

TRACKING THE EMERGENT PROPERTIES OF THE COLLABORATIVE ONLINE  
STORY "DEUS CITY" FOR TESTING THE STANDARD MODEL  
OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES

by

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For my parents,  
the original “Doctors Brackin”

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by

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DISSERTATION

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TaureanFreak, Wolfhawk, Wavecrest, Brumguy, Pied Piper, and all the rest! And of course to all the volunteer “Taskmakers” who signed that non-disclosure and kept to it: Mark who made TCotSA happen basically single-handedly, and Marc who was my sounding board for so long, and Lex again for coming behind the curtain which was so cool, and all the others who made puzzles and helped with the scripted part. And to anybody else who stumbled upon the site and liked it whether you played casually or got sucked in too and rocked our world by solving mysteries and changing the story and “the future.” And finally, to Dave Bleasdale, whom I do not know, but who back in August of 2006 posted the solution to the horrible and maddening formatting problem I created for myself within my word processing program: All hail the power of the online digital collective.

What I’m really saying is: THANKS everybody!

March, 2008

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The University of Texas at Dallas, 2008

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The Alternate Reality Game Genre, is a relatively new form of Online Interactive Entertainment, born from alternative advertising endeavors that focuses heavily on realistic immersion using real-world elements, fictional story elements, group problem solving dynamics, and collective thinking through the medium of the Internet, but has barely been explored for its huge storytelling potential. This study explores the possibilities for better collaborative storytelling through Alternate Reality Games by investigating their origins as well as their definably unique qualities and characteristics; by critically analyzing the recent Alternate Reality Game “Deus City” which was specifically designed for the study to test new forms and delivery methods within the context of the genre; and by outlining areas of change which indicate where the future of Interactive fiction may be very soon. Particular attention is paid to the current methodology and anatomy of what is by definition an Alternate Reality Game versus

other forms of Chaotic or Collaborative Online Fiction, and the characterizable structure of the player base for such games.

The narrative analysis concludes that while no single Alternate Reality Game can encapsulate all the possibilities or permutations which could represent every boundary of the Alternate Reality Game genre, each game can serve to help define those boundaries in multiple ways. The “Deus City” Game Project which was created for this very purpose succeeded in showing that new forms will be readily accepted within the Alternate Reality Game community and that the rapidly expanding player base is likewise open to new forms which focus more on story and less on formulaic game mechanics or selling a product. Further, the study concludes that while the genre is not fundamentally dependant upon expensive or emergent technology as the core elements rely merely on good storytelling and the existing telecommunications infrastructure, the genre is nevertheless going to change as new technologies change and the tools of online interactivity mature. This is predicted to happen as the mobility brought about by place shifting, time shifting, and high speed information transfer and storage for large amounts of information become commonplace. The result is the multi-component “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development,” a descriptive model for Alternate Reality Game development and player interaction which is different from any that has come before, and a call for new research and models which will expand upon this new model.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	v
Abstract .....	viii
List of Figures.....	xi
<b>PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO ONLINE INTERACTIVE FICTION AND THE ALTERNATE REALITY GAME GENRE</b>	
Chapter 1: Playing in an Alternate Reality .....	2
Chapter 2 The Ever-Increasing Importance of Social Networks in Online Interactive Entertainment.....	16
Chapter 3: A Brief Literature and Resource Review of ARGs.....	39
Chapter 4: The Four Essential Elements of ARGs.....	45
Chapter 5: Unanswered Questions Prior to the “Deus City” ARG Project.....	59
<b>PART TWO: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE "DEUS CITY" ALTERNATE REALITY GAME PROJECT</b>	
Chapter 6: Methodology of the “Deus City” ARG Project.....	68
Chapter 7: Anatomy of the “Deus City” ARG .....	76
Chapter 8: Anatomy of the “Deus City” ARG Player Base .....	83
Chapter 9: Effectiveness of the “Deus City” ARG .....	90
<b>PART THREE: THE FUTURE OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES AND ONLINE INTERACTIVE FICTION</b>	
Chapter 10: The Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development .....	103
Chapter 11: The Future of Online Interactive Fiction .....	113
Summary of findings .....	125
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A: Glossary of Alternate Reality Game Terms .....	127
Appendix B: Index of Alternate Reality Games .....	135
Appendix C: A Brief Summary of the “Deus City” ARG Interactive Storyline .....	143
Appendix D: The “Deus City” End-Of-Game Novella .....	146
Bibliography .....	257

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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A Possible Placement of the Alternate Reality Game Genre Within the Scope of Online Interactive Entertainment .....	4
Figure 2. The 42 (4orty 2wo) Entertainment "Inverted Pyramid Model" of Alternate Reality Game Audience (Player) Participation.....	36
Figure 3. Freytag's "Plot Triangle" of the Traditional Story Arc.....	65
Figure 4. Breakdown of "Deus City" ARG Registered Player Demographics .....	86
Figure 5. Using 42 Entertainment's "Inverted Pyramid Model" to Track a Player's Path to Enthusiastic "Level 3" Status.....	104
Figure 6. A Theoretical Four-sided ARG "Square Model" .....	106
Figure 7. The "Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development".....	107
Figure 8. Two "Adjacent ARGs" With Shared Game Elements .....	108
Figure 9. Example of a Possible "ARG Cluster" of "Adjacent ARGs" .....	110
Figure 10. Possible Example of an "Inclusive ARG" Enclosing Smaller ARGs .....	111

**PART ONE:**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO ONLINE INTERACTIVE FICTION  
AND THE ALTERNATE REALITY GAME GENRE**

## CHAPTER 1

### PLAYING IN AN “ALTERNATE REALITY”

Alternate-reality gaming blends real-life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, video games and online community--and may be one of the most powerful guerrilla marketing mechanisms ever invented.

—John Borland of C|net News, *Blurring the Line Between Games and Life*

“This is not a game!” is the catchphrase for the relatively new genre of Online Interactive Entertainment referred to by its participants and creators as “*Alternate Reality Gaming*” or ARG. The statement is most intriguing in the simple fact that it is a lie. ARG is a game, but it is a game in which the only agreed upon rule is that everyone will share in the lie. ARG is a form of collaborative storytelling through online interactive authoring - in which the game creators and primary storytellers called *puppetmasters* control the overall story for thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of players who agree to share in the lie.

ARG has been called by the popular ARG network website:

...an obsession-inspiring genre that blends real-life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, video games and online community. ... These games are an intensely complicated series of puzzles involving coded Web sites, real-world clues like the newspaper advertisements, phone calls in the middle of the night from game characters and more. That blend of real-world activities and a dramatic storyline has proven irresistible to many.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ARG Network, “What Is an ARG??” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com/what.html> [accessed February 17, 2008].

It represents a new form of game *immersion* other than the now more traditional model of the virtual world. On the contrary: “In a well-designed and produced ARG, the interactions and *in-game* events mimic real life and don’t announce themselves as elements of a game at all. There is no simulation of a virtual world through a symbolic interface.”<sup>2</sup> The new form of immersion presented by ARG mimics real life because it uses real life elements, blurring reality and illusion by making them literally indistinguishable in a *real-world* way. In other words, an Alternate Reality Game transforms the audience from passive spectator to active participant in such a way that the audience itself becomes the player in the game and helps the story to be told. This is both significant and shattering to the definition of what an “audience” is for such a game.

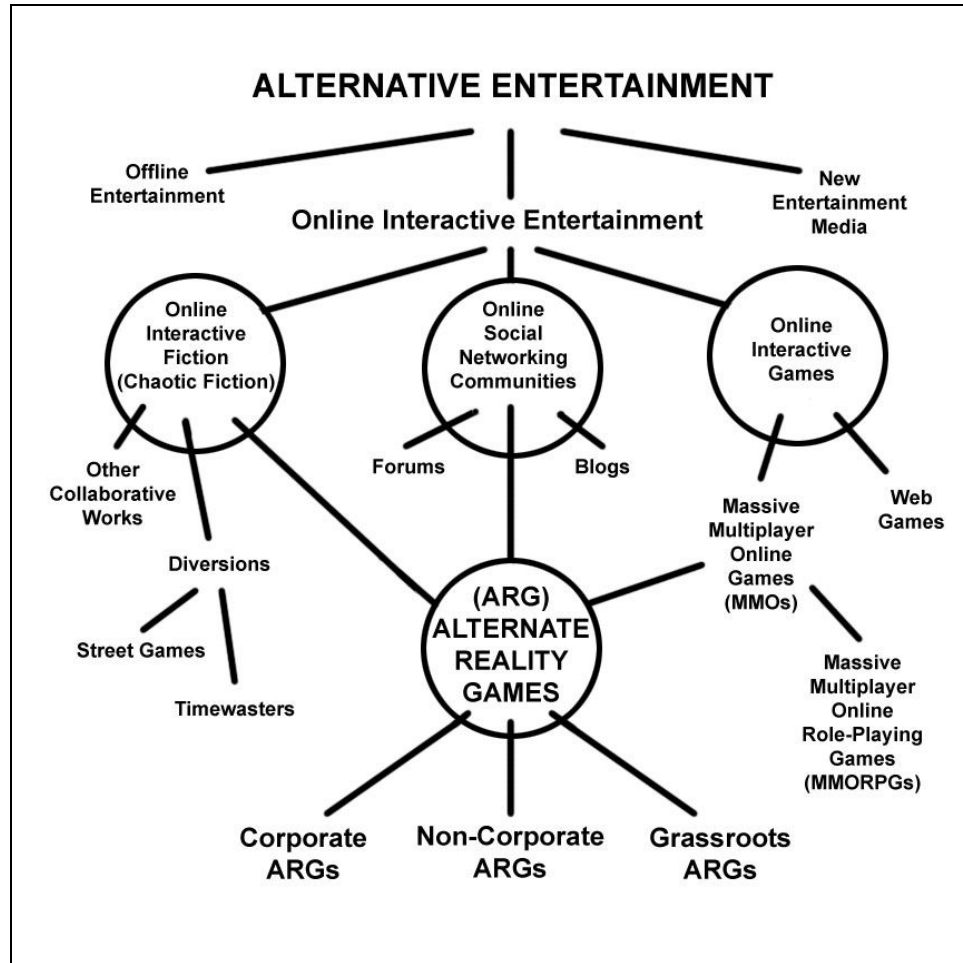
Placing the ARG genre into its proper context is no easy task. It has been called “part story, part game, part puzzle, part treasure hunt,”<sup>3</sup> and a flow chart of related Online Interactive Entertainment quickly loops back on itself when one tries to include all the possible parts of ARG within it such as e-mail, websites, text/voice messaging, live events, and similar methods of content delivery. The reason for this is that all aspects of online entertainment – as well as all other alternative, traditional, and offline forms of communication, entertainment, and advertising - are all fair game for an Alternate Reality Game. By stripping out the connections between those elements which can be used in an ARG and instead mapping only the fundamentally necessary

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 13.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Smith, “Inside a Virtual Global Treasure Hunt.” Interview by GameDaily BIZ, February 8, 2006, [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/feb2006/id20060208\\_155878.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/feb2006/id20060208_155878.htm) [accessed February 22, 2008].

parts of ARG as a genre, it is possible to place Alternate Reality Games within the broader genre of online interactive entertainment. I have shown this possibility in the figure below (Fig 1).



**Figure 1. A Possible Placement of the Alternate Reality Game Genre Within the Scope of Online Interactive Entertainment**

As the diagram suggests, I have placed ARG to show that it is essentially a crossbred product of *Online Interactive Fiction*, online social networking communities,

and online interactive games, specifically MMOs,<sup>4</sup> though that specific terminology remains largely unused within this context as the *Massive Multi-Player Online Game* label tends to be reserved for video games by popular usage. There is much debate as to which of those three can lay greater claim to the ARG birthright, but in reality it is likely a merging of all three in various forms. In order to understand how this strange form known as the Alternate Reality Game came about, what it truly is, and how we can properly comprehend the subtle interplay of its elements, it is necessary to first look at the origins of the genre, which lay in perhaps the most unexpected of places: corporate America.

### **The Not-So-Humble Beginnings of Alternate Reality Games**

ARGs began as a complicated marketing strategy for more traditional forms of entertainment media including movies, video games, and television shows. Because of this, “they are usually free to play”<sup>5</sup> and often have a specific goal of involving the player with the story directly. This involvement is usually achieved by connecting players to game elements in the real world and to each other in very realistic and sometimes unusual ways. Many game puzzles can or must be solved only by the collaborative efforts of multiple players, sometimes requiring one or more players to “get up from their computers to go outside to find clues or other planted assets in the real world.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>4</sup>IGDA, “Alternate Reality Games White Paper 2006” International Game Developers Association, 2006, <http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf> [accessed February 13, 2008].

<sup>5</sup>ARG Network, “What Is an ARG??” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com/what.html> [accessed February 17, 2008].

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

ARGs are a growing subset of the alternative Online Interactive Entertainment industry in general, to which many video games also belong, but the majority of large-scale ARGs are still nothing more than glorified interactive ads for a commercial product as evidenced by the many successful ARG advertising campaigns which have been made.<sup>7</sup> Dave Szulborski, one of the preeminent names in ARG, states: “Games done by major companies as marketing tools, ... tend to be less immersive and inherently less believable than grassroots or amateur games done by fans of the genre.”<sup>8</sup> ARG, while still comparatively small, has now become a popular but misunderstood genre in and of itself, and is ready to be explored by these same independent grassroots “amateurs” such as myself and those others which were involved in the “Deus City” ARG project, as discussed in detail in Part Two.

### **Unleashing “The Beast”**

“The Beast,” the very first ARG which ran in 2000, was at its core a very advanced interactive promotional back-story for the movie AI. When the game ended, there were purported to be over a million players who were actively following the plot and who were left frustrated when the game ended after the promotion ended.<sup>9</sup> There

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<sup>7</sup> ARGNet, “ARGnet: The Alternate Reality Game Network Home Page,” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com> [accessed April 8, 2007]; John W. Gosney, *Beyond Reality: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, Boston: Thompson Course Technology PTR, 2005; Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 11; Dave Szulborski, “The World According to Dave Szulborski,” Dave Szulborski Home Page, <http://www.daveszulborski.com/> [accessed February 18, 2008].

<sup>9</sup> Jane McGonigal, “This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play.” *Melbourne DAC*, 2003, <http://www.seanstewart.org/beast/mcgonigal/notagame/paper.pdf> [accessed January 15, 2008].

was no further content for the game developed despite the fact that the game elements were arguably more popular than the movie itself, which despite the popularity of the promotional campaign, did not do as well in the box office as its producers had hoped. Fortunately for ARG enthusiasts however, the predominant ARG powerhouse developer 4orty 2wo (42) Entertainment, which was responsible for developing the “Beast” project, soon delivered another blockbuster ARG entitled “I Love Bees” which was a very loosely inspired, but rather complicated promotional scheme for Microsoft’s “Halo II” X-box console game. Both ARGs represented an almost ironic use of multimedia and real-world social networking for such a traditional and closed-ended product, but it did not matter. By 2003 the genre, and with it some established norms for the ARG social network were born<sup>10</sup>

This social network is in fact the backbone of ARG, and in order to understand why that is the case we must also look at the history of online social networks in Online Interactive Entertainment. We shall leave those specifics, however for chapter 2, and continue to look at how “The Beast’s” legacy inspired a genre.

### **Three Types of ARG**

“The Beast” certainly kicked open the door for Online Interactive Fiction and the ARG genre and established 42 Entertainment as the foremost frontrunner developer in the genre. The games which streamed through that open door in the years hence have emerged almost faster than they could be qualified, cross-referenced, or catalogued. Indeed a number of potentially successful games died in the stampeding rush before

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Gosney, *Beyond reality: A guide to alternate reality gaming*, [Boston: Thompson Course Technology PTR, 2005], 4-12; Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 93-104

they could ever reach the light of day, due to a series of known and unknown factors, as the player base formed and the conventions for the new genre were quickly established by the player base. It was suggested by the 2006 IGDA ARG whitepaper that ARGs might be classified into a number of non-genre specific categories such as *Promotional*, *Grassroots*, *Productized/ Commercial*, *Educational/Training* and the like<sup>11</sup>, but such designations can be clunky and ambiguous and I propose a much simpler terminology for ease of this discussion. I shall call the three types of ARGs: *Commercial ARG*, *Non-Commercial ARG*, and *Grassroots ARG*. The latter term retains its meaning and should be reserved for any and all small scale independent or *indie ARGs* which usually focus on telling a short story by revealing a small puzzle trail or through other immersive elements on a manageable scale for one or two puppetmasters, without the intent of recovering its budget. It is a term which I only reference briefly for the purposes of this study as a point of contrast for scale and purpose. The other two are defined below.

### **The “Commercial ARG” Legacy**

The first successful ARGs were structurally and phenomenologically similar to “The Beast” in nearly every way. They measured success based on audience participation as a whole and website activity, and had a single trailhead and puzzle trail for the active collective community to solve before moving on to the next one. Only as the players came to understand the boundaries and “rules” of working together and standards for self-organizing the social network of a particular ARG have ARG developers ventured to change the delivery format. For the most part, however, those

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<sup>11</sup> IGDA, “Alternate Reality Games White Paper 2006” International Game Developers Association, 2006, <http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf> [accessed February 13, 2008]

early ARGs which were the most successful were those with the biggest budgets and the corporate backing to gain a high profile exposure and media attention – that is to say, those which were developed from a stated corporate objective or commercial agenda. Their similarity, therefore to a prior successful marketing strategy is not surprising. Such games are intended to be massively large, and are usually designed to sell a product, create media hype, or heighten consumer awareness of a brand through alternative, viral, or guerilla marketing techniques in the form of an Alternate Reality Game. This type of ARG is what I shall call a Commercial ARG.

As previously stated, Online Interactive Games are a growing subset of the alternative entertainment industry in general. The larger genre includes interactive blogs, interactive role playing games such as massive multiplayer online games (MMORPGs), on-line scavenger hunts, and of course, Alternate Reality Games. Most Commercial ARGs have incorporated aspects of the other types of online interactive games to the point that barely eight years after the creation of the genre, it has become a significant growth industry in and of itself, albeit still a small one in comparison to the massive video game industry or traditional commercial marketing. Until recently the game industry as a whole has mostly ignored the ARG phenomenon, but it has begun to take notice with the recent emergence of several highly successful Commercial ARGs and ARG-like marketing campaigns within the last few years. These include the many games from 42 Entertainment like “Vanishing Point,” “Dead Man’s Tale,” and “Hex 168.” Others, like “Ocular Effect,” based on the ABC TV-movie Fallen or the “Heroes 360” ARG, set in the world of the popular NBC TV series “Heroes,” and most recently the wide and varied exploits of acclaimed Director J.J. Abrams with projects such as

“The LOST Experience/Find 815,” a multi-season series of activities based on the hit ABC series “LOST,” have taken TV worlds to a new level for many viewers. Abrams also recently spearheaded a mysterious campaign for the monster movie Cloverfield, and has promised that others are just around the corner. Indeed due to the nature of the genre, any allegedly “comprehensive” list that could be made would already be obsolete by the time of publication. For further information regarding these or other specific Commercial ARGs mentioned at the time of writing, however, see appendix B, “Index of Alternate Reality Games” which has been included for convenience and reference.

### **Defining “Non-Commercial ARGs”**

I will define any ARG to be non-commercial if it is a medium to large scale ARG which does not have a stated corporate or commercial product agenda, and instead focuses more heavily on storytelling. Such a game would likely have a bigger budget or scope than a grassroots ARG, and therefore not be bound by the inherent limitations of that type. I have also referred to this type of ARG as an “ARG for ARG’s sake,”<sup>12</sup> an expression which I feel captures well the artistic and storytelling possibilities of the genre which do not necessarily get expressed within a commercial agenda.

Understandably, this type of game may or may not include a business model for making a profit from within the context of the game’s own elements – such as through imbedded advertising structures or a marketable in-game product – but only if it does not define the game’s purpose or objective in any expressly or singularly commercial way. At this time no large-scale game has succeeded in funding itself solely through in-game

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<sup>12</sup> Adam L. Brackin, “Developing an ARG” Panel I discussion, ARGfest. San Francisco, CA. March 3, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8tX2uMj5ok&feature=related> [accessed April 8, 2008].

advertising. The two major trends that have emerged in this area are “support through the sale of products related to the game, and fees for participation in the game.”<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, the very first Non-Commercial ARG to fit this definition was one of the very first ARGs of all. Called “Majestic” by its creators at Electronic Arts, the game was designed to be playable for free up to a specific point, and did not have a specific product which it was marketing. But due to a series of misfortunes and a poor game model, the game did not last and is considered one of the genres few “failed” ARGs. Ultimately the company chose not to continue the game due to “lack of players.”<sup>14</sup> Other successful and acclaimed games of a non-commercial origin have emerged, however, including such titles as “edoc Laundry,” “Chasing the Wish” and its sequel “Catching the Wish,” “Cathy’s Book,” and “Studio Cypher,” among others, and of course my own “Deus City” discussed in Part Two.

In 2006, Elan Lee and Dawne Weisman founded “edoc Laundry,” a company designed to produce ARGs using clothes as the primary platform, most notably the Poor Richard band online murder mystery. Every garment is embedded with hidden messages within the intricately detailed graphics and designs of the clothes. Consumers decipher the codes hidden within the garments and input the results into the game’s main website to reveal pieces of a story about the murder of the band manager.

In June of 2006, “Catching the Wish” launched from an in-game website about comic books based on its predecessor, 2003’s “Chasing the Wish.” In these stories,

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<sup>13</sup> IGDA. “Alternate Reality Games White Paper 2006” International Game Developers Association, 2006. <http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf> [accessed February 13, 2008].

<sup>14</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 105-117

Szulborski used an original graphic novel as a delivery method, a groundbreaking immersive and interactive comic book, integrated with an online Alternate Reality Game about a web-designer named Dale with financial problems who awakens in a mental hospital with no idea how he got there, and is told that his family is dead from a car crash he doesn't remember. Three years later, Szulborski revisited the idea with the first ever follow-up ARG "Catching the Wish" which also started with fictional web-designer Dale Sprague, who this time, had created a graphic novel Comic Book, which was made available from New Fiction. While not technically a sequel ARG and therefore not in the same game-space as the original necessarily, many of the characters from the 2003 ARG had the same name and were in similar positions to the original game. Consequently, many major differences in the characters existed and it was not a straightforward follow-up to the original game.<sup>15</sup>

Even 42 Entertainment has made an entry into the Non-Commercial ARG category with the 2006 entry, "Cathy's Book" which was billed as "the first fully immersive multimedia book experience."<sup>16</sup> Not backed by a secondary marketing agenda, the book was a combination of web sites, cell phone numbers, and physical clues—all within a believably realistic commercial novel which could be purchased wherever books were sold. The story started in San Francisco, where high school senior Cathy, while tracking her deadbeat boyfriend, tumbled into a world of Chinese myth, high-tech misdeeds, and immortal beings. She recorded her adventures in her journal, the trailhead for the game, upon which almost every page was laced with "extra

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<sup>15</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*, 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005] 141-156

<sup>16</sup> 42 Entertainment, "Case Studies: 'Cathy's Book'," 42 Entertainment, <http://www.42entertainment.com/cathy.html> [accessed April 8, 2008].

doodles, illustrations, and snarky side-comments for real-world investigation and in-game fun.” After a pre-sales order of 120,000 copies, it became a *New York Times* bestseller in its first full week on bookstore shelves.<sup>17</sup>

Attempting to revive the pay-to-play model, Studio Cypher launched the first chapter of its “multiplayer novel” in 2006. Each chapter was billed as a mini-ARG for which participants who paid the ten dollar registration fee received earlier access to information and greater opportunities to interact with characters than the non-paying participants. Unfortunately not everyone liked this model and it is difficult to judge the efficacy of self-funded ARG models at this time, especially those which use the “pay to play” model<sup>18</sup>, but the general feeling in the community is that it still seems likely attempts to fund large-scale ARGs without using them as corporate marketing schemes for other products will continue as the genre grows<sup>19</sup>.

The largest Non-Commercial ARG to date was “Perplex City,” a puzzle card driven scavenger hunt from the U.K. based developers Mind Candy, and offering a hundred-thousand British pound cash prize, which was eventually awarded to a player who discovered the hidden location of an object just outside of London. On one hand, players simply solved cards alone or together on online chat rooms, logged onto the perplexcity.com website to guess the answers to the puzzle cards, and all their player

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<sup>17</sup> 42 Entertainment, “Case Studies: ‘Cathy’s Book’,” 42 Entertainment, <http://www.42entertainment.com/cathy.html> [accessed April 8, 2008].

<sup>18</sup> Michelle Senderhauf, “Did Studio Cypher Leave Agents Out in the Cold?,” ARG Network, June 10, 2006, [http://www.argn.com/archive/000423did\\_studio\\_cypher\\_leave\\_agents\\_out\\_in\\_the\\_cold.php](http://www.argn.com/archive/000423did_studio_cypher_leave_agents_out_in_the_cold.php) [accessed February 17, 2008].

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia, “Alternate Reality Game,” Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternate\\_reality\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternate_reality_game) [accessed February 10, 2008].

data was automatically tracked. On the other hand the game involved a deep and complicated plotline about an alternate dimension that was similar to our own, but which valued knowledge and thinking above all, and needed the help of our world to recover a stolen religious artifact which they called the “Receda Cube.”<sup>20</sup> It was claimed that neither game element required the player to participate in the other, but in fact the clues to the mystery were imbedded in the cards. Because of this, it took nearly a year longer for the collective players to complete the game than was originally projected, partially because some did not want to risk losing their chance at the money <sup>21</sup>

Many of these Non-Commercial ARGs seek profit in other ways. “Perplex City” charged about seven dollars for a pack of six random cards, making it essentially a collectable card game and following the conventions of such, to the point of having a spectrum of common to ultra-rare cards, of varying difficulty, and making it statistically less probable with each card purchase to acquire new cards to solve. At the time of this writing, it was observed on Wikipedia’s history of ARGs entry that “Whether the model was a success is unknown at this time, although Mind Candy’s acceptance of corporate sponsorship and venture capital suggests that the puzzle cards alone are not enough to fully fund the ARG at this time”<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, Mind Candy did receive over \$8 million in venture capital for season two of their game, and unfortunately the company was unable to follow through with the second season of the project, due to internal factors.

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<sup>20</sup> Mind Candy, “Perplex City Wiki” Mediawiki Perplexcity Wiki site, [http://perplexcitywiki.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://perplexcitywiki.com/wiki/Main_Page) [accessed February 24, 2008].

<sup>21</sup> Marc McGinley, “PerplexCity” Highest Ranked Player. Yahoo! Personal Messenger conversation with author. Wednesday, Feb 07, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia, “History of Alternate Reality Games,” Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Alternate\\_Reality\\_Games](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Alternate_Reality_Games) [accessed February 10, 2008].

This is something which may cause a negative reaction from investors for Non-Commercial ARGs in the future, although that remains to be seen at the time of writing.

For all Non-Commercial ARGs, the income which sustains the game may lie in selling comic books, subscriptions, or simple ad space on their website, but ultimately the funds for development must come from somewhere, and the cost of the game must be recovered in some way. At this time, a viable game design for a self-sustaining Non-Commercial ARG may or may not exist, but it is clear that any medium to large scale game must first have the proper resources if it is going to be self-sustaining without commercial endorsement up front. This is a lesson that can be learned by examining the history of the online social network within the broader context of Online Interactive Entertainment, a journey upon which all roads unfailingly lead to ARG. For more detailed information about the specific Non-Commercial ARGs discussed above and others not discussed, see appendix B.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE EVER-INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ONLINE INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

Social and gaming networks, once considered polar opposites, are cross-pollinating as online interactions replace prime-time TV and other, more traditional media experiences. [Shopping and partying games] are attracting players that games like Super Mario Brothers never did.

—Matt Stagle of USA Today, *Online Games Meet Social Networking Tools*

In order to best understand why it is that the social network is the backbone of Alternate Reality Games, it is best to review the history of the online social network within the broader scope of Online Interactive Entertainment. Today ARG is still a fringe form of guerrilla marketing and alternative entertainment. Someday soon, however it may be considered commonplace, perhaps even mainstream. In the present, we can merely examine the phenomenology of interactive entertainment forms such as multiplayer video games and MMOs, which until recently were considered alternative entertainment forms, but now represent a multi-billion dollar industry in the real world. These “alternate realities” are accessed through devices on millions of living room floors and desks and are found in school backpacks and pockets all around the world. Not too long ago it was a much different world.

## **The Early Years: LAN Parties, Direct Connect and Dial-up networks**

When the first multiplayer games began popping up a few decades ago, there was no such thing yet as a commercially available Internet - at least not in any way that would be recognizable as the graphical hypertext markup language (HTML) based Internet which first appeared in the early 1990's. The first multi-user dungeon (MUD) game created in 1978 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle was an "online virtual space" that players accessed with nothing more than a text interface.<sup>1</sup> While it allowed the imagination to fill in the gaps, this early form of interactive storytelling was quite limiting and as one might expect, the evolution of the video game would parallel the technology upon which it relied, becoming more complex, graphical, interactive, and eventually more widely distributed only as the computer became more and more a part of daily life in the world.

Online gaming and social networks in the 1980's were not embraced by the majority of the population. Unlike the forums and chats of today, the only people with access to any kind of online social network or game were those in the universities and the government positioned to have access to the necessary equipment and proprietary knowledge to access them. At this time the primary use was one of self-preservation of a sort, a kind of archive of itself which over time became the foundation for today's Internet as more and more computers became available and more people became comfortable using the improved interfaces and graphical browsers which began to be

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph D. Straubhaar and Robert LaRose, *Media Now* [Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth, 2004], 232-233.

commercially available through MCI, until 1991 when “the floodgate to commercial use of the Internet was opened.”<sup>2</sup>

During this time, computer game development was coming into its own. New types of online multiplayer and local access network (LAN) games were being released. Early Games like “Doom” in 1993 began capitalizing on this new Internet and network “fad” by pushing the limits of what computer games meant. Doom is widely recognized for its ground-breaking use of 3D maps within a *first person shooter (FPS)* perspective well beyond that of its predecessors “Wolfenstein 3D” which had lacked ceilings or “Battlezone” which had been a simple framework; but it is also recognized for its ability to network computers together for multiplayer gaming, and a built-in way for players to create their own custom expansion levels and run them. “Doom’s” developer ID Software brilliantly distributed the game as shareware, causing “Doom” to be downloaded by an estimated 10 million people within two years, popularizing the online mode of game play and producing the first FPS gaming subculture. It had such a significant impact on the industry that all FPS games from the mid-1990s boom were often known simply as “Doom clones” and had an effect so lasting on our culture that the critical mass media has even attributed certain identifiable “psychopathologies” to the genre.<sup>3</sup> If nothing else though, the game certainly aided in establishing a social network of game levels posted for download and a steady stream of servers for hosting an impromptu game. These are two emergent properties which continue today, though

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<sup>2</sup> SallyRichards, *Future Net* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002], 24-26.

<sup>3</sup> Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, *Handbook of computer game studies* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.], 41; Ken S. McAllister, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.] 6-8, 101.

mostly for one of its two sequels or four similar “Quake” games which the company has since spawned.

At about the same time millions were downloading the first shareware versions of an FPS, a new genre of interactive game destined to dominate the Internet was giving rise. The *real time strategy* (RTS), has a fairly extensive history, but can be said to have established the popular perception and definition of what several core prototype concepts are, by the games released between 1992 and 1998. “Warcraft” by Blizzard Entertainment and “Dune II” by Westwood Studios in particular, contributed to this definition. Different from an FPS in almost every way, the primarily “top down” view of the early and typical RTS requires the player to manage a whole army from a high vantage point, and in so doing gave a completely dissimilar play experience. What was similar, however was the way in which players were able to dial in or log onto the network and play directly against other players instead of playing the predictable computer army.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps not unexpectedly, the RTS likewise has a huge following now of an online social network filled with gamers who preferred the RTS style of game play, but also wanted to play online.

When developer Multitude began work on its “online tactical team-based sports game” in 1998 called “Fireteam,” it thought long and hard about how to “take the next step in gaming evolution” by taking its game beyond just a multiplayer function to create a community which would be a “significant part of the product.”

In other games, such as Diablo or Quake, the players were creating communities themselves, mostly through their own Web sites. Multitude, on the other hand, devoted significant development time to creating tools that would help the

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<sup>4</sup> Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005], 207; Austin Grossman, ed. *Postmortems from Game Developer* [San Francisco: CMP Books, 2003], 113, 318.

community. We spent as much time on Fireteam's lobby and community web pages as we did on the game engine itself. Our goal was to create a game that would make people say, "Wow, this is what I've wanted from an Internet game."<sup>5</sup>

For both of these social groups, the social network existed either physically in the room in the case of LAN parties, or in virtual chat rooms which staged their games. Simple private messages within the games allowed player to communicate while playing, but little more. Regardless, these online game social networking groups would succeed in influencing changes within their genres through each new incarnation of computer technology's limits, pushing it towards the engaging, the convenient, and the emergent, and eventually leaving the dial-up modem and the direct access cable in the dust.

### **The Yahoo! Games Revolution**

The online games of the mid 1990's were not limited simply to the boxed-up disks which one purchased from a shelf and took home to install and challenge a friend in a multiplayer battle. As the Internet itself was becoming more sophisticated, something called the browser game began to entice the ever increasing numbers of Internet surfers with card games, board games, emulated arcade games and much more. Some games required a plug-in or a download to play, but some were totally server based and seemingly overnight an undeterminable number of websites began adding interactive Internet-based games.

Soon whole websites existed dedicated to nothing more than online games, and yet another social network was established to influence and change the face of Internet

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<sup>5</sup> Art Min "Postmortem: Multitude's Fireteam," *Postmortems from Game Developer* [San Francisco: CMP Books, 2003], 287

entertainment. This time though, the demographic had changed. Suddenly more women and older players who were interested in the slower pace or thematic change over the war and combat themes of other games and systems.

One major success story occurred in 1997, when the Internet search engine company Yahoo! purchased one of the larger of these game sites located at classicgames.com, then changed the name to "Games Domain" and opened up the browser games found there to all registered Yahoo! users and guests. The group finally settled on the current Yahoo! Games section of their site<sup>6</sup>, but the venture was a great success due to the large number of people who already had built-in access through their account.

The social network was formed from detailed record keeping and statistics, and in the case of Yahoo! games also featured an "All Star" system for players, by which a user could pay to get extra privileges on Yahoo! Games sites such as disabling advertisements and playing certain games or game variants in private areas and rooms. The significance of the Yahoo! Games social network and the many others like it is simple: While RTSs and FPSs were succeeding in putting like players together into chat rooms to launch games, the games of the browser game genre were imbedded into the chat rooms instead of the other way around, making the game a part of the social function rather than the need to communicate a function of the scenario in which a game is played. It is also the foundation upon which ARG is built. Eventually this idea would carry over into virtual worlds and other adjacent spaces, something which is still

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<sup>6</sup> Yahoo!, "Yahoo! Games," Yahoo! Games Main Page, <http://games.yahoo.com> [accessed April 11, 2007].

playing itself out with no sign of slowing, and represents the fundamental split in Online Interactive Fiction.

### **Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games**

“In 1997, ... online gaming entered the mainstream with Richard Garriott’s “Ultima Online,” the first Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), a gigantic implementation of a fantasy world derived from his earlier, genre founding fantasy role-playing series.”<sup>7</sup> The genre started out on shaky footing, receiving no small amount of criticism, but in time it proved to be a highly successful model of gaming, and by it a new type of online social network was born. Soon MMORPG games like “Everquest” became:

...the current societal exemplar for video game addiction. Professionals and married couples lose themselves in these fantasy kingdoms for hours a week. These are largely online communities. They are message boards and chat rooms with costumes and chat and some distraction. They are 3D environments where people can build up persistent characters and enjoy some interaction. They add the hierarchy and interaction of other beings to the struggles to develop oneself in a finite virtual world.<sup>8</sup>

A big name for a big game, it takes a lot of words to describe the nature of a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game or MMORPG for “short.” The main difference between today’s MMOs and all of the multiplayer games which came before is the sheer scale of the virtual world in both terms of size and player population. Not to be trifled of course, is the massive revenue stream and business model of the developer. While games like ID’s “Quake” and “Doom” have always had a respectable

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<sup>7</sup> Austin Grossman, ed. *Postmortems from Game Developer* [San Francisco: CMP Books, 2003], 273

<sup>8</sup> Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005], 52

cult-geek following and there are still innumerable private servers at any given moment ready to put players together into the various modified and patched versions and custom hacks that dominate that particular online social network, there is also still no monthly subscription fee for playing those games. MMOs on the other hand require a significant developer investment of time, money, upkeep, story modification, character moderation, and so forth just to keep the game going. It is for this reason that most MMOs have some form of monthly subscription fee, a negligible cost to most players who are more than happy to support the upkeep of their virtual world and line the pockets of their world-making developers of course.<sup>9</sup>

Just a few short years ago, Austin Grossman, editor of Postmortems from Game Developers commented in a notation:

Online Gaming as a large-scale commercial endeavor is clearly a big part of the future of gaming. There is something uniquely thrilling about the experience of sharing a virtual world with other people. The emotional buzz and endless unpredictability of human interaction are irreplaceable.<sup>10</sup>

His prediction is already proving to be right. At that time the MMOG was still largely unexplored territory, beyond those previously mentioned, but everything changed in November of 2004 with the launch of the Fantasy epic “World of Warcraft” (WoW), based upon developer Blizzard’s popular “Warcraft” RTS game trilogy released between 1994 and 2002.

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<sup>9</sup> Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005], 52; James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003], 169-179; Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005] 100-125.

<sup>10</sup> Austin Grossman, ed. *Postmortems from Game Developer* [San Francisco: CMP Books, 2003], 273

WoW is currently the most widely successful MMO of any kind, a fact which according to the WoW website is due to the uniqueness of the game.

Unlike other MMORPGs, World of Warcraft allows players to play the game at their own pace, whether it be a few hours here and there or entire weeks at a time. The quest system also provides an enormous variety of captivating quests with story elements, dynamic events, and flexible reward systems. World of Warcraft also features a faster style of play, with less downtime and an emphasis on combat and tactics against multiple opponents.<sup>11</sup>

This new formula has rocketed the game and the company into success, having more than ten million accounts as of January 2008, with no signs of slowing down considering the upcoming release of the second expansion announced for later this year.

Other forms of MMOs have existed, such as the MMO-RTS which like its 90's counterpart stands for Real Time Strategy, but none have reached the mainstream success of the MMORPG. Despite this, the MMORTS is significant because it represents a parallel attempt to venture into other styles of game while remaining within the multiplayer formula. Most are free to download and free to join, with a small monthly fee similar to WoW and others. However, without the powerhouse of a developing company behind it such as Blizzard Entertainment and other game mechanic factors which do not work well in an MMO environment, the MMORTS has not yet, and may never see the light of mainstream development. One such dilemma is offline army management while players are away – something which is not a problem in MMORPG because the player's character can simply disappear, but is fundamentally contrary to the point of RTS.

MMOs can be summarized as Immersive, sometimes fully 3D world interactions with large numbers of players working towards a specific goal or set of goals. With

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<sup>11</sup> Blizzard, "World of Warcraft Community Site," WoW MMORPG Home Page, <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com> [accessed March 26, 2007].

them, the social network exists in the cooperation and/or conflict between players. MMOs have been criticized for lacking story, but some have said that the purpose of them is to “make your own story.” Based on the rising numbers of games like WoW, including Blizzard’s recent job postings for “the next generation MMO,”<sup>12</sup> it seems that there is either something to this theory or when it comes to story, nobody really cares as long as the world is engaging, the play convenient, and the next quest or social interaction is entertaining.

### **Console Gaming Networks and Getting Along in a Network that Works**

There are an uncountable number of factors in the success or failure of any form of online entertainment. The seventh generation of console gaming systems is not the first to attempt network connection and online play, and consoles have been around in one form or another since before the Internet was just a network. The most recent incarnations are, however, the first generation of systems to directly compete with each other based on online play, and it has within the last two years become considered an industry standard for a console to be connectable. This sign of the social networking times is indicated by heavy marketing for console gamers to join the online networks “Xbox live,” “Playstation Network,” or “Wii Network” respectively.

The networks are similar in that they allow for online game play with others who are also on the network and have the same games, and allow for a Yahoo! Games style ranking and best score tracking and sharing feature within that console’s gaming social network. There are fundamental differences in the services however. For example,

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<sup>12</sup> Blizzard, “World of Warcraft Community Site,” WoW MMORPG Home Page, <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>, [accessed March 26, 2007].

Microsoft's Xbox Live Service still charges a monthly subscription fee to connect an Xbox or Xbox 360 to the network, while the more recently launched Sony Playstation 3 (PS3) and Nintendo Wii both have the ability to connect to their respective networks for free. This can be done by registering for the Playstation Network via another computer, but the Wii boldly claims to connect "out of the box" to allow players to begin buying up "Wii points" right away for spending in Nintendo's classic game downloads and peripherals through their "Virtual Console". As each new system is released, online multiplayer functions of consoles become more and more important to the manufacturers and to the players of these highly technical entertainment systems.

We see, for example, the lofty claims made on the Wii website regarding the impact the console's connection to their network will have upon the console's player population:

The Wii console will revolutionize how people play games. But more importantly, it will entice new players into the world of video games by offering a variety of entertainment, information and communication channels that add value to the console and make it a device that the entire family can enjoy. The Wii Menu will be the first screen shown on the television, as it easily integrates itself as part of people's everyday lives.<sup>13</sup>

Another page on the Wii website outlines the connectivity capabilities of the console in a similarly mild Orwellian tone: "The Wii console can communicate with the Internet even when the power is turned off. The WiiConnect24 service delivers a new surprise or game update, even if the system is idle. When you turn your Wii on each day, you'll never know what to expect!"<sup>14</sup> Nintendo is blurring the definition of the console as it

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<sup>13</sup> Nintendo, "In-depth Regional Wii Coverage," Nintendo Wii menu Features Page. <http://wii.nintendo.com/wiimenu.jsp> [accessed March 26, 2007].

<sup>14</sup> Nintendo, "In-depth Regional Wii Coverage," Nintendo Wiiconnect24 Features Page, <http://wii.nintendo.com/wiiconnect24.jsp> [accessed March 26, 2007].

becomes something more than a device for playing purchased disks. It is now also a social networking tool and a form of Internet entertainment with downloadable content and plug-in applications.

The line where the Internet happens has been blurring since about the turn of the twenty first century. No longer must one sit in front of a wired computer to surf the web. Wireless Laptops, cell phones, PDAs and just about anything that communicates is or can be connected to the web. These engaging, convenient, and emergent locations now include the newest consoles. For example, the newest wave of handheld gaming systems by two of these same top three manufacturers both came equipped with wireless functions. The Nintendo DS and Playstation Portable both proved that wireless technology was a logical next-step for console gaming, and sure enough, the Wii and PS3 both come standard with wireless networking cards, which is of course how the Wii is able to update itself “even when the power is turned off.” There are more features to list like the news and weather tools, or the social networking “mii” utilities which allow sharing of avatars across friendly consoles. Playstation 3 also offers a similar service: “Playstation 3 delivers ‘always-on’ online connectivity; offering a world of online possibilities including multiplayer gaming, text and video messaging, voice chatting, downloading content and browsing the Internet.”<sup>15</sup> When compared to the “optional” wireless adaptor for Xbox 360, the oldest of the three newest systems, it seems like Microsoft may have missed a golden opportunity by releasing a sub-par console. The reality, however, is that the console market simply moves so fast, that by the time one manufacturer releases a system, many of its features are already obsolete, irrelevant, or

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<sup>15</sup> Sony, “Playstation 3 Home Page,” Sony Playstation 3, <http://www.us.playstation.com/PS3> [accessed March 26, 2007].

superseded by the next one projected to come along, as could be argued by critics of the Xbox 360 console, even though there has yet to be a game released which maximizes its custom triple-core PowerPC-based design “xenon” CPU processor by IBM.<sup>16</sup> The fault for that however, lies more arguably with the game developers.

In one sense, the next-generation console war has become a peripherals war of this fashion. While the PS3 promotes its integrated everything, Wii is introducing revolutionary controllers that sense movement (an old idea which has caught up to technology’s abilities), and Xbox is standing on Voice-Over IP headsets which allow players to talk to each other from their respective locales while playing on Xbox Live. Unfortunately, although there are a great many cross-platform games which support online and multiplayer play, there aren’t really any cross-over games which allow play from across the proprietary networks of these systems. This means that even if a player with an Xbox has the same game as a player with a Playstation, and both are connected to their respective networks, they will still not be able to play together. A number of reasons have been cited for this, such as differences in the games themselves on multiple platforms, and presumably a question of inter-network compatibility protocol standards, but the fact remains that unlike PC Internet gaming, be it TC-IP or otherwise, no console maker is yet willing to extend the hand of shared user friendship beyond their own gaming network. In 2006, Microsoft’s Bill Gates spoke of plans to integrate several Microsoft services into one entity with “Live Anywhere” (which was later shortened to “Live”), a service which would “allow multiplayer games and communication possible between Xbox 360 and the new Windows Vista operating

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Brown, “Just Like Being There: Papers from the Fall Processor Forum 2005: Application-Customized CPU Design,” <http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/power/library/pa-fpfxbox/> [accessed March 26, 2007].

system for the PC,”<sup>17</sup> but this is still only a baby step away from the closed network which consoles are now confined to by design.

So while the console system has come a long way thanks to the influence of social networks on that particular slice of entertainment, there is also a lot of growing left to do – especially considering how far we have come in other ways when we step outside of the traditional definitions of “games” and look at the next forms of Internet entertainment to emerge, such as streaming media, interactive storytelling, and virtual worlds.

### **Second Life and Online Virtual Worlds**

“Second Life” and its similar copycat virtual world social network counterparts are so new and so full of emergent properties, that it is difficult to quantify, classify or at times even explain. Perhaps Grossman inadvertently addresses the issue with this statement:

The least predictable and least controllable factor in an online game is the players themselves. An online game is partly composed of the people that play it, the community that surrounds it and the culture that forms in the process. But as a developer, how do you influence the nature of the community that comes about, both before and after a game’s launch? You can’t control what players do in your world, only try to create a system that encourages play. At times, rule-changes feel more like legislation than game design. Community management has become an essential developer task. The whole nature of the relationship between game developers and players is changing from vendor-buyer to some amalgam of host-guest, server-client, and government-citizen.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Gates, “Microsoft Press Conference,” [Keynote Speech, E3, Los Angeles, CA, May 9, 2006.]

<sup>18</sup> Austin Grossman, ed. *Postmortems from Game Developer* [San Francisco: CMP Books, 2003], 274

Grossman was not writing about “Second Life,” he was writing about MMOs, but his question is the fundamental philosophy upon which the digital sandbox that is Linden Labs’ “Second Life” has been founded. What if there were no rules? No story? No system to encourage play? What would happen? The answer is that “Second Life” happened and allegedly continues to get bigger every day while it happens.

If it can be said that the browser game is an activity which is surrounded by a social network tool, then “Second Life” is the 3D virtual world which surrounds a social network tool. Through by literal interpretation of the term it is technically an MMO, “Second Life” is still something else since there are no “players” within it. This is a condition which exists because there is no game. Everything in “Second Life” is by definition an emergent property from user-generated content, avatar clothes and items to the very buildings, casinos, and virtual art galleries which populate this other world. With nearly 2.5 million accounts according to Linden<sup>19</sup>, Second Life is seemingly gaining quickly on the twice as old “World of Warcraft” MMORPG, and threatens to challenge the “tell your own story” adage in a whole new way. Though some are claiming that this is a gross over-exaggeration, and that the number of active users was really more like 230,000 in 2007 due to multiple alternate accounts and a significant number of completely inactive users.<sup>20</sup>

“Second Life” is too expansive to hope to analyze in detail, but much attention has been given to the virtual space by the media of late. “Second Life” has been

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<sup>19</sup> Linden Labs, “Second Life: Your World - Your Imagination,” Second Life Virtual World Home Page. <http://secondlife.com/> [accessed February 8, 2008].

