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# Honor Bound: The Casual Transmedia Game A Case Study of a New Game Design Framework

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*Honor Bound: The Casual Transmedia Game*  
A Case Study of a New Game Design Framework

Laura Schluckebier

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the  
Department of Communication at Trinity University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
with departmental honors.

April 20, 2012

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*Honor Bound: The Casual Transmedia Game*

A Case Study of a New Game Design Framework

By Laura Schluckebier

2011-2012 Honors Thesis

Department of Communication

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Trinity University

San Antonio, Texas

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## **Introduction**

In the past decade, a new genre of gaming has begun to make its mark on the world. Alternate reality games (ARGs) are like real-world video games where people rather than characters are the players and the real world rather than the virtual is the platform. Clues, plot points, and puzzles are interwoven in a rich world of physical locations and transmedia platforms. The game turns into an immersive experience, becoming an alternate reality for players.

Most ARGs are used for promotional purposes, creating excitement for a product or organization by getting players involved with the brand through the game. ARGs get a brand name recognized because players associate a brand name or product with an interactive experience. From a promotional standpoint, it's a great way to get consumers involved and interacting with the brand and to create lasting impressions.

However, ARGs typically have a very narrow audience to which they cater—an audience that is heavily experienced in games, especially in non-mainstream gameplay. These games take up a lot of time and usually require some previous gaming experience to even find the beginning of the game. This means that ARGs are only being implemented by companies who want to cater to that narrow advanced gamer audience. As this is a small subsection of consumers, ARGs are most often not used at all because they don't reach the right audience. ARGs hold enormous potential for companies looking to launch or reinforce brands into the public because of the interactive nature of the game. Thus, it seems as if a new ARG framework should be developed for companies who want to reach a much more mainstream or casual gaming audience.

Businesses need a new ARG design framework –Casual Transmedia Game (CTG). A CTG is a game that combines elements of ARGs and casual gaming, another gaming genre that

is increasing in popularity with the rising rate of smartphones (Chau 2006). In combining these elements in a CTG, a game can be designed that caters both to hardcore gamers, to casual gamers, and to those who have no gaming experience.

## **Literature Review**

### **Alternate Reality Games**

Alternate reality games (ARGs) comprise a new genre of storytelling centered around collective problem solving. Usually the ultimate goal of these games is to solve a larger-than-life problem, a problem that has been designed so that no single person can solve it alone. In other ARGs, the goal of the game is simply to promote a product by creating an invested player-consumer base. Players around the world then gather in online spaces to discuss game tactics and work together to solve the mystery of the game. These online communities of players make decisions and act on them in real world and virtual spaces. Because players are active participants in the game it's possible for the players' actions to influence the narrative path of the game (Kim et al. 2009, McGonigal 2003, Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008).

Although ARGs can take on an infinite variety of forms, they usually incorporate several key components or elements: a goal of solving a mystery, multimodal communication, collective participation, and an entry point.

### **Solve a Mystery**

Firstly, an ARG's main goal is to solve a mystery (Kim et al. 2009). In *The Beast*, this mystery was to solve the conspiracy murder of Dr. Jeanine Salla (McGonigal 2003). In *I Love Bees*, players had to help a crash-landed AI program find its way back to the *Halo* universe

(McGonigal 2007). Players of *Perplex City* solved the real-world location of the Cube, buried in an undisclosed location (YouTube). To solve these overarching mysteries players must solve a series of puzzles that lead to additional clues. However, the problem that an ARG aims to solve can also have real-world ramifications. For instance, ARG developer and researcher Jane McGonigal created a game called *World Without Oil*, a successful ARG that aimed to take on the real-world problem of oil dependency ([worldwithoutoil.org](http://worldwithoutoil.org)). According to ARG designers, the best ARGs feature overarching problems that align with players' interest, whether because of the product it's promoting or because the puzzles require connecting to a community (Kim et al. 2009). For instance, *Why So Serious?* was an ARG designed to promote the 2008 movie *The Dark Knight*, the second movie in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy. Many of the players of *Why So Serious?* were fans of Batman and wanted to play the game in order to "get closer" to the film (Readon 2009). Another example is the game *Year Zero*, in which Nine Inch Nail fans were given the chance to uncover previously unreleased tracks or win a private concert. The alignment of interest makes for a more active player base, and thus a more successful ARG (Kim et al. 2009).

### Multimodal Communication

Another element of an ARG is that it employs multimodal communication. In other words, clues for the game do not come to players from a single media source; they come to them from a variety of sources including websites, text messages, and emails but also in real life spaces as well. These clues can appear on flyers, park benches, billboards, or any multitude of places in real life. (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Kim et al. 2009, McGonigal 2003). The narratives of these games therefore are storylines that infiltrate and fully permeate the players' real lives.

For example, arguably the first and most famous ARG, *The Beast*, which was a game promoting the film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, communicated to players via movie posters, incredibly complex fake websites, emails, faxes, and real-time events. Because ARGs use everyday networking technologies, players often feel they are always playing the game (Kim et al. 2009, McGonigal 2003).

Another major component of an ARG is collective participation. The clues game makers distribute to players require the use of teamwork because they are too complex for just one player to solve. ARG players most often form their own online spaces in which to discuss new clues, courses of action for the game, and other game related discussions. In *The Beast*, players created a Yahoo group for their space where they not only exchanged information but archived the entire game. These players referred to themselves as the “Cloudmakers.” By the end of the game, there were reportedly 7480 Cloudmakers who had created 42,209 messages in their Yahoo group (McGonigal 2003). *Why So Serious* had nearly 10 million players from 75 different countries (“Why So Serious? – An Overview of 42 Entertainment’s Viral Campaign,” danmanOO7, 2009). *I Love Bees*, an ARG promoting the game *Halo 2*, recorded more than 600,000 players over the course of the summer of 2004. The need for collective participation from the gamers stems from the nature of the ARG itself. For instance, the game makers of *I Love Bees*, the ARG created to promote *Halo 2*, created some clues that were in different languages, forcing the players to consult with those of different nationalities and locales (Kim et al. 2009, Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, McGonigal 2003).

The players are not simply just working together to solve a mystery, however. Their actions and decisions directly affect the gameplay of the ARG. The pace of the game and the direction of the storyline depend on how the players navigate the game. For instance, the game

designers of *The Beast* created a series of puzzles that were supposed to keep the players busy for several months. The Cloudmakers shocked the game designers by solving all of these puzzles the first day they were released. This forced the game makers to reorganize their tactics to create a better game for the players (McGonigal 2003). Another example from the game *I Love Bees* involved players who were faced with a choice to reveal or hide the whereabouts of a character to a villain in the game. The game designers believed that the players were sympathetic to this character. However, in a turn of events, the player revealed the whereabouts of the character and the game designers were forced to redirect their narrative to account for this unexpected choice. In order to cope with this narrative engineering, an ARG must be loosely structured enough to improvise with those who play it (Kim et al. 2009).

### Entry Points

Another major component of an ARG is how players enter the game. To enter an ARG, players must first discover what is known as a “rabbit hole” (a term taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*). Rabbit holes are the entry point of an ARG, but this starting line is not clearly labeled. Instead, it’s usually an anomaly of some sort that strikes an observer as odd (Kim et al. 2009). For example, a rabbit hole to *The Beast* was located in the credits of a trailer for *A.I.* In the credits, Dr. Jeanine Salla was listed as Sentient Machine Therapist. Searching for her on the internet revealed in-depth websites that eventually lead to the





ARG narrative about a murder conspiracy (McGonigal 2003). Ideally, one simply stumbles upon a rabbit hole, but there are cases when the game makers lead players to points of entry. For example, *I Love Bees* started with mailing influential game bloggers a package that led them to a website to begin the game (McGonigal 2007). McDonald's *The Lost Ring* used a similar starting point by mailing a starting package to 50 influential bloggers who then wrote about the package, enabling others to hear about the game as well (Brunelli 2008).

Most of the large-scale ARGs have been created to be used as marketing tools for media products. The games are funded by the company promoting the product in hopes that the game will draw larger audiences. For example, *The Beast* and *Why So Serious?* are both ARGs for movies (McGonigal 2003, Readon 2009). *I Love Bees* was created to promote a video game (McGonigal 2007). *The Lost Ring* was created to promote McDonalds and the 2008 Olympics (Brunelli 2008). Most ARGs have something they aim to promote as an ultimate goal. ARG designer and founder of Licorice Film, Hazel Grian, says “organizations are realizing that ARGs are a better way to engage young people with issues. They enable brands to give the audience an experience they’ll remember, rather than advertising directly at them and dictating to them.” In other words, ARGs are a form of advertisement that engages the consumers instead of simply talking at them. “With ARGs, people felt engaged and immersed in the brand” says Grian. McGonigal refers to this engagement as “gift marketing.” It gives the company a chance to “make something amazing, give it away [to the consumers and audience], and then take credit [for giving the audience this amazing thing that they took part in]” (“Serious Fun” 2009).

