



a collaborative design by Rui Silva and Drew Crow

Elevator Pitch

Infomancer is a fusion of RPG and online ARG which aims to teach players the skills to operate effectively in a reality where information is power. The game is built on a novel engine which centers around the Twitter API and uses Twitter together with a custom web portal as the main interface to the game. Players take the role of information gatherers in an ancient feud between humanity and a group of extraterrestrial oppressors, and must use and develop their skills of discernment and observation to support the side they have chosen.

Introduction

This game has been designed as a response to Gameful Challenge #8 - Making the Invisible Visible. The remit was to design a game which furnishes players with the skills to make visible the hidden power structures within an organisation, club or the world as a whole. The designers of this game decided to create a game which helps players to hone their ability to gather evidence and assess the trustworthiness of information. In today's connected world it is information, not money that is the source of power, and if an individual understands the ebb and flow of information and can control it, they can rule the world!

In order to create an engaging and unique experience for the players of our game, the designers have conceived of a unique game engine which centres around one of the most game-changing technologies of the information age - Twitter. Harking back somewhat to the text-based MUDs and adventure games of yesteryear, the game engine uses Twitter as the game interface providing conduits for information to flow between players and NPCs within the game. The game is enhanced with mini-games and visual evidence gathering missions, and player metrics are drawn together by a web portal which integrates with the Twitter API.

The game narrative revolves around an ancient, extraterrestrial progenitor race in conflict with humanity and asks players to ally themselves with one of the two camps, based on the conclusions they draw from initial evidence gathering missions. From this first step, they are woven into a web of intelligence and counter-intelligence and must decide who to trust and who not to trust, and what to do with the information they receive. Their loyalties will be tested and challenged by new events which happen in the fictional game universe and the information ripples which radiate out from these events. In this way, the game will become a perpetual ARG, shaped by the choices which are made by the players themselves and the information

and misinformation generated by the stimuli the game provides. At key points during the gameplay, the reality may diverge and players enter parallel alternate realities dependent upon their choices in responding to information which they or other players generate.

Genre

Infomancer does not fit comfortably into a single established genre, but instead sits somewhere between an online ARG, a role playing game, a text-based adventure game and a MUD. Much of the originality arises from the fact that the engine is largely text based, but introduces visual elements in the interface and mini-games. As far as gameplay is concerned, Infomancer will feel very much like an ARG, immersing the player in an alternate universe, co-constructed by other players and the puppetmasters of the game, and evolving with the gameplay.

Core Mechanics

The core mechanics of the game centre around players passing on information to other players and NPCs or characters in the game through Twitter messages. At points during the game, players will be provided with a stimulus such as the depiction of a scene from a recent fictional event. These stimuli are used to generate information which can be used to help one or other of the sides in the game. Depending on where their loyalties lie, players can choose to do any one of a number of things with the information:

- They can pass the information up to those players who have a higher security clearance than they do (equivalent to reporting to the 'powers that be').
- They can pass the information down to those players who have a lower security clearance than they do (equivalent to 'rallying the troops' or 'informing the masses').
- They can choose to pass the information to players who have chosen the opposite side to them (equivalent to acting as an informant).
- They can choose to pass on the information to one or more specific people.
- They can choose to alter the information before doing one of the above (equivalent to acting as a double agent or generating misinformation, depending which of the above is done with the information).
- They can choose to use their reputation as a liar to pass on accurate information in the expectation that people will think they are lying (equivalent to a double bluff).

Likewise, information which is passed to players rather than generated by them can be handled in the same ways. Players must use their discretion and tally information with the evidence they have available to decide how to handle the information they receive or generate, and decide whether it is trustworthy or not.

Stimulus content may take the form of still scenes, mini-games or video sequences. Progression in the game is fed back to the player using a measure of their current 'security clearance', which is calculated based on statistics such as:

- How many pieces of information they have generated.
- How many times these pieces of information are passed on by others unaltered.
- Players' performance in mini-games.

This metric is also used to 'level up' players at key points and provide a trigger to access additional features and tools in the web interface. These additional features will be designed to give these players an advantage and may take the form of:

- The ability to list other players who are playing the game.

- The ability to query the game engine regarding a specific piece of information in order to view statistics about it.
- The ability to review previously encountered mini-games or other pieces of evidence.
- The ability to view a leader board of those players with the same or lower security clearance than them.
- Additional pieces of evidence delivered solely through the web interface - these may take the form of contact from an informant on the other side of the conflict. They might also take the form of a console which can be used to communicate directly with the informant at specific times or on specific subjects.
- 'Power-ups' in the form of technological artifacts (manifested as cheat codes) which provide an advantage in mini-games.

Narrative



The game narrative surrounds an alternate Earth history where an ancient alien progenitor race came to Earth when mankind was in its infancy intending to merge their culture with our own, having been forced from their own world by an impending supernova of their system's star. Although the civilisation as a whole was benign and altruistic, there were those who intended to use the vastly superior and highly refined technology they possessed to enslave humanity. Thus begun an ancient feud between humanity and those parties of the progenitors who wished to enslave them - The Oppressors. As humanity evolved and multiplied, the rapidly dwindling Oppressors did all they could to suppress the development of human technology, but eventually they were forced to go underground as

groups of humans acting independently made technological breakthroughs which shook the very foundations of the Oppressors' stronghold - steam power, mechanisation and electricity. Instead, the Oppressors used their vastly subtler and superior technology to mentally manipulate those in power in order to gain political influence. In parallel to this, a secret coalition of human and human-progenitor hybrid leaders formed and passed on the knowledge of the Earth's true history down the generations. The secret coalition works tirelessly to sabotage the efforts of the Oppressors and has succeeded in appropriating a certain amount of their technology, hacking it together with the much cruder and more visceral emerging human technologies of steam power and high voltage electricity.

The player is thrown into a dystopian steampunk world rife with secret conflict, guerilla warfare and political manipulation. They must choose where their loyalties lie and decide how to defeat the Oppressors or aid them using the most powerful tool they have available - information. They must become an Infomancer.



Technology

The main engine for the game will be a service built using PHP and the Twitter API. This will track players and their security levels, parse tweets from players and pass them onto other players. Two web interfaces will be provided, one as a back end for



the puppetmasters to introduce stimulus materials by tweeting links to players and keep track of players' progress, and the other for the players themselves to act as a feedback portal for them to keep an eye on their current security clearance level and as a place to introduce other tools which may become available as players' security levels increase.

Players will interact with the game using their twitter account, tweeting information they receive or generate using hashtags: #passitup #passitdown #passitover to the game account @1nf0m4nc3r from where the system will pass on the tweet as a direct message to the appropriate players, tagging it with the originator's name. Alternatively, players can choose to send the

tweet via direct message to a specific player or players.

In addition to the back end system built on PHP, stimulus materials will be produced using Flash or HTML5 and will be delivered via hyperlinks in tweets or through the web interface.

Aesthetics

The aesthetics will have a graphic novel theme, consisting of layered 2D graphics possibly using parallax effects to enhance the feeling of depth. The narrative will be reflected by the visual components of the game - a dark, dystopian steampunk feel with lashings of afrofuturist aesthetic elements.

Credits

Images courtesy of 2Advanced Studios, Wayne Haag and Bartelme Design.