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**Negotiating Narrative in Cross-Media Works:
Emergent storytelling in *Art of the H3ist***

In the spring of 2005, Audi of America launched a premium compact car, the A3, which created a new category in the automotive industry. The company launched the model during the *New York International Auto Show* where the A3 that was being displayed was transported briefly to the dealership located in Park Avenue two days prior to the launch party. That night, however, those who were in the vicinity of the dealership heard some commotion and later noticed that the display windows of the dealership had been smashed and the car was stolen. Once the police found out about the theft, they closed down the location for twenty-four hours to investigate the incident and put up signs around the store soliciting any eyewitnesses to the event. The day after the break-in, witnesses of the theft approached the dealership to report that they saw shady figures the previous night before the incident. During the remainder of the auto show, a sign was placed on the exhibit platform instead of the car announcing its VIN number and pleading the assistance of anyone who can help them in recovering it. Similar announcements were being made not only on the official Web site of Audi, but also on various media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The New Yorker* in addition to television commercials, online banners that appeared on technology sites such as *Wired*, and even on the billboards in the Times Square. The marketing manager of Audi, Stephen Berkov, issued a press release asking for the help of anyone with any information about the whereabouts of the car, and promising not to prosecute in return. *McKinney Silver's* innovative advertising campaign for the all-new Audi A3, *The Art of the H3ist (AoTH)*, had effectively begun.

Created in conjunction with a team of five script writers, Gregg Hale, Michael Monello, Brian Clark, Steve Wax, and Matt Fischvogt, *AoTH* was an immersive campaign that utilized every

possible media to develop an evolving new-fashioned thriller that included various plot twists, such as murder, revenge, double-cross lovers, and a cross-country car chase.¹ The campaign was essentially an Alternate Reality Game. Immersive games such as these are a type or a subset of pervasive play that uses mobile, ubiquitous and embedded technologies to create virtual playing fields in everyday spaces. ARGs, in particular, are an experimental gaming genre that blurs the lines between reality and fiction by conveying a fractured narrative through Web sites, text messages, snail mail, phone calls, and even real-life interactions. As Jane McGonigal observes, the game's famous mantra, "This is not a game," promises to erase the game boundaries by obscuring any metacommunication that may potentially announce that "This is play" ("A Real Little Game" 2).

Because ARGs use so many different mediums and platforms to narrate the story, they pose considerable challenges that require the examination of the materiality of the medium and how it affects the structure of the narrative. The complex nature of ARGs, that it is a game with a strong story component that develops across different communication platforms in real time, necessitates a narrative model that is not medium-biased while, at the same time, is able to account for the user interaction that contribute to the experience. Specifically, this narrative model must include the examination of how the medium constructs the work and the work constructs the medium, but more important, it must also consider the performativity of that work (no doubt an attribute that emerges as a result of the materiality of the medium) in creating experiences that are conducive to certain performances and not others. These performances ultimately yield emergent storytelling and build the overarching narrative of the work. To demonstrate the significance of the player performances in determining the development of the story, I will use two live events that took place in *AoTH*, one in Chicago, the other one at the *Coachella Music Festival*, in which player-based initiatives dramatically altered the story to the point that the latter event, dubbed as the "Coachella disaster," threatened to end the game. Before discussing the emergent storytelling that came about as

a result of these player-based performances, I would like to introduce some of the key concepts that will lay the groundwork for the discussion that follows.

