

# ReVeLaTIOnS

an ARG BY

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created at  
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# Table of Contents

## Narrative

### Characters

Talib Saad

Lisha Smith

Dr. Verity Leto

## Gameplay

Step 1: Down a Rabbit Hole

Step 2: Hidden in a Survey

Step 3: Directions from a Voicemail

Step 4: Overlooked on a Bulletin Board

Step 5: Concealed in a Bathroom

Step 6: Visible Through a Camera

Step 7: A Twisted Message

Step 8: Everyday Sights Reworked

Step 9: Instructions to Await

Step 10: Closure from a Doctor

## Analysis

Narrative

Gameplay

Aesthetic

Use of Media

Genre

# Narrative

Talib Saad was born in 1949 and later attended the University of Chicago. While there, he quickly befriended a girl by the name of Lisha Smith. The two became fast friends, both brilliant but socially awkward, and had few friends aside from each other. But unbeknownst to Talib, Lisha was not merely uncomfortable socializing. She had immense difficulty empathizing, communicating, and understanding others. Yet she and Talib were able to bond over their continual quest for more knowledge. While at the end of his second year of studies Talib had yet to declare a major, Lisha entered the University intending to study psychology. She was mentored by professor Bruno Bettelheim, one of many at the time to believe that autism was caused by cold mothers and absent fathers. Due to her own relatively normal family, she didn't suspect that she was autistic. In August 1969, when Lisha and Talib were both staying at the University and doing research for professors, she vanished without a word.

Talib was consumed by her disappearance and has yet to let it go. For months he thought she would return, thought he would get some word from her family. But she had taken all of her personal belongings and was not enrolled in the next academic quarter. Talib had to accept that she had left, of her own volition, and apparently did not value their friendship enough to give him any warning... but he could not.

The same year Lisha disappeared, one professor was attacked in his own office, and another was fired, causing mass student protests and expulsions. The first men walked on the moon. Rather than view each of these as some separate event, Talib slowly came to believe that they were connected.

It was some time before he began to wonder why he was so fixated on the disappearance of his friend, over forty years ago. Why he was so convinced it was all part of some massive conspiracy. Though he did not stop searching for what he believed to be the truth, he started to wonder if his own isolation and lack of social contact was a sign of some larger problem. Seemingly trapped in this moment of history, 1969 being the last year his life made sense, Talib wondered if his own parents (typical "refrigerator" parents) could have caused him to become like Lisha, who he has since realized was likely autistic.

Thanks to his newfound self-awareness, Talib sought professional help. It took him some time to trust his shrink, Verity Leto. But after seeing her for some time, he began to open up, and she helped him to make some progress with his still undisclosed condition. Yet something happened, in the past few months--Talib began to see the events of 1969 in a new light. His shrink does not know what changed, but after all the progress he had made he began to shut down, to refuse to speak or disclose how he was feeling, and finally, recently, to stop seeing her all together. After missing several appointments, she became ostensibly concerned about his well-being and went to his work, to ensure that he was all right. But Talib was not there, though he had left his computer. Quickly discovering that he is now reaching out to others in his obsession, convincing them that something happened, Verity ultimately sends out an e-mail herself, attempting to reassure these strangers that nothing strange is happening, and she will find Talib and make sure that he is alright as well. With this as the ending, the players are left wondering: was none of this real, but merely the confused ravings of a mad man? Or is Verity part of the conspiracy herself, trying to keep Talib's information quiet?

As an additional note, all historical events used throughout *Revelations* are true. Bruno Bettelheim was an internationally renowned child psychologist and taught at the University of

Chicago from 1944-1973. His ideas that autism was not an inborn trait, but rather caused by mothers who were unaffectionate (perhaps stemming from not wanting their children in the first place) and fathers who were not present or effectual parents are now largely disproved, but at the time of his work were popular theories. The book that contains the final clue in *Revelations* is considered one of his seminal works.

The two incidents that happened at the University in 1969 that are mentioned as part of the backstory both happened as well. Professor Richard Flacks was permanently disabled in his office in May 1969, before leaving to teach in California. Professor Marlene Dixon was fired the same year, prompting student protests that resulted in the highest number of expulsions in any college throughout the decade. And, of course, the moon landing occurred July 20, 1969.

