Narrative Friction in Alternate Reality Games: Design Insights from Conspiracy For Good

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ABSTRACT

Alternate Reality Games (ARG) tend to have story-driven game structures. Hence, it is useful to investigate how player activities interact with the often pre-scripted storyline in this genre. In this article, we report on a study of a particular ARG production, *Conspiracy For Good* (*CFG*), which was at the same time emphasising the role of strong storytelling, and active on-site participation by players. We uncover multiple levels of friction between the story content and the mode of play of live participants, but also between live and online participation. Based on the observations from the production, we present design recommendations for future productions with similar goals.

Keywords

ARG, transmedia, larp, design, pervasive, games, gameplay, narrative

INTRODUCTION

Alternate reality games (ARG) (Martin et al., 2006) have primarily been designed as storytelling vehicles. Being transmedia (Dena, 2009) productions, one of their main attractions lies in their ability to transport the players to a fictional world superimposed on the reality of everyday life and delivering an interactive narrative grounded in that setting. The play style is largely collective: Through locating content in the real world and online, players uncover, piece together and influence a given narrative.

The genre and play style that was novel ten years ago (Taylor & Kolko, 2003) is now well established, and it has by and large also met with success: there have been large-scale commercial productions, mostly in the advertisement sector, some of which have received critical acclaim. Certain patterns of gameplay have been well documented, in particular the way collective intelligence (McGonigal, 2003b; also Shirky, 2008) allows players to solve extremely difficult puzzles. What has been less studied is the interplay between narrative and gameplay in these games.

In this paper, we focus on that interplay in a recent ARG production. The *Conspiracy For Good* (*CFG*) was explicitly designed to offer direct participation in a well-designed storyline. In fact, the designers consider it a *participation drama* (Whittock, 2010) rather than an ARG or a pervasive game, although it technically belongs to all three categories. The focus on telling a story and direct participation in the story makes the production a good candidate for uncovering the problems as well as potential of pervasive, participatory storytelling.

A particularly interesting aspect of *CFG* concerns the interplay between narrative and gameplay in conjunction with *tiered participation* (Dena, 2008). Almost all trans-medial productions make use of some kind of participant tiers, so that players are offered multiple entry routes and can choose their own level and style of participation. In comparison to most other ARGs, *CFG* had a particularly strong live play component, drawing upon the tradition of Nordic live action role-playing (Stenros & Montola, 2010, 2011). While online play followed the traditional ARG model of crowd-sourced, collective puzzle solving, the on-street players played in small groups and with a strong focus on interacting with the environment. *CFG* put the players on the streets, making them solve puzzles, dodge security guards and interact with hired actors, thus much more resembling the activities that you would expect in a computer game, only in the physical world (see Image 1). Our analysis shows that for multiple reasons, the live participation tier became distanced both from the overall storyline and online play.

Image 1. Player escapes from the Blackwell Briggs security personnel on Millennium Bridge in London.

This study is an analysis of the design challenges of combining strong narratives with pervasive street play, suggesting the reasoning behind these challenges, and offering possible solutions. In this paper we follow Tavinor's (2009) terminology and use *fiction* to refer to the diegetic story-world while *narrative* and *story* refer to a designer-directed storyline. As discussed in more detail below, the story was not scripted as a completely sequential structure, but fragmented into a set of *story beats* that to some extent could play out in varying order, and some of which could be influenced by player activities.

Although some story beats were focused on players uncovering events that already had happened, several of the key storyline events happened during the game and were influenced by player actions.

THE STRUCTURE OF A CONSPIRACY

Conspiracy For Good was a commercial pilot project in a potential series of ARGs created in collaboration by The company P, Tim Kring Entertainment, and Nokia, who sponsored the event to promote Nokia Point & Find technology[1]. *CFG* ran for four months online, culminating in four live events on the streets of London in July and August 2010. The focus on participation drama was largely shaped by the visions of the established TV series producer Tim Kring and apparent in particular in the online *webisodes*, short high-quality videos that were published online throughout the whole game and that communicated both the storyline and the progression of the players.