## Measures of Success for ARGs

The most important aspect that determines whether an ARG is successful or not is the balance between the activity level and the amount of players. High activity and involvement from players can sustain a game with fewer players, while lower individual activity from a larger player base can also propel a game forward. If the players do not work together to solve the clues of the game, the ARG can't move forward because it is propelled by the players' decisions and actions. Additionally, a successful ARG needs an active community because the problems posed by the game designers require many players with different skill sets or geographic locations so the community can coordinate solving difficult puzzles or real world meetups (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008).

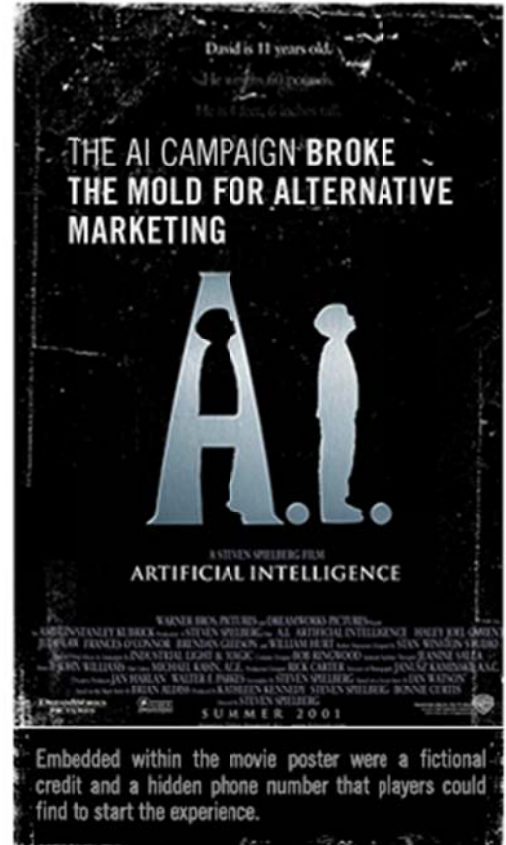
Successful ARGs typically have low barriers to entry. While rabbit holes may be difficult to spot, they are designed to be discovered by anyone and located in spaces that do not require payment to view, such as the credit line in the *A.I.* trailer. Also, most ARGs usually have multiple rabbit holes into the game to further increase the likelihood of player participation. In the case of multiple entry points, rabbit holes are usually distributed across different types of media to draw in players with different experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Kim et al. 2009).

Additionally, an ARG will be considered successful if it produces the desired player-consumer response. Different ARGs will have different projected engagement expectations, but the goal is still the same: to connect the players to a brand in an interactive way that creates a unique connection between brand and consumer.

## Case Study of Successful ARGs

### The Beast

*The Beast* was arguably the first ARG created and is still considered by many to be the “ultimate ARG.” It was designed and written by Elan Lee, Sean Stewart, and Jordan Weisman as part of a team from 42 Entertainment, one of the biggest names in ARG design, and funded by Microsoft. The game was built to promote Steven Spielberg’s movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. The game was set in the future. Rabbit holes into the game were strewn throughout media, including posters, trailers, and direct mail. One of the rabbit holes that received the most buzz was the previous mentioned credit listing of Dr. Jeanine Salla, Sentient Robot Therapist. *The Beast* featured pervasive elements typical of ARGs such as faxes and emails to individual players, but



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what is considered to be the most immersive component of the game was its incredibly complex string of websites, which lead players further and further into the alternate future reality of the game. These included websites of fictional characters, companies, political groups, and even a coroner’s office. The sites were all-encompassing and never let on to the fact that they were part of an elaborate game. They were fully functional, even up banner ads for fake companies and dozens of internal pages (McGonigal 2003). Additionally, one of the most striking features of *The Beast* was that it never admitted to being a game. It was never advertised or announced, even after the game ended in July 2001 (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Kim et al. 2009, McGonigal 2003).

Despite this, the game created a huge amount of buzz for the movie's release. Weisman estimates that the game directly generated 30 million impressions (Iezzi 2005).

### I Love Bees

Another popular ARG, *I Love Bees*, was helmed by renowned game designer Jane McGonigal. McGonigal has creatively been involved designing ARGs such as *World Without Oil*, which won Best Activism Website in 2007 at SXSW Interactive (worldwithoutoil.org), and *The Lost Ring*, created for McDonald's promotional campaign for the 2008 Olympics (Brunelli 2008). *I Love Bees* played out during 2004 to promote the upcoming release of *Halo 2*. The point of this game was to help an AI program from the *Halo* universe that had crash-landed on Earth. Although this ARG also used transmedia storytelling elements such as websites, blogs, emails, and mp3 recordings, most of this story was transmitted through payphones. The rabbit hole, in the form of jars of honey, led to what appeared to be an amateur beekeeping website. Soon, it was revealed that the website held sets of GPS coordinates around the world with accompanying dates and times. Players gathered online and coordinated with each other to find people to physically go to these locations where a pay phone would ring and a new piece of the story would be revealed. *I Love Bees* required players to work together not only to get players to each location but also because many of the clues were in different languages such as Russian, German, and Sanskrit (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Kim et al. 2009, McGonigal 2007).

### Why So Serious?

Within the past few years, the most successful ARG was *Why So Serious?*, the ARG promoting Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight*. Billboards across America were made to

look like campaign advertisements for Harvey Dent, Gotham City's District Attorney. These billboards led to a variety of pro-Harvey Dent websites that players could explore. Later, the billboards were defaced via "Jokerization," a graffiti-style vandalism which marked the face of Harvey Dent to look like the makeup of the joker – two black eyes and a crooked, blood-red smile. These defaced billboards led to even more websites, more sinister than the original ones.



An interesting aspect about this ARG was that it allowed fans to divide into three groups—

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Jokers, Citizens for Batman, and Harvey Dent campaigners. These groups would organize real-world meet ups in costume, which created incredible hype and media attention for the upcoming movie (Readon 2008). Clues came to the players not only through email and texts, but through some truly bizarre methods. One of the first clues was a phone number written in the sky by an airplane. Another clue sent players to a bakery to buy a cake. Inside the cake was a cell phone, a direct line into the happenings of Gotham City (danmanOO7 2009).

The game is also one of the longest running ARGs ever, spanning a period of the 18 months prior to the film's release (Readon 2008, danmanOO7 2009). The game reached over 10 million players in over 75 countries. Though partially due to Heath Ledger's publicized and tragic death just months prior to the release, *The Dark Knight* had the biggest opening day of all time and was the top grossing film of the year (danmanOO7 2009).

## Perplex City

The ARG *Perplex City* is notable because it was created as a self-promoting game—it didn't promote anything other than itself. The idea was that the game could pay for itself by the selling of Perplex City game cards.

Like any trading card game, players would buy a pack of cards. Each card held a puzzle or clue to the game.

Some of the puzzles would be simple self-contained mind puzzles, but others would be clues to the plot of *Perplex City*. In this way, the game tried to balance itself between casual

and hardcore gaming—in other

words to players both who only invested a small amount of time to those who invested enormous amount of time and effort in playing the game. The plot of the game revolved around players searching for the hidden location of a cube. An example of a transmedia element in this game was posters that appeared all over the world offering a reward for a missing cube. The game began in April 2005, and finally ended in February 2007 when a man named Andy Darley found the buried cube, earning himself a \$200,000 prize. Though players seemed to genuinely enjoy playing the game, the cost of playing the game made it unsuccessful in the eyes of the game creators, Mind Candy. The company had actually planned on carrying on a season two of *Perplex City*, but the time, effort, and money to do so was considered not to be worth it. The plan



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of the playing cards sustaining the game was a failure (“£100,000 Prize for Digital Hunter” 2007, “Perplex City,” TheHour 2007).

### World Without Oil

*World Without Oil* is significant because well-known ARG creator Jane McGonigal, previously mentioned in conjunction with *I Love Bees*, authored this more serious game. This ARG was also not a promotional tool, but rather a social activism tool. The game asked players to imagine what the world would be like in a global oil crisis. Players kept track of their simulated experiences via blogs, photos, podcasts, etc. The more players contributed, the more real the entire experience became. The game lasted for 32 weeks, and the goal of the game was to create awareness in the world—this is what will happen if an oil crisis occurs. As a social activism tool, *World Without Oil* hoped to raise awareness in order to motivate people to help the environment now, before the plot of the game became a reality. This game marked a trend of ARGs being used not only as a promotional tool for companies, organizations, or brands, but as a tool for positive social behavior ([worldwithoutoil.org](http://worldwithoutoil.org)).

### **ARG Players**

The stereotype of gamers is that they are lonely, antisocial males. However, ARG players must work together in order to solve the game puzzles. Players participate in the game either because they are drawn in by the mystery of the game or because they’re drawn to the promotional ties to the game (Kim et al. 2009). For instance, as described above, many players engaged with *Why So Serious?* because of its associations to the incredibly hyped Batman movie (Readon 2009). Additionally, the gender stereotype of gamers doesn’t hold true for ARG players.

