Agents of Discovery

I developed the initial idea for Agents of Discovery (a cross-platform iOS/Android game) while working at a technology-based non-profit. Once it was funded, I worked as lead designer and writer during its first two major releases. During that time, we sold it to clients such as the Calgary Zoo, the U.S. Forest Service, and Southern California Edison. It continues to grow to this day and has since become its own company.

World-Building

I started the writing process on this project with world-building. The concept we landed on was that players would join a secret agency called O.I.S.E.A.U. – one that consisted largely of talking animals (and occasionally plants). This excerpt is from one of the early design documents when the game was called "Agents of Nature."

It is worth briefly discussing the "character" of O.I.S.E.A.U. in order to ensure that it is being depicted in promotional media, in-game content, and through social networking in a consistent manner regardless of the author. The writing should be appealing to a young audience with more subtle humour to appeal to older audiences as well. O.I.S.E.A.U., the Order of Inter-Species Explorers, Adventurers, and Übernaturalists, consists of "agents of nature" all dedicated to solving the greatest mysteries of nature. Upon downloading the app, users become an agent of nature and slowly begin climbing the ranks of O.I.S.E.A.U.

The organization is involved with preserving biodiversity through research, conservation efforts, public outreach, and education. As an organization, O.I.S.E.A.U. seems to be both omnipotent and incompetent, possessing at times the most advanced high-tech equipment while at other times relying on crudely built, childish inventions.

Name: Field Agent White Spruce

Bio: As a sapling, White Spruce had already perfected the art of blending in with crowds. You will never catch this agent out of character.

Overheard: "White Spruce? What white spruce? All I see is a harmless newborn baby. Wahhh."

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It is unclear whether O.I.S.E.A.U., which takes itself very seriously, is a "real" organization or just the product of the imagination of its members. The organization frequently sends its agents on tasks that are

either completely unrelated to the overall purpose of the mission or just plain pointless. However, none of the agents really seem to mind because at the end of the day they just like having fun in nature.

When referring to O.I.S.E.A.U. in promotional materials, it should be clear that O.I.S.E.A.U. is an autonomous, self-regulating organization. In other words, we should avoid statements such as "Get to Know is pleased to announce that we have finished development of the O.I.S.E.A.U. mobile app." Instead, we should opt for something like "In a heroic effort to engage with new media, O.I.S.E.A.U. are launching their mobile app in order to recruit new members."

Gameplay Loop

After leaving the project, I was contracted to create a new overall gameplay loop for Agents of Discovery. It needed to work with existing gameplay, revolve around bees, and incorporate short, medium, and long-term story arcs.

You have just joined the Discovery Agents, collectors and keepers of knowledge, in the midst of a full-blown crisis. It would appear that the USBees, the agency's hive of robotic bees/flying memory sticks that store all of its collected knowledge, have all been released. This deed was committed after *somebody* called the HIVE protocol, designed to be used only in case of emergency to ensure the continuation of the work of the agency. After the HIVE protocol is called, the USBees take off in a random direction and go into hiding, though thankfully they confine themselves to North America (since bees, as everyone knows, make terrible sailors).

But who initiated the protocol? Why *rogue agents* did, species such as the Tiny Flying Hippopotamus, tired of languishing in obscurity. Tired of being called "fictional" simply because the world wasn't ready to know them. They released the USBees so that others may know the pain and indignity of perceived non-existence, and then fled the agency!

Now the rogue agents realize how important this knowledge is. What they *didn't* realize, of course, is that the USBees, as part of the HIVE protocol, emit a constant tracking signal so that they can be recovered.

But the USBees don't let just *anyone* find them. They require you to solve a series of challenges testing existing knowledge in order to find them.

If you do succeed in finding one of the USBees, you are rewarded not only with the recovered knowledge, but also with a cute pouch of coins to help you along the way. This too is part of the HIVE protocol, the designers of which knew they'd need to provide for basic provisions. What are you supposed to eat, bark? Don't eat bark!

Why does this even matter? How is this a crisis? The reasons are too many to count! Unless you can count to two. Reason one! There are no backups. Cloud Storage technology is still being developed by the Agency. The R&D didn't go as quickly as we might have hoped. So far the only thing that the Cloud Storage Laboratory has produced is a whole lot of lemon-scented rain. Reason two! Without the knowledge that the agency collects and guards, the world simply stops functioning! The water in rivers flow confusingly upwards rather than downstream! The trees forget to photosynthesize! Motor vehicle operators treat merge signs as yields!

Now find those USBees!

Story Arcs

The objective was to release content over time, so they wanted ideas for the short, medium, and long term to keep players engaged.

Short Term: The USBees

The USBees, which collectively contain all Discovery Agents knowledge, have been released and nobody knows why. Equally mysterious is that the robotic Queen Bee, AKA the Founder, AKA the USBeekeeper, has been kidnapped.

As a new Discovery Agent, you must head into the field and recover the USBees. Plugging them back into HQ is the only way to power up the HIVE and re-open communication with the queen. But it won't be that easy. As part of their security protocol, USBees can only be recovered by solving challenges worthy of a true Discovery Agent.

When the HIVE hits a certain power level (threshold adjusted dependent on number of nearby sites), you're able to communicate with the queen and bring her back to HQ. Upon her return, however, she has no memory, random-access or otherwise, of what happened.

