

The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly Of Ingress

Preface

If you are reading this essay, then I assume you familiar with the game Ingress. If you are not, there will not be much point in continuing to read further.

I have been playing Ingress for almost eleven months and it has been a constant source of enjoyment. On the day Communities was released for Google+, four players and I founded what would become one of the largest Enlightened communities for a specific region - The Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area or “DMV (DC, Maryland, Virginia)” Enlightened, as we call it. As the community grows, the amount of Ingress-related communication I receive on a daily basis is immeasurable. In addition, I am also a member of a dozen or more Ingress communities, that range from the neighborhood level to global leadership forums.

I have noticed lately that there is a rising undercurrent of Ingress disenfranchisement among the current user base. The amount of players flagrantly bemoaning Ingress seems to increase with every passing day. With help, I have gathered what I believe to be a comprehensive list of issues and want to explore what I perceive to be the good, the bad, and the ugly of Ingress to date.

What makes me qualified to offer constructive criticism, besides being an Ingress Agent? I simply have an opinion. By day, I am a project manager, who manages software endeavors, large and small. Some projects were/are game-like, while others have a vastly different scope. I am also familiar with MMORPGs and ARGs in general, and attended this year’s ARGFest-O-Con in Seattle, WA which was extremely educational in learning about the planning required for an ARG. While compiling and researching the negative issues, it appears the root cause for many may be due to inadequate planning or handling schedule constraints with risks acknowledged and accepted. The alternative explanation is someone simply turning the proverbial blind eye and marched forward with decisions that were not properly vetted. I choose to believe former is true from a Google entity.

Ingress today is currently a good and somewhat niche game. What Ingress could become, is a great global augmented reality experience. Myself and many others believe that Niantic is at a critical point in the development of Ingress. We hope this essay starts a conversation that ultimately leads to the resolution of some of the long standing player frustrations while still retaining the positive aspects that have made Ingress as successful as it has been to date.

10/17/2013 - Edit - Redacted names of players used in a screenshot by request and altered the story about reporting ADA after using a virus to accurately reflect what occurred.

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The Good:

Social Interactions

I recently conducted an informal poll across the various Google Hangouts, in which I participate. The question I posed was to define the *good* of Ingress in two words or less. The overwhelming response was - social interactions.

Ingress players have forged many new relationships that would likely not have occurred without

playing the game. Despite being a game, Ingress has broken down ethnic, sexual, financial, racial, and other barriers by bringing people together to focus on a common goal. It is amazing the tolerance that can be exhibited when the mindset of a collective strives towards a singular purpose. Players of Ingress have an instant connection to one another. This immediate bond with strangers was experienced during one of my recent business trips to Alaska. Before I traveled to Alaska in February, I contacted the local Anchorage Enlightened to let them know I was coming. We exchanged contact information and as soon as I landed, complete strangers met me for a tour around their city and dinner. Because of Ingress, I created friendships that I would never have made otherwise. The pinnacle of my own experience with the social aspect of Ingress was being asked to officiate the wedding of a person I met through the game and whom I now consider a good friend. ¹

Educational

In addition to the social aspect of the game, Ingress is educational. There are countless stories about people discovering a historical landmark they never previously knew existed, in a neighborhood in which they had lived for many years. Players are learning about specific events and times in history, sometimes without even realizing it. I was unaware of a significant historical site roughly a quarter-mile down the road from my office. I would have been ambivalent towards it to this day, were it not for Ingress. The location is now one of my favorite places on earth. With the advent of GPS navigation in every mobile phone, the art of reading a map and navigating spatially has been lost. This is another skill that is being taught through the use of Ingress.

Some portals provide the potential for other learning opportunities besides the historical aspect. For example, Anchorage, Alaska is home to portals that are part of an immense work of art. There is a model of the solar system named the Anchorage Light Speed Planet walk. A model of the Sun, which is a portal, is located in the downtown area. There are markers stretching out from the Sun representing each of the planets. Each marker contains all sorts of educational tidbits about the planet. One very cool characteristic about this work of art is that each step equals the distance light travels in one second. It takes approximately eight minutes to walk from the Sun portal to the Earth portal and it should take roughly five and a half hours to walk to the Pluto portal. Driving is recommended for the outer planets past the asteroid belt. I would love for these portals to be near me. If they were, I would take my two sons to them in order to teach them about our solar system. I imagine that seeing a replica of the Sun and walking to the planets in our solar system would be a more memorable learning experience than reading about them in a book.

Communication Skills

I have said it many times - Ingress is a game. However, it is also a lesson in communication and leadership skills. Because of the social aspect of the game, and the aforementioned barriers that Ingress shatters, there is an odd maturation process as it relates to interacting within the community that most players go through. In essence, they learn to communicate with one another and unlike a PlayStation game are not able to hide behind an anonymous game name. However, there are those who prefer to play the game alone whether by geographical limitations or by preference. The game mechanics support this to an extent. Yet, even people who prefer a solitary

¹ <https://plus.google.com/u/0/104577088576326284308/posts/UVVrqg2wPZT>

game style often contribute and interact with others Ingress players on social networking sites.

Psychological and social behavior studies show us that birds of a feather do, in fact, flock together - to an extent.² It is commonality that establishes that initial bond with a stranger. While there are growing pains; most people do eventually evolve, grow, and mature in the manner in which they interact and communicate with one another.

Leadership Skills

There are as many different styles of leadership as there are kinds of Ingress players. Ingress player communities tend to be supportive, intimate, and teeming with camaraderie. However, in social communities like the ones fostered by Google+, natural leaders tend to rise to the top, either by referent or coercive power.

Because of the diverse membership Ingress communities have, one leadership style does not work. Learning how to motivate agents to be interested in attending a community event in their local area or region can require a multi-pronged approach. Instilling a sense of pride in their community and self, and making sure agents play ethically and fairly, and do not utilize shortcuts that could result in their account being banned, can be challenging. Making everyone feel like they have a sense of ownership can, at times, feel like an impossible task.

Abraham Lincoln once said, *“You can please some of the people some of the time, all of the people some of the time, some of the people all of the time; but you can never please all of the people all of the time.”* This is a fundamental lesson leaders of a Ingress community must understand and be comfortable with in order to succeed.

Ingress, a game, can also be used as a mentoring platform. My journey through Ingress has been very rewarding. I have enjoyed bearing witness to young adults maturing more rapidly in ten months than they probably would have of their own accord. Most communities I have spoken to, all have stories about the growing pains of organizing. Yet, they have all persevered. It has been equally as enjoyable to witness the seasoned community members and working professionals take young adults or new community members under their wing, to demonstrate and educate on alternative and possibly better courses of action given a particular situation.

Strategy and Planning

Ingress is also about strategizing and planning. The amount of time that players dedicate in order to play can be significant. Some Ingress players spend hours with each other. Players eat meals with each other and travel outside their local areas with one another. Players can spend days, weeks, or even months planning for a single event whose net end-result may not exist for longer than 30 minutes. The satisfaction derived from achieving a seemingly impossible objective can be life-changing.

These sorts of activities advocate people not only socialize, but cooperate towards a common goal that is larger than the agenda of any one player. When it comes time to execute a plan, agents want to hit the ground running and not stop. Risk analysis and mitigation is usually a part of planning Ingress operations. If A happens we can do B. What is the likelihood of A occurring?

² <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2005/02/attraction.aspx>

Are we willing to accept the amount of risk of option C? As a certified PMP project manager in my 9-to-5 life, I love this aspect of Ingress. Problem-solving is a crucial skill for game play, that also lends itself to real-life applications, including the workplace.

Self-Policing and Cross-Faction Relationships

Ingress communities tend to have an organic self-policing mechanism. This appears to be true both on a small scale and globally. Many areas have created cross-faction communities or elements of something similar where disputes are first attempted to be resolved locally before reporting them to Niantic. It only behooves each faction to work together outside of the game to ensure that players have a safe and fun environment in which to play. Establishing cross-faction relationships is, in my opinion, a key to local Ingress success.