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Terdiman, “Counting the Real Second Life,” *News.com*, January 3, 2007. [http://www.news.com/Counting-the-real-Second-Life-population/2100-1043\\_3-6146943.html](http://www.news.com/Counting-the-real-Second-Life-population/2100-1043_3-6146943.html) [accessed February 20, 2008].

reviewed in a number of prominent magazines such as *Time Magazine*<sup>21</sup> and *PC Magazine*<sup>22</sup>, somewhat favorably but in both publications significantly, because they have no direct game or entertainment related reason to promote the virtual world. Numerous websites are continually cropping up – a secondary emergent property of the virtual world’s impact upon Internet entertainment, as well as a few ink and paper books such as *Second Life: The Official Guide*.<sup>23</sup>

“Case” is the pseudonym for a man who reports that he likes participating in online virtual communities as a female because it makes it easier for him to be aggressive and confrontational without being judged harshly as being a typical male. He says: “For virtual reality to be interesting, it has to emulate the real. But you have to be able to do something in the virtual that you couldn’t in the real.”<sup>24</sup> For him it is gender-bending, but for some it is as simple as the flying and god-like creative powers given in the “Second Life” space. For others it is the moral and ethical liberties felt by manipulating a god-like avatar. The list goes on, and not all are limited to second life. The very reason why a player uses his or her level seven Orc to kill a wandering enemy in WoW is fundamentally the same, but in this case the social network is in the sandbox

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<sup>21</sup> Joel Stein, “My So-Called Second Life,” *Time*, December 16, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570708,00.html> [accessed March 26, 2007].

<sup>22</sup> Dan Costa, “Second Life,” *PC Magazine*, October 28, 2003, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,4149,1306196,00.asp> [accessed March 26, 2007].

<sup>23</sup> Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Cory Ondrejka, Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham, and Philip Rosedale. *Second Life: The Official Guide*, [Berkeley: Sybex, 2007].

<sup>24</sup> Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005], 271

principle. Emergent properties go beyond those of a quantifiable “World of Warcraft” or of any other world for that matter, except perhaps for the act of “crafting” itself.

It is unclear yet what the full impact of “Second Life” will be upon online social networks and Internet entertainment, but it is a new “space” which will not be ignored as it continues to grow and evolve. Perhaps it will be the prototype model for the next generation of virtual spaces and games, or it may change in such a way as to accommodate other forms into itself. Already the virtual world allows the importing of textures, pictures, movies, and other content. The conversion of real money into virtual cash and back again has made millionaires in the real world, and the free reign to do nearly anything one pleases within the technical constraints of the program has caused quite a stir in many ways. In 2007 new legal limitations were placed upon the virtual world to handle the increasing worry surrounding fraud and illegal virtual gambling payouts which might be in conflict with underage and similar gambling laws which are seemingly unenforceable within a virtual environment.<sup>25</sup> After months of confusion ranging from zero-tolerance to a redefinition of virtual wagers itself, it is simply a matter of waiting to see what new wonders will come out of the social networks that lie within virtual worlds. Will the novelty wear off? Or has the bar officially been raised on what an online social network is? Trends seem to indicate that it is the latter.

### **YouTube and Other Non-games**

A truly thorough look at Online Interactive Entertainment would not be complete without a good look at the recent changes in time-shifted, user generated, and

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<sup>25</sup> Linden Labs. “Wagering in Second Life: New Policy” The Second Life Blog, entry posted July 25, 2007. <http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/07/25/wagering-in-second-life-new-policy/> [accessed February 20, 2008].

alternative media outlets which make up the non-gaming end of online fun.

YouTube.com was probably the biggest success story of 2006<sup>26</sup> or the most overpaid buyout in history. When Google offered \$1.65 billion in stock to YouTube to acquire them, many thought the merger was misguided, but whether the offer was sound or not is irrelevant. For a startup Internet company to get noticed by an entity such as Google is profoundly significant, and one must ask exactly what it was about the simple streaming video blogging “broadcast yourself” concept that turned a video posting and hosting site into something worth that much to Google.

The answer is simple. YouTube represents the cutting edge in new media Internet entertainment inspired by online social networking. An online group exists for literally anything imaginable now. It may be on Yahoo! Groups, or over on Flickr.com in the form of picture sharing, but somewhere there is a group that has allowed people who are geographically separated to communicate regardless of the real-world limitations. YouTube is also a grand representation of time-shifted media. No longer does the consumer need to wait for something to “come on,” as he or she can now simply play it on demand whenever – and in many cases wherever – he or she desires thanks to podcasting. From its comment and rating system to video response tracking, the whole site is intended to inspire social networking, viral advertising, and free services which represent many of the fundamental values of Google as well. It was a good fit.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Google, “Google To Acquire YouTube for \$1.65 Billion in Stock”, Google Press center, October 9, 2006. [http://www.google.com/press/pressrel/google\\_youtube.html](http://www.google.com/press/pressrel/google_youtube.html) [accessed March 26, 2007].

<sup>27</sup> Lionel Felix and Damian Stolarz, *Hands-On Guide to Video Blogging and Podcasting: Emerging Media Tools for Business Communication*, [Burlington: Focal, 2006]; Joe Follansbee,

One might call the success of YouTube, or any other enormous online social network, attributable to the “hey look at this” principle and a desire to become involved in something bigger than one’s own self. It is possibly the same element of human nature which causes us to flock around an unconscious person or slow down to view the wreck on the other side of the divided highway that also causes us to send endless articles, links, pictures, ridiculous spam, and all manner of other things to one another when we surf the Internet. It is also why viral marketing works. For this type of social network, the network is in the form of discussions, and information exchange. It is perhaps the purest form of online social network – one where there is no extra white noise, and every member of the group or participant in the discussion can get down to the dirty details of whatever obscure topic is being discussed, watched, admired, or criticized. When one of these little distractions lands us in an online social network to which we feel strongly enough akin to, to actually join, then perhaps it is an indication that that particular social network might be the next influence for change in our own personal Internet entertainment domain.

### **ARG: A New Kind of Social Network**

As stated previously, in Alternate Reality Games the social network is everything. It is built upon the above forms; indeed it evolved from them, and permeates the genre in every way. The social network exists within the puzzle solves, the in-game and *out-of-game* forums, and in the “shared lie,” which is the willing suspension of disbelief the ARG player seems to crave as the game elements spill over into their real lives through

whatever means allowed by the game designers. ARG does not require peripherals or advanced programming. There is no need for a virtual world or cutting edge graphics. ARG is simply not that kind of game, but it was born from all of the above social game forms and therefore any model of ARG which is to be considered must account for that reality.

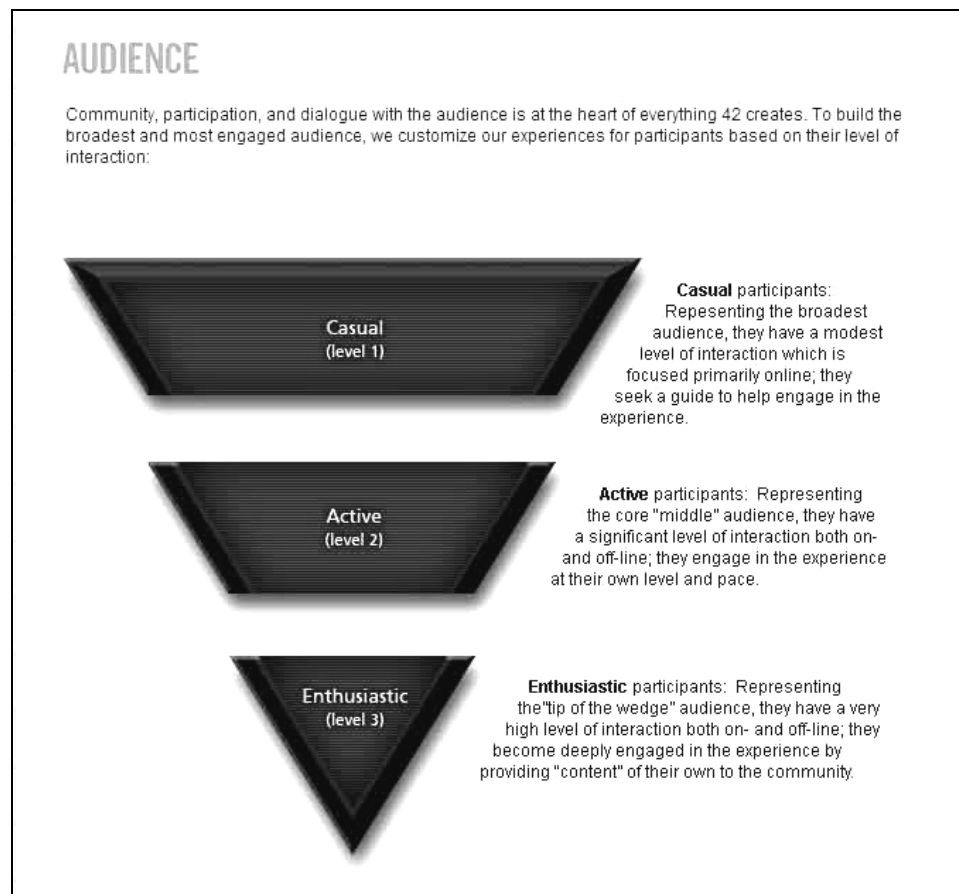
While no pre-existing published academic model exists for ARG development or game mechanic structure, the current accepted model for illustrating the audience's social network base was suggested by 42 Entertainment both on their website and during the keynote speech at the San Francisco ARGfest in March of 2007 (Fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> An inverted pyramid model is embraced, which visually represents both the quality of involvement and quantity of people in the audience. Because the audience is drawn into the creative act of interactive fiction that is an ARG, however, the model is essentially illustrating the player involvement during a particular game. It is this inverted pyramid model of player participation by which 42 Entertainment creates most or all their games, as could be argued do most commercially funded ARG creators, though that information is still a closely guarded corporate secret for fairly obvious reasons.

According to the model, the majority of the audience – or “level 1” players – are at the top, playing casually with little to no interaction with the story and a heavy passive role in the storytelling process, lurking heavily on the game forums and benefiting from others' interactions within game elements. This is the closest thing to a traditional audience role and is where every player begins when he or she first starts to play the

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<sup>28</sup> 42 Entertainment, “How We See Things,” 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007]; 42 Entertainment, “Play my Game,” Keynote Address, ARGfest, San Francisco, CA, March 3, 2007, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ9-5\\_Nmwbk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ9-5_Nmwbk) [accessed April 8, 2008].

game. Because these are the majority of players, it has sometimes been misunderstood that an ARG is “not really a game” since “there is nothing to do but watch,” but this is really a terrible misunderstanding of how the ARG player dynamic works as a whole, according to the model.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 2. The 42 (4orty 2wo) Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid Model” of Alternate Reality Game Audience (Player) Participation<sup>30</sup>**

<sup>29</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005] 7

<sup>30</sup> 42 Entertainment, “How We See Things,” 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007].

The middle area of the pyramid is where the “level 2” players reside. These are the active players who represent the average level of game involvement and interactive storytelling participation. Level 2 players represent the core audience, and have “a significant level of interaction both on and off-line; they engage in the experience at their own level and pace.”<sup>31</sup> It is significant to note that this average level of game involvement is neither the same as greatest number of players, nor highest level of player interaction. Rather, the middle “level 2” players are the well-rounded target audience of a game which represents the most likely payoff for a commercial endeavor, whatever that may be.

At the tip of the inverted pyramid model are the “level 3” players. They are the most intense, obsessed, involved and enthusiastic players. According to the model, without the “level 3” participants, the story would not and could not move forward, and therefore are required in order for the other players to see changes within the game. While not strictly true in all ways, the general representation holds. Finally, it is worth noting that the enthusiastic players do not represent a significant enough marketing base for commercially funded marketing ARGs alone, as the active and casual players together make ARG a viable marketing strategy, and the pyramidal structure of the player base gives the genre its unique and individualized player experiences based on the player’s personal preference and desired involvement in the interactive narrative.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 42 Entertainment, “How We See Things,” 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007]

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

## **The Problem with the Pyramid Model**

While there are many examples of highly successful ARGs which illustrate the effectiveness of the “Pyramid Model” of player participation as a marketing strategy, it is also a very simple model which does not allow for an expansion of the active player base or higher levels of involvement across the entire spectrum of players, such as emphasizing interactive storytelling as the primary focus of a game. This is because storytelling is not the primary stated focus of Commercial ARGs, nor should it be necessarily. By designing a new type of game, one which is structured differently, the efficacy of this model can be determined and ultimately set aside for new, more efficient models which fit the goals of a particular ARG, which might or might not be more focused on storytelling and less on casual player involvement, advertising, or financial gain. It is for this reason that this study explores the possibilities for better collaborative storytelling in Alternate Reality Games by investigating their origins as well as their definably unique qualities and characteristics. This was done by critically analyzing the success of the recent Alternate Reality Game “Deus City” which was specifically designed for the study to test new forms and delivery methods within the context of the genre; and by outlining the areas of change which indicate where the future of interactive fiction may be very soon. The study required a new model of ARG Participation and development to be proposed. For an in-depth look at the “Deus City” game project, see Part Two of this study. An in-depth look at the proposed descriptive model which compensates for the unaddressed elements of ARG by the “Pyramid Model” above is presented in Chapter 9.

## CHAPTER 3

### A BRIEF LITERATURE AND RESOURCE REVIEW OF ARGS

Whenever you roll the dice or draw a card or click on that digitized enemy in a video game, you are automatically reminded on some level that you are playing a game. Alternate Reality Games, however, ignore that paradigm, by using tools and methods that are already integrated parts of the player's every day life.

—Dave Szulborski, *This is Not a Game: a Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*

Alternate Reality Games exist in a genre that is easily overlooked right now, but soon will be much easier to identify. The establishment of ARG is widening because the Online Interactive Entertainment's gaming community is growing as online social networks continue to grow. Such Web-initiatives as ARGn.com, Unficiton.com, IonARG.com, and this year's despoiler.com for example are moving the genre forward in leaps and bounds. The greatest volume of discussion regarding ARG, its properties, qualities, and its future, is occurring through these online communities.

Another example of ARG's growth is indicated by the expansion of the companies involved in creating them over the last few years, such as the previously mentioned Forty Two Entertainment, the creators of numerous Commercial ARGs such as "The Beast" and "I Love Bees," or the company Mind Candy, the creators of the independent corporate, but Non-Commercial ARG "Perplex City." A delightful number of independent ARG projects similar to my own "Deus City" ARG have also been started in the last year thanks to increased interest, support, and demand from the community, as

well as free online resources such as blogging websites and YouTube, which have provided the low-cost and free online tools for these small budget ARGs.

### **This is Not a Game?**

Jane McGonigal's seminal 2003 essay "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play" was the first serious academic examination of the genre.

She writes:

It is reasonable to argue that nothing about this virtual play was simulated. The computer-driven alternate reality 'The Beast' created was make believe, but every aspect of the player's experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real.<sup>1</sup>

The essay succeeded in fueling the fire of ARG, addressing the questions of what it is, what it means, and where it was going. At this early stage, McGonigal even hesitates to call "The Beast" a game, but summarizes the reality aspect of the budding genre quite well, showing a profound understanding between the virtual or simulated and the immersive. This concept of immersive elements is explored in greater depth in chapter 3, "The Elements of ARG."

The first academically qualified book to investigate and critically analyze online storytelling across interactive media from both a classic and historical narrative technique approach and an in-depth look at modern technology within the genre was Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment.<sup>2</sup> The author begins with what is described as the "campfire model" of ancient interactive entertainment, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jane McGonigal, "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play," *Melbourne DAC*, 2003, <http://www.seanstewart.org/beast/mcgonigal/notagame/paper.pdf> [accessed January 15, 2008].

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn H Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. [St. Louis: Focal Press, 2004]

brings the reader quickly through to modern times for a comprehensive overview of the genre, and even ending with a glancing blow at Alternate Reality Games. While a number of other titles which examine the broader genre of Online Interactive Entertainment do exist,<sup>3</sup> most do not contain more than a small mention of the Alternate Reality Game genre subset if at all, since the primary focus of interactive entertainment is the multi-billion dollar video game industry including Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, and this reality is reflected in the related literature as might be expected.

### **ARG in Print**

A very small number of books have been written on the subject of ARG specifically as of yet, barely providing a working definition of the genre, an in-depth look at the history and evolution of various games successful and failed, and making some small projections as to the future of ARG. Perhaps it is not surprising that corporate Commercial ARG developers have not revealed their secrets or business models in print, as they have been too busy building their own reputations and high quality Commercial ARGs veiled in secrecy. This is an understandable business practice and not a bad thing at all from a commercial standpoint, but it does create a disadvantage for those who would seek to study academically the multi-faceted and complex ARG phenomenon. Fortunately for the academic community, however, independent, grass-

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Glassner, *Interactive Storytelling: Techniques for 21st Century Fiction*, [Wellesley: AK Peters, 2004]; Chris Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling*, [Berkeley: New Riders Games, 2004]; Kay Teehan, *Digital Storytelling: In and Out of the Classroom*, [Morrisville: Lulu.com Press, 2006].

roots, and similar Non-Commercial ARG creators are not limited by a corporate agenda, and these books are easily discussed.

J. W. Gosney's 2005 book Beyond Reality: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming was the first proper ARG publication<sup>4</sup>. Gosney gives a brief history of ARG, but also includes an instructional guide for players with advice on approaching an ARG; including an annotated real ARG ("The Beast"), a sample rabbit hole and an example ARG (called "Route 66") with analysis of each. The author is an experienced player with a unique perspective, but in many ways the book is still an incomplete glancing blow at ARG, if for no other reason than its admirable early entry into the field with so few usable references at the time, in a genre that was still defining itself. Also included in the book is a simple and somewhat dated, but clear outline for designing an ARG and suggested web design for would-be puppetmasters, which is more useful now as an archive of older web technology methods than as a practical, modern how-to guide.

Dave Szulborski's This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming is in many ways the more academic and useful book<sup>5</sup>, having been written by the experienced puppetmaster of a number of acclaimed grassroots ARGs. The book is an in-depth list of ARGs through 2005, focusing on not only the theory and history behind the genre but also the practice of making and playing ARGs with a look to the future of the genre and numerous references and resources for further study including various articles and academic insights, which predate and include the inception of the genre. Szulborski also implies that another reason that ARG should not be ignored as a form of

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Gosney, *Beyond reality: A guide to alternate reality gaming*, [Boston: Thompson Course Technology PTR, 2005]

<sup>5</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005].

online diversion is that it is the first form of entertainment that has been produced exclusively “by the Internet, and for the Internet”, though as mentioned it does spill over into the real world too – a bold claim either way.<sup>6</sup>

Szulborski’s 2005 follow-up book Through the Rabbit Hole: A Beginner's Guide to Playing Alternate Reality Games was written as “an introduction for newcomers to the exciting genre of alternate reality gaming.”<sup>7</sup> There is not much new content in the book to speak of as compared to his first book, but the games discussed are more recent and the rule-book style tone makes it a better choice for new players in the genre who are interested in breaking into ARG game theory without slogging through the meta-discussion of other books. Through the Rabbit Hole uses a simple and concise manner to lay out many of the game-elements and some general guidelines for playing Alternate Reality Games, using the games and his own experiences from the first five years of the ARG genre, as reasonably well as can be expected in the rapidly changing game environment of ARGs.

### **What is Lacking**

What the current body of study regarding the genre of ARG lacks is an in-depth critical and statistical academic analysis of an ARG’s most critical elements, those qualities which make it by definition an Alternate Reality Game. This is a difficult and monumental task that will likely take years of collaborative work and access to data that is currently a closely guarded secret. Past ARGs have been determined to be either a

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<sup>6</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 1.

<sup>7</sup> Dave Szulborski, *Through the Rabbit Hole: A beginners Guide to Playing Alternate Reality Games*, [Lulu.com Press, 2005].

success or a failure based on those factors which have been outlined in the above literature and resource studies, or as often as not by their commercial returns and simple website visit counts. Though a number of possibilities exist, it is also phenomenologically unclear at this time why the ARG player base seemingly prefers the reality of the player's experience versus the computer-driven virtual and simulated reality environments such as those presented by newer generation video games or other virtual worlds like "Second Life." Invariably ARGs set within these false constructs are short-lived and unremarkable, a phenomenon which is outside the bounds of this study but well worthy of study at some point in the future.

Laying the foundation for a later academic statistical analysis through an initial exploratory analysis, was the primary goal of this study and is reflected by the proposed method in which the "Deus City" ARG was further developed and the first major story arc launched. This proposal was based on the many unanswered questions and areas of need identified prior to the "Deus City" game project's creation. Much insight has been gained by the project and much can be gained by the resulting exploratory analysis of the game based on these many unanswered questions prior to its inception. These same questions are discussed in chapter 4, but first the basic elements of ARG must be identified, an exercise which deserves a chapter of its own.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE FOUR ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF ARGs

“TINAG means that the characters believe that they are in a real world, in an authentic reality, but not necessarily that of the player's reality. The story operates in a general state of believability and consistency. And to take it a step further, our role as players is to take a leap and, at times, suspend our beliefs and stop thinking about this as just a game.”

—Unforums user “Chewy”, *Posted message paraphrasing ARG Netcast #28 with Elan Lee of 42 Entertainment*

An ARG does not depend upon the elements of traditional games. The elements of traditional games can be identified as: defined rules, defined space, a given set of components, and a set of victory conditions which constitute the end of the game. Instead, the four elements which make an ARG are derived directly from the player base itself, and can be defined as: *emergent properties, immersive elements, collaborative interactive storytelling, and the self organizing structure of the massive online social network* which constitutes the player base.<sup>1</sup> Each of these elements is defined and discussed in detail below.

#### **Emergent Properties**

While not technically an element of traditional games, emergent properties are still important in all good games and game design. They are secondary or unexpected

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 2; 42 Entertainment, “How We See Things,” 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007].

attributes beyond game's main stated intent. For example, the game of poker, especially in "no limit" forms without a rigid betting structure, is largely driven by emergent behavior. No rule requires that any player should fold, but usually many players do. Because the game is driven by emergent behavior, play at one poker table might be radically different from that at another, while the rules of the game are exactly the same, even if the decks were identically stacked – which of course they should never be. Variations of games that develop are examples of emergent meta-play, the predominant catalyst of the evolution of new games. In ARG, This phenomenon becomes the central focus of the game, with no rules to govern player actions at all, and meta-discussion can greatly interfere with the game itself.

In the Commercial ARG "Last Call Poker" for example, a 2005 game from 42 Entertainment, to promote the Activision Videogame "Gun," an online flash based poker site became the literal primary game mechanic for player interaction, but by playing, players gained access to content hidden on the site which drew many of the over half a million players who actively participated during the eight-week campaign into the deeper ARG elements of the campaign which "was designed to get players engaged in a viral narrative that blurred the line between fiction and reality"<sup>2</sup> according to the 42 entertainment website. In addition:

Players and press followed trails of blood from virtual poker tables to the ultimate Last Call: real graves and graveyards around the country. ... By providing incentives to players to pre-order GUN and offering the chance of discovering secrets which would gain them weapons and extra gold within the game itself, Last Call Poker was unique in its integrations between the marketing campaign and the product. In addition to the vibrant online community that developed around the virtual poker tables, Last Call Poker drove the play experience into the real world – in graveyards around the country. Participants in selected cities were invited to attend memorial

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<sup>2</sup> 42 Entertainment, "Case Studies: 'Last Call Poker'," 42 Entertainment, <http://www.42entertainment.com/poker.html> [accessed April 8, 2008].

services for Lucky Brown, the fictional financier of Last Call Poker, and play a round of Tombstone Hold'em with the broader community of enthusiasts. Participants were also invited to share their own stories and pictures related to life in the hereafter, resulting in a vibrant and touching collection of user-generated content.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that for many, however, the focus of the marketing which was the videogame "GUN" was secondary to the experience of the "Last Call Poker" ARG experience, and in reality much more enjoyable, lasting, and memorable because it was exactly that: reality. This is just one example of why traditional game elements are too limiting to describe ARG.

### **Immersive Elements**

The boundaries of ARG are defined by the believability of its immersive elements. An ARG must have a game-space, which is the sum total of all of the in-game and out-of-game elements including the websites, real-world elements, and any other thing, virtual or real, which is a part of the game. Immersion takes on many forms and has a much broader definition within the context of interactive fiction and games, especially video games; but for the sub-genre of ARG it is only as effective as the real-world objects or tools through which the story is told and which cross over into reality and defy normal game paradigms. These elements can be anything from puzzles to phone calls in the night, and are limited only by the availability of ideas, technologies, and objects in the real world.

In video games, no matter how advanced, what physics engine is employed, or how well-rendered the game is, the end result is still a finite number of possible game permutations. Every game possibility exists within the box at the time of shipping. Even

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<sup>3</sup> 42 Entertainment, "Case Studies: 'Last Call Poker'," 42 Entertainment, <http://www.42entertainment.com/poker.html> [accessed April 8, 2008].

Online games like MMORPGs which more and more often are able to encapsulate evolving worlds and living social networks still have self-imposed limitations which are necessary to that world's functionality and believability in terms of where the player can go and what the player can do specifically. Such limitations do not necessarily exist within the context of an ARG, because the medium of ARGs is the real world and everything within it.

Specific Immersive elements employed vary from one ARG to another, though there have been some fairly standard components used again and again. In its simplest form it is an online puzzle, cipher, or code which must be solved or cracked. In the earliest ARGs these invariably took the form of a puzzle trail: a series of gates through which the player base was required to move. The difficulty of these puzzles within the trail allowed the puppetmasters to control the pace and tempo of the game within the construct of an artificial story path. While this highly effective method is still used in traditional feeling ARGs, new methods for using puzzle elements soon emerged. On their "How we see things" web page, for example, 42 Entertainment states that "Stories that touch an audience throughout their daily lives – via means expected and unexpected – deliver an immersive and memorable experience." Elsewhere on the page it can also be seen to say that "Story elements that are artfully placed across existing media platforms are an effective way to deliver content as well as to drive attention to everyday messaging."<sup>4</sup>

In the 2005-06 hit "PerplexCity" for example, the closest element of "reality" that most players experienced were the puzzle cards which they purchased and collected,

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<sup>4</sup> 42 Entertainment, "How We See Things," 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007].

then attempted to solve. Most of the game elements existed online at perplexcity.com through the main website which was the virtual connection to the “alternate” world of Perplex City. This was a more traditional form of online immersion for games, and the remaining elements of the game fit so well with traditional board game forms, that in 2007 a board game version of the ARG hit shelves with limited acclaim, just one of the many factors contributing to the game’s unexpected death on the edge of a second season launch. While some online communities have attempted to downgrade PerplexCity from ARG to timewaster status in light of its casual use of immersive elements,<sup>5</sup> it still serves to provide contrast for other games which relied heavily on real-world immersive elements.

In contrast, the 2005 game “Art of the Heist,” a Commercial ARG designed to promote the release of the Audi A3, the real-world immersive elements were the very backbone of the game. In fact it was so high-profile and stunt-like that many respectable “non-game” related papers and magazines took notice. *BusinessWeek* for example, reported levelly:

It began with a staged car theft at a New York City Audi dealership. Then, much to the confusion of event organizers, Audi posted handbills seeking information about the theft at the New York International Auto Show last March. That beginning, as intriguing as the start of a John Grisham novel, was then augmented by ads -- placed in major magazines, blogs, and streaming video -- featuring fictional people purporting to capture moments of the whodunit tale. It was all done in the name of generating chatter about Audi.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ARGNet, “ARGnet: The Alternate Reality Game Network Home Page,” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com> [accessed April 8, 2007]; Unfiction, “Unforum Index,” Unfiction’s ARG Unforums, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/> [accessed February 18, 2008, 2007].

<sup>6</sup> Kiley, David, “A New Kind of Car Chase.” *Business Week*, 2005. [http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/may2005/nf20050516\\_9437\\_db016.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/may2005/nf20050516_9437_db016.htm) [accessed Feb 2, 2008].

For players of “Art of the Heist,” the game essentially involved three layers of interaction. As with any good story there was character development which revealed a back story about an art retrieval business and a recent art heist. Secondly, players helped the characters by becoming engaged in file and password cracking, or other online puzzle elements. Then, for the most involved, it was possible through live events referred to in the game as “retrievals” to actually discover and recover physical game elements in the real world from computer chips, to stolen art, to entire cars which had been left especially for that purpose. Players who participated in the live events received special pins and complimentary cell phones, adding to the “real” element for them.

Other prominent examples exist, and the more “real-world” the example the more “immersive” the game has said to have been. But whether a particular ARG draws the player in through believable online elements or through publicity stunts and real-world ads, it will fail to hold their attention without a good storyline, and in order for it to be an ARG, and therefore a subset of Online Interactive (or “Chaotic”) Fiction, that story must be a collaborative work.

### **Collaborative Interactive Storytelling**

Collaborative storytelling is the method by which the puppetmasters and the players interact through role-playing, in-character messages or communications, and whatever other means, that provides characterization, plot, or otherwise moves a story forward. As it is with pre-programmed immersive elements in traditional video games versus ARG’s real-world elements, there is also no set or pre-scripted series of dialogue

for an ARG player. Even the most ambitious attempts at an intuitive text or dialogue based video game have fallen short in the simulation of reality because it follows a flowchart of scripted dialogue. This typically means that either the dialogue choices presented to the player are not what he or she would have wanted to say or the reactions of the in-game character are not realistic because no computer or program at this time is able to properly simulate real human interaction. This is because a video game character's dialogue options are still limited by the extent of the programming and the writing that went into that character's dialogue scripts, and every possible option, no matter how seemingly exhaustive must still be necessarily pre-programmed into the game prior to its distribution. The video game character can feel no emotion, thus no real anger or fear from the player, and therefore can not sense sarcasm, a joke, a cultural reference, or any other standard human interaction. In other words, until a computer is created which can fully receive the random and uniquely individual infinitely diverse human input, process it, then effectively pass the famously proposed "Turing test,"<sup>7</sup> in its responses every time, there will be no substitute for the real human interaction of an ARG anytime soon.

Collaborative storytelling is the primary vehicle for moving a story forward in an ARG, and becomes available to the casual player only through self-organizing structure of the massive online social networks which constitute the player base as discussed in further detail below. Done well, the process is seamless and fluid and allows the right amount of player control to influence the game's story. Done poorly an ARG storyline can either go nowhere or be horribly derailed into oblivion, by what is usually referred to

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<sup>7</sup> Stanford. "The Turing Test" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. July 28, 2005. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/turing-test/> [accessed February 13, 2008].

as a “*gamejack*,” Usually this is the attempt to wrest control of an ARG from the puppetmaster in a way contrary to that in which they've invited the audience to participate, but accidental forms of this have occurred. Through out-of-game resources such as the “Unforums” (forums.unfiction.com/ forums), the events of the game are typically chronicled for all to see by the players, and thus succeed in telling the story in a somewhat non-linear but accessible fashion. Often times, players will write summaries of the storyline “so far” for new and casual players who may not be directly involved enough with the characters to know what is going on with the story.

It is worth examining PerplexCity again when defining collaborative storytelling, because it has been criticized within the ARG community for being “too linear” in the same way that a Game Master of a Tabletop RPG might be referred to as running a “railroad” campaign. The game’s design required specific actions on the part of the players to be figured out in a particular order before the game could move to the next plot point, and as a result there were month-long periods when “nothing happened” with the larger plot from the player perspective, even up to the final fruitless search for the hidden prize.<sup>8</sup> In the end the game’s creators decided to give a number of direct and rather simple clues as to the prize’s location on their own in-game forums, a move which finally allowed the prize to be found and the game to end, but it was a move that was hotly debated and criticized within the ARG community as being bad form.<sup>9</sup>

It is generally recognized within the ARG community that some players have difficulty accepting any new game that is not “The Beast” or “I love Bees.” This is

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<sup>8</sup> Marc McGinley, “PerplexCity” Highest Ranked Player. Yahoo! Personal Messenger conversation with author. Wednesday, Feb 07, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> ARG Netcast, “Episode 12: The Supersized,” ARGN Netcast Web Site, Audio Mp3. <http://www.argnetcast.info/archives/428>. [accessed February 8, 2008].

because these were some of the first ARG entries, and much like one's first love or first video game, there can sometimes become an emotional attachment to one's first ARG which never dies. This is not to imply that these early games did not have heart. On the contrary, they set the standard quite high for any game thereafter. This is because ARG developer 42 Entertainment has understood from the beginning the importance of character to story, and as such has brought the highest quality of characterization through writing and interaction possible within their games. In "I love Bees" for example, the 2004 Commercial ARG created for the Microsoft Game Studio to promote Halo II, the campaign was "an original radio drama that was deconstructed and delivered to consumers over an unlikely broadcast medium: ringing payphones," for which, "players hunted down and answered payphones in all 50 states and several countries around the world." This was done in order to follow the story of a stranded Artificial Intelligence which had become trapped in the code of a fictional beekeeper's blog after it crash landed on Earth; and by doing so, players were thus able to unlock online content and move the story forward.

Even more significant for the genre, however, than the revolutionary real world delivery method of the payphones, was the resulting shock and horror which ensued when the players subsequently discovered that through their own actions, a few of them had inadvertently caused the protagonist known as the Sleeping Princess, another AI living on the ilovebees.com server, to be destroyed by Melissa, the evil antagonist AI by giving her key information which was not ever intended for the villainess: collaborative storytelling at its finest. While many were outraged by the horrifying twist of witnessing the child-like Sleeping Princess's screams as she was murdered, it was later revealed

that the Sleeping Princess was not in fact destroyed, but contained, and later on became merged with Melissa to bring about a happy ending to the story. It was that story which ultimately had 2.5 million participants following the game, as well as the significant press coverage in the mainstream press and virtually all key gaming publications which followed. “Halo2” sold \$125 million in copies the first day of release, a number rivaling most blockbuster films.<sup>10</sup>

The essence of collaborative storytelling lies in the give and take continuum between the player and the puppetmasters of a particular ARG within the context of the story that is being told. Because ARGs essentially happen in “real time,” 24 hours a day, every day, it becomes necessary to set limitations upon the players from within the game, sometimes through controlled ignoring or selective response, other times by limiting the communication methods, and sometimes by finding a creative way to allow player faux pas to slip through into the story when appropriate without destroying the “happy ending” as was done with the Sleeping Princess’s “death.” That is of course, assuming that the ending is written before starting, which, depending on the allowed amount of emergent properties in a game’s design, sometimes is not. This must all be done while allowing enough freedom for the collaborative story to be told within the context of the players’ social network as it self-organizes for a particular game, an emergent property which stands on its own as the final element of ARG, as described below.

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<sup>10</sup> 42 Entertainment, “Case Studies: ‘I Love Bees,’” 42 Entertainment, <http://www.42entertainment.com/bees.html> [accessed April 8, 2008]; 42 Entertainment, “Play my Game,” Keynote Address, ARGfest, San Francisco, CA, March 3, 2007, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ9-5\\_Nmwbk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ9-5_Nmwbk) [accessed April 8, 2008].

## **The Self-Organizing Structure of the Social Network**

I have already spent some time regarding the overall nature of the social network in chapter 1, along with an in-depth description of the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid Model” of player participation in chapter 2. The pyramid model should not be confused with the fourth element of ARG itself. It is through the self organizing structure of that social network - which is represented by the inverted pyramid model - that the players are able to assert themselves and be defined as casual, active, or enthusiastic. Right now there are two primary ways in which the players of ARG organize themselves and, their information, and tell the story from their perspective. The first is through out-of-game forums like the Unforums, and the second is through in-game forums or message boards if provided by a particular ARG website. The significant difference between the two is that a different set of social rules governs each. When a player posts to an in-game forum, he or she is said to be posting in-character and is not allowed to refer to the game as a game, or to break character or in extreme cases, to have knowledge that was attained by any out-of-game resource, depending on the structure and format of the game and the expected level of role-play built into the game by the creators.

The 2006 ARG “Ocular Effect” from ABC Family and game creator Xenofile Media is a fair example of how a social network’s structure can change the face of a game for better or for worse. The visually stunning Emmy-winning game was set in the same world as “Fallen,” a fairly well-received TV series on ABC Family about a Nephilim, or half-human half fallen Angel who must deal with his teen angst and secret

identity while saving the world.<sup>11</sup> None of that has much to do especially with the ARG, however, for in it players were informed by the fictitious character “Kane” that:

A short while ago, a mysterious object, The Oculus took control of my website. Since that time, I have begun an online investigation to delve into the real meaning of The Oculus through the collective efforts of researchers like you. Meanwhile, The Oculus is revealing the strange journey of a girl named Faith who seems to hold secrets that may affect us all. Begin your Journey by following the Steps below. Rely on the Community for direction if you get lost.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately “the Community” was fairly unreliable in this case, due to the well-meaning but misguided creators’ decision to create an in-game forum which was only accessible after registration. In short, this had two effects: It drove a lot of potential players away before they could ever get involved; and it divided the community by making many look for an alternative forum space. Many turned to the Unforums, a wonderful out-of-game resource for players, but which is considered off limits to puppetmasters by the Unforums’ terms of service and the in-game/out-of-game convention of ARGs in general. This move therefore likely limited the “Ocular Effect” game’s puppetmaster interactions. Others registered and grudgingly posted to the in-game forums, but because they were closed to casual players or lurkers, many players felt that there was not enough room for self-organization and that the social structure for the game was too forced. In the end, the player and character communications broke down and the award winning content of the game was left high and dry for all but the most hardcore fans – that is to say the enthusiastic, level 3 players. The first post to the final player forum thread says it all:

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<sup>11</sup> ABC Family, “Fallen’ Home Page,” ABC Family, <http://a51.abcfamily.go.com/shows/fallen/fallen/index.html> [accessed February 2, 2008].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

It's over. After weeks of waiting, we get wrap-up post and a lame video message from our favorite psychic gay classical music-enthusiast explaining that she is the reincarnation of Mozart. Then we get a survey from the PMs (Xenophile Media) asking what we thought. If I don't stop typing right now, I will likely explode upon this page a stream of obscenity which would get me banned.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to this is the 2006 game "Who is Benjamin Stove" in which players unraveled a mystery about a character who had discovered an odd painting of a crop circle in a corn field that had the shape of an ethanol molecule; a shape that reappeared a number of times throughout the campaign and became iconic for the game. The significance of the game's social network structure is because it was one of the first games to have forums on a website created and maintained by one of the central characters but moderated by experienced ARG players. This allowed players to deal with questions and comments relating to the game reality without involving a character who might be suddenly confronted with the reality that they were, in fact, fictional.<sup>14</sup>

Based on current trends and the results of my own ARG projects, it is my prediction that the social structure of the players will continue to experience most change in coming years both in and out-of-game as the ARG genre grows in popularity, exposure, recognition, and the player base grows exponentially with it. Already, new despoiler sites and other resources are cropping up within the ARG community, and new services like Facebook along with new mobile technologies are changing the way we view all social networks in general, but there are many factors and variables that must be considered. Therefore, I will set aside these unanswered speculations for the

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<sup>13</sup> Lostpedian[Pseud.], Comment on "It's Over," Unforums: Alternate Reality Gaming Bulletin Board, comment posted November 11, 2006, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=17418> [accessed January 10, 2008].

<sup>14</sup> IGDA, "Alternate Reality Games White Paper 2006" International Game Developers Association, 2006, 30 <http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf> [accessed February 13, 2008].

moment, and revisit them in chapter 11. Instead, let us first turn back the clock to 2006, and consider the much earlier questions which presented themselves prior to the “Deus City” ARG Project.

## CHAPTER 5

### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS PRIOR TO THE “DEUS CITY” ALTERNATE REALITY GAME PROJECT

Pardon my trout, but we've been talking about this most of the day...  
—Cloudmaker Daniel Fabulich, *Post coining  
the term “trout” for “The Beast”*

Long before the creation of the “Deus City” game project, there was a great debate raging on the popular ARG news sites and forums such as ARGnet and Unforums. Much of this was generated within meta-game discussion threads for various games, centering around the conceptual definitions of what an ARG “is” by definition, what it “is not” by exclusion, and whether or not each game, which was currently being played was by any classifiable characteristics or guidelines, a “proper” Alternate Reality Game as opposed to a timewaster or diversion or some other form of interactive online game. The unanswered questions outnumbered the answers.

While much of the debate and labeling still rages at this time on these same forums as new games are launched, the player base continues to build and each person adds his or her opinion to the digital cacophony. There are certain posts and entries which seem to rise to the top, either through quotes by others, responses on a new thread spawned by the entry, or by some other intellectual quality of the post which makes it worth noting. Below are explored a few of these key dilemmas, which are indicative of generally held opinions, popular questions, or otherwise well-stated arguments which were collected over the last year from these sources.

## The Unfiction Viewpoint

Unfiction.com creator and moderator Sean Stacey, known to the ARG community as “SpaceBass” is as active in the online meta-theory discussion as anyone. He was a highly active player during “The Beast” and has written numerous subsequent articles discussing the nature of ARG and what he has termed *Chaotic Fiction*. He has highlighted the differences between the two on Unfiction.com and ARGn and has spearheaded the promotion of the genre in many ways, long before the “Deus City” ARG Project was conceived. In a 2006 article regarding the nature of ARG, Stacey weighs in on the issue well:

My first observation in considering the debates about what qualities define an Alternate Reality Game was that different people tended to focus on different elements of the games. For some people, the principal attraction is the things they can do within the game, such as interacting by chat or email with characters, or solving puzzles to unlock information. For others, their focus centered more on the fictional construct being delivered by the game, the plot and theme, the characters and their development over time, or in reaction to the players. Both of these elements are important in Alternate Reality Games but in entirely different ways. The former group is an example of the experience of playing the game itself, while the latter is an example of the fictional construct that is created by the game. These elements are intertwined but should be considered separately.<sup>1</sup>

Stacey’s observation is significant because of the dichotomy that exists between the construct of the game – something that is different for every ARG just as each game engine differs slightly in a particular video game – and the story, which often gets lost within the game elements except in out-of-game discussions on boards like Unfiction.com. The question then arises as to whether the definable nature of the game lies in story itself or in the construct of realism that the game elements immersively simulate. In other words, is it still an ARG if it does not rely on a secondary discussion in

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<sup>1</sup> Sean C Stacey, “Undefining ARG,” Unfiction Compendium Archive, November 10, 2006 <http://www.unfiction.com/compendium/2006/11/10/undefining-arg/> [accessed January 10, 2008].

order for players to understand the story and continue playing, and if so then is there an alternative model which will allow for such a game to exist?

Stacey continues this line of questioning with a number of other astute observations:

The second thing I noticed about trying to define alternate reality gaming was that everyone pretty much had a different idea of what it really was. It is curious, but not altogether unexpected, that so many people can participate together in these games and yet come away with such differing ideas of what they had experienced. Those opinions diverged not only on how to categorize whether or not a particular campaign [was] or [was] not an 'ARG' but also even more aggressively on how to define the categories themselves which make up an Alternate Reality Game. My final observation was that, in trying to define alternate reality gaming, we generally did so with the premise that it was a discrete universe without a greater context. There are numerous attempts to define campaigns as either 'ARG' or 'Not,' but again it seems impossible to agree on a set of parameters with which to make such judgments. This appears to me to be due to the fact that we lack a way to better define the concept-space in which Alternate Reality Games exist.<sup>2</sup>

Stacey recognizes that there is a need to define ARG without constraining it to a specific formula or pattern. The need for a new narrative model is evident, one that expands upon the metaphors which are currently accepted, but does not preclude the eventuality of new forms which will come along in greater and greater regularity. He concludes the 2006 article by proposing the broader term Chaotic Fiction as an overarching label for those things which are a “fictional construct that begins with a set of rules, uses those rules to run its scenario through an organic ‘computer’ comprised of audience and author, and ends with a finite body of work that was not predetermined.”<sup>3</sup> The term has helped to clarify certain aspects of the genre for many, allowing for better organization of games within umbrella categories for forms of collaborative online fiction

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<sup>2</sup> Sean C Stacey, “Undefined ARG,” Unfiction Compendium Archive, November 10, 2006 <http://www.unfiction.com/compendium/2006/11/10/undefining-arg/> [accessed January 10, 2008].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

which are not specifically classifiable as ARG but which deserve recognition within the combined body of fictional works which are being made using this new media form, but there is still much of a dilemma as to where this line is drawn for ARG specifically to begin when the meta-level rules for each game and its elements differ and the narrative story may or may not be the focus of a particular game.

### **One Player's Helpful Analogy**

One veteran "level 3" ARG player and Unforums poster known as "Catherwood" summarized the definition dilemma well in 2007 on the Unforums in a thread topic entitled "The Future of ARGs" with an analogy comparing ARGs to the age-old storytelling method, the book:

[W]hat we really are discussing are the basics of "How the heck do we know how to play these things, when they are all so different?" The analogy has been brought up before, that ARGs are now where film was in the early stages, when people only knew how to read books. You know how to read a book, right? You know it has a cover, you know to open it and start at page one (and which side of the book is page one in \*your\* language), and you know how to turn the pages. You read it linearly, right? Now that you have that knowledge, you can read anything that comes in book form, right? Along comes a "choose your own adventure" book. You've been told that it is a book, it looks like a book, and you know that you should read chapter two right after the end of chapter one. But wait! Here's a book that tells you specifically NOT to read chapter two next, but makes you CHOOSE between reading either chapter three or chapter seven next. How can you "know" to skip chapter two? How can you trust that skipping around like this is "better"? Is this a hoax book? Is someone playing a prank on you? ... Another format of book is the short story collection. Again, nothing says you must read them in sequence; it is acceptable to skip around, choosing shorter stories over long ones, or skipping over authors you dislike. You can in fact "lurk" with a book like this. How do you know this? Has this book come with instructions, like that choose-your-adventure book did at the end of chapter one? No, but this one has a LABEL which hints that it isn't an ordinary, sequential, traditional novel. Now you can develop strategies for approaching yet another kind of book. It's still a book, but "short story collection with multiple authors" is giving you a new set of tools to try out, a new method for getting a different experience. Your experience and enjoyment of this will vary, as there is no single

way to read this type of book. I'll give up categorizing ARGs when they all start to look and play alike.<sup>4</sup>

Catherwood's comparison is strong because it realizes that for every genre of storytelling there will be aberrations. It is through these aberrations that we are often able to define the boundaries of what is considered a part of the genre and what is not. To say that a specific online collaborative activity is not an ARG or is an ARG ultimately falls to the majority opinion and to the resulting definitions which are created around that popular opinion.

This is not to be confused with alternative delivery methods of traditional media, however, for though it might be fair to say that an e-book or an audio-book is not technically a "book" in the true and proper definition of the word, in that it contains no spine or physical pages to turn with one's hand – that both are still incontrovertibly forms of the same "novel" or work and must therefore not be excluded as an appropriate means by which someone can ingest the work. Szulborski reminds us that while ARGs will continue to be compared to digital novels, it is "the actions and discoveries of the player or players as a whole that drive the plot forward."<sup>5</sup> Analogies aside, it is similar issues of nomenclature and classification which are still being determined for ARG and for Online Interactive Fiction or Chaotic Fiction as a genre.

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<sup>4</sup> Catherwood[Pseud.], Comment on "The Future of ARGs," Unforums: Alternate Reality Gaming Bulletin Board, comment posted Mar 18, 2007, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?p=311705#311705> [accessed January 9, 2008].

