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"We're All A Bunch of Nutters!":
The Production Dynamics of Alternate Reality Games

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Alternate reality games (ARGs) combine transmedia and pervasive storytelling, layering fictional narratives onto real world spaces and raising a number of production challenges in the process. This article will consider the key professional skills, working attitudes, and relationships that sit behind ARGs' complex narratives by focusing on a case study example, Nottingham-based *The Malthusian Paradox* (*TMP*). It will focus on how flexibility and trust were manifested throughout *TMP*'s production process and shaped the dynamics of the production team. In doing so, the article will argue that emerging transmedia narrative forms that exploit the potential of digital technologies are reshaping working practices within the creative industries and requiring practitioners to evolve and revaluate their roles within the creative process.

Keywords: alternate reality games, creative labor, media work, trust, production cultures, pervasive gaming

Alternate reality games (ARGs) have seen increased scholarly interest within the fields of games and new media studies since the first examples were launched in the early 2000s. Such games ask players to track the game narrative across multiple media outlets, solving puzzles, hunting down clues on websites, and interacting with characters (and other players) via e-mail, chat, telephone conversations or in person. They often take place over a number of months and in several locations, both real and virtual, and in doing so consciously blur the spatiotemporal boundaries between fiction and the real world. As such, they can be defined as both transmedia and pervasive, and their production is defined by the consequences of these two terms. Within the context of ARGs, *transmedia* points to the need for game

producers to manage multiple technologies and narrative forms, each of which have different affordances and require different skills sets. *Pervasive* points toward the way ARG narratives blend together fictional settings with real world locations and form narratives that can stretch over long periods of time. Much of the existing scholarship on ARGs has focused on the players and the experiences or pleasures these games can offer. Elements of the player experience such as behavior (O'Hara, Williams, & Grian, 2008), the relationship between players (Dena, 2008), collective intelligence (McGonigal, 2008), or the importance of suspension of disbelief (McGonigal, 2003) have formed the backbone for the growing amount of scholarship in this area. Little work, however, has been done on the working *practices* of these games. Research that does focus on more production-oriented matters has tended to focus either on the relationship between designers and players (Evans, Flintham, & Martindale, 2014 McGonigal, 2007) or in design strategies for ensuring maximum immersion and participation (Benford & Giannachi, 2011; Kim, Lee, Thomas & Dombrowski, 2009).

What is currently lacking in the examination of ARGs is the kind of research that has more recently emerged within film and television studies, and in particular that which examines the production cultures (Caldwell, 2008) of the creative industries. As Jane McGonical (2007) writes:

> The attention-seeking performances of the players [in ARGs] are prompted and guided by an invisible creative team, which carefully and purposefully stays out of sight while the players attract the limelight. This off-stage design team is composed of a group of shadowy, often anonymous figures working behind the scenes as the writers, programmers, directors and stage managers of the live gameplay. (p. 252)

These shadowy figures and the kind of production culture that such an operation engenders are ripe for further investigation. In many ways, ARGs face the same issues with interteam relationships, logistics, people, and time management as creative productions do more generally. Brigitte Steinheider and George Legrady, for instance, identify the importance of communication and knowledge sharing to the creation of a digital media installation (Steinheider & Legrady, 2004), both factors that can equally be applied to ARGs. However, the additional characteristics of these games as running over a prolonged period of time, often in multiple locations, across multiple technological platforms, featuring large groups of players and crew involved in multiple stages of pre-, mid- and post-production simultaneously create a distinctive working environment. The issues of collective action that permeate discussions of ARG players also have resonance in the working dynamics of ARG production teams. As O'Hara, Williams and Grian argue, such dynamics cannot be "idealized" (2008, p. 139) and as such need to be examined in terms of both the working pleasures such games offer their creators and also the specific challenges they raise.

This article will consider some of the key professional skills, working attitudes, and relationships that sit behind ARGs' complex narratives by focusing on a case study example, *The Malthusian Paradox* (*TMP*) by Nottingham-based digital arts company Urban Angel. The value of a single case study here lies in how it facilitates a microanalysis of production practices and the daily intersection between creative and noncreative factors. I will focus on two broad themes, flexibility and trust, that are, in themselves, unsurprising qualities in a small creative team. However, by focusing on a single case study in detail, it becomes possible to examine *how* these qualities manifest within a specific creative form, the ARG.

Scholarship around working in the creative industries often takes a macro view of the role of labor and practice within the large, commercial creative industries. Mark Banks, for instance, examines "how the artistic desires of *creative autonomy* and independence exist in uneasy tension with capitalist imperatives of profit-generation and *controlled accumulation*" (Banks, 2007, p. 6). David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker use interviews with workers across three sectors of the creative industries (television, magazines, and music) to consider large-scale issues such as working hours, pay, networking, and job security (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). Such discussions often link to career-level decisions such as how to secure more work, what contracts to take, and the role of organizational hierarchies (see Blair, 2001; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987).

