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Gamers finding adrenaline rush offline

By Jackie Burrell
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Hearts hammering, 40 blue-tagged runners raced through the night, darting frenetically through hotel lobbies, weaving down increasingly empty streets and crawling, Ninja-style, through Golden Gate Park to flee an ever-escalating number of pursuers.

The adrenaline rush only subsided when they crested the last hill and caught sight of the roaring bonfire and glistening surf of Ocean Beach, and smelled the unmistakable sweet scent of s'mores.

There was a time when the words "alternate reality" conjured up visions of friendless geeks clutching game controllers. But there's another world of alternate reality where games such as SFZero happen in the real world, not on screen.

It's a world of untrammelled creativity, where city plazas and telephone booths become playing fields, players become creative superheroes, and, suddenly, adventure is everywhere.

"It makes the world magical," said Kelly Revak, a folklore masters student at UC Berkeley and one of SFZero's top-scoring players.

This magical world emerged five years ago, when some creative game designers challenged folks obsessed by videogames such as "Doom" to get up off the couch and go outside.

Using online instructions, the so-called "puppetmasters" conjured up physical challenges and insane puzzles that no one could solve alone, and wrapped up the package in a compelling narrative arc.

Suddenly there was a new genre that encouraged intellectual collaboration and creativity, and built far-flung but tight-knit communities. And it did so using nearly every recent tech trend, from wireless communication to global positioning technology, social networking and You Tube.

Berkeley game devotee Jean Bascom said, "It puts the virtual into the reality instead of the reality into the virtual."

There are no murders or mysteries in SFZero. Instead, the game's online puppetmasters -- designers Sam Lavigne, Sean Mahan and Miramonte High School alumnus Ian Kizu-Blair -- send players out on missions that range from random acts of kindness to the epic midnight race they dubbed "Journey to the End of the Night."

Instead of using a plotted narrative arc, like the precedent-setting 2001 game "The Beast" and 2004's legendary "ILoveBees" did, the founders -- philosophy, comparative literature and liberal arts majors -- were inspired by what they saw on MySpace and Facebook.

"Social networking had gotten big," said Kizu-Blair, "and we realized that social networks



Excited participants prepare to run SFZero's "Journey to the End of the Night." The event pitted blue-ribboned runners and purple-tagged chasers on a wild, all-night foot-and-Muni race through the streets of San Francisco last summer.

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all had stories in them. If the game was going to be in the real world, we didn't want a fantastic story of androids. We wanted something normal, but beyond their everyday experiences."

Instead of creating fictional superheroes, the game turned its players into fantastic versions of themselves and built communities of shared interests.

"We tried to create a really exciting experience for participants, and what they fantasize about doing," says Lavigne. "Like being in a movie where you're running away from strangers, and you don't know why. The city turns into kind of a playground."

San Francisco's "Journey to the End of the Night" was so vivid that weeks after being chased through the night by purple-ribboned taggers -- the fulfillment of every scary movie fantasy -- players said their hearts still raced every time they saw the color purple.

During the past year, Kizu-Blair and his team have crafted hundreds of other missions for their 800-plus members. And their players have added more.

Some are quirky, but simple. The Pop Tart Pop Art task, for example, had Revak turning toasty pastries into tiny Andy Warhol-esque paintings that looked like her arch-rival OliverX -- or his game icon, anyway.

Some involve a sort of gentle lunacy, such as the Spork Hunt in downtown Berkeley.

Yet others require battle-scale strategic planning -- as in last summer's water balloon ambush of unsuspecting player Cameron Suey in Golden Gate Park.

The results were so glorious -- squadrons of SFZero players cascading down the bucolic hills and popping up from picnic blankets -- that a nearby birthday party joined in the fun.

"Love them, love them," says Jane McGonigal, a nationally renowned game designer whose doctoral thesis devotes a chapter to SFZero.

"The work they're doing is the most in touch with people's interactive desires," the "ILoveBees" designer said. "It combines the YouTube, blogger-maker culture, but at the same time the control of the puppetmasters. You feel like you have permission to do these strange things."

It was a winning combination for California Shakespeare Theater dramaturg Daniel Venning.

"It was a computer game that got you out of the house and allowed you to do things artistically," he said. "It sounded extremely exciting to me, a type of role playing game that is active and requires imagination, instead of just reception on the part of the player."

Like its predecessors, SFZero has a core organizational structure, but it is the players -- those 840 people from San Francisco and the East Bay, Minneapolis, Chicago and New York -- that shape the outcome.

And it was OliverX and his faction of Minneapolis players that changed SFZero from a quirky, artistic game into a hyper-competitive, insanely creative form of play, Revak and Venning say.

Scores leapfrogged practically overnight as players turned even straightforward missions into creative tours de force.

Revak and OliverX were "always trying to push the boundaries," said Venning, "in the most imaginative way possible."

So when OliverX blew up Revak's apartment, everyone agreed, it was really, really creative. A few people found it a tad disconcerting, but Revak and Venning thought it was funny -- and they were there.

