

This Is Not A
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This Is Not A Game

A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming
(Print Edition) By Dave Szulborski

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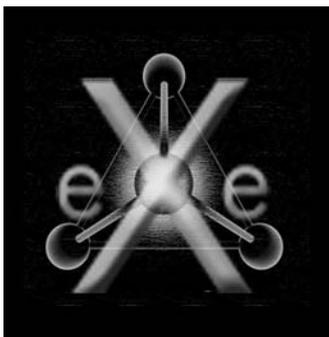
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Dedication:

This Is Not A Game is dedicated first and foremost to my family, for always believing in me and for encouraging and reminding me to enjoy life. For my parents, who taught me that success lies in doing what you love, not in what pays the best. For my brothers and sister, who taught me that family bonds can grow stronger through the years, despite miles between us and different lives to lead. For my children and grandchildren, who gave me the strength to carry on through the darkest of times. For my late wife Rose, who passed away much too young, but will live on in our hearts forever. And finally, for Brittany and Cole, who proved to me that miracles do happen, and that strength, hope, and courage sometimes come in the smallest of packages.

Secondly, This Is Not A Game is dedicated to the **Urban Hunt** Puppetmaster team – Dee, Becca, Diandra, Rick, and Paul – who made my latest excursion into the land of Alternate Reality Gaming enjoyable and memorable. I miss our Tuesday night meetings.

Dave Szulborski, January 1, 2005

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Ben Mack, award winning magician and advertising guru, who wrote Appendix E, “The Structure of Magic.”

Dee Cook, one of my fellow Puppetmasters from my latest game **Urban Hunt**. She contributed a personal reflection on



the game creation experience in Appendix C.

Paul Melamud, another of my fellow Puppetmasters from **Urban Hunt**. Paul contributed a detailed analysis of one of the puzzles he created for the game in Appendix D.

Denny Unger, the owner and webmaster for <http://www.worldworksgames.com>. Denny designed the incredible cover for This Is Not A Game, as well as the website for the book at <http://www.immersivegaming.com>.

Thank you to each and every one of the above people who made This Is Not A Game possible. I hope the book inspires many new Alternate Reality Gaming fans and Puppetmasters long into the future.



methods as they did then (allowing for new technology, of course), they would indeed be called alternate reality games. Unfortunately, they were done at a time when the Internet was not as user friendly and ubiquitous as it is now, so it was much more difficult for players to find out about, communicate with each other about, or work collectively on to solve these online mysteries. One of these games, Pink Floyd's **Publius Enigma**, actually has been pointed to by some unofficial ARG historians as being the first true alternate reality game, since it began in 1994, seven years before **the Beast** debuted. The other project, however, began even before **Publius Enigma**, and could arguably be called the first ARG ever.

Ong's Hat: Incunabula

It's hard to say exactly when the interactive online mystery that has come to be known as **Ong's Hat: Incunabula** actually began. Do an online search for the terms and you'll be rewarded with an endless repetition of the claim *"The delightful legend of the Ong's Hat travel cult has been posted in the form of the 'Incunabula Papers' since the earliest days of BBS and Internet communications."* Dig a little deeper and you can find traces of online activity that, in retrospect, can only be considered the *in-game* telling of the story, throughout the 1990s, and real world evidence reaching back as far as 1988, when small pieces appeared in cyber-science fiction magazines, like the old Boing-Boing print magazine, Xerox 'zines' and catalogs, mail-art networks, and photocopied newsletters. As already defined for ARGs, the story was delivered through various media and methods and, at many points, required some form of action or interaction from the "player" to proceed further into the mysteries of the tale. The well-researched and intricately detailed plot, much too long and twisted to do justice to with a brief summary here, took years to unfold and represents, in my opinion, the first real attempt to create a believable and interactive fictional world using the tools of the Internet.