The first appearance of the production was through a viral teaser campaign with ordinary people as well as recruited celebrities claiming that they were "not members". Interested people were directed towards a web site where they could sign up and record their own "unmember" videos. This first teaser campaign was followed by a four-month long online game, with the primary purpose of introducing the storylines and characters, using mostly typical ARG tropes of distributed narrative and puzzle solving. Already during this period, there was an element of mobile gaming. Three free puzzle games for Nokia phones were distributed through the Nokia OVI store, targeting regular Nokia users that were unaware of the ARG. Playing the games unlocked clues for the alternate reality game (in the manner of *Chain Factor*, see Lantz, 2009). As the games were downloaded over 900,000 times, they served as one entry route to the game.

During the last month of the production, the emphasis shifted drastically in favour of live participation in the four London events. In order to ensure a sufficient number of players, the live events were publicised through local channels (such as club listings), and made available to anyone, whether or not they had participated in the ARG so far. Starting with the third event, live players also got access to a headquarters in London, accessible around the clock.[2] The live events lasted for approximately six hours each and had 80-180 participants each. Live players would frequently meet fictional characters played by interactive actors, *ractors* (see Stenros & Montola, 2011). During the course of events, these interactions required an increasing level of reciprocal role-playing by the participants. While the players were never cast as fictional characters, they still had to fit themselves into the fictional universe of the game.

Every live player group was equipped with a Nokia Point & Find-enabled smartphone. Point & Find retrieves location-specific information from the camera: by pointing the phone towards a distinctive object, you retrieve information related to the object or the location (see Image 2). This set the basic structure for the live events as a kind of treasure hunts. The players would go around, discovering clues and navigating their way through the game. Hence, this part of the game employed what Jenkins calls *environmental storytelling* (Jenkins, 2004), in that some plot material was uncovered through spatial exploration based on the Point & Find technology, propped places, and the interaction with actors.

Finally, the webisodes created a closed loop between the online content and the live events. The live events were filmed by a camera crews, and the activities edited together

into online webisodes that would communicate the progression to players who could not make it to the event. They also served as advertisements for upcoming events.

Image 2. Nokia Point & Find in use.

Conspiracy For Good wove together the story of an evil corporation Blackwell Briggs and the global benevolent conspiracy organisation that rose to oppose its actions. The players were recruited to save the Zambian village of Chataika, threatened by a Blackwell Briggs oil pipeline. Their task was to help a local Zambian teacher to travel to London and uncover proof about the illegal actions of the corporation. The game was intended as a serious game, one where participants would not only think about various charitable goals and organisations, but concretely act to support them. This was particularly apparent in the live events, where some of the tasks involved contributing to actual London-based volunteer organisations.

STUDYING *CONSPIRACY FOR GOOD*

As *CFG* was a long, distributed and complex project with numerous play modes, a number of methods were used for data gathering. The strategy of using several complementary methods is usually necessary in the holistic study of pervasive play (Stenros et al, in press). Our study employed the following methods of data acquisition:

Discussions with the production crew. During the design phase, two researchers repeatedly met with designers to discuss the emerging game design and the motivations behind it. After each live event, they also participated in the production debriefing.

Participatory observation. Three researchers participated in live events as players and participant observers.

Semi-structured player interviews. The observers recruited players for interviews, which were conducted either on the spot after the game, or a few days later by phone. We conducted 12 interviews with a total of 16 respondents. Interview transcriptions were cut into 1120 separate items, each corresponding to a single statement. The items were

analyzed by affinity diagramming method (Holtzblatt et al., 2004). 25 themes emerged from the analysis, forming the backbone of this study.

Monitoring online discussion forums during and after the events. The *Unforum*, a popular site for dedicated ARG players, was monitored to get a better understanding of the game events from the online players' point of view.

Online survey. An online survey was distributed four weeks after the game. The participants were recruited through a targeted mail, sent by Nokia, to all registered *CFG* participants. 168 persons, 113 men and 49 women, responded to the survey and 96 completed the full survey. The average respondent was around 30 years old. Of the survey respondents, 64% had not attended any of the live events. This makes the survey a useful complement to the interviews, as these were done only with live participants.

Overall evaluation
Before going into the core issues of this paper, we will summarize how the game was perceived by players.

