

Pervasive Larps at Scale: Design Challenges of a Novel Work

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INTRODUCTION

Pervasive games are characterized by the expansion of the area of play spatially, temporally, and/or socially, blurring the line between events that occur within the game and those that occur outside of it, creating a unique and immersive game experience (Montola et al. 2009). One of the most widely known examples of a pervasive game is *Pokemon Go* (Niantic 2016), a Location-Based Mobile Game (LBMG). LBMGs expand the potential game area spatially by encouraging players to play in a variety of real-life locations while tracking them using positioning technology such as GPS. They also expand the game space temporally by encouraging constant play, with the game world existing in real-time. This expansion of the game area moves the game out of its own space and into the realm of everyday life (Montola 2010), leading to instances of social expansion, such as when bystanders become involved (Tokgöz and Burak 2018). Some pervasive games are designed to incorporate even more elements of social play, such as role-play, as seen in *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*, a pervasive larp staged in Stockholm, Sweden in 2006 that ran for five weeks. The game began with players interacting only with each other in character, then expanded to involve puzzles and "rituals" in public spaces, interacting with the real world and the people in it, and eventually culminating in two major public events: a protest and a final "homecoming" ritual (Stenros 2007).

Pervasive larps, despite their potential for creating unique and engaging experiences, currently face limitations that prevent them from achieving the level of success seen in other types of pervasive games such as LBMGs. One of the main challenges is the negative perception of role-playing and its association with being "nerdy" or unpopular, as portrayed in media (Curran 2011). Additionally, pervasive larps are typically run infrequently and only for small groups of players, unlike LBMGs which can reach millions of active users. For example, *Momentum* had only 30 players, with four of them being secret informants who maintained the game, while *Pokemon GO* reached a peak of 147 million active users.

In this paper, a new pervasive game that combines elements of larp with the goal of reaching a wider audience will be presented. The design and development of such a game poses several challenges, however, this paper will explore potential solutions and strategies to overcome these obstacles.

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INCOMING_TRANSMISSION

INCOMING_TRANSMISSION is a pervasive game played out in Adelaide, Australia over the four weeks of the Adelaide Fringe 2023. Players will begin their journey by arriving at the designated starting location with their smartphones at one of the many scheduled session times that are spaced throughout the festival. Participants will then be given tasks, challenges, and puzzles that they must complete in order to progress through the game.

Unlike traditional larps, where players are aware of each other's identities before the game begins, INCOMING_TRANSMISSION utilizes a staggered start style, where players are not all assembled at the same time. This means that players will only be able to confirm the identity of other players if they are familiar with each other outside of the game. This design choice allows the organizers to offload some of the usual workload required by a larp by coordinating encounters where multiple players perform roles without knowing if the other people involved are actors or not. Additionally, players can also be utilized to perform short tasks that prepare and maintain future tasks for other players, or to keep an eye on other players' progress.

To appeal to a wider audience and ensure immediate engagement, INCOMING_TRANSMISSION does not include traditional larp elements such as briefing sessions, workshops, or even direct instructions before the game begins on how to play their characters. Instead, to maintain immersion and prevent players from breaking character during player-player interactions, players are told they are secret agents who have been recruited to fight a covert threat. They are told to be wary of others and not to trust anyone, including other players. Players are also assigned a score which is visible to all players through a leaderboard on the app. Points are awarded for completing tasks, and points can be removed if players falsely claim to have completed tasks. Additionally, players will also be awarded points for reporting other players who break the game rules by breaking character, which is explained within the game's narrative as being necessary to protect the organization.

The game is made up of multiple tasks, challenges, and puzzles, which are referred to as "assignments"- like the missions or quests of a video game. These assignments are either casual, one-time tasks that reward players with small details about the game's world and story, similar to side quests, or assignments that are part of a more complex series and involve key plot developments, similar to story missions.

To ensure scalability and accommodate for the players progressing through the story at different times, semi-automated game mastering (Jonsson and Waern, 2008) is utilized. The specific missions offered to each player will be determined automatically based on metrics collected throughout the game. For example, players who are less reliable will be given less critical tasks, while players who excel at role-playing will be given the opportunity to participate in missions that involve a larger number of players.

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