TMP offers an alternative perspective. It was publically funded by the Arts Council England and as such had experimentation and outreach as primary aims rather than profit. It was produced by a small team so although managerial structures were present, and the implications of this structure will be discussed below, it was not on the scale of the examples in the scholarship above. It is closer to Mark Deuze's argument that "media work takes place on the individual level, often within the context of a team, a group or department of a larger organization" (2007, p. 88). *TMP* provides the opportunity to consider how smaller units of creative labor operate and, to take Deuze's point even further, consider those outside of the capitalist structures of large media organizations. In doing so, it is possible to explore the more "micro" qualities that affect how creative personnel go about their daily work. Simultaneously, most creative labor scholarship focuses on more traditional, industry sectors such as television (Caldwell, 2008, film, music, publishing or advertising. By examining a younger, more experimental narrative form, it becomes possible to consider how professionals reflect on their working practices when presented with a different set of creative and noncreative challenges. The specific difficulties with working on a single narrative "text" across multiple locations, over a long period of time, and on a range of technological platforms raises particular issues around the boundaries of work and the management of relationships within the production team.

To examine these issues, I will use two focus groups run with core production personnel involved in *TMP* to explore the particular production dynamics that emerged and evolved over the course of the game's run. These groups were part of a wider interdisciplinary research program involving academics working from gaming, media, and computer science perspectives that included observations of player involvement in the game and the development of *TMP*'s technical infrastructure. They were run as special sessions during Urban Angel's regular production meeting schedule and involved producer Adam Sporne, director Dominic Shaw, and various members of *TMP*'s cast. The first group, involving Adam, Dominic, and lead actors Rachel Smith and Anthony Neylon, took place partway through production, in November 2012, when *TMP* had been running for approximately three weeks. The focus group ran after a more general production meeting in which the next stages of *TMP* were being organized. This was done in order to get an "in the moment" discussion of the particular challenges the team had faced during the game's opening weeks and to gain more direct reflection on the production process. The second group involved Adam, Dominic, and a larger number of cast members. It took place one week after the final video had been posted and the game had closed in December 2012. It therefore presented a more reflective space whereby the team could look back at the production as a whole and the ways in which their working practices had changed. Although the research team had been involved in each of the game's events, focus

groups offered a more defined space where specific issues around the production process, creative labor, and the challenges faced by Urban Angel could be addressed. Both groups were relatively informal due to the prolonged relationship between the research and production teams and as such opened up a space for collective reflection and interrogation of working practices.

"But That's a Planning Thing, Isn't It?": Trajectories and Dynamics in ARG Production

Although Urban Angel, the producers of *TMP*, had created a number of small-scale digital and screen technology–based art installations, *TMP* was the largest narrative production they had ever organized. Run in four locations across the UK's East Midlands region (Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, and Sleaford) between October and December 2012, the narrative focused on two organizations: TFT Biotechnology, a shady corporation involved in the genetic engineering of food, and Amber, an activist group attempting to reveal TFT's plans to engineer crops capable of acting as bioweapons. The game began with a lecture by Dr. Solomon Baxter (Owen Craven-Griffiths), a live event in which he revealed TFT's hidden agenda. During the lecture Dr. Baxter was kidnapped at gunpoint. At that moment, his daughter *Rachel* (Rachel Smith)[2] emerged from the audience and had a heated argument with Amber leader Alex (Anthony Neylon). At the lecture's conclusion, Alex asked players to become Amber operatives to help them find Dr. Baxter and expose TFT.

The narrative then progressed over a series of transmedia components that made use of multiple technological platforms and media forms and facilitated a wide variety of engagement modes for its players, exploiting the specific capabilities of each medium (see Jenkins, 2006, p. 96; Evans, 2011). A series of online videos formed the core "spine" of the narrative and were expanded via live interactions with actors, puzzles, ciphers, and object-based interactions. A large number of live events took place within each host city, with several taking place during the GameCity festival in Nottingham. Players initially had to meet Alex to receive additional storyworld information and be initiated formally into the game. They were then given a series of tasks including collecting a Scrabble tile from an Amber agent in order to collectively build a message, deciphering a hidden code in a piece of graffiti, and taking part in a public protest against TFT. As the game progressed, players were invited to further meetings with key cast members, asked to piece together shredded documents, told to follow clues based on books including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island,* and directed to locate a code to open a safe. The most extreme of these live events involved players being "kidnapped" by TFT agents and interrogated, an event that will be discussed in more detail below. Other activities were Web focused and involved players investigating character blogs or accessing voicemail accounts. The game placed players in a variety of roles including those familiar from conventional screen media, such as viewer and listener, and those associated with more experimental, interactive transmedia content, such as detective and performer. Parallel to these staged events, players were encouraged to log their experiences via a series of blogs that were advertised via an Amber website and were invited to interact with the characters via Twitter profiles. As explored elsewhere (Evans, Flintham, & Martindale, 2014), players also formed their own online spaces in which the

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[2] In order to avoid confusion, "Rachel" will be used to refer to the actress whereas "*Rachel*" will refer to the character.

narrative was discussed and expanded upon via Facebook and a Wiki page. In many ways, *TMP* is a typical ARG, existing in both the real and virtual world and opening up spaces for collective puzzle solving and exploiting the potential of distinct technological and nontechnological narrative forms.