However, not every person can be a cross-faction moderator. It takes a special person to be able to remove themselves from a situation and think objectively and without prejudice. It can be hard to remember that there are always two sides or more to every situation. Another lesson I have learned is that these cross-faction relationships are delicate, and easier to destroy than to maintain. Once a person loses trust in another, it is a difficult uphill climb to regain what has been lost. Fortunately, if the trust has evaporated, Google+ features exist to prevent unsavory interactions via muting and blocking, in the event that the sour interactions can no longer remain civil and/or non-offensive.

Launching and Integrating With Other Google Products

Ingress has also been influential in helping launch or influence several Google products such as Hangouts, Communities, and Google+. At a minimum, Ingress provided the other Google products with a ready-made customer base. It is my opinion, that when Google+ launched Communities, the majority of the initial ones created were Ingress-related.

Google Hangouts, prior to its current incarnation, had functionality scattered between Google Talk, browser chats, video chats, Voice, etc. Google's roadmap may have intended to merge these services into a common platform before Ingress was released. However, I believe Ingress may have influenced a more rapid integration. I partake in almost two dozen Hangouts daily, with most related to Ingress and the various communities of which I am a member.

The integration of Ingress with Gmail through user account association, the invite system, and communication is also a positive partnership for Google. I know many players who had no desire to use Gmail or Google+ prior to Ingress. Because of Ingress, they are now active on both.

The Bad:

Barriers to integrating deeper with other Google products

While Niantic technically is a division of Google, they are allowed to operate independently of Google, much like the YouTube corporate model. Larry Page, while attending Google's annual senior executives' two-day February retreat directed his staff to stop the infighting occurring across and within business units.³ Despite that directive, some of the actions undertaken by Niantic have rubbed other business units the wrong way. According to a source within Google that did not want to be named, one of the most recent examples was the hiring of Anne

³ <http://money.cnn.com/2013/05/16/technology/innovation/larry-page-google-io/index.html>

Beuttenmüller full-time to the Niantic team. Anne's choice to move was allegedly hotly contested and had to go all the way to the top to of Google for approval. If Google's other business units could cooperate with Niantic, they could harness the dedicated user base to gain rapid feedback on existing products, features, and develop innovative new solutions. Niantic provides a ready-made dedicated target audience for these actions. However, with tenuous internal relationships already present, innovation may be stifled or occur at a slower pace.

Beta Tag

An anecdotal survey I conducted showed most players do not perceive Ingress to be beta software. This is due in large part to the continued release of new features, weapons, and game mechanic tweaks while failing to address some of the bugs and larger issues. To quote Blizzard, the creators of World of Warcraft, "A real beta rarely works, and when it does, it doesn't work well." According to Ingress, as of 1 AUG 2013, Niantic partnered with HINT, Zipcar, Jamba Juice, Chrome, Duane Reade, and Verizon.⁴ I also believe they were partnered with Motorola and Vodafone as well. In my experience I have never encountered a software product that while still in *beta* has active in-store retail partnership as well as in-game advertising. Nor am I familiar with any beta software products that have production companies turning out weekly videos for a fake news show via YouTube. I cannot recall any other beta application holding dozens of game events around the world or pimping the game at Google I/O, SXSW, and other conferences. Google - they do things differently. However, what Ingress has seems very un-beta to me. A worst case scenario has Ingress perhaps in perpetual beta. Using the beta tag seems like a scapegoat for poor planning at this point.

Software Rollbacks

Updates to the Ingress scanner appear to be rolling out every couple of weeks recently. If I had to guess, Ingress is being developed in a very Scrum-like implementation of an Agile software development framework. An environment like this allows software developers to prioritize their work and remain very flexible in the event they need to step backwards if code is not designed correctly. Inherently, this is not a bad thing if the framework is implemented correctly.

Sadly, what happens more times than not in a situation where leadership and vision are absent is individual agendas are allowed to rule. This allows software rollbacks and changes to be used more as a crutch for poor planning than it does for anything else. Poorly thought through changes to the most basic and long-standing game mechanics are evident by the multiple occasions where the changes had to be modified shortly after being implemented. The silver lining in the situation is the product can continually evolve at a rapid pace and respond to user input quickly. However, this does not excuse a development team for not thinking through the consequences of every change.

When a developer rolls back or weakens features that were implemented 48 hours prior, that does not foster a high degree of confidence that the company is thinking about the consequences and impacts of changes. No matter how autonomous Niantic is allowed to be - they do represent Google at the end of the day. These actions exhibit immaturity in project planning, lack of

⁴ <https://plus.google.com/103905733728370027697/posts/7tPbfJuGASR>

judgment, and could have been preventable. There is a certain expectation of professionalism and competence that users have, even in beta products from Google. Ultimately, users will abandon the project as they grow increasingly tired of all of the rollbacks and implemented features that add nothing to the user experience.

Data Planning & Integrity

There was a change to shield attributes in early June that came without warning. Ingress' poorly planned data architecture and inventory management meant that dropping shields and picking them back up would upgrade old shields to new ones with the altered attributes. I wonder if people realized at the time why this occurred?

When designing a game that contains items, a general rule of thumb is to track the items programmatically with your software and in most cases utilizing a database of some sort. Without the ability to track players or items, answering even the simplest of questions becomes an arduous task. It is typically best practice to not degrade or lose data that you are tracking. The ability to upgrade shields by dropping them and picking them up was due to a loss of item data information. When an item is dropped by a player, the item loses pertinent information. The information is regenerated when it is picked back up by the player, thus updating it. This seems to be further evidence of inefficient planning.

Below is a link to a brilliant Ingress "postmortem" written by Kristian Köhntopp and posted on 19 AUG 2013.⁵ Kristian's paper explains many of the flaws with the way Niantic designed Ingress. He explains the technical aspects in a way that most people should understand. I implore you to read his work. As a person who was once responsible for data analysis and small scale databases, it pained me to read it. Allow me to share this excerpt with you:

When dropping an object, Ingress 'forgets' the original type 5 object and generates a new type 4 object with a new GUID - in database circles a big no-no: Never erase, change or reuse anything that is supposed to act as a primary key.

The author further goes to make the point that, *"What would be a simple tracing job in the face of stable GUID values becomes a BigData log eating job in the face of variable GUID values."* This explains a lot and is another unfortunate example of bad planning. Traceability of features, products, and actions should be fundamental to any project - software or not. Most importantly when user game play data is involved. To read the whole article visit:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A252cvmjl86n9uZ0tyi2X4ZabxLE4ribJIEBbC8FifQ>

The Storyline

What do the two TV series, "Lost" and "Fringe," have in common with Ingress? All of them have storylines that are so fractured people lost interest. "Fringe" lost 50% of its viewership in five seasons. "Lost" hemorrhaged a little more than a third of their viewership between the first episode compared to the last. Characters come and go with reckless abandon in Ingress, as they did in those shows. New characters appear out of nowhere with little to no backstory allowing crazy situations to alter the continuity of the entire universe (or multiple universes). Sometimes, events and characters do not appear to move the story forward at all. The Cassandra XM

⁵ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A252cvmjl86n9uZ0tyi2X4ZabxLE4ribJIEBbC8FifQ>

Anomaly was supposed to conclude with a major shift in the storyline. As I understood it, and how it was portrayed, characters from both factions were going to weigh in about the impacts of the anomaly.⁶ After Cassandra was won by the Enlightened two months ago, no major changes to the story or the game have occurred. The story and gameplay seem to be in the same spot prior to Cassandra. The Ingress Report's Susanna Moyer who appeared to become a Resistance sympathizer during the Cassandra anomaly event is back to portraying and claiming to be an unbiased⁷ source for Ingress related news and reports.

The topic of the storyline came up in a recent Ingress Hangout. I asked how many people actually knew what was going on and could explain it. Sadly, there was only one person, out of about fifty players, that said he could. Before I received my invite, I drank up the storyline. It was unconventional and exciting. However, once I started to play and the longer I played, the more fractured the storyline became. This resulted in my caring less and less about the evolution of the story or its characters.