Like any good narrative, the Ong's Hat story actually intertwined two distinct plots or sequences of events: the events in the Ong's Hat Ashram in the 1970s that the "Incunabula



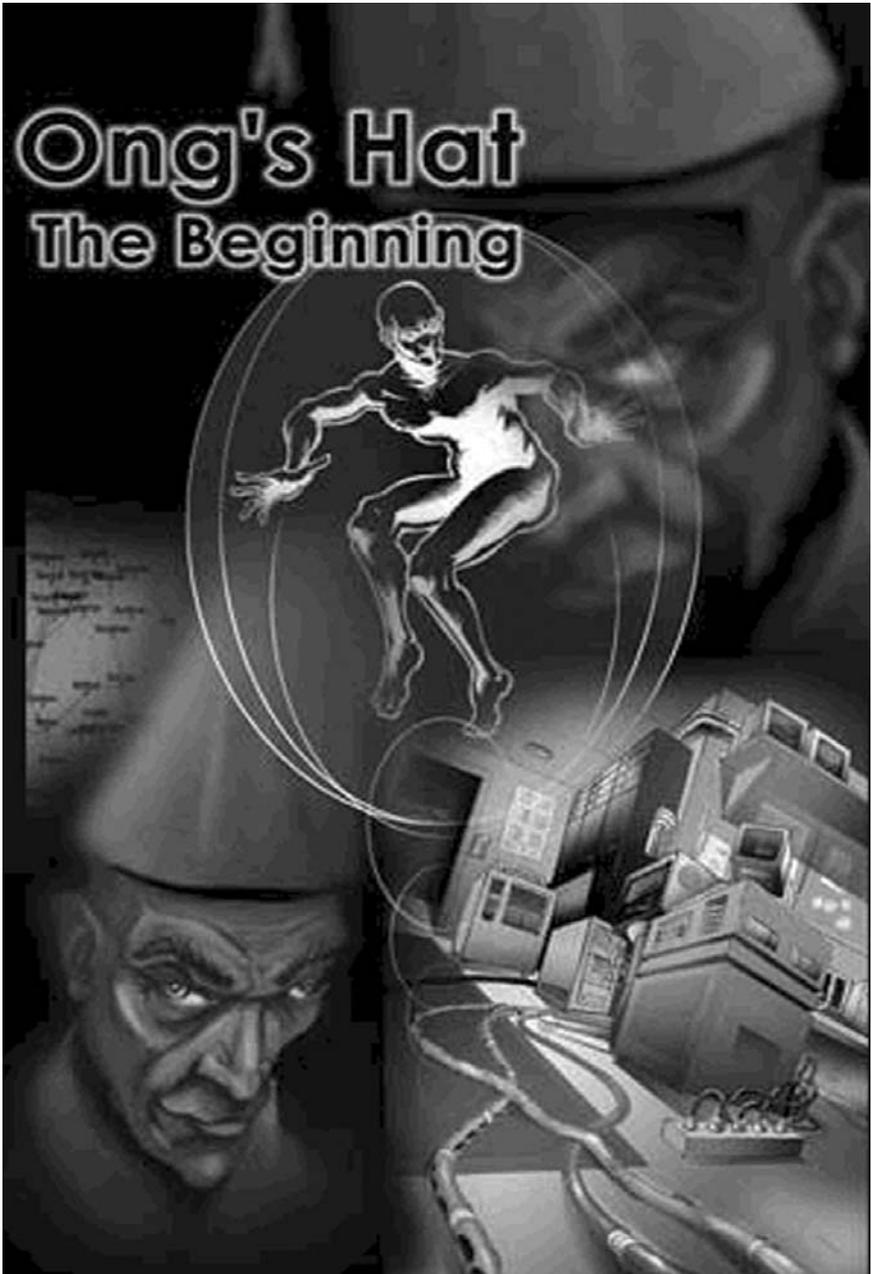
Papers” allegedly detail, which served as the *story* level of the narrative, and the discovery and distribution of the documents sometime later, which served as the *discourse* level of the narrative. So, undeniably, the Ong’s Hat experience had the aesthetic elements of a story required to make an ARG an immersive experience. Additionally, **Ong’s Hat: Incunabula**, by using the various real world communication methods available on the Internet at the time to tell its story, and by requiring players to interact at critical point of the discourse, also incorporated the game elements that traditionally make up and define an alternate reality game. At the very least, like House of Leaves, referenced earlier in this book, it was a literary/digital crossover, utilizing Xerox, BBS and later Internet technology, CD ROM technology, and even traditional print publishing as it’s various mediums. In fact, one of the creators of the original CD ROM has said that it included 23 intricate puzzles, most of which were never solved!