Claiming that play is distinct from “ordinary” life both as to locality and duration, Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, contends that play creates temporary worlds within the ordinary world dedicated to the performance of an act apart (10-11). These temporary worlds constitute what Huizinga refers to as the *magic circle*. While Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explain that inside the magic circle special meanings accrue and a new reality is created defined by the rules of the game, they are quick to note that some games work at erasing the boundaries of the circle so that space of play becomes indistinguishable from ordinary life (“This Is Not a Game: Play in cultural environments” 16). Accordingly, McGonigal defines these types of games as pervasive games which consist of mixed reality games that use mobile, ubiquitous and embedded technologies that create virtual playing fields in everyday spaces. ARGs, according to her, belong to a subset of these games defined as immersive games because their denial of their game status puts them squarely in the player’s world rather than a separate place. Accordingly, Dave Szulborski, one of the important people in the field, who himself has designed games, explains that ARGs don’t attempt to immerse the player in the artificial world of the game, but that a successful ARG immerses the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player. The Alternate Reality Game does not really want the player to think of the game world as an alternate reality at all, but that the ultimate goal is to have the player believe that the events take place and characters exist in her world, not in an alternate reality at all, thereby effectively erasing the magic circle (31). It comes as no surprise, then, that *AoTH* became a nationwide car chase that took place within the context of real events (like *Coachella* and the annual gaming conference, *E5*) in real world locations to which its players can physically go and witness and report on the interactions between the characters and even interact with them themselves.

AotH is a story about a group of art thieves who are planning on digging a tunnel underneath the *Uffizi Gallery* in Florence, Italy, to steal several paintings. The story begins with a bizarre surveillance footage taken from the real Audi shipping facility in Germany where a man, pursued by the police, is seen running into a storage unit that contains brand new A3s about to be shipped to the US and hiding something in five of them. Later, it becomes apparent that the man is one of the art thieves, who, being chased by the police, left the plans of an art heist encoded in the SD cards² of the cars, hoping to retrieve it later when things settle down. After the initial car theft, Audi hires *Last Resort Retrieval*, an art retrieval business owned by sexy Nisha Roberts and her boyfriend, Ian, to locate the stolen car, which ultimately turns into the hunt for the plans hidden inside the other five cars. Throughout the game, the Web site of the art retrieval business, now defunct, revealed the back story of the incident by providing more than a thousand pieces of information, backdated over a year, complete with e-mails, phone conversations, documents, videos, and pictures. As a side plot to introduce the villains into the story, the legendary (but fictional) game designer Virgil Tatum (whose Web site, *Virgil, King of Code*, also allowed the story unfold) develops a romantic interest for Nisha and wants to build a videogame based on her adventures and the art retrieval company.³ Although the game suggestively points toward Virgil as being the villain who masterminded the theft, ultimately, as a result of an unfortunate glitch in the course of the game, the puppet masters were forced to rewrite the ending of the story to designate one of Virgil's men, Cybergosse, to be the bad guy instead. The fractures in the development of the game, such as this one, make ARGs challenging to design and a joy to perform because they force the puppet masters to constantly adjust the story in real time as a response to player interaction. These instances, then, reveal a strong connection between games and stories by indicating, if well done, how successfully interactivity can be integrated into stories without disrupting the flow of the narrative.

Examining the structure of stories that are possible within works that incorporate interactivity because they require their audience to perform certain tasks that may change the flow of the pre-scripted story is a challenging task on multiple fronts. Part of the difficulty arises from seemingly contradictory qualities of stories and games: while the former is a concept that has originated within primarily a print-based culture where authorial presence is paramount, the latter bears the potential to shamelessly elide authorial interventions. This has been the topic of contention among scholars in early 90s. In an attempt to formulate an understanding of narrative that accounts for its existence in interactive environments, scholars like Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laurie Ryan, and others have focused on a spatial understanding of storytelling and emphasized that storytelling is primarily the art of world-building more than anything else. While Jenkins reminds us that the popular traditions emphasize spatial exploration over causal event chains, Marie-Laure Ryan states that “[f]or a narratologist...capturing a fictional world that evolves in time under the action of intelligent agents is all it takes for a semiotic artifact to fulfill semantic conditions of narrativity” (200).