According to a survey of the players of *The Beast*, 50% of responders were female (McGonigal 2003).

However, not all participants are equally engaged in the ARG. Dr. Jeffrey Kim of the Information School at the University of Washington who was one of the three main designers of *The Beast* describes the level of activity as a continuum. There are the devotees who are constantly at work trying to solve the ARG's mysteries. Active players participate but less frequently than devotees and place less emphasis on the immediacy of the game. Then there are casual gamers who simply lurk around ARG forums and websites to observe the mystery become unraveled without actually contributing to the solution. There is an additional fourth level of activity known as the curious who simply hear about the ARG through others or stumble upon it themselves but do not actually partake in any action of the storyline. The casual players differ from the curious because they will actively seek out updated information on the gameplay, whereas the curious have no interest in keeping up with the game and have simply chanced upon it. Even though the active players drive the storyline of the ARG, they only constitute a fraction of those who actually discover the ARG (Kim et al. 2009).

### **ARG Developers and Development**

The creators have been given the title of "puppet master." Puppet masters design the games, but then stay "behind the curtain" and usually do not come to the forefront of the game activity. They have three main responsibilities as puppet masters: to act as a storyteller, to understand the community of players, and to create the pieces of the story through technology and media (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008). The relationship between puppet master and players is a tenuous one. McGonigal describes it as "the puppet master problem." This problem is finding the



balance between power and fun. To game theorists and critics, this relationship between puppet master and player is a bit perverse and perhaps even dangerous. What if the puppet master asks the players to “go too far”? To the game creators themselves, the balance is important to keep the game progressing and the players entertained. McGonigal asks of all puppet masters: “How do you structure a game so that you can effectively, and remotely, ‘pull the strings’ of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of players *without* making them feel like mere puppets?” (pg 3, 2007).

There are six basic tasks in ARG development: creating of a puppet master team, brainstorming the framework of the game, constructing a media plan, building a community forum, forming the timeline, developing the game content, and finally deciding on how to launch the game (See Table 1).

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### Creating of the Puppet Master

The team must be composed of people of different backgrounds, just like the players, so they can create puzzles complicated enough to stump a collective intelligence community for at least some period of time. The size of the team depends on the size and ambition of the game. For example, *I Love Bees*’ creative team was composed of 30 individuals.

### Brainstorming the Theme and Story

Now that the puppet master team has been assembled, they must come together and create the alternate reality in which this game will take place. What is the story? What themes and ideals will the game involve? Along with this brainstorming session, the creators must pick

the game “verbs,” such as “solve,” “congregate,” and “collect.” These verbs will help direct players and will help the team determine what kind of shape the game will take.

### Constructing a Media Plan

The media plan is mostly formulating the strategies of the game—where will rabbit holes be placed? Where will the clues be discovered? How? How many clues will be released? Will they be released all at once or at intervals? What clues will be offline? Which will be online? Will the offline clues be physically available? How will smartphones factor into the game play? All of these questions must be carefully considered before the game content is even created.

### Building a Community

McGonigal also suggests building a community forum online where gamers can go online to discuss tactics and plans for action. She notes that “an ARG works only as well as the players communicate and cooperate together” (Owings 2009, pg 27). Therefore, creating a dedicated online forum for discussing the ARG would help facilitate communication with other players. An online forum created by the puppet masters is helpful but not essential. For example, the Cloudmakers didn’t use a premade structure built by the game builders—they created their own independent Yahoo group (Owings 2009).

### Forming a Timeline

The fifth step is to create a timeline, including a launch date and an ending date. A well-planned timeline is essential so players are always engaged and interested and don’t become bored with a lull of activity or overtaxed with too many puzzles simultaneously (Owings 2009).

### Developing Content

Only now do the puppet masters actually create the content for the game as in the creation of a movie, TV show, and a video game. All of the preproduction logistics must be done before content creation begins. Content varies from game to game, but the goal is to ultimately create a game that feels real to players and that draws them into the action and storyline (Owings 2009). A prime example of this is *The Beast* which created such an immersive narrative that players had a hard time readjusting to post-*Beast* life after the game ended. One player said that *The Beast* “[blurred] the lines between story and reality. The game promised to become not just entertainment, but our lives” (McGonigal 2003).

### Launching the Game

The final step to creating an ARG is deciding how to launch the ARG (Owings 2009). Some games like *I Love Bees* and *The Lost Ring* sent out packages to influential gamers and bloggers to get buzz starting about the games (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Brunelli 2008). However, others like *The Beast* subtly placed rabbit holes which slowly drew players into the game (McGonigal 2003, Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008, Kim et al. 2009). *Perplex City* began as a trading card game which eventually evolved into a full blown overarching story (YouTube). *Why So Serious?* began in many different places including the aforementioned billboards but also Joker cards with a phone number on them that were distributed at Comic Con 2007 (Readon 2009, danmanOO7 2009).

## **Future of ARG Design**

Kim et al. (2009) says that in the future ARGs will continue to be developed to harness the power of collective problem solving. Many types of organizations will want information on how to such a group of problem solvers: nonprofit organizations for mobilizing volunteers, businesses for generating brand allegiance, and government agencies for regulating civic behavior. ARGs are being viewed as tools rather than simply games. As Kim et al. states, “If the drive to solve collective problems could be yoked to a significant social goal, ARGs could result in collective behavior that does more than market media products” (2009, pg 20).

Additionally, the main thing that ARG researchers Kim, Allen, and Lee (2008) say designers must do when creating ARGs in the future is to create games that can accommodate both casual and hardcore players— in other words, those who want to play the game without investing too much energy and those who want to immerse themselves fully into the alternate reality narrative. ARGs are increasingly becoming more mainstream as they promote massively popular media products, such as *The Dark Knight* and *Halo 2*. As the games become more mainstream, the players who participate are thus more mainstream and have less experience in this alternative gameplay. This requires the barriers of entry to be lowered to allow for less experienced players to enjoy the game as well (Kim, Allen, & Lee 2008).

## Casual Game Design

This accommodation to more casual players is needed because of the rising prevalence of casual games. Casual games are “simple, one-player puzzles that can be played on desktop computers, gaming consoles, cell phones or hand-held computers. It takes less than a minute to understand the rules, structure and plot” (Konrad 2006, pg 1). Casual gaming is sometimes seen

in opposition to hard-core multiplayer games which can consume days or weeks of players' time (Bogost 2007, Sowa 2008). With casual gaming, players can play in very short intervals such as during lunch breaks or between classes or for long stretches of time (Konrad 2006).

Although casual gamers are difficult to define, the International Game Developers Association suggests a broad characterization of “gamers who play games for enjoyment and relaxations” since casual games are much less complex and require less time commitment than traditional hardcore video games—games which require a more intense time commitment to the plot and gameplay. Thus, casual games “attempt to minimize complexity and investment in player time, money, and control mastery” (pg 1, Bogost 2007). Interestingly, though, many casual game designs operate under the philosophy of “easy to learn, hard to master.” As Bogost points out, while casual games are considered “low time commitment” in terms of learning, they are rather high time commitment in mastery (Bogost 2007).

The prevalence of casual gaming is increasing in what Juul (2010) calls the “casual revolution.” Revenues from casual gaming worldwide in 2002 was \$228 million; in 2006, it was up to \$953 million (Konrad 2006). Games are becoming a more important focus for developers of mobile phones and social networking sites like Facebook where most of these games are played. Playing games is the third most popular activity on Facebook (Chau 2006, Hjorth 2010).

The integration of casual gaming and mobile devices has created a previously untapped market because of how easy and convenient it is to play these games during gaps in daily activity. Casual gaming is changing the gaming demographic both in terms of socio-economics and gender (Chau 2006). For example 89% of casual gamers are over 30, 72% are female, and 53% are married with children. Additionally, 50% of casual gamers have a college degree (Konrad 2006). Casual games are appealing not just to the typical male gamer demographic

because they offer a “quick, stress-free experience, like a 15-minute mediation” which appeals to those of all ages and genders (Sowa 2008). This demographic information is especially important because it has revealed a growing market—women over 30 who are now gaming. It’s important that casual gaming has actually reached this demographic because they are very often key to the purchasing decisions in households (Chau 2006, Hjorth 2010, “Casual Gaming Equals Serious Business” 2010).

Casual gaming is also becoming a subject of interest because it has become the basis of what is known as “advergaming”— casual games that are designed for a specific client to promote or market a product or brand. An example of an advergame is a series of three games created by Blitz games in 2006-2007 for Burger King: Big Bumpin’, Pocketbike Racer, and Steak King. They were pay-to-play Xbox games which were designed to simultaneously provide entertainment and advertising for Burger King. This is still a relatively new field, and because of this, most advergames have been unsuccessful at winning over players. Advergame designer Edward Linley says that there are several important factors in making a successful advergame: The game must be of good quality to gain any attention or respect from gamers; there must be attention to detail when designing the character and character movements in the game; the client must be supportive of the game in their own advertising campaigns and enthusiasm about the advergame; and finally, the developers and the client must keep the game in the foreground and the branding firmly in the background (Linley 2007).