## Sources

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# Characters

## Talib Saad

With a name that means "seeker of knowledge," Talib is the driving force behind *Revelations*. Born in 1949 to a disaffected mother and a father who disappeared when Talib was still a child, he hardly wait to escape his small-town home for a new experience at a big university. Always withdrawn and often finding basic social interactions a chore, Talib withdrew into his studies. He would often easily become obsessed with a topic and discover (or imagine) connections between something that fascinated him and anything else he happened to come across from a similar time or field.

After eighteen years of relative isolation, Talib was surprised and pleased to find a close companion in Lisha Smith. Given her own idiosyncratic behavior, he found her easy to talk to without wondering if he was making an irreparable faux-pas or going on too long about a topic that interested only him. The two clung to each other and barely went a day without seeing each other.

After two years of close friendship, Talib was shocked and hurt by Lisha's disappearance. Feeling both abandoned and betrayed, he could not allow himself to believe that she would leave him. He unconsciously protected his own hurt feelings and bruised ego by clinging to the theory that she was somehow forced to leave. Given his tendency to find patterns and connections that most would not, Talib determined that this incident that happened to him must be connected somehow to other events that had disturbed him recently--namely, the moon landing, the attack on Richard Flacks, and the firing of Marlene Dixon.

Several decades later, and Talib was still unable to let go of what had happened that fateful summer of 1969. Though it clearly took him some time, he ultimately came to the conclusion that perhaps he needed psychological help. In the late 2000s, he began seeing Dr. Verity Leto on a regular basis. Though it took him some time to trust her, he began slowly making progress, becoming less obsessive in his daily actions and less fixated on his past. For

the first time, he began feeling optimistic about his future.

Then everything changed. Late August 2011, Talib discovered something, some new fact about Lisha's disappearance that he believed could answer everything. While this discovery is never disclosed, his actions following it jumpstart *Revelations*. Once again lost in a world of apophenia and isolation, Talib allows himself to become convinced that his fixation on the events of 1969 is not a sign of a mental disturbance, but his ability to discover the truth. He comes to believe that not only is it his duty to share his personal revelations with anyone he can, but he hopes to find others like himself, constantly solving puzzles and questing for knowledge, to perhaps one day be less alone.

## **Lisha Smith**

Born 1949, Lisha (Lisha meaning "full of mystery") had a relatively normal childhood and adolescence. Though widely considered shy to the point of being frightened of most people she met, her startling intelligence caused most to allow her some oddities. When she came to the University of Chicago, Talib became the first true friend she had. Grateful and surprised to meet someone who could overlook her social inadequacies in favor of her intellectual contribution, she was more than grateful for his constant companionship.

Having long since known that she would study psychology, Lisha was thrilled to come to the attention of professor and well-known psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. Under his tutelage, she became fascinated with the study of autism and its development in children. Yet the more she learned, the more she recognized many of its symptoms within herself. Frightened of what she might discover, and ultimately confused by Bettelheim's claims that autism was the result of parental distance, she fell into a deep depression.

Ashamed of herself for becoming so frightened of what she might learn, when in the past she had always been able to distance herself from what she studied, she withheld her feelings and potential discoveries from Talib, attempting to handle these new and disturbing problems on her own. But after several months spent doing research for Bettelheim, without the work of other classes to distract her, her depression reached a breaking point and she began to frighten herself.

Managing to once again use her steadfast analytical side, she made reservations for herself at mental institution. Lisha knew she was not ready to face her issues herself, but she was hopeful that with assistance she could overcome them. Her social anxieties at their peak, she was unable to tell Talib what she had discovered and since planned to do. While initially intending to return after what she hoped would be a quick recovery, ultimately, she never saw Talib again.

## **Dr. Verity Leto**

Verity Leto (Verity meaning "truth," Leto meaning "hidden, forgotten"), while also a University of Chicago alum, did not know Talib (or Lisha) until several years ago, when he came to her as a patient. After studying psychology at the University, and working on campus at the Student Counseling Services for several years before opening her own practice, prospective patients are often referred to Verity through the University. A specialist in the range of conditions on the autistic spectrum as well as several anxiety disorders, Verity seemed a perfect match for Talib.