One of the key ways in which the experience of pervasive forms such as ARGs have been articulated is via Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi's appropriation of the term "trajectory." They use the term to examine the ways in which pervasive design works to construct particular kinds of experiences for participants:

> We consider an experience to be a complex mixture of space, time, interfaces, and performance roles that are connected into a sophisticated structure using computing technologies. A participant's experience is constituted by a journey through this structure. Each participant may follow his or her own routes or trajectories, which intertwine and interweave in different ways to create social structures. (Benford & Giannachi, 2011, pp. 14–15)

These trajectories may become highly personalized for each participant and will include "transitions" between physical spaces, between roles (spectator to performer for instance), and between technologies, each of which must be designed and managed (ibid, pp. 231–235). While Benford and Giannachi's model focuses primarily on practice in relation to its impact on participants, the concept of trajectories is equally important in considering the production processes behind forms such as ARGs. Just as those taking part in ARGs follow one of many designed participation trajectories, the producers must also follow a parallel trajectory to ensure that the experience is constructed on time and ultimately forms a logical and coherent narrative. Just as participants must move between spaces, across technologies, and via different roles, so too must the production team. These trajectories may involve creative decision-making but, just as importantly, will also include noncreative elements such as logistics and time management. Understanding how these production trajectories are managed opens up the opportunity for interrogating the specific creative labor issues within transmedia, longitudinal, multimodal productions.

The idea of a production trajectory appeared throughout the production focus groups. This primarily occurred through an acknowledgment of the need for careful planning and a mapping of the relationship between distinct technological or narrative platforms. *TMP*'s writer/producer, Adam Sporne, and director, Dominic Shaw, discussed one of the most popular live interactions, in which players were "kidnapped" by TFT operatives and interrogated about their knowledge of Amber. They described the way in which a careful planning stage was required in order to bring together the multiple spaces in which the player had been engaging with the narrative (and had subsequently been leaving traces of that engagement) in order to make more individually tailored interrogation experiences:

> We changed it slightly for each player depending on how we knew they'd been in previous situations and stuff. (Dominic, group 2)

The night before, we'd researched everyone on Facebook, gone through all the Facebook profiles so we had personal questions for each person. . . . So they each got a slightly different interview. (Adam, group 2)

Implicit in these discussions is the way the production team understood the mapping of each individual narrative component and the role they played in each player's individual route through them.

The importance of the production team having an element of control and forethought over this production trajectory emerged in a later discussion between Adam and Dominic:

Adam: I wish we could have filmed [the videos] as we went along but there's just no time.

Dominic: I reckon next time, next time I think we should do it. But that's a planning thing isn't it? (group 2)

This "planning thing" points toward the confluence of factors that determine how a production is managed. Although these factors may be of a creative or aesthetic nature, relating to how Adam and/or Dominic choose to create a specific part of *TMP*'s narrative, the crucial characteristic of production trajectories are that they are often about decidedly *un*creative elements. As Theron Schmidt identifies, artistic processes often involve large amounts of nonartistic work that is done by individuals other than the main creative force. He argues that "what the 'work' of artwork normally looks like is not primarily undertaken by the artist . . . but by hidden activities of communication, negotiation and professional virtuosity" (Schmidt, 2013, p. 19). Key elements of a transmedia ARG's production trajectory may very well be determined by more logistical factors such as manpower and time management, technological factors, or the mundanities of public performances such as the requirements of local government or health and safety. In order to facilitate a key narrative moment, such as the kidnapping, a number of tasks had to be completed in addition to writing the scripts or the actual on-the-day performance: a rental Range Rover was arranged, additional cast members were hired, a room for the interrogations was found in each city, each player was profiled using their activity on the Facebook group and in other interactions, and the police were informed to prevent any disruption or suspicion. These arrangements needed to occur while the team was also running other narrative moments with similarly complex organizational arrangements.

The ability of the creative team to successfully navigate the production trajectory of *TMP* was integrated with the production *dynamics* of Urban Angel and the *TMP* cast. The term "production dynamics" refers to the characteristics that define the personal and professional relationships between key production personnel. Naturally, the concept of creativity is central to ARG production; however, the scale and complexity of such productions, as with film, television, theater, or gaming, also require them to be collaborative moments of creativity. Helen Blair points out the limitations of considering creative work as individualistic, arguing in relation to the UK film industry that "semi-permanent work groups, individuals working together on a repeated basis form an important unit of labour market organisation" (Blair, 2001, p. 154). ARG crews are just such semi-permanent work groups, and as such the qualities that define what happens between different members of the production team are just as important as the processes

individuals may go through within their own roles. The concept of production dynamics offers the chance to interrogate how such collaboration works. When discussing and reflecting on *TMP*, the production team often commented not only on their own pleasures and working practices but also on the relationships between themselves as individuals and other members of the production team. Central to these dynamics were the interrelated qualities of flexibility and trust, both of which are common throughout creative work. However, as we shall see, the requirements of ARGs result in these characteristics manifesting in specific ways that were essential for the successful running of a multisited, multimodal, longitudinal, transmedia ARG. They encompass personnel, location, partnership, and technological and aesthetic issues and as such offer a framework for the production dynamics of ARGs: the key working challenges and pleasures within such productions and between members of the production team.