Another problem with the storyline is that there is very little correlation between the storyline and gameplay. To make the two harmonious, both factions should be trying to do different things. The Enlightened should be focused on building fields, harvesting XM, and controlling mind units. The Resistance should be focused on destroying efforts. However, the game mechanics for the two factions are identical. This divorces the game from the storyline.

Survey Results

The reaction from the hangout prompted me to create an extremely unscientific and simple two-question survey I posted to Google+.⁸ The two questions asked how long a player had been playing, and what their knowledge of the storyline was. I thought correlating length of playing time to the storyline would be a better indicator of the player's ability to find and absorb storyline data. There is a quantifiable amount of material a player could have been exposed to during a given period of time, regardless of playing style.

Out of the 101 response received by the time of writing this:

- 86 have been playing six months or longer.
- 17 said they were either familiar or very familiar with the story.
- 84 said they could not explain the story arch to date, character back stories, or worse.

Admittedly, my data may be skewed towards players who have been playing a while. Players who just started playing would probably not know who I am, have me circled, and as a result did not take the survey. In fact, only two people indicated they had been playing for two months or less. Anecdotally I hypothesize that, most new players of a month or less would not be able to explain the storyline and how certain events/characters have shaped it. This is supported by my interactions with the new members of our Enlightened community. A factionmate in our hangout

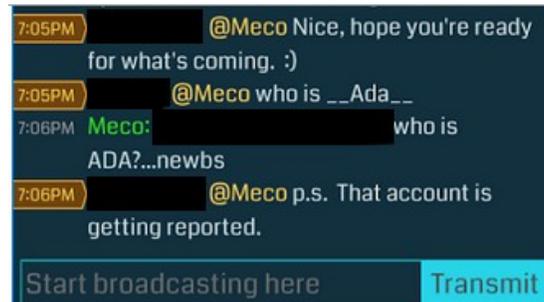
6 <https://plus.google.com/+NianticProject/posts/LJkKohqgp3f>

7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLDEUWIbtkQ58tbLEFP6IA1PtmPk48jDBr&feature=player_detailpage&v=jzf9lb8xguU#t=259

8 <http://goo.gl/BQJ8Iv>

the day the survey idea was hatched actually admitted, “I’ve read the short novels. I am still confused myself.”

There may be a flaw in the game if players exist who are level eight and that are not familiar with crucial offensive weapons and what the outcome of using them in the game would be. The players in the screenshot below thought __ADA__ was a second account at first until they were brought up to speed on how viruses work.



Trusting the narrator and narrative

When I attended ARGFest-o-Con, <http://2013.argfestocon.com>, this year, there was a recurring theme from speakers - make sure you have an endgame and don't let your player lose trust in the narrator. Those are two very important pieces of advice that speakers like Jordan Weisman, Mike Selinker, J.C. Hutchins, Steve Peters, and Rob Jagnow spoke about numerous times. If that decorated braintrust puts such an emphasis on those two simple principles - they must be two critical aspects of game design.

Contributing to the story should be the Ingress related puzzles. Puzzles should lead players back into the game. However, solving of puzzles that lead to in-game passcode rewards does not propel the story line. Directing people to solve puzzles that requires additional information which trickles out to users over a long period of time is frustrating and not enjoyable. This is another tenant of game design that Mike Selinker bemoaned. For example, months after the Shaper Glyphs were introduced in May, do we have confirmation of what the glyphs mean and their purpose? Where they come from? Why were they shared? How long did it take to arrive at these conclusions and were the answers to these questions given to agents or solved by agents?

All of this directly feeds into trusting the narrator. In the case of Ingress, the narrator is really unknown. Not all players trust that Niantic is looking out for them, is unbiased, or has planned things long term. Who do agents follow on Google+ or Twitter to get the story? How do the Tycho comics tie in to everything? What am I missing out on if I do not read the mini-Ingress novels? What about the live events around the world and the Ingress Report? How about the various Google+ communities or YouTube channels? The delivery of the story is so fractured that it is no wonder that new players have a hard time understanding and explaining Ingress beyond two factions fighting.

Plausibility

Another thing I learned at ARGFest-O-Con this year was related to the development and plausibility of a storyline. The quote that stuck with me was, “*Suspend belief but not logic.*”

That is very important. I understand that intelligent life and aliens have not been discovered. Nor does XM exist in the real world. This is a *game* after all, albeit an augmented reality game. However, I can suspend my belief of the real world for the sake of playing and engrossing myself in the world of the game. To do this, individual character mini-archs within the larger story arch need to make sense as well. Codes granting thousands of items can not be dismissed with a simple “Oops” and “We’ve killed off the guy who was responsible.” The mass redemption of Zipcar codes altered the gameplay in our area forever. Those explanations are a cop-out, convenient, and border on requiring blind faith.

When a game has to issue a message similar to, “just trust me”, then there are problems with the plausibility and continuity of the storyline. I am also unsure if the storyline is linear or not. Are things moving chronologically? The story has shown some impetus for predicting future events. Is it non-linear? Very few have the skills to pull off a story like that in the movie “Memento”. Mixing the two seems dangerous and once again tends to reduce the amount of integrity and credibility a player has in the narrator if not executed properly. Planning is key for a non-linear story.

The Lack Of An End Game

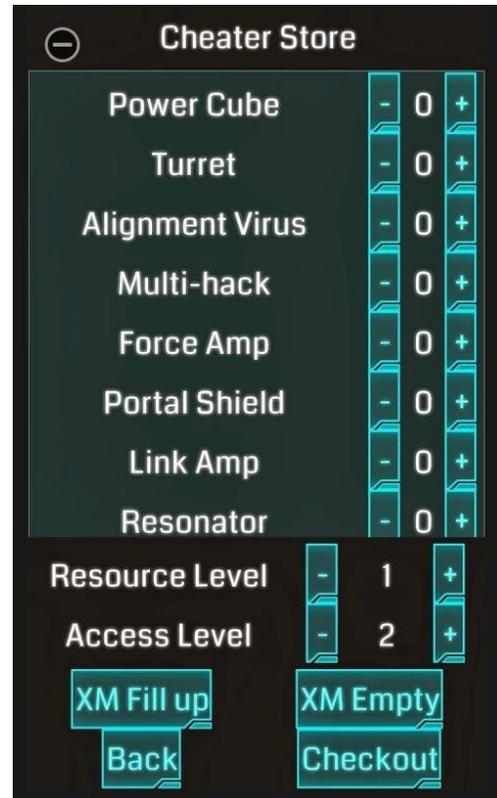
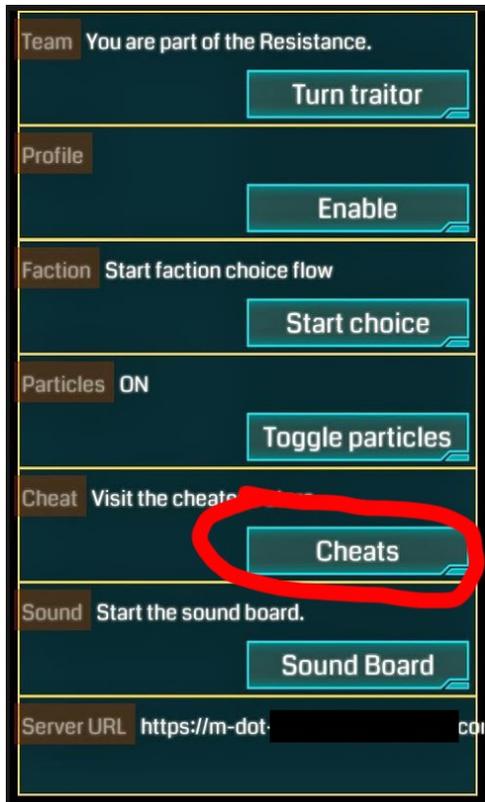
I have to ask, does Ingress really have an end game? Unless something drastic occurs, no one side will ever truly be able to control all of the mind units (MU) in the world. There is no clear and attainable end game. This once again lends to the storyline not being interesting or plausible. The story seems to be continuously evolving, as if it is setting the stage for a second or third act ten months after release when one should have already occurred. Playing Ingress at this point, this long, feels like watching the second season of The Walking Dead. Just get off the farm already! Even MMORPGs like World of Warcraft (WoW) had storylines end. Warcraft extended the game by introducing expansion packs, creating all new storylines to explore, and raising the level cap. Within the main story archs of WoW were also lots of mini-archs. Ingress appears to have a single arch to which characters and events contribute, but do not stand on their own. Players are already becoming bored, and then either choosing to stop following the storyline, or quit the game altogether.