She was quite concerned about his mental health and stability upon meeting him,

working hard to earn his trust and draw him out of his obsessive fixations. While it took time, she did ultimately help him progress to the point where she thought a normal future was in sight, until suddenly he reverted to his past behavior and began skipping appointments. Finally taking matters into her own hands, Verity attempted to find Talib, and instead stumbled upon e-mails regarding the extensive series of puzzles he had begun to put in place around the campus. Ostensibly worrying that he might draw others into his madness, she contacted those Talib had already begun to draw in, to tell them that none of what they had learned was real.

But in the end, was she imparting wisdom to protect these other souls from going the way of Talib? Or was her unexpectedly intrusive behavior a sign that Talib was right--not only about past conspiracies, but that he is still being watched?

# Gameplay

*Revelations* is an ARG that follows the enigmatic trail created by a single man: Talib Saad. On this journey, players can individually--or in groups if they so choose--progress through a series of puzzles in order to uncover the truth behind a series of unsettling and “coincidental” events occurring in 1969. The ARG was developed to take place over a few days without intervention from the puzzle master. That is, the ARG runs as though Talib Saad set up a trail of breadcrumbs, showed players the first crumb, and then stepped back and waited patiently, without intervention, for players to reach the final set of instructions.

Highly paranoid, Talib needed to know that players were clever and invested enough to solve each of the puzzles. He cannot compromise his position or identity, and therefore separates himself from his work until he knows that the players can be trusted. However, since many of the puzzles use public space and are susceptible to outside interference, the runners of the ARG must constantly (and quietly) check to make sure nothing has been tampered with or removed. This ensures that that every player has the chance to find and solve each of the puzzles.

## Step 1: Down a Rabbit Hole

Players begin the ARG with a single e-mail from Anna Skarsgaard<sup>1</sup>, an alias of Talib Saad.

----- Forwarded message -----  
From: Annalisa Skarsgaard <[annaskarsgaard@gmail.com](mailto:annaskarsgaard@gmail.com)>  
Date: Mon, Nov 28, 2011 at 8:43 AM  
Subject: Puzzle Games Survey  
To: [ncasslem@uchicago.edu](mailto:ncasslem@uchicago.edu)

Hi Nicholas,

My name is Anna Skarsgaard and I'm the founder of Tru Games, a small group of students at the University of Chicago aimed at making innovative puzzle flash games. I saw your name listed as one of the contacts for the new game development club, and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sending out a quick survey to your group. We're trying to get an idea of the interest of puzzle games and the use of puzzles in games on campus, and your help would be greatly appreciated! It's really short, only 6 questions, and shouldn't take more than a minute or two. Easy right? Thanks a lot, and I hope we can maybe collaborate on a project in the future!

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TJ93VDT>

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Skarsgaard is a reference to Annalisa Skarsgaard, one of the main characters from the ARG *Oscillation* that ran on campus the proceeding spring. Players who took part in *Oscillation* will hopefully recognize the name and realize that they are entering another puzzle driven reality. Talib's choice to use this name as an alias shows that he is aware of the involvement of puzzle seekers on campus and is calling out to those who are interested in learning what is normally hidden behind the veil of the everyday.

Sincerely,  
Anna

--

Anna Skarsgaard  
Tru Games, Founder  
773.349.2741

This e-mail can be forwarded to any number of people and only requires the link included in the e-mail. The e-mail asks its readers to participate in a survey about puzzles in modern video games.

## Step 2: Hidden in a Survey

Following the link, players are led to what seems like a legitimate survey on a well-known survey-hosting website. However, several of the letters in the survey are replaced with their "1337" equivalent<sup>2</sup>.

### Puzzles in Modern Video Games

Tru Games is a group of student game developers at the University of Chicago aimed at making free and innovative flash games. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey, your results are greatly appreciated!