Jobs, Roles, and Boundaries: Flexibility in ARG Production

The notion of being flexible in working practices appears in several pieces of creative labor scholarship. Mark Banks positions flexibility as an increasingly inherent quality of the creative industries, arguing that

> while flexible working is found in other industrial sectors, its virtues are more vigorously promoted in the *cultural* industries, where positive connotations of creativity, independence and nonconformity are used to underwrite the promotion of these non-traditional styles of work that appear to offer choice and flexibility for workers, but are more likely designed to ensure that firms extract greater surplus values from labour. (Banks, 2007, p. 56, emphasis in original)

Flexibility and its dark twin of exploitation are intertwined in discussions of the creative industries. Hesmondhalgh and Baker discuss the related issue of "self-exploitation," or the willingness of creative industry workers to agree to long hours in return for emotional rewards such as recognition or a "sense of fulfilment" (2010, p. 9). What emerges in the focus groups for *TMP* is a more complex articulation of flexibility. This is not to say that issues of long working hours and self-exploitation did not equally feature prominently. Several comments made by the production team alluded to the demanding nature of such creative work. One member of the production team commented that "you have to cater to each [player] as an individual and that is mental" (Lawrence, group 2), while a number of other team members described the work as "tiring" and said that it could "strain relationships." In line with Baker's argument about creative workers perceiving the rewards of such intense working practices, these comments were often given in self-deprecating or affectionate tones, followed by assertions as to how much the speakers enjoyed their work or the particular pleasures they gained from it. However, at the same time, a more nuanced idea of flexibility emerged that related to both the boundaries of individual roles within transmedia ARGs and the ways in which those fluid roles subsequently link to creative practices and aesthetic choices.

The distinctive nature of ARGs as a *pervasive game* and the greater player involvement that games elicit were seen as a core reason for needing inherent flexibility throughout the production. Adam

commented on the distinctive nature of working on an ARG in comparison to more traditional media forms:

> Normally you know the audience is just going to sit there, but we were in the situation where we're going to do this thing and we don't know what the hell's going to happen with the audience. They might sit there, they might get up, they might try and get involved, who knows. That was very, very different. (Adam, group 2)

TMP therefore offers an example of production practices that differ from established media forms such as a film or television, one that is the result of a shift in the relationship between production and audience. Jane McGonigal has identified the difficulty with predicting how ARG players will respond to game elements, identifying a case with the ARG *Go Game* that resulted in players interpreting literally what was meant to be a metaphorical command to "remove your pants and dance" (2007, pp. 259–260). While film and television audiences may easily respond to content in a variety of unexpected ways, the temporal and spatial gap between them and production personnel separates that response from daily creative labor. With ARGs, producers and cast members are regularly confronted by their audience and so must find ways to respond to them more directly. This led the production team to develop a specific form of flexible working practice in order to successfully account for the unexpectedness of ARG engagement.

The most prominent way in which flexibility emerged throughout the production process was in terms of the roles that each member played within that process. Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi identify three core roles within pervasive media experiences: performers, spectators, and orchestrators (2011, p. 165). Within the latter are a number of subroles relating to technical and front-of-house issues (ibid, p. 222). In *TMP,* the production team was required to develop a high level of flexibility within their roles as "orchestrators." This was especially the case for members of the team on the periphery of the core narrative who were required to take on roles other than that which they were originally employed for. Adam described how this process happened in relation to one team member, Lawrence (Loz): "Loz came to volunteer at first . . . he is a performer but he didn't come as a performer. . . . He wasn't a character. He didn't exist in the game at all" (Adam, group 2). Intense player interest in Loz on blogs, however, led to his integration into the narrative, and ultimately into later interactions and videos. He was required to be flexible enough to shift roles, from production assistant to actor, a shift naturally facilitated by his previous experience as a performer. Benford and Giannachi hint at movements such as this when they argue that pervasive media experiences require "traditional actors [to] step away from center stage to adopt an orchestration role that increasingly blurs acting with technical operation" (2011, p. 226). While Loz fits the model of this movement through production roles, he is distinct in the fact that this movement was unpredicted and unplanned for. Rather than appearing in the original production trajectory and dynamic for the game, and so being factored into Loz's role within the team, it emerged as a direct response to unexpected player engagement.