<sup>5</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*. 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 10

## Mapping the ARG Story Arc

Another significant issue that remained unaddressed prior to the “Deus City” Project was that of mapping out an actual story arc within the context of given ARGs. One of the most commonly taught and referenced methods of defining a story arc was developed by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German dramatist and novelist Gustav Freytag, who was known for his analysis of the structure of ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama. According to Freytag’s widely translated and reprinted seminal book Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art, a drama is divided into five parts, or “acts” and can be diagrammed according to the model known as “Freytag’s Plot Triangle” (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> The problem with applying this popular dramatic structure to an ARG is that it does not fit well with the living and collaborative nature of Alternate Reality Game storytelling despite the similar three-sided triangular shape given to both this and the 42 Entertainment model illustrated in chapter 2 (Fig. 2). The reason for this is simple, while the “Inverted Pyramid Model” above serves to illustrate the quality and quantity of the audience for a work through the surface area of its respective parts, Freytag’s “Plot Triangle” is used to illustrate the path of a “plot with unity of action” around the perimeter of the triangle, something which is difficult if not impossible to map prior to the telling of a work of interactive online fiction, if for no other reason than that unity of the action is determined by an un-predetermined if not chaotic collective: the massive online community of players who are both the audience and partial storytellers simultaneously.

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<sup>6</sup> Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*. [New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1968]; Barbara F McManus, “Freytag’s Triangle,” Professor of Classics Emerita, College of New Rochelle, <http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmamus/freytag.html> [accessed Jan 9, 2008].

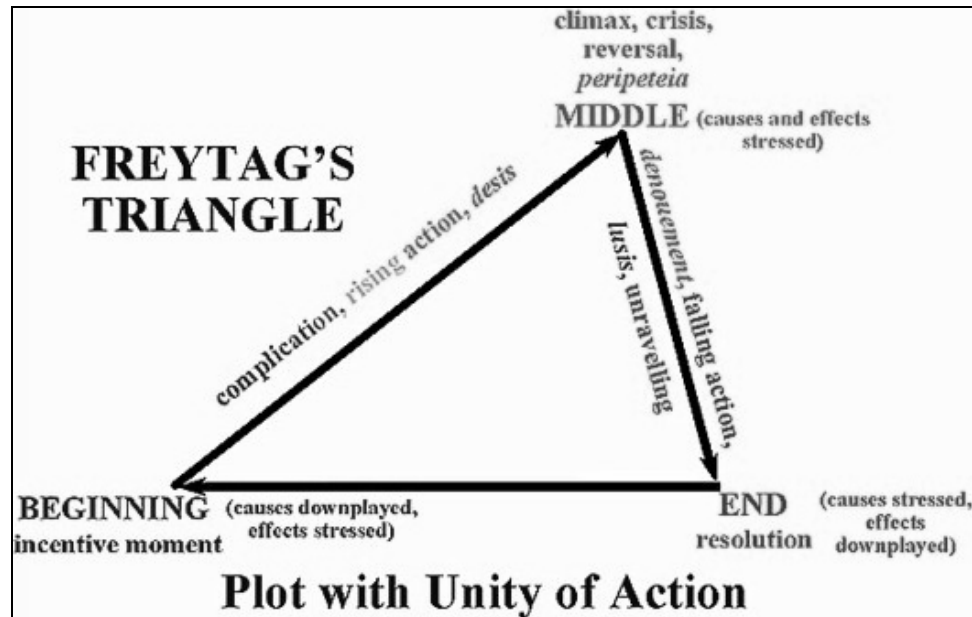


Figure 3. Freytag's "Plot Triangle" of the Traditional Story Arc<sup>7</sup>

A good story within the constraints of the Freytag model requires specific points of rising action to a climactic highpoint followed by falling action and closure, this is neither an imitation of life, as ARG strives to be, nor of many other Twentieth Century creative forms which have emerged that are similarly far removed from Greek and Shakespearean forms upon which Freytag's pyramid structure was based. One could easily point to such literary techniques as "stream of consciousness" writing or to contemporary "melodramas" which focus less on effecting a change in the major character of the story, and more on effecting a change in the audience, or even to experimental and improvisational theatre as storytelling methods which break the "old molds."

Likewise one must consider the impact of twentieth century film and television on storytelling, as well as the recent advent of computer games as a serious and powerful

<sup>7</sup> Barbara F McManus, "Freytag's Triangle," Professor of Classics Emerita, College of New Rochelle, <http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcm Manus/freytag.html> [accessed Jan 9, 2008].

new media for storytelling, none of which need necessarily conform to the Freytag Pyramid model, but which often do and are able to by the nature of their respective story content delivery methods. Indeed if the purpose of a traditional story arc is to move a character or situation from one state to another – in other words, to effect a change – then the traditional model for fiction no longer applies, and most certainly does not apply to a new media collaborative storytelling genre such as ARG, therefore new narrative models must be brought forth based on a proper definition of ARG though identification of its elements as described in chapter 4.

### **Testing the Boundaries**

In the face of such confusion, and as the form and function of this new media form is being defined, it becomes necessary to test the boundaries of ARG to find out where the proposed definitions hold together and where they seem to be completely inapplicable. No single game or diversion can do this with finality. Indeed the time will come again soon when an in depth critical structural analysis of the genre will be required to differentiate and define it properly from both video games and other less collaborative forms of Online Interactive Entertainment. It was for this very purpose that the “Deus City” game project tested the boundaries and definitions of ARG for a calendar year, succeeding in more ways than one in identifying new forms and directions for ARG as well as identifying a number of flaws and definable danger areas for the genre. A critical analysis of this process and the results follow.

**PART TWO**

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE “DEUS CITY”**

**ALTERNATE REALITY GAME PROJECT**

## CHAPTER 6

### METHODOLOGY OF THE “DEUS CITY” GAME PROJECT

The CRAZY THING is that independently of ANYTHING involving the storyline, I had been talking with Tara Mercer about her acquiring me a fake subcue so I could adopt a public identity. She never mentioned it to me. All she said was “That gives me an idea. Meet me at the cafe on Main Street in a few decades” and then nothing. This game consistently gives me chills.

*-“Deus City” Player Hook, Unforums post upon discovering that she had inadvertently caused a series of “future” events to unfold*

The “Deus City” Game project was created as a point of reference for an in-depth exploratory analysis of an original Alternate Reality Game, and for the purpose of determining the different levels of player involvement and thereby test the validity of the current model within the context of a particular game. This test was done by including the most critical elements of ARG - those qualities which make it by definition an Alternate Reality Game according to popular definitions, and which redefine immersion in a non-virtual way using existing technologies through new models of interactive storytelling, all as described above. These elements of ARG as defined previously are identified as: emergent properties, immersive elements, collaborative interactive storytelling, and the self organizing structure of the massive online social network which constitutes the player base. It was the goal of the study, by exhaustive notation and analysis of each stage of the creation process of an ARG, to objectively quantify the level of player participation within the four elements of the game, for the purpose of

comparison to the current model of player participation, and to propose a new descriptive model for ARG game development and structure by way of the player interaction.

The specific aim of the study is to better understand and define where the tendencies in the genre are, and to subsequently improve upon this atypical model of immersion by testing the validity of the current 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” model (ch. 1: fig. 2) for player participation and collaborative storytelling through careful adjustment of game elements. To put it simply, it was the intention of the project to increase the intensity level of player involvement in the ARG, and in doing, either validate the accepted simple “inverted pyramid” model or to reveal indicators that a new model might be necessary.

### **The Significance of “Deus City”**

The significance of the study both for the ARG community and for the Humanities, is in the qualification of the above game elements as they relate to the multiple levels of player involvement, for the purpose of discovering possible new forms in ARG evolution which might involve more players on a more personal level or allow deeper access to core game and story elements to more players in general. The current “inverted pyramid” model is widely accepted as the common structure for the ARG genre player base, but it is highly likely that other models may and should exist. As is explained in greater detail in chapter 6, a number of experimental factors were introduced into the game such as a competitive element which forced the population to take sides, alternate trailheads which drew in players with different play styles and

interests, and a ranking system which labeled players based on their choices and involvement, in order to test the current model.

The greatest direct contribution to the Humanities was a fully collaborative game of immersive aesthetics and collective play, chronicled from start to finish for analysis by future players and game creators; and using methods, game-space models and media combinations never before used in a single ARG prior to the project as described below. It is in the analysis and reflection, however, that the project truly stands apart from other ARGs. Interactive fiction is still in its experimental stages, and most of the mainstream ARG projects are funded by marketing budgets and the accompanying agenda and strategies. By the nature of this type of Commercial ARG, the full potential of interactive authoring and collective storytelling is diminished, and puppetmasters are restricted to the stated goals of their funding providers, usually the sale or unveiling of a commercial product. The “Deus City” Game project was in effect an “ARG for ARG’s sake” and was the first experimental ARG expressly developed to test the boundaries of the genre and thereby take the game style to a new level of Alternate Reality through emergent properties, immersive elements, collaborative storytelling, and the self-organizing structure of the player base within the context of a medium scale Non-Commercial ARG.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of the project were similar to those of any creative-based medium such as a novel or a video game, but by quantifying certain of the above specific variables and measuring them throughout the process, the emergent properties

produced by the ARG made it possible to measure the level of player involvement in the story as well as other game elements, and thereby form an exploratory analysis upon which future studies may draw. While neither a longitudinal or latitudinal statistical analysis in any form, the informal collection of data from the site statistics and player data allowed a number of expectations and pre-qualifications regarding the assumptions of the 42 “Inverted Pyramid” model to be tested with great success. Specifically, the player base was expected to increase exponentially and as the number of players increased, the methods of interaction and delivery were designed change to accommodate the larger player numbers, allowing them to interact with each other in greater ways, and shifting the generation of content from the puppetmasters to the players in larger part.

Due to the emergent and “chaotic” nature of ARG it was impossible to outline the specific methodology for game creation prior to the game, but a general story direction and intended tool set were declared prior to game creation. ARG elements for “Deus City” that were anticipated included interactive fictional blogs (*blargs*); minor role playing game elements such as personal statistics tracking through database management; puzzle solving; multimedia content of all kinds including text articles, audio recordings, flash, and video, specialized external game-content websites; online and real-world scavenger hunts; and anything else that the Internet and/or real world had to offer to be determined as the project moved forward. Most ARGs have incorporated aspects of other types of traditional and alternative entertainment forms, while making significant modifications as needed depending on the tools required for their game.

## **Gaining Entry**

The biggest barrier to entry into the Alternate Reality Game market is recognition and acceptance in the ARG community of a particular game before it begins. This type of game relies heavily on anticipation of upcoming titles in order to build a strong player base of appropriate size for the collaborative dynamic to work. Often times, Commercial ARGs will overcome this through expensive ads or public announcements which effectively throw back the puppetmaster curtain and in the opinion of some, detracts from the initial appearance of reality for the game because it breaks the “fourth wall” of illusion. It also undeniably increases visibility and therefore playability of the game by publicly broadening the initial audience exposure to the trailhead. Such action was an impossibility for the “Deus City” ARG due to budget limitations, however, at the very beginning we placed rumors and messages on blogs and forums in the alternate reality gaming community and the main website<sup>1</sup> went live months ahead of actual game launch, with a countdown to the release of our trailhead video on November 11, 2006 at 11:11 a.m. and eleven seconds. We continued to break the entry barrier by releasing information about “Deus City” to the ARG network writers in a quickly accepted out-of-game press release which ultimately resulted in a high exposure speculative initial article on ARGn.com and similar sites as described below.

## **Gaining Exposure**

Following initial exposure, a variety of marketing techniques were used to draw people into the game. We continued our marketing by sending occasional press

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<sup>1</sup> Fundi Technologies, “Deus City” Deus City Main Page, <http://deuscity.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008].

releases to the online ARG network, where we were featured on the front page of the site six times over the course of the year<sup>2</sup>. The game was also featured in numerous ARG Netcast broadcasts<sup>3</sup>, and a resulting user-generated forum posting appeared on Unfiction<sup>4</sup> soon thereafter giving users a place for out-of-game discussion aside from the steadily posted comments along with the in-game character blogs<sup>5</sup> and the published in-game forums that explained the back-story of the game and provided an in-game interaction for players.

Going forward, we released the game concept in stages with help from an international team of puzzle writers we called *taskmakers* and used word of mouth and viral-marketing as a substantial means for gaining both players and team members. In October, 2006 a parallel and initially unrelated game was begun by a member of the team - then eventually was merged into the project and effectively became what Sean Stacey called “Pretty Cool” due to the different feel of each game, adding “They got me, ... they did it very well, they pulled it off!”<sup>6</sup> This game was called “the Committee of the Sedulous Amalgamation” (tCotSA) and is discussed in detail in chapter 9. The main

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<sup>2</sup> ARGNet, “ARGnet: The Alternate Reality Game Network Home Page,” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com> [accessed April 8, 2007].

<sup>3</sup> ARG Netcast, “ARG Netcasts,” ARGN Netcast Web Site, <http://www.argnetcast.info> [accessed February 18, 2008].

<sup>4</sup> Unfiction, “Unforum Index,” Unfiction’s ARG Unforums, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/> [accessed February 18, 2008, 2007].

<sup>5</sup> Fundi Technologies, “Deus Ex Machina” Deus City Brackin Character Blog, <http://deus-city.blogspot.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008]; Fundi Technologies, “Foo Defiant” Deus City Foo Character Blog. “<http://foo-defiant.blogspot.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008]. Fundi Technologies, “The Brotherhood of the Prophet,” Deus City Brother Theo Character Blog, <http://nostredame.blogspot.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008].

<sup>6</sup> ARG Netcast. “Episode 16: Back to Basics” ARGN Netcast Web Site. Audio Mp3. <http://www.argnetcast.info/archives/436> [accessed February 26, 2008]

“Deus City” game beta was originally slated to start in March of 2007. However, public demand and interest persuaded us to launch early in January of the same year, and we were very pleased with the enthusiastic response and steady influx of new players every day after launch over the course of the next calendar year. We also used numerous in-game techniques to encourage players to download a flier from the main website, copy and distribute it in unknown locations around the world. We received a surprisingly good response from this effort, likely because most of the players were exposed daily to a similar demographic which was interested in joining the game such as college campus bulletin boards and game stores. The scale of the game was otherwise highly dependent upon marketing funds, and while online ad space imbedded on the site did provide a small return on hosting costs, most of the budget was unrecovered for the game, meaning that no additional external marketing was able to be performed.

### **Gaining Resources**

The final barrier to entry was simply the cost of the people creating the game in the form of programming time and paid taskmakers. This was facilitated in two ways. Primarily, Fundi Technologies, LLC<sup>7</sup> provided programming time at cost, but much of the content for the latter phases of the game was player generated once the software for the main website was in place. Fundi Games was quick to adapt to changes in the environment of the market because the game engine was modular - making it agile enough to make changes that may be required for government regulations, as well as

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<sup>7</sup> Fundi Technologies. “Funditechnologies.com” Fundi Home Page. <http://funditechnologies.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008]

giving us the ability to integrate new technologies as they were developed. For all of these reasons “Deus City” was an ARG with a unique game anatomy and structure containing both typical and new ARG elements, a discussion which though not terribly complicated deserves its own chapter as follows.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANATOMY OF THE “DEUS CITY” ALTERNATE REALITY GAME

You start as an audience member and create a world you're interested in, and then you move into the telling of those stories, bringing what has interested you as an audience member.

— American playwright Neil LaBute, *Playing the Game*

I am the creator and head writer of the “Deus City” game project which officially launched for beta in November, 2006. With the help of a few other puppetmasters and Fundi Technologies, the main game site at deuscity.com went live on January 2007. In May 2007 the scale of player participation made it possible to relinquish significant control of the content over to the player base in order to facilitate the achievement of the ultimate objectives of the “Deus City” ARG project, as a player-driven work of collaborative fiction. It was the intent to create a game which could not be gamejacked because it would capitalize on the actual moral and practical real-world decisions of the players rather than attempting to guide them down a single pre-determined story path. This was done with great success and from that point the scale of the game escalated exponentially.

The pre-game interaction began as early as October of 2006 with a series of blogs and emails from fictional characters and fictionalized versions of real people. The online interactive preparations for the project validated the potential of the “Deus City” ARG and the proposed methodology. The creative portion of the project entailed the

design, implementation, and conclusion of the “Deus City” ARG which ran for one calendar year from November 11, 2006 until November 11, 2007. The story’s primary setting was Deus City, a fictional city located thirty years in the future (2036/2037). The story’s foundation was built upon the premise that scientists in the city had found a way to communicate with their past (2006) which allowed the player to venture into a science-fiction world of tomorrow – today by registering to be a “temporal agent” of the year 2006. The game already boasted over 600 registered players at the time of the first major interactive story-arc, and concluded with just under 1,500 registered players and countless unknown lurkers and other casual players. A more detailed discussion of the player base is given in chapter 8.

### **Designing “Deus City”**

The game used an “inside out design,” meaning the players started at a specific point and with limited knowledge, but the story itself relied upon the previously mentioned emergent properties of interactive authoring, placing it firmly within the definition of Chaotic Fiction, and with the intent of being classified an Alternate Reality Game. As a result, the eventual overall outcome was impossible to predict from the beginning, but through non-player character interactions and in-game news articles from the “future,” the overall storyline was generally steerable and the boundaries of the game world of the city of Deus City in 2036-2037 were slowly fleshed out as a believable setting for a story to take place. Locations in the online city were represented by web pages or by entire web sites which contained at least one puzzle or task central to the game. Puzzle makers for the game came in under a Fundi Technologies

“*taskmaker*” non-disclosure agreement and were given credit for their puzzles within the game in the form of a signature graphic. Some of the taskmakers on the team also had additional roles including role-play or acting parts as minor in-game characters, graphic design, or other helpful parts. From a design point of view, each puzzle or task had its own web page on the main site. The task page was themed according to the district where it was located, and the subject of the tasks was also theme appropriate to its color/district of location. Each district had a distinctive feeling and theme based upon the established socio-economic level of the respective “boroughs,” which were heavily modeled after the city of New York in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

A player could not access any task at any time; however, instead they had to earn the right to do so. They were given limitations within the game through three personal statistics: *prestige*, *credits*, and *karma*, which limited their available actions within the game as described below. Players were also able to publish lists of other players they associated with, forming social networks within the context of the game. Every task cost a certain number of virtual game credits. The harder the task, then the more credits it cost and the greater the in-game rewards. Upon entering the game, a new player was able to find simple tasks that cost only a few credits to solve. Later as the player progressed, they needed to find in-game information to solve some tasks. At first this information was easy to find and available in several locations, but later it required collaboration between players with access to areas which only they had based upon their in-game statistics, namely their credits, prestige, and karma.

## Breaking the ARG Mold

The target market for Online Interactive Entertainment in general and ARG specifically is growing, and one project goal was to attempt to establish a new connection between traditional table-top role-playing, the social networking found in Massive Multi-Player Online Games (MMOs) and the “virtual-reality” of ARGs, which is typically thought of as its immersive elements as described in chapter 4. This was noted in a 2006 article on ARGn about the “Deus City” project: prior to launch of the game.

On the more ambitious side of the project, the game is planned to have features such as dynamic point structures based upon the players' ability to solve the tasks correctly with the fewest number of guesses. There are also hints to a "virtual future economy" structure that could also lead to some interesting gameplay. Also intriguing is the idea that the game will attempt to integrate morality into the gameplay structure, as to give at least two different paths a player can run through the game, with moral and ethical implications as a result of the decisions made in the game.<sup>1</sup>

Implementing these three statistics was relatively simple, and required nothing more from the player perspective than a simple registration in order to gain access to the site. Most personal information was optional, and displaying it was also up to the player, with the exception of a confirmation of age that was required for all players. For legal reasons, specifically compliance with the Child Online Protection Act<sup>2</sup>, and a general sensitivity to possible mature themes introduced by the nature of Online Interactive Fiction, “Deus City” was only open for registration to players over the age of thirteen years old. Beyond that, registration was open to any and all, and allowed the tracking of not only real demographic player data for the purpose of the study, but also the

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Eisner, “Deus City: Perplex Deux?,” ARG network, September 4, 2006, [http://www.argn.com/archive/000455deus\\_city\\_perplex\\_deux.php](http://www.argn.com/archive/000455deus_city_perplex_deux.php) [accessed February 10, 2008].

<sup>2</sup> COPA Commission, “COPA Commission Website,” Child Online Protection Act Commission Home Page. <http://www.copacommission.org/> [accessed February 22, 2008]

promised RPG type of in game statistics as described by the ARGn article and individually in greater detail below.

Credits were obtained by players in a variety of ways. When players joined, they began the game with a small number of virtual credits. Credits were automatically generated based on prestige and the amount of current available credits, a game element which was designed to set the pace of the game by encouraging players to “save up” their credits and to spend them wisely on solves by pooling their collective knowledge on the various forums either in-game or otherwise. A plan for players to also convert real U.S. dollars to game credits similar to “Second Life” using the “Deus City Bank” was put into place originally, but later scrapped for a number of reasons including a desire for continued high levels of player participation and valid unanswered legal questions regarding virtual commodities during that time.<sup>3</sup> In addition to solving tasks and paying for other in-game items and actions, credits were used to purchase certain game elements, and extra solves. This virtual economy separated the “haves” from the “have-nots,” and was of great influence upon the social network both within the context of the game and for out-of-game interaction between players.

Prestige was an artificial statistic which generated a spirit of competition among players. The statistic was based on the moral choices of the players and their ability to solve in-game tasks and puzzles. Choices which supported the Orwellian corporations rewarded higher prestige, while those which were questionable in loyalty to the city or outrightly supported the revolutionary “underground” resulted in lower prestige. Each player was also assigned a karma rating. This was a new method of tracking player

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<sup>3</sup> Linden Labs, “Wagering in Second Life: New Policy,” The Second Life Blog, entry posted July 25, 2007. <http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/07/25/wagering-in-second-life-new-policy/> [accessed February 20, 2008].

alignments similar to some RPG video games. The mechanism unlocked alternate game paths and allowed for emergent properties within the game. Similarly, a player's karma rating changed based on how tasks were completed. Preliminary research indicated that as the factions formed, a competitive spirit would be introduced into the game, an emergent property which was one of the first in ARG and which was encouraged throughout all stages of the game.

These in-game statistics were used by the puppetmaster to determine how each in-game non-player character (NPC) would react to the players, based on that character's alignments and loyalties, and the player's statistics coupled with their ability to convincingly role-play and manipulate information out of those game characters. Much early meta-discussion broke out on the out-of-game forums regarding this game mechanic which fueled the fires defining ARG, but ultimately the arguments died out, and a consensus was reached that the player statistic element was merely a facet of the game, not its focus, and therefore did not detract from the ARG substantially.

It was always my intent as the head writer and co-creator of the "Deus City" ARG to take alternate reality gaming to a new level, reinventing it as more than an "Internet scavenger hunt" or glorified "puzzle solving" trail into the fully immersive world described above and opening up the possibility for player generated content to affect and influence the game. The main website was merely a construct by which players could have a deeper understanding of the world of Deus City, but it was through personal interaction with the characters that they discovered the nuances of the fictional world of Deus City, 2037. This is because the in-game character reactions changed based upon

their prestige and karma, and their ability to discover contacts and uncover plot points were entirely based upon their decisions while playing the game.

Because the majority of the game took place through this constructed interface website which required registration, the procedures for data collection and analysis were relatively simple, and allowed for extensive data mining of all relevant player demographic data, level of involvement through player activity tracking, and all other in-game player actions and interactions such as in-game logging of internal messaging and puzzle solves. While the study was intended as a qualitative exploratory analysis more than a quantitative experimental or statistical study, the four primary variables were as listed and defined in chapter 4: Emergent properties, immersive elements, collaborative storytelling, and the self-organizing structure of the player base. To maintain the validity of the project, the above four elements of ARG were defined according to accepted definitions as found in Szulborski's *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*<sup>4</sup>, and the model of community participation is the accepted model of ARG player involvement as proposed by 4orty2wo Entertainment<sup>5</sup> so that the focus of the critical analysis could be on the heart of the matter: the player base.

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<sup>4</sup> Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, 2nd digital ed. [New-Fiction Press, 2005], 17-67

<sup>5</sup> 42 Entertainment, "How We See Things," 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007].

## CHAPTER 8

### ANATOMY OF THE “DEUS CITY” ALTERNATE REALITY GAME PLAYER BASE

“Leaving was my decision. They said that if I didn't like the game that maybe I should play another one, but ended by saying they hoped I played and enjoyed the game. I just don't have the heart to do it.”

— “Deus City” player Pied Piper, *Unforums post, deciding to stop playing the game after calling “Fujimoto,” the fictional evil Orwellian President of Deus City, 2037 a “transvestite.”*

Alternate Reality Games have the potential to include player demographic cross-sections from the video game market, MMORPG market, table-top gaming market as well as other adjacent sub-markets of the Online Interactive Entertainment market, such as the Yahoo! Games community and other online social networks as discussed in chapter 2. This market includes older players, female players and others who might be considered a minority in the video game demographic. For the “Deus City” ARG, this trend was evidenced from the beginning by those players posting on the Unforums and similar sites, such as the self-proclaimed 43 year old female Deus City “addict” who shall remain nameless,<sup>1</sup> or the difficult to classify “nomadic Romani kid who hangs out with hobos,”<sup>2</sup> who subsequently produced two original in-game videos as part of a major

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<sup>1</sup> Private in-game message to “Foo” the incumbent fictional evil Orwellian President of Deus City, 2037, on the Deus City main website.

<sup>2</sup> Unimportanthero[Pseud.]. Comment on “Old Downtown - Roaches” Unforums: Alternate Reality Gaming Bulletin Board, comment posted March 9, 2007. <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=18627> [accessed February 3, 2008]

ongoing subplot and after the game ended, agreed to come “behind the curtain” and become a puppetmaster for the next project.

Ultimately though, the question which was meant to be answered by the demographics in this exploratory analysis of the “Deus City” ARG project was to discover whether the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” Model of player participation was valid within the context of the game, or if it could be disproved by designing a game which contained the elements of ARG discussed in chapter 4, but could potentially produce a different result in player participation than that suggested by the model. The results of the study clearly demonstrate that the players did participate in a traditional manner, and the “Deus City” ARG project served only to affirm the “Inverted Pyramid” model both demographically and functionally as detailed below with a simple examination of the “Deus City” ARG player demographics.

### **A Casual Look at the “Deus City” ARG’s Player Demographics**

As stated previously, “Deus City” was only open for registration to players over the age of thirteen years old in accordance with the COPA. Preliminary data indicated, however that the average known age of players was over twenty one, and a larger sample verified this estimate, as the final known age average of all 1,450 registered players was between twenty two and twenty three years old. This number is not an entirely accurate picture of the age of the player base however, because there is no way to collect data on those casual, level 1 players who did not register and played the game by either reading the Unforums posts, reading the in-game news feeds, or otherwise lurked casually as a level 1 player.

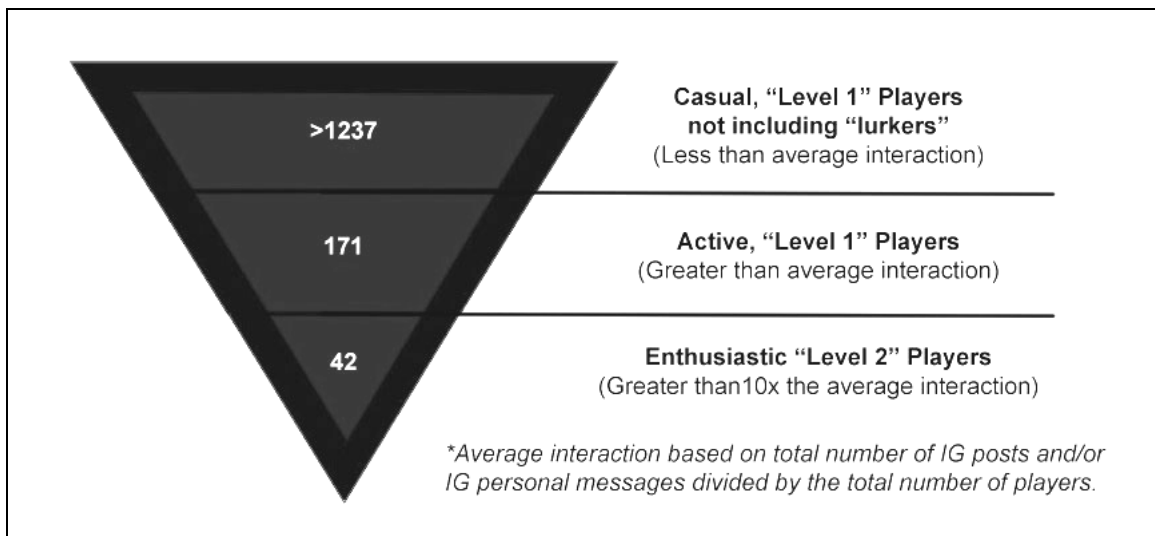
If the number of views on the combined 4,347 out-of-game posts in the “Deus City” and “tCotSA” Unforums threads along with the many tens of thousands of views for those posts are considered, then the number of casual players may well be double or triple that of the registered casual players, and if instead the unique visits on the main “Deus City” game website are any indication, then the number of casual players was closer to the neighborhood of 38,990. This is in fact, the standard way that the corporate ARGs, including those of 42 Entertainment calculate their casual participation levels.<sup>3</sup> Either way, it is a fair statement that while most of the registered players for the “Deus City” ARG were never more than casual, level 1 players, not all of those casual players registered on the site, and it is therefore impossible to know how many truly casual, level 1 players there were for the “Deus City” ARG by any current player tracking methods.

The above age average also does not account for the differences that can be seen in the more active, level 2 and enthusiastic, level 3 player averages. The average number of posts per player was determined in order to discover whether the majority or the minority posted more than average. It was an overwhelming minority that posted the majority of interactions, and their age data was very telling. Those players who posted to the in-game forums and messaged other players and characters using the in-game messaging system tended to be older than the average registered player, specifically an average of between twenty three and twenty four years for those 707 players who ventured to be more participatory and interactive in the game. As the level of player interaction increased, so did the average age of the player. Those players which could

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<sup>3</sup> 42 Entertainment, “How We See Things,” 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007]

be considered as unquestionably active, level 2 or greater, meaning that they posted more than the average number of times for all players, were an average age of between twenty four and twenty five years for the 171 players in that category. Pushing this to the extreme, the forty two “Deus City” players which could be considered enthusiastic, Level 3 players - meaning that they posted to the in-game forums and/or sent in-game messages at more than ten times the average number of posts by all players - were an average age of just under twenty six years old as illustrated below (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4. Breakdown of “Deus City” ARG Registered Player Demographics Based on Level of Interaction**

The further significance of the demographic breakdown is unclear, since the exploratory analysis represented by the “Deus City” ARG project and this study was never intended to be a statistical analysis of player demographics, but it does seem to indicate that further study regarding the level of player involvement as it relates to the ARG player base’s ages is warranted sometime in the future. Preliminary data also indicated that players were evenly split between men and women, but as the game

progressed, more male players signed up than female players, possibly due to the science-fiction genre, Orwellian themes, or other unknown factors. This holds no significance whatsoever to the testing of the “Inverted Pyramid” model but does pose a few interesting questions which might be answered by an appropriately geared player gender study of ARGs.

### **Implications for the “Inverted Pyramid” Model**

What the above numbers do support simply and clearly is the shape and function of the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” model of player participation. The casual, level 1 players significantly outnumbered the active, level 2 players by a factor of over ten to one (or ten percent), when defining “active” as any player which had a more than average level of participation as above, namely four or more posts (the average being between three and four posts) to either the in-game forum or by using the internal messaging system. This is not including any player which did not register for the site. This is because once a player crossed the barrier of participation and became active, level 2 the majority continued to be so, and the few who then subsequently crossed over to enthusiastic, level 3 status so completely increased the average number of posts that the small number of players which represented the most active contingent represented the majority of the interactions,.

Those same enthusiastic, level 3 players, of which there were only forty two, in turn represented a mere one in every sixty six (or less than one and a half percent) of the total number of registered players for the game, despite posting 4860 of the exactly 9999 (or greater than forty eight point six percent) of the player generated messages

and posts from within the game. This interesting phenomenon is perhaps a sort of “Pareto Principle”, which is also known as “the 80/20 rule”<sup>4</sup> which seems to stand up within ARGs by the defined characteristics of the “Inverted Pyramid” model as defined in chapter 2, which state that the majority of the most intense interactions will be performed by the minority of players and vice versa. If including all active and enthusiastic players, the 80/20 mark falls even closer with the aforementioned 213 combined active and enthusiastic players (fourteen point seven percent of the total) contributing 7984 (or greater than seventy nine point eight percent) of the 9999 in-game interactions.

It is therefore possible to draw some conclusions in regard to the study and the “Inverted Pyramid” model in as much as can be learned from player participation in the “Deus City” ARG within its delimitations, as it relates to player participation within the game. The first is that the definitions of each of the three tiers of the “Inverted Pyramid” model have not been disproved within the context of the “Deus City” ARG in terms of both qualitative player involvement and quantitative player numbers in each level of participation versus each of the other two levels, and can therefore continue to be used according to those definitions originally proposed by 42 Entertainment. This validates the assumptions of the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” model of player participation as discussed in Chapter 1 in full, for the purposes of this study. This conclusion, therefore allows us to examine the effectiveness of the “Deus City” ARG

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<sup>4</sup> New School University, “Vilfredo Pareto” Vilfredo Pareto Page, <http://cepa.newschool.edu/het/profiles/pareto.htm> [accessed February 26, 2008]; Wikipedia. “Pareto Principle” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto\\_principle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle) [accessed February 25, 2008].

within the context of its emergent properties as a fully realized and appropriate entry into the genre of Alternate Reality Games.

## CHAPTER 9

### THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE “DEUS CITY” ALTERNATE REALITY GAME

This, I know, is a bit of an overshare. I am really only telling you this because I want it to be clear why I may have seemed a little overly emotional in my last communiqué. I originally decided to help with the problems of Deus City, because I thought it might lower my stress level to focus my mind on something other than the day-to-day things with my family, and at the time, I didn't realize the nature of this enterprise. I am now too addicted to back out, however, so I'm afraid we are both stuck with me here.

*-43 year-old female player, Private in-game message to “Foo” the incumbent fictional evil Orwellian President of Deus City, 2037*

The “Deus City” ARG was a year-long non-commercial campaign centering on the fictional story that emerged when a team of students inadvertently made contact with a highly technological and personally invasive Orwellian City thirty years into the future, within which a serial killer ran rampant in the name of a revolutionary underground movement, thus causing players to have to choose sides, solve the mystery and change the future. As discussed in chapter 7, the game was unique for its use of a morally ambiguous karma system, use of a virtual credit economy for pacing, and dual storyline which forced players to pick sides. It was hailed as a success in a number of ways by the ARG community and the players of the game, but the question arises as to what that means exactly.

For a Commercial ARG, success is measured primarily by the number of participants, usually indicated by the amount of traffic on their various websites, and

ultimately by the amount of exposure for or sales of the product being marketed. In other words, the success of the commercial game is only as great as the effectiveness of the marketing campaign. This is not a bad thing at all, indeed that is the very point and purpose of a commercially funded ARG, and it is likely that they will always be seen as the powerhouse ARGs with the budget and the backing to draw in the crowds. After all, as soon as a smaller group can do it to that same scale without spending someone else's marketing dollar then the big companies will no longer need a Commercial ARG developer in the first place.

If it is unfair to expect Non-Commercial ARGs to reach the size and scale of their Commercial ARG counterparts, then we must also question the markers of success for such ARGs. If Non-Commercial ARGs are like the "independent films" of the ARG genre, then they should be judged on a different standard and allowed a certain amount of experimentation, alternative vision, and open-ended direction. For me personally the motivation to create a Non-Commercial ARG lies in the ability to tell less structured stories within the context of collaborative fiction, a dangerous game for the more linear and goal-minded Commercial ARGs.

The "Deus City" ARG project capitalized on this experimental open-ended quality, as does my current project "Conspiracy Asylum" to an even greater extent, but either or both games could have just as easily fallen apart if the collaborative spirit of storytelling was not there on the part of the players. It has been shown that there is a strong connection between those active, level 2 and enthusiastic, level 3 players and the emergent properties of a particular game, and to me that is the most profound indicator of how well and truly "Deus City" was a successful game. This success was

less related to my abilities as a puppetmaster, or the planning and release of game elements in a timely manner during the year – often times it felt quite the contrary and indeed was – but rather because I succeeded in setting the stage of an alternate reality where a collaborative story could be told with the help of other puppetmasters and puzzle writers, then provided the right tools for the players themselves to tell that story. Below are some of the least expected and most inspiring emergent properties that I wish to identify from the “Deus City” ARG.

### **The “Deus City” Controversy**

From the very beginning “Deus City” caused a stir within the ARG community. Mostly this was due to its unusual elements such as game statistics and unclear expectations within the early stages of the main website’s launch, but those who chose to interact within this new system quickly realized that there was a deep and hard boiled plot of mystery and intrigue waiting just below the surface. Aside from being great publicity for the game, the controversy also caused everyone who took part in the discussion to have to rethink the definitions of what an ARG really was.

Nearly every new game goes through period, however brief where the question “But, is it an ARG?” is asked by the player audience. Most of the time the answer ends up being “yes,” but for “Deus City” the answer was unclear well into the fourth month of the game, long after the initial pre-game email and blarg plotlines had converged into the main site’s trailhead registration page, and puzzles were being solved by players as their statistics changed and virtual credits paced the tempo of the game. These unexpected out-of-game discussions were going on wildly within pages and pages of

meta threads on Unforums<sup>1</sup> as the ARG Netcast hosts debated hotly why and why not “Deus City” was a proper ARG, and what one was in the first place<sup>2</sup>. Eventually “Deus City” was accepted into the ranks of ARGs, and even made the “what’s hot” list on both the ARGn and Unfiction websites<sup>3</sup>, but not before much debate and grudging resentment that a game which did not have corporate backing or a hidden agenda other than to tell a collaborative story could still qualify, having enough of the essential elements of ARG to in fact be one.

### **“the Committee of the Sedulous Amalgamation”**

I have never met Mark Heggen, but I feel that I know his abilities well through our many online chats and brainstorming sessions for the game. The single greatest producer of in-game puzzles for “Deus City,” Heggen came aboard the project team in 2007 as a taskmaker and soon took an integral behind the scenes role as puzzle maker, puppetmaster, non-player character role-player and general sounding board for new ideas within the game. He is the creator of a small grassroots game of its own right which he began independently of the “Deus City” project called “the Committee of the

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<sup>1</sup> Unfiction, “DC: Deus City,” Unfiction’s ARG Unforums, Deus City Index. <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/index.php?f=209> [accessed February 18, 2008, 2007].

<sup>2</sup> ARG Netcast. “Episode 12: The Supersized.” ARGN Netcast Web Site. Audio Mp3. <http://www.argnetcast.info/archives/428>. [accessed February 8, 2008]; ARG Netcast. “Episode 13: You Can’t Handle the Truth.” ARGN Netcast Web Site. Audio Mp3. <http://www.argnetcast.info/archives/432>. [accessed February 4, 2008].

<sup>3</sup> ARGNet, “ARGnet: The Alternate Reality Game Network Home Page,” ARG Network, <http://www.argn.com> [accessed April 8, 2007]; Unfiction, “Unforum Index,” Unfiction’s ARG Unforums, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/> [accessed February 18, 2008, 2007].

Sedulous Amalgamation,”<sup>4</sup> and which, as mentioned previously, was well received from the beginning by its players and the community in general.

The game was about a secret society, a theme which tied in well with the established game elements and plot of “Deus City,” except that while “Deus City” was an Internet-based game which at its core required human interaction through in-game messaging and posts, “tCotSA” had a very loose plot and relied heavily on real-world items and the US Postal system. It began with as few as twenty five players and an unknown number of casual followers, but was later revealed to be alternate point of entry for “Deus City,” a fact which drew the attention of thousands of ARG participants and inspired a huge surge in the “Deus City” game on the level of thousands of new players within a few weeks time as evidenced by traffic on the “Deus City” site at that time, and added a critical real-world element back into the game a time that was entirely appropriate, and which subsequently led into what would be known as the “folio quest” a subplot which involved an international search for pages of a lost manuscript, some of which are likely still hiding in various books around the world.

Upon revelation that the two games had merged and that one was in fact an alternate trailhead for the other as “tCotSA” drew to a close, ARGn wrote an article about the event and its impact upon the back story of the larger game and the in-game character “Brackin’s” struggles:

According to the information revealed through the cryptic mailings, the Committee for Sedulous Amalgamation was established five hundred years ago to protect fragments of Nostradamus’ folio. They then funded Adam Brackin’s Time Communication project and charged its members to join the agents of Deus City and collect the missing pieces of the Nostradamus’ work. Further investigation reveals additional parallels between the two games. An arithmetic symbol used by the Deus

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<sup>4</sup> Unfiction, “DC: tCotSA,” Unfiction’s ARG Unforums, tCotSA Index, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/index.php?f=215> [accessed February 18, 2008, 2007].

City PM, ... appears on many tCotSA messages, including its trailhead. tCotSA also makes reference to the death of one of its members, which parallels Alexis Wright Sr.'s plane crash in Alabama from the Deus City story. The impact of this merging of games remains to be seen, as both ARGs have employed very different gameplay styles, with Deus City relying heavily on character interaction while tCoSA utilized "snail mail" to great effect. A similar merger of ongoing games happened in the past with Wildfire Industries and Synagoga. Watching these two communities interact will be an interesting study in merging gaming cultures, whether the games merge completely or continue running concurrent plotlines.<sup>5</sup>

The puppetmaster-led decision to make the "tCotSA" merger was not a result of direct player interactions necessarily, though much of the established "Deus City" back story was created through the interactions of players during the blarg and email pre-game interactions, but it is still a perfect example of how the game – or more accurately two games – became more than the sum of its parts because of a series of well timed emergent properties which lined up in such a way as to make the merge appropriate.

### **The Union**

One enthusiastic, level 3 player that stands out among the crowd was a relative latecomer to the game who went by the in-game handle of "Agent Hook." The reason why she became so instrumental in the game is that above and beyond the high levels of interaction in the game with forum posts, personal messages, and character interaction, is that she was one of those select few who succeeded in changing the game in important and significant ways. While she contributed to the game in many different ways, such as her many in-game messages and posts, a real-world trek to New Mexico to attempt to find a page of the mysterious "Folio of Nostradamus," character interaction which included the planting a number of self fulfilling prophecy

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Anderson, "The Sedulous Amalgamation of Alexis Wright Senior," ARG Network, March 3, 2007, [http://www.argn.com/archive/000554the\\_sedulous\\_amalgamation\\_of\\_alexis\\_wright\\_senior.php](http://www.argn.com/archive/000554the_sedulous_amalgamation_of_alexis_wright_senior.php) [accessed February 10, 2008].

“seeds” in the minds of various important in-game characters thirty years in the future, and even by contributing some fan fiction to the out-of-game forums; the most prominent way that Agent Hook actually changed the game was by creating a faction known as “The Union” which had an entirely player-generated website, external videos which were distributed via YouTube, and its own anti-corporate agenda which was every bit as Orwellian and dystopian as the in-game counterparts found on the actual game site. The group was a take on the existent but ambiguous in-game “Underground” movement which was already written into the plot, but instead had its own stated goals to the extent of actually printing and secretly distributing a “Manifesto” to other players. These real-world elements represented emergent game elements which were not a part of the original plan for Deus City, but which were contributed entirely by the player base based on the story which was being told and a desire to interact with and even alter the outcome of it.

Within the contents of this manifesto was a puzzle which when decoded indicated that the day of the revolution was near, and those loyal to the cause should rally around at the appointed time and place, thirty years in the future. Within the context of the game of course this meant that the characters would be aware of the event, and therefore would need to react to it, or else the puppetmasters would have to otherwise “write it out” of the story. This was of course the exact type of interaction that was hoped to emerge from the game, and it was wholeheartedly embraced by the puppetmasters and subsequently denied by the corporate news feeds, thus firmly entrenching it within the context of the game. Indeed many players were not clear where the puppetmaster generated content ended and the player generated content began, and it was at this

point that the work became truly collaborative at its core in terms of plot. The new faction turned the tide of sentiment towards the underground movement within the game and ultimately succeeded in bringing down the time communication technology, causing a rip in the space time continuum, a subsequent paradox, and in the end – caused the future city of Deus City to arguably never have existed in the first place.

In a more linear and less experimental game, this could have been disastrous, resulting in a need for a major redirection of the players, or in the worst case a dreaded gamejack, but to the collaborative storytelling spirit with which the game was designed it made for a perfect dramatic climax the likes of which Freytag himself would have been proud. By not focusing on a single storyline or “railroad” campaign, the story was able to go in wonderful and exciting new and unexpected directions as led by the players and not the puppetmasters.

### **Other Emergent Properties of “Deus City”**

A full list of emergent properties in the game would be long and very difficult if not impossible to create. So many of the games elements blurred during player interactions that there was no precise line where the script ended and the emergent elements changed the story. This was sometimes made easier for us by the plot and premise of the fictional Deus City’s ability to communicate with the past, because it was possible to create self-fulfilling prophecies and the illusion of player content where there was none, and then to act on the best examples of them when they did come along. Later, as the player became more directly involved in the storytelling this was even easier to do. One example of this was the character “Theophilus” who, while consistently enigmatic and

mystical, occasionally contacted players he had never spoken to before with comments like “It is time for us to have our first conversation again. Time is a great circle and we must complete it,” which implied a history of interaction that did not exist, but almost inevitably led to new player interactions and the ability to forward a new plot point when needed. While highly useful as a technique within the constructed boundaries of the game’s elements, this method still relied on the player’s reaction to be successful.

Another way in which the players successfully added content to the game was during the pre-game back story narrative interactions which followed the movements of two main characters for the purpose of establishing the two factions within the city once the game launched. At this time it was unknown to me which faction would end up as the dominant force, or exactly how it would come about. It was through hundreds of emails between the two main characters and a few hundred players with varying loyalties, that one faction emerged victorious. Thus when the game launched, the losing character was given a minor role within the context of the larger plot. From a story point of view it really did not matter which one emerged over the other, but from a player perspective it was all-important, and therefore it was reflected within the game later on as a back story by which all other interactions with those same characters in the fictional future of “Deus City” would be influenced.

One final example of emergent properties within “Deus City” exists in a new game made by the player called “Silent.”<sup>6</sup> The game, which he called “Revenge” was a small but enjoyable fan made xml video game tribute to the larger game, hosted externally, linked from Unforums, and inspired by “Deus City”. The game is further

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<sup>6</sup> Philipp Lenssen, “Revenge,” tariqali34 Google Page, 2007, <http://tariqali34.googlepages.com/revenge.htm> [accessed February 18, 2008].

significant because the creator states that it was made by his in-character persona. His posted link states: “Think of it in terms of symbols,” a reference to his own unique game experience and the anachronistic medieval setting of the smaller game.<sup>7</sup> The game is significant not only because it is an emergent property of the ARG, but it is specifically stated that it is created from within the context of his own experiences as a character within the broader context of the game world. The potential for user-generated content is limitless, and the only foreseeable barrier to this other than the ability of those players to create decent content is the current fear of those same players that by taking too much control of the narrative elements, they will somehow break the game. Depending on the design of the ARG this is of course a very real possibility, but within the context of “Deus City” the pace and method of player contributions was either self-managing or otherwise easily manageable, and I was quite pleased with the quality and frequency of the player generated emergent properties within the game.

### **“Conspiracy Asylum”**

At the time of this writing, “Conspiracy Asylum”<sup>8</sup> is my own experimental non-commercial, player-driven timewaster diversion, set in an adjacent game-space as “Deus City,” with a number of character crossovers and plot devices which may eventually lead into a trailhead for “Deus City II” sometime in 2009. It is perhaps an indication of “Deus City’s” successes that upon launching the smaller title, registration

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<sup>7</sup> Silent[Pseud.]. Comment on “Fan-inspired Deus City game,” Unforums: Alternate Reality Gaming Bulletin Board, comment posted November 24, 2007, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=22228&sid=1885ebf65b42321c62b27e5a4084e57a> [accessed February 18, 2008]

<sup>8</sup> Fundi Technologies “Conspiracy Asylum” Conspiracy Asylum Home Page. <http://conspiracyasylum.com/> [accessed February 26, 2008].

for the in-game forums began almost immediately and despite lack of exposure for the game. At the time of writing over 200 players have already registered, less than a month after launch. “Conspiracy Asylum’s” greatest potential significance lays in the potential ARG sequel status of a shared game space with a prior title, which if successful has the potential to create the first multiplicitous ARG grouping with shared game elements from earlier games, spin off game-spaces and other as of yet unexplored adjacent spaces and shared elements for ARG. For more on this, see chapter 10.