#### **What is your favori7e style or genre of video game?**

*Role-playing, Simulation, Racing, Puzzle, Strategy, Survival-horror, Fighting, Rhy7hm, Party, MMO's, Adventure, Other (please specify)*

#### **Which of the following styles or genr3s do you enjoy playing? Check all that apply.**

*Role-playing, Simulation, Racing, Puzzl3, Strategy, Survival-horror, Fighting, Rhythm, Party, MMO's, Adventure*

#### **Do you enjoy pl4ying puzzle games such as Solitaire, Bejeweled, Mahjong, Tetris, etc?**

Yes, No

#### **Have you heard of the following puzzle games? Check all that apply.**

*Braid, Portal, Professor Layton, Machinarium, SpaceChem, Entan9lement*

#### **Do you enjoy pl4ying puzzle games such as Solitaire, Bejeweled, Mahjong, Tetris, etc?**

Yes, No

**Optionally, provide a reason for your choice in the previous ques7ion.**

**To be informed of future Tru Games developments, ple4se enter your e-mail address. We will keep it private and you will have the ability to revoke it at any time.**

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<sup>2</sup> 1337, or leetspeak, is alternate mapping of alphabetical characters with numbers, where each number bears some resemblance to the letter it is replacing. Players do not need to know know to read or write in 1337, they only need to pick out all the numbers. In the survey, 1 = L, 2 = Z, 3 = E, 4 = A, 7 = T, 9 = G.



Please call with any questions or comments. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time.

By pulling out all the numbers, the players get a 10-digit string: 7733492741. The most observant may guess it is the phone number (773) 349-2741, and to confirm suspicions, the survey closes with the line “Please call with any questions or comments.” Since no phone number is given, players are expected, like in all puzzles, to search within the constraints of the data (the survey) in order to find and call some number. A further confirmation of the phone numbers lies inconspicuously in Anna Skarsgaard’s e-mail signature.

### **Step 3: Directions from a Voicemail**

Calling the number will lead straight to the voicemail of a Google Voice account. The voicemail consists of computer generated speech reading the following script:

Congratulations Puzzle Seeker, you have taken the first step toward finding the truth. Be careful. They are watching. They are always watching. Don't go alone, and don't go at night. You will find the next clue near the north entrance of Cobb Hall. Good luck.

The message includes the line “Don't go alone, and don't go at night” to encourage players to participate in the ARG with a friend and to solve puzzles during the day, since many clues are located indoors and most buildings on campus are locked at 5:00.

This first puzzle serves, also, as the first bit of narrative. Players are encouraged to question what kind of person would create these puzzles and mask his or her identity with computer generated speech. The content of the voicemail, further, aims to feel very paranoid and help set the tone for the rest of the game.

### **Step 4: Overlooked on a Bulletin Board**

Incidentally, the north entrance of Cobb Hall is the side entrance of the building, and just inside the door is a bulletin board filled with various fliers and posters for upcoming events and meetings. On this board however, amidst all the legitimate information, is a peculiar photocopied newspaper article about the moon landing with mysterious instructions on top:

For more information, go to <http://truthof1969.wordpress.com/> and Walker 306.

The web address leads to an amateur blog containing historical information and conspiracy theory related to the narrative thread of the ARG.

By browsing the posts, the player’s initial suspicions of Talib’s paranoia and tendency towards conspiracy are confirmed. The blog entries focus on linking seemingly unrelated factual events that happened in the same year to the fictional disappearance of his friend. Furthermore, it becomes clear that his friend Lisha’s disappearance is the driving force behind his search for more information. While none of the information on the blog is needed to solve the puzzles, it

acts as optional content for dedicated players and those interested in narrative.

## Step 5: Concealed in a Bathroom

After browsing the content of the blog, if they so choose, players then travel to Walker 306, which they find to be a single-user bathroom. The bathroom seems completely normal except for a bit of graffiti written on the wall<sup>3</sup>. At first, the two lines are unreadable; however, by looking in the mirror, the handwritten text is reversed and players see:

*strKHA*  
*Eckhart 21*

Traveling to Eckhart 21, another single-user bathroom, players find another pair of text written backwards on the wall. This time, when read in the mirror, players read:

*THEY ARE WATCHING*  
*bit.ly/\_\_\_\_\_*

Combining the two messages, players form the link [bit.ly/strKHA](http://bit.ly/strKHA), which leads to <http://cam.uchicago.edu/view/index.shtml>.

## Step 6: Visible Through a Camera

This website, as players discover, is one of a number of cameras that maintain live streams of several locations on campus, freely accessible to anyone on the Internet. This particular camera is located within Crerar Library, and for the duration of the ARG, a poster can be seen on the stream that reads *55 Free Ellis*. Traveling to the intersection of 55th Street and Ellis Avenue, players find a local landmark: an enclosed bin marked Free Book Exchange, where members of the community actively take and leave books.