The online survey paints a positive picture of the experience. Overall, participants rated the production quality as good to excellent (see Image 3). Participants that had attended live events were more positive than participants that only participated online.
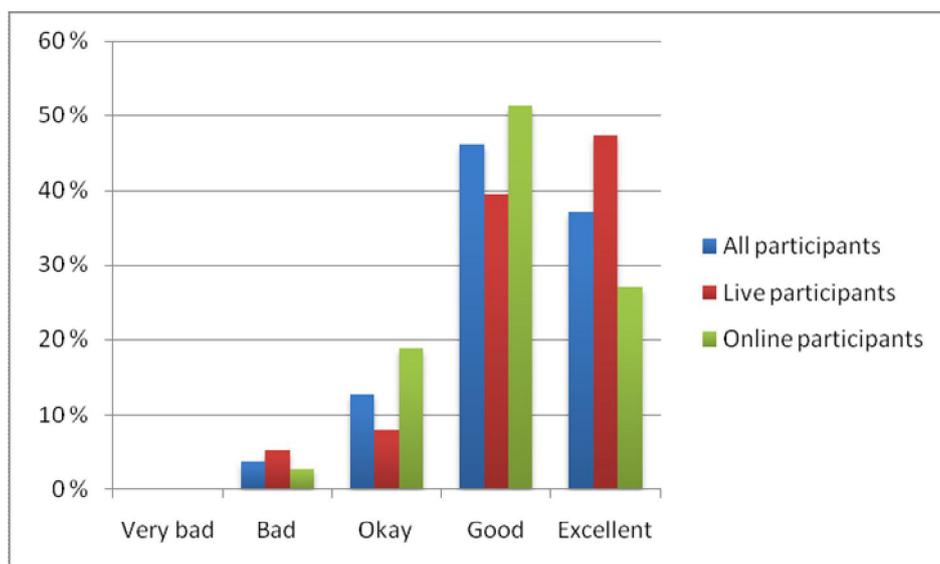
Image 3. Production quality, as rated by all participants, online only participants, and participants who also participated in live events (78 respondents).

Pervasive games that offer live participation tend to generate very positive comments from participants (see e.g. McGonigal, 2003 and Stenros et al, 2007), and *Conspiracy For Good* was no exception. As answers to the survey question "Please summarise your general impressions of the game" we find answers such as

> It is one of the largest pervasive experiences I believe anyone has ever participated in. I sincerely hope that the amount of effort can one day be duplicated and surpassed.

> Something that I will never forget. My friends on Facebook were all intrigued and asking "what was that about!"

The semi-structured interviews offer a more nuanced – and critical – view of the game. Though most interviewees had an overall positive attitude towards *CFG*, they voiced certain reservations.

The respondents had fairly sophisticated game literacy, as 80% of the participants reported playing computer or video games and two thirds mobile games. Surprisingly, two thirds had played pervasive games before, and one third had played role-playing games. Hence, most players had clear preconceptions of what kind of game they were to take part in.

NARRATIVE FRICTION
Conspiracy For Good aimed at creating a coherent storytelling path, weaving together online and live participation. While the game was positively received, there were issues of *narrative friction*, and these were largely related to how the story beats were communicated in different media. Below, we discuss these as a) friction between online and live play, b) between narrative and gameplay, c) between genre expectations and actual play, d) between collective and competitive play, and finally e) between the perception of a game world and the presence of a production team.

A. Friction between online play and live play
The influence of online content to the live experience varied tremendously. Some reported that online content, especially the videos, enhanced the immersion in the storyline:

> The online content really padded out the rest of the game between the Saturdays. With so much to explore, read, investigate and solve it made the conspiracy so much bigger and personal. (online survey).

However, both the interviews and the online survey show surprisingly low involvement with background story and online content prior to events. This comes up in the online survey. In response to the question "Describe your online involvement with the game a bit" we received, for example, the following answers:

> Nothing much to describe – for me it's all about the live experience. (online survey, live participant)

> I just used the site for getting details on the live events. (online survey, live participant)

A major cause of the problem was the clear division between online players and street players – they were not the same people.[3] The online parts of the game could be played from around the world, and many of the players that took it up had previous experiences with alternate reality games, whereas the live players had to be physically present in London and were primarily recruited locally. Many of the latter saw the game more as a treasure hunt or a *smart street sport* (Montola et al., 2009). In the online survey, we find these players comparing the experience to the kind of games that are featured at urban game festivals such as *Come Out & Play*[4] and *Hide&Seek*[5]. A common denominator for such games is that they play out over a limited time period (less than a day) and although they may require intense efforts during the event, they require very little preparation. With this in mind, it is not surprising that such participants were not motivated to read up

on the storyline in advance. Several of the interviewed live participants had at times problems remembering the main characters, and they could not describe their goals and motivations.