The Minneapolis player tracked down Revak's home address through nefarious means, including fictitious duplicate characters and a double agent who wasn't.

Venning laughed as he recalled the "explosion." It was poker night at Revak's Berkeley apartment, when a mysterious woman -- Oliver's Bay Area friend "Agent Apricot" -- knocked at the door and delivered a note that read, simply, "Boom."

Of course, Bay Area residents didn't hear the virtual explosion, but they may have seen other SFZero antics in action. They may have played McGonigal's absorbing "ILoveBees." Or they may have caught a glimpse of this other world on prime time.

Alternate reality games hit the mainstream last October when an episode of "CSI: New York" featured a gruesome fraternity murder and a clue-encoded T-shirt.

The blood and gore were fictional, of course, but the coded clothing hailed from edoc laundry, a Seattle-based alternate reality/sportswear company co-founded by Elan Lee, a former Microsoft video game designer.

And it's sublimely fitting that it was Lee who made prime time because the granddaddy of the alternate gaming world -- "The Beast" -- was his creation.

Back in 2001, Microsoft embarked on a marketing-game project to pique public interest in the movie "A.I." The Spielberg movie didn't exactly dazzle at the box office, but Lee's game, nicknamed "The Beast," unleashed a completely new type of alternate reality play.

"Everyone who played it felt it was the start of something new, this massively collaborative game," McGonigal said. "When the game was over, you wanted to keep playing in real life."

The game lasted for 12 weeks and used 30 different Web sites, real-world rallies and events, and online discussion boards that sizzled as tens of thousands of players around the world worked together to solve the mystery.

It was the first game, says McGonigal, to tap into the concept of collaborative intelligence. No individual could solve all of the game's arcane codes and puzzles -- one puzzle required knowledge of lute tablature, for example -- but thousands of people pooling their intellectual resources could solve anything.

Three years later, the award-winning "ILoveBees" took the genre to a new level. More than 1 million people collaborated on online discussion boards, downloaded global positioning coordinates, then raced to public pay phones at those GPS sites to wait -- with other players, strangers and curious passersby -- for coded transmissions to unlock the next chapter of the game.

"It was an intense kind of community, this sense that gaming was real," said McGonigal, who was a lead designer on the project. "It wasn't some fictional thought happening on a screen. You really went to the GPS coordinates. You answered the phone."

The thing that struck Greg Niemeyer, a professor of practical art and new media at UC Berkeley, was the way these games built communities across time zones and continents.

"Games are a societal organizer," he said. "Games have always provided a tool of engagement. They bring people together."

And the effects linger long after the game ends, Niemeyer says, much like the "Tetris effect" -- the optic phenomenon that makes avid Tetris players see ghostly falling blocks long after the game is turned off.

"You go to work and imagine yourself half in the game," Niemeyer said.

And SFZero's missions do the same thing, Revak said.

"Even if you're not playing it, you're always thinking about it, thinking about the possibilities," she said.

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COME OUT AND PLAY

The precedent-setting alternate reality games "The Beast" and "ILoveBees" are long gone, but there are plenty of other opportunities to play. Among them:

- SFZERO. A free, noncommercial, collaborative game that sends its members out on quirky, creative missions ranging from last summer's epic "Journey to the End of the Night" -- a wild chase through the streets of San Francisco, Brooklyn and Manhattan -- to flattery brigades, art projects and strange postal challenges, including "The Beautiful Letter" task.
- CRUEL 2 B KIND. A free, experimental game of benevolent assassination -- players are attacked with random acts of kindness, so you can be "killed" with a flower or effusive praise. The game is played in public spaces and coordinated via text messages. Hundreds of people played the game in Manhattan during New York's Come Out and Play

Festival. The next Bay Area game is scheduled for early March. Visit www.CruelGame.com for details.

- **PERPLEX CITY.** This commercial, alternate reality game involves a real-world treasure hunt set in a mythical metropolis. Clues are conveyed via Web sites, game cards (which must be purchased), telephone calls and events. Last summer's San Francisco rally included games, discussions and a few moments of rampant paranoia when gamers received text messages telling them to race outside, where they were promptly buzzed by real helicopters searching for a fictitious mole. Join the game at www.PerplexCity.com.

- **EDOC LAUNDRY.** This Seattle-based alternate reality/sportswear company sells clothing whose vivid graphics obscure the cryptic messages and codes imbedded in the design. When the code is typed online, the Web site reveals clues to the next chapter of a mystery about a band called Poor Richard. Join the game at www.edoclaundry.com.

- **CATHY'S BOOK.** Another product of 42 Entertainment, the Emeryville alternate reality game company that created "ILoveBees" and "Last Call Poker" and is also affiliated with edoc laundry. This controversial book is a multimedia hybrid aimed at teen readers who must solve the mystery by delving into takeout menus and other slips of paper packaged with the book, and by checking out the Web sites and mysterious phone numbers jotted onto the book's pages. The book can be purchased through local bookstores and www.Amazon.com. For information on the concept, visit www.42Entertainment.com.

For more info

To join the game, go to www.SFZero.org.

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