## Step 7: A Twisted Message

In addition to its normal contents, the free book bin holds a small cardboard box containing pencils and many copies of four different strips of paper, each bearing a short message. When read straight, these messages reveal nothing about the next step in the puzzle. Instead, they hint at the unusual reading method required to extract such useful information from them: wrapping the strips around one of the pencils provided, and then reading downwards from the first letter in the message. This type of encryption is referred to as a scytale. If the players decrypt the four scytales correctly, they discover four short clues,

Wieboldt  
Lesser stair  
Past the cage  
Up the rungs

Together, these phrases form the key to a location. Going up the smaller set of stairs in

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid permanent damage, clues were written on a piece of transparent tape and stuck to the wall.

Wieboldt (which are actually treated as emergency stairs on all but the first floor) takes the players past a cage-like fence and up to a service ladder, which leads to a rather sinister-looking tunnel. Written in the mouth of the tunnel is the URL for the last big puzzle, <http://thetruthctd.weebly.com>.

## Step 8: Everyday Sights Reworked

On the website, players find a series of passages that transforms Instance the Determination art installation<sup>4</sup> into a puzzle. This information comes as a collection of paragraphs written by Talib, followed by a series of blank spaces. The first of these paragraphs is an introduction of sorts, which also gives the players hints to make their puzzle-solving a little easier. For example, it contains the phrases Instance the Determination and its sponsor, the Franke Institute for the Humanities, in its text, capitalizing them to make them stand out as unusual. Searching for these words online reveals a map of Instance the Determination locations, which players will find very useful in solving the rest of the puzzle.

The introduction is followed by passages describing Talib's life and state of mind, in both the past and the present, in a cryptic style reminiscent of the green storybook text from the video game *Braid*. In addition to giving insight into narrative and character, each passage points to a location on campus, corresponding to one of the Instance the Determination quotations. Numbers in bold font preceding each passage tell players which letters and numbers to use from the relevant quotation, and insert into the blanks at the bottom of the page to produce the next clue (since this is not obvious, the introduction subtly suggests that this is what the players should do).

For example, the first paragraph reads:

**5.11.13** I Walk up the narrow, winding staircase to my old English professor's office. Glancing out a nearby window, I am suddenly arrested by a dizzying sight: the recent snow, now seen from four stories up, seemingly covering the entire world. I shudder to see how completely the old patterns seem to vanish beneath so light a blanket. But the blanket will not last! I Walk on.

This clue leads players to Walker, the home of the English department at the University. On the fourth floor staircase players find the index entry,

Generalities, glittering, 139

Taking the 5th, the 11th, and the 13th letters from this quote produces the letters REG.

After assembling all the letters and numbers, the players eventually find themselves in possession of a string REGRJ506.A9B57COPY14. If players do not realize that they must split the string into a library call number, the 20 blank spaces at the bottom of the webpage<sup>5</sup>, separated into four groups, lead the player to parse the characters into a clear call number,

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<sup>4</sup>The Instance the Determination is art installation sponsored by the Franke Institute for the Humanities created in 2006. It consists of quotations from the index of a book that have been painted in hallways and stairwells around the University of Chicago campus.

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## Step 9: Instructions to Await

This call number corresponds to a book, *The Empty Fortress* by Bruno Bettelheim, stored in the movable stacks of the Regenstein Library's B-Level. The website's final sentence, "You will find me in the Fortress," helps the player feel confident that they have found the right book. Written on *The Empty Fortress's* back edge is <http://thetruthunltd.weebly.com>, the address for the ARG's second and final website. The website contains a single block of text with simple instructions:

Congratulations, pattern seeker. Send me an empty email, subject 1969, and I will tell you all I know. My address is [revel4ta@gmail.com](mailto:revel4ta@gmail.com). Keep it secret. You are not alone, but be careful who you trust. They are always watching.

