End of the Line

Comp150 homework 3: ARGS: Jim Kim, Julia Knight, Thomas Schaffner, Cameron Seitzman

A source of misery that plagues people, especially in consumer-based countries like America, is waiting. Primarily, I am thinking about waiting in lines at the checkout register – usually a 2-10 minute wait. The problem with this wait is that people get bored, but there’s very little one can do to solve this boredom. It doesn’t make sense to read one page of a book, or check a single email and not even have time to respond to it. Furthermore, if one tries to do one of these solutions, they’ll often fail to notice when the line moves, causing frustration for anyone behind them. (This misery does not apply, however, to doctor’s offices, the DMV, the airport, or anywhere one waits for a prolonged period of time, as one can do a meaningful activity such as holding a phone call or reading a chapter of a book). Thus, by the very nature of this misery – waiting – few reasonable solutions exist to help forget one’s waiting. The solution to waiting, therefore, is to make the waiting more enjoyable – to make the waiting an active activity instead of a passively-endured experience, to make waiting involve creativity and thought. This is the purpose that the murder-mystery roleplay game End of the Line serves – to make waiting a creative experience.

In testing the game, however, I noticed the game inadvertently addresses a second source of misery. Ever since the advent of handheld digital devices, namely smart phones, people have in times of boredom buried their noses in technology, rejecting the reality literally under their noses (excuse the pun). While one cannot respond to emails or read a book, they can spend 3 minutes absentmindedly playing games like Angry Birds or Flappy Bird, updating their social media, or performing other digital tasks. The misery I identified is exactly this – people supplant reality with place-holding digital experiences. By incorporating aspects of the immediate environment around players, End of the Line seeks to solve this misery, encouraging people to be aware of their environments and to actively and creatively consider the world that surrounds them.

End of the Line, to summarize, is a murder mystery game that incorporates aspects of one’s surroundings as direct elements of gameplay, and encourages active and creative thought rather than passive waiting. The game itself, it should be noted, is a less stereotypical ARG – the game features no extrinsic rewards, and is single-player (though it could be hypothetically extended to a multiplayer game through the use of friendly “detective’s assistants” or the involvement of nearby people as “witnesses.” This however, is not recommended, as the game is intended to be a personal experience). However, the game is indeed a game as based on McGonigal’s four essential characteristics (McGonigal 21) – it has a goal (to solve the mystery), rules (as described below), a feedback system (the game ends when one reaches the checkout register, or is at the front of the line; one therefore also has a built-in timer: they must solve the mystery before time runs out!), and can only be played voluntarily.
One may argue that End of the Line is not really an ARG, as “ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it.” (McGonigal 125) Indeed, at face value, End of the Line may violate this rule: rather than waiting in line, you make up a fanciful story to occupy your mind. But this is not the case. “ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life” (McGonigal 125), after all, and End of the Line is a way to engage with your surroundings and really pay attention to the details of the world. End of the Line, furthermore, is very much in line with McGonigal’s vision of games, utilizing a number of her recommended fixes for reality.

To begin with, the game uses Fix #1, “Unnecessary Obstacles” (McGonigal 22) – it provides obstacles to actively overcome rather than waiting passively. The game is the embodiment of Fix #7, “Wholehearted Participation,” as it certainly causes the player to “participate more fully” (McGonigal 124) while waiting in line. The game, moreover, emphasizes Fix #8, “Meaningful Rewards,” as it grants large intrinsic rewards for participation in a largely “pointless and unrewarding” experience (McGonigal 148). And while the game is much more freeform than traditional ARGs like Ingress, End of the Line, like Chore Wars, creates a “memorable, positive experience […] that should change the way [we] think about and approach” (McGonigal 123) waiting in line.

When testing the game, it became evident that unless the backstory was relatively short and spontaneous, Step 1 became a stumbling block that people struggled to progress past. So as to achieve a game that is more creative and interesting the phrasing of Step 1 was changed from an “elaborate and involved backstory” to simply “a backstory,” stressing the fact that backstory is simply one part of the game, rather than the focus, and thus putting attention back on the gameplay process as a whole rather than any individual step.