The conversation, however, has recently shifted to tracing narrative that expands across different media platforms and operates in different modes. These “cross-media” narratives pose further challenges because they necessitate the examination of the materiality of each medium and how it affects the structure of the narrative. Calling for a media-specific analysis that is alert to the ways in which the medium constructs the work and the work constructs the medium, N. Katherine Hayles explains that materiality is “[a]n emergent property [that] depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user’s interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops—strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks” (33). She is quick to note that media-specific analysis, rather than considering one medium in isolation from others, recognizes and indeed foregrounds remediation

between media, where different media take over the content of other media forms and respond to it using their own medium-specific strategies and technologies. Acknowledging the difficulty in theorizing the role of the mediums in the meaning-making process, Christy Dena, in “Beyond Multimedia, Narrative, and Game,” develops a theory of polymorphic fiction that “involve[s] a combination of distinct articulations that include what can be regarded as narrative-based and game-based compositions” (185). The implications of Hayles’ call for media-specific analysis combined with Dena’s formulation of polymorphic fictions is undoubtedly a step in the right direction that accounts for the different modes of communication and meaning-making that responds to amorphous materiality that pervasive games in general (including ARGs) have the potential to afford.

Performativity is perhaps the most important characteristics of the materiality of pervasive games because it allows for emergent storytelling, perhaps more so than any other medium. The concept of *performative* has its roots in J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts. In *How to Do Things with Words*, he refers to the type of speech acts that *do* things when they are uttered as *performatives*; the famous example being the utterance that performs the action of initiating a marriage union as in “I now pronounce you man and wife” (Austin 3-7). Appropriating Hayles’s approach to the materiality of the medium and Austin’s theory of the performative, I examine in my dissertation the type and nature of the performative activities that each work (ranging from 16th century novels to virtual worlds) elicits when forming the narrative. More recently, game theorist Ian Bogost in “Persuasive Games: Performative Play” notes that there are other types of activities that players engage in when playing which are a “rarer kind of gameplay⁴ action, one that performs some action outside of the game at the same time as it does so in the game.” The emphasis on the performative characteristics of works, then, is crucial when interrogating the construction of narrative in pervasive games. While defining emergent storytelling as one of the characteristics of pervasive games, Salen and

Zimmerman explain in “This Is Not a Game” that many of the most significant story events are player-produced and every interaction between characters built on previous ones, adding up to larger patterns of behavior (23).

AotH magnified the importance of the player performance within the story by seamlessly integrating the development of the narrative and gameplay. Brian Clark explains that it was important for the project that the details of the story and the twists in the plot be discovered by the players themselves. In essence, the story of the *AotH* developed as the players interacted with the game or failed to do so, or took different turns in the way they chose to interact. To ensure that players got involved in the story development, the team planned several live events at various dealerships, parties, and events, where selected players, referred to as *retrievers*, were sent in to collect information or steal the SD cards located in A3s. Of course, the ultimate goal was to get the players to interact with the product for which the brand was sponsoring the experience. The retrievers were selected through a hexadecimal job ad placed on *Monster.com*. Appearing to be gibberish to anyone who did not know about ARGs (or take the time to solve the puzzles), these job ads, when encoded, were messages mostly from Ian on behalf of Nisha (who was rather distrustful of outside help), requesting the help of retrievers who could assist them in a certain city at a given time. These retrievers were then provided with fake press passes to allow them to “sneak” into whatever event that was going on and were given Treo 650 smart phones, pre-coded with a conference call number, along with ear buds which they were to use during the event so that they could document the incidents and broadcast it online, specifically on the *unfiction* forums, for the rest of the players.

One of the most interesting ways in which player-initiated actions enriched the plot of the game in *AotH* is that when a player, Lou Mac, worked his way into a live event in Chicago after having been rejected as a retriever, thereby forcing the scriptwriters to write him into the story. When Nisha (who was recruiting the retrievers for this particular event) rejected him, Lou Mac e-

mailed Ian, Nisha's in-game boyfriend with whom she had recently quarreled, and informed him that his girlfriend was up to something and offered to be of assistance in spying on the event. Ecstatic about this opportunity, Clark and Monello had Ian contact Lou Mac and leave him a Treo phone at the player's hotel. The open-ended nature of this event, as Monello recollects, made the production process quite difficult and that if they had more time, they would have probably created something specific for him.