Game Mechanics

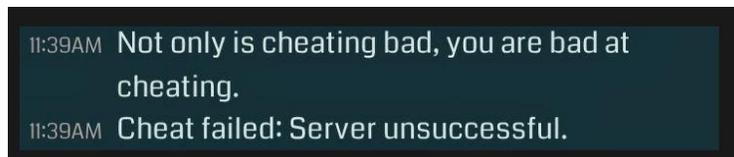
Engagement and compulsion are different things. Game mechanics need to be thought out. They should be planned and aligned closely with the story. Altering the game mechanics that do not drive an attribute of the story and that were not requested is akin to cutting off your nose to spite your face. It is done just to do it.

At the heart of Ingress is the collaborative play that is almost a requirement for players if they want to succeed. One feature that has been requested for a very long time, is the ability to drop and pick-up multiple items simultaneously. As agents recruit new players, it is imperative that players teach one another about the game. Being able to provide a new protégé with gear or other multiple items is critical to the collaborative play of Ingress. That I believe is the reason why being able to drop items has existed since the the early stages of the game. Yet, in order to drop multiple items they have to be dropped from our inventories one a time via a series of multiple clicks - per item.

What most people probably do not realize, is that the the ability to provide multiple items via the user interface has, on some level, existed for a very long time. If you download the Ingress APK, decompile it, and take a look at its source. There are options to enable a “Cheater Store”. This employee-only “Cheater Store” has the ability to provide multiple items via the UI. Providing multiple items already happens when a player hacks a portal. Why something similar could not be rolled out is beyond my expertise. I imagine the following will have to be answered programmatically. How will the items be displayed on the screen? Is there an item limit for drops? How will items be retrieved?



Public Service Announcement: Don't try to enable the “Cheater Store”. It will not work. Not only do you need to log in to an internal Google server, you will also get the following message in COMMS when it fails:



Another game mechanic that needs to be improved upon is inventory management. A player's inventory was not always limited. Around the first of the year, Niantic instituted the 2,000 item

limit cap. As demonstrated by this email received by an agent on December 20th shows, Niantic underestimated the amount of inventory a player would keep at a given time and its impact on the scanner app. Another example of poor planning.

The issue you were experiencing with hacking a Portal should now be resolved. This issue has been connected with having too many items in your inventory. Ongoing XM research has shown that having an extremely large inventory with thousands of items (XMPs, resonators, shields, etc) may cause problems with your Scanner. Please try using items from your inventory rather than hacking Portals to get new items. Additional information from the NIA can be found at <http://www.nianticproject.com/?id=sc119b>

For a time, only items gained by hacking portals could cause a player to hit the item cap and be denied items. There was a bug in the system that allowed items redeemed via passcodes entered in to the Intel page to bypass the 2,000 item cap and be rewarded to players. To make matter worse, in February, Niantic rolled out their in-game partnership with Zipcar. Allegedly, the license plates for the Zipcars were redeemable codes. Someone figured out that many of the codes were incremental and discovered the ceiling and the floor of the range. Using a simple mouse click script that started at the minimum value and used the Intel page to input codes automatically, agents were able to surpass the 2,000 item cap with ease and retrieve *thousands* of items. This should have been thought through better.

A common user complaint regarding the item cap is the lack of a total item cap count. Some have argued that it is relatively simple to count the number of items manually. The problem with that argument is that it is equally as trivial to implement a sum function for all items and do this once as opposed to counting your items every day.

Reddit user ZorbaTHut⁹ said it best about game design. Specifically in reference to the new Ingress achievements:

Good game design isn't a series of whiplash moves from one mechanic to another, it's a gradual introduction of mechanics that ensure the player always has something fun to pursue. This is unfortunately something Ingress is sorely lacking, and the achievement system as written isn't going to help at all.

If anything it'll make it worse - few things suck fun out of a game faster than dangling an obviously grindy carrot in front of someone's face. There's a reason all modern MMOs are skinner boxes.¹⁰

Sadly he is correct. Most MMOs are nothing more than just Skinner boxes.¹¹ Ingress is quickly turning into that. Ignoring the multitude of feature requests from the Ingress user base, Niantic

⁹ <http://www.reddit.com/user/ZorbaTHut>

¹⁰ http://www.reddit.com/r/Ingress/comments/1lu7ol/achievements_are_happening/cc2xxob

¹¹ <http://www.penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/the-skinner-box>

comes off as an Apple-like company that is detached from its players and continues to implement what they deem is a priority.

Enabling Dangerous Real World Behavior

Ingress is a social game. We have already established that. It is also a personal game. The time that people invest into the game sometimes makes people take in-game events very personally. Unfortunately, this occasionally leads to aggressive behavior towards players.

I believe that most of this would not be an issue if the Ingress scanner application did not email, log in COMMs, and notify the time, date, location, portal name, and agent name of the person who attacked a portal. This can make for a fun rivalry or turn into something more treacherous. By providing this information people can compile player movement profiles and force interactions with hostile overtones.

It seems hypocritical to have the following community guideline yet provide all of the information needed to locate a person. Again - poor planning.

Harassment: Things like predatory behavior, stalking, threats, harassment, intimidation, and inciting others to commit violent acts or to violate the Terms of Service are taken very seriously, and may result in account termination.

Below is Niantic's official position on privacy per their community guidelines:

Privacy: Players are identified in the game by screen names that they select. Don't post or reveal other information about a user's identity, including their name, phone number, email or physical address.

Again - this seems hypocritical and selfish when people are encouraged to submit SITREPs, photos, videos, and Google+ posts detailing their Ingress exploits. In addition, Google's LEGAL TOS requires a real name on Google+. Forcing us to use Hangouts and Communities forces us to reveal our out-of-game identities. It becomes very easy to track and find a person. On one hand, Niantic is encouraging people to promote the product publicly but on the other has a policy warning players away from using publicly available information.

In our community, we were provided a link to a Resistance created spreadsheet that contained personally identifiable information (PII) of the Enlightened members in our area. The Google Docs change tracking showed that it was being actively curated by several known Resistance members. They were granted explicit shared edit access to the document and were doing just that. This was reported to Niantic. Weeks went by and nothing happened. Because there was PII involved, we felt the need to escalate it directly to Niantic employees via relationships that some members of our community have with them. They were tagged in a private post providing them a link to the document where they would could view it and see the gmail accounts of the people granted permission to edit the document as well as the version history detailing when and what information they contributed. The post was acknowledged by Niantic employees and we were told it would be looked into. Weeks went by and nothing occurred. The information was in a spreadsheet that was linked prominently in the Resistance's About section for their local community. It was only by reluctant agreement after a back and forth that a Resistance player

deleted the information. To our knowledge, no action was ever taken by Niantic. However, the PII was available for anyone to access who had the link for several months that included a license plate, physical description, locations for work, relationships amongst player, etc.

Like many communities, there have been complaints of people being followed by vehicle at night. Most troubling are female players feeling like they are being stalked by male players using COMMS to pinpoint the location of agents. Some in an attempt to follow other agents have displayed reckless driving behavior that include almost hitting a pedestrian, being pulled over by police, conducting illegal U-Turns, and most egregious of them all blocking the exits of a parking structure or public park forcing confrontations. Although the game does not encourage this type of play, it is a symptom of providing identifiable player data in a heavily competitive game.