## Step 10: Closure from a Doctor

After leaving their information for Talib, the player has no further actions to take, waiting for more instructions or information. However, they do not receive any--from Talib, at least. At the conclusion of the ARG, players who submitted an e-mail, either in the initial survey or on the final step, we receive a message from from Dr. Verity Leto, Talib's psychiatrist. Sent from a legitimate UChicago e-mail address, the message reads,

On Wed, Dec 7, 2011 at 1:49 PM, Verity Leto <[vleto@uchicago.edu](mailto:vleto@uchicago.edu)> wrote:

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Verity Leto, and I am a licensed psychiatrist at the University of Chicago. It has come to my attention that one of my patients, a Mr. Talib Saad, has contacted you under the alias Anna Skarsgaard regarding a hypothetical conspiracy occurring in the year 1969. While he can be compelling, and has apparently led you on quite the wild goose chase, I would like to assure you that there is no such conspiracy. Mr. Saad is well aware that the disappearance of his friend has nothing to do with the other events of the year, other than perhaps the influence the turbulent atmosphere may have had on her already fragile mind. He also certainly knows that the moon landing was not faked, and that the United States government had nothing to do with the local events at the University of Chicago that year.

I apologize for whatever inconvenience or distress this may have caused you, and assure you that Mr. Saad will soon be back in my care.

All the best,  
Verity Leto, M.D.

While on the surface this seems to end the game by revealing to the player that nothing they encountered was real, on second glance it in fact raises more questions. How did Verity

discover what Talib was doing? How did she gain access to the player's e-mails? And what of the somewhat ominous ending--"Mr. Saad will soon be back in my care"? Is Talib really a crazed conspiracy theorist who has lost his grip on reality? Or is he, perhaps, the only one who can see the truth, and Dr. Verity Leto is the one attempting to silence him?

# Analysis

## Narrative

The strength of *Revelations*' narrative, in many ways, lies in its sparsity. After all, *Revelations*, at its core, is about asking questions and taking nothing for granted. In this way, players develop their own unique narrative through the questions they ask, the evidence they explore within the provided narrative, and their own conclusions and guesswork. The way that one player experiences and engages with the story will be vastly different than the way another player does, though they are provided with the same set of enigmatic clues and facts.

That being said, as the creators of the ARG, we were forced to ask ourselves many questions we hope players will ask themselves as well--questions about the nature of the characters, their actions, and their place within the narrative. For example, why did Talib create this extensive series of puzzles and riddles? Why did he reach out this way? Whether or not we share our version of this story, it was important for us to analyze and answer these questions to better explore and develop the themes we were asking players to experience.

To answer the above questions, we felt that one reason Talib would go through the trouble of producing such an elaborate scheme is that he gradually became frightened of losing his ability to have human connections. He reaches out to strangers because there isn't anyone close to him anymore. He doesn't know how to make a new intimate friendship. While frightened of not being able to connect, he has yet to realize that he's largely lost the ability to already. Anonymously contacting people, working through puzzles together, seeking more knowledge and a greater understanding of the past is the only way he can think to seek this connection.

Further, he is working through a nearly life-long obsession. He's never been able to believe that Lisha just abandoned him. While her reasons for leaving were not, in fact, about Talib, his deep-seated sense of abandonment and betrayal haven't allowed him to move on past this event. Unwilling to believe that she left of her own accord, combined with his paranoia and proclivity for seeing patterns, he instead created massive conspiracy theories that he holds to very strongly so that his world can appear more ordered.

Yet he is also becoming worried about his own sanity. After realizing that Lisha was autistic, Talib began to recognize many of the same symptoms within himself. For instance, as mentioned before, his fixation on certain topics and his difficulties interacting, are both common symptoms of autism. But as he grew increasingly concerned about his mental health, he also tried to push away these worries and not have to admit what might be wrong with him. The more disconnected from reality his behavior became, the more he clung to the notion that his ideas were true and he wasn't crazy--he was just the only person who could see the truth.

## Gameplay

Games have the very unique opportunity among narrative media to convey themes and meaning not only through showing and telling, but also in doing. In other words, games are able to use mechanics to allow players to discover themes and affect on their own instead of relying

entirely on narrative and characters to produce feeling and meaning. In ARG's, this is achieved by imbuing the narrative and puzzles with the themes and aesthetic that the designers want to get across without being unnecessarily obvious.