The transformation of Loz from background helper to core cast member was a direct result of the intersection between production and narrative trajectories. He was initially employed for a week of events taking place during the annual GameCity festival in Nottingham city center. The festival setting, and so higher number of players and surrounding nonplayers, required additional manpower to help gather

recruitment information and keep the actors safe. In traditional screen narrative production, the background workers of technicians and assistants tend to be hidden by camera angles and editing. In pervasive ARG public events, they become more visible, manning recruitment stands or appearing alongside players as a form of crowd control. In *TMP,* this led to their integration into the narrative and required them to adapt to multiple roles beyond the one they were originally hired for.

This flexibility in roles, on some occasions, opened up greater creative freedom for those members of the team not directly involved in the creation of new content or the game's design. Before each character interaction, Adam would provide actors with a brief on what information they needed to give each player and any particular qualities they should bring out in their performance. In reference to one such brief, he described how the actor Leon interpreted his instructions as offering a high level of individual creative freedom: "Leon asked me what he should do and he was making notes and then he showed me the notes and at the end it just said 'carte blanche' . . . do what you want" (Adam, group 2).

Rachel similarly enjoyed being given greater independence over her creative choices. She displayed significant enthusiasm when she said that "[the] favorite brief I ever received before going out and doing some missions was a post-it note with two lines jotted on it. It was, like, right, there's your assignment. It was wicked. It worked really well" (Rachel, group 2).

These examples demonstrate a significant amount of creative agency being shared between the production's management and its performers. *TMP*'s production has qualities of what Mark Banks calls "craft production" in which "control over the conception, design and manufacture of a cultural good is possessed by individual or small groups or workers, operating in close quarters in 'workshop' conditions" (2007, p. 39). Both Leon and Rachel embraced these conditions enthusiastically, deriving significant professional satisfaction from them. At the same time, however, they reveal the inherently unpredictable nature of ARG performance and high level of flexibility they were required to embody. The flexibility to shift between roles was matched with flexibility within those roles.

For the actors in *TMP,* there was also a need to be flexible around the boundaries of work, something that re-raises the issue of self-exploitation discussed above, but takes on an added layer of necessity when the pervasive nature of ARGs is taken into account. A core characteristic of ARGs is the blurring between fictional and nonfictional space. By deliberately setting narrative moments in a range of real world spaces and over a prolonged period of time, the game constructs a narrative world that bleeds into the real one. The consequence of this, however, is that there is no "off-stage" space for the actors. If they meet a player, they must be performing and therefore working. Rachel, who along with Anthony had the most direct contact with players, found this to be a departure from previous acting work, saying that "I love interacting with audiences, but it's never been on a gaming level . . . it's never been so immersive that I'm never a person to them, I'm always a character" (Rachel, group 1). Although generally speaking positively about her experience on the game, she did speak of this flexibility being particularly challenging. When players coincidentally visited the shop in which she also worked, for instance, she immediately shifted into character in order to prevent the narrative bubble of the game being burst, even though she was actually in an entirely different workspace. She articulated this as being part of the work associated with this type of narrative form and a natural consequence of agreeing to play this kind of role, saying "if

you've got to fall into character for 10 minutes in the middle of the day then it's just what you've got to do. It comes with the job and you just do it" (Rachel, group 1).

Rachel's comments speak to the need for ARG production teams to not only be flexible in terms of the roles they fill, or when they are required to fit those roles, but also in terms of *how* they fill those roles and the potential need to adapt pre-existing working strategies that they may have developed from working in more traditional theatrical, televisual, or cinematic forms. For Adam, the process of setting challenges and puzzles that needed to be solved required a significant amount of self-reflection and re-evaluation as he determined exactly which kinds of puzzles worked best and, more importantly, the difficulty level that would achieve what he perceived as the "correct" level of engagement. As a creative producer, the design of puzzles is something that distinguishes games from other narrative forms such as theater, television, or film. In the first focus group, run partway through *TMP*'s duration, Adam was beginning to feel frustrated at the apparent ease with which the puzzles were being solved: "I want them to have to struggle a little bit. I'm getting a bit fed up with them solving stuff too quickly" (Adam, group 1). He went on to work through revising the next puzzle during the focus group and gave a commentary to his thought processes:

> Rather than just giving them the disk, so they had it all, they're going to get the transcript but with all the important bits blacked out. And then I'm going to stick a post-it note on it with some sort of a code that'll then let them get the video file off the TFT website. But I haven't decided what the code is, so I'm just working that out now . . . we're not sure where that's going but there's definitely a thread within that that we're using. (Adam, group 1)

Adam's comments demonstrate the emergence of an iterative revision process as the game progressed in order to address what he saw as a limitation in his own creative decisions and to player engagement. Jane McGonigal identifies a similar working process in other ARG productions. In discussing *I Love Bees*, an ARG in which players were directed to GPS coordinates over a 12-week period and given a range of tasks to complete, she describes the need to respond to players' "misinterpretations." However, she equally argues that the production team were able to use players' online discussions and blogs to adapt their creative strategies: the "iterative structure allowed the *ILB* puppet masters to rewrite game missions in real-time to better suit the interpretations the players were spinning off of our 'scripts'" (McGonigal, 2007, pp. 261–262). This process demands an inherently flexible attitude toward the creative process, as demonstrated by Adam in his responsive design of core game puzzles.