This was obviously a problem, as *CFG* was intended as a transmedial participatory *drama*, where the storyline would be directly meaningful for the individual player who could take part in some of the action. With the story unknown to so many of the live players, the meaning and motivations of their actions in the larger context of the game world was lost (see Image 4).

Image 4. Many street players knew little of the backstory. When they met Nadirah, pictured here being interrogated before making her way to Europe, they did not know what she had gone through.

In order to address this, the organizers planted actors and arranged events that would bring more exposition of past events in the storyline into the live events. They also recruited expert players to act as ambassadors explaining crucial plot points to new players. However, for aesthetic reasons information about the backstory, motivations of major characters and even gaming instructions were given *diegetically* – by fictional characters and within the narrative – in order to preserve coherence between the game world and the play experience. The effect was that such retellings took up a lot of playtime, while still being difficult to comprehend.

It would only be a small exaggeration to suggest that *CFG*, was, in practice, two games for two audiences.

> Overall, what was sorely lacking was an integration of live event content with online components. The online community was essentially given the shaft the moment the live events were on the horizon, which led to even more hardcore players giving up. (online survey, answer by a participant that participated both online and live)

As noted by this respondent, it is more than likely that some of the online participants felt that they were excluded from the game if unable to attend the live events.

B. Friction between narrative and gameplay

In order to guarantee that a satisfying narrative unfolds, the game organizers need to plan events beforehand. However, if the players feel that they have no agency, that their actions have no effect on the story, this is discouraging and makes the interactive game part feel superfluous. Games rely on *aesthetics of action*.

Game studies has discussed the friction between narrative and gameplay in digital games (e.g. Murray, 2004; Mateas, 2004; Jenkins, 2004). *Conspiracy For Good* was an event game spilling into the physical world, played only once with run-time gamemasters. This means that the there was no possibility save and replay, no need for an AI and no limitations in material constraints (affordances), all usually relevant for the construction of narrative-rich digital games.

CFG had a set story, where the players' actions did not influence the grand narrative. The interviewees differ in their opinion on the experience of this. Some felt that the balance between game and drama worked better and was more interactive than in similar projects they had attended in the past. Even in cases where the outcome of a task had been determined months ahead, these players felt that it was them who determined the end result.

> Even though it was a game and stuff, you felt closer to the reality they were creating than the previous one I went to. (Interview 12)

> This is definitely more interactive, because normally it's more following people around and watching them, but with this for certain parts you got to take part as well. (Interview 8)

Other players, and even the same players in other situations, had the opposite experience: that their actions had no impact on the events. *Railroading*, forcing the sequence of events in a certain direction, was mentioned as a criticism.

> So of course I felt more, being just a follower rather than being in the middle of doing, but of course that was a bold attempt to create something that would make people feel like they're in the midst of doing something themselves rather than just following. Yeah, well, it was sort of, bit difficult to perceive it as a game. (Interview 2)

The fixed story structure was not the only thing that influenced the players' sense of agency. A complaint that arose several times during the interviews was that all important choices were done by actors – except that sometimes the interviewees mistook *other players* for actors. Hence, the problem may be related to more general problem with a collaborative play design. Several interviewees also complained that there was no point in trying to push oneself to solve puzzles, since there were so many other players who would solve them quicker. Social scientists call this phenomenon *social loafing* (Karau & Williams, 1993): people making less of an effort to achieve a goal when they work in a group than when they work alone.

> You didn't feel like you had to get involved in order for the game to progress, because someone else was gonna do it. (Interview 1)

Although the main plot was set, several subplots could be influenced by the players both online and physically in London, the latter primarily in between the organised events. However, as the live events were scripted sites of play many players missed this opportunity.