One of our driving forces in design *Revelations* was to encourage people to slow down and have a deeper experience with their surroundings. For example, we wanted players explore parts of campus they had never been to before, to take them off their usual paths and discover things and places that they would otherwise look over entirely. Therefore, we took the effort to find some of the coolest parts of our school and integrate them into our puzzles. In this way, players would get a taste of some of the many intriguing locations tucked away in corners that students are usually too single-minded to appreciate. Similarly, by making people look for a clue on a bulletin board, we hope that after the game, players occasionally pause in front of bulletin boards and look for things out of the ordinary. It is easy to exist in "bubble," only experiencing one aspect of campus life, completely unaware of the multitude of other places and activities that are available. We hoped to force people out of these comfort zones.

Through the narrative, we also wanted to bring some attention to the fact that our university does have this fascinating history. While many people seem to know about relations with South Side Chicago, or are proud of Obama's connection to our school, there are many other influential figures and controversial events that remain under the radar. A lot has happened here, and for the most part, we don't learn about much of it.

We also hope that participating in this story will make people look at things in a new light. While none of us are proposing that because all these historical events happened in one year, and some of them were hard to find information on, there really was a massive conspiracy to cover up their connection, we do think that sometimes people can be too accepting of what they're told if it comes from someone they believe to be more knowledgeable. It's a good life skill not to take anything, information or otherwise, for granted.

Less tangibly, we wanted to make people question the levels and balance between reality and sanity. To what extent do we all see patterns in reality? And how much should we? Is believing in conspiracy theories necessarily indicative of overzealous paranoia, or are there aspects of our lives and our world that are covered up somehow by people with more power than us? Yet at the same time, to what extent should people try to explain the patterns they see? Reading too much into the minutiae of everyday life isn't healthy, either. So can patterns exist without something or someone behind them, and if so, what does that mean?

## Aesthetic

*Revelations* sports a do-it-yourself aesthetic, which emphasizes the easy accessibility, to artists, of projects of this type. Its digital components are all made with free web services that require little to no programming skill to manipulate, while its physical puzzles are assembled from cheap, easily-acquirable materials, like pencils, paper, and poster board, in an informal manner that requires little to no artistic skill to produce. When it needs to call upon more elaborate compositions to produce emotional impact, *Revelations* stays true to its value of accessibility and simply appropriates interesting spaces and objects that already exist, like the Wieboldt tunnel, the University of Chicago campus webcams, and the "Instance the Determination" art installation. This practice makes ARGs in the style of *Revelations* necessarily site specific, but this limitation (which can be a boon for the creative process, as it gives artists a meaningful constraint on which to base their work) is more than offset by the power of the

artistic message that this specific type of appropriation helps get across.

The on-site re-contextualization of existing spaces and objects in *Revelations* pushes the kind of postmodern appropriation art that is seen in galleries all the time out into the real world. Essentially, instead of taking a found object or its image into an art gallery, it leaves it in its natural habitat, but frames it in a new artistic context, by adding a layer of supplemental information. This practice encourages people to look for art all around them, instead of cordoning it off into designated spaces. In this sense, ARGs like *Revelations* could be seen as a kind of street art, though they remain special in that they accomplish so much without actually altering anything, physically—using digital media as their primary tool, instead. This greatly broadens the scope of what can be respectfully re-contextualized; for example, you cannot really put up a plaque with supplemental information near any piece of “Instance the Determination” without ruining it, whereas a website can accomplish this task quite harmlessly. All in all, the aesthetic style of *Revelations* reinforces two powerful messages about artistic accessibility: that art can be found and should be created in the midst of everyday reality, rather than in isolated locations, and that excellent art can be made by anyone with the right determination and a little time, regardless of their budget or artistic or technical training.

## Use of Media

As an alternate reality game, *Revelations* makes use of a wide variety of media, both digital and physical, to construct puzzles and convey narrative. Examples of these media include, in order of appearance: an online survey, a recorded phone message made with an internet phone service, a flyer, a blog, marker graffiti, an existing live video feed, a poster, a small craft project comprised of pencils, strips of paper with writing on them, and a cardboard box, the first of two websites, an existing art installation, a defaced used book, the second of two websites, and an email. The players also have to traverse spaces and interact with objects that are difficult to classify as media, but which are of crucial importance to the project, nevertheless. Spaces include single-user bathrooms in Walker and Eckhart, a dark stairway and service tunnel in Weiboldt Hall, the B-Level of the Regenstein Library, and the various campus buildings in which pieces of “Instance the Determination” are housed, while objects include the movable stacks in the B-Level and the free book bin at the intersection of 55th and Ellis. The sheer breadth of these examples supports a claim often made about ARGs: that they use reality itself as their medium.