### **Past Present and Future**

It has been shown that the “Deus City” ARG was a relatively popular Non-Commercial ARG which received good reviews upon its conclusion despite its small budget. It met the goals of the study to stay within the definable properties of ARG by containing the four elements of ARG which were previously identified as: emergent properties, immersive elements, collaborative interactive storytelling, and the self organizing structure of the massive online social network which constitutes the player base. The game allowed for multiple levels of interaction and encouraged and rewarded higher levels of interaction in order to test the validity of the 42 “Inverted Pyramid” model and succeeded in doing this. While no single Alternate Reality Game can encapsulate all the possibilities or permutations which could represent every boundary of the ARG genre, each game can serve to help define those boundaries in multiple ways. The “Deus City” Game Project was created for this very purpose and succeeded in showing that new forms will be readily accepted within the Alternate Reality Game community and that the rapidly expanding player base is likewise open to new forms which focus

more on story and less on formulaic game mechanics or selling a product. In this way, even if other more traditional measures of success are discarded, “Deus City” is considered a success by its creators, and has provided the information needed to now look forward into the actual future of ARG and interactive Chaotic Fiction.

**PART THREE**

**THE FUTURE OF ARG  
AND INTERACTIVE CHAOTIC FICTION**

## CHAPTER 10

### THE BRACKIN CIRCULAR MODEL OF ARG DEVELOPMENT

He wants us to coin a new term for it.

Yea, what was it? ARG-pg? Alternate Reality Role-Playing...?

*-ARG Netcast Hosts, "Episode 13: You Can't Handle the Truth," in response to an OOG letter written by "Deus City" puppetmaster Adam Brackin*

The multi-component "Brackin Circular Model for ARG Development" is a descriptive model for ARG game development and structure built primarily on the terminology and concepts established by the fundamentally proven and accepted 42 Entertainment "Inverted Pyramid" model for player participation as discussed previously (ch. 1: fig. 2)<sup>1</sup>. It has been shown to be a valid model for player participation as described by 42 Entertainment which was designed to build the broadest and most engaged audience based on trends for level of interaction, even within the "Deus City" Game Project, which was designed to challenge the validity of the model. As stated previously, the pyramid model was designed within the context of elaborate ARG advertising campaigns, and therefore assumes the goal of maximum player involvement rather than a necessary level of involvement for those players.

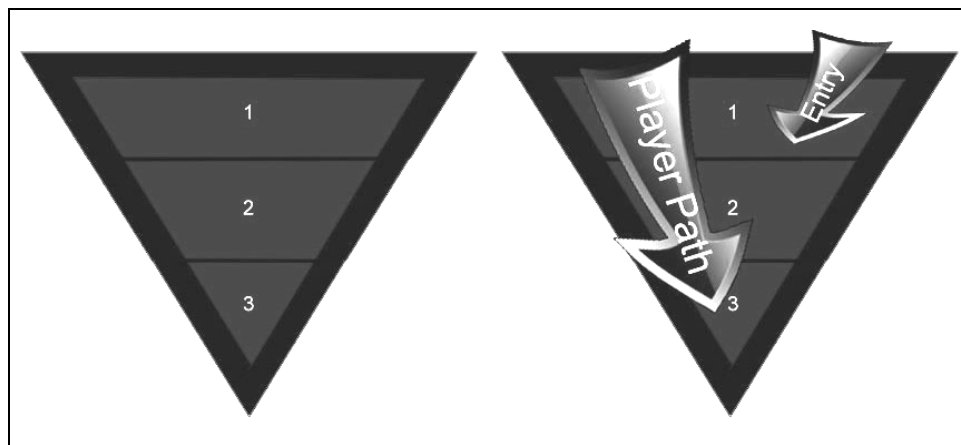
The goal for such ARGs is not to necessarily acquire more enthusiastic, level 3 players – those who play most intensely and over time may even be given the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> 42 Entertainment. "How We See Things." 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed April 8, 2007].

provide content or change certain outcomes or aspects of the game – but rather to accommodate the natural social tendencies of a smallest percentage to play in this obsessive way. Similarly it is recognized that by percentage, more will play at an active, level 2 and will represent the core middle audience, and that the widest audience of all will be merely casual, level 1 participants who lurk on the forums and follow the game passively.

Understanding what this model represents and its significance to the elements of ARG and therefore the structure of a game, it can also be said that the model serves to illustrate the path for those who ultimately become the most involved at the “tip of the wedge” or level 3, while the “point of entry” into a given game exists somewhere at the top of level 1. By recalling this model as an “Inverted Pyramid” we can thus diagram an enthusiastic player’s passage from level 1, through level 2, and into level 3 as the typical path for highest interaction participants who would be considered enthusiastic in their participation and contribution to a particular game. This is illustrated below (Fig. 4).



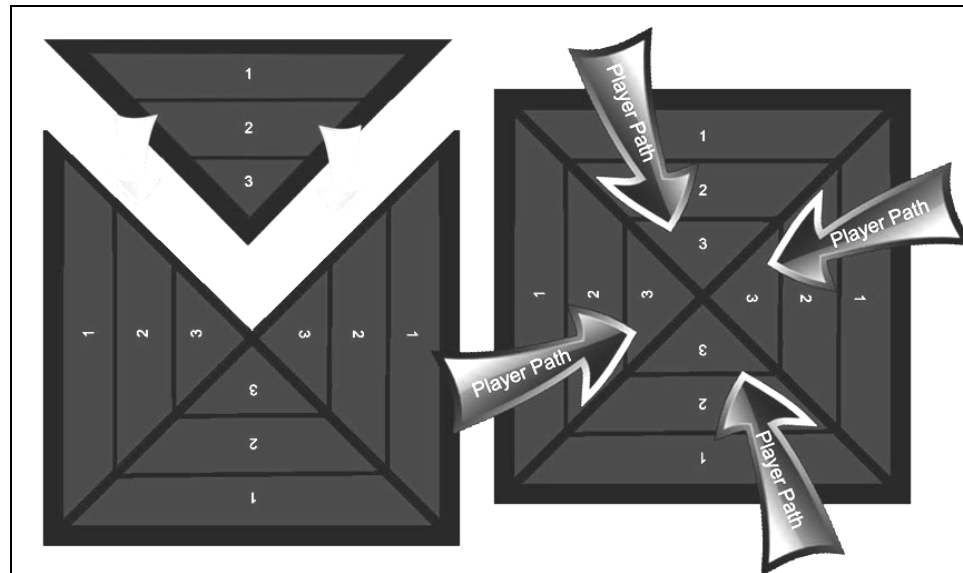
**Figure 5. Using 42 Entertainment’s “Inverted Pyramid Model” To Track a Player’s Path to Enthusiastic “Level 3” Status**

Once it is realized that the “Inverted Pyramid model” effectively illustrates not only player participation but the simplest player path towards the tip of the inverted pyramid’s wedge, where the highest level of involvement in the game space can occur, it becomes possible to expand upon the prior limitations of the model in order to accommodate representation of more complicated game development models, such as those being experimented with by independent, Non-Commercial ARG creators like myself. While the pyramid is sufficient for a simple, somewhat structured, traditional unilateral ARG with a single point of entry or trailhead into a game, and an easily definable puzzle trail and game space with specific limitations or commercial product to market, it is ineffective as a means of illustrating a game with multiple trailheads, storylines, other points of entry, or irregular forms of enthusiastic player involvement.

### **A Theoretical “Square Model.”**

If for the sake of understanding, however if we were to imagine a perfectly symmetrical four sided Alternate Reality Game with four equal trailhead points of entry, four parallel storylines and four player paths towards enthusiastic player involvement – an impossibility that could only exist in the theoretical – then the pyramid model serves one final time to visually illustrate the creation of a square, in which the center point is the area of highest player involvement, and each side is a separate point of entry to the game for the players. The player path in such a case would be from any of these theoretical sides towards the center point as illustrated below (Fig. 5) and players would be able to enter the game space from one of four separate but equal trailheads on their

personal journey to level 3, enthusiastic player status where they can be the most active and influential to the game.



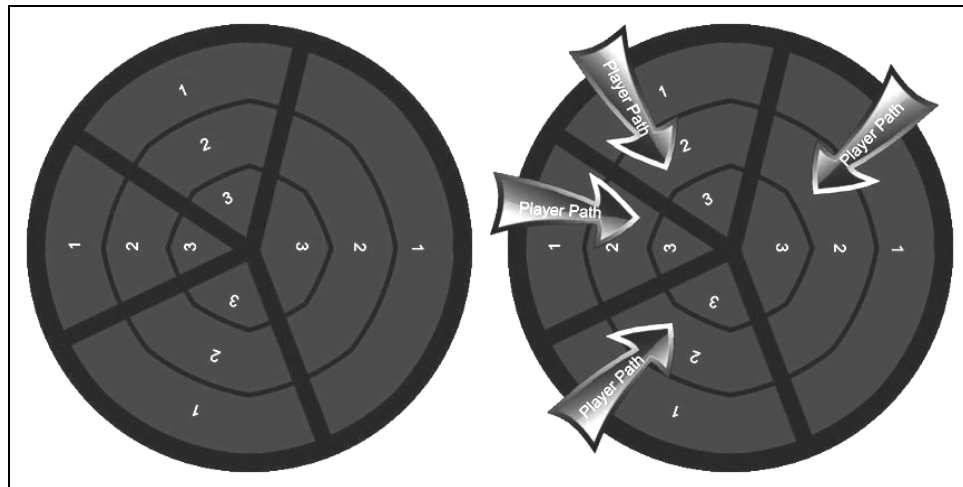
**Figure 6. A Theoretical Four-sided ARG “Square Model”**

Unfortunately, the four-sided ARG is viable only as an illustrative theoretical model and could not be put into practice easily due to the chaotic nature of the genre in which a perfectly symmetrical game could not be carried out without disastrous consequences, and it is at this point in visualizing that the triangles and squares must be abandoned for a better shape. A multi faceted ARG with multiple points of entry and synchronized asymmetrical game elements which form separate player paths towards greater participation could not exist in such a way as to be unilateral and equilateral for all of its elements and force players to conform to a square model such as the one above. The new shape must allow for all of the above terminology to remain valid, and build upon the pyramidal wedge concept, while allowing for any number of trailheads instead of four. It must also accommodate a more realistic asynchronous wedge size

and shape in order to represent larger and smaller trailheads and/or unequal quantities of player involvement along with the quality of that involvement as previously illustrated through the level 1, 2, and 3 terminologies.

### The Proposed “Circular Model”

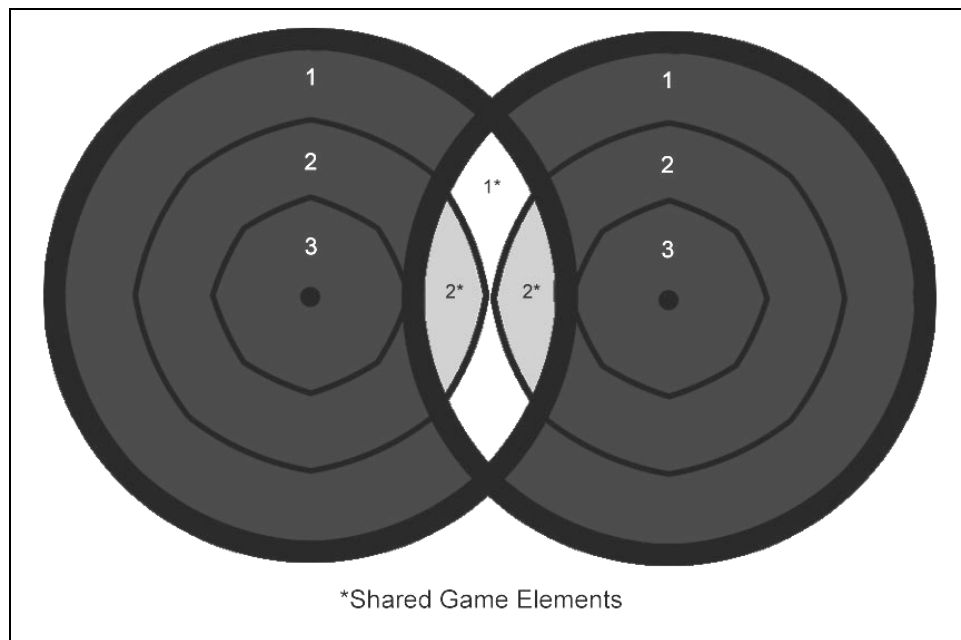
The solution to the dilemma can be found by creating a new circular model in the form of a simple pie chart. By abandoning the triangle for a “slice of pie,” the same basic principle of a multi-sided ARG can be illustrated with ease and simplicity regardless of the number of separate elements or points of entry. The example below illustrates how the same theoretical four sided ARG can be represented with unequal parts as would be a more realistic representation of a multi-component game. I call this newly shaped model the “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development” (Fig. 7).



**Figure 7. The “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development”**

There are a number of additional reasons for proposing a circular model for ARG game design. Primarily it clarifies a given game’s anatomy and player involvement

through unequal parts of the whole, but it also allows for expansion and clarification of adjacent and related game spaces such as sequels, spin-offs, and parallel games. By using a conventional Venn diagram technique with two games that are modeled as circles with specific indicators for level 1, level 2, and level 3 players, regardless of the delineation of individual game parts or paths, it becomes clear how the two adjacent game spaces interact and overlap (Fig. 7). In the simple example below two ARGs overlap within elements of levels two and three respectively. This represents the ability of a player to be more heavily involved in one than another of two parallel stories while maintaining an active role in both.



**Figure 8. Two “Adjacent ARGs” With Shared Game Elements**

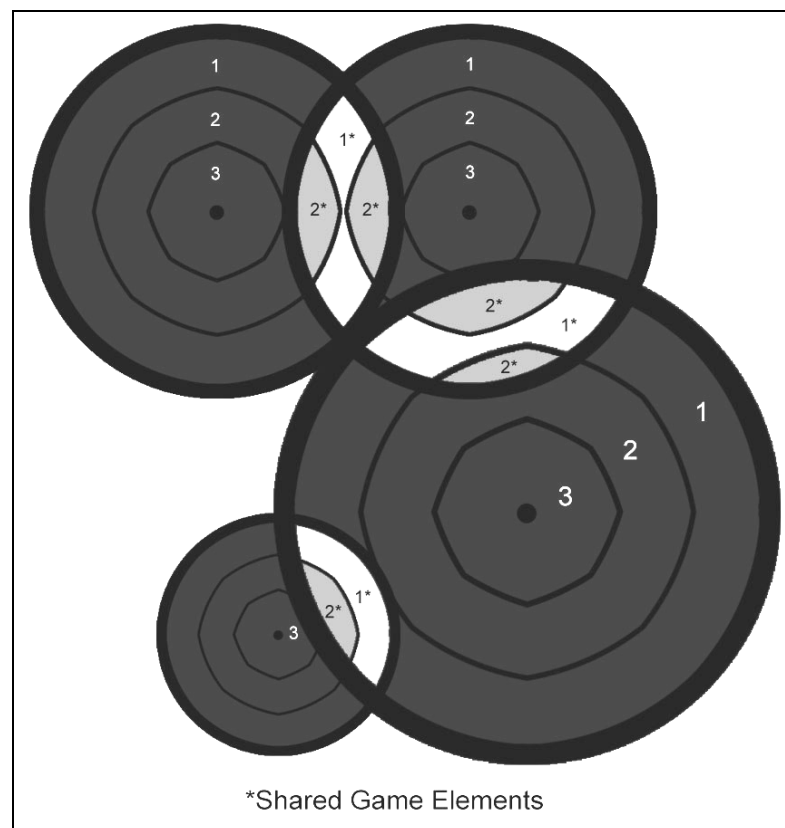
It is irrelevant whether the two ARGs represented would be run simultaneously and parallel to one another, or whether one was a sequel or spin-off game which succeeded the other. The model effectively represents both scenarios and it is the

common game elements which are emphasized. This is something that has not been represented to the ARG community up to this point, mostly because the genre is so new and there have been extremely few sequel or parallel ARGs to date such as “Catching the Wish” or “Sameeeeees 2”. The “Circular Model” is intended to be a new way of representing the next stage of ARG evolution in which multiple games with shared elements are inevitable. I propose that a new term be used for clarity of such a shared-element game, which I will call an “*Adjacent ARG*,” and define as any game which contains shared elements with another ARG, either because they are run simultaneously in a shared game space, or because the latter is a sequel of the earlier game. At the time of this writing, I am currently running an experimental diversionary Chaotic Fiction timewaster called “Conspiracy Asylum” set in the same game world as the successfully completed “Deus City” ARG, the first ARG prequel and prelude to the expected “Deus City II,” tentatively scheduled for release sometime in 2009. Such a game would be considered an adjacent ARG within the context of the “Circular Model.”

### **The ARG Cluster**

The properties of a circular model can be further utilized to compare a cluster of adjacent game spaces such as a franchise series of ARGs taking place in the same fictional universe through multiple presentation methods or levels of immersion through real-world elements. I call this type of interrelated Adjacent ARGs an “*ARG Cluster*,” definable as a series of three or more Adjacent ARGs which have overlapping shared elements and exist within the same definable game space.

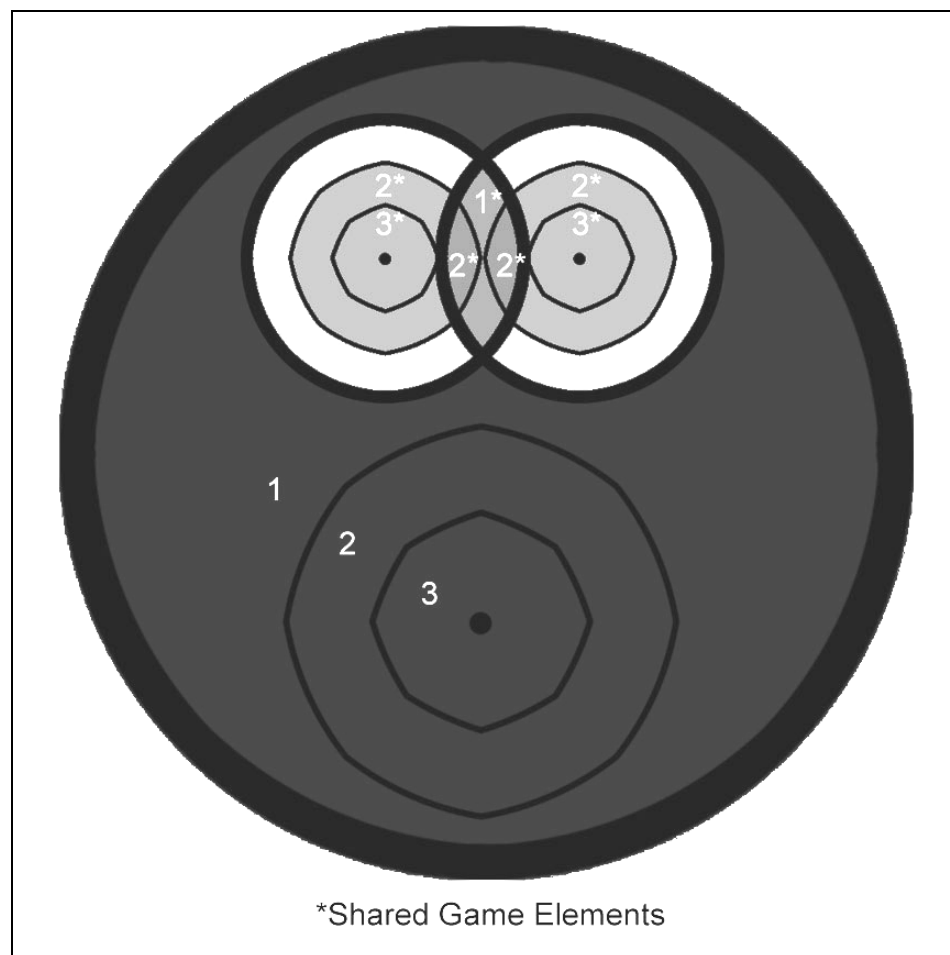
In this way, the interplay of game elements can be illustrated, either for the purpose of planning or mapping out a game during the early development stages or by categorizing and quantifying the player involvement levels and crossover elements after the successful completion of a game to better understand the actual shared game elements and emergent properties. An example of one of infinitely possible permutations of this “ARG cluster” principle is illustrated below (Fig. 9).



**Figure 9. Example of a Possible “ARG Cluster” of “Adjacent ARGs”**

The comparison of ARGs within similar game spaces is not limited to only “Adjacent ARG” game spaces. Through the properties of the “Circular Model”, a visual representation of what I call an “*Inclusive ARG*” can also be represented (Fig. 10). This

is defined as any Adjacent ARG which encapsulates entirely the elements and game space of another, smaller ARG either because the larger is a sequel of a grander scope, or the smaller is an alternate or related imbedded storyline distinctively different from the larger ARG's Level 3 game space. In the figure below a double parallel game with shared elements is shown imbedded inside of a larger game, but a simpler example of one lone game imbedded inside of the larger could just as easily be shown.



**Figure 10. Possible Example of an  
“Inclusive ARG” Enclosing Smaller ARGs**

This type of proposed ARG design could be used as a model for sequel games which are grander in scope than the previous iteration, or as a new way of providing casual, level 1 players alternative paths into alternative smaller game spaces which are included within a larger game simultaneously. The inclusion of one or more ARGs within the framework of another can best be properly visualized through the use of the “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development,” as it accounts not only for the size and shape of the individual ARGs, but also demonstrates the desired level of participation for the player base within a given area of the model. At the time of writing, no known ARG fitting this description of inclusion has been attempted, though the planned “Deus City II” ARG would likely enclose my current project, the “Conspiracy Asylum” diversionary timewaster in such a way.

In conclusion, while the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” model serves its purpose well, and illustrates beautifully the three levels of player involvement for straightforward ARGs which take place in a single game space, the principles established by it must be expanded in order to account for games with multiple game elements, point of entry trailheads, and player paths. This includes Adjacent ARG and Inclusive ARG game spaces for subsequent and complimentary ARGs and their sequels. Through the descriptive “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development,” we can now do just that.

## CHAPTER 11

### THE FUTURE OF ONLINE INTERACTIVE FICTION

Year Zero, hm? As artsy as that is--and as much as Trent Reznor wants to say that it's the art form itself--and as cool as that is--it's still marketing.

-Rekidk, (on a meta-thread discussing ARG as art form vs. a marketing strategy) Unforums 2007

That's a mean razor you got there, Rekidk. Cuts real sharp, depending upon what marketing means. I could probably use that razor to slice out everything but "Deus City" and Sameeees 2 [...] from the touchie-feelie pile.

-FLmutant, (in response to the above post) Unforums 2007

In 1948, George Orwell gave to the world a vision of the future based on the trends and troubles that he saw in the world around him, at a time when the first electronic computer was being used to crack Nazi war codes.<sup>1</sup> While his dystopian and totalitarian 1984 fortunately never came to pass, one prediction did come true – at least in part. The western world has come to rely on innumerable little screens which tie us all together into one big online collective of social networks from which we can get more information, news, services, and entertainment than we could ever possibly digest; and likewise by which we can contribute to, interact with, comment on, and play with in nearly every imaginable way. Some elements of Orwell's entertaining science-fiction novel can seem almost comical to us five decades after its writing and over two decades after the year about which he made his predictions. It is significant, however,

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, . *Nineteen Eighty Four*, [Secker and Warburg, London: 1949]; Joseph D Straubhaar and Robert LaRose, *Media Now*, [Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth, 2004.], 230

for us to realize that as we have seen above, these same contemporary online social networks have been and are now influencing and changing the very nature of entertainment, and doing so most significantly through the interactive, ever-changing, ever-growing Internet itself.

In order to predict what might be the next stage in Alternate Reality gaming and the evolution of Online Interactive Fiction, we must once more look at the component parts of the genre and try to understand how each will change in the coming years. By looking at current trends of change such as emergent properties in games overall, identifying predicted immersive element potential in new technologies such as mobile devices, and thus recognizing some of the newest potential media outlets for the self organizing structure of the massive online social network which constitutes the player base, it opens new possibilities for collaborative interactive storytelling, and we can begin to get a broader picture of what the alternate “realities” of the future might be, and what the role of Alternate Reality Games may soon become for us all as these four interconnected elements change and in doing also change one another.

### **The Changing Face of Games**

As previously discussed, the video game market is a multi-billion dollar industry which is constantly changing, as technology and the tools to make them improve. According to a number of sources, around sixty percent of the people in the United States play video games and at least forty-three percent of these are women.<sup>2</sup> In a

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<sup>2</sup> John Kirriemuir, “Video Gaming, Education and Digital Learning Technologies,” *D-Lib Magazine*, February 2002. <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/february02/kirriemuir/02kirriemuir.html#IDSA> [accessed February 21, 2008]; Games-Advertising. “Games-Advertising Information Website.” <http://www.games-advertising.com/> [accessed January, 5, 2007].

survey conducted by Wizards of the Coast Inc., of the video game market eight percent play computer based role playing games (RPGs) and seven point three million of those people (which is thirty three percent), play table-top RPGs as well.<sup>3</sup> I believe this overlap is a target market and predict to see a significant percentage of this group playing ARGs within a few short years, and that this will be achieved through the use of online social networks in both current and new forms.

It can be argued that simple platform titles and license games loosely based on franchise movies or shows are still the video game industry's standard. Even today there are content licensing issues within development companies due to a lack of shared assets and intellectual property worries. But some video games are changing the industry despite all of this. A number of good examples exist, but there are a handful which illustrate the point best. New high cost and high profile titles like "Spore" and "Prototype" are redefining how emergent properties work in video games with multiple story paths and interlacing independent game elements, while other titles like "Ghostbusters" and "LOST: Via Domus" are redefining video game license titles within the context of canonical storylines and authenticity of the game world. These four games illustrate the coming changes simply, and are worth a closer look because of the impact they and similar games will have upon ARGs and Online Interactive Entertainment as a whole.

In her 2007 thesis, Dr. Monica Evans of the University of Texas at Dallas wrote of the now soon to be released "Spore" as:

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan Dancey, "Adventure Game Industry Market Research Summary (RPGs) V1.0," Wizards of the Coast. Feb 7, 2000, <http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/wotcdemo.html> [accessed Jan , 2007].

A highly anticipated title from developer Will Wright. Originally known by the working title “Sim Everything”, *Spore* will allow players to chart the course of an entire civilization from the beginnings of life as single-celled organisms to an intelligent species with intergalactic flight capability. The game has garnered a great deal of attention for its impressive scope of gameplay and for the fact that nearly the entire game will be procedurally generated, allowing players, in Wright’s words, to be less like Frodo Baggins or Luke Skywalker than J.R.R. Tolkien or George Lucas.<sup>4</sup>

A fairly tight lid is being kept on the “Prototype” game currently, but developers have promised an “open world thriller” in which the player assumes the identity of:

[A] shapeshifter with amazing powers of combat, destruction, and deception. Consume targets for their form and memories to assume a perfect disguise, or instantly transform your body into an array of deadly biological weapons, cutting your way to the heart of the conspiracy forty years in the making; stalk the streets of New York City, searching for the life you led before. Take the form of anyone in your path, using an arsenal of identities to confound, exploit or annihilate your enemies. ... [with] unprecedented Abilities and Control - Play as the most powerful and dynamic character ever created with innovative shapeshifting powers and over the top parkour locomotion movement; shapeshifting - Attack with brutal and devastating powers; instantly triggering hundreds of power combinations (Attack, Defensive and Sensory); disguise - Assume the perfect disguise by transforming into any character and assuming the victim's powers, skills and abilities.<sup>5</sup>

If even half these promises are true, then the newest games coming from the video game developers in the next few years are going to change the standards and expectations of immersion and emergent properties in video games forever, significant because it will mean a shift in both immersive and emergent elements for the video game industry towards becoming more like ARGs are now.

Similarly, “Ghostbusters” is being billed as the sequel that was never filmed. It was written by the original creators of the franchise, and is to be set in 1991 with chronologically age appropriate characters voiced by the original actors who would

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<sup>4</sup> Monica Joyce Evans, “Computer Games and Interactive Narrative: A Structural Analysis,” [Ph.D diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 2007], 196

<sup>5</sup> Newegg, “Prototype PC Game Sierra” Newegg Software, Prototype Game Page, <http://www.newegg.com/Product/Product.aspx?Item=N82E16832128006> [accessed February 24, 2008].

likely be too old now to pass for their seventeen-year younger selves. Game Informer quotes creator Dan Aykroyd as saying "If you have an appetite for the third movie, then the video game is it."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, "LOST: Via Domus's" producer, Gadi Pollack, stated in an interview with *PC World* about his game that:

ABC and the LOST team gave us blueprints of all the hatches and we even sent our artist director to Hawaii for one week to take reference photos of the jungle and the sets that are used for the show. We know the fans are diehard and wanted to please them, so everything that is in the game is an exact replica on what is on the Island.<sup>7</sup>

"LOST" already has an extended experience ARG. That coupled with the show and the new video game is nothing especially remarkable until realizing that the continuity being kept from one to the other for it and other franchise titles like "Ghostbusters," are examples of the forthcoming game continuity revolution which will soon thrust the player into a new level of immersion within a world, or in this case a virtual game-space, which has not been seen before in an extended cross-media fictional franchise. While neither of these examples is intended to be in the Online Interactive Entertainment category, it is only a matter of time before the ideology is transferred into new games that will be, at which point ARG will be required to evolve with it, or risk being eclipsed by it.

### **The Emerging Immersive Element Potential**

The Internet is rapidly changing. Futurist Bob Glass predicted this in 2002, saying that for him:

[R]ight now, the Internet is frustrating and not at all what I want. The fundamental differences are that I'm [a] sensory psychologist and right now I can only see and hear, so I'll keep waiting for the technology to evolve, but it will get there. I believe in

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<sup>6</sup> *Game Informer Magazine*, "The Real Ghostbusters," Cover Story, December, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Peckham, "Lost -The Video Game: Our Exclusive Q&A With Its Developer," *PC World*, February 7, 2008, <http://blogs.pcworld.com/gameon/archives/006458.html> [accessed February 21, 2008].

10 to 20 years we'll have smell, we'll have touch – we have this today, but it's not widespread. Taste – who knows? But the important thing is that I think the idea of using a computer will just go away and become a part of us.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately for Glass, we are not quite there yet, but as stated in chapter 2, the line where the Internet happens has been blurring since about 2000. No longer must one sit in front of a wired computer with a keyboard, mouse, and monitor to surf the web.

Wireless Laptops, cell phones, PDAs and just about anything else that communicates, is or can be connected to the web. New devices which combine the functionality of all these others have now emerged such as the iPhone and the Nokia NSeries mobile units, which are still being gloriously mislabeled as phones with features by some, but are really mobile computers with access to internet, phone, television, movies, music, photography, GPS tracking, and so much more.<sup>9</sup>

Right now the computer is still an essential element of ARG. It is where the social network forms and the primary vehicle for dissemination of information within a game takes place. This will change. As computers become something else, something which fits into one's pocket for example, then the idea of "sitting down" to play one's ARG will transition out, and the real-world game elements will become the focus even more than they are now. ARG will become what one does from moment to moment while at the restaurant waiting in the line, for his or her food to come to the table, and wherever else we want. When we can take the social network with us, we can take the game with us, and it has just become substantially more immersive, interactive, and invasively real-world, and by extension is no longer a form of "online" interactive fiction because the

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<sup>8</sup> Sally Richards, *Future Net*, [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002], 229.

<sup>9</sup> Apple, "Apple – iPhone" Apple, 2008, <http://www.apple.com/iphone/> [accessed February 18, 2008]; Nokia, "Nokia NSeries" Nokia NSeries Mobile Technologies. <http://www.nseries.com/ces/> [accessed February 17, 2008].

idea of being “offline” will become a false concept entirely, as might the ideas of being in-game or out-of-game, once the immersion of real-world game elements become indistinguishable from the meta game experience of an ARG.

This concept gets pushed even further when one considers the research being done in *augmented reality*, a field of research which deals with the combination of real-world and computer-generated data, usually in conjunction with some sort of mobile heads-up display or portable device. The medical, maintenance and construction, educational, information, and gaming implications are already speculated upon, and once researchers overcome the challenges faced, it is likely that augmented reality will quickly become a part of every day life. Already, one student in Australia has succeeded in turning his real world campus into an augmented FPS “Quake” game via a headset and computer backpack<sup>10</sup>, and the military has been devising uses for augmented reality for decades:

[R]ecently, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has funded an HMD project to develop a display that can be coupled with a portable information system. The idea here is that an augmented-reality system could provide troops with vital information about their surroundings, such as showing where entrances are on the opposite end of a building, somewhat like X-ray vision. Augmented reality displays could also highlight troop movements, and give soldiers the ability to move to where the enemy can't see them.<sup>11</sup>

It is predicted that we are only a few years away from augmented reality technology becoming a part of our reality. The processing power is available, the theories are sound, and the technology is in development, the major barrier to entry will be societal acceptance, but soon even that will be no issue as early adoption gives way

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Bonsor, “How Augmented Reality Will Really Work,” How Stuff Works Website, <http://www.howstuffworks.com/augmented-reality.htm> [accessed February 17, 2008].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

to the mainstream for the technology, at which point it will inevitably be snatched up and used for the ARG genre.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Changing Social Network**

Social networks are changing too. Back In 1967, one year after SABRE, the first civilian computer network came into being<sup>13</sup>, Robert E. Mueller, futurist, scientist, artist, and author of The Science of Art wrote on what he called “The Cybernetics of Creative Communication.” While this term is dated and lacks the clarity that looking backward upon the history of technology provides, Mueller’s perspective can provide a starting point for assessing the influence of the intangible net which now exists. “Communication is the root idea of our age, just as evolution or relativity was for previous generations. Its theoretical considerations provide us with skeleton keys to unlock many modern mysteries.”<sup>14</sup> We now live in a post-modern age of computer science-fact and Internet saturated, time-shifted, virtual-reality enhanced, online social networks; and the temptation is to over-simplify by looking at just the most recent trends. For a number of centuries though, the culture of time and space has revolved around the series of sweeping changes in technology and culture which have created distinctive new modes of thinking about experiencing them. The product of which has resulted in a

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<sup>12</sup> Dean Terry, Professor of Emerging Media and Arts & Technology at the University of Texas at Dallas, Personal interview by author, February 19, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph D Straubhaar and Robert LaRose, *Media Now*, [Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth, 2004.], 230

<sup>14</sup> Robert E Mueller, *The Science of Art*, [New York: John Day Company, 1967], 11

transformation of the very dimensions of life and thought.<sup>15</sup> Put into simplest terms, the evolution of changes brought about by online social networks over Internet entertainment in the last few decades has been a logical extension of the push towards the engaging, the convenient, and the emergent in everything from video games to virtual worlds and every other online adjacent space including Alternate Reality Games.

The result is massive social networks in wonderfully diverse new forms. We must understand how people are using social networks to predict where they will go. Aside from the most traditional social networks, other examples today include blogging communities, virtual world communities, integrated social aggregation networks, external technology networks, mobile social networks, and media social networks,<sup>16</sup> but soon new forms will become commonplace, such as *ad hoc social networks*, and *augmented reality networks* which will build upon the coming augmented reality technology, and other new forms which do not have names yet.<sup>17</sup>

The significance of ad hoc networks lies in the potential for temporary networks to spring up anywhere and everywhere that they are needed. Right now cell phones are relatively dumb. A phone does not know where it is in space at a given time any more than the internet exists in a physical location out in the real world. Both of these concepts of time and space are changing, and with relatively simple changes such as

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, [Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2003], 3; David Carr and Chan-Fai Cheung, eds. *Space, Time, and Culture*. 1st ed., [Springer, 2004].

<sup>16</sup> University of Texas at Dallas Mobile Lab, "Passing Bits of Data Understanding ad hoc social networks and how they might be used in the future" UT Dallas Mobile Lab Presentation, November 27, 2007, [http://mobilelab.utdallas.edu/presentations/MobileLab-AdHocSocialNetworks\\_v1.pdf](http://mobilelab.utdallas.edu/presentations/MobileLab-AdHocSocialNetworks_v1.pdf) [accessed February 20, 2008].

<sup>17</sup> Dean Terry, Professor of Emerging Media and Arts & Technology at the University of Texas at Dallas. Personal interview by author, February 19, 2008.

GPS technology placed in mobile devices and time aware aggregation software applications, suddenly a whole new kind of real time and space social network possibilities emerge. Soon people will be able to connect through each other's cell phones and mobile devices directly, connect with locations and places virtually or with augmented data, and even hook up with an emergent "smart mob" of networked devices which are part of a local network for the simple reason that they are within proximity of one another in the real world.<sup>18</sup>

Already the sharing of pictures, emails, and text messages across telephone networks and the internet are commonplace. Nearby Nintendo DS systems with the right games are able to create an ad hoc social network for multiplayer fun, but the real opportunity for ad hoc social networking lies not just in proximity based games, but in mobile technologies that fully utilize the ad hoc nature of the network regardless of service provider, unit hardware, or operating systems. In a recent proposal students from the University of Texas at Dallas Mobile Lab suggested:

The possibilities are endless. People can play "collection" games, where the idea is to collect something (like a Pokeman character) from a location, or using a cell phone to geo cache and geo tag. If you and your friends are within a certain area, you can play interactive and attack based games...<sup>19</sup>

These new types of social networks will have a strange effect on the ARG genre. It will blur the lines of reality, alternate reality, and augmented reality even further than what they are currently. Whatever forms it eventually takes, however the new mobile technologies and other emergent network types will have a profound effect on online

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<sup>18</sup> University of Texas at Dallas Mobile Lab, "Passing Bits of Data Understanding ad hoc social networks and how they might be used in the future" UT Dallas Mobile Lab Presentation, November 27, 2007, [http://mobilelab.utdallas.edu/presentations/MobileLab-AdHocSocialNetworks\\_v1.pdf](http://mobilelab.utdallas.edu/presentations/MobileLab-AdHocSocialNetworks_v1.pdf) [accessed February 20, 2008].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

social networks as a whole, and in turn will change the way that Online Interactive Fiction and ARG are defined and played.

### **Looking to the Future**

It's difficult to predict the future. The more specific we try to get the greater a chance for error is introduced. Perhaps a company such as Blizzard or Ensemble will eventually solve the MMORTS dilemma discussed in chapter 2, and convert one of their RTS success story titles into a multi-player version yet. Perhaps the proprietary network issue will be overcome by consoles as they become more and more like elaborate dedicated computers while the cost of PCs continue to drop. Perhaps the next "YouTube" is waiting around the corner to stream high quality video, and somehow overcoming the bandwidth barrier. It is my strong belief that the genre of ARG is the next stage of the gaming evolution. It is a practically untapped marketplace outside of complicated ads for big budget TV shows and Hollywood movies. ARG has nearly unlimited growth potential once integrated with other existing online social networks and technologies. It taps into emergent properties in a way that traditional video games and RPGs, even MMORPGs, can not. It works from the inside-out, unlike video games which have limits and constraints built into their outside-in design. ARG is the tip of a multi-billion dollar industry waiting to be tapped for its full potential because of its ability to be phenomenologically real, and because no matter how good a virtual world gets, it is not and never will be "real." The fact is that a time and space-shifted virtual reality will never equal the real thing until such a network exists where the desired content is within literally everything, and is therefore an extension or augmentation of "normal" reality.

In the end we may be no more successful in predicting the future than George Orwell was in 1948, but it is of course still our right and privilege to try to do so. Perhaps it is even compulsory that we must do so before we can move forward in a normal pragmatic and evolutionary way. Regardless, it is no great prediction to say, that whatever tomorrow may bring, online social networks will most definitely continue to influence and change Internet entertainment towards the engaging, convenient, and emergent, with greater and greater impact until we have reached a common consensus that the global human social network is at a place where it needed to be all along.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that the future of ARG is completely dependant upon what the players of ARGs want. Do they want more encompassing storylines masking themselves as reality? Do they want to blur the line of suspension of disbelief? Do users really want to believe, or do they want to still know somewhere in the back of their head that it is all a game? The alternative is a game that intrudes on real life to the point of being indistinguishable from reality, which leads to a possible future in which no one really knows when they are playing a game, the moral and ethical implications of which I dare say would far outreach the purposes and conclusions of this study.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The “Deus City” ARG project, which was designed around the elements of ARG as defined by the ARG community, successfully validated the 42 Entertainment model of Player Participation based on game statistics and numerous examples of player interaction. Likewise, the project showed that the ARG community continues to be open to new experiences and forms for the genre, including new media and game designs which incorporate the elements of ARG in new and interesting ways. The project also showed that a game can be created with multiple trailhead points of entry and multiple player paths towards enthusiastic, level 3 player status, where the game can be changed by such a player through the conventions of online collaborative fiction, also called Chaotic Fiction.

Using this research data it was possible therefore to construct a new descriptive model for visualizing advanced and multi-component ARGs and better mapping of player participation, called the “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development” which will allow representation of these and other new game space formats as yet untried by developers, and as the ARG genre moves forward into the future. Plans are being made now for further research through game development to implement and validate the newest game-space format which was described with the proposed term “Adjacent ARG”. In addition, two new theoretical game space formats which have been suggested are described by the proposed game terms as “ARG cluster” and “Inclusive ARG” as represented by the Brackin circular model.

Further, the study concludes that while the genre is not fundamentally dependant upon expensive or emergent technology as the core elements rely merely on good storytelling and the existing telecommunications infrastructure, the genre is nevertheless going to change as new technologies change and the tools of online interactivity mature.

In conclusion, the study identified new areas of growth for the Alternate Reality Game genre, and has opened the door for new research and study to test the descriptive multi-component “Brackin Circular Model of ARG Development” which has been proposed.

## APPENDIX A

### GLOSSARY OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAME TERMS

The following list is intended to provide a quick reference for those readers unfamiliar with most, or all, of the Alternate Reality Game genre *terms* used in this document. Many of these terms have not yet been solidly defined by the community with a set definition and have not made it into the urban dictionaries, and a number of them I have proposed myself in order to facilitate and simplify my own discussion about the future of ARGs. The newly proposed terms are indicated in their definitions below.

The following definitions were primarily derived from the Unforums' index/meta/glossary thread, the limited literature as cited in chapter 3, some from giantmice.com and the Wikipedia, and/or supplemented with my own experience as a puppetmaster and player when applicable.

**Active Player:** See "*Level 2 Player.*"

**Adjacent ARG:** Proposed term by which an ARG contains shared elements with another ARG, either because they are run simultaneously in a shared *game space*, or because the latter is a sequel of the earlier game.

**Alternate Reality Game (ARG):** An ever-changing interactive narrative form of *Chaotic Fiction* that uses the real world as a platform, often involving multiple media, the Internet, and game-like elements to tell a story that may be affected by participants' ideas or actions. The four "elements of ARG" can be defined as: *emergent properties*, *immersive elements*, *collaborative interactive storytelling*, and *the self organizing structure of the massive online social network* which constitutes the player base. Unlike computer games and traditional tabletop role-playing games, non-player characters in ARGs are typically controlled by real people in real time. ARGs do not generally require special software or interfaces to play, nor require players to role-play or create characters or avatars by definition, though each game is unique and new variations of the form are constantly being created.

**Alternative Entertainment:** A broad generic term which includes all new forms of entertainment and/or storytelling through new media such as *Online Interactive Entertainment*, (including: *Online Interactive Fiction*, *Online Social Networks*, and *Online*

*Interactive Video Games*,) mobile technologies, emergent technology and many other new forms not addressed in this study.

**ARG Cluster:** Proposed term for a series of three or more *Adjacent ARGs* which have overlapping shared elements and exist within the same definable game space.

**“ARG for ARG’s Sake!”:** My own catchphrase philosophy to describe a *Non-Commercial ARG* which focuses on new forms of interactive storytelling instead of marketing a commercial product.

**ARG Network (ARGn):** Foremost ARG news and information website located on the web at [www.argn.com](http://www.argn.com)

**ARG Netcast:** Considered by many the “bad boys” of ARG, the collaborative effort of numerous ARG critics that is the ARGn Netcast is the always vocal and sometimes factual weekly Internet show which discusses all things ARG-like and casts out from [www.argnetcast.info](http://www.argnetcast.info)

**Blarg:** Literally “Blog ARG,” indicates an ARG which is run primarily through interactions on fictional character blogs.

**Casual Player:** See “Level 1 Player.”

**Chaotic Fiction (CF):** Unfiction founder Sean Stacey has suggested that the best way to define the *Online Interactive Fiction* genre was not to define it, and instead locate each game on three axes: “rule set,” “authorship” and “coherence,” in a sphere of “*Chaotic Fiction*” that would include OOG works such as the “Uncyclopedia” and street games like “SF0” as well.

**Collaborative (Interactive) Storytelling (CS):** One of Dave Szulborski’s proposed “Elements of ARG,” the method in which the *puppetmasters* and the players interact through *role-playing*, *In-character* messages or communications, and whatever other means, that provides characterization or otherwise moves a story forward. (See Also “*Online Interactive Fiction*”)

**Commercial ARG (C-ARG):** Proposed term for any ARG which is developed from a stated corporate objective or commercial agenda. Such games are usually high budget, intended to be massively large, and are usually designed to sell a product, create media hype, or heighten consumer awareness of a brand through alternative, viral, or guerilla marketing techniques in the form of an ARG. This is the first type of ARG from which all other smaller game models have been developed

**Curtain:** In ARG, the imaginary “curtain” of non-communication that PMs live behind while running a game so as to preserve the illusion that “*This is not a Game.*” Most attempts to run a game without this convention have failed.

**Despoiler.org:** The ARG OOG forum created to provide an avenue for the anonymous posting of information, in particular “spoilers.” Despoiler’s self-proclaimed mission is to “provide an outlet for anonymous disclosure of these so-called sensitive elements.” The site was a result of certain unspecified games which pitted players against one another.

**Diversion:** Any of a number of “happy fun time activities” which may contain ARG or CF elements such as a *timewaster*, but not usually a heavily significant plot or Interactive fiction element. Often associated with short marketing gimmicks that are mistaken for *trailheads*, but in fact lead nowhere.

**Drop:** The acquisition or relinquishing of a *real-world* game item in a *real-world* location, for the purpose of furthering the story in an ARG.

**Educational/Training ARG:** Somewhat ambiguous term used in the 2006 IGDA ARG whitepaper, it refers to the ability of the ARG medium to be used for training and team building for a specific audience. They can share elements of the *Single-Player ARG*, but instead, they promote a non-traditional product. The product isn’t a movie, or a shirt you can wear, or a card to keep – it is simply knowledge.

**Emergent Properties:** One of Dave Szulborski’s proposed “Elements of ARG,” it can be defined as the secondary or unexpected attributes beyond game’s main stated intent. While not technically an element of traditional games, *emergent properties* are still important in all good games and game design.

**Enthusiastic Player:** See “*Level 3 Player*.”

**Game Master (GM):** A player in a multiplayer game who acts as organizer, arbitrator, and officiate in rules situations. Today, the GM is usually associated with role-playing games (such as Dungeons and Dragons) as the storyteller who runs the scenario. In an ARG this term is not used and the role is filled by the PM. (See *PuppetMaster*)

**Game Space:** The immersive and fictional elements of an ARG - be they online, virtual, imagined, *real-world*, or categorizable by any other means - can be qualified for the purpose of simplicity and reference. In other words, the limitations of the story, setting, and scope of a game.

**Gamejack:** The attempt to wrest control of an ARG from the PM in a way contrary to that in which they've invited the audience to participate and outside of the normal bounds of the interactive narrative’s open structure by pretending to be an *in-game* character, PM, etc.

