



Where Home and reality intersect: A Xi (pronounced "zai") billboard in Birmingham, England.

The Truth Behind Xi

For a second, your heart stops beating. "It's just a game," you remind yourself. "Just a game." You're driving down a street, maybe from work or school. For the past few days, you've been logged into the PlayStation Home, trying to unravel the mystery of "Xi" and find Jess, a girl from the United Kingdom who's gone missing. It's a virtual mystery that invites PS3 owners to dive through phony puzzles and games as if there were something serious at stake. It's an Alternate Reality Game [ARG].

But for a moment, you forget that it's fake, because the billboard you just drove past in real life has the words "www.XiJess.com" scrawled across the bottom.

"It's just a game," you repeat to yourself. But you're not logged into PlayStation Home at the moment... The game has invaded reality. It's become the obsession of millions of PS3 owners across the world.

So we had to talk to the team that made it happen.



A customized summer apartment, decorated for the testers' party. Woohoo, time to dance!

Who's Talking?



And what's nDreams?

"A studio that makes unconventional games. We're always the first to do whatever we do, and we'll never do the same thing twice."

—David Varela, Producer of Xi



"We aim to work on innovative titles. We like working on the edges of the games industry, exploring new areas and lurking in the shadows."

—Patrick O'Lunaigh, Creative Director of Xi and founder of nDreams



PTOM: How did you come up with the idea of making an ARG for Home?

Patrick O'Lunaigh: I'd seen a presentation about Home at the Edinburgh Interactive Festival in 2007. I was really inspired by the possibilities, so I spoke to some guys I knew at SCEE, and pitched them the idea which formed the basis of Xi—a mysterious ARG-style game centred in Home. Fortunately, two visionary guys, Tomas Gillo and Phil Harrison, really bought into it and brought us on board.

David Varela: As soon as I heard about Home, I knew it would be a great platform for an adventure. It's such a good match—Home and ARGs are made for each other.

When did work on this project start?

POL: December 2007. Just over a year before we launched Xi. The first six months was spent experimenting; we got the chance to really understand what Home is capable of and then we designed Xi around what we'd learned.

How many people worked on Xi?

DV: There was a core team of six. In such a small team, everybody has to multitask, so job descriptions were pretty flexible. We outsourced some of the art, but really, the vast majority of the work was done by six guys in one room.



What was the ultimate goal?

DV: I think we all had our own specific goals. I wanted to tell a good story and give people a fun ride. I think Patrick wanted to show what Home could do in terms of gameplay and technology. Sony wanted us to create a sense of community and get people coming into Home day after day. Ultimately, Xi is the videogame equivalent of a soap opera—a game that develops over time and keeps you coming back to find out more.

POL: I'm just hugely proud that Xi happened at all. It'll always be the first console-based ARG.

An ARG blurs the line between reality and fiction. Did that make it hard to keep track of what was fiction and what wasn't?

POL: It did get a little crazy at times. We've had players pretending to be characters in the game and sending messages/codes to other players.

DV: When you open up a game into the real world, it gets people questioning everything—you create a heightened state of awareness. People thought they could see Xi everywhere. The poor guy who spotted the first Xi billboard poster thought he was losing his mind.

What is your favourite object/game/character/whatever in Xi?

POL: I loved putting the fish-tank games together, and I'm very pleased with the Alpha Zone 1 games. The karaoke video in the party (which combines green-screen and machinima) is fab. Character-wise, Ignatius is great—he's definitely the character who is the most fun to follow.

DV: I have a soft spot for Stapler the robot. And I loved watching the forums as all the players worked together on the billboard



puzzle around the world. But then there's the crane game in Maintenance too... There's too much to choose from.

Any interesting stories about the development of Xi?

DV: Every game I work on, I always end up doing the dirty work. I was the one hiding USB flash drives in the mud on Hampstead Heath. I was the one scouting a puzzle trail round the streets of Paris in a blizzard. Next time, I'm going to make sure we're working somewhere tropical...

POL: We've got some great footage of David looking like a drowned rat in Paris! To be honest, Xi has been a total blast. Watching the community "live" has to be the best bit—the Billboard puzzle was brilliant as we got to see players working together across multiple languages, dashing around Europe whilst the U.S. community drove them on...

Any plans for the future?

POL: We have lots of ideas for Home post-Xi. Home is capable of so much more than you've seen so far; we've only really scratched the surface. We're talking to Sony about a few of the ideas, so if everyone who is enjoying Xi can contact Sony and tell them, that would be great.