### **Gaming as Advertisement**

The advertising industry is constantly combating negative about the idea of advertising as a result, in part, because of its omnipresence. Consumers have, in fact, become so accustomed to

the presence of advertising that they have “constructed mental shortcuts” to avoid it all together. When consumers encounter an advertisement, they mentally employ an “advertising schema,” which allows them to identify it as persuasive speech and therefore ignore it (Dahlén & Edenius 2007).

Advertisers have developed ways to combat this problem: advertising formats within traditional media, such as advertorials, or advertising in non-traditional media, such as games (Dahlén & Edenius 2007). Because consumers have the ability to mentally skip advertisements, it is becoming apparent that advertisements must become “just as valuable, engagement and sought-after as news and entertainment” (Cheyfitz 2011). Creative advertising attracts a larger audience because it tends to stand out from static, traditional advertising that consumers have learned to mentally avoid. These creative ads are impacting audiences’ emotions and thus their attitudes and purchasing intentions (Smith, Chen, & Yang 2008).

New advertising methods have been developed by advertising agencies in order to attract the attention of audiences. One model that relates to alternate reality game design and promotional tactics is called *engagement* which involves “the emotional connection between consumers and brands.” This engagement typically will occur in a social context. It is a model in which brands involve their consumers with the brand. Once the consumer has chosen to “opt-in” to this brand engagement, the company then attempts to provide “compelling brand experiences” (Rappaport 2007). This model describes the relationship that occurs between a company that sponsors an ARG and the players of the ARG. This advertising model focuses on the active relationship between consumer and brand and requires intense research into the consumers’ lives to understand their needs

In addition to these three rising advertising models that are replacing traditional advertising, product placement has also become a more widely used form of advertising. Product placement is defined as consciously integrating an advertisement into actual media content (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit 2009). Studies have shown that consumers paid more attention to advertisements when the advertisement had an editorial rather than commercial format (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit 2009, Dahlén & Edenius 2007). This is because placing it in this context blurs the lines between the advertisement and its surroundings, and thus the consumers' advertisement schema is not activated and they are less likely to avoid it. Thus, they evaluate the message more favorably (Dahlén & Edenius 2007).

Product placement has also been studied in games as well. In research, it seems that inexperienced gamers are focusing most of their attention on actually playing the game and not on brand placement within the game. However, more experienced gamers are able to spend more of their attention on the smaller details of the game, and are thus more likely to notice and consume the brand placement (Dahlén & Edenius 2007).

New forms of advertising have also been tested on television audiences. For instance, it has been found that television fans are willing to take part in a virtual world experiment. In 2007, the CBS show *CSI: New York* launched an experiment by introducing their fans to the virtual world of Second Life. The experiment started by discussing Second Life on an episode of the show and then progressed by inviting fans to join the *CSI* plotline in the virtual world. In a study by Joy Chavez Mapaye, a television fan researcher, players cited that they were motivated by their interest and the innovation of the experiment. Those who did not participate said that they did not have the time or interest and nearly half of those who did participate in the virtual world experiment did not even watch *CSI*. Gender did not seem to be a factor in those who played the



game, and other demographic information showed that the “millennials” were the most comfortable age group using the virtual world. Additionally, the respondents seemed to be very social, unlike most stereotypes about those who engage in virtual environments. Many of them reported that they came to the virtual world experiment to meet other people. They also reported that they consumed media on a very regular basis (Mapaye 2009).

## **Gamification**

### Definition and Examples

Though there exists some debate among scholars regarding the definition of “gamification,” it can be most broadly defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (pg 2, Deterding et al. 2011). For the purposes of this case study, however, gamification can take on the more specific definition of a form of game design that “produces states of desirable experience and motivates users to remain engaged in an activity with unparalleled intensity and duration” (pg 2, Deterding et al 2011). An example of gamification are the various location services like Foursquare and Gowalla which allow players to “check in” to the places they visit in real life via a mobile device. The more times a player checks in, the more points he or she gains. These location services are now adding in freebies to encourage more players to join and to give real-life meaning to these games. A more in-depth example of a location game is Chromaroma, a game created for the London public transportation system. Players earn points by exploring alternative routes, getting exercise by getting off a stop early, and completing “missions” while on their daily commute. According to a designer of the game, “Chromaroma takes something boring—commuting—and makes it more playful, more interesting, more surprising” (pg 1, “Chromaroma and the Onward March of Gamification”).

Another example of a gamification in daily life is Chore Wars, which was developed in 2007. Technically, Chore Wars acts as a digital manager of chores around a household or office, tracking the tasks of each person. However, Chore Wars turns doing chores into an adventure. A family or a group of coworkers comes together to create a team of players, represented by avatars. They then create a list of tasks that must be done. As a player completes a task, he or she logs it online and earns the avatar experience, gold, or points. The more chores a player does, the more in-game rewards he or she attains. Jane McGonigal refers to Chore Wars as a type of alternate reality game because it does create a kind of alternate reality within your real life—in this reality, your chores actually earn you useful items (McGonigal 2011).

### Gamification and the Workplace

Game designers are currently examining the idea of gamification to revolutionize certain aspects of the workplace. Though there seems to be some line drawn between the idea of “work” and “play,” it is remarkable how many similarities exist between doing work and playing games. There is a trend in attempting to reconcile these similarities into a gaming work environment—one that is both productive and fun. While playing games, players repeat tasks, manage resources, interact with other players, overcome challenges, and do this while having fun. Many mid-level jobs can be classified as having these same qualities, and thus the train of thought is that if games have work-like elements and are fun, then if work had game-like elements, perhaps it would also be fun (Ashley 2007).

Games make what may seem like repetition of tasks fun by adding a point system and increasing difficulty levels. As in real life work situations, if a player plays a game and doesn't feel an increased level of difficulty, he or she will grow bored of the task. The ideas of a point

system and increasing level difficulty are the keys to the success of a game—the levels increase in just enough difficulty to interest players into continuing to try when they run into obstacles. This structure of a game will elicit the emotional response that is known in gaming terms as “flow”—a state in which concerns or problems leave players’ minds and they are completely engaged in the gameplay. It is described as “a perfect meeting of skill and challenge” (Csíkszentmihályi 1990, McGonigal 2003, Ashley 2007).

Jobs that are too easy or too slow would benefit from a “videogame makeover.” This kind of makeover could come in many forms. Some of the game mechanics that could be implemented in work include attaching a point system to emails to encourage employees to answer and act upon emails, making keeping up with an overwhelming inbox less mentally taxing. Additionally, supervisors could set up badges for employees to earn for completing tasks. The “makeover” could go as far as purchasing new software for a company which incentivizes employees positively for progress made. These changes to the workplace environment would not just be for the good of the employees’ mental productivity, but for the good of the management staff. The points, levels, and badges can be used objectively by management to analyze the productivity of their salespeople (Ashley 2007).

### **Learning through Games**

It has become a growing trend to introduce games as learning tools. The idea and purpose behind this is to increase students’ interest in the subject being presented in a game environment and to enhance students’ learning through playing (Charoenying 2010, Cohen 2011, Deubel 2006). Games are played by students naturally, and thus they “present viable contexts for the design of learning activities” (Charoenying 2010). According to some sources, playing games to

learn is supported by the constructivist theory, which “calls for active engagement and experiential learning” (Deubel 2006).

There have been many criticisms on using games in a classroom or educational environment. One criticism is that many games currently used for educational purposes lack a meaningful connection to the academic content. Another concern is that students playing the game might see it just as that—a game—and misinterpret the intended learning objective (Deubel 2006). Additionally, some concerns have been raised about the addictiveness of games that can distract students from the learning process (Papastergiou 2008).

Deubel says in his research that the key to truly harnessing the power and potential benefits that educational games have to offer is to design a role-playing or adventure game that focus not on violence but on strategic planning and problem solving (2006). There are also other elements that make an effective educational game. The game should present an engaging virtual environment that present students with a goal-oriented challenge that they can explore and experiment within the virtual space (Hoffmann 2009). Most basically, educational games should include rules, goals, feedback which is clearly indicated to players (may be signaling winning or losing or simply need for help), a conflict or challenge, interaction with the virtual environment, and, of course, information that is actually representative of the educational goal (Deubel 2006). Other sources emphasize that these games must have the same level of design mechanics as the games that students play outside of school—an advanced user interface, sophisticated graphic designs and sounds, and immersive narratives. If these familiar game elements aren’t incorporated, educational games lose their appeal to students and therefore their learning effectiveness (Papastergiou 2008).