Medium Term: The Discovery Elders

So the queen is back. Things are returning to normal. The USBee recovery operation continues. But then the queen contacts you with some secret and urgent missions. Sometimes when she's speaking everything seems okay. Other times she spaces out. Her fonts go out of whack. Her instructions become contradictory.

All you're able to glean is that you need to track down certain (site-agnostic) caches to recover some computer parts. Once you've gathered them all you head back to HQ to find the queen missing *again*. Frankly she's becoming a bit of a nuisance but you keep that thought to yourself.

As you search around the queen's chambers a hidden panel suddenly slides open. Emerging behind a wall of smoke, hacking and wheezing, are the incredibly old Discovery Elders. Agonizingly slowly, the Elders reveal the origin of the queen. She is an open-source project that they created way back in the days of punchcard computing. She's been infected with a virus. The Elders themselves are the ones behind the kidnapping, but only because they were trying to fix her. The virus *reverses* her core function to amass, protect, and spread knowledge. It caused her to release the USBees in the first place.

As you gathered the parts needed to fix the queen, the Elders were watching you to make sure you could be trusted because A) they still aren't sure who wrote the virus and B) you've got a real suspicious-looking face.

Long Term: The COLONIZE Protocol

With the queen freshly Norton'd and her version upgraded (finally giving her, among other things, a personality), she and the Elders put a plan in motion to prevent this sort of fiasco from happening in the future. Thus begins the COLONIZE Protocol – a way of both decentralizing the Discovery Agents' knowledge and putting greater responsibility into the hands of individual Agents.

For reach region with a Discovery Agents presence, a new Field HQ is built that can be added on to by users. It features unique items, designs, monuments, materials, artefacts, and species found in their region. Within the Field HQ each DA gets their own customizable space. But they can also put their resources towards achieving collective goals like a new DuckDeterminer for the HQ games room, or a wind turbine that generates extra coins for all associated users.

Part of COLONIZE is to gather and spread "new" knowledge (unlike the previous stages which were recovering "existing" knowledge). To that end users receive empty USBees with specific challenges in them tied to a user's level, for example to find five different types of pine and snap a photo of their needles.

Completing these fills up a user's USBees, which are then plugged in to the Field HQ's own miniature HIVE server. After the new knowledge is uploaded, the USBee toddles off to a different Field HQ or to Central to spread it. So basically a slower cloud storage system. Metaphors of local/global cooperation abound.

On their way to a different HQ, the filled USBee leaves a trail of its nano-pollen (the material that actually stores the data – obviously) behind that only the sending user can see. The user follows this trail to find a special container growing from the ground that can be cracked open for rewards like base

materials or devices to annoy your friends. So the USBees are cross-pollinating both by spreading knowledge and more literally.

Through this process, your base is built and maintained. But all is not sunshine. Occasionally the Rogue Agents appear – the group that you learn is responsible for the queen's virus – who try to release your USBees or dismantle some of your base. You need to track these rogues down and turn them.

An additional layer could tie in real-world quests from site partners, where for example your base is visually depicted as being run over with an invasive weed and it's up to Discovery Agents to head out and get rid of them. Or your base is hit with drought to coincide with a promo with a water utility that offers free rainwater capture barrels or low-flow showerheads.

Tutorial Script

Based on the USBees Concept, I was also asked to develop a new introductory script for the app.

Upon logging in to Discovery Agents, the user is brought to the front of the treehouse. If it is a new user the Acorn Woodpecker will prompt them to initiate the Training Camp right away.

> *"Thanks for joining the Discovery Agents. We need your help!"*

[What happened?] / [I'm bored already]

If [I'm bored already]:

> *"Right to the point. Got it."*

And then skip to the final line in this section. Otherwise:

> *"Not to alarm you, but see how EVERYTHING IS A DISASTER?"*

> *"That's because our leader the Queen Bee has been the giant robot version of kidnapped!"*

> *"And her hive of USBees have all been released!"*

> *"Those USBees store the knowledge that we work so hard to collect."*

> *"Our top mission is to bring them all back!"*

"But first we need to get you trained ASAP. Ready to start a DANGEROUSLY SHORTENED version of Training Camp?"

[Lead the way!] / [No thanks, that sounds like learning]

If [No thanks, that sounds like learning]:

"Just want to jump to it? I hear ya. Come back if you ever want to get your learn on."

The first time user selects to start the (Dangerously Shortened) Training Camp and is immediately brought into the Training Camp.

A returning user can select the gadget button at the bottom of the screen and is presented with several options.

The user taps "(Dangerously Shortened) Training Camp" and the screen fades to black. Then a map appears, showing the DA headquarters and surrounding buildings.

The Acorn Woodpecker appears on the map and speaks to the user.

"Here it is! Can I show you around?"

The user is presented with two options.

Yes and no options show at the bottom of the dialogue box.

Selecting the Map button brings the user directly to the map and the game treats it as a mission site.

Selecting the no option:

"Okay then, explore on your own. Leave no stone unturned! Except for that stone in the pond because that's actually a painted turtle – a really grumpy one."

Selecting the checkmark initiates a dialogue with the Avatar.