The event, which involved the players going out on a boat ride with Nisha and a character, who was later revealed to be one of the villains, was delayed because of a storm. Lou Mac explains that he was stuck at the Latin-American Social Club for three hours, soaked in the rain, frantically trying to call other players to find out what is going on. During that time, however, he was spotted by Nisha, who knew that she had rejected Lou's application. Upon discovering Lou Mac, she confronted him rather belligerently, inquiring into his true motives. Monello recollects that the actress playing Nisha was so into the story at that point that they did not have to tell her what to do. Nisha seemed so genuine in her confrontation that Lou "hid from her ... in the porter-potty to remain out of sight. From there [he] could talk to one of the folks in the chat room via cell phone and try to keep [the online community] updated" by relating what was going on and taking pictures of what he can see in the brief moments that he was able to open the door of the porter-potty. This rather unusual gameplay, not only enriched the story, but also led to others referring to him (and they still do) as the "porter-potty Lou," a legendary title that is still remembered affectionately by the rest of the players. In this respect, Lou's initiative demonstrates that interactivity is not the problem in creating a sound narrative and that, as Szulborski notes, when the game constructs a believable, internally consistent world in which the player has the information necessary to make choices that affect the game in understandable ways, interaction in the form of agency can be combined with the narrative form.

Sometimes, however, the play set in motion could result in unpleasant, or even dangerous, situations because of the lack of control of the puppet masters over every detail of the situation. Salen and Zimmerman note that part of the gameplay in these games that occur in public spaces is to negotiate the friction between the real-world setting and the unusual way the players inhabit them (23). I argue, however, this negotiation is not just conducted by the players (who are indeed in the “field” performing, but also the puppet masters who try to overcome the challenges in real-time that the public space may present. Because there are no clearly pre-defined rules that allow the players know exactly what the expected gameplay is at any given point, metacommunication between the puppet masters and the players (which is mostly conducted through the characters) becomes crucial in effectively continuing the experience. The *Coachella* event that Clark describes as a “classic victory drawn from the jaws of defeat” was one of those emergent gameplays that actually threatened the continuation of the game and necessitated a substantial rewrite of the ending of the story.

The creative team decided to plan a live event at the *Coachella Music Festival* that Audi was sponsoring that year. The retrievers were given free tickets to the festival and were told to enjoy the concerts during the day and that the live event, another SD card retrieval, was to take place later that night at the Audi tent during a party that was co-sponsored by the car maker and a magazine. Explaining that they were doing the event at a party over which they had no control, Monello says that there were two A3s at the tent and they had prepared the Web cameras and the wiring to monitor and show the one that the retrieval was supposed to take place. But the owners of the party changed the setup so the team was forced to change the position of the cars and rewire everything at the last minute. Additionally, the party owners roped the party and did not let anyone in at the time when the event was scheduled to take place. The main problem, according to J5 and others, was that the festival grounds had really poor cellular coverage and that, although the actual event was later at

night, it essentially lasted the entire day, thereby leaving all the phones but one, that of Jane McGonigal's out of charge. So the puppet masters had no reliable way of communicating with the retrievers and the retrievers were not able get updates from other players. The players, as J5 remembers, did not have any direction and were pretty much left alone, so "they try to advance the plot by improvising."

Communicating with another *AotH* player who was not an official retriever at the event, but who had obtained a pass to the Audi party from elsewhere, the retrievers found out that they had the people who were trying to get into the party asked to wait in a separate location, and that things, for some reason, were about to get ugly. As they find out later, the magazine that was co-sponsoring the party brought in a famous DJ to spin during the event and had given out a lot more passes to the party than the capacity of the location. Seeing that there was not enough space for everyone, and fearing that a riot may break out, the puppet masters were trying to figure out how to salvage the situation. Players simply did not know whether the place was truly closed off or that the velvet rope was a puzzle that they had to solve to get into the event. More important, the puppet masters had no reliable way of communicating this information.