### Learning with MMORPGs

However, there are also many opportunity to learn while playing games, especially MMORPGs or massive multiplayer online role-playing games. There are three key elements of playing MMORPGs that educators incorporate in their classrooms to enhance students' learning and group dynamics: the deep bonds of guilds, working in groups, and daily excitement of questing. For instance, players will do tedious works in an online game space because they feel socially obligated to do so. If educators are able to foster a sense of community within the classroom, students will most likely feel socially obligated towards their peers in the classroom, and they will be more likely to step up in a group project setting. Additionally, quests in MMORPGs often require the skill sets of several different types of players. In the same way, while working collectively, educators should encourage individual responsibilities within group projects to develop each student's critical thinking skills (Curry 2010).

MMORPGs can also be used to teach students ethnographic research methods, especially for studies on cyber-culture. These environments provide a rich supply of subjects for qualitative research methods and allow researchers to access a wide variety information by remaining physically in one place. MMORPGs also offer a safe environment in which to learn. A threatening situation, even something as seemingly harmless as a class discussion, can make a student shut down. In an environment where students present themselves as a customized avatar, distanced by a computer monitor from their research subjects, a more effective dialogue might occur (Delwiche 2003).

## Serious Games

A specific genre of games that are used for educational purposes are serious games. Serious games are an emerging game genre which focuses “on the use of digital gaming platforms and technologies for purposes beyond pure entertainment,” specifically to develop a particular skill set (Ritterfeld et al. 2009, pg 691). Examples of serious games include educational games, war games, and social issue games (Ritterfeld et al. 2009, Peng, Lee, & Heeter 2010). There are two main elements of serious games: multimodality and interactivity. Multimodality allows for knowledge and content to be presented in an unprecedented way using a digital gaming environment. The information is presented to players not through text or video, but through visual, auditory, haptic, and other sensory means. Learning through higher levels of modality has been proven to allow for more effective learning. Interactivity allows players to communicate with the gaming system, allowing for a range of outcomes from which the players can learn. It allows players a range to explore possibilities of problem solving, to actively seek information, and to change and influence the game. Just as with multimodality, learning in an interactive environment has been shown to produce more effective learning outcomes (Ritterfeld et al. 2009).

Serious games have long been used in a tradition known as “wargaming,” a tool for military training and education. However, wargaming has been rather inconsistent with its success; while some games have succeeded well in communicating certain tactics, others have failed. The reasons for failure include the circumstances, material, participants, or poor design quality. However, while there are individual factors that affect wargaming, there does seem to be some intangible undercurrent that links wargames and success. This has been identified to be the relationship between gaming, narrative, and war. Games are powerful platforms because of the

way that they are able to tell a story and engage a player into a scenario. This is why games work so well for war environments – “gaming, as a story-living experience, engages the human brain in ways more akin to real-life experiences than to reading a novel or watching a video” (Perla & McGrady 2011, pg 112). Because it allows players to interact with an environment, a game can prepare soldiers more completely than learning war situations in a classroom or from a video (Perla & McGrady 2011).

### Serious Games for Social Change

Another way that serious games are being used today is to create platforms for social change. According to one study, dozens of serious games have been designed to promote different agendas for social change, such as awareness for the environment or international violence. This study also confirmed that those who participated in these games expressed a greater desire to help in the realm of social issue that was being promoted than those who simply read pamphlets. Furthermore, those who played these games were also more likely to take an active role in the social issue. Playing these interactive games thus seems to influence people’s empathies on social issues more than simply reading the same information. While many of these games have been played by millions of people, very little research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness on these games (Peng, Lee, & Heeter 2010).

Games for Change is a group that was founded in 2004 which aims to “facilitate the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts.” The company aims to further the best practices of the field of games for social change by hosting design challenges and festivals, offering awards in categories such as Awareness-raising, Transformation (these games aim to transform players’ views and real-world

behaviors), Social Commentary, and Audience. Games for Change also hosts its own lab where game designers use a community of game critics to beta test games for social change. The lab currently features over 100 games, organized by age groups and game themes. The games range in resolution, complexity, and even platform—some are computer-based, while others are played on Facebook or mobile devices (Schreiner 2008).

### Examples of Serious Games for Social Change



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Winner of “Best Transformation Game” in the 2007 Games for Change Annual Contest, *PeaceMaker* is a game in which players immerse themselves in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Players take on the role as either the Israeli Prime Minister or Palestinian President to handle political events such as diplomatic negotiations or

violence in their country. The goal of the game is for both sides to reach a peaceful agreement. The game allows for players to become aware of the issues on both sides of this conflict. Players “play the news” by reacting to real-life Middle Eastern events that are presented as news footage (Peng, Lee, & Heeter 2010, Schreiner 2008).

*Darfur is Dying* was launched on April 30, 2006. A game that lasts no more than 15 minutes, it places players in the situation of refugees in Darfur. Players choose one of two paths, to play as a refugee inside a camp earning money and building shelter, or else as a refugee outside the camp attempting to find water while avoiding armed Janjaweed military men. The



game was sponsored by Reebok and MTVu and was designed by University of Southern California students (Vargas 2006, Schreiner 2008).

Developed by Gamelab and high school students involved with Global Kids, a New York group that educates youth about international issues, *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* puts its players in Haiti. Players make decisions as a Haitian family to maintain a reasonable lifestyle by obtaining healthcare, education, work, and other basic resources. This allows players to examine the lives of current families in Haiti and how they deal with poverty, especially in regards to securing education and a better way of life.

The description of the social commentary game *The Arcade Wire: Oil God* tells players, “You are an Oil God! Wreak havoc on the world’s oil supplies by unleashing war and disaster. Bend governments and economies to your will to alter trade practices. Your goal? Double consumer gasoline prices in five years using whatever means necessary.” The game was created by Dr. Ian Bogost’s game design company Persuasive Games. Players have the ability to subject the world to their “Hand of God” credits, which include disasters such as natural disasters, international wars, and even alien invasions. The ultimate goal of the game is to allow players to see for themselves how geopolitical events can impact the international oil situation (Schreiner 2008).



*Oil God.*  
Image

*Evoke* introduces itself as “a ten-week crash course in changing the world.” Running from March 3 through May 12, 2012, *Evoke* is a social networking game aimed to empower people worldwide to develop creative solutions to the world’s social problems. Players collaborated with each other via blogs, videos, and pictures to share their experience and ideas in order to solve problems like world hunger, limited clean water, and violence in Africa. The game was designed by Jane McGonigal and the World Bank ([urgentevoke.com](http://urgentevoke.com)).

Additionally, the previously mentioned *World Without Oil*, also designed by McGonigal, can be considered a serious game for social change as it aimed to educate people on the possible outcomes of a worldwide oil shortage ([worldwithoutoil.com](http://worldwithoutoil.com)).

## **Methods**

The effectiveness of a casual transmedia game was tested through a case study approach in a microenvironment situation. The CTG was used as a promotional tool for TigerTV, Trinity University’s student-run television station. TigerTV is an incredible asset to the Trinity University campus, but not one that is known as much by the student body as a whole. TigerTV, in the Department of Communication, houses a multimillion dollar studio and control room that is on par with the equipment used by professional news station. Students work tirelessly to create three original entirely student-run shows, *Studio21*, a music and pop culture show, *Not So Late Show*, a late night comedy-styled show, and *Newswave*, a campus news show.

The next step was to develop an alternate reality storyline in which the game would be grounded. At first the game was designed to focus exclusively on TigerTV, since they were the client. However, focusing the game exclusively for the station would limit the scope of the game because in the Trinity community students already did not know a lot about TigerTV. The plot needed to be more expansive in order to make it more inviting to those who were not involved in

the station. If the plot focused solely on TigerTV, only Communication students or TigerTV personnel would be interested in playing. However, if the plot were broadened, more people would be interested. Thus, instead of making the plot only focused on TigerTV, the plot was created to be applicable to all students.

The plot was written so the mystery revolved around something being stolen—the game would be a classic whodunit mystery. This narrative was borrowed from *Perplex City* because it operated more like a CTG than an ARG—it started as a casual card game that players could just play at face value or that they could take to a deeper level with more layered clues. With this in mind, the next step was to determine what could be stolen from Trinity’s campus that would create a big enough stir to get people to pay attention. The first idea was to steal something from the TigerTV studio since the goal was to get people to learn about TigerTV. This would potentially have limited participation because this would have narrowed the focus too much on the station, which was the opposite of the game’s goal—to interest more than those with communication majors or those already involved with TigerTV. In the final game, the stolen item was the Trinity University Honor Codes that every first year signs upon entering the University during orientation (See Appendix, Figures 1 and 2). These codes are not only prominently displayed in the main administration office building, Northrup Hall, making their absence noticeable, but they hold a symbolic meaning in the Trinity community. Stealing them would not only be an act of theft but an affront to the entire institution’s honor. This was the tie-in to the game’s name, *Honor Bound*.