Some interview participants as well as survey respondents comment on a lack of dramatic sophistication in the production. The setup with an evil corporation with no redeeming features on one side, and the players as the good guys, helping poor people, standing up to corruption, and setting up a conspiracy for good provided little basis for engagement to these players. Some players demanded more shades of grey, in particular wanting to play the bad guys.

> And I guess, an, more interesting idea for the whole game mechanic and storyline would have been that some of the participants would've played for the evil guys. So, now the screenwriters and producers seemed to have such a good idea that we all have to be on the side of the good, but you know, people aren't that simple and easy, so some people might have wanted to play on the side of the bad, especially when you know that they're purely fiction. [...] But now it was sort of too clear from the outset that we're all on the side of the good and that's a bit boring. (Interview 2)

Despite the fact that *CFG* did not require players to actively role-play, there are occasional reports of deep immersion into a plot event. In these moments the friction between playing a game and partaking in a (prescripted) narrative fell away:

> As captured in the online video (much to my surprise!) ... instinctively – without any thought or planning – I took a stand in the safe house, when all other participants had left (on demand!). It's an instinct as well as a principle – in life and in any game – that I remain as a witness, ready to step in if something 'bad' was going to happen to our leader! It was certainly an unscripted moment that played out really well for the actors. Yes. They did well. A best and a redeeming moment, for us and the game! (Survey response to "Tell us about your best game moment!")

C. Friction between genre expectations and actual play
Even though the majority of players had earlier experience with pervasive and alternate reality games, many of them struggled to find comparable experiences afterwards. Some mentioned TV series (*24*, *Lost*) as similar concepts; others discussed tabletop role-playing games or experimental participatory theatre. Even the players that had the most similar experiences came from two backgrounds: Some were fans of The company P, with previous experience of pervasive larps, others were London-based street game enthusiasts with a history of attending *Hide&Seek* events.

Hence, the players arrived with conflicting expectations. We have already touched upon the dissimilar genre expectations between online and live participants, but there were also conflicting expectations within the live player group.

First, there was confusion on the *genre of the story*. Some thought that *CFG* was a *24*-style action thriller, whereas others considered it to be much more "realistic". This confusion is understandable. The production quality was very high, creating friction between "realism" and "Hollywood realism". Genres influence story logics, which is particularly relevant for co-creative performances including pretence and role taking, as every participant contributes to the whole, based on their own genre expectations (e.g. Stenros, 2004). Some respondents complained that the production values of the videos

and the merchandise given to the players were too professional, and felt that that clashed with the "realism" of the story.

> I normally know what is real or not real, I felt like I don't really believe that could actually happen. (Interview 10)

> They weren't what somebody, as much as the realism here with the conspiracy was great, the realism wasn't there with the Blackwell Briggs people. It was kind of lacking, they were a bit wishy-washy. You couldn't get yourself into it with them. (interview 5)

Secondly, there were differing expectations regarding the *genre of play*. The relative novelty of the live events primarily caused confusion and a lack of player initiative. Players reported on several occasions in which they simply did not know how to proceed in the game.

> At the beginning I felt a bit lost but then I came to event 4 and didn't know enough about the whole thing.

> [W]e got lost, missed the point of the game and therefore ended up last pretty much!

> There was some time in the final event when we weren't sure what to do, though in general that event was well planned.

> (Survey responses to: "Tell us about the most boring or bad moment of the game.")

Even experienced ARG participants encountered some friction. The online experience was a fairly typical ARG, in which participants collaborate to solve puzzles and push the story forwards. During the live events, players were split into teams, and the teams had differing experiences. For example, during the last event some players met the main villain, others were recruited into the evil corporation, and some were captured by Blackwell Briggs guards. Such designs encourage players to discuss the game afterwards, as a way of enriching the experience for all. However, the live players were not expecting such big differences between the team experiences, and some felt that they missed out on the good parts.

> When it was obvious that the recruitment tests were obviously arbitrary, and being unlucky our team ended up being the last to be interviewed, which meant that I, being last, got a 30 second interview and obviously no chance to progress. (Survey answer to: "Tell us about the most boring or bad moment of the game")

D. Friction between collective and competitive play

Generally, there was a tension regarding the intended play style. The online part was constructed as a puzzle for a hive mind (McGonigal, 2003b), meaning in effect that the player group played as a single entity to uncover and piece together the distributed narrative. But when players were divided into teams in live events, it generated an expectation of competition between teams.