**Grassroots ARG:** Used to describe a small scale independent or “*indie*” ARG which usually focuses on telling a short story through ARG elements on a manageable scale for one or two PMs. Originally considered a sub-genre of ARG, it has gained respect in the community as of late.

**Guide:** An OOG narrative retelling of a particular ARG's storyline so far. Especially handy for new players, *lurkers*, and *casual* (*level 1*) players.

**Immersion:** Within ARG, the ability to forget that one is playing a game or interacting with game elements. It is a frequently-used buzzword, in which case its meaning is intentionally vague, but carries the connotation of being particularly engrossing. Arguably, it is the state where you cease to be aware of your physical self. It is frequently accompanied by intense focus, distorted sense of time and effortless action. The term is widely used to describe video games, but it is not clear if the word is used consistently. (See also: *Immersive Elements*)

**Inclusive ARG:** Proposed term by which one ARG encapsulates entirely the elements and *game space* of another, smaller ARG either because the larger is a sequel of a grander scope, or the smaller is an alternate or related imbedded storyline.

**Immersive Elements:** One of Dave Szulborski's proposed "Elements of ARG," it is effectively the *game space* of an ARG. Namely, the game elements, either virtual or *real-world*, which provide context, setting, characterization, or otherwise move the story forward in some way while allowing a player to experience *immersion* (see *immersion*) and otherwise forget that he or she is playing a "game."

**Independent (Indie) ARG:** See: "Grassroots ARG"

**In Character (IC):** Within ARG and CF, any player action or interaction which is In-Game regardless of it is something that player would normally do in real life. (See also: *In-Game*)

**In-Game (IG):** Within ARG and CF, any action or interaction with game-elements on the part of a player which is done "in character" or for the purpose of furthering the game as opposed to "*Out-of-Game*" (OOG) in which it is the player speaking and not necessarily his or her character. (See also: *Out-of-Game*)

**The "Inverted Pyramid" Model of Player Participation:** Model proposed by 42 Entertainment to illustrate the typical distribution of levels and ratios of player interaction into three categories of "casual," "Active," and "Enthusiastic." (See also *Level 1*, *Level 2*, *Level 3*) Refer to Chapter 2: Figure 1.

**Level 1 Player:** According to the 42 Entertainment "Inverted Pyramid" model of player interaction, the casual participants, representing the broadest audience, a modest level of interaction which is focused primarily online; and who seek a *guide* to help engage in the experience. (See also: *Lurker*)

**Level 2 Player:** According to the 42 Entertainment "Inverted Pyramid" model of player interaction, the active participants representing the core middle audience, with a significant level of interaction both on and off-line; but who engage in the experience at their own level and pace.

**Level 3 Player:** According to the 42 Entertainment “Inverted Pyramid” model” of player interaction, the enthusiastic participants representing the “tip of the wedge” audience, with a very high level of interaction both on and off-line; and who become deeply engaged in the experience by providing content of their own to the community.

**Lurker:** Any person who reads discussions on a message board, newsgroup, chat room, file sharing or other interactive system, but rarely if ever logs-in or participates. (See also: *Level 1 Player*)

**Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMO):** Typically a genre of online computer game in which a large number of players interact with one another while playing. While ARGs and MMOs could technically coexist within the subheading of *Online Interactive Games* and would both fit the technical definition of “Massive Multiplayer Online” games, they are often viewed as mutually exclusive forms and the designation of “MMO” is typically reserved for more traditional video game titles exclusively, RPG or otherwise. (See also: “MMORPG”)

**Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG):** A genre of online computer role-playing games (or CRPGs) in which a large number of players interact with one another, but typically in a virtual world unlike ARG, through an avatar character which has statistics and abilities that are fundamentally similar to a tabletop RPGs in many ways. Sometimes confused with ARG, the two are mutually exclusive forms at this level of terminology if for no other reason than for clarity of form.

**META:** A prefix used in order to indicate a concept which is an abstraction from another concept, used to complete or add to the latter. Within ARG, an OOG notation used to designate *meta-game* discussion on a thread or forum. (See: *Meta-Game*)

**Meta-Game:** Any of a series of abstract issues about the ARG or CF genre or regarding a specific game, but that are not considered *in-game*. Meta game discussion usually occurs in a separate thread on OOG websites (such as the Unforums).

**Newbie (noob):** Within the context of ARG, a new, inexperienced, very casual, or recently started *level 3 player*. (See *Level 3 Player*)

**Non-Commercial ARG (NC-ARG):** Proposed term for a medium to large scale ARG which does not have a stated corporate or commercial product agenda, but is too large to be considered “grassroots.” It instead focuses heavily on new interactive storytelling methods and is an “ARG for ARG’s sake.” This may or may not include a business model for making a profit from within the context of the game’s own elements such as through imbedded advertising structures, but does not define the game’s purpose or objective in any way.

**Online Interactive Entertainment:** A somewhat broad term for new forms of entertainment and/or storytelling within the heading of *Alternative Entertainment*, which

uses the Internet as the primary form of interaction and can include *Online Interactive Fiction*, *Online Social Networks*, and *Online Interactive Video Games*,) among many other forms.

***Online Interactive Fiction:*** A broad and difficult to define sub-category of *Online Interactive Entertainment* which is more often referred to synonymously as “Chaotic Fiction” by those in the ARG and *CF* community (see *Chaotic Fiction*), though it technically could be argued to include certain online interactive video games such as *MMORPGs* depending on one’s definition of “interaction.” (See also: *Alternative Entertainment*, *MMORPG*, and *Online Interactive Games*)

***Online Interactive Games:*** A somewhat broad and difficult to define sub-category of *Online Interactive Entertainment* which includes *MMO* games such as *MMORPGs*, Web-based Java and Flash games, most Yahoo and similar style games, and arguably ARGs also. (See also: *MMORPGs*, and *ARGs*)

***Out-of-Game (OOG):*** Things that occur outside of the game world such as a forum post on an OOG website or forum such as the Unforums. Anything that is not *IG* is *OOG*.

***Player:*** In ARG, a player of a game is an audience member who is a participant therein. The term 'player' is typically used with the same meaning in ARG game theory as in ordinary recreational games, though it can imply various levels of participation (See: *Level 1 Player*, *Level 2 Player*, *Level 3 Player*) according to the “*Inverted Pyramid*” model of player participation.

***Productized ARG:*** Highly ambiguous term used in the 2006 IGDA ARG whitepaper, it was meant to represent those which are defined with a product as the driving effort of game or critical to puzzle solving within the game also including commercial efforts designed to fix a business model on top of an ARG experience. (See also: *Non-Commercial ARG*)

***Promotional ARG:*** Highly ambiguous term used in the 2006 IGDA ARG whitepaper, it was meant to represent those high profile *Commercial ARGs* which started the genre with a complex marketing strategy of a product.

***PuppetMaster (PM):*** an individual involved in designing and/or running an ARG. PMs are simultaneously allies and adversaries to the player base, creating obstacles and providing resources for overcoming them in the course of telling the game's story. *PMs* generally remain behind the *curtain* while a particular game is running.

***Online Social Networks:*** Online social networks are webs of relationships that grow from Internet based discussions, usually about a specific topic or subject matter. Within the context of *Online Interactive Entertainment*, they typically grow from conversations among people who share a common entertainment interest, but who differ in other ways such as location, leisure time availability, or are otherwise distributed across time and

space. They are currently the key component for ARG and the other forms of *Interactive Online Entertainment*

**Puzzle Trail:** A series of puzzles where one puzzle leads to another webpage that contains another puzzle and so on and so on. Sometimes they contain a brief hint of a story and they can provide a great distraction for people in between playing ARGs. Many times, players will create little *puzzle trails* for other players

**Pyramid Model (of Player Interaction):** See Inverted Pyramid Model

**Rabbit Hole:** See “Trailhead.”

**Real-World:** a phrase used to refer to the physical reality of everyday life which humans on the planet earth experience; it is also referred to as the human condition. More specifically, the term is used in ARG to refer to any game element which qualifies as the above and improves the realistic *immersive* quality of the game and furthers the “TINAG” mentality. (See: *This is not a game!*)

**Role Playing Game (RPG):** Any game in which the participants assume the roles of fictional characters and collaboratively create or follow stories. ARGs can have strong RPG elements, but by definition do not require any or all of them as the focus is on *real-world* elements instead. However, the role of the *puppetmaster* in creating ARG narratives and the *PM's* relationship with an ARG's players bears a great deal of similarity to the role of a DM in this type of game. (See also: Dungeon Master)

**The Self-Organizing Structure (of the Social Network):** One of Dave Szulborski's proposed “Elements of ARG,” it is the self-imposed set of rules by which a given ARG's player base organizes its own social network, usually through IG and OOG forums. This is an essential *emergent property* of ARGs.

**Single-Player ARG:** Somewhat ambiguous term used in the 2006 IGDA ARG whitepaper, meant to categorize those games which are tailored to be able to be played by an individual without the aid of an *online social network*, such as the “Jamie Kane” ARG, but arguably including such games as “PerplexCity” or “The Lost Experience.”

**Spoiler:** Any puzzle solve or solution to a game-related challenge. Usually spoilers are identified through spoiler tags or other means on OOG forums to allow players to choose whether or not to view them.

**This is Not a Game (TINAG):** The ARG motto. It is the key concept by which an ARG itself does not acknowledge that it is a game. It follows that it does not have an acknowledged ruleset for players; and instead relies on the principle that as in real-life, players determine the “rules” either through trial and error or by setting their own boundaries. The narrative presents a fully-realized world in this manner and a new level of *immersion* through *real-world* elements. (See also *Immersive Elements*, and *Real-World*)

**Timewaster:** see “*Diversion*”

**Trailhead:** Also known as a “Rabbit Hole” as in Alice in Wonderland, it marks the first website, contact, or puzzle that starts off an ARG and acts as a point of entry into a game’s particular *Alternate Reality*.

**Trout:** One of the oldest, - and according to some, most controversial – ARG terms. It is used on OOG posts to reply to others when their information is irrelevant, typically because it has been mentioned elsewhere on the forum or thread.

**Unforums (UF):** The ARG and CF genre's largest message board site, dedicated to OOG discussion for players.

**Virtual Reality:** A technology, which allows a user to interact with a computer-simulated environment, be it a real or imagined one. This is not to be confused with the *real-world Immersive Elements of Alternate Reality Games*, which are likely to include some lesser virtual elements such as websites within the context of the *real-world* environment.

**Wiki:** A content management system that allows multiple people to edit and add pages, often used as a reference trail for ARGs.

## APPENDIX B

### INDEX OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES

The following list is intended to provide a quick reference for those readers unfamiliar with most or all of the Alternate Reality Games discussed above and a few other significant popular ARGs not discussed. This is not an exhaustive or comprehensive historical list of popular or prominent ARGs by any means, but is a good starting point should someone care to take up the task. Though I am familiar with many of these games myself, from my own limited perspective, it is the nature of ARG to be a collaborative work of fiction, and the true scope of a game often only becomes clear once the community bands together to write game summaries and collect the many thousands of personal experiences into a coherent storyline. As such, I used summaries from the IGDA ARG whitepaper, the ARG network, the despoilers from various ARG *wiki* sites and the new despoiler.org, in the case of corporate and *Commercial ARGs* the concise (if somewhat biased) respective sites of the developer, and in many cases the Wikipedia in addition to my own (also biased) experiences to compile this Appendix B.

**“Art of the Heist”** Haxan 2005: A high profile commercial campaign created for Audi to launch the A3. Early in the game, a security camera recording was discovered which showed a shadowy villain stashing pieces of information inside 6 different Audi A3 cars. The cars, throughout the course of the game, were all tracked down, to get back the information hidden in them. The game involved, loosely, three layers of interaction: character development and back story, file and password cracking, and live event retrievals. Players who were involved in the live events received special pins, and complimentary cell phones.

**“The Beast”** 42 Entertainment, 2001: An award winning commercial campaign built and executed for Warner Brothers to promote Steven Spielberg’s film, AI: Artificial Intelligence. The first truly successful ARG, It created mainstream awareness of the movie as well as the ARG genre. Developed by Jordan Weisman and his team while at Microsoft, The Beast was a sub-dermal narrative that drew consumers into the world of AI, and made them active participants in the fiction before the film’s release. Over 3 million people actively participated in the game, playing in dozens of countries around the globe. Web communities with hundreds of thousands of members were self-built to play, discuss, and solve “The Beast.”

**“Catching the Wish” (CTW2)** Dave Szulborski, 2006: Follow up *Non-Commercial ARG* to the wildly successful 2003 “Chasing the Wish,” CTW2 also started with fictional web-designer Dale Sprague, who this time, has created the graphic novel comic book to be widely available from New Fiction. While many of the characters from the 2003 ARG had the same name and were in similar positions to the original game, many major differences in the characters existed and it was no straightforward follow up to the original game.

**“Cathy’s Book” (CB)** 42 Entertainment, 2006: Billed as “the first fully immersive multimedia book experience,” CB was a combination of web sites, cell phone numbers, and physical clues—all within a believably realistic commercial novel. The story starts in San Francisco, where high school senior Cathy, while tracking her deadbeat boyfriend, tumbles into a world of Chinese myth, high-tech misdeeds, and immortal beings. She recorded her adventures in her journal, the *trailhead* for the game, upon which almost every page was laced with “extra doodles, illustrations, and snarky side-comments for *real-world* investigation and *in-game* fun.” After a pre-sales order of 120,000 copies, it became a New York Times bestseller in its first full week on bookstore shelves.

**“Chasing the Wish” (CtW)** Dave Szulborski 2003: *Grassroots ARG* which used an original graphic novel as a delivery method, a groundbreaking immersive and interactive comic book, integrated with an online Alternate Reality Game about a web-designer named Dale Sprague with financial problems who awakens in a mental hospital with no idea how he got there, and is told that his family is dead from a car crash he doesn’t remember. It was followed up by the ARG “Catching the Wish” three years later.

**“Cloverfield” (1-18-08)** 2007-2008: The highly mysterious game and extended experience surrounding the January 2008 release of the JJ Abrams monster movie Cloverfield, which in itself was filled with subtle clues and hidden details for the viewer to find.

**“the Committee of the Sedulous Amalgamation” (tCotSA)** Mark Heggen, 2006-2007: Once referred to as the most successful alternate *trailhead* ever by Unfiction, tCotSA was designed as a small scale *grassroots* game in its own right, created and run by the talented Heggen about a secret society, which relied heavily on *real-world* items and the US Postal system. The game began with as few as 25 players and an unknown number of casual followers, but was later revealed to be alternate point of entry for DC, a fact which drew the attention of thousands of ARG participants and inspired a huge surge in the DC game on the level of thousands of new players within a few weeks time.

**“Conspiracy Asylum” (CA)** Fundi Games, 2008: At the time of writing, CA is our own experimental *non-commercial*, player-driven *timewaster diversion*, set in an adjacent game-space as DC, with a number of character crossovers and plot devices which may eventually lead into a *trailhead* for DC II sometime in 2009. Its greatest potential significance lays in the potential ARG sequel status of a shared *game space* with a prior title.

**“Dead Man’s Tale” (DMT)** 42 Entertainment, 2006: Dead Man’s Tale was a commercial online interactive adventure that played out on Microsoft Windows Live Messenger and featured story experiences based on Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest in advance of that film’s worldwide launch. DMT included a dozen flash games / interactive puzzles, and was designed to appeal both to casual users and enthusiasts. For those who made it to the end, the reward was exclusive and never-before-seen footage from the movie. More than three and a half million unique people participated in Dead Man’s Tale and encouraged nearly 200,000 wholly new downloads of the Windows Live Messenger platform.

**“Deus City” (DC)** Fundi Games, 2006-2007. My own year long *non-commercial* campaign centering on the results of a team of students which inadvertently made contact with a highly technological and personally invasive Orwellian City thirty years into the future, within which a serial killer ran rampant in the name of a revolutionary underground movement, thus causing players to have to choose sides, solve the mystery and change the future. The game was unique for its use of a morally ambiguous “karma” system, use of a virtual credit economy for pacing, and dual storyline which forced players to pick sides. Over the course of the year, the main site had close to 41,000 unique visitors and almost 1,500 registered users who actively played the game, solved puzzles, and interacted with characters.

**“edoc laundry” (edoc)** EDOC laundry, 2006-2008: For this Non-Corporate ARG Elan Lee and Dawne Weisman founded edoc laundry, a company designed to produce ARGs using clothes as the primary platform, most notably the Poor Richard Band online murder mystery. Every garment is embedded with hidden messages within the graphic and details of the clothes. Consumers decipher the codes hidden within the garments and input the results into the game’s main website to reveal pieces of a story about the murder of the band manager.

**“Find 815” (F815)** Hi Res/ABC 2008-?: The name of the ABC “LOST” TV show’s fourth season extended experience campaign for what was previously known as “The LOST Experience” ARG.

**“Heroes 360” (H360, Primatech)** NBC, 2006-2007: A digital extension of the NBC TV series “Heroes” that explored the Heroes’ universe. The name was changed in season 2 to “Heroes Evolutions.” It was a somewhat superficial series of show-related websites, character blogs, and downloadable content, H360 was proclaimed as a “dry run” for the second season which is being called “Heroes Evolutions.”

**“Heroes Evolutions” (Heroes 360)** NBC, 2007: The second season for the digital extension of the NBC TV series “Heroes” that explored the Heroes universe.

**“HEX 168” (HEX)** 42 Entertainment, 2005: A 6-week commercial campaign designed for the launch of the Xbox 360 console. The campaign started with a mysterious website established by the crazed scientist Dr. Lutz, who was insistent that there was evidence all around the world of a massive change coming. Real-world examples of the “hex”

symbol and the slogan “The Beginning is Nigh” led to Lutz’s call to action for players to submit their own photographic or video evidence of the affects of “Hex 168,” which were subsequently provided to the Internet audience to review and rate. Top vote-getters were then judged and winners granted an invitation to a “secret” pre-launch party and free Xboxes. Six-and-a-half million people voted on over 2,500 player created and produced submissions within a 10-day pre-launch period. “Hex 168” resulted in thousands of official creative content entries submissions, tens of millions of web hits through viewing and voting.

**“I Love Bees” (ILB)** 42 Entertainment, 2004: Created for the Microsoft Game Studio to promote the Halo2 Xbox game. It was an “original radio drama” that was deconstructed and delivered to consumers over the unlikely broadcast medium of ringing payphones, which the players obsessively sought out in order to unlock the content online for the broader community playing the game. The game was a giant multi-player, multi-platform story, immersing players in the world of Halo2 in the four months leading up to the title’s record shattering launch. ILB had tens of thousands of enthusiasts mobilized in public for pervasive missions, three-quarters of a million active participants working online to talk about and solve the immersive mystery, and nearly two-and-a-half million casual participants tracking the experience.

**“Jamie Kane” (JK)** Cross-Media Entertainment, 2005-?: The stand out *single player ARG*, created for the BBC centers around the death of a celebrity. By joining the “fan club,” one can start the game at any time, then progress though it for about two weeks start to finish and without help from others.

**“KateModern” (KM)** LG15 Studios, 2007: Fan-created spin-off of “LonelyGirl15.” See LG15.

**“Last Call Poker” (LCP)** 42 Entertainment, 2005: Created for Activision to promote the fall 2005 release of the “GUN” video game. Built around an online poker site, players could gain clues and access content hidden on the site and thus become engaged in a viral narrative that blurred the line between fiction and reality. By providing incentives to players to pre-order GUN and offering the chance of discovering secrets which would gain them weapons and extra gold within the game itself, LCP was unique in its integrations between the marketing campaign and the *real-world* product. LCP further drove the play experience into the real world – in graveyards around the country, when participants in selected cities were invited to attend memorial services for Lucky Brown, the fictional financier of LCP, and play a round of Tombstone Hold’em with the broader community of enthusiasts. Participants were also invited to share their own stories and pictures related to life in the hereafter, resulting in “a vibrant and touching collection of user-generated content.” Over half a million players actively participated during the 8 week campaign.

**“Lonely Girl 15” (LG15):** LG15 Studios, 2006-2007: An ongoing interactive web-based video series with an ARG component, centering on the life of a fictional teenage girl named Bree, whose YouTube username is “lonelygirl15.” The series is presented

through short, regularly updated video blogs posted by the fictional characters. Lonelygirl15 came to international attention ostensibly as a real video blogger who achieved massive popularity on YouTube, a popular video sharing website, but was eventually outed by suspicious viewers as a hoax featuring a fictitious character played by American-New Zealand actress Jessica Rose. It was also the first Internet series to introduce sponsored product integration. A spin-off called KateModern, premiered in July 2007 with a video featuring Kate's artwork. While a separate series, it is significant that KateModern and lonelygirl15 live in the same fictional universe, another first. As of September 2007, the LG15 series have more than 70 million combined views.

**“The Lost Experience” (TLE, Find 815)** Hi Res/ABC 2006-2007: Developed as a viewer companion to the popular and enigmatic ABC series “LOST” towards the end of the show’s second season, TLE took “LOST” fans on an expansive, international trail through websites, commercials, emails, phone numbers, and more, in search of pieces to a larger puzzle, which when solved, revealed background information into the mythology of Lost and enlightened fans as to some of the show’s secrets. The game has recently re-launched in the fourth season under the title “Find 815.”

**“Majestic”** Electronic Arts, 2001-2002: Launched with the tagline “It plays you,” “Majestic” was the now notorious high-profile ARG *failure*, which was intended to be a science fiction shadow-government conspiracy thriller, but was put on hold due to a number of factors including respect for the September 11, 2001 attacks. It had too few players to continue the game upon resuming. Game play frequently involved the players receiving clues that they would use to solve puzzles and unravel the story. All the messages were automated, with limited dialogue options, but AIM provided some interactive conversations.

**“MSN Found” (Found)** 42 Entertainment, 2005: Found was built to support the launch of the new MSN Search release. It was a 12 week campaign through ads containing viral videos that were accessed through key word searches in the MSN Search engine. After viewing a few of these “testimonial” videos, the audience realized that the six characters who present the viral content were part of a “search opera” – a story of friendship and romance that played out through the exchange of found videos and story details embedded in the MSN Search engine itself. The campaign captured the time and attention of several million users, who collectively performed tens of millions of searches. A supplemental spoof search that was launched for April Fool’s Day also resulted in more than a million additional users creating and emailing spoofed MSN Search results to family and friends.

**“Ocular Effect” (OE)** Xenophile Media, 2006: A visually stunning Emmy winning game set in the same fictional world as the ABC Family TV show and movie series “Fallen” which chronicled the mysterious and strange travels of a girl named Faith who held secrets that “could effect the world” and a mysterious object called “the oculus” which had supposedly taken over her website. The game used a rich series of well written and produced video shorts and puzzles, featuring various characters and settings around the world and with strong tie-ins as an extended world for the show.

**“Omnifam” (Alias: Omnifam)** 2005: Grassroots game designed and executed by several genre enthusiasts as a fan-fiction piece revolving around the story universe of ABC’s “Alias”. While not the first ARG to be written independently by fans for an existing media property, it was the first to do so for a television property and, more importantly, for a television property that had played with ARG-like aspects in the past.

**“Orbital Colony” (OC)** 2005-2006: Grassroots game initially conceived as a way in which active players in the Unfiction community could learn how to design and produce an Alternate Reality Game with the goal to maintain an open development group that received aid from experienced developers. Notable because it eventually became more than two one-week long mini-games, as the complex story grew into a full blown ARG that was played out over a two month period and fifteen different websites engaging a large number of players with little to no promotional effort and overcoming the stigma of being a so-called training ARG.

**“PerplexCity” (PxC)** Mind Candy, 2005-2007: Creator Michael Smith delivered the highly acclaimed card-based puzzle game which broke new ground for *Non-Commercial* ARGs as the first big budget game without a hidden commercial agenda. Puzzle Card sales funded the game during the first "season", which had players looking for "The Receda Cube," a priceless scientific and spiritual artifact to the people of the fictional "Perplex City," which was stolen and buried somewhere on Earth; and with a real prize of £100,000 to whoever found it. The highly linear story was told through blogs, puzzles, and other various media. The second season received a record-breaking amount of Venture Capital for a *Non-Commercial* ARG, and was originally scheduled to launch in March of 2007, however, following significant delays and conflicting rumors as to why, the second season was eventually announced to be on an indefinite hold.

**“ReGenesis: Extended Reality” (ReGenesis)** Xenophile Media, 2004-2006: A longstanding and award winning exploratory game, RG drew viewers into a conspiracy and mystery that wove in and out of the TV series “ReGenesis,” by using the Internet, email and other media to immerse the viewer, and blurred the line between fiction and reality. RG is significant because it was the first successfully deployed ARG paired with a major television broadcast.

**“Sameeeeeees”** 2006: Jan Libby 2006: Whimsical and popular *indie* ARG centered around Mr. Alan Johnson, leader of a group called the Spoocheeeeees who secretly ruled all world governments with power from a mystical disc, and a man who called himself Peeps, leader of the Sammeeeeees who were trying to break the Spoocheeeeees' nefarious hold on power. The significance of this so-called *grassroots* game lies in the eighteen months of rigorous preparation before launch and highly professional execution of the game by the puppetmaster.

**“Sameeeeeees 2”** 2007. Jan Libby 2007: Second installment of the popular “Sameeeeeees ARG series. (See: “Sameeeeeees”)

**“SF Zero” (SF0)** Not technically an ARG, SFZero is a self-proclaimed collaborative production game” in which players build “characters” by completing tasks for their groups and increasing their score. It is a devilishly simple non-commercial San Francisco Bay Area regional interactive experiment which gained some notoriety during ARGfest 2007, SF0 has challenged the definition of what CF is. The goals of play include meeting new people, exploring the city, and participating in non-consumer leisure activities.

**“Studio Cypher” (SC)** Studio Cyphers, LLC 2006: Billed as a “multiplayer novel” SC attempted to revive the pay-to-play model, Each chapter was billed as a mini-ARG for which participants who paid the \$10 registration fee received earlier access to information and greater opportunities to interact with characters than the non-paying participants. Unfortunately not everyone liked this model and many felt the fees were not worth the overall game experience.

**“tCotSA”:** See: “the Committee of the Sedulous Amalgamation”

**“The Urban Hunt” (UH)** Dave Szulborski, 2004: A *grassroots* game that helped set the standard, at first glance, UH appeared to be a new reality TV show called “Dread House.” The tagline of the show was "It's not what you think!" This phrase proved to be rather appropriate when players realized that they had stumbled upon a trailhead as secret documents turned up from the “failed” show and were led down a dark path through dreams and mysterious disappearances.

**“The Vanishing Point” (VP)** 42 Entertainment, 2006: A *Commercial ARG* created for the release of Windows Vista, Microsoft and AMD jointly launched VP as a global cross-media puzzle game. It began as a mysterious low-profile stealth campaign utilizing Japanese puzzle boxes, USB drives, AMD computers and videos on YouTube, then escalated quickly into a series of high profile events like a Los Vegas fountain and laser show which transmitted secret messages then captured in photographs or video used to help players solve online puzzles and even win a trip into outer space. The events took place in 12 major cities around the US, Australia, Canada, England, Germany, and Singapore. Over a million people were drawn to the website, and nearly 100,000 people registered and actively played during the four week game.

**“Who is Benjamin Stove”(WiBS)** Campbell-Ewald & GMD Studios, 2006: Mystery about a character who discovered an odd painting while was visiting his parents for the holidays. The painting was of a crop circle in a corn field that had the shape of an ethanol molecule, a shape that reappeared a number of times throughout the campaign. Notable because it was one of the first games to have forums on a website created and maintained by one of the central characters but moderated by experienced ARG players. This allowed players to deal with questions and comments relating to the game reality without involving a character who might be suddenly confronted with the reality that they were, in fact, fictional. The game was also notably unusual as a promotional campaign as it was not designed to promote a specific product, nor was the client revealed until several months into the campaign.

**“World Without Oil” (WWO)** ITVS/Electric Shadows/Ken Eklund 2007: Criticized for being a diversionary *timewaster* and collaborative work rather than an ARG as it claimed to be, WWO is significant because it was partially funded by a grant from the CPB, and subsequently touted as a “serious game” for the public good. WWO invited people from all walks of life to contribute “collective imagination” to confront a real-world issue: the predicted oil crisis. The game simulated the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis. It established a citizen “nerve center” to track events and share solutions. Anybody could play by creating a personal story – an email, phone call, blog post, video, photo, and so forth – that chronicled the imagined reality of their life in the crisis. The game encouraged excellence with daily awards and recognition for authentic and intriguing stories but there was no *puzzle trail* or central narrative storyline.

**“Year Zero” (YZ, Y0)** 42 Entertainment, 2007-?: Based on the Nine Inch Nails concept album of the same name, it is expected to have a follow-up, and a possible accompanying film or television project. Band front man Trent Reznor called the game “a new entertainment form” and also stated, in response to criticism regarding the promotion of the album, “The term 'marketing' sure is a frustrating one for me at the moment. What you are now starting to experience IS 'year zero'. It's not some kind of gimmick to get you to buy a record - it IS the art form... and we're just getting started. Hope you enjoy the ride.”

## APPENDIX C

### A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE “DEUS CITY” ARG INTERACTIVE STORYLINE

The main storyline of the “Deus City” ARG was written long before I ever knew what an ARG was. In 2003 I began my coursework at UT-Dallas, at which time I took a class entitled “Screenwriting” that would change the direction of my whole program. The class had one assignment: Write a fully submittible screenplay. At the end of the semester I had written the first version of a movie screenplay entitled “Deus Ex Machina,” set in an indeterminate futuristic Orwellian cyber noir “corporate bordello” in which the “Corporate Senate” has direct control over the government, and tracks everyone with a subcutaneous tracking chip. The main character was a 1930’s film noir “Sam Spade” style detective who hated the technological world he lived in, and was thereby able to solve crimes by using the older forgotten methods of yesteryear.

Three years later I hit upon the idea of using this story’s setting, characters, and general plot outline as the backbone for an online interactive story, and “Deus City” was born. The storyline below is told without regard to the specific player created elements of the game versus the *puppetmaster* created content, if for no other reason than in attempting to define that blurry line the story itself would become ridiculously complex if not entirely unfollowable.

The fictional “Deus City” ARG’s story officially began in 2006 when an insignificant blog (the first *trailhead*) appeared in the seemingly infinite sea of blogs that some call the blogosphere. The writer, not so surreptitiously named “Brackin” was an *in-game* version of myself who was working as the project leader of a team from the University of Texas at Dallas to make contact with themselves exactly one week into the future using what they called a “Space Laser.” The team’s progress and pitfalls were chronicled by my fictional counterpart “Brackin” on his blog, including the test fire of the laser as a countdown appeared on the team’s website at [www.deuscitey.com](http://www.deuscitey.com) for the project’s attempt at making contact with the future, an address chosen seemingly at random by the team’s entirely fictional technical supervisor nicknamed “Foo.”

At the appointed time a “live” video was broadcast on the project’s site via alleged YouTube placeholder files, thus showing the experiment. Foo was mysteriously absent, claiming later that he was locked in the server room, but it was hardly noticed, for at the appropriate firing time, the experiment went horribly “right” and the team received their first message from “Mustafa Tang Fujimoto,” CEO of “Defensecorp,” and the president, and majority leader of the Deus City Corporate Senate in the year 2036, who gives a

rather enigmatic plea for help, finishing with the game's catchphrase: "The future is coming. Can you change it?"

The plug was then mysteriously pulled on the project entirely and the team was disbanded. It was at this point that the players were first required to choose sides and lend support – a recurring theme of the game - through emails and blog posts players were able to discover the status of the team. Brackin is bitter over his removal from "his project", while Foo has re-emerged and is citing foul play for his prior absence, claiming he was locked in the server room by someone. He reveals that he still has a backdoor into the system and allows players to help him "hack the feed" in order to restore communications with the future.

Not long after, Foo's own Blog entitled "Foo-Defiant" emerged, as did more ambiguous messages from the future which implicated both men as perhaps having ulterior motives, such as those from a new character: The enigmatic "Brother Theophilus" whose pirated video messages predicted doom and apocalypse in stark contrast to the seemingly idyllic Utopia of Deus City being portrayed in the official corporate messages. It was revealed through player inquests that Fujimoto was none other than the future incarnation of Foo himself, and that there was significant evidence to suppose that Brother Theophilus was none other than the future Incarnation of Brackin who preached of a prophecy, a mysterious secret society which he called the "Sodality of Nostradamus," and a folio written by Nostradamus's apprentice "James Chavingy" which outlined the nuclear disaster and subsequent apocalyptic fall of civilization in 2012 and the beginning of World War III, which was ironically caused by the communication from the future of 2042 being cut off inexplicably and a worldwide panic which followed it.

Believing that the future could not be changed, and guided by the messages from his future self, Brackin changed his name to "Brother Theo" and set off on a quest, doggedly pursued by the authorities and those who would seek to stop him from reclaiming his technology, while through the help of players, Foo was able to wrest control of the technology back for himself and start his own company, which he somewhat fatalistically named "Defense-Corp" with the misguided intent of changing the future for the better of all. Meanwhile Brother Theo was tracked by players through a series of clues left by him on his new blog as he found the first of a series of hidden real-world folio pages from the "Folio of Nostradamus," until he was finally forced into hiding, where he did not emerge again except in vague passing for those enthusiastic players most loyal to him over the course of the game.

Through his newfound corporate structure, and with help from the future, Foo is able to gain a firm hold upon the Deus City interface and open the site to players for registration as "temporal agents." This marked the conclusion of the pre-game and the start of the main game on the deuscity.com homepage.

From this point the narrative became less linear. Players were assigned a district in which to perform investigations and were able to go to virtual locations on the site based

on their karma and prestige levels, and then spend virtual credits to attempt puzzle solves and find small pieces to the larger puzzle hidden within the districts of the futuristic Deus City. Players were also able to make contact with other players and in-game characters, including their “handler” which was also determined based on their personal Karma. Characters reacted differently based on this statistic until getting to know the player personally. Daily news articles from the future were also posted, giving clues to the important issues coming through from the Deus City corporation news filters. By working together and solving the mystery the players were able to discover a serial killer, solve multiple murders, and assist a revolutionary force in overthrowing the corporate government, creating a paradox and arguably preventing the city from ever having existed in the first place.

The story wrapped up using a very traditional format, the novella. This novella was essentially a novelized format of the original screenplay, with changes made to accommodate the players’ effects on the world where needed. This novella was released relatively quickly over the course of the final week, one chapter at a time, in various virtual locations around the city, as a way of summing up all of the major game related stories, and as one final puzzle requiring all of the players to work together, regardless of their *in-game* statistics. In the end, the story was quite well received by the players and critics, and the game was said to have “wrapped up nicely” and that “the players also seemed to appreciate it all” by Unfiction’s Sean Stacey in a private e-mail following the game to myself.

An untold number of subplots and side stories also existed which are now lost, including everyone’s own personal experiences within the game. Many were resolved and some were not, leaving room for a sequel and for speculation, much to the sadness of some players, but also mimicking the nature of reality in its many unsolved mysteries. In the end, the Deus City story was a collaborative work of fiction was a great success, gritty, visceral, and real, the likes of which could never have been told by any one person.

## APPENDIX D

### THE “DEUS CITY” END-OF-GAME NOVELLA:

A note from the author:

The following, is the 119-page novella conclusion to the “Deus City” Alternate Reality Game. It was delivered to the players in fourteen parts, including the thirteen central chapters of the novella proper, and the Epilogue. Each part was hidden around the city in virtual locations that could only be accessed by certain players, thus requiring them to work together to put it all back together into a standard narrative form. Here, for the first time is that narrative, in its entirety and in its proper order. The prologues one and two, which were released on the main game site at an earlier time than the rest have also been included in their original format for continuity purposes.

Originally a screenplay by which the puppetmasters guided the main story and thus the players of the “Deus City” ARG, this fully realized story was written into its current form as the game progressed rapidly towards completion with the intention of tying up any “loose ends,” and as one final alternative delivery method of content within the scope of the game. Other than the use of first person present tense, I feel that it is a pretty normal piece of fiction and I am proud of the way it came out. It allowed players to have one final, and for some a more comprehensive, look at the characters with whom they had been laughing, playing, fighting, and solving future mysteries for nearly a year; as well as the only character with whom they were never able to interact directly, the main character of the story: Detective N. Sawyer.

I hope it is as enjoyable to whoever chooses to read it, as it was for me to write my version of the “Deus City” story, with the help of all those many excellent players out there. I also apologize in advance to my mother for the casual swearing.

-Dr. Adam L. Brackin

**DEUS EX MACHINA:**  
**A DETECTIVE N. SAWYER MYSTERY**

by

Adam L. Brackin

## Prologue 1: Sawyer

I have been called a lot of things...

"Slob."

"Washout."

"Antique."

I don't deny it. After all, I got into this business when I was still young enough to care. Somebody told me once that I read too many books as a kid. Before the mega-corporations put all the books on aud-vid feeds and torched the others in the recyke plants. Before there was an intra-net monitor on every street corner which stored everything about you automatically. Before the skin-chips went live and Big Brother started tracking what our preferred brand of toilet paper and cigarettes were when we bought them.

Before they made life unlivable.

I guess it started when selling all the public utilities, public education, and public government to the highest private sector bidders actually made sense to a starving economy with a dying educational system and morally ambiguous national identity. With the gears of war grinding away everywhere else it was the best hope for salvation. Maybe the only hope for salvation.

With their new power, the corporate C.E.O.s lobbied themselves into permanent senatorial positions, and after a while an emergency practice became policy. There was no revolution. Nobody fought it. Nobody with the power to do anything about it anyway. The "corps" ushered in a new kind of world. A world where it made sense to have an Instant bank account, credit card, medical history and personal GPS tracker all rolled into one little digital signature. They injected the chips into our wrists. Wallets became

obsolete, checkbooks a historical novelty, old credit cards a collectible antique. One injection was the price of admittance to Eden. Personal freedom the cost of absolute security.

They said the truth was spherical, that tolerance was finally made possible, and that religion was obsolete. Too few argued. Why have faith in a godless world when man's own utopia was within reach? The crime rate dropped like a lead weight, those who were afraid of the omniscience of the chip were more afraid of starving. In a short generation, peace finally came. Who am I to judge?

Somebody once said technology progresses too fast for blame to be posted to any one identifiable man. But sometimes, when everything else is burned and blown away, identity is all you have left. To me though, it's all just like some dark dream, the kind where you lose yourself to something else and find yourself asking..

Who am I?

The system calls me "Private Detective GD111842-3PI, 3rd class: Freelance License."

Around here, though, they just tend to call me Sawyer.

Welcome to my city.

## Prologue 2: Deus City

The twenty-first century cityscape of light, metal, and glass that is Deus City was in the distance beyond the trees and grass of the *Mercer Club* golf course. A sparkling white golf ball sat in a sand bunker a few feet away from the short grass green where a red flag marked the eighteenth hole cup. The smiling, red haired man in his thirties was wearing an ostentatious red golfing outfit and hat. He was a handsome man, walking alone, pulling his large-wheeled golf bag behind him down into the sand bunker. He had a handheld PDA in his free hand, which due to an extravagant overuse of technology was indicating the ball's position on the course.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as he sat his bag upright, and touched the electronic wonder. It emitted a happy digital chitter and on the two-inch screen a friendly-looking animated digital caddy program appeared. The smiling virtual caddy intoned its advice in a tinny happy voice as a cartoon bubble emerged from his digital mouth with the same words: "*Sand Trap. 18th Hole, 15.75 feet away. Pitching wedge recommended sir!*" The man slid the data pad into his breast pocket then withdrew a club from the upright bag. He glanced to the sky in irritation as a rumble of thunder echoed across the green, then cleared his throat and set up his final shot.

At the apex of his swing Lightning struck. His scream was a horrible chilling yell which died into a muted gurgle. He fell over dead in the sand, cooked and smoking, his data pad slid out of his pocket and flopped into the sand. Steam rose from the charred dead man. There was a moment of nothing. Then, a shadow fell over the dead man as heavy, fat drops of rain plop, plop, plopped onto the sand beside him making tiny craters in the smooth sand. The rain quickly became a torrential downpour. The shadow grew larger and everything around became darker. The smiling animated caddy on the data pad read "Error" - just one of the many things in Deus City about to die.

## Chapter 1: Deus Ex Machina

It's late afternoon, but inside *Sam's Café* it's a dark brownish-gray that matches the pouring rain outside. It has been drenching rain for days and the weather feeds have promised only more to come. I am hiding from the waterlogged world at my regular table, sipping coffee from my steaming blue mug of black liquid and reflecting peacefully on my surroundings. It is dark except for the series of dim hanging cones mixed with the ambient glow of the computer monitors. *Sam's* is one of those retro early 20<sup>th</sup> century style places that are so fashionable nowadays. If you took everything from the 1939 "Futurama" exhibit and slapped a modern corporate logo on it, you'd pretty much have the world summed up.

In here, every table sports its own tiny wireless keyboard and sugar caddy crammed with little white packets stamped "surplus." The sugar is for the coffee, but I never use it. The keyboards are for the flat screens embedded in the dark yellow wall above it like little windows into the virtual world. Unfortunately I do use that. *Sam* keeps the default setting at rotating art. Right now they are showing selections from early Surrealism. De Chirico I think. Most places it's a trick to avoid screaming newscasters, brainwashing commercials, or something equally disturbing. My keyboard is shoved out of the way as usual, to make room for my things, namely the steaming mug and a half-crushed open pack of stale cigarettes.

That's usually about when Bishop explodes into the place with all the grace and courtesy of a dam bursting. Today is no exception. "Sawyer!" he screeches, waving his arms at me from across the room and splattering water everywhere. "This is totally insane! You are not going to believe this one my man!" I stare into my coffee mug so as not to encourage him. It never works, but I do it anyway.

I don't remember the exact circumstances when I met Bishop. Nearly a third my age, he is a skinny twenty-something nerd with dark rimmed glasses and a contagious nervous smile. His dark brown hair is always slicked back over his sharp nose and big ears whether it's raining or not, and commendably I suppose, he is consistently clean-shaven and washed. Today of course, his skintight pullover shirt and slim-fit black jeans are soaked clean through, pushing him past *washed* into something closer to drowned rat. His black sneakers squeak on the linoleum as he stumbles towards me. He is overloaded as usual with all manner of gadgets and computer junk, but somehow he juggles well enough to prevent his thin black leather briefcase, PDA, and whatever else he has from slipping away and flying in a wet streak across the room.

I look up slowly from my cup and cast him my usual bored gaze. I haven't seen him in days but I am still sitting in the same chair and wearing the same white shirt under my gray trench coat as I had been the last time I saw him. I haven't shaved in even longer than that, and calling my defiant stubble a beard would probably be more accurate.

Bishop flops into the chair opposite me, his usual spot. His lips never stop flapping. His words are always a constant stream when he talks - a sort of throwback to the ADHD generation, but he strikes me as particularly fidgety and nervous right now. More so than usual, I suppose I should say. Honestly, though, abnormal psychology never was my area. While waiting for him to get to the point, I grab a cigarette from the table with my dominant left hand and stick it in my mouth. Jamming my fist into my coat pocket I root around for a pack of matches, but come up empty. I knew there was something I needed to pick up. I let the cigarette dangle limply and reluctantly give in to the knowledge that a conversation with Bishop is inevitable.

Sam shoots me a gaze from behind the bar. She's a handsome woman if you get down to it, always standing behind the bar, washing out multicolored mugs

or cooking something up. I'd guess that her name is probably Samantha or Samara but I never bothered to ask since I'm about a quarter century too old for her anyway. She has these watchful and piercing blue eyes as if she's always standing guard for something, and I'd swear she never misses a tick. Her short platinum blonde hair and no-nonsense expression compliment her waitress' dress and light yellow apron. Right now it is painted with annoyance. I get the impression that she hates everything about Bishop, sees him as an annoying punk kid. I get the impression that she hates him more when he gets into a panicky rant.

She's a wise woman.

"What are we going to do?" he barks. "This is the third independent security registry revision this month! I mean how many times are they going to pull this crap on us? If they don't ease up on the *corp* pressure we may have to apply for a *725-b clearance code* if we don't want to forfeit our cases to one of the mid-city security contracts before registering any more freelance!" I try not to look too interested. It isn't hard. "You have any idea what kind of licensing fines that would rack up?" He asks as though I care. "And our finances aren't exactly on the high end if you know what I mean! I mean look at this!" He wiggles in his chair as though trying to get comfortable and points at his data pad display with his skinny pale index finger. I cross my arms and make no effort to even look at it. "How many times are they going to change corporate policy before they decide... hey is that decaf?"

I take advantage of the pause while Bishop turns and motions with his thumb to Sam like a freeway hitchhiker to bring him the coffee.

"Who cares?" I say. "We don't *have* any cases."

"What!" Bishop snaps back to attention, his head bobbing like a carnie bobble-head doll. "Well not at this exact moment, no, but you never know when we might get some, uh..."

"Overflow?" I suggest.

"Uh, yea, overflow! Exactly!" Bishop says, flashing me his skeleton smile. "Take that thing with Transcorp for example!" I stare blankly across my coffee at him. "You have to be kidding me! Sheesh Sawyer, don't you watch the news?"

"Nope." I reply "Too many synth-beer commercials."

"Oh for god's sake! Here, check this out then." The twerp touches his digital pad twice with a finger. "It just came down from the filter a few minutes ago. I caught it watching the Red District feed on the rail in." The screen on the wall flicks from a flowery garden scene to a flashy Culturecorp news article unabashedly titled '*Can Transcorp Train Cops?*' The vid is of various men in their iconic grey Transcorp Security uniforms prancing around in formations looking confused and stupid as usual.

"See!" He says triumphantly, "Transcorp's flooded, can't handle the strain. Got this new problem with some fraudulent insurance claim scam or something, it's our opportunity! What I'm talking about! Get some real clients and a corp-endorsed license protocol override! Avoid the usual non-corp fines for being freelance completely. You know, the usual bull--"

Just then Sam throws down an empty orange coffee mug with complete disregard for whatever bishop is saying. In one smooth motion with her other hand, she tips a steaming river of coffee from the glass pot into it, causing him to snatch his data pad from the table and jump back in surprise. "Decaf this time?" she asks me. Her steely eyes pierce me hard. She's about had it with my little counterpart. I look back to him. He's still dripping water, wringing out his shirt onto the floor next to him as he slops back into his chair.

"No way." I say.

"You still having trouble sleeping?" she says.

"No." I lie.

Lightning flashes outside. *In my head it lights up the image of a fiery-red-haired effeminate dead Priest in purple robes. His body lies sprawled on an elaborately inlaid marble floor. The man looks surprised. Possibly because an alarming amount of blood is pooling near his head.* I blink away the memory of the dream.

"That's what I thought." She tells me, nodding to the pot of decaf in her hand. *"This is what you need."*

"You got what *I* need Sam." Bishop says bringing the steaming orange mug to his lips. His timing needs a little work. So does his delivery for that matter. "Give it to me baby!" He says, before taking a long draw from the cup.

Sam pours hot coffee into my mug, her expression unchanged. "I do know what you need Bishop," she says. "Here." She turns, smiles, and pours all but a little of the rest of the hot black liquid directly into Bish's lap. For the second time in a minute, he jumps up, this time sending his chair flying backwards. Hot coffee sprays from him like a wet dog. He dances around swearing and screaming like a teenage girl. I turn my head away so he won't see me smile to myself, hiding my amusement in my fresh coffee cup. Bishop is trying to wipe himself off but keeps burning his hands every time. "I've got some valuable property down there!" he whines. "Oh Damn! My Data pad!" Bishop scrambles to wipe the coffee off of his palm pilot. Sam refills Bishop's cup a quarter of the way with what little is left in the pot.

"Oops." Sam says. "Looks like I need more." She turns on her heel and walks away smiling.

"What's her problem tonight?" bishop asks me.

I look up from my mug and size up the skinny pervert before me. "The usual, I think."