Once the stolen item was selected, the goal was to create a believable alternate reality narrative in which the Honor Codes were stolen. This was done by inviting a select few Trinity organizations to participate in the game as “suspects” in the Honor Code theft case, and the

players of the game would have to answer clues about them in order to eliminate them as suspects, leaving only the true culprit. This was a way to get more people involved with the game, to promote more than one organization, and to widen the breadth of the game beyond simply those who participate in TigerTV. It was a win-win for the client and the other student organizations: they got free promotion, and the game was able to create a more comprehensive narrative that could reach out to all of Trinity.

The goal for the game was to investigate the effectiveness of a casual transmedia game (CTG). To do so, this game combined elements of hardcore ARGs with more casual games. In other words, it used elements of games that are more time and energy intensive with elements of games that are played with a much less extreme commitment. Thus the game structure allowed both casual and hardcore players to enjoy and participate in the game. The CTG approach arose from combining ideas from *Perplex City* and a piece written by Matt Hills entitled “Absent Epic, Implied Story Arcs, and Variation on Narrative Theme: *Doctor Who* (2005-2008) as Cult/Mainstream Television.” Hills states, “The defining feature of the new *Who*, I would say, is the deft way in which it satisfies cult fans’ interests in diegetic continuity and coherence while at the same time reconfiguring continuity such that it becomes inclusive rather than a barrier to new mainstream audiences... In narrative terms it successfully establishes a fully inclusive continuity, and hence bridges cult and mainstream television status” (2). What Hills is trying to get across in this article is that the show *Doctor Who* is so successful because of the way it frames its narrative: its individual episodes are a self-contained 45 minute story which are perfect for casual viewers to pick up and watch at any time, while the entire story arc of the show is deep enough to encourage “cult” viewers who obsessively watch every episode.

In order to achieve this balance between cult and casual in the game, a point-based system was designed. Teams would earn points, and the team with the most points at the end of the time period would win a cash prize. To earn points, the teams would solve clues. These clues were questions about the “accused” organizations. To answer these questions, the teams had to ask others about the organizations in question and therefore interact with people they ordinarily they might not. This game framework allowed for both casual players who only wanted to participate minimally and for hardcore players who wanted to answer every single clue.

The distribution of the clues was also designed for both casual and hardcore game players. Some of the clues were placed in a centrally located spot, such as the game website. Those were easy to view and all teams successfully answered those. However, for those who wanted to put more effort into the game, there were also clues located throughout the campus. These clues required more time and dedication to locate and answer and thus were geared towards the more hardcore players who wanted the challenge. Those more difficult clues were also worth more points because they were more challenging and time-consuming.

There was a third level of clue difficulty as well: Three times during the week, a clue was hidden. Immediately after the groups were contacted via text message with a hint of where that clue could be found. The first team to find that clue would earn 50 points, the most points awarded for an individual clue. The teams who competed for these clues were clearly marked as the hardcore teams. The more casual teams weren’t as bothered with racing against the more competitive teams, but were still satisfied playing the game by finding the less competitive clues. The hidden clues helped gauge the success of the game—there were teams sprinting from opposite sides of campus to be the first one to find the hidden clues.

Because the game was a mix between an ARG and a casual game, the game and clues were fairly easy and transparent. The game was announced and promoted a week before the launch on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. However, the “start” of the game included a video clip that did not announce itself as part of the game. The clip was the catalyst of the game plot—the Honor Codes were stolen because of what happened in the clip. It wasn’t necessary for players to see or even understand the clip in order to play the game, so it was filmed for the two purposes of creating the plot and to give the more hardcore players a deeper element in the game. Players may have seen the clip, and it wasn’t necessary to see to play the game, but having the clip did add a deeper layer which hardcore players appreciated.

The game was designed so players could interact with the game’s narrative. Initially, the vision was for the player’s actions to affect the end of the game. However, because the game was limited to a single puppet master, it was incredibly difficult finding a way to implement a player-edited narrative. Because of this a compromise was struck—the players could interact with the game, but in a fairly limited way that could be controlled and regulated by a singular puppet master. In the middle of the game period, teams were offered the option to continue being loyal to the cause of finding the Honor Code thief or to switch sides and instead help the Honor Code thief by framing a suspect. This was a successful twist in that it gave the players a chance to interact further with the game, which created a closer bond between game and player. The good and evil team distinctions were enhanced this idea by creating different clues for the different sides and also by making “loyalty bands,” colored strips of cloth that designated which side each team was on.

## **Results and Discussion**

Before discussion the results of the casual transmedia game *Honor Bound*, it should be noted that throughout the course of researching previous successful ARGs, follow up research on successful ARGs were not published. The literature merely described what occurred in the game, but there was a definite lack of follow up in information regarding how successful the game was based on determined success metrics, how many players participated, what the gender divide was in the game, or what improvements could be made in future game design. This case study means to set an example for further game design studies by following up on the game's success with predetermined success metrics as well as gathering player demographic information and then publishing those results so that alternate reality game design and research can be pushed forward.

By the end of game registration, *Honor Bound* had 60 teams registered. All together, 167 individuals signed up to play. Trinity University has approximately 2400 undergraduate students, which means that roughly 7% of the campus was playing *Honor Bound*. Of these 60 teams, 37 teams followed through in game participation. Of those 37 teams, 25 were actively playing, which means they were solving puzzles at least every two days. Thus, with a 62% retention rate, the game was a successful in active participant retention.

After the game concluded on March 30<sup>th</sup>, a survey was sent to all of the teams asking for feedback about their experience during their game. The survey asked the participants to rank their enjoyment of playing on a scale of 1-10. The average enjoyment ranking was 7.72, the lowest rank was 7, and the highest was 10. From these results, the game was also a success as most people seemed to enjoy playing. To the teams, especially those actively engaged, the game was more than a boring, transparent promotional tool.

The game was also judged on how much players actually learned from the experience, since at its core, the game was intended to spread information amongst players. 83.3% responded that they learned “good new information” and that it was an “effective way to learn about organizations” that they would never have heard about before. Only 16.6% reported that they didn’t find the game informative. Several respondents said that this type of game would be helpful for first year students who would have the opportunity to join student organizations instead of the juniors and seniors who have already selected and committed to their organizations. Additionally, several participants revealed that playing this game made them very interested in joining the organizations that were highlighted during the game.

As far as gender division, the survey indicated that the player base of this game was largely female: 25% of the players were male, while 75% were female. This was an interesting finding considering the stereotype of a gamer is male. The fact that most of the players were females shows that they are just as invested in the game narrative as males. This is also supported by the fact that the winning team was entirely female. In proposing CTG in the future to brands, this statistic would allow companies to see this game design framework is capable of reaching beyond what many consider the stereotypical gamer.

The survey also questioned the players about their previous gaming experience, both casual and hardcore. Casual gaming was defined as “a recent phenomenon that is growing especially due to mobile phone gaming. Casual games are not exclusively mobile phone games, but they only require players to play in short spurts of time.” Hardcore gaming was defined as “games that require an intense time commitment to complete and understand the game mechanics and timeline.” Of those who responded, 27.7% responded that they didn’t play casual games, 44.4% responded they occasionally played casual games, 11.1% said they were fairly



active casual gamers, and 16.6% said that they were very active gamers. Those who said they played casual games said they used it mostly as a form of procrastination. All who played casual games said they played on a smart phone, and so those without a smartphone said they felt disadvantaged in playing casual games. Additionally, of those who responded, 61.1% reported that they did not play hardcore games, 11.1% responded they occasionally played hardcore games, 16.6% responded they were fairly active hardcore gamers, and 11.1% responded that they were very active hardcore gamer. Those who were hardcore gamers cited a strong storyline as a reason for getting invested in a hardcore game.

The game website on which half of the clues were posted along with the leader boards had 1,446 visits and 451 unique visitors (See Appendix, Figure 3 and 4). This is particularly interesting considering the fact that only 167 individuals were signed up to play the game. The explanation for this is either players visiting the site through different email accounts or interested third parties who were not actually playing the game. 68.95% of the visits were return visits while 31.05% were new visitors. The site had 7,080 pageviews, which meant that each person viewed game details and clues almost five pages per visit. The average time on the site was just over five and a half minutes, which is a long time for a visitor to remain on a website. The average attention span per website was remarkably low, and so for the game website to have captivated the players for an average of five and a half minutes each visit is incredibly positive. This statistic would be shown to potential companies interested in CTG to show them the engagement that this game framework provides between the player-consumers and the brand.

### Game Master Team Consideration

The case study revealed that it is not possible to run a CTG without a team. Simply putting the game into motion and keeping all of the balls in the air during the gameplay period requires a team of people. A team would help with the multiple jobs involved in CTG implementation such as clue and plot distribution, logistical communication between game makers and players, and points tracking. Additionally, a team would be the best way to tackle issues of plot and clue intertwinement. Just one person may be able to come up with good ideas, but the collaboration of a team cannot be replicated by an individual.