*Revelations* does not incorporate media indiscriminately, however, in its quest to embrace the larger “reality medium.” Instead, it uses each for what it can do best. Online, text-based digital media (the blog and the websites) cover most of the ARG's narrative, since their portability allows players to go through relatively wordy sections at their own pace, in whatever degree of comfort they choose. Spaces and physical objects, on the other hand, convey the ARG's more visceral emotional side, by giving players the feeling of uncovering a conspiracy that has always existed around them, hidden from view. The physical media created for the project, which are all fairly informal, reveal the human side of this emotional component: Talib's struggle to get his information to the right people using only his own limited means. Already existing physical media, due to their large scale and close connection with everyday reality, represent the inhuman side: the powerful, entrenched conspiracy that Talib is trying to oppose. By drawing upon the natural strengths of many different media, *Revelations* is able to make the most of its limited budget and development time to create a rich experience for its players.



## Genre

With the increase in popularity of ARG's as a narrative and ludic medium, a standard within the genre is being developed. Many game designers, including Jane McGonigal and Sean Stewart, have very clear ideas of what an ARG is and is not. However, through our work with *Revelations*, we call to question what is considered an ARG. For example, the aforementioned designers believe that ARG's must be large, taking place over the course of weeks to month and involving wide-scale collaboration, participation, and the ability for players to affect story. While these may be manageable goals for corporations with large budgets, experienced designers, and a wide range of tools and resources, requiring them severely limits the potential of this medium, especially for those who want to create smaller-scale ARG's or ARG's that focus on other aspects of transmedia experiences.

Therefore, instead of defining ARG's as a list of characteristics, we instead saw these characteristics as mechanics that have the potential to work well with this particular medium. Instead of being requirements, they are design elements that game makers should be suggested to consider. This way, games that fulfill many criteria of an ARG, but lack a few of the major characteristics that "full ARG's" contain, can still be taken seriously in the study of ARG's and can provide useful insights for the creation of both ARG's of similar scale and those of much larger scale.

In terms of qualities that *Revelations* shares with the most popular ARG's, it does well in exploring a wide variety of media. It presents the narrative in chunks and forces the players to look and work for these pieces. Additionally, it allows for different level of engagement by offering players narrative, but not requiring them to explore it to solve the puzzles. The game also works hard to establish an immersive aesthetic, never revealing that players are, in fact, playing a game. In these ways, *Revelations* draws from a long history of ARG's and continues many of the traditional ideas and characteristics of an ARG. What *Revelations* lacks, however, is a sense of time and the need for players to interact.

Both of these shortcomings, however, resulted in analysis of our audience and the prioritization of our efforts. Knowing that we would be running the ARG the last week of classes, we were able to anticipate amount the time and energy that our audience would give us. Understanding that many would be very busy and would not have a lot of extra time to play this completely recreational game, we focused on creating content of high quality instead of quantity. Furthermore, with a limited amount of time, it would be difficult to ensure that players met and collaborated, so we did not use additional energy to make puzzles that would require this extra layer of play.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons one can learn from *Revelations*--in regard to ARG design--is that it is important to look at one's resources and gauge where to expend energy. More precisely, it is important to prioritize which aspects of an ARG designers chose to explore and develop. Do you spend time making puzzles that require multiple people to solve, or do you instead use that time to make more or harder puzzles? Do you put the effort into creating a message board for players to meet if they will only have the chance to use ? Do you sacrifice interesting puzzles in a heavily favored medium in order to create a more representative sample of media?

Furthermore, we hope that *Revelations* can show that it is possible to create a unique, enjoyable experience with a limited time and almost no budget. It was our aim to create a game that not only entertained, but also enriched. In a world where so many ARG's are being produced to advertise a product, it can be difficult to find an ARG that looks beyond just the fun and shiny factors and encourages players to ask deeper questions and truly attempt look at the world in a different way.