"That's not funny." He says. I smile to myself all over again, but I'm unable to hide in my mug this time. Bishop doesn't notice though, he's

reaching down for his briefcase. He snaps it open on the table, tapping the palm pilot twice with his finger and tossing it into the open case. The table monitor pops briefly to the Grey District's I-corp corporate logo then back to Sam's default rotating art. It's French impressionist. I forget which one. "I'm getting out of here before I get all *dry* or anything; let me know what you want to do about the seven-two-five and the Transcorp situation. I have to run to *Spanner's* anyway to see if he's got our *sniffer* ready, maybe say hello to the fine ladies up in Northpoint while I'm at it!"

Bishop talks himself out the door. Sam looks up at the departing Bishop with disgust. I'm wondering if she's going to throw something at him to help him along when he stops cold. "Oh yea!" he says. "Spanner told me to tell you not to put it that close to a *mag-coil* next time or he's double charging you an inconvenience fee. I swear I'm going to stop loaning you my toys Sawyer if you don't learn to use them properly... By the way, you have a message."

Bishop points back towards the screen then leaves, clutching his briefcase to his chest. I can see him through the big window where the 'open' sign flickers. He pulls his shirt over his head, and runs out into the stormy street, nearly in the direct path of a trashy auto-cab going too fast. I turn back to the monitor. The art is gone again. I guess *Big Brother* has found me. My digital mailbox is up and flashing text at me. The prompt "*1 new message*" is displayed on the screen. I sigh, reach up and tap the screen. I know that the embedded scanner in the screen has just read the *subcue* chip stuck in my wrist, confirmed my identity, and told database to charge me for the four cups of black and one decaf I've drunk tonight. There goes my life savings.

The message pops onto the screen. I take a long swig of the coffee, finishing it off. The decaf tastes like socks and dirt, but I don't really even care. Finally I reach up and touch the little grey icon on the screen that causes a small hard copy printout of the message to spit out on

overpriced low quality paper recyke from a hidden slot under the monitor,  
which I snatch and stare at for a long moment. It says simply:

Deus Ex Machina

5 p.m.

Red Line

## Chapter 2: Skiver

A grey *Transcorp* magnetic monorail train with a green stripe zooms past at incredible speed without stopping, and is gone. The sun is setting with a green and purple glow behind the lights of the Grey District's city skyline. The rain has lightened up. It falls in a mist over the platform and its two parallel tracks where on the other line, a train with a dark blue stripe sits, its sliding doors wide open. It's the rush hour, and the platform is full of businessmen and women in suits, the aforementioned train having just belched them out to finish their daily commute on foot. They are chameleons, the odd few who have somehow scratched their way up from the factory floor in some I-corp fab plant to middle management across town. They are the ones who are playing the game the way it's meant to be played. The ones who society calls a success. Who am I to judge?

Each suit walks through the turnstile checkpoint, passing their right hand under the scanner as they do so, scanning, tracking, cataloging. The numerous advertisements and billboards shift to display the most demographically appropriate benefits of the grey district's corporate providers: *Intellicorp* Communications, *N-Corp* industries, and *Transcorp* rail lines.

A light wind swirls various papers and trash around the platform as the bulk of the crowd filters out. I'm standing with my arms crossed leaning against an out of the way pillar on the rail-side of the checkpoint. I'm wearing my favorite brown fedora pulled low over my brow. Bishop says I'm a walking cliché, I say whatever works, works.

I've never been much for mysterious messages. Waste of time by my book. There are a few basic rules for good detective work, and the first is "don't waste time." I pull back my right coat sleeve and check my watch. That's one hour wasted. I'm considering how much longer I'm actually going to stand

here, when a second train pulls in from the other direction on the other track. It's the Red Line express. Right on time. My watch changes from 4:59 to 5:00 with a digital pip.

Of course on a slow week, there's always an exception to the rules. Anything to take your mind off of bad times and bad dreams. Plus the red line train only has one stop in Grey District. No surprise considering that the Upper Crust typically doesn't find its way down to where the crumbs fall. Then it happens.

A woman in the crowd screams. I snap back to attention, but there is confusion, nothing obvious other than a small crowd quickly forming at the edge of the platform. I make my way over to the crowd. Two of Grey district's *Transcorp Security* men are already there. They are wearing the same grey officer uniforms as the clueless sods in Bishop's video; from their confused expression to the shield badges clipped to their shirts. I spot a Lieutenant among them. His badge is a not-too-subtle variant emblazoned with golden rays pinned to his flat-topped hat. I take note of their belts, each equipped with a gun, cuffs and other typical police paraphernalia and make a mental not to tick any of them off.

"Transcorp Security! Step aside please!" One of them bellows. "What happened here?" This time it is the Lieutenant.

"He slipped!" I hear somebody say.

"The rain" says someone else. "He fell!"

Looking down past the heads of those peering down the side of the station in the gap between the platform and the rail, I see the dead broken body a few stories below the closest track. The man is face-down, but I can still make out that he is a thin, dark skinned Latino in his mid-thirties with oily jet black hair. Blood is oozing away from him. He has obviously just fallen. An odd sense of *deja vu* washes over me that I can't shake, but

I'm able to step back a few feet before the dizziness makes me the sequel. I look towards the sky instead and let the cold mist hit my face.

"All right, we'll take care of this." I hear the security man say. I blink away the moisture from my eyes and see him pull out his small comm. device. "Central, we have a possible jumper on the Mid City Red Line, please give me an S.Q. ident scan for a body about 20 meters below me." By then, the lieutenant spots me and makes a bee line. He speaks. The contempt in his voice is obvious. "Well, well. If it isn't Detective Sawyer!" Apparently my reputation has preceded me. Or at least his hasn't. I strain my revisionist's memory to find the guy's name, but I draw a blank. "And what prey tell, is a Private... *Dick* such as yourself doing here?"

"Catching a train." I tell him. "You?"

"You watch yourself Sawyer!" He says. "It's just a matter of time before they pass the law that lets me haul your scruffy hide in. Freelance license or not, I ought to cart you in now for loitering."

"At least I haven't sold my soul to the system." I say. "How many proofs of purchase did you have to send in for that nifty badge?" Oh well, so much for not ticking them off.

"Oh that's it!" he says "I'm putting you in for-" He doesn't get to finish. One of his men is shouting at him. Instead he scowls and turns. "What is it Samuels?"

"We got a *skiver* here, no *ident chip*!" The man called Samuels shouts back.

"Another one? Damn." Suddenly he forgets about me. "All right, call the *Sci-* and *Medicorp* chumps in. They can't see skivers on their network. We'll let them handle cleanup, but alert *Intellicorp* media first! Make sure they get first coverage. Red District's *Culturecorp* media would love to plaster another friggin' '*I-Corp* God-killer victim' on the news feeds.

The Lieutenant Turns back to me. His mouth is an obscene gash. "And as for you, why don't you go catch your train before I get too bored." He starts to turn but decides to get cute instead. "And get a shave you pathetic slob," he says "Grey doesn't suit you." I decide he's right. I turn, cock my hat and walk away from the crowd.

"Dick." I whisper under my breath. If I was paying more attention I'd have seen her there on the station. Well dressed, extremely voluptuous and quite out of place as she turned from the crowd and followed me with her icy green eyes. She is young and beautiful with fiery red lips and lush mounds of red curly hair that cascade over her shoulders. On her head is a little red hat which is held in place with large hat pins. She is wearing a very professional red coat over her short red business skirt and white stockings. She has on white elbow length gloves. Her high heeled patent leather bag and matching red shoes complete the look. She looks in every way the classic femme fatale. The kind I swore never to get involved with. If I'd been paying attention, that is.

But instead I miss it when she reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a small device. I don't notice when her eyes dart to it, then back to me. I don't know that she watches me go, oblivious to her watchful emerald eyes as I trot all the way out of the station and down the wet streets back towards Sam's and sanity. I never see her open her matching red umbrella as the rain picks back up and the last rays of sunlight are banished by the cold darkness of nighttime storms.

Yea, on a slow week there's always an exception. Unfortunately this wasn't going to be a slow week. Women have a way of doing that. Coincidentally, that's the second rule.

I tend to break it too.

### Chapter 3: Tara Mercer

It is pouring rain outside again, and the only low light is from the hanging lamps on the inside of the café and the single streetlamp on the corner which can be seen through the big window at the front. All the table monitors are black now. I hear the occasional thunder in the distance from time to time, usually accompanying a slight flicker in the hanging lights and a quick line of static in the monitors. I'm only one in the Café except for Sam behind counter. Sometimes she lets me stay past closing for no real reason. Usually I take her up on it.

The door chime sounds and a drop-dead gorgeous woman decked in red from head to toe enters the Cafe with a big red umbrella. She shakes the water off of her umbrella as she closes it and brushes a limp lock of her red hair back over her ear.

"I'm closing." Sam tells her.

Drop-dead ignores Sam and instead sashays over to where I'm nursing a whole new coffee in a dark green mug. Without so much as a nod, she sits down and pulls out a slim cigarette from her purse. Lightning flashes the world outside white, and the thunder is loud and close. The lights in the café flicker hard. In my head a red haired woman thrashes about in a pool. All I can see is churning water and the red one piece swimsuit she is wearing on her voluptuous body. I try but I can't see her face.

I shake myself out of the memory of the dream and wince. The lights are back on. I blink and jam my thumbs into my temples. Drop-dead is smiling at me from across the table. I cross my arms and stare right back across the table at her. I hope I'm regaining my composure and taking on my usual expressionless look. Out of the corner of my eye I see Sam give me a dirty look before turning her back on us to finish cleaning the bar and close up.

"My name is Tara Mercer, Detective..." She says. "You may know of my late-husband?" In the window the neon "open" sign flickers off. Sam is making a show of closing up. I'm honored.

"I'm not a Detective," I say. "I drink coffee."

"Come now Mr. Sawyer," she says, "I'm a busy woman. I need your particular expertise in a delicate matter concerning my husband. Do you have a light?"

"Quit." I say. "How did you find me here? And why do you assume I am who you think I am?" The lie is a weak one, and her smile matches it. She pushes the unlit cigarette back into her purse, she pulls off her gloves and folds them, placing them into the purse, then pulls out a tube of red lipstick and a handkerchief instead. Then she speaks again.

"My husband's profession allows me a certain, freedom in these regards." she says. "People interest me Mr. Sawyer. I consider myself something of a student of human nature."

"What's that to me?" I ask her.

She lowers the purse to her side and opens the tube of lipstick, smoothly brushing back a limp lock of wet red hair. She begins applying the stick to her luscious lips.

"I have a favor to ask of you Mr. Sawyer," She says. "A delicate matter which you are in the unique position to do something about. I have become aware of some embarrassing events which recently took place, and I can't help but feel at least partially responsible for them." Behind the counter Sam rolls her eyes. She is standing with her arms crossed, a dirty dishrag dangling from her fingertips, and I'd wager more than a few dirty words dangling from her tongue. "These events had caused some bad publicity for my husband in his particular line of work, and someone somewhere is trying desperately to undermine our good name."

I sit with my arms crossed. My cold expression relays my mild interest, but not so much in what's coming out of her mouth as what's going onto it. "Unfortunately, due to certain new high-profile security policies, we have been unwilling to risk his corporate investments and political influence in a possible public affair." She says. I watch as she caps the lipstick and blots her lips with the handkerchief. "Because of your special ability Mr. Sawyer to move - shall we say - '*off* the record?' You alone may be able to help me." She places the handkerchief on the table. A dark red lip print is on it. "My husband was a wealthy man Mr. Sawyer," she says, "and though you must understand that I cannot officially hire you for your services, I trust that you will check to see that your accounts are in order and consider my predicament."

Before I can process what she's saying, drop-dead stands up from the table, adjusts her hat and her purse strap, then turns to go. "Good day Detective Sawyer." She says over her shoulder. She makes it as far as the door, when Bishop, with his usual timing, and soaked to the bone from the storm walks up with his briefcase over his head and knocks loudly on the glass shouting something none of us can hear.

Tara opens the door from the inside. Bishop holds the door for her awkwardly - an afterthought I'm sure. He fumbles with his case while letting in the storm and blocking her way all at the same time. He continues to stand in the doorway stupidly, as she lowers her head, excuses herself and brushes past and opens her umbrella.

Bishop just stands in the open doorway, wind and rain sweeping past him. He cranes his neck as Tara passes around the corner and past the big window. "The pleasure is all mine!" He shouts towards the storm. "Va-va-va voom!" He has all the subtlety of a hand grenade. Not that matters, she's long gone by the time he's said it.

"Close the door Bishop before I make you mop that floor yourself!" It's Sam. Bishop grins, he looks mildly embarrassed, steps inside, and lets the door close behind him as he nearly slips on the wet floor again. He talks himself to the table, his words a constant stream as usual. Act two, scene one, and Bishop is the leading man.

"I hate the rain!" he says. "What's the point of all this water anyway? Course I don't really hate the rain so much, it's the lightning, y'know? Power outages, power surges! Zzzt! I wouldn't be afraid of actual lightning or anything, not like that guy, what was he? Senator, got fried last week, the sucker! Zzzzzt!!" Bishop shakes water in every direction as he demonstrates the lightning strike effect on a human body. For the briefest moment I wonder if I might ever be that lucky. He sloshes into the chair across from me. It looks like he's been running around in the rain since I saw him leave. I saw a drowned rat in a gutter once in a back alley. It looked better than he does. "Course they say you have a better chance of winning the corporate lottery than actually being hit by lightning. I wonder if-" His voice trails off to some inner monologue I'm glad I can't hear, as he examines his briefcase for water damage and searches for something to wipe it down with.

"I'd rather be hit by lightning." I tell him.

"You would!" he says. "Speaking of which, the I-Corp Bank either made a serious error today or you are holding out on me because I got notice about an hour ago that our account balance seriously shot-" again he trails away, he's spotted the handkerchief. "And... What the hell is this?" He picks up the red lip-printed handkerchief, looking at it, then at the door where Mrs. Mercer had made her escape, then finally at me for an explanation.

"Just exactly who was that red hot thing that just walked out of here Sawyer? Friend of yours?" I ignore his intense stare long enough for him to

feel awkward. He glances down then to me then at the handkerchief and back again. Then it hits me.

"So... Our accounts are in order?" I ask.

"Waaaait a freaking minute! We got a client? We got a job! Red-hot's hired us?!" Bishop jerks forward in triumphant if not epileptic celebration. His hair slaps forward flipping yet more water onto the table as he grabs the hanky and waves it around like a victory flag. Or possibly a white flag of surrender.

I look down at the place on the table where the handkerchief had been moments before. A very small shimmery translucent bag about the size of my thumb sits on the table with three identical, tiny rice-like metal objects in it. Slow horror mixed with curiosity crawls down my spine as recognition sets in. Bishop sees the same thing, because he stops convulsing and slowly picks it up, dangling the bag between his forefinger and thumb like a used prophylactic.

"Are these...? Oh crap they are! Sawyer, what are you doing with these! They could strip your license if they saw you with these! More importantly they could strip my core access privileges if they saw me with you with these!" He looks around in a panic, then drops the tiny bag onto the table next to the wall behind the keyboard. I glance at it casually before raising my coffee mug to my lips.

"I've always liked the rain," I say. "It washes the garbage out of the gutters and the blood off of the rails." Bishop stops looking around nervously and stares untrustingly at me instead.

"What blood?" he says, and suddenly we're at work.

"That message I got today was written in it," I say. "Somebody with a sick sense of humor got me out to the train station today to watch a skiver end himself."

"A skiver?" he says unbelieving. "You mean an illegal with no ident chip?" I love it when he states the obvious. Bishop lets out a long low whistle before continuing. "Man you can't take a legal piss without a subcutaneous identity chip!" He looks again at the three identity chips in the shiny bag he tossed behind the keyboard. "So wh-who's chips were they?"

"Good question." I say, "Lets find out."

"Sawyer, no!" He says quickly, "We can't just scan them here, what if they are hot-listed... or worse! If those chips are flagged in any way then in two minutes they will have I-corp Security crawling all over us! I know! I used to work for data fraud, not that I have to tell you that... Are you listening to me damn it?"

While Bishop protests, I tap on the dark cafe monitor screen and it instantly springs to my familiar I-corp desktop interface. I tap the telephone icon and the expected vid-phone dialing window appears. "Welcome to I-net," the no-nonsense male voice of Intellicorp says. "To place a call, please scan your identity chip for payment confirmation and state the name of the person you wish to call." Various Ads also appear on the screen - the reason I usually avoid the phone at all costs, but this is different. This is work.

Bishop is pouting. He's never liked risk-taking that didn't involve a virtual alias, and multiple levels of anti-tracer encryption. "Why do you never listen to me any more?" he says.

"Because you talk too much." I tell him. I peel open the clear little bag and empty the three metallic rice-like chips into my left hand. Closing my left thumb over one of the chips, I roll the other two back into the bag and set it back onto the table. Bishop merely crosses his arms, leans back in his chair, and mumbles to himself.

"I'm telling you! That can't work!" he whines. "Those things automatically deactivate when they are removed from a human body, there is no possible way for you to just scan one like that."

Still holding the chip clenched in my left hand, I pass it under the wall monitor's hidden scanner. The general color scheme of the screen changes to red. "Identity confirmed." The voice of I-corp says. "We regret that you have insufficient funds to place this call. Thank you for choosing Intellicorp."

"Look like this chip belongs to a broke priest." I say, looking at the name attached to the bank credit balance that has helpfully appeared on the screen. "Somebody named Father Beck."

Bishop jerks forward in shock to look at the screen. "What?! That's impossible. Gotta be a database error, you can't have a live chip outside of a dead person!"

"Yea, I'll give you that. It doesn't make much sense. But if this chip is still active, then maybe this priest is still alive. Can you find me a last known address for him? I'm starting to take an interest in the priesthood." Bishop grabs the keyboard in front of him, typing wildly, the threat of corporate fallout eclipsed by his techno-fetish for information retrieval. The screen rapidly changes as reams of information scroll past faster than humanly possible. He shakes his head at me in disbelief and a second later we are hacked into the city's raw data feed.

"Whatever you say Sawyer, I just work here" he says. "But as for me, I prefer cold... hard... facts!" Each of Bishop's last 3 words is punctuated by a keystroke on the board in front of him. I let a slight smile slip out around the edges for his dramatic flair and a page of biographical information scrolls onto the screen.

"And here we are!" he says. "Looks like your priest lived in Grey's old downtown sector. Rough neighborhood." Bishop hits a combination of keys with

a flourish and the monitor spits out a small paper with a name and address on it.

"I think I can handle it." I tell him. "I have another job for you." I reach into my pocket and push the now-wrinkled first message I received over to Bishop.

"Duce Ecks Match-in-uh? What is this, Latin?"

"I think it's a literary term. Somebody sent it to me to get me out to the station tonight. God-something. Look it up, it won't kill you." Bishop wrinkles his nose at the notion. Probably because he can do this without any kind of password cipher or hack program. Then, without another word I down the last of my coffee, snatch the printout away from the wall, and grab my hat before making my way towards the door and the downpour that awaits me.

"And figure out who those other two lonelies are," I shout back to him, "If they are dead I want obit's. I'll be back in an hour."

"Okay then, well I'll just sit here... then, and get arrested then while you go and do whatever it is you... do... then!" He mutters to himself, thinking I can't hear him. "I deserve a raise." Bishop turns toward the bar behind him. "Hey waitress, how bout some--"

A loud clatter and a girly yell is the last thing I hear as the door shuts behind me. I put on my hat, pausing long enough to pull my coat tight around me before I walk out into the stormy night.

#### Chapter 4: St. Ajmeri's Holy Church of the United Faith

It's not raining as hard as before, but high, and long lightning throws away the shadows briefly before giving me back to the dark, empty, wet street. The thunder rolls and echoes down between the tall buildings down the dark wet streets of the old city. The cracked sidewalk is illuminated in small pockets by the dented flickering lamp posts every few meters, more out of formality than practical need. Water gushes along the gutters and down the drain, carrying trash and paper along with it - a much needed and long overdue service.

Probably because of the late hour displayed on a distant clock tower - which makes up part of what little of the brightly lit city skyline can be seen between the narrow gaps of the buildings - I can hear the sound of cars and a magnetic train shooting past a few blocks away. Boarded up and broken windows make up most of the first floor of the row-house buildings and apartments I'm passing. What few gray signs and ads are plastered about betray the fact that Intellicorp, Transcorp, and the other Wright industries are still the dominant corporations in Grey district's slummy old downtown.

I walk down the sidewalk past the abandoned buildings to where a large High-Gothic cathedral complete with flying buttresses and an old and damaged glowing stained-glass rose window sits nestled between trashy high-rise condos. It is dirty grey stone on the outside, and is without doubt very old. Pre-war I'd say. A small yellow light streams from the small open door set inside of the enormous intricately carved wooden double door portico at its front. The wood and stone relief is that strange blend of Judeo-Christian and Muslim Iconography characterized by the only corporate sanctioned-religion known as the "Holy United Faith."

Before I decide to take a case I always follow four simple rules. First, I Never waste time on the dead-ends. Second, never get involved with

the rich beautiful woman who wants to hire you. Next, never get involved in politics. And finally, never, ever, get involved with religion.

I step into the street, my foot splashing into a hidden hole masquerading as a shallow puddle. I stop for a brief second then shaking of the wet filth, continue across towards the church. I step up to the church portico, well-lit by a nearby well-intentioned street lamp. Numerous smiling posters of Senator Alexis Wright declaring "Have it the Wright way!" are here, having been plastered in a repeating pattern along the inside wall of the portico. Oh well, the damned rules just get in the way anyway.

I test the small wooden portal of the church, set inside the massive double doorway. I don't enter though; I stop instead to glance at the sign above the door. *St. Ajmeri's Holy Church of the United Faith* it says, and lightening flashes causing me to jump a little at the brightness. I blink away the pain and over my shoulder from across the street, I could swear I see a man's face in a doorway, shrouded in darkness stealing a glance at me. I try to focus and turn around but the man has melted into the dark shadows and is gone. If he was ever there. I really have to get some sleep. I allow myself a brief moment of thought to stare across the street before turning back to the still open door of the cathedral and stepping inside.

It is pitch dark in the farthest reaches of the high-gothic pantheon cathedral. Central lighting, hidden among the twisted support pillars and nearby the many iconoclastic sculptures, combined with hundreds of flickering candles reveal that the interior of the church is even more ornate inside than out. Unlike the dirty street outside, this place is well kept and clean. An eerie wordless medieval chant melody winds its way through the chapel. Digital devotion for electric monks. The tall arcades and intricate stained glass windows light up with the occasional lightning flash. It casts an eerie rainbowed kaleidoscope of colors in all shapes and sizes strobing into the church. A narrow ledge with a railing hugs every wall just below the base of

the high windows, where the clearstory meets the lower arcade. The high central dome and vaulted ceiling top the ornately inlaid floor of the crossing beyond the vast worship area, where double rows of highly sculpted columns with inlaid mosaic patterns break apart the long rows of numerous wooden pews. These face forward toward the great altarpiece in the apse and choir.

The massive choir centerpiece reminds me of something I saw in a book once, back when there were books. I think it was called "The Ecstasy of St. Theresa" by some dead bastard named Bernini. The mind is a strange thing, but I don't linger on it. Either way this one is filled with mighty life-sized angelic figures clad in roman armor, engaged in a horrific battle with various writhing demonic creatures. Neither side is clearly winning this spiritual stalemate cast in stone and golden metal from what I can tell, but then I've never been much on theology.

The sculpture undulates from the base of the high choir windows, obscuring the walkway, down to the inlaid floor of the crossing. When the lightning flashes through the high stained glass Choir arcades, it casts the tormented angels and beasts into stark relief, giving them momentary life as they struggle and strain together.

I step gingerly past the wooden threshold as lightning flashes briefly lighting up the wet street through the dark hole behind me. The wooden door creaks closed and I hear my shoe squeak painfully as I step in the direction of the central aisle of the cathedral.

Some day maybe I'll learn to follow the rules, but it won't be today. Instead, I take another squeaky step inside and stand in the entranceway proper, removing my wet hat with my left hand. I scan the length of the Nave facing the magnificent sculpture at the far end of the central walkway of inlaid grey stone that makes up the floor.

"Do you seek refuge from the storm my son?" a soft-spoken voice from the shadows says. I turn on it, half surprise reaction, half relief. A man steps into the weak light from the shadows near the doorway behind where I'm standing. He is a short dark-skinned man in his 30's. His trim jet-black beard frames his handsome Middle-Eastern features that compliment his thick Middle-Eastern accent. He wears a flowing purple priest's robe with golden trim inside of which his crossed arms hide.

"Among other things." I say, squaring up my shoulders.

"Other things?" He says

"The answer to a mystery." I say. "I'm looking for a priest. Father Beck. Is he here?"

"Ahh... a pilgrim!" He says, his round face breaking into a crisp white smile. "Come pilgrim. We shall attempt to find your truth." He gives me a knowing glance before gliding towards the front of the cathedral. I look around the entryway, peering deep into the dark shadows for whatever else might have slipped my notice, but there is nothing. So I turn and follow the Priest down the long stone nave.

"Truth? Does the church still deal in truth?" I say "I was under the impression that the media had exclusive rights nowadays." The priest casts me a whimsical smile and chuckles.

"Do you not know the nature of the truth?" he asks. "The truth is spherical pilgrim. All truth perspectives are viable when we realize that Yahweh-Allah-God reveals himself to each of us in a way that we can best understand."

"I'm Sorry, what are you talking about?" I say.

"I mean that to me you are merely a pilgrim, another in a long line of truth-seekers." He explains. "But to yourself you are many things. What I can not say, I am but a humble servant of Deus."

"Are you Father Beck or not?" I'm talking louder than I mean to, partially because he is walking faster than me. He stops and turns, allowing me to catch up. We stand there silently for a minute as the priest sizes me up."

"No." he says flatly. "I am Father Ziod." His smile comes back and he says. "Tell me pilgrim, why do you seek the dead among the living?"

"So he is dead then... How and when?"

"Come, I will show you," says Ziod, and he resumes his walk towards the front of the church. He walks quickly for such a small man. It takes an effort for me to stay at his side, my coat-tails brushing past the many rows of pews until we finally reach the wide open central crossing of the cathedral, below the great dome of the church to where the base of the monstrous sculpture meets the stone floor.

"Yahweh-Allah-God loves all creatures infinitely," he tells me. "It is for this reason that we have such diversity on our terrestrial plain."

"Yahweh-Allah-God?" I say, "What happened to just-plain-God?"

He Smiles at this. "Yes my son, the one true god is too big for any one name, his love is in all mankind. All things, all creation, even 'the fallen', though the Virgin Saint Dairine of the Blue Veil did teach us that we must also-"

"What fallen?" I say. I know he's toying with me, but something in my gut tells me that I'm getting closer.

"Er, yes. Some of us fall, others of us have fallen. Yet others do not survive the fall... Such it was with Father Beck."

Bingo. "You speak in riddles." I say. "Did Father Beck... Fall?"

"You are now seeing the truth behind the truth aren't you?" He says.

"What are you telling me? That he literally fell? That he died by falling from a great height?" As I'm saying it some trick of the light draws my attention and I glance up to where the furthest of the epic statues

struggle against one another in their permanent wrestling rage. Right on cue the lightning flashes behind the high clerestory stained glass, casting a long horrible shadow of the two topmost statues merging and spreading them all the way down the slope in a strobing flash of colors. The shadow betrays itself as the shape of a man not unlike how one might appear if he should he lose his footing up on the places where the walkway is hidden by the writhing stone creatures and fall to his death below.

For a moment I can see him there in the split second flash of dancing light and colors. The fiery red-haired effeminate dead Father Beck lies at the base of the sculpture. His expression is that of surprise. Blood pools near his head. I feel like I've seen it all before somewhere. I rub the light from my eyes and look away. Father Ziod is beaming from ear to ear, he too peers up at the massive sculptural scene looming before us. I suddenly feel both puzzled and uncomfortable. It's definitely time to leave this place. It occurs to me that I don't know the last time I slept.

"Man fights battles all around himself." The priest says. "The spiritual war wages with the physical struggle. Sometimes we win these battles, and sometimes we do not."

"Uh huh." I say "Can you show me where he slept?" Moments later I'm standing by a tiny half circle window with bars at the top of a small and simple monastic cell. I can see nothing out of it except more rain - if you can call it that - floating down in waves of eerie grey mist. Ziod stands in the doorway holding a single candlestick in a little tin candle holder.

The walls of the cell are bare save the unusual Crucifix/Star of-David hybrid hanging on the wall above the humble sheetless cot. A well-used little wooden study desk, barely big enough for a man to sit at, is opposite. On it is a single large book, a half-used unlit candle and a strand of prayer beads. The candlelight from Father Ziod's single candlestick casts an eerie dancing yellow glow over everything in the room including me.

I gaze out of the little window at the blackness beyond strangely fascinated by the silent lightning somewhere in the distance, before beginning my slow search of the room. I decide the cot is as good a place to start as any. Ziod is still talking in riddles. I decide he's either a really great preacher or a really lonely one.

"The man you seek struggled with a fallen self, he died to himself many times, and Yahweh-Allah-God took him and gave him a new life each time. In his final life he came to be with us here, knowing that the world had no place for him anymore." I give him a courtesy glance, he has an almost wax-like benevolent expression, and I half expect it to melt away like the candle he's holding. "We took him as one of our own and called him as Yahweh-Allah-God would have us call him." He motions to the crucifix on the wall. I'm holding the mattress end up in the air, but glance at the crucifix doubtfully, to show him that I'm not completely ignoring him.

Nothing. I lower the mattress, and run my hand along the bare walls, testing for anything unusual. Ziod continues. "Then some fifteen days ago as of this night, while dutifully cleaning the effigy of the spirits for evening mass, he fell in a different way than he had before, and was taken from us in body and in spirit." I flick a glance at him but say nothing. I stroll over to the little wooden desk instead. "He found his place among us serving the wretched and the poor, and sharing his truth to those who would hear it. Many times did I hear him tell of his new life in Yahweh-Allah-God. And many times did others seek his truth. Many of the brothers here miss his truth. I am one of them."

I scan the surface of the desk and brush my left hand across it. I finger the beads and then pick up the unlit candlestick holder in my left hand by its tiny tin handle. It's just like the other one, standard issue I suppose. As I'm about to set it down though, I see it. Something carefully scratched into the surface of the desk where the candle was sitting. Ziod is

too busy listening to himself to notice. "For it is a new truth in science and logic that Yahweh-Allah God gives to those who seek a new identity in him, if they know where to look. We must always strive to be observant to see the truth about those around us." I replace the candle holder and continue my search, of the desk but it's a formality at this point. I have what I came for.

"A new identity?" I say. I fish the tiny subcue chip from the depths of his deep trench coat pocket, holding it between the first finger and thumb of my left hand and lock eyes with Ziod. "Like this one?"

Ziod stares across the glowing yellow room at the miniscule device between my thick fingers. His benevolent smile melts into a tight frown. He speaks firmly but gently. "I believe it is time for you to go now. I can not help you any further... Detective."

\* \* \*

I step from the small doorway of the enormous cathedral portico where yellow light from inside pours out onto the sidewalk in front of the church. Standing at the edge of the light I close my coat tightly around me, preparing to melt into the night. A thick dark mist sucks away all light mere inches away from the portico's protective cover.

I step from the cathedral onto the sidewalk and begin the long walk down the deserted ghetto street of flickering streetlights and the wet gutters from the direction I originally came. For the first few seconds it's so quiet that my footfalls and the buzzing of an old halogen bulb are the only sounds, until they are drowned out slowly by the rain picking up again, plopping harder and faster onto the shiny wet concrete jungle. As I pass under a street lamp it goes out with a flash and a pop-hiss then after I pass

it, inexplicably flickers back on. A conspiracy of light and darkness against me.

I allow myself an indulgent smile at the thought as I stop for a moment and look both directions down the street, but it is completely empty of anything living. Only swirling papers and trash getting pummeled by the storm's renewed vigor. I raise my trench coat's collar, pull down my hat, and quicken my pace, splashing past the boarded up buildings of Old Downtown. I'm eager now to get back to Sam's and find out what Bishop has dug up about the phrase that seems to be the common thread in an otherwise random series of events. The phrase scratched into a wooden desk by a now dead priest.

*~ Deus Ex Machina ~*

## Chapter 5: Subcues

The sun should be coming up by the time I make it back to Sam's, but the rain and thunder are so hard and fast that it's impossible to tell if it's bothered to rise yet or not. Water cascades in sheets into the dark grey back streets outside of the big curved window. Sam is at her usual post behind the counter, preparing for the day and serving various things to the small handful of quiet patrons who are scattered around at various tables and the bar.

I'm guzzling a steaming cup of coffee in a light blue mug, my sopping wet hat laid out beside me on my regular table. I try not to think about how my face and hair are damp or how uncomfortable my wet clothes are. Taking my coat off would probably help with that, but it's just too much trouble to bother to take off right now.

Bishop sits in his usual spot across from me. He has surrounded himself with the keyboard, his data-pad which he is mothering, and a few other unidentifiable gadgets which he continually guards from my wet dripping. The table monitor displays the quickly changing but familiar stream of meaningless white text on black that is the city info pipeline. We sit there for a few minutes like that, me enjoying my brew and him stewing over whatever, until he finally speaks.

"I don't know what to make of any of this!"

"Join the club." I reply, but he's really just talking to himself.

"So let me get your end straight," he continues, "What you are telling me is that our very lonely identity chip really does come from a very recently dead priest?"

"Yep. That Father Ziod got real nervous when I showed it to him."

"This doesn't make sense at all! He's dead! His chip shouldn't read as active! I mean geez Sawyer you know full well that these things have med

sensors tied into the Global Positioning Network! They deactivate when you die!" Bishop glances up from his data pad at me and lifts his right fist for emphasis, but never stops his constant stream of words. "Wait, you *showed* it to him?!" I shrug and drink my coffee. "Sawyer, do you even know what it is you are playing with here? I don't care how much you hate them, you so much as fart and they know about it at Medicorp! One of these days when the caffeine and nicotine finally screws you over, at least you can know that your chip will get an ambulance down here for you with a pre-printed body bag!"

I consider this for a moment, but there are no immediate answers visible at the bottom of my mug, so instead I take a big gulp of the steaming black fluid and leave it to destiny. Bishop continues: "There's no way his chip could even register on the network if this Father Beck guy took a nose dive from this church balcony like you say. Unless..." He looks up from the computer screen which is now displaying cascading pages upon pages of text data. He is now wearing a look of sheer horror. I meet his gaze calmly, which is always easy when I have no idea what he is doing.

"Unless?" I say into the cup.

"Oh God Sawyer! Somebody with serious deity-level net access could be going around scavenging subcue chips off of dead bodies and re-activating them!"

"So did you find an obit' on this guy or not?" I ask.

"Well that's the strange thing." He says, snapping back. "I checked central database with a little of my hack and slash love! And apparently your Father Beck died seven years, three months, and... two days ago of massive Cardiac Arrest during evening meal at the Holy Faith United's St. Ajmeri's Cathedral! Sound familiar?" He obliges me with a full-visual interface, and a short static-text obituary appears on the screen complete with news a feed stock picture. It confirms what Bishop has been saying, but the picture is

not that of an effeminate red haired Father Beck. He is an old man with white hair and a beard, much to my surprise. "It even says that when Medicorp got to Old-Downtown he was already laid out. No mention anywhere of a swan dive into the church last week, no explanation of why his original death certification, assuming there even was one, was later nullified, much less how the hell you ended up with his still-active ident chip!"

"So basically this chip belongs to a twice dead priest. What else?"

Bish sighs. "Well, I checked out the different sector feed pipelines before they hit the filter this morning for sleeper stories about unexplained deaths. Call it a hunch. I Cross referenced them against what we already knew... and, well, you're gonna love this! I got it off the third tier of Red District's Culturecorp media feed. The story is a few hours old, and there's no audio, but..." Bishop madly types a string of commands into his keyboard and touches his personal data pad. The background changes colors to dark red. A different news story pops onto the Cafe's table monitor: "*God-Killer Strikes Again!*" along with the various red-schemed ads for high-end products and services one would expect from Culturecorp.

"Medicorp was shocked again today to find yet another mysterious skiver murdered by the infamous 'God-Killer!' The unknown assassin has been scouring the Grey District slum-lands owned by Intellicorp's Senator Alexis Wright, and victimizing those who foolishly think they can live an immoral life off of the international human information grid by committing the worst crime imaginable of digging out their own sub-dermal identity chips."

As bishop scrolls the article down, I notice two digital photos are imbedded in the article. The first shot is of the instantly recognizable, well dressed, and smiling Senator Wright in an expensive grey suit. He sits casually at a large grey metal and glass desk. He is an older man with piercing black eyes and grayish white hair. He has a well trimmed mustache and a wry smile. Behind the senator, two oversized fake leafy plants set into

grey cylindrical pots sit in the corners, behind which is a floor to ceiling glass wall bearing witness to the office's great height and overlooking the ultra-modern cityscape beyond. I can't help but notice that the Grey district's color scheme reveals the reason for its name. Bishop continues reading the Culturecorp article with his signature animated fervor. I return to my near-empty blue mug.

"These social parasites are finding out all too soon, however, that they are easy prey for a bloodthirsty serial killer who specializes in staging so called '*acts of god*' to cover his intolerable acts of blood lust! The killer has stooped so low as to costume his victims in a feeble attempt to disguise his acts as with the skiver who allegedly 'fell' inside of St. Ajmeri's Church of United faith last Sunday." The second photo is a lot more interesting. It's the exterior facade of the Cathedral, taken during the daytime and in better weather. A pair of priests stands in front of the church, some sort of stock or promotional photo. One is unquestionably the enigmatic Father Ziod, but the other is a red-headed and effeminate priest standing in the foreground wearing a purple clergy robe and a nervous smile; an interesting coincidence to say the least. While Bishop furiously continues his dramatic reading, I take the last short sip from my drink, finishing it off.

With a smile at Sam I salute her with my now empty mug. She sashays over with a fresh pot and renews my coffee. Bishop edges his own empty white mug towards the edge of the table, but Sam purposefully ignores it with a content smile. I take a long gulp of the fresh coffee while Bishop reads on. "Most recently, the trail of death led to the Grey District's Red line train terminal, where yesterday another mysterious falling skiver was cast to his doom by this unseen madman only to be torn apart by the magnetic forces below! Thanks to the dutiful reports of loyal citizens in-" I cut his diatribe off there. It's enough propaganda for one day.

"I think I get the idea... Love that Impartial Culturecorp media." I tip my head to Sam. "Thanks." I say, as much for the coffee as for leaving Bishop's empty. She smiles dryly and returns to her duties behind the counter, but stays within earshot of our conversation, occasionally glancing at me with an icy frown.

"You don't like any media Sawyer," Bishop says, "you'd give up breathing if the corporations endorsed it." I don't contradict him. Bishop raises the white mug almost up to his lips, then noticing that it is still bone dry, returns it to the table with a frown, this time closer to the center and away from his other things. He then flicks the shimmery bag with the three subcue chips in it over to my side of the table.

"Tell you what," he says "I'll give you three guesses who one of your other two lonely chips is."

"Would it be the train jumper by chance?" I ask.

"You know it!" Bishop's mouth splits wide into a stupid skeleton grin. He enters a series of keystrokes and a city biographical information page pops onto the table's wall monitor. All thoughts about the probable cost of retrieving that particular page of data are pushed aside by the fact that I recognize the face. He's the same thin, dark-skinned Latino in his mid-thirties with shifty eyes and oily jet black hair. In his bio pic he has a thin goatee and a sneering gash for a mouth. "His name was Benny Gonzalez, his last four transactions yesterday before dropping off the grid were: checking out of an old downtown substance abuse center, a vid-phone call he placed using a terminal somewhere on South Washington 10 minutes later, and his boarding of Transcorp's Redline southbound an hour after that, during which he managed to transfer every cent of his bank funds into an encrypted account! I've been trying to figure out where it went, but the trail has been burned. Fifteen minutes later he was rail goo, minus one very small identity chip which now sits on our table."

I cringe in distaste at Bishop's total lack of human decency, a rare commodity in the younger generation nowadays, but one of the few idealisms I hold onto. "Transcorp didn't flag it?" I ask.

"That's the thing my man! There's no way they couldn't have! The whole thing stinks of cover-up! Unless of course somebody's figured out how to stop time, remove a globally tracked subcue chip from a dead wino 50 meters down in a high intensity grav-field, while off the global grid themselves, and then restart time only to smuggle a hot identity chip out of a high security tracking grid!"

"Where was the 'substance abuse center' this Gonzalez checked out of? Bishop smiles again and punches two keys. The screen changes yet again.

"Oh you're gonna love this one!" he says "The center is in Old Downtown, run by our new friends... The Unified Trans-denominational order of St. Ajmeri's Holy Church of the United Faith Cathedral!

"And the vid call?"

"Didn't think to check, hang on..." Bishop pulls one of the chips out of the bag, glancing nervously around the cafe, then hits a few keys on the board. The screen changes to a phone log screen. "It was to somebody named Mrs. Tara Mercer... Wait, Mercer? That sounds familiar. Holy-!" Bishop stops dead, petrified by the implications of the name. He's annoying but at least he's not completely gone.

"I know I'm not going to like this," I say, "but I'm going to ask anyway. Who's our third lonely chip Bish?"

Bishop leans in conspiratorially and begins to whisper. "That's the missing piece! Our third chip belongs to the late Senator Thomas Mercer, former CEO of red district's Mercer Enterprises! You know them, metro-wide monopoly In Entertainment, Medical and Commerce! Made that chip in your arm! But I didn't think..." I watch with bemusement as Bishop smacks himself in the forehead, then rubs the sting away, either because he did it too hard or

had never actually tried it before. "I mean, that just doesn't fit!" he protests. "H-he was fried on a damn golf course, he had his ident chip and everything, I just figured the one we were sent was a forgery and was working up to that, but... it does fit doesn't it? There's a connection. Screw me if I know what it is but it's all there. Three natural deaths, three degrees of separation... all tied to the red-hottest thing to walk into this cafe this week!"

"That 'red-hot thing' was *Mrs. Mercer*, kid." I say. "Or didn't the computer let you in on that little fact?"

"Whaaat?" Bish's face is screwed up in disbelief. "Senator's wives don't go walking around grey district with extra ident chips in their purses! In case you didn't know it, these little shiny bags are shielded! Only Medicorp is even supposed to have these things!"

"Someone sent them to her." I say pensively "A warning. Apparently that's where we come in."

"What? Like a finger in a box? Ransom? That makes no sense Sawyer, all these people died by natural causes. Genuine 'Acts of God' if you will!" Bishop makes little quotation marks with his fingers to make sure I get him. "Really got those conspiracy nuts going. Speaking of which, you were right, that *Duce* note you were sent with the Latin on it is just some old literary term." I notice that Sam is now listening intently to our banter. Her eyes meet mine and she shakes her head slowly without breaking eye contact. I smile and take a swig of coffee, then turn my attention back to the monitor in the wall.

"Show me." I tell him. Bishop rolls his eyes but keys it up anyway. Another screen of information, this time a reference dictionary of literary terms appears. He reads from the screen grudgingly.

"Fine. Be thorough, I still get paid." He says "Deus Ex Machina: literally God from the machine... derives from ancient Greek drama... an

apparently insoluble crisis which was solved by the intervention of a god or goddess..." His expression is that of smug delight. "Like I said, it's nothing. Hundreds of publications have been released discussing the topic, essays, the usual crap, but it came up clean on the Securicorp search, and the rest is just old literary refs. Dead-end as far as I can tell."

I frown unhappily, knowing that I'm missing something important. "Maybe." I say, but I am distracted by a very confused looking delivery boy in a grey uniform who at that moment rides up to the cafe, hugging the wall as a shield from the unrelenting waves of rain inches away. The late-teen straddles an old fashioned grey motorized bicycle with a small rear compartment. He has Asian features under his mop of extremely blond hair. Over his shoulder is a grey satchel with the logo "TRANSCORP DELIVERY" on it. He also wears a hooded disposable clear plastic poncho to shield him from the wet wind.

The youth checks a digital pad centered on the handlebars, then snapping it from its dock port, glances at the street address. Satisfied he pulls a very small box out of the satchel and quickly enters the cafe, shaking the water from himself like a sea mammal. The parcel is wrapped in white paper and has various postage markings on it but no visible name or address aside from a sticker with a printed barcode on the top. The Delivery Boy double checks his data pad and speaks to the room. "I'm looking for a Private Detective N. Sawyer?" Bishop and I look to each other then to the young man with obvious surprise. Water rolls off of his poncho, pooling on the floor. He's holding the package nervously, clearly unused to this part of Grey District. He glances around the room searching for eye contact. He turns to Sam apologetically. "Sorry about the mess ma'am!"

Sam nods at the delivery boy and offers him a weak smile. "I can take that." She says. "Coffee?" The Delivery boy makes his way to the counter, not sure what to say.

"Uh... No thank you ma'am, I'm running a little behind schedule. But If I could just get your scan?" He holds out the data pad first, allowing Sam to pass her right hand over it. A digital chitter sounds and her profile is checked, cross-referenced, debited and updated in some central computer databank downtown. "Ah, yes, well thank you. Have a good day." He says. "Thank you for choosing Transcorp delivery."

The Delivery boy glances at his pad once again and taps it twice with his middle finger as he walks back into the rain-soaked streets. Only once his bike has faded into the gray sheets of water does Sam stroll nonchalantly over to the table and stands over it with her arms crossed. She wears a sly one-sided mischievous smile.

"Didn't know you *had* a first name Sawyer." She says. "What's the 'N' stand for?"

"Usually 'none of your business'" I say, knowingly endangering myself for some well-deserved spite later.

But Sam simply says "Hmm... Why do I believe that?," and sets the white package onto the table, pushing Bishop's empty white mug aside with her hand. "Your bloody finger, I believe?" Bishop looks stricken, but with a crooked smile I pull the paper off of the little box.

Inside is a shimmering bag identical to the one left by Tara last night. Inside of the bag are a single metallic rice-like Subcue Identity chip and a tiny slip of paper like the fortune from a Chinatown fortune cookie.

I steal a glance to make sure that no one in the cafe has taken undue interest, but they are all too busy about their morning business to take notice of an old man, a kid, and a waitress. So I lift the bag up between my first finger and thumb and turn it, revealing the handwritten fortune in a distinctly feminine script.

## *Deus Ex Machina*

I look up at Bishop determinably. Bishop's expression is closer to abject horror. Sam merely stands over us, arms crossed, and expressionless like some stoic Greek goddess. I pop open the bag and roll the subcue into my left palm, close my fist over it and pass it over the table's wall monitor. To our shared surprise, the Desktop instantly changes back to the dramatic red interface with numerous flashy icons and pop-ups that is instantly recognizable as Red District's. Prominently displayed are a fiery animated "Culturecorp!" logo and a few dozen ads.

I don't have to try to make a call, the personal settings answer my question for me. The foremost window displays a welcome message for Tara Mercer. A glamorous head and shoulders photo of her is also displayed as part of the welcome. Her smiling lips are the same glossy crimson as her shiny mounds of hair which are pulled back on her slightly turned head. There's no accounting for vanity I suppose.

"See. I told you it was her." I say.

"What does this mean?" Bishop whispers nervously.

"Well for one thing it means that even senator's wives have to put up with their own corporate ad propaganda." I say, clearing the screen and dumping the chip back into the shielded bag. "I think it's time to kill four stones with one bird. See what else you can dig up on the Mercer family history. I'm stopping this little computer game and paying Mrs. Mercer a personal visit." And with that I stand up, and thrust the shiny bag into my still damp trench coat pocket. No rest for the weary or the wet after all. Instead, I flop my hat onto my head and exit the cafe with an irritated scowl. Bishop and Sam stare at me in mirrored surprise as the door swings shut and the dark torrent swallows me up once more.

## Chapter 6: Mercer Complex

There are different types of nightmares. There's the kind where you are lost, searching frantically for something or someplace. In some you can't move: paralyzed by fear you struggle against everything to be free. After awhile you get to know the nightmares like old friends that wait for you to visit. You remember them. Name them. Even rank them.