### Technology Uses and Considerations

One or two of the survey respondents mentioned that their team felt disadvantaged that they did not have smartphones and thus felt like they couldn't fully participate in the game. This was an interesting response because considerations were made to avoid using smartphone-exclusive material. For example, QR codes were contemplated as a clue distribution method but players would have to scan them with their smartphone in order to record their points. However, because some players would be playing without a smartphone, this clue structure was altered. Instead, players emailed answers to a separate email account or could log their points via a Google Doc linked by a tinyurl. However, it must be taken into account that in all contexts, there will be players without the most current technological trends. Game makers must keep this in mind when designing a CTG.

Another concern was that the game involved too much social media. In the course of the game, in order to increase social awareness of the game around campus, players posted pictures and statuses to Facebook (See Appendix, Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8). This allowed non-players to

look into the game and see what was going on as well. As a game that was supposed to create more awareness about campus organizations, this complaint seems antithetical to the goal of the game. Social networking is a major trend especially in promotion. Since a CTG is a promotional tool for organizations, it only makes sense that social media outlets are incorporated.

Additionally, many of the players enjoyed showing off their team pride in an online social context. However, again, the use of social networking must be taken into account when designing the game—how should it be incorporated? How will this benefit the game?

### Narrative Considerations

It is important to have a clear idea of how the narrative of the game is structured prior to the launch. As mentioned previously, it is permissible to have a loose framework of the game if player action is expected to have an impact on the narrative. Even with a loose narrative structure, however, the release of narrative plot points must be predetermined and exact so that the players are able to connect the dots between each occurrence. While the entirety of the *Honor Bound* plot was planned prior to the launch, in the midst of the game chaos, a minor plot mistake was made. In the middle of the week, the Honor Code Thief contacted each of the teams and gave them the chance to switch their loyalty to the Thief. In this message, the Thief was only supposed say that the teams who switched would be framing a suspect, but not who the suspect was. However, this message did reveal the identity of the suspect to be framed, TigerTV. This meant that every team, including the teams who remained loyal to the Honor Codes, knew that TigerTV was being framed and was thus innocent, even though TigerTV was supposed to remain on the suspect list until the end of the game. Even though this plot hole was largely overlooked by most of the players, this mistake is a something to note because it marks the importance of the

puppet masters having all of their plot pieces prepared and double-checked prior to launch so that these plot holes in the game can be avoided.

One recurring suggestion that players reported in the survey concerned the narrative of the game. Some teams reported wanting more narrative control of the game, instead of simply playing through a string of events that were preplanned. Most teams wanted more narratively-based clues, instead of clues that were fairly unconnected from the plot.

Additionally, another great suggestion was that the clues should be progressive—the clues should progress the players through the story and make them feel as if they are actually moving towards something. In *Honor Bound*, each individual clue could be solved without having solved the clues that preceded it. This decision in the game design framework had both positive and negative impacts on the game. On the positive side, this choice was made in order to keep the game more casual. A clue could be found by the teams and solved immediately without having to progress through the clues in order. This made the game easier to play and required less time commitment. Some of the clues were placed in hard-to-find locations and so forcing the players to find the previous clue to progress to the next clue would be leaning towards the hardcore ARG side instead of the casual side. A progressive narrative might have turned off some of the more casual teams to the game, however, and they might have stopped playing. Thus, this choice to make the clues disconnected from each other was made in order to retain more of the casual teams.

However, on the negative side, this choice slightly alienated some of the hardcore teams who were looking for a more satisfying narrative and progressive clues. This is the balancing act that a CTG must perform. While the hardcore teams did say that they wished the game had a deeper, more engaging narrative, it did not keep them from fully investing in the game—it was

simply a desire for the game to be more. Although the *Honor Bound* narrative attempted to do all of this in the game, this is one area of the game that could have been given more attention.

Additionally, this aspect of game design is incredibly important since a CTG is pulling elements from traditional ARGs. In traditional, large scale ARGs, the players' actions have a direct impact on the game's narrative. In fact, in the narrative brainstorming process, the narrative is constructed only loosely in order to allow for player choice within the game. A CTG should allow for this narrative interaction with the players. With only one game maker running the background logistics, clue distribution, communication interference, and points tracking, it was really quite impossible to make the narrative as flexible as it should have been.

In the future designs of CTG, the puppet masters will want to strike a balance better than *Honor Bound* and follow the previously mentioned *Doctor Who* narrative framework analyzed by Matt Hills. Perhaps there could have been added an additional layer of clues that were progressive enough to keep the more hardcore gamers entertained. It's important to note that the players really do want to feel a compelling narrative in the story and that they want the clues and their actions to have some bearing on the plot. This is a key part of console-based games, and this element must be brought to a CTG, even though it is more casual. As discussed in the literature review, a large part of casual game enjoyment is that players get to see their actions turn immediately into reaction in the game. Thus, it is important for this mix of casual and hardcore games to have an element of narrative control in the hands of the players.

### Incentive Considerations

There were two forms of incentives used in the game. Each played off of the other in order to propel players through the game. The secondary incentive was points. For every clue or

puzzle a team answered, they would receive points. These point values would be recorded online for the teams to compare against other teams. Some teams referenced playing specifically for personal pride in beating other teams. However, the primary form of incentive was the monetary prize offered to the team with the most points at the end of the week.

This combination of incentives worked well because it used a combination of hardcore ARG and casual game incentives. The points system was a casual game element, while the larger prize was an ARG element. By bringing them together, the incentive structure worked well in the *Honor Bound* game. The points allowed teams to keep track of where they were on the leader board and compete against other teams while the large end-of-game prize moved the game and players beyond casual play towards actually finishing the game.

### Scope Considerations

Even though the main client was TigerTV, including the other eight organizations in the scope and plot of the game was a positive decision. In promoting a smaller entity, whether it's a company or a campus organization, it is effective to use connections with other entities, both well-known and lesser-known. Increasing the scope of the game makes the game feel bigger than it might actually be. By incorporating eight additional groups into the plot of the game, the game suddenly transformed into a much larger promotion that was able to piggyback on the coattails of some of the larger student organizations on campus.

Connections and communication with other co-sponsoring groups when using a CTG as a promotional tool is essential. In most of the cases, all the larger organizations have to do is give consent to use their name and answer a few of the game maker's questions. The smaller organizations were excited to join in on this promotional tool as well because they needed the

publicity. The way that this CTG benefited from the smaller organizations was simply increasing its breadth—the more groups that were involved, the bigger the game actually seemed. In reality, the game would have been the same size (as in, would have had the same number of clues, same amount of difficulty) if it only incorporated TigerTV. The addition of the other groups inflated the image of the game in a positive way. Additionally, the cooperation of the other student organizations with the game increased the buy-in among individuals that were affiliated with these other organizations. Some teams signed up because they were excited to see their organization listed as a suspect and wanted to see how deep their organization was involved in this game.

#### Point Tracking Considerations

One of the most difficult parts of the game was keeping track of each team's points. Teams submitted the answers to each clue via email, and the puppet master was required to keep track of the points through a spreadsheet by inputting each of the clue's worth. Many of the clues were worth different amount of points, and so it was necessary to be diligent in keeping track of the clues' worth. With several dozen teams sending multiple emails with their answers every day, it was extraordinarily difficult to keep all of the points perfectly recorded. Several times, teams emailed in concerns that their points were not being calculated correctly. Although the puppet master immediately rectified these mistakes, it is important to note that the task of keeping track of points should be given to a designated person on the design team because of the preciseness needed. In addition, in future CTG design, a program to help the point tracker organize each team's points would be invaluable because it would help reduce the possibility of error.

### Clue Considerations

Each clue required a team to answer a question about one of the student organizations that had agreed to be part of the game (See Appendix, Figure 9). Narratively, answering these clues were supposed to allow teams to determine which suspects on the list of possible thieves could be eliminated at the end of each day during the game. In reality, this was not the case—that was simply the narrative illusion the game presented to tie the individual clues to the overarching narrative. The narrative of the game had already predetermined which suspects would be eliminated each day. As discussed previously, in a future CTG design with a team of puppet masters, this framework would be altered so that the players' actions would have an impact on the narrative.

Designing the clues of *Honor Bound* took into account two major considerations: level of difficulty and release timing. The clues aimed to strike a balance between difficult and easy in order to keep the teams both entertained but hopeful in solving the clues. Puzzles that were too difficult would discourage players from continuing, but puzzles that were too easy would cause players to get bored. For the most part, the clues seemed to strike this balance. However, in the survey, some teams reported that they wished that the clues were more difficult, while some reported that some of the clues were not easy enough. Overall, however, judging by the player enjoyment rating, it seems as though the clues did manage to satisfy a majority of the players. There was only one clue that caused a rather large discontentment among players. A clue was hidden in the campus library, and players searched for over an hour and a half for the clue's location. Finally, the puppet master had to intervene to determine if the clue had been disturbed by a non-player, such as administration or the campus cleaning service. It was later determined



that the clue was found by a player who simply did not make it known that he had found the clue, but several of the teams voiced their displeasure that they had a great deal of time searching for a clue that was no longer present.