When the retrievers managed to talk themselves into the party, Hitshermark says that they were the only ones at the party and the Web camera was setup to point to the wrong A3 (a white one), which was unlocked, rather than the one that they needed to get into, which was being guarded by the security. Monello notes that the setup was not ready when the players came into the tent. Even if the car had not been locked, there were no SD cards hidden inside it to be retrieved. According to Monello, the players were there at a time when they should not have been. Originally the retrievers were supposed to meet Nisha outside of *Coachella* grounds, in the parking lot, where they were going to be given their mission that required them to get into the party. But the puppet masters had to hold it off because of the aforementioned logistical and security problems. The

writers played the scenario out as if Nisha saw the retrievers, but was suspicious of their motivations. They reconsidered the story and played it out as if Nisha would ask “What are these guys doing in the tent?” After a while, however, the retrievers spotted two Goons who are also after the SD cards. Realizing that they had to get the Goons out of the party before they can even start looking for the SD card once the car was unlocked, Hitshermark devised a plan of giving the Goon the old memory card of her camera, convincing him that that was the card they were looking for, an act that resulted in Nisha branding them as traitors. Around 3:00AM, seeing that the car was still locked, the retrievers took their pictures in front of the car and sent it to the characters (of the story) with the note: “We were here. Where were you?” A short while later, they received a text message letting them know that Nisha had called off the mission. Tired, thirsty, hungry, frustrated, and feeling betrayed, the retrievers went back home.

Monello explains that they had a hard time getting back on their feet after the *Coachella* event because the story took such a radically different direction than they were expecting and they were simply not prepared to handle it story-wise. Not only they had to change the villain of the story, but also (more importantly so) they had to make amends with the community who was not amused by how things were handled. Perhaps because of this disaster, the team decided to include the *Coachella 5* in the finale of the story in some fashion so the retrievers did not return home with a sense of failure, but felt comfortable about what had happened in the story. They decided on doing something that had never been done before in any ARG: they asked Hitshermark, who was a pretty well-known player in the community, to become a character in the story. This decision had major implications for the ARG. For the first time, the invisible curtain between the architects and the characters of the story and the players, had been breached. Until then, characters only interacted with players in-character through in-game tools. This act not only took the Brechtian fourth wall down, but also redefined the rules of ARGs as a genre. When asked, Hitshermark accepted to have a

minor role but she did not want to be told anything about it until the last possible moment so she can act as a player till the end. Accordingly, the team called her three days prior to when they wanted her to fly up to Los Angeles for a film shoot where she was first asked to film Ian getting kidnapped by the Goons with her Treo phone. Later, because allegedly she had seen too much, she was filmed as being kidnapped by someone. The next day, a newspaper clip announcing a body discovered in the middle of a landscape that the players immediately identified as Hitshermark's. By allowing a player who is well-known in the community to become a fictional character in the story, the puppet masters effectively broke one of the important rules of ARGing. In addition to being able to break the somewhat established rules of ARGs, Monello notes that this incident gave the story a dangerous feel, it became a Bourne Identity-type story. Breaking the established rules by turning a player into a character, *ArtH* was able to achieve a heightened sense of realism for its player base.

These two incidents alone demonstrate that when devising a model of narrative in cross-media experiences, it is imperative that take into account the performativity of the work in addition to adopting approaches befitting to examining polymorphic fictions that incorporates different modes of communication and meaning-making so that emergent storytelling is considered.

¹ McKinney-Silver contracted *Haxan Films* and *GMD Studios* through *Chelsea Pictures*, who were *Haxan Films'* agents for commercial work. Steve Wax of *Chelsea Pictures*, along with Mike Monello and Gregg Hale of *Haxan Films*, went on to form *Campfire Media* after *Art of the Heist* concluded. The full credits list can be found at *Haxan Film's* website: <http://www.haxan.com/2005/07/27/the-art-of-the-heist-credits/>.

C.f. Taken from an e-mail correspondence with Brian Clark dated 4 December 2008.

² An SD card (or a Solid State Memory Card) is a card found in phones, video cameras, cars, and various other electronic devices that is used to store data.

³ *Audi of America*. "Audi's 'The Art of the Heist' Campaign Launched with Stolen A3." 8 June 2005. 5 December 2008 <<http://www.audiworld.com/news/05/060805/content.shtml>>.

⁴ Game play is the general mechanics of video games: controls, goals, interaction with the user.