It seems impossible to avoid bumping in to another player in some situations, given the social nature of the game. Agents are going to meet each other while they are out and about. For better or worse the system fosters these interactions by providing a location, time, and agent name in COMMS. However, the impotence demonstrated in enforcing violations of the TOS by Niantic caused by these interactions that are derivative of playing Ingress is insulting. In the example above it included irrefutable proof of who, what and when submitted and edited PII about members of another faction. I understand the desire to weed out retribution type reports. However, there have been multiple cases of cross-faction unity reporting an issue - only to have the reports be ignored or rejected.

It is these inactions and inadequate actions that erode the trust between developer and player. These issues contributing factors to hostile confrontations should have been predicted. There is no requirement affecting game play or the story to know *who* is attacking a portal. Again, *who* is attacking has no bearing overtly on the game. The negatives of providing *who* far outweigh the positives. In my opinion, attacks should be blind. Nothing is logged in COMMS when an agent upgrades a resonator. Why implement a system that contradicts itself? Either provide information for all actions or none. I believe that not providing agent information in logs could help eliminate some of this dangerous real-world behavior.

User Interface Design

I once heard the Ingress user interface (UI) being compared to a website circa 1995, meaning development appears to focus on the animations, sounds, and sparkling effects. Until recently, a player had to click, click, click to execute most single actions in the game. To fire an XMP you had to enter the OPS menu, click weapons, find the level you wanted to fire, click it, then click the fire button. Somewhere along the way this changed and firing an XMP became a long press on-screen interaction. However, the action defaulted to launching your highest level XMP. Eventually this feature was tuned even further to fire the same level XMP that you had just launched. In the most recent version of Ingress there is an interface that provides the player an on-screen scrollable weapons inventory once the first XMP has been fired so one can fire any level weapon on the fly. One problem with the current implementation of this is agents cannot interact with other portals while the XMP menu is displayed. To do so the player has to click the “done” button and exit the firing menu.

From my own personal experience, I have the sense that Niantic has a lot of application

developers on staff as opposed to game developers. On a small software development team, it is rare to have people that understand how to execute the marriage of user interface design and developing for a game-like user experience. Typically, what happens is the product becomes tilted towards one or the other based on the past experience of the programmers as is evident with Ingress.

A lot of the time, the user experience feels like it was an after thought. Simple planning and thinking through the game mechanics should have dictated that the desire to rapidly fire an XMP, any level XMP, with minimal screen interactions was the most desirable path to implement. Developing and programming for Google+ is not the same as an Aliens vs Humans interactive augmented reality game. They are different products.

Ingress also does not provide the simple ability to turn off or disable certain visual effects. Disabling hacking animations, for example, could speed up both game play as well as help individuals with older, slower phone models. I find this odd because disabling certain sound effects are under the users control.

In addition to the game UI, users are equipped with the Intel page and its user interface. If you play Ingress and have not heard of IITC (Ingress Intel Total Conversion) - you may be a new player. Many people use it. Most of the people I know use it. IITC takes the default Intel page and essentially lays a new skin over it. IITC uses the existing data provided to the default Intel page. It just lets you do more with it.

Unfortunately, the concept of IITC itself is against the TOS. However, the original developer sought an official response from Niantic on whether or not IITC was ok to use because so many people, including Niantic employees, were using it. The developer received a response that *"We would greatly appreciate it if you remove all works, and refrain from creating any future works using Ingress content."*¹² No Niantic employee has posted another screenshot using IITC that I am aware of since. The experience was a prime example of "Silence is concurrence." When forced to give an opinion - it did not work out in favor of the party seeking permission. The rumor behind closed doors is that had the developer not pushed for an official blessing Niantic would have continued to turn a blind eye as they had been doing. Thankfully, the project was posted to a Git repository and a new maintainer¹³ has picked up the IITC banner.

The core game mechanics of Ingress that dictate teamwork and collaborative play, unfortunately Ingress does not have an efficient companion communications system to effectively organize and communicate native to the scanner application. What has been implemented is reminiscent of an IRC chat room with the only way to collaborate and notify a person in-game is via @ mentions of the player(s) game name. This can be quite tedious if you are trying to notify multiple people. Until very recently, the in-game communication was akin to drinking from a firehose. Everything was posted in All Chat team communication being posted in Faction Chat. Today we have a third tab where Alerts are displayed. Ten months after release this is a good first step. However, I do not understand why the ability to turn on or off certain types of messages was not a default

12 <http://decodeingress.me/2013/03/16/ingress-intel-total-conversion-plugin-is-shutting-down/>

13 <http://iitc.jonatkins.com>

option.

Ingress, as a Google product, could be integrated tighter with Google's social networking platform. It would be nice to receive chat notifications outside of the game if you are not near your phone. Thinking ahead, a feature to mute notifications from specific players or types of alerts would be good as well. While email notifications of portals under attack are nice, there is a lot more that could be done. This walled garden internal business strategy is shortchanging a more robust user experience that could integrate across many of Google's products using a single point as the launching pad.

Level Eight Agents

A common complaint I often hear comes from folks who have been level eight after the novelty has worn off is, "Now what?". As stated before, most players do not really care about the storyline as it is currently being delivered. In February 2013, a Niantic employee replied to a commented asking about if and when the level cap would be raised. The reply was, "Yes and I think it won't be long."¹⁴ Eight months later - this has yet to occur.

In addition, during a Hangout On Air in February of 2013 with Cowgirl App!, Niantic employees were on the record saying there would be more general missions and location specific missions coming. The current missions in-game have only consisted of training missions. Once again - that was eight months ago. No additional in-game missions or content exist for driving the storyline. It is almost as if the Ingress world inside the scanner application is completely separate and oblivious to the Ingress world outside of it.

Some rural players have expressed the sentiment that Ingress is biased toward urban players. Recently, Niantic rolled out a new player's badge reward type system. Essentially, it is a achievement trophy case. It will be extremely difficult for some rural players to achieve certain levels; thus making the badges worthless in their eyes and a non-motivator. Similar achievement systems are part of gaming platforms like Xbox Live and Playstation Network. However, rarely is it used as the main driving force for game play. In the case of Ingress - it is all level eight players have, because most do not follow the story and there are no other carrots in-game to nudge play along. I have heard the argument that level eight players should create fields try to gain MUs. However, level eight players do not receive additional points for creating a field using level eight portals. The portal level has no impact on the global MU count. With the inclusion of the Link Amp modifications, low level players can make links and fields as large or larger than an unmodified level eight portal. This game mechanic exists at level one and is not the main motivator for how the majority of agents play on a daily basis.

The Ugly:

Selective enforcement of the TOS and Community Guidelines

As mentioned earlier under the section talking about the user interface, products like IITC are against the TOS. However, Niantic employees have in the past posted pictures themselves using

14 <https://plus.google.com/u/0/107179591490960059904/posts/UnBQ1td1inP>

IITC. Recently a Niantic employee boasted about their underage child playing Ingress on Google+. Previously under the “Enabling Dangerous Real World Behavior” section I provided an example of a gross violation of PII being released and the lack of consequences. These are just some examples of the selective enforcement that has eroded the credibility of Niantic in the eyes of many players. The message received is, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Turf Mentality

An unfortunate side effect of a game like Ingress is players cultivating a turf mentality. People can become extremely possessive over a piece of virtual real-estate when you vest the amount of time and energy Ingress player typically do on average to the game. Remember, the Ingress slogan is, “The World Is Not What It Seems”. There are roughly a dozen portals in my neighborhood. I make it a point to leave them alone unless the opposite faction starts to build them to a high level. Why? I do this because I can farm and play anywhere on any given day if I choose and it is within my means. To focus on one tiny small area seems counter to the spirit of the game.

Home portals are convenient but there is nothing that says another player cannot destroy your resonators or create a link from it to Timbuktu. Only the game mechanics dictate what a player can and cannot do. Nothing else. No one can force a “No Links” rule or a “Safe Zone” law within the game. Natural impulses and feelings are not entitlement or rights to control an area. Cooperation must be organized and not coerced.