In addition to balancing the clues in difficulty, the clues were also planned to have a specific release schedule. This was planned by the puppet master to avoid the problem that *The Beast* puppet masters encountered on the launch day of the game. Elan Lee, one of the main ARG designers, said that they released a series of puzzles on the first day of the game that the puppet masters estimated would take them three months to solve. Instead, the Cloudmakers solved every one of them in one day (McGonigal 2003). This situation was not desirable for *Honor Bound* because the game was supposed to last a week. If this *Beast*-like situation were to occur, some teams would have solved all 55 puzzles on the first day and would not have been engaged with the game the rest of the week. In order to prevent this, the clues had staggered release points. An average of 5-10 clues was released per day. This benefited the game in an additional way—it gave the game a sense of anticipation. Players would eagerly await the posting of new clues on the website and would be constantly on the lookout for new clues posted around campus.

## **Conclusion**

This case study shows that a casual transmedia game (CTG) has the ability to be a successful promotional tool for a brand that wishes to engage its consumer base in an interactive experience. A CTG has advantages over a traditional ARG and also casual gaming. Firstly, it engages players of all types of gaming backgrounds. Whereas ARGs typically exclusively attract players who have extensive gaming backgrounds, a CTG was able to attract players who have

never played games before. This is due to the casual elements that were added to the ARG design framework of a CTG. The design of a CTG allows for a broader consumer-player audience which exposes the brand to more people.

As a new tool for advertising and promotion, a CTG offers a unique way for a brand to connect with its consumers. In addition to attracting a wide consumer-player audience, a CTG engages the players with the brand. This interaction causes a stronger bond and connection between the consumer and the brand, creating a longer-lasting impression than traditional advertising. As stated earlier, participants of the game indicated their interest in joining and becoming involved with the organizations that were promoted in *Honor Bound*, including the original client of the game, TigerTV. Encouraging the players to become involved with these organizations through the game opened the door of possibility to these players of learning about and potentially becoming engaged with these organizations.

Additionally, the *Honor Bound* CTG was able to get the players to become active participants on campus. Most teams did not simply answer the clues, but also went to on-campus activities sponsored by the promoted organizations. The ability of the game to do increase participation across a number of organizations shows that CTGs holds the possibility of being more than simply a promotional tool; it can also be a tool for social activism.

The future research of CTG design framework requires more case studies of this new genre of game. This includes not only designing more CTGs in different environments with different goals, but following up on the implications of their impacts by writing analyses. There is a great lack of follow-up analysis in the study of alternate reality game design and also social activism game design. These are both important areas of focus in game design scholarship, and yet the study of the design implications has not been recorded. Thus it is imperative for the future

of CTG development and design that there be written case studies of the successes and failures of future CTG design projects.

Additionally, future CTGs should continue to focus on balancing the elements of casual gaming and ARGs. It is encouraged that the game looks as the narrative framework of *Doctor Who* analyzed by Matt Hills because of the shows continued success as a casual and cult show. Additionally, future CTG design frameworks should attempt to incorporate player action impact on the game narrative. The ability of a CTG to do this will mark it either as simply a narrative acted in real-world spaces or as a game played out in real-world spaces, in which the player has control over the direction of the narrative, as in a console game. Though there still remains much research to be done on this newly created game design structure, casual transmedia games hold great potential for future implementation.

—Laura Schluckebier, 2012

APPENDIX



Figure 1: The Honor Codes prior to *Honor Bound*

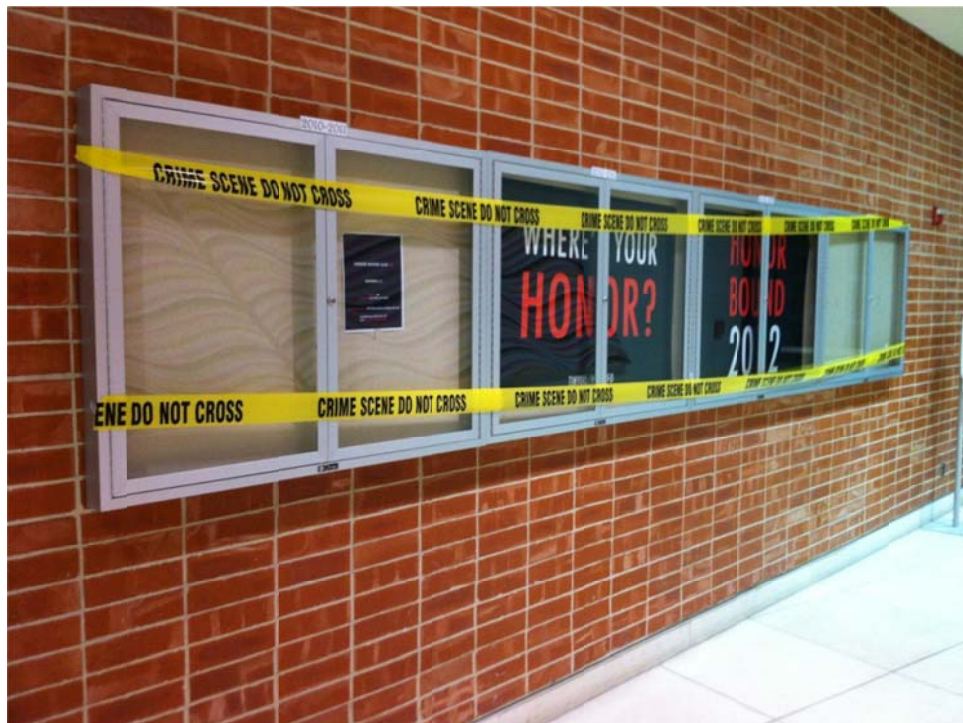


Figure 2: The Honor Code case during *Honor Bound*

# HONOR BOUND

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  - Follow the Story
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## WELCOME TO HONOR BOUND



### Friday March 30th

*Congratulations on finishing Honor Bound! Come to RCC 401 for the Honor Bound End-of-Game reception to see who the winner is. As for the thief...*

**Figure 3: A screen capture of the *Honor Bound* information hub**

**Leaderboards**

	Team Name	Points ▼
1	APO	880
2	CELP	865
3	Dumbledore's Army	840
4	Manchester United Fan	770
5	2 Classics Majors and a Hostage	730
6	Brunch Duo	720
7	PDK	695
8	V2	630
9	SPURS	610
10	Team Fluttershy	590
11	Girl Frat	570
12	Team RIO	560
13	Ponyo	525
14	Mighty Morphing Fuzzle	390
15	Team EllenD	390
16	Winning	375
17	McClellan 2nd	320
18	Triple H	310
19	CTME	300
20	Team Friendship	210

**Figure 4: A screen capture of the top 20 players on the leader boards in the middle of the game**

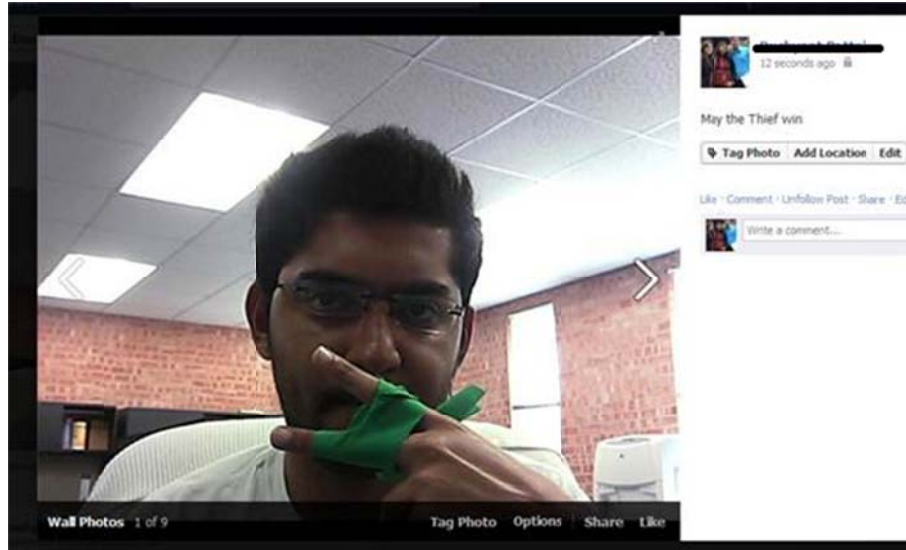


Figure 5: Player posting his picture with his loyalty band on Facebook



Figure 6: A player Facebook status



Figure 7: Players showing off their loyalty bands in front of an *Honor Bound* poster





Figure 8: A team displaying their loyalty bands and taking a picture in front of a recycled water fountain-- two clues in one picture

**CLUES FOR MONDAY, MARCH 26, 2012**

**#32** What is SOS's annual sustainability project?

**#33** In what Trinity event will the Swing Bums be performing this spring?

**#34** What is the annual charity event that PDK promotes every fall?

points: **10**  
expire: **thursday**

email answers to  
**2012honorbound@gmail.com**

Figure 9: A sample clue from the game

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