**What You Need:** A coin, and to be somewhere in line. Beyond a coin flip, this game takes place between your mind’s eye and the room you’re in.

**Setup:**
1. Consider the length of the line you’re in. If it’s a relatively short line you’ll traverse in a minute or two, you’re playing the game on the Easy difficulty setting. If it’s medium length line that may take a handful of minutes, you’re playing on Medium. If it’s a longer line that may take some time, you’re playing on Hard.
   a. Example: I am waiting in line at the supermarket. There are 3 people with reasonably full baskets in front of me, so I select the Medium difficulty.

**Gameplay**
1. Look at the person in front of you in line. Create a backstory for that person (as serious or as silly as you like -- just don’t overthink it). If you’re playing on Easy, it must involve one aspect about them. If Medium, 2 aspects, and if Hard, 3 aspects.
a. An aspect can be anything from the type of jacket they are wearing, to an interesting piece of jewelry, an accent they have when speaking, an item they are holding, etc…
b. Example: Because I am playing on Medium, I select 2 aspects: the man’s leather jacket and his brightly colored shoes. The man is a safety-concerned man in a biker gang who has come to the grocery store in order to stock up on burly biker snacks, like beef jerky. He’s also concerned with visibility, so he may be buying flashlights or candles.

2. The person in front of you is dead, having been murdered! Make up the way they were killed! (As before, this can be silly or serious -- just be consistent in your theming!)
   a. If I were playing a sillier game, the man may have died from slipping on a banana peel or from a mysterious trout that flew over the aisles and struck him in the head. If I were playing a more serious game, the man could die from being stabbed in the back or poisoned with iocane powder.
   b. Example: I’m playing a silly game, so the man died due to a shopping cart drive by from a rival biker gang who hate safety. Not only did they murder a man, but they ignored the rule about allowing adults to sit in shopping carts!

3. Now you have to flip the coin! If head, choose the oldest person in line. If tails, choose the youngest person in the line. The person you choose is the murderer!
   a. Example: I choose the sweet-looking old lady behind me. She’s the murderer! And she looked so sweet!

4. It’s your job, as the detective, to bring figure out how the murderer did it. This is where the game becomes truly creative, in accordance with your silliness or serious noir theme. Like Step 2, however, the difficulty is relevant here. If you’re playing on Easy, the killer did it only with what’s in their hands. (If their hands are empty, did they do it with their fists? Or is there an invisible weapon? And how would they get their hands on an invisible weapon?) If you’re playing on Medium, the killer did it with what’s in their hands, but you have also incorporate one aspect about them into how they did it. If Hard, incorporate two aspects.
   a. If you want a challenge, don’t pick the obvious weapon! Getting stabbed with a knife makes for a boring story! Replacing someone’s hat with a boa constrictor with a boa constrictor, on the other hand...
   b. Example: That not-so-sweet old lady was holding a purse. I consider that perhaps she bludgeoned him with the purse, but that seems boring and an unsatisfying answer. Plus, it doesn’t involve an aspect about her. But: she has a cane with a duck’s head handle. Clearly, she is the elderly queen of the ducks, and as everyone knows, ducks are bikers are mortal enemies. She must have summoned a horde of rabid attack ducks to deal with the biker. Or did she? There are no feathers around,
so it must have been...ninja ducks! It was the old not-so-sweet lady, in the supermarket, with the ninja ducks!

**Losing:** You lose if, before you solve the mystery, you reach the front of the line and have to speak to the person behind the register.

**Winning:** You win if you can solve the murder before you reach the front of the line. However, if you’re playing on Medium you have the option of flipping a coin (required on Hard). If the coin lands tails, then you were wrong! It was not the person you chose, but in fact that opposite person. If you chose the oldest, it was in fact the youngest who was the murderer, and vice versa. What’s more, the real murderer framed who you thought was the murderer! You now must, same as in Step 4, determine how the real killer did it, as well as how they framed the person you thought was the killer.