Cheating

Cheating is rampant. I truly do not think the general body of players understand how easy and widespread it is. Making things even harder is the open source nature of the Android platform itself. Just like the Ingress Community Guidelines state:

*Methods of cheating, unfortunately, are limited only by cheaters’ imaginations, but include at a minimum the following: playing with multiple accounts (one account per player, please); sharing accounts; win trading; using tools or techniques to alter or falsify your location; or selling or trading accounts.*¹⁵

Location Spoofing

Unfortunately, despite Niantic’s best efforts, location spoofing remains extremely easy to do, and continues to pose a real threat to the normal user experience. The same exploit Koush Dutta outlined in November of 2012 exists today.¹⁶ Niantic has implemented some checks to dissuade location spoofing. However, there are many ways to get around the fuzzy screen if your scanner becomes locked due to an inaccurate location. The only issue that causes location spoofing to not work is altering your location too fast with too great a distance. There are apps however that will let you set a GPS waypoint route to move your agent around a path smoothly and others still that will move you randomly after a certain period of time a very small distance all while being undetected.

¹⁵ <https://support.google.com/ingress/answer/2808360?hl=en>

¹⁶ <https://plus.google.com/103583939320326217147/posts/3Kf5Gr62XQA>

I unfortunately can not offer a magical solution that would exterminate this problem. Many people have suggested that Niantic could cross-reference a cell tower signal with a wi-fi access point coupled with the location of the portal you are hacking at hack time. Somehow the data driving all of these inputs could theoretically give a confidence factor as to whether the person was spoofing or not. Except - all of these inputs can be faked. I also do not know how much overhead a solution would this add to the game. The bottom line is location spoofing is a real problem that is ridiculously easy to exploit. It will more than likely take communities policing themselves to eradicate location spoofers. However, all that is required to play Ingress is a Google account and an invite code.

Bots

A new threat has been increasing as of late - bots. What are bots? A bot is an agent's account that is logged in to the Ingress scanner app but is being controlled autonomously, meaning there is no one at the device. There are several bot programs already in the wild.¹⁷ The most popular seems to be a very effective farming bot.¹⁸ Even with the unique threat of bots, the common denominator to enable this facet of cheating is being able to spoof one's location. Without that fundamental exploit, bots would more than likely not exist or be as dangerous.

Scripts

In addition to bots people have been using scripts. In some cases the scripts are used to simplify actions like dropping multiple or recycling mass quantities of items. Dropping multiple items en masse is a feature that has been requested almost immediately after Ingress was released. I personally do not believe that using a script to drop multiple items is a bad thing. It does not *in my opinion* impact the game. The time saved between dropping multiple items using a script versus doing it by hand is negligible. It does save a lot of repetitious screen clicking and frustration on the part of the player.

However, people have modified drop scripts or created their own scripts for purposes that do impact the immediate game play like fire and deploy loop scripts or recycling scripts. Have you ever wondered how someone could fire XMPs and deploy resonators at the same time? In some cases it was a script. There are telltale signs of a script user versus someone who just happens to be fast. Humans are not perfect.

Scripting is one area Niantic was able to positively impact change to a degree. Using mouse interaction scripts, the most common type of scripting I have researched, requires timing to be programmed between actions. Have you noticed how sometimes your screen "stutters" after firing an XMP or dropping items by going black for a second or two? That is enough to throw most scripts off. You can get around this by setting your waiting periods to be extremely long. However by doing so you lose the slight time advantage over doing the same actions by hand. A player would still be able to kick off the script and walk away, drink a beer, come back an hour later and have 200 items dropped on the ground. Unless the beer is really good, it would not be worth it for a Bud Light.

17 <https://github.com/Maome/ingress-bot>

18 <http://manuel-mueller.eu/index.php?lang=en>

Multiple Accounts

Another common exploit of the Ingress universe is a single person operating multiple accounts. It never ceases to amaze me how often people get caught using multiple accounts. Ingress is a very social game. Eventually, you will encounter other players outside of the game. The problem stems from a player introduces himself as JonsDad to an agent from an opposing faction and that agent sees the JonsMom account active at that very location with no one else around - something ain't right. When a player claims to submit a faction change but their old account can still be tagged be an @ mention in COMMs - something ain't right. When a player who is known to be DynamicTony walks past you as you sit on a bench in a park and the agent BumbleBee, who you have met first hand, is active at the exact same location as you at the time DyanmicTony walked past but is no where around - something ain't right. When you claim your kids, uncle, brother, best friend, and priest all play but you are seen alone in your truck in a deserted cemetery parking lot at 2am and L8 XMPS are being dropped then magically disappearing - something ain't right. Sure, the smart ones create photo ops of your children playing from time to time to perpetuate the lie. Eventually, that person will be caught with their child's account without their child.

My point is - if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and swims like a duck, chances are it is a duck. To *my* knowledge, in the eleven months playing Ingress, I have never had to explain an action of mine or have been reported for anything. Yet there are those who have had to concoct tales to explain things. Explanations are excuses after the fact. Eventually, the majority of those who cheat get caught. The ability to reason is a vastly underestimated human attribute.

There are those who are simply bored. There are those who want to cheat. However, one thing Niantic can do is speed up the account deletion and faction change process. There are some people who created a second account because it was easier to do that than sit and wait three weeks for the faction change request to be processed. Ingress is very competitive. Unfortunately most, if not all, people creating a second account start off with pure intentions and only create the second account to avoid waiting weeks for the faction change to be processed. However, each time it has ended up with the person giving in to the dark side and try to gain an advantage by ultimately using their original account in addition to the new account. Even the most patient and disciplined cheaters have slipped up by accidentally firing a single XMP months after their original account was allegedly deleted. That tiny mistake put their agent name in the COMMs, was noticed, and now they are banned.

What else can Niantic do? A second preventative action would be the accountability of invites. It should be relatively easy to see who is providing whom invites and how often the account receiving those invites are being banned or reported for suspicious behavior. Google+ has ripples for posts. There should be an easy ripple-like invite metric that can be queried for. Unlike items that seem to lose fidelity, we know who provided whom an invite because this information is displayed on the screen of the player after they redeem the invite under the faction choice buttons. Hopefully that information persists.

My last suggestion would to be more reactionary where reports are submitted and corroborated by multiple people and across factions. Unless the incident is egregious in nature, I would never recommend banning an account as a first step. That being said, if enough people report dubious

activity, Niantic should at a minimum send a warning by way of an email. I do not believe that Niantic is being proactive enough and in a timely manner in the enforcement of their own TOS and Community Guidelines.

Mule Accounts

A mule account is a single account that several people have access to. A person who has another main account will log in and load the mule account with gear. Once completed, another player will log in and drop the items to their main account or others. These accounts are used to stock up on items in one area where there is a consistently maintained farm. Someone in another area, including another state or country, will log in to the account to retrieve the items. Rinse and repeat. One person boasted directly to me that they had a mule account and dared me to report it. He said, “We’ll just create another one. All I need is a Gmail address.”

Along the lines of mule accounts we now have “Seller” accounts starting appear. These are akin to gold farmers in World of Warcraft who pop in to COMMs and offer to sell items to players in exchange for real world money. What is disappointing is that because of the lag between submitting a report to Niantic and when they receive it and act upon it, seller accounts can be active for weeks or months at a time. For the duration of the lag, sellers are operating with immunity because of the lack of fidelity with the data being tracked by Niantic. If there was a properly planned data architecture, it would be fairly easy to find accounts and track items. It should not be difficult to find level eight players in Pennsylvania who only drop items to a level one account that is then being logged in to somewhere in Virginia shortly thereafter and dropping items only to be picked up by other players repeatedly.

XM Replay

Have you ever wondered how single agent could defend an attack given the current game mechanics for so long without using much if any of the XM on the ground? They may have been using a lot of power cubes, or recycling a lot of items with or without a script. However, they might be taking advantage of the XM Replay bug.