But the worst nightmares are the ones where you have to catch something just a few steps ahead of you that you can't quite reach. That's the deep anger of a case that never was. A client that goes sour, and a payoff that turns out to be hush money in somebody's sick frame job or if you're lucky: practical joke.

I hear the low rolling thunder as I step soaking wet from the garden complex across the street towards the Mercer Towers. The storm has briefly lessened in that way it always seems to when you are about to go inside, and instead a sort of light rain is coming down. The crimson clouds of sunrise are just thin enough over the opulent cityscape around the Mercer complex to cast an eerie first light upon everything. I can't really tell if the red glow is from the natural light or the unnatural red brick and red glass walls that grow from the ground like crimson crystals on some alien world.

The Mercer Complex is in the dead center of the Red District, a section of the city rich with lush parks and red rose gardens. The trim of every building here is red; many are made of red brick in that popular early 20<sup>th</sup> century design. Signs of wealth and glamour abound, and advertising in the red district is exactly what would be expected: Entertainment from "Culturecorp," Medical care from "Medicorp," and Commercial products from "Comcorp." I can't help but notice that the ads are more technological, against one wall projected holograms entice, on a storefront the products are displayed and shifting, everything is more entertaining, lighthearted, vivid,

and alive. For a brief moment I forget myself in it. The entire district is active, moving and even the relatively quiet streets of a rainy morning are not completely deserted.

Then a public service announcement starring none other than Mrs. Mercer herself appears on the wall before me, and I remember why I'm here. Sometimes anger can be a great muse when fire burns inside you and the fuel is knowing you have been taken for a fool. I set my jaw and stomp through a puddle, not caring about the muddy splash I make.

The Mercer Complex. Small half-cylinder external glass elevators crawl up the sides of the dozen or so enormous Mercer towers. The central tower is decidedly taller than the others, though all of them together dwarf the other buildings in the skyline. The glass skyscrapers are tinted with a reflective metallic crimson hue which reflects that same damn golden red sunrise through the rain.

The street falls away quickly as the external glass elevator shoots up the side of the tallest Mercer Tower with me in it. Steady rain streaks the glass as the half cylinder shoots skyward. I stand with my arms crossed and fists clenched watching the floors count off. When anger is your motivator, it's then that you become more than your own self, sharp stinging words that aren't yours boil up... ready to cut and pierce into whoever or whatever might stand in your way.

The glass elevator doors slide open and I step out, glancing both ways and taking in the penthouse's sickeningly lavish opulence. The default color of it is of course blood red. I tear the room apart with my eyes while standing in the elevator doorway. Everything is either gloss red or stark white inside of the huge vaulted penthouse atop the tallest building in the city. Floor to ceiling glass walls on three sides of the central room, where the elevator is, directly opposite, and to the right of me. There are a few doorways in the solid wall, leading to the rest of the penthouse.

The large, long central room is made for entertaining, from the expensive Old World modern art hanging on the one solid central wall, the red velvet pool table, enormous widescreen vid monitor and ultra-modern entertainment center, to the plush red leather sectional furniture suit and matching red leather bar. The thick carpet is gleaming white shag.

The news is on. There's a female voice coming from the widescreen. "Yellow District's stubborn CEO Phillip Moore announced this morning that he was denying the merger offer of White District's Defensecorp. Despite Senator Moore's status as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most economically influential man in the world, it is widely thought that his denial of the merger will be political and economic suicide for the city's golden boy senator."

The huge vid monitor displays the Culturecorp news netcast. A brief glance is enough to see the classy, well dressed, busty female Culturecorp newscaster giving a story behind a cherry red desk. She wears a professional looking yet alluring red suit. Inset into the picture is a stock photo of Senator Phillip Moore. He is a grumpy looking balding man wearing a canary yellow tuxedo and holding a golden-topped cane. A classic bad photo. The kind the media keeps around to trash rival politicians when they see fit.

I listen to the sultry female newscaster continue to read her story as I finish my scan of the room. Something just isn't right, but I can't place it. My intuition has gone sour. "Senate Majority Leader, President and Defense Cartel Mogul, Senator Tang Fujimoto of the White district along with the "United Defense Board council" has made repeated attempts to secure the vote from Yellow district's Pancorporate International, under whose corporate umbrella also fall "Pancorp Research and Media," "Educorp Unified schools," and "Pancorp Technologies." Senator Fujimoto has continued his corporate lobbying without any indications of successfully swaying Senator Moore in any way. This is perhaps most surprising, considering Senator Fujimoto's recent

success in pushing through the much needed 'Ironclad Import and Export Tax Bill' last month to the deadlocked Corporate National Senate."

Then I see it. There, past the steady rain running down the big glass wall on my right, a huge motorized sliding glass door stands open to the rooftop pool. Movement. I can make out various human figures through the window outside. I should step backwards into the elevator and leave. Quickly. I should but I don't.

Instead I step out from the elevator and move toward the large glass door leading to the veranda. I don't really notice the female newscaster as her cued up propaganda blends into the background noise of the splattering water outside. "Senator Fujimoto is most noted for his unparalleled corporate hold over the Western Region's military-industrial complex thanks to the corporation's ongoing involvement with the design and development of the Global Defense Network and his ongoing proposal for a worldwide corporate alliance of military trust firms such as his own Defensecorp. For Senator Moore however, his refusal to accept the merger has raised questions of patriotism... "

I step past the threshold of the great glass door, looking out into the wet porch with a frown. The sun is now up but it is darker thanks to the newest storm clouds directly overhead. Outside of the penthouse is a great red porch with a stark-white in-ground pool and a low diving board. The bar extends outside through a second closed sliding door. Ultra modern neo-retro red pool furniture and covered tables sit around a low square dancing stage. A long flower bed of red rose bushes lines one end of the porch then merges into an organically shaped rose garden in the corner.

The figures are police and medical personnel. They wear clear ponchos to shield from accidentally becoming wet. Some are the Red District's Sci-corp Security officers in official forensics team police uniforms with red trim. Others wear the Medicorp logo, and a medical caduceus on their backs.

They are milling about the pool judiciously, and oblivious to my presence in the doorway. For the moment anyway.

I recognize the man in charge. He wears a white shirt and a black tie but no poncho. His suit pants are held up with suspenders on which his official Red District badge is pinned. I guess I would say he's a clean-shaven and fit, brown-haired, ruggedly handsome man in his thirties with hazel eyes and a take-charge no nonsense expression. At the moment he's wearing latex gloves and is wearing his nine millimeter at his side. He barks orders at the others and points at the pool.

In for way more than a penny or a pound already, I take one step past the open patio door stopping in the threshold just short of the rain. Floating in grotesque red-colored water face down in the pool is the unmistakable form of a woman. I don't need to see her face. It is the red-haired bikini-clad body of Tara Mercer.

A long stick with a wire ring breaks the surface of the water. I watch as the Security men begin to pull the body to the side of the pool with the long body removing device. The same trick used on a million frogs and snakes in every pool there ever was. That's when Detective Kropp looks up from the task and spots me. His double take gives me just enough time to wave and smile.

"How the Hell did you get up here!" He bellows.

"I was wondering that myself." I say. "But the easy answer would be the Elevator."

Tara's subcue still chip rests lightly on my fingers, hidden from view just behind my slightly cupped left hand. I clench to hide it, and then casually slip the hand back into my deep coat pocket.

"Don't get smart with me!" Barks Kropp. "You're that washout they call Sawyer right?" I acknowledge both truths with a shrug and a single nod. "I thought so. You are so out of your grey-zone beat right now that I could snap

you back and make your nose bleed! And that's not including how you could possibly even know about this! I highly recommend you start talking."

"Let's just pretend for a minute that we are human beings shall we?" I say. "I'll bet you a cup of coffee that body is one subcue short of legal."

Kropp Smiles. "All right I'll bite, how'd you know that?"

"I'm psychic." I say. "Didn't you know? Speaking of which, how did you know you had a floater here if her chip didn't tell you?"

Not one to loose his composure, the Red District Detective Kropp snatches my collar with his gloved hands yanking me outside into the rain then slams me against the tinted glass wall separating the patio from the interior. From the outside the glass is the same shimmering metallic Crimson as the rest of the tower complex. My rattling teeth are no longer smiling.

"Listen you arrogant bastard! I don't have time for your garbage, we got a blip on the grid saying that her vitals were fluctuating right before she fell off the network, now if you know anything about it--"

"Detective Kropp?" It's one of the Red Security Officer peons. A fresh kid of eighteen or nineteen by my guess standing behind him clutching a data pad.

"What!?" Kropp spits out, releasing his grip on my shirt and turning to the nervous lackey.

"Uh... W-we just got a hot reading for the victim's--"

"Corpse!"

"Yes sir, the uh... corpse's chip." The officer says.

"Where?" Growls Kropp. The other man is clearly dreading the answer. For that matter so am I, though I have to admit his discomfort and my burning curiosity over exactly what Kropp's face will be do slightly outweigh it. I'd put five credits on quiet disbelief, and ten on raw anger.

"Uh, well..." he starts out, "You aren't going to believe this, but she just came up the elevator and is, um... s-standing right in front of you?"

Kropp smiles widely and turns back to me with the pleasure of a cat to his latest mouse. My third guess.

"Looks like you're in some trouble... detective!" Kropp says, his voice a sarcastic singsong lilt that instantly becomes deadly serious. "Where is it?"

I extract the chip from my pocket and hold it out in the palm of my hand. "All you had to do was ask." I say.

It's just professional courtesy after all.

\* \* \*

The steady raindrops dance on the sidewalk as I emerge horizontally from the ornate double doors of the tallest Mercer Tower. The two Red Security officers which have assisted in my short flight stand and watch me, frowning, with arms crossed, as I extract myself from the gutter, flop my hat onto my head, then walk sloppily down the busy street away from the penthouse topped skyscraper. The city's newest and best neo-retro style cars zip by as morning rush hour begins and the city's Smart Highway AI kicks the local speed limit up.

Yea, there are different types of nightmares. There's the kind where you are lost, searching frantically for something or someplace. In some you can't move: paralyzed by fear you struggle against everything to be free.

I notice a large shadow in the trees of a nearby park across the street and cock my head for a better look. The kid hiding there wears a black leather jacket and has long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. He has on small round sunglasses and wears torn blue jeans and black combat boots. Suddenly he realizes I have spotted him, turns in obvious fear and darts off through the park.

But the worst nightmares are the ones where you have to catch something just a few steps ahead of you that you can't quite reach.

I knit my eyebrows together and frown. Then without a second's pause for thought, grab my hat back off of my head and explode across the street. Dodging cars and splashing after him into the park, nearly getting hit by a classy Fleetline remake. The chauffer lays on the horn at me as I streak by it. There's a glancing wet slap of my coat off of the bumper as a pass.

Damn. I hate this dream.

## Chapter 7: Run-around

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls as the ever-present rain begins to fall faster again, shielded only somewhat by the trees in Mercer's little garden park. The kid in the black jacket is shuffling across a footbridge over an overflowing tiny stream which winds its way through a waterlogged red flower garden. He looks back, and realizing that he is being tailed, breaks into a run. I feel my heart and muscles crank up to match his pace and give chase across the corner of the park, past various benches and side paths, through a thick wooded area, then down a hill and out a side entrance towards a small alleyway.

Already my lungs are straining for air and my pants soaked to the knees from the splashing. The skinny alleyway is lined with modern-looking red trash bins and dumpsters. Most of the rain is blocked by the tall buildings on either side but spouts are delivering plenty of water into the narrow back street so that water flows through the center of the alley. Whatever part of my socks were previously still dry are no longer.

The world around me fades away: tunnel vision, splashing footfalls, breathing. That is my universe. More than winded, I'm a dying man, but I keep going. Every cigarette I ever smoked mocking me from the inside out. I slide to a stop at a brick wall 10 feet high blocking the alley, just as my prey jumps down from it to the other side.

I close my eyes for a moment then set my jaw. No time to be tired yet. I flop my wet hat onto my head to free up both hands and look for a way up the wall. A nearby stack of large solid black plastic crates stacked by a the back door to some little shop provides the only possibility. I grunt and strain to pull my ever older body up onto the things. Water gushes from the nearby drainpipe, fueling the little river that the alley has become and reminding me how slippery everything is.

I clamber up the wet boxes, losing my footing at the top and causing the topmost boxes to fall and break open with a splintering crack, spilling its garbage-like recycle contents all over the alleyway, but I somehow manage to shoot out a hand and catch the edge of the wall as my body slaps up against the red brick. I yell to help my strength along as I bring the other arm around to grab the edge. I'm a dangling puppet, and I force the thoughts of falling out of my head - wanting instead to hang on long enough to hoist myself up to the top of the wall.

I wouldn't win any awards for gracefulness, but I manage to pendulum swing a leg up onto the wall and kick my way over onto the top. My face is pressed hard against the rough brick and I can taste the earthy wash of wet brick in my mouth and nose as the wet wind picks up my hat and flicks it with one big wet finger backwards over the wall to god only knows what gutter.

I liked that hat, but there's nothing like a little anger to give you your second wind. I drop hard onto the other side with a splash, cringing in pain as I land wrong on my bad leg. Run now. Pain later. I hoist myself up and resume the chase. His widened head-start having just reduced my chances greatly. The alleyway continues for only a few more feet then turns sharply. I launch myself down it and away from the two buildings. The rain is once again pelts into my now naked head as the alleyway dumps me out onto an extremely busy Red District plaza.

People are moving in all directions like big red ants whose anthill has just been kicked by a tardy schoolboy. Throngs of professionally dressed business men and women in red pinstripe and satin suits have begun to make their way to places of work despite the incessant rain. The black leather coat is nowhere to be seen in the crowd of red umbrellas.

In my mind I see the very pleased kid panting hard while hiding behind some parked '36 Ford F1 COE Panel Smart-car Delivery Van remake. His blonde bangs have escaped his pony tail and are plastered to his face as he peeks

out slowly across the wet plaza and spots a very confused and irritated me a few hundred yards away running my left hand through my dark, wet, hatless hair before ducking back with a satisfied smile and sinking to the ground with his knees to his chest laughing manically.

I look up into the sky and let the rain pelt my unshaven face in pure disgust. Wherever he is he's gone and the only thing I managed to learn was exactly how out of shape I am.

\* \* \*

Thunder rolls as I let the glass door slam behind me. I shake the water out of my hair like some stray dog and walk frowning over to my table where a startled and very dry Bishop sits.

"Where the Hell have you been!" He demands "Do you have any idea what I've been dealing with here?"

I flop soggily into my chair and sigh, running my left hand one last time through my wet hair where my hat should be.

"I've been running around town." I say.

"Well while you've been 'running around' I've been dealing with Securicorp all damn morning! Are you aware that you've been stripped of your freelance license and are officially off the security backup investigator roster?!"

"I had a hunch." I tell him.

"A hunch? A hunch?! Look at this!" He's screaming now. Bish punches up my messages with the keyboard and begins to read with hurried frustration and exasperation the gory and precise ways in which I am now officially inadequate. I reach over to the sugar caddy, extract a few packets and begin to build a sugar packet tower.

"This is to inform you, Detective N. Sawyer, Private Investigator Freelance registration number GD111-etc., etc., that you have been removed from active listing and all recent financial transfers to accounts in your name have been frozen until further notice, pending investigation into allegations regarding 'code J239: Obstruction of Justice' while out of your authorized sector. A complete legal copy of that injunction has been filed with and can be access through the joint office of..." Bishop breaks off and looks at me accusingly. I continue building my sugar packet tower.

"Damn it Sawyer what did you do exactly? The rest is just rights junk: 'You have the right to appeal, you have the right to move about the city and congregate in groups of two or more, your demographic consumer data has been recorded and logged for court references.' The usual legal crap." My stack of sugar packets falls into a heap forcing me to begin again except that Sam sets a hot fresh cup of distraction in front of me.

"Mercer's dead kid." I say between scalding gulps. "She drowned herself in her pool sometime early this morning if you believe it."

"Whaaat? Why haven't I heard about it? I know that hasn't hit the media filters yet!"

"Don't expect it to for a while, we'll have to give Medicorp enough time to re-insert her ident chip and come up with a good cover story." Bishop looks over from his monitor and narrows his eyes in disbelief, bringing one hand up to his face to scratch an imaginary itch.

"Are you serious?!" he says "Of course you are, you were born without a normal sense of humor. Wait! You mean they found her ident chip on you? That's why we got pounded? Sawyer this is big! We have to get out now! Just reapplying while on probation is going to take... months! But if they have the chip then we might be OK! Oh jeez!" he runs his nervous hands across his slicked back hair and releases a big breath towards the ceiling.

"What did you find out about Mercer?" I say. A little detail like a probationary license isn't going to stop me once I've started.

"Clean." He says absentmindedly to the ceiling. "Only child... Mother and only brother died in a car accident back before the autocar highway grid, killed by some drunk guy in a stolen car, then his dad left him his Old-world entertainment empire at the age of nineteen when he unexpectedly keeled over dead in his mashed potatoes in his fifties." Bishop looks up at me as though done. I stare at him over my coffee mug till he sighs and punches up the information he found onto the cafe monitor, continuing to summarize it for me.

"All right man, you want a civic history lesson then here you go: The event was so traumatic that Mercer used his newfound money, power and influence to push through the identity chip laws, funded the autocar automated safety highway, prohibition, and basically built Red District brick by brick. The success of Medicorp alone was enough to rocket him to public hero status, and the rest was history. Mrs. Mercer was born Tara Moore, daughter of Phillip Moore of the Yellow district..."

Bishop's words are a dancing mockery, his irritation at having to slog through such daunting facts is apparent. "They were married 10 years ago, big public ceremony, blah, blah, blah... Between the two of them; till Mercer then owned enough capital and market stocks to claim a majority vote in congress to become a senator. Aaaaand that's all there is 'till he golfed himself through eighteen holes of death in the middle of last week!"

Bishop smiles mockingly and looks up at me. I am unmoved. He should have been a writer. A hack pulp fiction writer probably, but a writer none the less. "That's it!" He says "Nothing else! Finito! End of story!" Bishop punches a key on the keyboard with his finger and the Cafe monitor snaps to black. "Now, if you don't mind! I say we walk away before we really get into some trouble!"

There is an awkward silence as I sit blankly and Bishop pretends not to fidget, glancing at the monitor and typing up a new page of unrelated text. When figure he's finally blown himself out and is ready to work I speak.

"Give me a good reason, somebody obviously wants me involved."

Bishop's gaze falls from the monitor and he stares at me unbelieving. He becomes more animated and noticeably upset again as he speaks, ending by waving his hands around wildly. "A reason?! How 'bout the fact that Red's husband is sitting in my briefcase next to a dead priest and a wino? Or how 'bout the simple fact that we don't have a client and couldn't get paid even if we did?! Way I figure it, Red baited you to that terminal yesterday so she could shove that skiver off the ledge the way she killed her husband and the priest! Then last night she planted the three subcues on you so you could take the fall! ...so to speak. And if that's not enough for you, then how about the fact that Red District has enough evidence to drag you in for murder of one of the most prominent senator's wives based on the fact that she was found very dead without a skin chip that YOU let them know you had!"

I smile wryly and make a mental note to make the awkward silence longer next time.

"Gee Bishop I'm impressed!" I say. "Did you think that out all on your own? Only one problem though: She didn't send that first message."

"What? How could you possibly know that?!"

"Intuition." I say.

"You are a mad man, Sawyer!"

Bishop digs around on the desk as he speaks until he comes up with the outer white mail wrapper with the barcode from the package delivered earlier that day. He waves the mail wrapper around for emphasis.

"All right then," he says "If none of that works for you how about the fact that I traced that nice little package you were sent today, and while red-hot was taking her swim somebody was dropping that package into the box

in front of that seedy rat-hole you call an apartment! Which means that it was already out of her when she died!" There is a deafening crack and the lights of the café flicker out as Lightning strikes one of the rods on the building's pediment high above. I'm suddenly standing over a large woman's body sprawled on the floor. Her face is turned away, but in the second or so of flashing electrical light I see her dyed brown hair and blue fluffy nightgown haphazardly skewed over her heavy thigh until the darkness rushes back in and swallows the room.

I look up from my empty mug and collapsed tower of sugar packets slightly confused. I blink a few times trying to remember the dream but it is gone. Did I just fall asleep? Damn caffeine.

"What?" I say to the mug.

"Your Apartment?" Bishop says. "You know, that place where your other shirt lives? You sleep there occasionally... Been there recently?"

I scratch my head, making my already disheveled hair worse. I realize I have no idea what the answer to his question is.

"Actually, that's the best Idea I've heard all day." I say.

And with these words I extract myself from my chair, throw a half salute to Sam behind the counter as I walk across the Cafe, yank the door open and charge back outside into the rain. Wishing to anything I still had my damn hat.

Bishop stares unbelievably towards the window as I go. "I think he's lost his mind." I hear him say behind me to Sam. "He's going to get us all killed one of these days."

"If he keeps leaving you here with me I'll do it myself." She says.

"Funny." He says, and probably says more but I'm gone at that point and there is too much glass and falling water for me to know what.

## Chapter 8: Home Front

The shabby wooden door slams as I reach up to my head where my hat should be, then cringe in not finding it. I instead take off my trench coat and hang it on the empty coat rack, then flip the light switch by the door. The single shadeless lamp stand in the corner flickers to life with its forty watt bulb changing the gray of the walls to a slightly brighter brownish gray instead then flickers out again. Not that it matters. I know every inch of this place. "Home sweet home," right? The place where we keep the proverbial closet. Home to skeletons and other secrets. The place where you keep your worries and your nightmares, and whatever it takes to keep them away.

My tiny, untidy, dark third floor efficiency apartment is pretty spartan, containing only a sagging loveseat, a scratched and beaten coffee table with a full ashtray as the centerpiece and a half-full bottle of brandless whiskey on it. Modern art. A hotplate and a bathroom sink pass for a kitchen, while a thin partition badly hides a dirty toilet in the corner. My shabby mattress lies against the wall on its flimsy metal bed frame - unmade but unused too.

There is no electronic appliance or device anywhere within the confines of my four peeling walls, and I like it that way. There's one tiny window that overlooks the dark skies of the hard and fast late morning storm. Water flows outside on the glass slickly obscuring the apartments across the street with its vomiting gargoyles and sweating gray stone as more lightning flashes, bathing my dark room in melting white strobes followed by rolling thunder.

I slosh over to the center of the room and kick something metallic and full of water, where drops of water are dripping from a leak in the ceiling. The leak - I'd forgotten about that. Under it, my one small tarnished pot overflows with water onto the creaky wooden floor. I empty the pot into the

sink and replace it under the drip. The pan begins to fill again with a metallic "plink,"

"plink,"

"plink"...

Sighing, I float over to the table, grab the half empty bottle of illegal hooch, and collapse into my dusty chair. *Whatever it takes to keep them away.*

I take a short drink then look at the bottle. The rotgut burns in my mouth and throat, then hits the one cup of coffee with a vengeance and I remember more things I had forgotten. I watch in detached fascination and surprise as I throw the bottle against the far wall, shattering it into wet shards and exploding its contents all over the cracked paint of my home. One tiny fleck of glass hits me and I reach over to scratch and flick it away. I can't help but notice that the shard of dark stinging bottle sticking out of my wrist is right where my own identity chip rests under the surface of my skin.

And for some reason I laugh.

And laugh.

And laugh.

Sometimes you break through the rose-colored haze of your own dreams long enough to catch a glimpse of yourself. And for one shining moment you think you'll never need to fear sleep again, because nothing could be worse than the nightmare you live from day to day. Still laughing I close my eyes and lean back. A few seconds later my head drops to the side and I sleep. Of course, that's usually when it sneaks up on you from behind.

I sit up in a start as lightning crackles and thunder rolls somewhere very close by. As the thunder fades I realize that someone is pounding furiously on my door and shouting in a deep resonating thickly accented voice.

"Wake up señor! The building is on fire!"

It takes me a second to rearrange the words in my head. Wake? Building?  
*Fire!*

I jump from my chair and yank open the door, accidentally kicking over the pot in the process and spilling yet more water onto the wooden floor. The old hallway is lined with wooden doors. Covered teardrop sconces cast dim light into the peeling, stained wallpaper. It has a tattered strip of carpet running down the center.

The hairy, fat, man giving the warning is wearing a tank top and boxers. He's already at the next apartment over pounding and shouting the warning to whoever else might still be in there. Behind him at the far end of the hallway, rain cascades down a third floor window identical to the one inside my apartment.

I sprint down the hallway, past where the man is standing, towards the stairs. The entire central stairway is engulfed in flames and smoke. It surges and leaps at me. I cough, fall back, turn on my heel and race back the length of the hallway, grabbing the fat man by his elbow and steering him towards the fire escape at the other end of the hallway - my end of the hallway, kicking out the window and squeezing the corpulent bastard through it to the metal walkway beyond. The impossibly fast flames follow me out the hole as I too launch myself onto the fire escape.

I ride the ladder down to the alleyway, my fat neighbor right behind me. Then it's across the street to watch my building burn away into a glowing shell until the corporate authorities can scramble the right human countermeasures.

An hour later, it is still raining softly, but in the distance the clouds have rolled back to reveal the sun setting in a golden and ochre explosion behind the smoldering black three-story skeleton of my burned apartment building as the darkness of night creeps in. As I stand there in

front of my favorite place to not-sleep, I realize exactly how sleazy and run down my neighborhood truly is. The edge of old downtown is obviously a part of my beloved trashy grey district as evidenced by the slapped-up advertisements on the mostly grey brick and cracked concrete, with its brownstone style row houses and apartments.

I notice that the larger, sleeker mega skyscrapers of the newer section of town can be seen in the far distance, great towers of artificial light stretching to the sky. The Transcorp Firemen and Medicorp paramedics are slowly picking through the wet wreckage of my apartment building. They are illuminated by the flashing red lights of two old-fashioned dirty red fire trucks and a Red Medicorp Ambulance. The firemen are no longer scrambling around like ants, but instead are standing around in strained silence in their stylized firemen's outfits complete with badges and helmets, all waiting for the order to pack it up and go home.

I stand awkwardly in the drizzle without my overcoat or hat. A group has gathered including the man I saved around the Culturecorp news truck which is recording stories for posterity and the evening news feed, but I stands away from the rest, in the light of a nearby lamppost, watching.

The firemen finally begin coil and stow their fire hoses. A paramedic zips up the last black body bag. I can see the face of the dead woman inside, she is a large but not unattractive woman in her late fifties. My landlady Mrs. Miller I'm pretty sure. She has dyed brown hair and is wearing that padded powder blue fuzzy bathrobe with fluffy trim. I notice that she has not been burned but her lifeless eyes stare skyward. She has an odd "Mona Lisa" like smile on her pale lips as the zipper cocoons her away.

"What started the fire?" Somebody asks.

"Faulty lamp," I hear someone say.

"Damn tragedy," says another.

Then from nowhere, thunder rolls and I sit up violently from my nightmare, startled out of sleep by the growling rumble as it fades across the city. The storm is in full force, water flows against the window and also "Plop,"

"Plop,"

"Plops" heavily into the now half-full pan in the center of my room across from the shattered whisky bottle shard, the contents of which have stained and run down the wall. Not even midnight yet.

Reality?

Dreams?

Is there even a difference anymore?

## Chapter 9: Life is but a Dream

I hate the nightmares.

I sit for a moment staring at the door, then stand up, grab my dry trench, and walk out of the door, tugging it closed and allowing it to slam behind me. For a minute I just stand holding my coat and scan the dark dirty hallway I know so well. Water cascades down the glass of the window at the end of the third floor hallway beyond which lies the fire escape. I stumble down all three flights of darkly stained wooden stairs struggling to put on my outer shell as I descend and turn the screw of reality a little tighter in my mind. I'm seeing things in heightened detail, every niggling nuance and dirty detail.

In the lobby the water flows on the outside of the double glass front doors of the building through which I can almost see the dark street and single streetlight on the other side. The small shabby entryway lit by the same teardrop sconces as the hallway upstairs is taken up almost entirely by the large creaking wooden staircase opposite the door, down which I now slink. To the left of the entranceway extending past the stairs is the hallway leading to the lower apartments. Only the one peeling wooden door labeled "Management" is present on this wall while to my left and opposite is nothing but a series of numbered metal Post Office box style mailboxes, each with its own keyhole. Some are missing doors revealing a dark emptiness, but most have some sort of makeshift label shoved into the tiny label slot. In the center, surrounded by the boxes on the top and sides is a larger door with a slot labeled *TRANSCORP: PICK UP TIME 4 P.M.*

I sometimes wonder if there is a difference between dreams and memory. Both are unreliable in the cloudy haze we refer to as our minds, and the imagined fires are just symbols for other things. Sometimes even bigger things, the kind you can't put out with water, or a hundred fire trucks. With

dreams we wake up and immediately start to forget. A nightmare which feels so real, can slip away a few seconds later. The terror becomes just a shadow of a memory. Like an old girlfriend's name. Or a childhood phone number. Just out of reach of the conscious mind. Something that was once so important, but is now all but gone, and only comes back as a half forgotten dream.

Staring at the rows of boxes, a wave of realization sweeps across me and I reach into my right coat pocket. The white mailer paper from the package this morning is still there. I rub it between my thumb and forefinger allowing its slick synthetic surface to grease the wheels of my mind. I step to the wall of boxes and run my left hand along the outgoing mailbox.

Transcorp.

A name I see a hundred times a day on everything around me. An icon of instant brand recognition. They say that the best place to hide something is in plain sight. Wherever this package was sent from, it wasn't Red District... it was a lot closer to home.

I turn. My deep thoughts give over to mild surprise. The doorway labeled "Management" stands slightly ajar. Has it been that way all the time? I shove the paper back into my pocket and cocking my head, hoof it towards the ground-floor apartment. I push lightly on the door. It gives out a slow groaning creak and opens.

So much for subtlety.

Thunder rolls outside and lightning flashes behind me in the lobby as I'm drawn into the shabby but tidy dimness of my landlady's apartment by something. A memory? Without a real reason I step inside the dingy sanctuary of the old woman I barely know.

It is an efficiency similar to mine, but bigger, and only slightly better furnished with real, albeit old appliances and electronics straight out of the 2024 catalog. Two tall lamps stand on either side of the couch, but only one casts a faint light into the room from its strained low wattage

bulb, and I notice that most of the light in the room is actually coming from her small flat wide-screen monitor imbedded in the wall. A grey-suited male Intellicorp newscaster is speaking, but the netcast is at a barely audible volume.

I try to tune most of it out but fail. Either these guys decided to respect Red District's investigation, or the untimely and scandalous demise of Mrs. Mercer somehow hasn't hit the feed yet.

Yea right.

"Yellow District's Senator Moore made a shocking personal appearance in the Green district's residential area today, at the site of the newly purchased Maxwell Elementary School. The senator stood by for the signing over of ownership rights of the school into the Yellow district's "EDUCORP Unified School District." The transaction was immediately followed by a renaming ceremony for the annexed school."

The room goes yellow. I glance at the screen and see that it's a clip of Yellow district's C.E.O. and Corporate Senator Phillip Moore for the second time in as many days, probably a record for city's most famous recluse. I notice that unlike the Culturecorp netcast in the late Mrs. Mercer's Penthouse, he is jovial and smiling. In the short vid clip the balding man has replaced his signature canary yellow tuxedo with a golden one, and he's waving a golden-topped cane with reckless abandon for the dozen or so frightened school children surrounding him. He stands by a golden sign that says "Phillip Moore Elementary School."

Sighing, I turn from the screen and scan the apartment. Something isn't right, but I'm having trouble placing it. The only other sounds are that of the relentless rain outside and occasional thunder in time with the lightning flashes as the disgruntled news man drones on.

"The acquisition of the old "David Maxwell Elementary School" likely marks a sad day in education for the Green District, as it is the final

campus to be swept up into the mouth of the gluttonous Phillip Moore. And now for the weather we go to Intellicorp meteorologist Stan Corbin to find out about all this rain. Stan?"

A well worn overstuffed couch sits in the center of the room, an oval coffee table covered with a laced table cloth in front of it. These sit on an old battered oriental rug. Nothing. The two windows light up through the thin white curtains hanging over them when lightning flashes. A small breakfast table with a tiny vase on it and chair under it sit between the two windows. The kitchen area is divided by a simple bar, while the bathroom fixtures are behind a wall divider and a beaded curtain which is tied open. Shelves of matching design are scattered about the room and there are two inset shelves on either side of the wall monitor. Various pictures, books, knickknacks and other mementos attest to the elderly woman who lives there. I stroll casually over to the wall and survey the items on the closest inset shelf while the weatherman begins his dire prognosis.

"The seemingly endless storms currently ravaging the city have made international headlines. With no end in sight from the deluge of storms, questions have been raised about possible relief efforts by our own Senator Wright, who is requesting that federal Defensecorp caches be tapped into if the rain continues and flooding become a serious problem as it threatens to do...

The Newscast continues but I don't hear it. I pick up a framed picture from the shelf. The woman in it is my landlady. I know this instantly, but the chill running down my spine comes when it hits me that she's also the same woman who I saw being zipped into a body bag recently. Or did I dream that? I don't have time to sort it out.

I've figured out what's wrong and I whip around to confirm it.

I love coffee tables. You can always tell a lot about a person based on what's on their coffee table. Some people have family albums, mementos,

things that help them remember. Others have those oversized books with full page color glossy photos of distant places they've never been. Nobody has books or magazines anymore. A long time ago a homeless guy once told me he never looked at them. "Why look at what I can't have?" he said. "It's just pornography for hopeless dreamers." I guess he's either chipped or dead.

I round in on the small coffee table. On top of the lace tablecloth is a gloss black leather book with silver lettering. I reach down and pick it up. I run my index finger across the embossed letters.

"Deus Ex Machina."

If there was a God. And he had a coffee table, I wonder what would be on it? I open the book to the first page. The title page. It reads "Deus Ex Machina: The Divine Scripture and Testament of Yaweh-Allah-God and his people." Somehow I doubt it would be any of the above.

I flip casually through the pages and something drops from somewhere inside the book with a little swish towards the table. Before I even look at it I know what it is. An empty small shimmering plastic subcue bag is spinning end over end towards the lace tablecloth.

I snap the book shut with one hand and bend to pick it up, looking through it to confirm what I already know.

Empty.

"Now what the hell is this doing here?" I say aloud, slightly surprised at the sound of my own voice.

Out on the street lightning flashes to answer me, lighting up the room through the two windows with a blinding whiteness. The lights flicker and thunder rolls. It is very close and loud and for a fraction of a second I can suddenly see everything in the room as clear as day.

The empty little silver bag in my hand.

The pictures in the shelf behind the couch.

The questionable stains on said couch.

The horrible wallpaper pattern and the bug crawling up it.

And of course, sticking out from behind the couch: the woman's foot momentarily unable to be concealed by the shadows of it.

I pocket the little bag and moves around to the back of the couch looking down at the body behind it. It is of course my landlady, the woman from the picture, the woman from my dream wearing the same blue fluffy nightgown and just as dead. You see, sometimes the memories come back. Like a half-forgotten dream. That's when the nightmares become real and you have to decide if it was all your imagination or just some weird coincidence.

"Oh... Right." I say, and then walk over to the screen to scan-in and do my civic duty.

\* \* \*

Rain still streaks the curtained windows as the three Grey-suited Transcorp security officers mill around inside my landlady's apartment. I'm leaning smugly against the side wall, still wearing my coat, standing next to the black monitor screen with my arms crossed watching the others work.

They are taking pictures of the crime scene with an oversized 3D lazcam equipped with a flash, and meticulously scanning the room with various other handheld devices for clues and other evidence. One of these emits a thin vertical green beam of light and is being used to carefully scan the walls, another is projecting a grid onto the room into tight segments for the photographer. The third man tries to activate a older model virtual police line but eventually gives up on the defunct antique. All the lights have been turned on and the room is now a sickly green-grey color.

That's when a very wet Detective Kropp bursts through the door with a fierce splashing kick. Ah my hero. He wears a freshly pressed outfit similar to the day before, along with a very grim expression - also similar to the

day before. He stands in the open doorway framed by the lobby beyond and speaks without looking up from the clear data pad he holds in his right hand. He dips his head towards the glistening badge hanging cockeyed from his left suspender as he barks into the room.

"Gentlemen! I'm Securicorp Detective Paul Kropp, on an emergency crossover freelance license! I've been put in charge of this investigation, and I'm taking over as right now!" He takes in the room with a quick sweep, coming to rest on me.

Ah, the moment I've been waiting for.

I glance up at Kropp as if I just now noticed him come in and offer him a little salute at the brim of my non-existent hat. Kropp's eyes narrow then he stomps wetly over to me, his eyes filled with rage and his face a twisted red mass.

"You?! I should have known!" he explodes.

"Ah... Detective there you are." I say, with as much casual aplomb as I can muster. "What's the matter didn't you miss me?"

Kropp waves his thick right index finger at me flicking water from his wet hand and hitting my smiling face. I blink it away tolerantly.

"Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you are going to be in for when central finds out you are investigating without a license?!" He bellows.

I answer with a casual wave of my hand. "I'm not investigating anything, detective I called this in."

Kropp Puts his hands on his hips. The twitch in his left eyelid begging me to give him a reason to lay me out cold. "What the happy Hell are you talking about?" he spits out through gritted teeth. He Leaves his left hand at his hip and resumes waving his right finger at me like a mother scolding her child. Somehow more water flicks onto me, and my patience wavers. I narrow my eyes and frown with irritation but hold my tongue. "I got called in

on some ridiculous slum-sector overflow garbage about a dead body in this roach motel, and unfortunately you certainly aren't a corpse!"

The other officers have stopped what they are doing, two stare at one another in shock, the third stands awkwardly, staring at Kropp and his waving finger, nobody daring to interrupt the hot headed Red District detective "I thought I had made damn sure I wouldn't see you again after that little ident-chip theft trick you pulled on the senator's wife yesterday! So you better have one cherry red reason for being here!"

I smile mischievously and put on my best patronizing tone. I usually reserve it for Bishop on particularly hellish days, but today I make an exception. "I'll use small words for you." I say. "I live upstairs. I found her about an hour ago. I called these fine officers - who took my statement, and I called your office at Securicorp Central in lovely downtown Red district, which was easy since they sent me a lovely notice earlier today informing me that you had my license pulled. *Capiche* detective?"

Kropp grabs me by the collar, twists it around and gives me an evil piercing stare, sizing me up. He opens his mouth then closes it, then turns to face the other officers.

"Her who?" He says.

My landlady's foot still ungracefully sticking out from behind the couch. The officers self-consciously look back what they had been doing and pretend to keep doing it.

"Oh... Right." He mumbles, and walks over to the body. I lean back against the wall with my arms crossed for a moment then attempt to smooth out my collar with my left hand.

"That's Linda Miller, my landlady," I say. "Or she was till now. I'm betting you won't find a chip in her to prove it though. Just like Tara Mercer, her husband, and a few others I happen to know you are familiar with." Kropp looks up at the nervous-looking officer holding a data pad. The

Officer nods his head in affirmation. Kropp looks up at me, the anger boiling over him again.

"Get out of here." he says, a leaking crack from the dam about to break.

"With pleasure." I say, knowing full well that anywhere I could go would be tracked and logged with even more detail than usual - assuming that's even possible. So I push off the wall and glide out the still open apartment doorway.

"Be sure they spell my name right in the witness report 'Kropp'." I say.

"That's Kropp!" He bellows.

"If you say so." I reply, and disappear out into the lobby and then street before he can change his mind.

It is raining like bullets as I step out the front door of the apartment building. I hurry across the empty river of a street and cringe as the dirty runoff pours over into my shoes. Small consolation is the bulge I feel in my pocket from the silver lettered little black book which I have somehow forgotten to leave at the crime scene.

I suddenly realize that leaning against the lamp post like a drowned rat is a man. Even soaked to the bone I recognize him, he is wearing exactly the same black leather and torn denim getup sunglasses and all, and his long wet blonde hair is still pulled back in a ponytail. His arms are crossed and he is staring straight at me with a big skeleton smile. In his right hand dangles my own rumpled old fedora.

I cautiously splash my way towards the younger man wondering if I'm up for a second run. Much to my surprise and relief however, he stays put, and though he has to shout through the rain for me to hear him, it is exactly what he does.

"Good evening!" He says, like some old friend I've known for years.  
"You're detective Sawyer."

"Who wants to know?" I say

"It wasn't a question!" He laughs, either at me or himself, I'm not really sure which. "Would you like your hat back first or should I just chuck it away now so I can get a head start?"

He holds out the hat at arms length. I take it and slap it onto my soaked head with satisfaction. I'm already drenched from head to foot, but at least now I can see again.

"Who are you?" I shout.

"Not important!"

"Why are you following me?" I try.

"Ha! I'm following you...?" I can tell his amusement is genuine. "Okay listen detective, you may not have noticed, but I think it's starting to rain a bit! Can we go somewhere and talk?"

I don't usually accept offers from strange men leaning on lampposts, but in this case I make an exception. A bucket couldn't have made us any wetter, but he walks me through a maze of back alleyways that keeps all but the vertical drops off us, until he finds the back door of some dive I couldn't find again if my life depended on it.

## Chapter 10: Ponytail

The door closes out the sheets of rain as soft jazzy music fills the dark smoky hideaway. Various private booths and tables are scattered around in the shadows of the dark little hole, which is predominantly dark wood and black in color, but still manages to look dirty. Like Sam's though, no real evidence of corporate intrusion can be seen here, so I'm willing to give it a chance. Even the bottle labels have been soaked off, and I'd swear that the smell of the synth-booze is stronger than normal. The single wall monitor near the door has a sign that reads "out of order" hanging crookedly on it, while dim multicolored lights hanging from ceiling cones cast an eerie glow into each corner of the room without really illuminating any dark place at all. Towards the back a small group is smoking, laughing, and playing poker with a pile of bottle caps at a little round table.

My new friend makes his way to the back of the room, nodding to someone in the shadows as he passes. I'm right behind him, stone faced, but hyper alert to my surroundings. My eyes flick left to the place where the unseen patrons of the bar sit, but either my eyes are still adjusting to the dark or this is the kind of place where people don't like to be seen. On second thought there isn't much of a question about it at all.

Ponytail slides into a hidden niche for two just past the poker players. I slosh into the seat across from him without bothering to remove my hat or coat. Considering the unlikely chance I had gotten it all back, I don't feel like pushing my luck.

"Quaint." I tell him. I'm whispering for some reason. "Never seen a whole hippie bar before."

"Please!" he says unamused, "We prefer 'beatnik' if you don't mind."

"What's the difference?"

"We bathe more for one." He says flippantly, then leans in close like he's telling me an important secret. "...but mostly we think more. You should know, you are one of us if the truth be told."

"Another philosopher? You aren't going to start preaching to me about relative truths are you? I've had about as much of that I can stomach."

His smile dies. He replies almost angrily. "Who? Those whacked out priests at that freaky HFU cult? Puh-lease! I'm not talking about this new world order garbage that comes down the digital feeds, I'm talking about good old fashioned Old-world human independence. Maybe you've heard of it?" His mild anger flips like a switch to cordiality. He smiles and leans back. I'm trying to remember the symptoms of schizophrenia, but they aren't coming to me. "You would feel pretty at home here if you gave it half a chance." He says. "You are an antique yourself Detective Sawyer, your warrantee is very expired." He laughs as he says this, it reminds me of a crazy paranoid old uncle I once had. Before the war redefined crazy that is.

"Did you bring me here just to pick on me or did you have something important to share?" I ask him.

He looks long and hard at me, sizing me up. "Time is running out on the world Detective, and God has chosen you!"

"You are crazy." I say.

"Maybe. But then again, maybe I'm just the messenger. Do you believe in God detective?"

I look at him doubtfully. "Yaweh-Alah-G-?"

"-No, I'm talking about God-God-God." He says.

"Nope. Neither one of them." I say. I wonder for a moment what kind of coffee the place has, but the man is suddenly staring at me. Uncomfortable and intense, but there is a gleam in his eye.

"Doesn't matter, he believes in you Sawyer. You are playing a part in something bigger than you realize. Don't feel bad. Most people look without

understanding what they are really seeing. Life's bigger than us, bigger than a dead senator and a supposed multiple murder cover up. Bigger than the corrupt media and the corporate machine even... if you can believe in that."

Something about him is making me uncomfortable, but not nervous. I lean back and cross my arms defiantly. "I don't believe in anything that controls me and dictates my identity." I tell him. "I hate our corrupt corporate driven government, I hate the corps and their fake media faces, and I hate these damned chips everybody has to use to survive." I'm a little surprised at my own words, but there they are. A couple of people at the bar give me a sideways glance then go back to nursing their drinks.

Then ponytail is laughing again. "The government's always been this way detective, they just legalized it. Take any of the major corp owners... Mercer, Wright, Moore, and the rest of the corporate assholes. They've just been color coded and tagged to track their migration patterns. You might as well switch all their ID chips around, they are all the same."

"Corrupt and self-serving you mean." He widens his skeleton smile, leaning in even further. His voice is a conspiratorial whisper. "I told you you'd like it here. That's why the world is on borrowed time detective. Greedy immoral men have finally created a society dependant on things that they can no longer control, and we are long overdue for judgment. Fate is reality, and we are living in somebody else's crazy idealistic dream world!"

I narrow my eyes and focus on him with what I might even call a touch of genuine interest - completely professional of course. "So what are you saying? The end is nigh? Some sort of apocalyptic destiny? Please spare me that one, I've been hearing that my whole life but I'm still here."

"Call it what you like. Of course, the people that matter would say that technology progresses too fast for blame to be posted to any one identifiable man, but that's not the point. Our precious self control-"he stops in mid thought as an attractive teenage girl clad all in black sets two

glasses of questionable liquid on the table. He nods to her then continues more quietly once she moves on. "...Our precious Self-control is just an illusion Sawyer. And despite what those cathedral types will tell you, fate and destiny are not the same thing."

"I still don't buy it." I say.

He sighs, and then tries a new approach. "Ever play cards detective?"

I glance at the card-clutching group nearby anteing bottle caps into a pile. I acknowledge him with a shrug and a single half-nod. his gaze is extremely intense, his dark eyes piercing and serious, as though he believes that all life itself hangs from his every word should I somehow miss the point of this odd discussion.

"I know a man, a gambler of sorts himself - goes by the name of Theo if you care - who taught me that if the cards you are dealt in life are determined by some unchanging fate, predestination, God... whatever, then your ultimate destiny depends on what you do with those cards... That's free will! That's the human condition! But it doesn't change the fact that even though we may get the final word on most things, our fate is controlled by something higher. Raise, fold, call... we can play the game as long as we don't run out of chips, that part's completely up to us. But the fact is, when the dealer stops dealing cards... the game ends."

"I've heard all this before. I've been working these streets for a long time. I'm afraid I haven't ever seen much evidence to support the existence of this God of yours, and poker never was my game."

He leans back and crosses his arms, mirroring my posture and expression. I wonder if he's about to give up and go. It strikes me that I haven't one shred of evidence from this guy, and I still don't know how he knows me or even what his name is.

"God is in everything Detective, even in you." He says, and begins to slide out of the dirty booth. I reach into my pocket and toss the small black leather book with the silver lettering onto the table with a wet slap.

"Even in 'the machine'?" I ask.

He stands up to go, pulls two bottle caps from his pocket and tosses them on the table. "Ironically, Yea..." He says before I can process his reason for doing it. "And as long as you live by the chip you are still a part of that dying machine. There's only one thing in those little books worth reading though... And it's on the last page. When you figure it out though, be sure to take a sniffer with you."

He turns and takes a step. I hold up my left index finger. "Wait." I say. "You never did give me your name."

"Most recently it's been 'Chris Brown'." he says over his shoulder. "But I'm done with it now." He turns and reaches into his pocket and draws out a grimy little subcue ident chip. He rolls it across the table with his index finger towards me. I watch it bounce off my coat sleeve and stop. The man opens his hand as though gesturing that I may have it. I realize that he has an ugly little scar on his wrist where his own subcue chip used to be but was apparently dug out with no small amount of difficulty.