The need for flexible working practices also emerged through the team's growing awareness that they had been overly relying on traditional narrative forms. The use of Web videos as a narrative spine allowed them to work in a form that was not only familiar to the audience, but also to a production team more used to working with linear narratives. However, as the production continued, they began to perceive the videos as a problem precisely because of their *lack* of flexibility. In some cases, this related to aesthetic style and the look of the videos. In the second focus group, Dominic discussed how he had begun to adapt his shooting style to "fit" the ARG form. He explained how 'I completely changed how I

make films over the course of [the game]. It was a really weird experience for me" and went on to describe how"

> when I first started making the films we had this little steadicam which I just didn't like using and as the film progressed, I think the results are just better. They sort of look more wobbly and screwed up—more like bad filmmaking. (Dominic, group 2)

In this comment, Dominic distances the ARG video form from more established forms of "good" filmmaking and describes his own need to adapt and evolve his preferred shooting style in order to fit the form he was working in.

Elsewhere, this discussion related to the nature of video as a narrative form and how it fixed certain events into the game in comparison to more responsive performer-player interactions. Dominic commented in the mid-production focus group that "one of the problems that's occurred for us, really, is that the narrative in the films is too rigid" (Dominic, group 1). Compared to the live interactions, in which actors could be briefed moments before meeting a player and as such take account of any last minute changes or the specific context of the interaction, the videos required scripting, preproduction planning, shooting, and editing. This production schedule meant that they were completed early on in *TMP*'s run and were subsequently fixed. Toward the end of the game, Adam and Dominic had decided they wanted the narrative to move in an unplanned direction and, most significantly, decided to change the allegiance of the central character, *Rachel* (see Evans, Flintham, & Martindale, 2013, for more information on this process). The inflexibility of the video format, however, meant that this change led to a significant amount of extra work as new videos were written, shot, and edited. As a result, Dominic promoted a far more flexible way of using video in ARGs that required necessary redundancy to be worked into the production trajectory: "if we did it again, I'd like to film bits knowing that it might get used or not and have all that extra bit. So film it in three ways and then use the one the audience chose" (Dominic, group 2).

Adam expressed similar values for any future ARG production he might be involved in:

> if you imagine the main story that we have in mind is plan A, then from plan A at any point during the day plan B, C, D, E, F, or G can take effect at any point or time during the day. But as long as we roughly know where we're going with it we can change it that quickly. (Adam, group 2)

At the core of *TMP* was the emergence of particular, flexible ways of working. Adam, Dominic, and the cast ultimately valued both the pleasures of being able to move between roles and adapt the way they performed within those roles and their alignment with the more iterative and interactive format of the ARG. This recognition was not immediate, but slowly emerged as they reflected on their working practices and refined them to suit the particular context of ARG production.

Faith and Agency: Trust in ARG Production

The flexibility inherent in the production dynamics of ARGs equally leads to a number of challenges. As Adam described, "I'll tell you the problem. Things are changing so super-rapidly that it's difficult, even as a production team and individuals to stay on top of it" (Adam, group 1). This uncertainty perhaps naturally leads to the second overarching production dynamic: trust. As with flexibility, the importance of trust to creative processes is not a radical notion. Dmitry M. Khodyakov's work on the conductorless orchestra Orpheus identifies personal qualities that impact on the construction of trust. As a starting point, he uses Karen Jones' definition of trust as "optimism about the goodwill and *competence* of another" (1996, p. 7, original emphasis). He rearticulates this model within a professional context by arguing that "when musicians talk about trust, they imply two things: professionalism and interpersonal characteristics" (Khodyakov, 2007, p. 8). The creation of trust is therefore not just about professional competency, but also about more personal attributes, many of which may link to the dynamic of flexibility discussed above, including a willingness to take on additional roles. This, Adam goes onto argue, allows creative productions to mitigate their inherent risks: "When others are perceived as competent and committed, our reliance on them becomes more reasonable in light of an uncertain future" (ibid., p. 12). The importance of flexibility to ARG production dynamics is evidence of their high-risk status and, as such, the importance of trust as a production dynamic.