Perhaps most telling are the following comments by an Internet researcher named Denny Unger, who spent years unraveling the Ong’s Hat mystery and so became one of the foremost authorities on the subject. Writing retrospectively about the experience after it had wound down and most of its secrets had been revealed, Unger writes, *“Ong’s Hat, Incunabula has always been about levels of understanding. As you research each aspect of the story you are presented with a challenge . . . You find a piece of compelling info that takes you down one path only to find that its a invalid path but wait . . . it turns out that the path you thought was a false path is actually the correct path and so on, and so forth.”* Sounds suspiciously like an ARG, doesn’t it?

Unger continues, *“A portion of the population just won’t ‘get’ the Incunabula and will pass it off as ‘that weird web thing’ but some are captured by it, obsessed by its mystery. This obsession generally lasts until that person has extracted whatever meaning is vital to them from the story. There is also another class of Incunabula explorer. This person extends beyond the initial obsession and begins to see a larger picture by piecing together seemingly unrelated bits of information. What this person also sees is a series of carefully constructed tests designed to filter out certain personality types and draw*



in successful 'candidates'."



The cover of the book, **Ong's Hat: The Beginning**, part of the Incunabula/Ong's Hat mythos.



Finally, Unger tries to summarize the process of the game as “steps,” based on his intimate knowledge of the content, presentation methods, and personal effects of the experience.

“I can break the apparent process down in five simple steps:

1) Create an interactive medium that immerses the public in an addictive, tantalizing story but keep the content restricted to certain personality types. Reveal concepts and ideas that generally represent your beliefs.

2) Along the way, feed this portion of the public information which may or may not be true about the story. (Filtration of the idiots)

3) Those that breach the truths and untruths may pass to the next level of information. Introduce more directed and personal information. Once again reveal accurate and inaccurate information. (Further idiot filtration)

4) As this select group narrows, inject information that more specifically reveals their personal belief systems, ideals, and goals.

5) If the users ideals, beliefs and goals have been properly modified by the process or the user already fits the mold, those persons are then accepted into the ‘fold’.”

Unger wrote these words in August 2001, after years of involvement with the Ong’s Hat material and before anyone was seriously analyzing **the Beast** in these terms. The evidence for this being at least some form of early if not full-fledged alternate reality game is hard to ignore.

Pink Floyd’s Publius Enigm

In June of 1994 somebody using the name “Publius” began posting enigmatic messages on a Pink Floyd Usenet news-group. The initial entry was posted with the simple subject line “The Message” and consisted of the following:

*My friends, You have heard the message Pink Floyd has delivered,
but have you listened?*



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Appendix F: Collaboration in Theory and Practice

by Joseph Matheny; Hyperauthor and Media Theorist

This is a manifesto about collaboration – it’s about the realities and functional challenges you will face trying to create and maintain a working collaboration environment. This is not one of those screeds about ‘collaboration and why the world’s future depends on it’ or anything like that. This is a meat and potatoes guide.

For the theory hounds:

It is only proper that such a manifesto begin with Doug Engelbart. In the 1960s, Engelbart and his laboratory at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) invented the fundamental building blocks found in all of today’s collaborative tools — everything from the data structures (hypertext) and user interfaces (windowing systems), to applications (groupware) and physical interfaces (the mouse). Engelbart’s work was driven by some deceptively simple observations, which he described in his 1962 paper, “Augmenting Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework.”

http://www.liquidinformation.org/engelbart/62_paper_top.html

There are a lot of buzzwords floating around these days that all loosely or tightly bind to the larger meta-concept of collaboration: SmartMobs, Living Networks, Groupware, Social Software Approaches, Collaborative or Collective Management, to name only a few. My personal favorite source of information about emerging paradigms in collaboration is my old cyber-buddy Jon Lebkowsky and his blog, Weblogsky.

<http://www.weblogsky.com/wfs.html>. If you’re interested in really drilling down into these concepts, I’d recommend Jon L’s blog as an excellent starting place. I am also fleshing out a white paper on the subject, to be released sometime in 2005, time permitting. Last, but not least, you can always google one of the above terms and take it from there.



But enough of that.