XM Replay is essentially the ability to exploit the system to gain an unlimited amount of energy using a modified client. Once again I will defer to Kristian Köhntopp’s Ingress postmortem for the details about XM Replay.¹⁹ Two quick points from his paper are the following:

- *XM is not an object in the game, but a cryptographically protected voucher for energy. The implementation is flawed and exploitable, the key length [sic] is too small.*
- *An unlimited amount of free energy breaks gameplay, as it allows for automated unlimited defense and invulnerable portals.*

Portals Submission/Moving/Removing Process

Submission process

Submitting a portal to be accepted and included into the game is tantamount to banging your head repeatedly on a brick wall. Niantic does provide is a listing of candidate portal criteria.²⁰ However, the acceptance and rejection process seems to adhere to anything but. Case in point, I

19 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A252cvmjl86n9uZ0tyi2X4ZabxLE4ribJIEBbC8FifO/edit>

20 <https://support.google.com/ingress/answer/3066197?hl=en>

recently submitted a very clear picture of a historical plaque denoting the first segregated school in Arlington, VA. This historical plaque was rejected for reasons unknown. It met all of the valid portal criteria, was a clear picture, and did not have another portal near it for several hundred meters.

When questioned about why a portal was rejected on a separate occasion, +NIA Ops, the official Niantic Police as it were said, "We're happy to provide details on rejections via Google+ and our official support forum, but we cannot do this without a lat/long."²¹ To which I would argue that if Niantic knew why the portal was rejected in the first place, would it not have been easier to include the reason in the rejection email. Instead, legitimate historical places are being submitted multiple times by the same or different people which eventually leads to one of the submissions being accepted or in some cases duplicate portals. Essentially we, the users, have to operate with the same mindset as a 1920's organized crime syndicate - vote early and vote often. In this case, submit portals early and submit portals often.

Deliberately Incorrect Portal Locations

One sure fire way to ensure portals are at your disposal is to falsely report their location on purpose. There was an infamous incident on the east coast where someone had half a dozen portals in their driveway that in reality were blocks or more away. They knew they were wrong. They said they were wrong. They refused to submit a move request. Instead, they built the portals up as high as they could and farmed them from the comfort of their couch.

Moving/Removing Portals

One tactic disgruntled players are using to try to level battlefields is submitting legitimate portals to be removed or moved. Likewise, there are times when a genuine portal needs to be moved because it was originally placed incorrectly or an unlawful portal needs to be removed. In all three scenarios, the criteria for whether a portal removal or move request is successful seems to depend on if the monkey pushes the right or left button for the reward that day in behavior training. There is absolutely no rhyme or reason that can be discerned from the communications players receive.

An example of this was a player that lived in a large gated mansion. Being a person who grew up with an opulent home he recognized the portal potential within his private and gated confines. His parents' estate has water fountains, large statues, etc so he submitted them. All of these interesting works of art satisfied all of the portal criteria except one. Most were inaccessible to the public locked behind a security system, gate and fence that wrapped around his private residence. Resistance and Enlightened members reported the portals - multiple times. It took months before they were removed. Meanwhile, he was able to build a private farm complete with multi-hacks and heat sinks.

The fact that the portals took so long to remove is only half of the story. Several of us who reported the portals eventually received the following notice from NIA Ops:

Thank you for your Ingress Portal data edit submission. NIA operatives have received multiple

21 <https://plus.google.com/u/0/108494514979781646717/posts/i61rV48No2z>

suggestions for this Portal. All suggestions were reviewed and improvements have been implemented.

Reading the email gave us a final sense of satisfaction. Despite months of waiting it appeared the cross-faction reports finally hit the right desk and the person who read them removed them. Until we used the Intel page to verify. Nothing had been changed or removed. Nothing.

I fired off a post tagging Ingress and NIA Ops on Google+.²² NIA Ops replied with, *“This is the response you'll receive if your suggestion was reviewed, but the team concluded that no location change was necessary.”* So essentially, if you report a portal for a location change or removal and receive an email stating that all changes were implemented - that email really means to communicate that nothing has been implemented. Can you begin to understand the confusion?

Another famous example was a portal that was in a government building and only accessible by badged working members allowed to enter. The portal was reported for removal and the removal was rejected. The reason for the rejection that I received was:

Thanks for your submission. Portals in semi-public places (i.e., limited access government buildings, military bases, or museums, etc.) are not considered inaccessible. The Portal meets current criteria and will not be removed.
- NianticOps

Fast forward about six months and it is the eve of the Washington D.C. Cassandra event and Niantic released the portal clusters. Each portal in the zone would be worth points if captured and linked. I immediately noticed a portal I had previously reported as being inaccessible was in zone one. I contacted a Niantic employee that I have been friendly with in the past who requested the location. The person went to the portal, or as close as he could get, to verify it and summarily had it removed. Just to reiterate the chain of events. My initial request was denied and it took a Niantic employee verifying the portal in real life to have my initial request be validated. That is far from an efficient system. Communications to players must improve.

Just a quick side note because I know it can be missed if you read it fast. The Niantic response says, “limited access government building” and not “that have public access areas or museums, etc” as the website and help read. There is a significant difference between the two.

Exclusive items

Recently Niantic released a mobile phone specific hackable weapon: the Ultra Strike. Only players using certain Motorola devices would have a chance to hack and receive an Ultra Strike weapon from portals. To be fair, I understand that Niantic has bills to pay. As stated before they are allowed to run autonomously as an independent start-up within Google. In the public eye Google is held to a higher standard than most and by association so is Niantic. Google fans and consumers typically do not like this sort of blatant nepotism and good ol' boy backroom deals. So naturally the social media outlets were flooded with Ingress players up in arms over this decision when it was announced.

²² <https://plus.google.com/104577088576326284308/posts/gswHFUv4vuG>

I reached out to Ingress and pointed out the sentiments of the previous paragraph. I received the following response:²³

+Andrew Krug Not sure we follow how our decisions to partner with HINT, Zipcar, Jamba Juice, Chrome, Duane Reade, and Verizon (see<http://www.droiddoes.com/>) puts into question the validity of previous statements, or how it relates to Apple's antenna issues. But we are ardent fans of conspiracy theories.

You can follow the link in the footnote for a full transcript of the interaction. The synopsis is that as Ingress has pointed out many times, Ingress is much more than a game due to the time and money the average players spends playing. No other new item was previously released to an exclusive platform. Limiting Ultra Strike's availability at first to a Motorola device was viewed by some as a cheap marketing gimmick to benefit Google directly and a small attempt to help save a failing brand. The other partners mentioned by Ingress are external customers. The cost of entry to participate with the other partners is much lower than with Motorola. I can purchase a bottle of Hint water for under \$2.00. However, it will cost a few hundred to get a new phone and participate with this new partner.

Hacking Ultra Strikes has now bred a sub-group of people changing their phone's build.prop information so their device will be recognized as one that can hack Ultra Strikes.²⁴ While a benign change, it is one that really does not affect the game. However it is cheating. Until these weapons are released to the masses - I imagine a great many people will continue this trend. This is yet another example of simply not thinking something through. This backlash and disenfranchisement should have been predicted and could have been either spun into a PR move to help a fellow Google owned product with promises of releasing them within a month - or not. Niantic chose the later. Months after the Motorola Ultra was released you can still only hack Ultra Strikes from certain Motorola phone unless you change your build.prop information.

Niantic Favoritism

The social aspect of Ingress not only forces players locally, regionally, and globally to interact, but also provides access to Niantic employees themselves. I have had the pleasure of talking to several of the more high profile employees within Niantic and have been featured in an Ingress report and was the one of two exclusive people featured in an Agent Intel video. My interactions with Niantic as well as witnessing the interactions of others have demonstrated that Niantic employees do play favorites with Ingress players. Favoritism ranges can extending extra codes to individuals, providing extra invites, receiving tours of the Google facilities, and most dangerous of all - a blind eye towards TOS and Community Standards violations.