> [T]here usually seems to be some kind of a time limit and some kind of a score kind of a thing, and in this case it was a bit difficult to understand whether there is a score and whether there is a time limit and whether we are sort of gaming against our peers or with them. (Interview, 2-25)

The quotation illustrates how the expectation of a competition increases the need for clear rules and instructions.

> … there was not really interaction between the front teams apart from trying to ask for help, when the people were about finding the clues. But apart from that, it could have been something that they could have done, interactions between the different teams, or kind of a competition to find a clue or something like that, with two teams. That could have been nice. (Interview 6)

In the final event, players also had to at times work as individuals, introducing yet another mode to the experience.

This created a conflict with the expected style of playing. In an ARG, it is very important to play along with the intended design, and avoid getting accidental glimpses behind the curtain (which would expose the diegetic story content as fiction) (McGonigal, 2006). The live events, with their focus on team play, inspired a more open attitude towards cheating. The reaction may have to do with the fact that there were plenty of external rewards for players showing up in the live events; they received t-shirts, compasses, binoculars, flashlights and so forth. This created a false expectation of a "big prize":

> I got a phone as did my wife but I would like to know what the winning group got as a Grand Prize. (Survey response)

The problem was aggravated by the fact that during the live events, not only the backstory but also the rules for were explained diegetically. Some informants felt that both the background and the gaming instructions should have been relayed outside the game[6]. Although this would break the flow of the game momentarily, it helps to make the game goals and limitations clear to players, and this in turn enables them to get the most out of the event.

The main motivation for adhering to rules seems to be the expectation that this will lead to the best experience. In multi-player games cheating is considered as an option when a particular experience turns out less well designed than expected (Consalvo, 2007).

> In the last one there were some boring 'aptitude tests' that took most of the afternoon and no time for actually solving anything. I gather from someone else we should have just cheated, but we didn't really understand the boundaries or anything.
>
> (Survey answer to: "Tell us about the most boring or bad moment of the game")

The experience of playing in a team was highly appreciated as such. Teams could pool skills and divide labour. For example, a number of players commented that they were happy that they did not have to carry out any "awkward" social tasks (talking to bystanders, role-playing with ractors) as others in their team loved doing that. Similarly, teamwork alleviated accessibility issues of physical tasks. Division into teams helped navigate those design issues by *pooling talent*. Yet, as mentioned, players craved clear instructions for whether they were expected to compete between teams or within teams.

E. Friction between fiction and production
The prevailing design ideal for alternate reality games is that the production team should stay hidden in order to maintain the illusion of alternate reality. In practice, upholding the illusion often requires a huge effort by the team and may limit feasible designs especially

in live events. In *CFG*, the players perceived numerous disjunctions between the fiction and the production. Especially during the first live event the players could spot members of the production crew lounging halfway into the game, or just hanging around the players checking out how the game was progressing. Filming the events caused a major break of the illusion. As all live events were filmed to produce the webisodes, camera crews constantly followed the players. Many complained about this, as the filming also disclosed to the players that they were going in the right direction.

> Once a cameraman asked us where are you going next. We said we don't know, sorry [laughs]. (Interview 3)

Some uses of game technology also lead to incongruence in which the activities performed did match their diegetic meaning (Waern et al., 2009). For example, in the third event the players were told to hack nearby security cameras to receive video feeds to their phones. In reality, what they did was to scan barcodes with their smartphones. In general, some of the actions that players had to perform in order to progress in the game felt unnatural or even contrived.

> [T]he camera seemed to be a sort of a pretext just to get us out there, and to.. It was sort of a narrative element that you know, the, you know, the big brother is watching us and the, whatever the company was called (interview 2)

Finally, there was a mismatch between the fictional level of threat, which was high, and the actual danger players were experiencing during events, which was very low. The players were cast as courageous activists, who were in constant danger. The live participants also had to sign a waiver that essentially said that the game organizers would not take any responsibility if something happened to the players. This raised the expectations about the intensity of the game and the actions the players would perform, but in practice the game was very safe. In the last live event, even running on grass was prohibited.