Now I'm going to talk about some ideas that I have extracted from real-life experiences in group efforts and collaborative projects. No matter what you call it, it all boils down to one thing. What we are talking about here is a many to one relationship to project development and management. While this may sound simple when stated on the bottom line, it is amazingly complex and full of many potential points of failure, to put it into network management parlance. Studying networks and how they function is actually a very sound idea when planning a collaborative project. This applies to social as well as technical networks. The main thing I most often see missing from group endeavors is a sound project management plan. Let's talk about project management. A couple of things need to happen before a collaborative project is started in earnest. A conceptual framework for the core story, the main characters and the basic methodologies for story delivery should be fleshed out before you begin deployment

- A simple set of tools should be evaluated and chosen
- A schedule should be drafted and all known elements should be plotted, with milestones and deliverables marked inside of this schedule
- A core team should already be pre-qualified and selected
- Someone should be chosen to be the leader or leaders, which I always refer to as 'central command'
- It helps for projects larger in scope to have teams and therefore team leaders that report to 'central command'

These are general bullet points and you may add or subtract to fit the particular idiosyncrasies of your own particular group working. I will now take each one of those bulleted items and expand on them a bit. A conceptual framework for the core story, the main characters and the basic methodologies for story delivery should already be fleshed out

This stage of planning is analogous to the draft state of a



novel*. It can be as simple as an outline, a set of index cards or as complex as a Labyrinth storyboard [<http://www.habitualindolence.net/labyrinth/>] or a Brain [<http://www.thebrain.com/>]. This can be drawn up by one person or several, and it can be taken from a pre-existing body of work, as we recently did with El Centro or it can be created from scratch. The important thing is that you have a map, even a crude one, before you invite too many people to join your party. The barebones framework includes:

- Starting point (how does this thing begin)
- Body (what are the points that the story is trying to get across and how do we get there)
- Resolution (how does this thing end)

Next, a listing of main characters, their psychology profiles and motivations should be listed. Then, once that is done I always like to plot the characters within the storyline framework. I also like to make rough outlines of places, secondary characters, and any groups or organizations that may play a key role in the story. Personally, I like using The Brain [<http://www.thebrain.com/>] for this outlining because it allows me to link people, places and things together in arrangements of importance (casual to critical) and in a non-hierarchical fashion, much the way real life works, in a social sense. To address cross platform issues with other team members I have only recently began to experiment with other tools like StorySprawl [<http://www.storysprawl.com/>] or Labyrinth [<http://www.habitualindolence.net/labyrinth/>] Wiki [<http://wiki.org/>] has been immensely useful in the recent past for collaborative story development and I can highly recommend it as a simple and useful tool. Other tools are as varied as your imagination, even including the trusty old private web board scenario. A nice open source solution is the ArsDigita Community System [<http://philip.greenspun.com/wtr/using-the-acs.html>]. If you're really ambitious and have a budget you may want to look into Groove [<http://www.groove.net>] or Vignette (formerly StoryServer) [<http://www.vignette.com/contentmanagement/0,2097,1-1-1928-4149-1966-4150,00.html>].



This is also as good a place as any to, at least arbitrarily, come up with the mechanics of your ‘belief engine’. What media are utilized and how, timing, manpower needed to actualize it, etc. It’s best to leave this looser than your story-line because the mechanics of your ground game need to be fluid so you can easily adapt and adjust to the dynamic landscape of ‘playtime’. Good planning also recognizes the cost of over planning. Remember, you can’t know it all, nor can you take into account all the circumstances that will arise once you have actual humans interacting with the abstracted user interface of your story/game. That brings me to an important point; this level is for all intents and purposes, although abstracted, the user interface to your story/game. Remember that. Good sources of information on approaches to this part of the process include, but are not limited to:

- Video game story line and movie script writing resources- stay away from ‘how to get your script greenlighted’ types of guides. Look to structural guides instead.
- Multimedia story development tools and guides
- Storyboard development resources
- Human Interface, design and theory [See the earlier parts of this book and <http://www.immersivegaming.com/tools.htm> for a list of resources

*As in El Centro, ARGs can also be useful to float ideas for new novels in front of a diverse audience to observe their reaction to story lines and elements. If you write and publish under various ‘Nome de Plumes’ like I do the anonymity factor of the PM role also comes in handy.. A simple set of tools should be evaluated and chosen It is always easier to decide on standards before you get started. This will help you avoid a lot of snags and pitfalls during the actual development and deployment processes. When at all possible, choose tools that allow for some flexibility should you wish to add more team members along the way. Lean away from proprietary or skewed solutions unless functionality absolutely dictates those propri-



etary solutions are the only available option. Cross platform solutions and ease of use should always be kept in mind when choosing tools for group use.