The most visible way in which trust appeared through focus group discussions was in the relationships between production team members and Adam and Dominic's reliance on bringing in people they had already worked with. Networking is a well-established pattern within the cultural industries, with David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker describing how across the cultural industries "there was a strong sense that the contacts which eventually lead to contracts rely on sociability" (2010, p. 14). This emphasis on informal social occasions as being central to professional practice did emerge in some anecdotal discussions within *TMP*'s crew. However, far more explicit was the reliance on professional networking and the creation of a "semi-permanent work group" (Blair, 2001). Adam discussed this explicitly when he said,

> I think there's a trust thing in there as well because I've got absolute faith in all the people who are part of the team . . . you've got to have faith in the people that you're working with and you've got to have faith in the work that you're doing. (Adam, group 2)

For Dominic, this trust was a result of a history of working together within contexts that had some relevance to the specific demands of pervasive narratives. This history gave them, for him, a collective identity that defined them not just as a team for *TMP* but also as professionals and individuals: "We're all nutters. We've got a history of working in very unpredictable environments where things have changed literally every day" (Dominic, group 2). This trust and history became a very concrete part of the production process, particularly in terms of actors, with Adam describing how "we wrote it with Rachel and Anthony in mind. So we tried to make it as close to their rhythms as possible . . . you're playing only slightly outside of yourself, really, rather than massively outside yourself" (Adam, group 1).

In an ARG such as *TMP*, the actors become a vital part of the producers' ability to manage their narrative and production trajectories. Each player can take an individual trajectory through the game,

potentially missing certain points of information. At the same time, *TMP* players created their own online spaces for game discussion and puzzle solving. These spaces increasingly locked the production out of these conversations and subsequently any understanding of how much each player knew about the narrative. Adam described how he asked Rachel to use her interactions with players to get a sense of where in the game they were, what puzzles they had solved, and what they had missed. The direct access to each player that such interactions gave her as a performer was something he could not achieve as producer: "I just thought, that's the best way to do it. There's a lot of stuff we're missing, there's a lot of private conversations going on on Facebook chat and stuff that we just can't access" (Adam, group 1). In this instance, the flexibility dynamic discussed above becomes crucial again. The trust that he had placed upon her in her primary role, as an actor, also extended to a secondary role, as intelligence gatherer on the playing experience. Adam and Rachel's working relationship became not only defined by professional trust (Adam's ability to trust Rachel to turn up for acting requirements and give a good performance), but also by elements of personal trust (that she would be willing to go beyond the role he hired her for).

Trust did not just manifest in a receptive manner, in the cast's ability to be trustworthy. It also manifested as a particular personal quality that the producers had to embody themselves; they had to develop the *ability to trust* both their cast and crew and their players, individuals that they did not know and did not have any kind of professional history. Jane McGonigal discusses the role ARG players serve not just in moving the narrative forward by completing puzzles and finding clues, but also how they work to maintain the integrity of the narrative through a "willing suspension of disbelief" that she labels "the Pinocchio effect" (2003). She explicitly identifies this as a quality of pervasive gaming forms such as ARGs, arguing that "pervasive games, at their heart, are the dream of the virtual to be real. And if pervasive games are the dream of the virtual to be real, then they are also the dream of the players for the real to be virtual" (ibid., p. 17). Elsewhere, she argues players will work to ensure that the narrative maintains integrity, even if the production is not as fluid as it could otherwise be:

> The clear visibility of the puppetmasters' work behind the curtain does not lessen the players' enjoyment. Rather, a beautifully crafted and always visible frame for the play heightens (and makes possible in the first place) the players' pleasure—just as long as the audience can play along, wink back at the puppetmasters and pretend to believe. (ibid, p. 15)

For McGonigal, ARG designers can rely on the players' willingness to work with them to ensure narrative coherence, hinting at a reciprocal relationship.

As with McGonigal's research, there is a tendency within ARG scholarship to focus on the ways in which the producers must construct a particular relationship with their players. However, *TMP* demonstrates the importance of the relationship that players must develop with producers, and in particular the necessity for producers to be willing to trust in their playing community. This sense of trust was not always automatic. Dominic, for instance, commented that the players' willingness to work with the producers to maintain the narrative, and allow them to do their job, was surprising:

> One of the things that's really stuck out for me is they very definitely said that I and Adam are not in the game. We're to do with the game, we're to do with designing the game, but we're not in the game, we're not characters in the game . . . and they ignore us . . . so when I come and grab Alex and take him away, to get him some lunch, or whatever, or just get him out of character for an hour to cool down a bit, they would not speculate about who we were. (Dominic, group 1)

Dominic was confronted with the fact that he could trust players to not complicate or destroy the diegetic integrity of *TMP*, and his necessarily non-narrative role within it, something he had not previously considered. Partway through the game, Adam described his relationship with the players as "[a] sort of symbiosis and we're feeding off them, and they're feeding off us" (Adam, group 1), hinting at a reciprocal relationship or two-way trust. He went on to discuss his relationship with one player in particular, who had set up a Wiki to allow players to discuss the game and share information. This player was highly engaged with the game and was often the first to solve puzzles. However, he would also check with Adam when he should post the answer, in order to ensure the pleasures of other players were not curtailed. Adam particularly valued the fact that he could trust the player to consider the integrity and experience of the game as a whole, saying, "[he] asked me if I wanted him to [post the answer to a puzzle] and he's been really good with that" (Adam, group 1). Over the course of *TMP*, Adam and Dominic discovered that their players' "willing suspension of disbelief" allowed them to extend the trust that they gave to the production team to the players themselves. This, however, also required them to recognize this trust and, with it, a relationship with their players that was based on sharing and equality.