It pains me to write the above paragraph. I imagine that my invitation to tour the Googleplex will probably be revoked after Niantic reads the prior paragraph. However, I stand by my claims. I absolutely enjoy the folks I have met from Niantic. You couldn't ask for a bunch of nicer people

23 <https://plus.google.com/103905733728370027697/posts/7tPbfJuGASR>

24 http://vi.reddit.com/r/Ingress/comments/1l469w/ultra_strikes_for_all/

that exhibit this passion over their work.

However, I think some employees, starting at the top, have let the perceived success of Ingress cloud the ability to operate as impartial narrators and unbiased members of the community at large. To be fair, nowhere does it say that Niantic employees must operate objectively and without prejudice. I could only dream to be involved with a team that is every bit as passionate as the folks I have met that are employed by Niantic/Google. Some employees have left working full-time at other Google divisions to go work for Niantic.

However, just as Niantic wants us to believe that “The World Is Not What It Seems” - they need to understand that in reality, outside of the game, it is what it seems. The world really is that simple. It is the incessant yearning for a purpose that clouds ones ability to reason. In the case of some Niantic employees, I think that yearning and subsequent finding of something to be so passionate about has impaired the ability to think objectively at times. In some very rare cases, this has devastated the game play and user experience by showing overt favoritism towards the actions of a group or people and/or turning a blind eye towards the specific actions of individual agents.

Conclusion

The game mechanics of Ingress dictate teamwork. These constraints have existed since day one of the closed beta release. Because of that, I find the following comments by John Hanke, Vice President of Product Development for Niantic Labs, extremely short sighted and a symptom of a larger problem described throughout this paper:

“Getting together in the real world, people are going out and playing for an hour -- or sometimes all night -- and then having beers or breakfast together,” he said. “People are doing that; I never expected them to when I designed this game.”²⁵
August 27, 2013

Sometimes, despite a very hard effort to be the best - things will not work out. After reading the quote above, I suppose the lack of vision starts at the top and at the very beginning of Ingress' life. The head of Niantic, the creator of Ingress, should have been able predict these types of social interactions occurring. To not anticipate it while creating gameplay dynamics that encourage people to collaborate is sad and unfortunate. A lot of the issues that are documented and discussed in this paper should have been predicted, mitigated, and better handled.

This would lead me to speculate that Mr. Hanke is not a gamer and does not understand MMOs or ARGs. He does not appear to understand the depths and sacrifices players of this genre are willing to make to achieve goals both real and imagined for “a game” like Ingress. The alternative explanation is that he does not care and is derelict in his responsibility for the vision and planning of his product. Make no mistake, according to CNN.com, “*Mr. Hanke’s original plan was to create an MMO.*” His product did not change course. It was always the plan to create an MMO.

²⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/26/tech/gaming-gadgets/google-niantic-ingress>

A frequent saying that is rattled off a lot is Ingress is what you want it to be. I myself have said this. However, I now understand that this means there is no longer any content being provided to drive my Ingress gaming experience. This all comes back to the issue of storyline and how it is delivered. Ingress is currently asking its players to repeat the same activity over and over with very little difference in gameplay and results. When communities start planning events independent of Niantic - that means something has run dry and Niantic is no longer in control. Perhaps that was the goal. However, for that to be true, it would make the Ingress experience a hypocritical one. On one hand you can't design a game where the users drive their own experience then ignore the requests of the same user base for new features, fixes, and enhancements.

The lack of continuing content for level eight agents will translate to an atrophy of players. Our community partakes in a quarterly census. On average we lose about 20% of our members every three months. However, during the census that was conducted in June we lost more level eight players than any time previously. More and more are leaving Ingress every day. As a community leader I have nothing to offer them - there is no incentive to stay.

Having written in excess of twenty pages it should go without saying that I am passionate about Ingress. For the almost a year it has provided me a place to make new friends. It has allowed me to hone my leadership, communication, and conflict resolution skills all from the comfort of my computer or scanner application. I have formed a bond with my community that I did not think possible. Being part of a group of people that steers and influences the pastime of hundreds and hundreds people has been exhilarating and not without its own challenges. Ingress has made me better professional and personally.

Despite two sections out of three being devoted to arguably unfavorable topics - I think Niantic executed a fair to good first attempt at combining an alternate reality game with augmented reality technology. It appears that Niantic's Achilles heel, however, is planning. No matter what, products being developed under the banner of Google carry a certain expectation of polish. I realize Niantic is operating separately. However, it is still Mother Google to whom they must answer.

I hope Niantic can address the cheating epidemic. In the end there are players who will cheat to cheat. Where there is a will there is a way. My Resistance co-founder of our area's Cross-Faction Moderator Community suggested an Xbox Live like reputation system. This too has its faults but might be a good start. I don't know if there is a magic bullet - but something has to change.

The portal submission process and communication to agents in general is broken and inefficient. While Google Maps is a great resource for a first attempt to verify submissions, I realize that it is not perfect. With that being said, it appears as though common sense in a lot of cases is missing from the process. It is inexcusable to have portals that overlap and two portals seemingly every post office - yet deny other legitimate ones that are accepted after the second, third, or fourth attempt. This signals to me that Niantic has a completely cavalier attitude to the whole portal submission/acceptance process.

Lastly, because the storyline is delivered in such a varied and shotgun like approach it often leads

a person to ingest multiple instances of the same information. If you follow any of the Niantic folks they tend to re-share - a lot. There are twitter reshares, users re-shares across multiple social networking platforms, YouTube videos, and emails detailing often trending across all of these that outlines what is in the Ingress report. If you gain media in-game and destroy it after viewing it, chances are you will get it again on a subsequent hack. There has to be a better way than overloading players with the same content to communicate the story. With a product slogan like "The World Is Not What It Seems" - perhaps how and through whom the story unfolds should have been planned out better. Ironically, with this overload of delivery people still do not seem to care, know, or understand the storyline.

The Conspiracy Theory

Part of me believes that Ingress isn't really just a "game". I am not referring to all of the esoteric like features mentioned previously that most do not see. Part of me believes that Ingress is a giant anthropological social experiment studying human interactions. Using all of the aforementioned integrated Google products it would be very easy to weigh social interactions, understand hierarchies, identify different personality traits in people, start to populate a database of how certain outside influences affect people with different personality traits. Think about it. What a data goldmine for that institutional area. It might explain why certain user requested game mechanics and features appear to be a low priority to be implemented. Assuming what I read was true about how Niantic was formed within Google I highly doubt this to be the case. But imagine an open set of data where you go into an experiment absent a hypothesis. Instead, you create the world, story, and external influences with the explicit goal of being able to mine that data for whatever anthropological social hypothesis you can come up with after the fact.

Final Words

Ingress has the potential for being a global phenomenon and a seminal product of the augmented reality gaming genre. Some of the challenges facing Ingress should be easy to fix. There is no need for communication to be a multi-step process when the initial message to a player could be more robust. The user interface issues have already been addressed by many people who have created unofficial ports and mods of the game. If they can do it - Niantic can do it.

The three biggest challenges facing the game going forward are incentivizing players to stay after level eight, fixing the user experience, and dealing with the cheaters. There simply is no reason to continue playing Ingress past level eight with the exception of some esoteric and out of game social reasons. To remedy the user experience, Niantic needs to first take a hard look at the story, how it is being delivered, and the incongruence between it and the game aspect of Ingress. Lastly there are the cheaters. Their actions tend to be obvious and outliers from normal player activity. In some cases, they are not anonymous accounts but known players that flaunt the TOS openly. Niantic also needs to practice what it preaches. To slap the hand of IITC developers, have employees posting about their children and/or grandchildren playing, and seemingly harboring player's who break the TOS is unacceptable. To hold the players to a higher standard than the Niantic employees is hypocritical.

The number of people who achieved level eight along side me last winter and continue to play dwindles each day. We love how Ingress has changed our lives. It is our passion for Ingress that was the genesis and reason for me writing this essay. Sadly, with each passing day that passion grows weaker and weaker. There is more that Ingress could offer. I hope I am still active when

when it is realized.

Credits

This essay would not have happened if it were not for the following people who acted as my pseudo-editors and collaborators.

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