A schedule should be drafted and all known elements should be plotted, with milestones and deliverables marked inside of this schedule. Ok, so this element will change as things progress but it still doesn't hurt to have a rough idea of what it will take, time-wise, to pull off your idea. When trying to fit things into a timeline you will often times put your ideas into a concrete enough form to be able to recognize 'feature creep' or in some cases, feature absence. It's really simple. Ask yourself: "How long do I want to do this and can I do everything I've planned on doing within that timeframe". You may find that your scope is too ambitious or that you really don't have the time and energy to execute all the ideas that you threw into the early planning stages. You can then adjust the timeframe or trim the 'features' to keep your project within the boundaries of sanity and completion. Treat your product as just that, a product. This will help with focus and staying on point. A core team should already be pre-qualified and selected. There are many ways to do this. One way is to simply hang around places like Unfiction's forums [<http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/>] and quietly watch to see who rises up as cream during the course of game play in other ARGs. Or you can simply recruit a few identified PMs when another game has concluded. In the case of El Centro, we were looking for some crack PMs to have as resources during the coming year so we actually set up an ARG-like interface that was not really an ARG. Basically El Centro was a multi-pronged interface to further several causes. One of which was to set up a multi-leveled puzzle scenario that would serve as a 'survival of fittest' course so that we could find candidates that had the unique qualities that we desired in a PM. You are also free to simply use your friends.

It will of course be impossible to have your entire team built before hand, in fact you should leave enough flex room so you can add candidates along the way as gameplay itself will produce 'superusers'. Leaving yourself a little wiggle room will allow unforeseen circumstances like PMs dropping out, being voted out, or proving to be incapable, to occur



without creating a cascading failure effect in your project once it is up and going. Someone should be chosen to be the leader or leaders, which I always refer to as ‘central command’

You will always have people who will object to this principle and I’m the first to admit that a decentralized approach can work, but more often than not, it doesn’t. This will also derail any power struggles that may arise later during the critical period of gameplay. Get it out of the way early. This is often simple because the original storyline is usually the product of one or several minds. Pick one or several flag bearers of the vision and allocate final approval or veto power to these people. There’s nothing wrong with taking a democratic approach such as voting or debate but remember that there will always be times when a quick decision is needed and when that time arises, someone must be mandated to make those decisions. I am reminded of a feature film I crewed on. Feature film production is somewhat similar in nature to an ARG project, actually. The director was asked if this wasn’t in fact a democracy, with all of the crew, from the grips to the production designer, to the actors to the director having some say in how things get done. He replied: “Sure, I’m open to suggestions. I guess this is a democracy up until the point that I have to say no to something.” Yes, I laughed too. Later when I went on to direct some music video projects on my own, I really understood what he was saying. A film project or an ARG is more like running an aircraft carrier than it is like living on a commune.

It helps for projects larger in scope to have teams and therefore team leaders that report to ‘central command’ Depending on the size and scope of your project, a hierarchical structure may be appropriate. Keep in mind that groups will naturally fall into pyramidal structures, with some taking lead, others taking more of a follow posture. Those that float to the top of these natural settlements may be useful as mid-tier leaders and can even be useful as agents to recruit later during play. The command structure does not have to be rigid or cut off. It often helps to have an ‘ear to the ground’ so to speak, so keep mid-tier recruitment in mind as an option. If you ever played any of the Steve Jackson games or Flying



Buffalo games, you already understand this principle.

In summation, I cannot stress enough that planning a framework for true and open collaboration may seem like a contradiction in terms, but it clearly is not. Some preliminary planning and construction of a workflow environment is integral to having a productive collaborative experience. Don't be afraid to plan but also keep in mind that as you progress and learn you will need to adjust and adapt. Building a framework allows for both while also providing a working space from which to launch a killer user experience. When faced with a challenge or dilemma, just remember: "Something's staring you straight in the face"