However, the negotiation of trust within the production team and between the production and the players was far from straightforward. In many ways, this trust did not equate to knowledge about the production or its narrative. As is often the case with ARGs, at the core of the game is a series of questions. Where is Dr Baxter? What are TFT up to? The answers to these questions are naturally a mystery to the players tasked with answering them, but they were equally kept as a mystery for most members of the production team:

> We talked about the fact that because it has to be secret, or a lot of it has to be secret, we talked about the fact that it was going to be a big team of people to be able to do it and we talked about how we were going to manage that. . . . What we decided was we'd only tell people exactly what they needed to know, we wouldn't tell them anything else. (Adam, group 2)

Adam's concern was that the entire game narrative was so vast and complex that if those involved in direct interactions with players knew all of it, there could be confusion or the revelation of information that was not yet due for release. This led to a strategic dissemination of information, with much of the production team discovering the narrative only in the briefings directly before each interaction. Adam and Dominic's trust in their production team only extended so far, as they maintained control over key narrative developments. In many ways, this decision was justified by problematic moments when trust was mishandled. Adam spoke of one volunteer who "didn't know the answer so they were just making stuff up, and that was causing me real issues and that had to stop quite quickly" (Adam,

group 2). This moment highlights the fragility of trust within production dynamics as well as the intricate relationship between trust and creative agency.

The ability to trust his production team and his players was not a straightforward process for Adam. It emerged as a result of others proving themselves to him, but, perhaps more importantly, his developing ability *to trust* and to cede a certain amount of control. Dmitry M. Khodyakov argues that "trust and control produce each other" (2007, p. 16) and that the two concepts, although distinct, cannot be separated from each other (ibid., p. 15). This returns again to issues of agency within critical theory approaches to cultural work in which, as Mark Banks asserts, cultural workers are "not . . . critical or active subjects in their own right" (2007, p. 36). In the case of *TMP*, the distribution of creative agency was problematic. We have already seen how in some cases Adam was very willing to hand over creative freedom to his cast member when it came to individual interactions, and the pleasures this afforded those performers. For Adam, his ability to not only judge other team members as trustworthy, but also to then actually trust them with vital narrative information or creative autonomy was something that evolved over the production's duration. Throughout *TMP,* he maintained control over virtual character interactions in which the physical presence of the actor was unnecessary, demonstrating an attempt to perpetuate his position within the production hierarchy and maintain more "top-down" control over the *TMP*'s narrative. When talking about Twitter character profiles, he said that "we talked about that . . . about whether it would be advantageous for the actors to do it, but then how can you keep control of that and make sure that things don't go the wrong way by accident" (Adam, group 2). His ability to trust other people in spaces that would significantly impact the narrative remained limited and something he acknowledged he was still working through: "I'd be more willing to [let the actors write Twitter feeds] now, after having done this one. I'd be a lot more willing" (Adam, group 2). He was forced to re-evaluate working practices that he had established earlier in his career, but this did not happen immediately, easily, or even fully. There was a noticeable, and gradual, shift in how he, as producer and head of the production hierarchy, constructed the production dynamics around him and, in particular, a shift in his ability to trust those around him as he adapted to the specific format of the ARG.

Conclusion

Although a single example of ARG production, *TMP* revealed a number of characteristics concerning the forms of creative labor in such transmedia, multimodal, multisited, longitudinal narrative forms. The logistical complexities of working across multiple sites (both real and virtual), multiple technologies, and over a number of months highlight the necessity for considering transmedia production as a journey that the production team must follow. Such journeys are defined by the dynamics between team members and between the team and its audience. All members of *TMP*'s production team were required to adapt and change their working practices. This process was characterized in particular by increased flexibility in terms of what their roles require and when they are required to fulfill them and the need to negotiate trust and agency between different members of the producer-cast-player triangle. This latter characteristic resulted in not only individuals lower down the production hierarchy proving themselves to be trustworthy, but also production management becoming willing to accept that trustworthiness and cede some control over their narrative.

Although, at their core, professional qualities such as flexibility and trust are not radically new, the evolution of *TMP*'s production strategies indicate that they are not necessarily manifesting in traditional ways. The members of *TMP*'s production were required to re-evaluate what they had perceived as the boundaries of their work. The how and when of creative labor became malleable throughout *TMP* as the actors took on greater creative autonomy and the producers allowed their control over the game to diminish. The difficulties that *TMP*'s senior production staff initially had in fully ceding control to either other production staff or players, and their ultimate recognition of needing to, speaks to the need to consider ARG production in relation, and comparison, to more traditional forms of creative labor. Doing so indicates a way toward further examining the changes the creative industries are undergoing with the rise of transmedia, multimodal, and longitudinal forms of storytelling.

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