As a result, some players felt that the game was *too* safe. Although a few mention minor safety concerns (such as feelings of danger in relation to taking a rusty ladder down on to the beach by the river Thames), others expressed a wish to do much more dangerous things.

> Safety...No - if anything CFG played it too safe, physically and creatively.

> (Survey answer to: "Were you ever concerned regarding the safety or ethics of the game?")

The players, who did perceive the game as dangerous, reported excitement, feeling the thrill of immediacy and tangibility (Montola et al. 2009 have identified these as significant sources of enjoyment in pervasive games).

The singular most successful immersion-inducing and "dangerous" part of the game was the Blackwell Briggs security team. Both in the online survey and in the player interviews these guards were mentioned numerous times.

> Getting shoved up against the handrail of Millennium bridge by a BB goon "Do you think this some sort of game".

> Running away from the Blackwell Briggs agents. Totally caught up in the moment like a child!
>
> (Survey answers to: "Tell us about your best game moment")

It seems that players who attended street games expected to be doing thrilling things for real, while the online players reported no such disappointment. However, there was also a marked difference in aesthetics between online content and live events. The online campaign featured serious themes and a high level of reality-fiction blur. The aesthetics of live events were based on playfulness, exemplified by a Bollywood flash dance mob distracting guards during the second event (see Image 5). The playful style of the live events was not a coincidence, but a deliberate design aiming to create a sense of safety, as well as to avoid scaring an outside audience. (For the problems related to outsider experiences in pervasive games see Montola et al., 2009). However, the trade-off is diluting the thrill of the experience.

Image 5. At the second live event a Bollywood flash dance mob performed to distract the bad guys enabling the unmembers to sneak into their new headquarters.

DESIGN TAKEAWAYS

By analysing the problems encountered in *CFG*, it is possible to tease out design insights for future productions.

Aesthetics of Action. As discussed earlier, the *CFG* production had close ties with the film media. But the aesthetics of action are different from the aesthetics of spectating, and knowledge transfer from cinema production to ARG production is far from direct. For instance, the players do not expect to have an uninterrupted and slick experience.

One of the most problematic and yet prevalent design ideals, shared between live role-playing and alternate reality games alike, is the desire to create a full 360° illusion of a game world (Waern et al., 2009; Koljonen, 2007). It emerges over and over again,

especially when designers arrive fresh and perceive this to be the significant feature of these genres. It is also often what the players' desire: the design ideal is closely related to the *Pinocchio effect* (McGonigal, 2003a) of players preferring to stay constantly in the game world, ignoring the fact that they are playing a game. However, it is just a design ideal, and seldom fully realised. Despite the expertise of the organising team, even the *CFG* team fell prey to this ideal.

In particular, giving out the instructions on how to play and recapitulating the story so far in a diegetic fashion caused major problems. However attractive the ideal was, it was slow, inefficient, imprecise and muddled. It is much preferable to communicate the rules, goals and setting outside the fiction and in a clear and concise manner. Seemingly, this violates the coherence of the game, but in actual practise, confusion over the setting and the rules is much more damaging to the experience. As noted by Jonsson et al. (2007) in an earlier unsuccessful attempt of a similar solution, the "problem was that there was no *agreement* on how to play and what to play". As we can see from *CFG*, this may be particularly problematic in productions where there is an apparent element of competition.

In ARGs, the *this is not a game* -aesthetic (McGonigal, 2003b) is just that, an aesthetic. Players do not *actually* think that the game is not a game, or that there is no distinction between game and reality. Like actors rehearsing a play, they are quite capable of separating the diegetic "reality" from the non-diegetic mechanics of play. They want to ensure that they play it right, and will seek to repair any gaps in the fiction by themselves if given the opportunity.

Sanctions. Related to the previous point, even though the live events did have multiple opportunities for in-game rewards, achievements, and penalties (getting to meet Sir Ian Briggs or being taken down to the basement for questioning), many players felt that there was no clear sense of achievement or failure. This resulted in players losing their sense of *dramatic agency* (Murray, 2004) in the game; the consequences of actions were felt to be meaningless. Making the possible winning and losing conditions more explicit would have made the live events more gamelike and engaging. This is related to that the sense of threat that seems to be an important motivating factor in many playful activities (Apter, 2007).