Then, this man called Chris shakes his head and pulls off his long blonde hair and glasses. The hair is just a wig. Underneath his short and shiny black hair is slicked back with too much grease. I'm strangely amused but equally dumbfounded.

"Life is but a dream detective." He says. "I could walk out that door and get hit by the midnight bus line right now... If I don't, then maybe you'll catch me later."

I glance down at the little chip sitting on the table in front of me next to the black book. When I look up I'm not at all surprised that my skiver friend is gone.

I open the book to the last page and my eyes widen as the last clue clicks into place. A big red stamp mark has been stamped on the inside back cover of the book. It reads: "Beneath the Street Press," and below that, a hand written note in a strangely familiar feminine hand:

*To whomever this copy finds,  
may it be an inspiration  
to you in your new life  
as it has been to me in mine!*  
-TMM

\* \* \*

The unmarked door of the hideaway beatnik bar slams behind me as I step out into the torrential rain pummeling the dark alleyway. I pull my coat up around me and make my best guesses until I finally find the street.

Out of nowhere a horn honks loud and long. I look up in horror as the headlights of an old style manual drive Transcorp bus comes barreling down upon me out of the rain. I jump back and the bus narrowly misses me, splashing dirty street water onto the broken sidewalk and whatever part of me might somehow have dried while sitting in the bar, and I decide then and there that God has a lousy sense of humor in more ways than one.

## Chapter 11: Sniffer

Outside Sam's, the rain madly beats the dark street. I burst in, soaking wet and frantic. The cafe is very closed but Bishop still sits at our usual table working hard. By "working hard" I of course mean that he is screaming at his datapad about some virtual work-order form paradox that more than likely has nothing to do with anything. I assume he's talking with somebody, but in reality he's yelling at the paperwork.

"C'mon, pack up your toys, I need you!" I say. "We have some trespassing to do and Senator Mercer is about to go home."

He looks up, not hearing me. "Good morning sunshine. Sleep in your clothes aga... We?! What do you mean WE?!" He's panicking, that means he's in.

From behind the bar Sam gives me a cautious look, a warning. I nod in silent acknowledgement to her as Bishop scrambles to fit everything into his slim black briefcase.

She knows me better than I know myself sometimes. I don't know why I always forget that.

\* \* \*

The glass elevator creeps up the side of the tallest red glass Mercer Tower towards the penthouse. It moves up as sheets of rain go down and great bolts of lightning crisscross in the dark and cloudy pre-dawn sky. Bishop and I stand in the rising elevator, the waterlogged city falling away from us. Bishop is fidgeting and twitching with nervous jitters and talking to himself. He carries a ridiculous amount of computer equipment along with his slim briefcase. I stand with my hands planted in my pockets, my face stoic with firm determination.

"This is insane! This is crazy! This is nuts! We'll never get away with this! Why are we doing this? We aren't getting paid! And even when we were getting paid we at least had a license-!" The elevator reaches the top floor and dings. The glass doors swish open. "-oh crap!"

I look at Bishop and shake my head, then charge into the dark Mercer penthouse. In the reflection of the dark glass I see Bishop standing paralyzed as the elevator door begins to close. He then lets out a YIP and dives into the room as the doors close behind him, and barely juggles the things in his arms, somehow managing not to drop anything.

The room is just as it was the last time I was here, except that the only light source comes from a shoulder high security pole with a glowing red tip. It pulses brighter and dimmer as it stands erect in the center of the living room casting an eerie red throbbing light into the room. Even the white carpet and trim have become a part of the pulsating red heartbeat. The rainwater flows down the three glass walls of the main room. It is like standing inside of a steadily creeping waterfall of blood. Undulating light patterns can be seen in it from the surrounding city lights and towers below.

I turn left on his heel and heads straight for the door to the back rooms. "Come on," I say. "Bring the sniffer." He's tiptoeing nervously at the edge of the room eyeing the glowing security device in its center like some kind of venomous snake.

"Uh.. you do know that's an electronic police line over there don't you Sawyer?... Sawyer?"

I go into the back rooms. Bishop's eyes widen and he scuttles after me. The dark hallway is long and skinny with numerous red doors. Expensive Red ridged wallpaper covers the wall on the right and nothing but floor to ceiling glass windows are on the left, and at the far end of the narrow hallway, continuing the outside perimeter from the main room, not to mention the decor. Here too the windows flow with water and reflected city light,

causing the wall and red carpet to appear as though they are flowing down and out over the edge of the tall building. At the end of the hallway is a large exotic potted jungle plant with a huge red leafy bulb.

I pass from door to door, quickly opening each one, looking in, then immediately closing the door again. Bishop - all the while mumbling something about how he's "going to regret this" - follows. He reaches into his pocket and ritualistically withdraws a pair of latex gloves, putting them on with no small amount of difficulty while I continue yanking open doors, checking rooms, and slamming them closed in frustration.

"So let me get this straight?" He asks, somewhere between casual conversation and defeated abandon. "You found another dead chipless person bringing the grand total to, uh, five... that we know of, and they all have a connection to Mercer. Mind telling me what we are looking for exactly?"

"If my guess is right, then you don't want to know." I say. "Where's that damn sniffer?" We're in a huge padded bedroom now, probably Mrs. Mercer's. The windowless internal space is extremely dark. The shadowy outline of furniture and a four post bed are nothing more than outlines against the murky blackness of the room. The fact that she apparently slept alone in the luxurious four poster both surprises and bothers me, but I can't quite make it fit.

"Oh... Uh, good," he says. "Glad I asked."

He snaps open his briefcase while still holding it, causing numerous items and papers to cascade onto the floor and dropping a few of the small electronic devices he's also been carrying. Then, with no small amount of swearing, he kneels, collecting his things and mumbles in an irritated babble of nonsense words.

I continue my increasingly frantic room search. I pass a round hole in the wall and jump to see a grizzled and tired scruffy old man grim with

determination - his steely eyes blazing with fire and ice before realizing that the damn little mirror is just doing its job.

Bishop doesn't notice. He's stacking his equipment in the corner then delicately scoops the small, metallic, thumb sized sniffer up into his right hand and gingerly clicking it on. It emits a soft greenish-white glow in a wide thin ray which he proceeds to scan the walls with. As he passes the beam over the doors the sniffer device emits a low tone. I stop and watch him work, remembering why it is I pay him.

"This is crazy Sawyer, this is like somebody's idea of a sick... Whoa!" As Bishop passes the beam over a section of the wall the beeping sniffer in his hand changes to a higher more excited pitch and tempo and the color shifts from green to red. He gapes at the spot where the light beam is cast, holding the beam as steady as his shaking hand will allow.

"Wait! Hold it there!" I say, cracking the first genuine smile I can remember for a long time.

Bish rolls his eyes. "Geez why didn't I think of that?" I start tapping and rubbing on the illuminated wall, passing my hands over the rough red wallpaper. Finding nothing, I stand up, thoughtfully looking first one way then the other. About two feet behind the wall where Bishop is standing there is a closet. I yank open the closet door and step into it, leaving him standing there nervously holding his toy.

I'm in Tara's ridiculously large walk-in closet. Row upon row of clothes and high fashion shoes hang here like so many personalities in the dark. A monument to Culturecorp and the Mercer Image, and a collective pricetag that would probably take an army of accountants to tabulate. I smash row after row of them aside with haphazard carelessness, with nothing but my gut to guide my recklessness towards one of the back walls, squinting to take in what little I can see.

And then it's there.

I pop my head and hand back into the bedroom startling Bishop just as lightning flashes, lighting up a door shaped trapezoid within the room like the hallway beyond and my own mad excitement. Bishop lets out a little girlish "yip" as I drag him bodily into the little room.

"You coming or what?"

He closes his eyes tightly and sighs then shuffles further into the closet behind me. The open series of doors cast almost no ambient light, but my eyes are adjusting and it's an easy few steps back to the cherry paneling on the closest perpendicular wall to the other side of where the sniffer device had reacted in the bedroom beyond.

Suddenly the wooden wall panel slides back with a whoosh revealing a pitch dark passage, blacker than the night ever got in the big city. A moment later a row dim fluorescents flicker to life, illuminating a narrow staircase leading down inside of the wall to the floor below.

"Aw Hell!" I hear bishop state plainly.

## Chapter 12: Seeing Double

Bishop and I descend the last steps of the grey concrete staircase and step into the center of an enormous loft sized room with hundreds upon hundreds of government style filing cabinets, shelves, vaults and various keyed bank style deposit boxes. The entire secret room's footprint is the entirety of the top floor of the mercer building, larger even than the penthouse apartment above, and with no apparent way down to the lower levels.

The red windows of the building are on all sides, where they can be seen past the many rows and shelves. The increasingly vicious storm is beating relentlessly on two sides of the building and water is cascading down all four. The lightning irregularly blazes the familiar dancing sparkles and red flowing water shapes onto everything inside the room, while the ensuing thunder noticeably rumbles and shakes the tall tower. Every time it does, the lights in the stairway flicker and the indistinct Red District skyline below even darkens for a moment before flickering back block by block.

"Whoa!" I hear from over my shoulder.

"I think we found what we were looking for." I say.

A faint tapping and banging noise is coming from somewhere in the room. Bishop freezes. I whirl towards the sound and focus in on a dark and distant corner where the flickering light from the stairway doesn't reach.

An especially long and well-timed flash of lightning lights up the corner while thunder growls long and low. In the corner I see the silhouetted outline of a man, gagged and tied in a wooden chair, he bangs on the floor with it, rocking back and forth, struggling for attention and freedom.

I cautiously move across the room towards him, looking down each long row of secure boxes and vaults as I pass them.

Alone.

I reach the man and utter confusion slaps me across the face. The man sits bound to his chair in nothing but his underwear and a white sleeveless undershirt. He's emaciated and thin, his red hair is ruffled, his beard thick and dirty under his strong, almost wild eyes, but there's no mistaking who he is.

The late Senator Thomas Mercer, back from the grave.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" I ask him, lifting the gag from his dirty head.

He coughs and wheezes weakly, and when he speaks it is with a dry and raspy unpracticed croak. "Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated I'm sure, But that impersonating bastard still got what was coming to him. Where's my backstabbing wife? I haven't seen her down here to taunt me with the news netcasts feeds in days!" His honest eyes go narrow. "And who are you anyway?"

"Detective Sawyer, Freelance." I say. "Tara Mercer is dead Senator. I saw her body."

This news seems to confuse him, his expression is a mix of sadness and amusement. "Heh. Then I'm glad you found me. I guess I'd better improve my security. There are only three people who are supposed to be able to get in here, and I'm one of them.

I reach into my pocket and hold up the silver bag with Senator Thomas Mercer's identity chip inside.

"You'll have to forgive me Senator." I say, "I've been... um, using you."

"Ah. I see." He says. "Well under the circumstances I guess I'm not too worried about it. Listen, I don't mean to be rude but do you think you might...?" Mercer nods down, indicating the ropes which confine him to his chair. I raise an eyebrow, stuff the chip back into his coat and move to free him of his ropes, working the first knots free with my fingers.

"Oh thank God." He sighs, "Another few minutes and I would have permanently ruined another perfectly good pair of underpants... Listen we don't have much time, if they've gotten to Tara already then he must be close to the end of the list! Who else is dead?"

"List? What list?" I ask him casually, then over my shoulder say, "Hey Bish, quit screwing around and grab those other subcues would you?... Bish?" I scan our end of the room. Bishop is nowhere to be seen. Only then do I realize he hasn't followed me. The hair on my neck prickles. I turn and cautiously move back towards the dark shadows of the many shelves leaving the still half-bound Thomas Mercer in the chair.

"Uh.. excuse me? Detective! Hello?"

Another bolt of Lightning flashes outside and this time the power cuts off entirely, leaving the room in total darkness for a few seconds until the red emergency power lights kick on. Even the skyline goes dark as the sector's power management computers are finally overcome by the strain and the safety protocols cut the power entirely.

Damn.

I can only take one tentative step when I hear the meaty smack of something hitting the floor behind me. I whirl around a half second too late. A dark form from the deep shadows between two shelves knocks me to the floor with a heavy thud.

I swing at the dark air but manage to kick at flesh. Then there is a great weight on me and we are rolling around and around across the floor and out of the darkness. The man is heavysset but short and a mess of fabric and rope. I land a few solid punches and take a few blows and a knee in the side myself, but finally pin him down as a rumbling flash illuminates the short bearded face in front of me with the blood red streaks of the water cascading down the floor to ceiling glass windows.

It is none other than Father Ziod in his purple HFU priest's robe. His face is a horrible sneer.

"Sinner! Blasphemer!" he screams at me, spittle and blood flying from his split lip.

Ziod brings up his knee to my groin and a different kind of lightning flashes before my eyes, forcing me to recoil and wince, stagger backwards while bent double, clutching myself.

"Repent of your sins my son!" he screams, using my pain as an opportunity to charge me like a bull, his silk-covered shoulder ramming my ribs with a horrible sick crunch and knocking me back into the window with terrifying crack. It is enough force to split the large pane of red window into a me-sized concave spider web, but not quite enough to shatter completely.

I reel from the blow and stagger forward, suddenly appreciative of just exactly how high the Mercer tower is, looking for Ziod but not seeing him until he dives at me yet again from the dark shadows. We both go down again, this time taking Thomas Mercer still tied to his chair with us. We hit him with a thud and a crack of splintering wood or possibly bones.

Then it's the tangle of flailing parts again, and we roll away from Mercer across the empty floor. I see that he has managed to free one of his hands from the broken chair before Ziod lands one on my jaw and spins me around. This time it doesn't hurt.

Thinking about adrenaline and revenge I manage to hoist myself onto my knee, and grabbing Ziod by the collar yank him up far enough to smack him three times hard and with my left fist.

"Repent this you sanctimonious bastard!"

Ziod goes limp and I drop him, his head hitting the floor like a melon with a hollow thud. His nose oozes blood and he lays still.

I limp towards Mercer clutching my ribs, my face poorly hiding my pain in the ambient red glow of the emergency lights, but not caring. I attempt to upright the chair with the senator still in it, but it is dangerously close to falling apart completely. Mercer clutches my coat collar with his free hand and the chair comes up. Pain like fire shoots through my side.

Mercer tugs on his other hand and the rope comes away from the chair.

"Oh God! What happened?" we hear. It's bishop. He's standing between two shelves clutching his head, blood glistening on his temple.

"Good. You aren't dead." I say.

"Gee thanks Sawyer, I knew you cared. Some bastard sucker-punched me when the lights went out. Where is he now?"

"I sucker-punched him a few times." I say. "Now his lights are out..."

I turn and point to the sorry sack of priest on the floor. The spot on the floor where Ziod lay is empty, and I cringe.

Stupid...

Damn stupid!

Ziod charges me from the darkness for the third time. Blood streams from his busted lip and nose like an animal, and a bloodlust is in his eyes.

"You will join the fallen!" he screams.

I instantly react, stepping to the side of the human missile just enough for him to get a glancing blow of my coattails. Unable to stop, Ziod misses me by inches and rockets instead into the already broken window pane.

We watch in fascination and horror as the window gives and Ziod punches through in seeming slow motion amidst shards of glass and blood out into the darkness. The sound of the storm immediately rushes in and Ziod is simply gone.

Mercer, Bishop and I stand in the gaping hole in the side of the Mercer Tower staring down to the dark street below. Mercer is loosening the last of the ropes still tied to his wrist, which he then throws out into the night.

The wind and rain whips past them in a whirling vortex taking the rope away as lightning flashes behind the building, punctuating his act like some ancient god. Mercer turns from the window and looks down at his underpants.

"Damn! Ruined another pair after all."

Mercer becomes deadly serious. "Come. I have something I need to show you." He says to me.

He leads us through the maze of shelves and lock boxes to an enormous vault door in the center of the room, where he begins spinning the giant combination lock back and forth. Bishop is dabbing at his bloody cut with his shirt sleeve before he looks up at the vault.

"Whoa! Big." He says.

Mercer glances at Bishop over his shoulder and smiles wryly with a laughing snort. I hold my expression and my judgment while Bishop looks from him to me self-consciously.

"What?... What?!"

The heavy vault door swings open revealing a small-sized room with floor to ceiling metal drawers and one small counter top upon which sits a thick red ledger book and a fancy gold and red pen. Mercer walks over to the ledger and flips through the pages to the last entry running his finger down the list. On the nearly full left page is a series of names and numbers all catalogued and notated with meticulous care by hand. The right page is completely blank.

"Gentlemen, do you have any idea what it's like to be the C.E.O. and congressional representative of Mercer Enterprises and its subsidiaries including Medicorp?"

"You mean being personally responsible for creating, owning, and ultimately managing the single largest world health corporation which manufactures and tracks every subcue identity chip ever made, and subsequently every person in Deus City?"

"Bingo. I've got stress. Ah here it is!" Mercer fingers an entry in the book, then walks over to a drawer and opens it. He withdraws a lidded box about the size of his hand.

"My heart bleeds for you." I say.

Mercer looks up at me and snorts, flips the box top off and over, sets the box into it and walks two fingers past the many index cards inside it. I can't help but admire his obvious distrust for digital filing of certain information, something that I would not have expected from a man like him. Bishop is stunned into horrified silence, something that I wouldn't have thought he was even capable of.

"Well needless to say that over the course of the last few years I have managed to accumulate something of a collection of... shall we say, interesting figures?" Mercer withdraws a shimmering bag from the box with a well practiced smile. Inside is a tiny subcue chip.

"You mean you kept certain dead people's chips for fun?"

"Fun, security, voyeuristic kicks, whatever... Why do people collect salt shakers? I don't know. For me it's these little things." His smile falls. "Of course, That's when my so-called wife and my back-stabbing business partner decided it was the perfect business opportunity! You'd be amazed what people will give for a new life.

Then it hits me.

The thing I was missing... Like another slap in the face, only not as polite, I realize I know the truth, and suddenly everything makes sense.

"Your twin brother." I say. "He didn't really die in that car accident did he?" Thomas Mercer's eyes light up and a smile of surprise dominates his face.

"Well what do you know? I guess that's why my wife said you were the best! When our mom was killed by that drunk car thief, Dad hid him from the prying eyes of the world. William was in a coma for years after the accident,

and we bought him the best doctors in the world. Dad said he didn't want him to have to suffer like I did. I was young, but I remember. Not too much suffering back then as I recall beyond the initial public spectacle, and will and I had always shared everything... After that, though William was always jealous of me. He wasn't content with living in the shadows. He even swore someday he'd have everything that was mine. I never took him seriously."

Mercer replaces the lid of the box and lovingly slides it back into its place in the drawer. "So I did what any loving brother would have done. I shared."

"Shared?"

"I loved my brother detective, he was insane at the end, maybe he it was the accident or maybe he always was... I don't really know anymore, but at the time it seemed like the solution to all our problems! I gave him a duplicate chip so that we could share it all. It was great! We were so much alike already that all we had to do was lay low for a month or take a tropical vacation while the other took care of business!"

"That's when he stole your idea?"

"That's not all he stole! He and Tara found out about my little collection here. Using that Unified Church of Ecumenical Apostasy - or whatever they call it - as a front, they offered a new kind of salvation to the sinners of this city. I found out. I protested. Loudly."

Mercer slams the metal drawer shut with a CLANG, causing Bishop to jump.

"When I threatened to tip off Securicorp they tossed me down here, in my most secret place... coming in often enough to make sure I wasn't dead yet and taunt me with their success and superiority... at least at first. I assume that when they were done with me they would have killed me. But then strange things began happening."

Mercer indicates the ledger with his hand. I step to it and look at the page. I scan the last five handwritten names. Some have a question mark and an exclamation point in feminine hand.

*Mr. Thomas Mercer ?!*

*Mr. Benny Gonzalez ?!*

*Fr. Emanuel Beck ?!*

*Ms. Tara Mercer*

*Ms. Linda Miller*

"When the people they were selling chips to started dying." I say  
"Killed you mean." He snorts. I study the last entries of the ledger, my eyes becoming narrow slits.

"Impossible, everyone we have investigated has died by an act of go...  
By an accident." I say.

"Uh huh." Mercer is not amused. I think perhaps even disappointed in me  
"I take it you aren't a religious man Mr. Sawyer?" he asks.

I look up from the ledger, my eyebrows knitted together, the edges of my mouth turned down slightly.

"Not especially." I say.

Senator Thomas Mercer chuckles.

"Neither was my wife. She was convinced I had something to do with it, that it was all a big conspiracy against her! She set up a portable screen and forced me to watch the news feeds as they came down the line, feeding me information and demanding that I tell her how to stop the deaths!"

Bishop gapes at both of us, his eyes dancing between us like someone watching a ping-pong table.

"She even hired some kid to dig up the hot chips so she could see what was wrong with them. Then, when my brother William died on the golf course she lost it, said she was going to hire a freelance detective to bring me down once and for all. I assume you know the rest.

"So what did kill all those people?"

"Hell if I know! Maybe the chips went bad and affected their minds... they were never meant to be in more than one body. For all I know they all went crazy and committed suicide."

Bishop can hold his tongue no more. "Wait, Wait, Wait! All of this is just really about an identity theft ring taken down by a bunch of coincidental accidental deaths and suicides? What the HELL does this mean Sawyer? Is it over?"

I stand with the ledger in my hands, scanning up the list of dead names one by one. Then my expressionless face widens into momentary surprise.

"No." I say, "There is one more person on this list who isn't dead yet."

"Good!" Mercer exclaims, "Then you may still have time! Take this, and if I could ask one last favor of you. Please call me a Medicorp ambulance as I do believe I'll pass out now." As he says this, he hands me the bagged chip and smiles, then his eyes roll up into his head and he sways hard against the wall of drawers with a metallic thud. I grab his arm to keep him from falling further and lower him slowly to the floor.

"Sleep tight Senator." I say. Bishop looks at me with an expression of questioning doubt. I afford myself one more look at the unconscious man and merely shrug. Then looking directly into Bishop's eyes I ask, "Can you take care of things here?"

He nods and swallows hard. He is straight faced and uncharacteristically serious as I turn and walk up and out of the vault to catch the train to yellow District before it is too late.

## Chapter 13: End Game

Senator Phillip Moore's office is a massively pretentious vaulted throne room of yellow and gilded gold. There are no walls, instead three story high ornate classical pillars of gold stretch in a row around the edges of the office that support the high roof like a gilded Parthenon. The ceiling is painted fresco and gilded relief of what appears to be a history of the city enacted by stylized renaissance nudes. Each pillar is connected to the next by high and wide glass windows which look out upon the continuing storm which beats down at the Yellow District below. In front of each pillar is a stand with an ornate golden statue of various nude women in various poses of varying modesty levels from the demure and innocent, to the downright pornographic and obscene.

In the far distance outside, framed by the darkest clouds in the west can be seen the older sections of the city such as Blue and Grey district and to the south the higher ultra-modern towers of Red District, still dark and without power, but it is evident that this office which stands like an ancient temple atop a skyscraper, in the middle of a magical golden kingdom, overlooks the most truly extravagant section of town, unaffected by the outage or the events outside its happy utopian bubble.

Inside the inner office, an enormous desk with a large clear flat-screen display monitor and conference table with multiple monitor screens inlaid, all sit at the end of the long room. Closer to the door is a full bar, a golden pool table, and an indoor whirlpool spa which looks to be about the right size for four models and one over-large senator. There is a dark yellow wall-to-wall carpet running the length of the room, and perhaps most ridiculous is a golden fountain right in the middle of it all, upon which stands nothing less than a golden effigy of the senator himself.

The real live flesh and blood Senator Phillip Moore sits at his enormous desk, whistling while working at some real live *paper* paperwork. He wears his trademark canary yellow suit. Sweat gleams off of his shiny balding head.

Next to the desk is a large golden mesh trashcan, made to catch the strands of paper for recyke from the small shredder perched on the desk above it. It stands half-full, a testament in itself to the Yellow Senator's waste and extravagance. I try to remember the last time I saw actual white paper.

The funny thing about nightmares is that if you realize you are having one, then it means it's almost over.

The wooden double door leading from the outer office and opposite of the desk shuts behind me loudly. Senator Moore jerks his head up with a start and glares at me with wide surprise.

It means you are about to wake up.

I stand bedraggled, bruised and bleeding in the entranceway of the towering Moore palace, my hands jammed into my coat pockets. I wear my hat crookedly on my head and a stony expressionless look on my face, waiting for the senator to explode.

"Who are you!? How did you get past my security?"

I withdraw my hand from my pocket. From my fingertips dangles the shiny transparent bag containing the subcue chip given to me by Senator Thomas Mercer.

"The Mercers sent me." I say.

Moore straightens his lapel and sits up straight in his enormous throne-like chair. His chubby cheeks puff as his mouth changes from surprise to a neutral line. He is hesitant and cautious with his words.

"I see." He says. "Leave it and get out."

"No, you don't see." I say. "The Senator has good reason to believe your life may be in danger."

"Don't be ridiculous." He says, with a jolly laugh. "Mercer's Dead."

I look to the edges of the tall golden office.

"Is this room monitored?"

"Of course not. I run this place."

"And how long has that been true?"

Moore's eyes narrow, his otherwise benevolent and cherubic features hardening.

"Who are you?"

"A freelance detective hired by your daughter Tara Moore-Mercer to find out certain things."

"And exactly what things have you found out... detective?"

"That everyone who has bought into the Mercer's little side business is dead. Including the ones doing the selling... except for you."

"What?! Are you actually telling me that you used a fake identity chip to sneak into my building and bypass my office security systems to talk to me about morality issues and this God-killer garbage? Get the hell out!"

Moore points at the door but I don't budge. Instead I start to walk slowly towards the desk.

"Call it what you like Senator. You are the last one alive on the list of people that Tara Mercer sold fake subcue chips to, and that makes for three possibilities."

Moore's expression changes to that of bemusement. He waves his hand at me patronizingly. I walk closer, skirting the long conference table.

"Oh this should be good. Please go on!" He laughs.

I count on my fingers as I go so that he will be able to keep up.

"One... You aren't who you say you are. You are an imposter who for sometime now has taken on the life and persona of one Senator Phillip Moore and your life could very well be in danger from whoever or whatever is killing people who aren't who they say they are."

Moore scowls, one eye narrowing, sizing me up before him, and likely calculating exactly how long it would take to pull a gun from his drawer, or maybe call for help.

"Two... You are the mastermind behind all of this. Your daughter and you cooked up a plan to take advantage of her husband's eccentric collection of identity chips and his unique access to the City's identity database. You put your own names on the list to cover your own back. If this is so then you have failed."

"And the third?"

"You have been taken for a fool, someone is setting you up... possibly those closest to you. And if your life is not in danger from that, then it is very likely in danger because of your very own stupidity."

"And which of these theories do you like the best, detective?"

"Honestly, I don't care." I tell him truthfully, jamming my fists back into my coat. Moore's surprise is evident. Then he smiles.

"Ah, I see then. So exactly how many credits do you need?"

"I don't want your money" I tell him, laughing.

"What? Well what in the world is it you DO you want then? Drugs? Alcohol? A woman? I don't have all day here!"

"I walked in that door already not liking you." I say. "You are as sold-out to the system as someone can get. You are the system." I'm now directly in front of the desk. My fists still firmly planted in my pockets. "I hate you and everything your system represents. I hate what society has become. I hate what you've made me become by selling out to your system. I hate that my so-called vote is represented by men like you who earn their place based on the size of their bank vaults..." I extract my hands and plant them on the enormous desk, leaning in close enough to smell the Senator's cologne.

"I didn't come here to save you." I tell him. "I came here to warn you. I don't care what you do. My job is done. My conscience is clean. Goodbye Senator Moore."

I turn to go, but I only make it about three steps. Somewhere in the back of the room is the sound of one-man applause.

"Brah-voh Dee-tective!" I hear a familiar voice say.

I turn to look. The man who called himself Chris Brown steps out from behind one of the golden pillars. His black hair is slicked back and his leather jacket and glasses are gone, but he wears the same shirt and pants as before. He has a wild grin and a gleam in his eyes and a small can in his hand filled with something that smells even more flammable than Moore's cologne. He wears an over the shoulder concealed carry holster jammed with an old style police pistol.

Chris stops clapping and draws his gun in a flash, pointing it at Senator Moore and walking forward to the back side of the desk.

"You," I say.

"Yea, me..." He says. "Whoever that is. I've been called so many things at one time or another... Farquar, Brown, Patish, Larson, Kaiku, Lex, Hook, Gordian, Theophilus... all the people I've had to become. Oh, but I still liked your little speech detective! I told you that you were one of us! I think you may have missed your true calling. Then again, you made it all the way up here after all! Did you like my little clues?"

The man steps up to Moore's chair behind the giant desk, sets the fuel can on the edge of the desk and cocks the gun against Phillip Moore's temple.

"Hi Dad. Miss me?"

"You son of a bitch! How dare you show your face around here!

Now now, you shouldn't talk about my dear sweet saintly mother like that, Pop! What would she say if she heard you, she was a virgin you know!

"I have no son you arrogant prick, and 'Saint' Dairine's reputation has already been dragged through the mud by those HFU Religious nut jobs! So why don't you pull that trigger if you think you can?"

The killer laughs. It is high and fast like a jackal.

"What? And have whoever I am today be placed at the scene of a murder? I think I'd much rather let God do the job, I rather had in mind a good fire today! What do you say?" He picks up the fuel can and begins flinging fluid around the room. It randomly sprays and splashes everything within a few feet of him, letting the last third pour out onto the top of the Senator's desk. More than a little gets on his jeans and shoes. "Can you believe they still use this stuff here in Yellow District Detective? Gee Dad, I thought you cared about the environment and fuel cell power! You should really do something about the fuel crisis at the Senate!"

He tosses the can, then withdraws a shiny antique metal lighter from his left pocket and flicks it open with a practiced thumb. A small flame appears on the wick. The madman smiles and tosses the lighter into the half-full trashcan beside the desk.

It instantly bursts into flame. A thin line of smoke wafts up to the high ceiling.

"There!" He says triumphantly, "We'll just wait for the smoke alarm to trigger aaand..."

"You'll never---" A piercing automatic fire alarm echoes through the building. I glance towards the ceiling. True fear is seen on Moore's face. The killer smiles and shakes with girlish delight.

"Ah! Right on schedule! My, but I do love the technical precision of our modern age!... Now Senator... I believe you were going to say something like," He does his best imitation of Phillip Moore, puffing out his cheeks and shaking his finger at the terrified Senator. "You'll never get away with this!"

He then turns to me. My gaze is unbroken as I intensely study the madman. My mind whirls with possibility, but they all seem to lead to one inevitable conclusion.

"And Detective, I believe you are supposed to try to get the gun away from me or talk me down from my insane ramblings or something?"

I turn to go, my coat brushing past the nearest corner of the pool table as I pass it. I wave goodbye with my left hand over my shoulder passively.

"Shoot him."

"What?! No!" The senator pleads.

"Chris laughs once then becomes deadly serious, as he realizes I'm not joking.

"Stop!"

I continue walking towards the door.

"Detective, please!" I hear the senator blubber. If he's faking it, he's doing a good job.

The killer's seriousness gives way to raw anger. "I said Stop!" He screams. I walk on, with raw determination carved deeply into my hardened face.

"STOPPPP!!!" The leather-clad gunman whirls on his heel in anger, taking the gun off of Moore and pointing it at me. I'm already back at the far end of the conference table and still moving towards the door. He pulls back the hammer with a voluble "click."

An instant later, and with surprising speed for a man of his lifestyle, Moore brings his fat arm up, golden topped cane in hand, and with a splitting crack knocks the man over the head with it, catching the gunman off guard.

The gun fires, grazing off of the pool table, leaving a dark gash then hitting one of the tall wooden doors. I feel the heat and wind of the bullet

as it misses my ear by millimeters. I stop moving towards the door, close my eyes in frustration, sigh, and turn back to face the desk.

The gunman has Moore pinned to his desk. He is choking the larger man with his own cane, all the while keeping the side of the hot gun pressed against Moore's face as he continues struggle against his better as best he can. Blood drips from the killer's forehead, and he laughs insanely.

I casually retrace my steps back towards the golden desk. The struggling men flip over once knocking the desk's Clearscreen monitor onto the floor with a crash, then again, this time rolling twice and knocking the paper shredder off the desk into the still-flaming trashcan. The cane whirls off into the hot tub with a splash. Both men are completely marinated in the flammable fluid from the top of the desk, and dangerously close to the fire itself.

The flames bloom out and up. They jump higher, becoming even with the desk. Pieces of charred ash and flaming paper shreds leap up and waft into the air and across the desk. Flames are now spreading across the carpet and the pillar of dark smoke begins to fill the room's ceiling.

I reach the desk and look down on the two men locked in struggle. Moore is now turning red from the killer's hand which grips his throat. Moore slaps the smooth surface against which he is pinned with his free hand, his desperate eyes pleading for help. His other hand is pinned down by the killer's but now holds the gun. Like a sick game of arm wrestling, neither is able to force the other over entirely.

Moore's hand gets too close to the pillar of fire and he recoils, crying out. The other's smile widens and he head-butts Moore's face with his bleeding forehead, then slams his arm down, causing the senator to lose his grip on the gun. Chris grabs for it but misses. It bounces on the smooth desktop and slides directly to me.

I look at the gun. It's an old .380 Enfield, cop issue.

I sigh again, and pick it up. Then I cock it against Chris Brown, or whatever his name is's temple.

The man releases his hold on Moore, laughing manically. The Senator gasps, taking in a great breath of air.

"I knew I could count on you detective! Your move!" He giggles delightedly.

"What happened to your zealous idealism that you so happily spouted at me before?" I ask. "More lies upon lies?"

The killer is all but surrounded by flames and burning ash, my new gun snug against his forehead. The fire flares up in patches around the room as floating burning pieces of paper land on gasoline soaked patches of carpet. He seems confused for a moment then brightens as though a grand realization has struck him.

"What? Oh I see! You don't realize that I'm just acting on God's instructions! You think I'm insane!"

"What? God wanted you to murder innocent people?"

"No no! You have it all wrong don't you see? These people aren't innocent! They are all guilty like you said! God told me so!" He looks down at the Senator with his eyes, and I press the gun hard into his head.

"Just look at this corrupt corpulent slob! I don't kill people! I'm just bringing justice! Who else is going to do it? They abolished the courts nearly a year ago, and that was just a formality!"

He looks up into what I hope is a deadly, angry gaze. I'm neither amused nor convinced by what the madman is saying, and as the slow realization of this hits him and he begins to panic, the killer's voice becomes higher, faster, and strained. His fear giving over to anger as he pleads for his life.

"No. No! God judges them! Don't you see?! I wouldn't kill my own father if I was crazy! God kills them! Not me! This greedy bastard is supposed to

die! I'm just making sure it happens the way He wants it to! There's a purpose to everything don't you see? There are no accidents! It's all fated! If this bastard lives then we are all going to die! Don't you understand?!"

Gently, almost lazily - while he is saying these last things - a single tiny glowing fleck of smoldering paper drifts like an orange-red snowflake into the dark waves of Chris Brown's greasy black hair.

"Everything happens for a reason!!!" He screams.

There is a long moment of nothingness, then the God Killer's head and hair burst into flames.

I jump back, keeping the gun on him as he begins to convulse around the room, shaking and beating his head as the flamespreads down his fuel-soaked body, succeeding only in spreading the flames faster to his face and arms as he slams backwards into the desk and flaming basket.

Senator Moore, now free from the other man's grip, launches himself away before the fire can reach him in a horrified panic towards the center of the room and dives into the fountain with a tremendous splash.

The desk fire spreads almost instantly, and in seconds Chris is nothing but an animated pillar of human fire and smoke dancing a grotesque last dance of heat and light and blazing burned flesh until he drops to the ground. The dying man burns a screaming trail of fire into the carpet which begins to quickly spread, engulfing half the office.

At this point the Smoke alarm finally gives itself over to the internal sprinklers, having been inexplicably delayed just long enough to consume the man, and in a few moments the flames are extinguished, but not before the unnamed killer has already collapsed into a charred pile of burned flesh.

I stand for a moment in the artificial rain, becoming wetter and wetter, as I try to process what just happened. I stare for a good long while at the smoking pile that was the killer until I'm quite sure he's dead, then make the long walk in silence around the back of the desk where the last of

the flames are sizzling out in the downpour of the office's fire suppression system.

Moore sits in the fountain, plastered up against his own proud and tall golden effigy fighting his fear and attempting to control his breathing. I kick over the now smoldering trash can. Ash and paper spills out onto the soggy carpet. I reach down, and with my coat sleeve in my hand pick up the antique lighter, test it, and when the flame appears flip the top back down and pockets it.

"Well at least this wasn't a total waste." I say aloud, then slosh through the now inch-deep water back to the double doors.

As I reach the large golden double doorway the still stunned Senator Moore speaks. I stop in the doorway but do not turn around.

"You saved me." He says "How can I ever thank you detective? I-I'll pay you! More than that! You are hired! You'll never want for anything ever again! The whole world will know what you have done if I have anything to say about it! Just tell me! What is your name?!"

I hesitate, my eyes dropping to the gun in my hand before I answer. The sprinkler system's water is dropping over the brim of my hat and down my face.

"I'm afraid I've been carrying so many subcues around that I'm a little hard to track, Senator. The name's Detective Kropp, Red sector. You can look me up, I've been following your God-killer for a while now."

I walk out the double doors and start down the hallway, savoring my lie and wondering if it'll stick, just as two Yellow District firemen burst into the inner office. The shock on their face at what they find upon entering is obvious. Behind me the floor is soaked, water pools on the table and desk. Smoke hangs heavy over wet ash and ruined carpet. The wet monitors and electronics spark and sizzle. The cracked desk monitor sits on the floor displaying nothing but colored static. Moore has a distant, far away and

glazed stare. He doctors his burned hand and stares sideways out the nearest floor to ceiling window.

"Oh good," I hear him say absentmindedly. "I think the rain's finally stopped."

I can see that indeed, outside the windows, the rain has stopped and the dark clouds are rolling away, allowing sunshine to peek through the clouds and casting a gleaming reflection onto the soaked and soggy floor of the Golden Moore Palace Tower.

### **Epilogue: Coffee and Cigarettes**

The no-nonsense voice of Grey District's Female Intellicorp Newscaster matches her pinstripe grey suit more than her rosy red lips.

"There was a surprising international legal policy turn-around today as Yellow District's Senator Moore has signed into international law the merger between Pancorporate International and all its subsidiaries, long-standing as the 3rd largest conglomerate in the world and the United Myriad Nation's mega conglomerate, "The Trans-Euro Federate Business Commission," forming what is now the largest mega-corporation in human history. Not only will this merger will bring the senator to a 53% majority status in the 'United Western Governmental Committee for Law and Commerce' as well as Majority Leader and Incumbent Presidential status within our own Corporate Senate, it will also grant Phillip Moore absolute diplomatic immunity in the whole of the Western World."

I stare at the screen in front of me. Now that the rain's stopped, Sam's is almost empty tonight, and I am pretty much alone with the news feed netcast reflecting in my steely grey eyes, and echoing in my gristly ears. It's dark but for the series of dim hanging cones of light above the dozen or so tables mixed with the glow of the thin flashing table monitors. Against the brick wall, on the small dark red-orange stage sits a Ska band made up of the four worn and haggard old men like me. The window behind the bar casts very little light into the dark empty dry street. The Orange "Open" Sign glows in the window.

"In light of his new world influence, and the current scandalous chaos which is engulfing the Red District's Mercer enterprises - upon today's shocking confirmation of evidence regarding the Senator Thomas Mercer identity theft and murder scandal - Yellow District's Senator Moore reacted to his son-in-law's indiscretions by immediately evoking his new majority

status and bringing strong corporate injunctions and fines upon the late Senator Mercer's now disgraced empire."

The Female I-corp Newscaster is now smiling broadly. The newscast is alternating between exclusive clips of the actions described and newscaster herself, as I watch emotionlessly while the newscaster's voice continues.

"The Corporate Senate is now in the process of seizing the Mercer Empire's holdings and its assets in order to ensure that the general population will not be affected by the recent irresponsible mismanagement of Sci-corp and Medicorp's subdermal Identity chip technologies among others. Senator Moore has declared that he is dropping most of his smaller lobbies, casting aside his former stance on the Global Defense Network among others, in order to concentrate his efforts on ushering in a new era through a unified network of peaceful trading and commercial oneness which everyone is calling a new 'world order'!

"In light of this positively charged and refreshing political climate, Senators Tang Fujimoto, former majority leader of White District's "Defensecorp" and many other smaller corporations in Deus City are moving forward with the long anticipated world defense network to ensure that 'a permanent peace for all nations will be inevitable.' This means good news for all Grey District's IN-CORP Workers as the building contracts and network interface protocol licensing will be drawn up quickly, and it is expected that within the next year at least 4 billion new industry jobs---

The sound of the newscast cuts off instantly when I tap the screen once with my left hand. I rub the week's worth of stubble on my face and work my way up to the messy salt and pepper mop I keep up top. Needs a trim. My well-worn, large light brown trench coat almost hides my sturdy body, but my stoic face reveals no emotion. Under my coat I'm wearing the same wrinkled white collar shirt over my white sleeveless undershirt. It is now haphazardly tucked into my brown slacks. An unlit cigarette dangles from my mouth. There

is an open new pack of cigarettes and a steaming black mug of coffee next to the keyboard.

I make no apologies.

I watch the muted monitor for a moment as the now silent Newscaster wordlessly continues her newscast. The caption reads: "Crime at all time low thanks to Transcorp security and Grey District's Senator Alexis Wright." A scrolling marquis at the bottom of the screen reports: "Wright industries stock at an all-time high due to hard working men and women of Grey District's In-corp."

I hear the band leader count to three as the broken down group launches into a soft instrumental ska number version of Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the Machine." I can't help but think that they sound tired. Defeated.

*I've been called a lot of things...I double tap the monitor, it pops to my familiar Icorp desktop. I move my finger over to the envelope icon and touch it. Instantly a digital window opens filling three fourths of the screen with the Intellicorp intranet browser and its ads and articles. They read: "Transcorp security investigates actual murder!," "Fanatic claims recent accidental death of priest might be linked to mysterious God-Killer," "Stock prices soar!," "Buy Black Vodka," "Detective Paul Kropp awarded honorary shareholder status for his heroic patriotism in the line of duty," "National test scores linked to enriched soda beverages," "Shop I-Corp clothing catalogue for practical and affordable work wear."*

All new, all the same.

I pull over the keyboard and type "special override mediapass" letter by letter into the location bar where the black cursor flashes.

*Slob...*

A smaller text window replaces the menu, the white pulsing cursor flashes in the black text entry field. The page is sterile, utilitarian. The way I like it.

My keystrokes are quick now, automatic. Eight keys sound off as seven asterisks bloom into place before replaced by the text: "Waiting for subcue identity chip confirmation."

I pass my right hand and with it my digital identity under the monitor. A digital chitter sounds. Then displayed is: "Verified."

*Washout...*

The small text window is replaced by a larger white field broken into three sections. A horizontal bar at the top displays the words: "Welcome to City Mail Feed - N. Sawyer, detective 2<sup>nd</sup> Class." A vertical bar at the left has three file folders, labeled: "In," "Out," and "Draft." The central space, which extends to the bottom right of the screen displays the message in a double sized font. The message flashes: "No New Mail."

*Antique...*

I finger the handle of the cup of coffee with my right hand, then bring my left hand up and lights the cigarette stuck in my mouth with a flick of my shiny antique metal lighter, before slipping the lighter back into my coat. My first cigarette in days is glowing and burning away with fire as I take a long, slow, drag.

*I don't deny it... After all, I got into this business when I was still young enough to care.*

Without exhaling I take a swig of my coffee.

*Before the mega-corporations made life totally unlivable. Before the skin-chips went live and Big Brother started tracking what our preferred brand of toilet paper was before we ever bought it.*

I exhale the smoke then take another long drag.

*I guess it started when selling all the public utilities, public education, and public government to the highest private sector bidders actually made sense to a starving economy with a dying educational system and morally ambiguous national identity.*

I remove the cigarette from my mouth with my left hand, and look long and hard at it.

*The corps' ushered in a new kind of world. A world where it made sense to have an Instant bank account, credit card, medical history and personal G.P.S. tracker all rolled into one little digital signature.*

I follow the slow descent of the still-lit cigarette with my eyes as I drop it into my coffee. Then I push the mug away from myself to the other side of the table.

*One injection was the price of admittance to Eden.*

I tap the Cafe monitor twice more without so much as glancing at it. It goes instantly black, and I don't care. I stare vacantly ahead and exhale my last drag of smoke.

*They said the truth was spherical, that tolerance was finally made possible, and that religion was obsolete. Too few argued. Why have faith in a godless world when man's utopia was within reach?*

Sam steps in front of me with an odd smile and delivers a fresh cup of coffee. Decaf.

*The crime rate dropped like a lead weight, those who were afraid of the omniscience of the chip were more afraid of starving. In a short generation, peace finally came. Who am I to judge?*

I close my eyes and strain against the pain of my broken ribs as I lean forward into my hands, cupping my face then run my fingers through my hair again, my coat sleeves falling to my elbows.

I let my arms fall to the table. The bloody gash in my right arm is still oozing with thick blood that hasn't quite clotted.

*Somebody once said technology progresses too fast for blame to be posted to any one identifiable man, but sometimes, when everything else is burned and blown away, identity is all you have left...*

I reach over with my left to the handle of the mug I was fingering before and drag it back to my side of the table, then turn my right palm up to take one more look at its improbable contents. Balanced in it is a tiny bloody subcue identity chip. My digital identity.

*To me though it's all just like some dark dream, the kind where you lose yourself to something else and find yourself asking who am I?...*

I use my thick left thumb and forefinger to pick up the subcue chip from my right hand and follow the slow descent of the still bloody chip with my eyes as I drop it into my coffee.

*Around here they just call me...*

The chip plops into the hot black liquid with a tiny splash. The black liquid engulfing me as I sink to the bottom of the mug. Then I push the mug away from myself to the other side of the table.

It's not like it's the first time I changed my identity.

END

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## VITA

Adam Lloyd Brackin was born to John and Anne Brackin in Columbus, Georgia on January 14, 1976 because it had the closest hospital to the small town of Waverly Hall where his father was a pastor. From the age of two, he traveled the world with his parents, living in the Philippines, Costa Rica, New Orleans, Guatemala, and Florida as a “Preacher’s Kid”, a “Missionary Kid”, and a “Director of Missions’ Kid”, all before he graduated from Sahuaro, High School in Tucson, Arizona. While in Tucson, he also attended Pima Community College for three semesters and worked the night shift as a Veterinary Technician.

On his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday he moved to Abilene, Texas where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art and English with Texas Educator Certification from Hardin-Simmons University and met and eventually married his wife Lisa in 2001. Adam worked three jobs after this, including tutoring at the local Sylvan Learning Center, as a certified test administrator at a Prometric Computerized Testing Center, and at the Hardin-Simmons Irving School of Education as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, all while he acquired his Masters of Education in Gifted and Talented Studies.

After graduation he moved to the North Dallas area with his wife on his twenty sixth birthday. After a semester in the public school system and a year as a freelance writer, Adam returned to school to pursue studies in “Art and Technology” through the “Arts and Humanities” Ph.D program at the University of Texas at Dallas. After three years as a private school teacher, Adam combined all of his loves together and he and

his wife started their own private school in Plano, Texas called “Bridge Builder Academy” which specializes in one-on-one teaching and in-home education through home-schooling with certified teachers.

Dr. Brackin hopes to one day franchise his private school, publish a series of novels and ARGs set in wonderful and mysterious future worlds including the sequel game “Deus City II,” and to also teach at the university level once more, where he aims to pass on his deep love of all storytelling methods students far into the future, unless the world does in fact come to an end on either December 21, 2012 or 2042 respectively, in which case I apologize for getting it right.