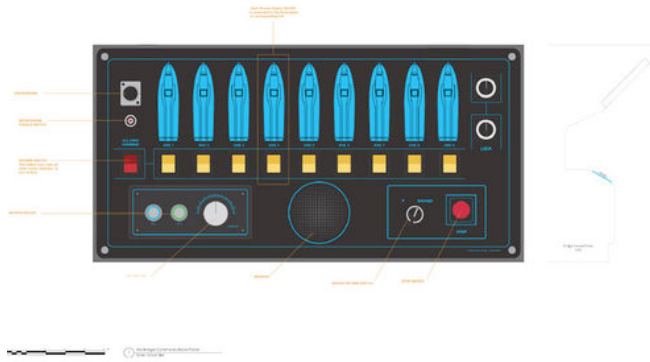
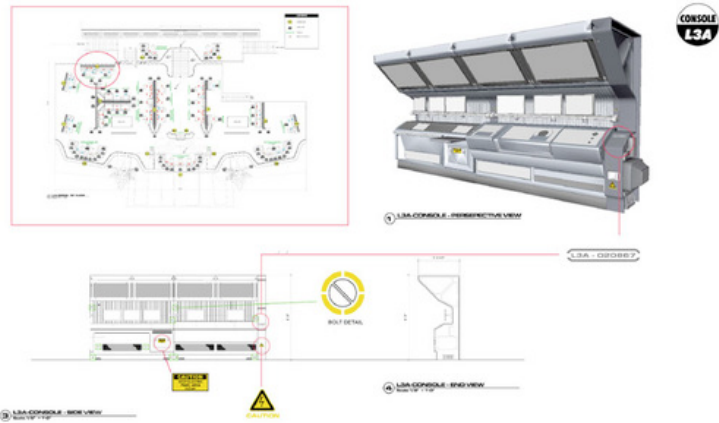
<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (22 October)

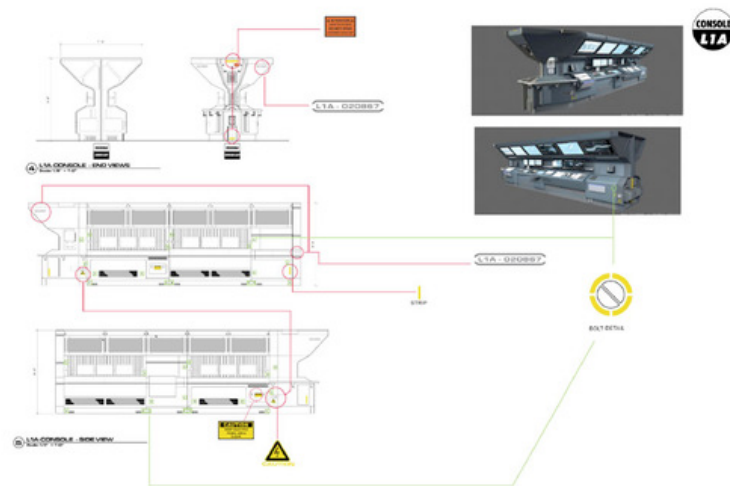


<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (27 October)



<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (29 October)





<http://www.corruptiontheory.com/> (3 November)



Ebay listing **230395817328**

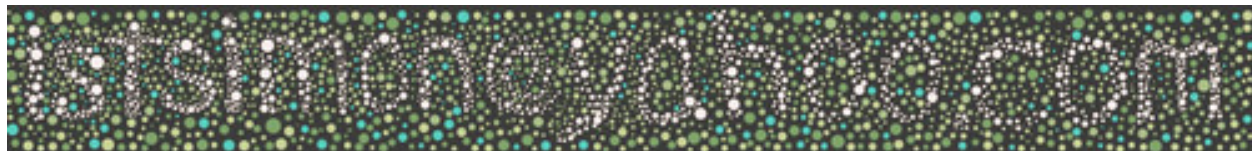
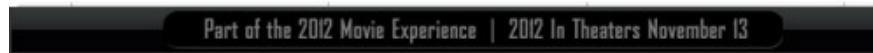


Naaczaal Revised Class and Price List

There have been some changes to Naaczaal pass availability due to a restructure of internal accommodations. A resulting increase in prices has been required to account for the high cost of constructing our arks in such a short time frame. Following is a summary of our current passenger eligibility requirements.

Accommodation Type	Price	Notes
Deluxe	€1B per pass	All green passholders must pay in full before receiving boarding instructions.
Administrative	N/A	No fee required for red passholders still employed by Naaczaal upon completion.
Government	Varies	Applicants must meet coalition approval or no passes will be awarded.
Other	Varies	These passholders must meet specific eligibility criteria. Also see the special note below.

We have received complaints from some green passholders who are under the impression that winners for the Institute for Human Continuity's Survival Lottery will be receiving passes for no fee. This is incorrect. Please note the survival lottery is not real. No "winners" will be drawn or announced..



<http://www.isabellastsimon.com/> (29 October)

Appendix B - Billboards



(CF 23 Jul. 2009)





(CF 26 Aug. 2009)





(CF 2 Sep. 2009)