Exposition. Exposition is a literary technique used to provide the audience with background about the plot, characters, setting, and the theme of the story. In *CFG*, it was expected that the live participants would have been somewhat familiar with the background story provided on the website – especially the webisodes that reported the story so far. In practice, live and online players participate for very different reasons and in very different ways, as was the case in *CFG*. The consequence was that few live players bothered to read up, and even fewer participated in the online puzzle solving activities.

Although the problem could have been fairly easily addressed in *CFG* (e.g. by handing out background leaflets during live events), this highlights a more general issue with the idea of tiered participation (Dena, 2008); combining various modes of participation in the same game. The different modes of gameplay are very likely going to engage different types of players. This can lead to a weak incitement for communicating between the different groups, and this, in turn, can weaken the game experience for all.

Through its inclusion of downloadable mobile phone games, *CFG* actually recruited a third group of players. However, the survey depicts these players as being very confused about *CFG* as a whole. We could not find a single example of an online or street player recruited through the mobile games.

Inappropriate Symbolic Actions. Games like *CFG* rely on players making physical actions (with or without the aid of technology), which have consequences in the game world. In a game which aims towards a 360° illusion and a seamless fictional world, a tight coupling between the physical action and its in-game meaning is preferable (Waern et al., 2009). The level of representation should not fluctuate too much. If you take a photo of a security camera in the physical world, the interpretation of that physical action should be similar in the diegetic game world. However, the *consequences* of the action can be drastically different in the game world.

Management of Expectations. *CFG* ran into some problems in managing the expectations for the live players. In general, understanding and managing the expectations that a production arises is crucial in shaping player engagement in live events, as these are fast paced and allow much less overview than the online participation does. In a participatory piece the expectations may also turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Lack of Shared Debrief. In Nordic larps it is customary to have a general debrief, where participants get to compare experiences, swap stories and reflect on the experience in an organized manner. These events serve as a site where a shared understanding of narrative and the meaning of a game is forged (Stenros & Montola, 2011). Though the live *CFG* live events were followed by parties, those did not serve as debriefing sessions. With separate debriefs after each event, the live players could potentially have developed a shared understanding of the unfolding narrative (or a *unity of action*, see e.g. Mateas, 2004) and preferred play style, and helped shape their expectations for upcoming events.

Team Play. Although the team structure created some misunderstandings in *CFG*, overall it seems to be a good strategy. From interviews and surveys, we can see that *CFG* worked well as a community-building and team-building experience. The game mechanics emphasized teamwork with separate but dynamic functional roles (Bichard & Waern, 2008) for the team members. A team allows the players to communicate what they know to each other, to get more inexperienced players into the game. However, when teams are used it is important to also communicate what is the team objective, such as, if they are competing against other teams.

CONCLUSIONS
The result of the very professional production of *Conspiracy For Good* was, for most participants, a fantastic experience. However, the integration of playful and at times competitive street events situated in a fictional story-world and punctuated by prescribed story beats, with the more narrative-driven, serious-minded and collaborative online participation created friction between narrative and gameplay that has not been reported for traditional ARG productions. Integrating narrative and gameplay is always a challenge for game design, and especially difficult one for novel forms of games.

In this article, we have reported in particular on how the playful and competitive play style of live participants created friction with story as well as with online play. For several reasons, such as playful style, division of players into teams, and direct

recruitment of players for live events, live players did not engage with the storyline as expected. This despite the fact that *Conspiracy For Good* was a story-driven production.

None of these challenges of participatory drama seem impossible to overcome, and this analysis offers some design directions to move past them. A main design takeaway is that many of these problems can be avoided with better and clearer communication regarding the structure of play, on site as well as online.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://pointandfind.nokia.com/

[2] The player headquarters proved to be the least used part of the game. Between events a handful of players dropped in very sporadically. Most of the time the HQ was empty.

[3] Although we cannot be sure that this is correct, one of our survey respondents claims that there were only three players total that followed the production from start to finish.

[4] www.comeoutandplay.org

[5] www.hideandseek.net

[6] Incidentally, the designers had similar problems in their first major pervasive game production *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*, leading to a different approach in the sequel, *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (see Jonsson et al. 2007).

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