

# Tracking Agama Design Document

*Written by:*

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**Abstract:**

*Tracking Agama* is an investigation in mobile and location-based storytelling. Using a combination of SMS messaging, voice calls and blog entries, *Tracking Agama* leads its participants on a narrative-based exploration of Los Angeles, in pursuit of a fabled urban researcher, “Agama.” Participants use a bit of detective work to discover the keywords allowing access to Agama’s voice-activated and phone-accessible audio diary entries; send and receive SMS messages from Agama and his assistant; and receive calls from the virtual characters.

**Introduction**

Tracking Agama invites players to experience downtown Los Angeles like never before, perhaps even for the first time in their lives. This project was designed with the intention of getting people out into a city that often goes unexplored or overlooked, even though it is full of so many hidden treasures.

Players are asked to interact with a narrative and become part of a puzzle that will lead them through new places, maybe some familiar places, and to see them in a different light, to experience them in unexpected ways, to redefine them as spaces that hold a new meaning for the player. Mobile technology offers us a platform to do this.

Our ultimate goal is to get people out of their cars, into the downtown area, away from their daily routine, and maybe even ride public transportation. Los Angeles often becomes synonymous with Hollywood, actors, cars and traffic, even though so much of Los Angeles history is rooted in the downtown area. We've focused on a few downtown locations, integrating an intriguing narrative, urban legends and historical information with the hopes of offering a new kind of experience to our players—one in which our players will look upon their city differently, exploring its layers of fiction, myth, history, architecture and topography.

## Mechanics of the Experience

*Tracking Agama* begins with a research blog published by the story's protagonist, Agama. Agama, as a newcomer to Los Angeles, becomes enthralled with the mysteries and urban legends of the downtown area. As he begins to unearth some information that was well buried (with good reason) he becomes entangled in a web of secrets, elaborate cover-ups and urban legends he believes to be legitimate. The deeper Agama digs, the more haunted he becomes by his own research, leading him into a downward spiral towards insanity. But just when it seems Agama has gone off the deep end, a mysterious post (see below) appears on his blog, posted by a stranger determined to enlist the help of others to save his friend Agama.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying 'http://trackingagama.net/research/'. The page content includes a header with the title '|| tracking agama ||', a date 'July 30, 2005', and a section titled 'help'. The main text of the post discusses a friend named Agama, mentions a voice memo system, and provides a phone number: 877-730-8047. It also lists two code words: 'Mirror' and 'Red Line'. On the right side of the page, there is a calendar for 'MAY 2006', a search box with the text 'Search this site:' and a 'Search' button, and a list of 'ARCHIVES' with links for July 2005, June 2005, May 2005, March 2005, February 2005, and January 2005. Below the archives is a 'RECENT ENTRIES' section with a link to 'help'.

*Final post to Agama's blog containing a phone number the player is meant to call (actual text located at end of this document).*

This final post, authored by "Shufelt", a "friend and collaborator", contains a phone number and some key words. It is at this point that we hope our potential players will be intrigued enough to pick up their phones, dial the number and follow prompts to enter the words provided. This phone number serves as an access point to Agama's voice

messaging system, which he uses as a voice recorder for his research. The player therefore gains access to many of Agama's research notes and can retrace his steps to help solve the mystery of his disappearance. The first message sends the player off to their first location, and from there they must begin to piece together the story by finding clues and codes embedded in the various locations around downtown Los Angeles. These clues and codes can be entered into the mobile phone as either SMS messages or as codes entered into Agama's voice mail box, accessed via the phone number posted on the blog. By sending a SMS message or entering a code, the player triggers one of many possible responses, including a response SMS from Shufelt or Agama or a return phone call from a story character, each giving more clues or instructions for finding Agama.

### **Required Hardware:**

*Tracking Agama* is designed to be used by the widest possible audience, and therefore utilizing the simplest of hardware/software. Any SMS-enabled mobile phone can be used to access *Tracking Agama*.

### **Technical Agama:**

The technical system for tracking agama was created with commercial, off-the-shelf technology and services, along with some VoiceXML (VXML) programming. It relies chiefly on two major components, a java based mail server, and a voice-enabled server application written in VXML.

### **Text Messaging**

The java mail server, James, is responsible for the text messaging aspects of the game, receiving incoming SMS messages, and parsing them to look for the specific codes the user is supposed to submit. Based on those codes, the application sends either a text message response back to the player, or, by using an Outbound mail java class handled by a voice application deployment service (*Tracking Agama* was originally developed and tested using a developer account from the provider BeVocal), makes a phone call to the user. When the player answers this call, they are handed over to the VXML system, which plays audio files, or performs text-to-speech synthesis, depending on the code initially input.

## Agama Notes

The second component of the system -- the Agama Notes system, which the protagonist uses as a research tool -- also relies on the commercial voice application deployment service and the VXML architecture. To access an AgamaNote, a player dials an 800 number. This call is received by the voice application deployment service, which points the call to a page on the TrackingAgama web server. This web page is written in vxml, and performs a variety of functions, such as prompting the user to enter a code, as well as playing the pre-recorded Agama notes themselves. Since the vxml pages are simple scripts interpreted by a web browser, the system also uses a PHP front-end and a MYSQL back-end to store useful information about each player, such as their phone number, the date and time they started playing, and their current location in the game.

trackingagama.net is powered by the weblog software Movable Type 3.1 and MYSQL. The server itself is running Apache 2.0 on Red Hat Linux 9.0.

### Goals and Theory

One of our primary goals was to address physical space, in this case 6 locations in downtown LA, and attempt to drive a “second look” at these spaces. So often, the cell phone and other mobile communications technology is cited as source of dislocation from our physical environment, so we took it as our challenge to design a project wherein the mobile platform became a conduit for engagement with the surroundings, thus simultaneously rethinking the space and the options for mobile technology. With this emphasis, distinguishing between a 'space' and a 'place' became a useful idea in conceptualizing Tracking Agama. Space has physical dimension, shape, boundaries, but place a personal, or societal or cultural resonance or context. Our goal was to use narrative delivery via cell phone in the physical *space* to modulate the understanding (via history, urban legend, new fiction, and puzzle elements) of the location as a *place*. For example, how many people consider the supernatural origins of the Bradbury Building while inside and experiencing its unique design, then try and connect to anything else in LA?

Because one of our goals was to offer as much flexibility in terms of engagement to our participant, and we hoped to accommodate both the person who wanted to explore the whole story in one afternoon as well as the person who wanted to read the blog one night, hit the library on a lunch break, hit Union Station and Angel's Flight on a weekend morning we decided upon an episodic narrative structure—even micro-episodic. We used the idea of “story nuggets” in the form of both the AgamaNotes and ShufeltCalls, which were designed to offer tiny chunks of story the participant would access in the space and on the move.

*Tracking Agama* exhibits an intersection of game and narrative design. The narrative pathways are available to the users to pursue on their terms, but, whereas narratives usually conceal their internal logic to be revealed or discovered as the narrative progresses and games reveal their internal logic and invite participation within those boundaries, *Tracking Agama* does a little of both. First, the player must master the keyword selection pattern used by the character Agama. Then, it is through player action deciphering puzzles by combining the keyword scheme with exploration of the location, that the narrative logic is revealed. Thus, the player produces the narrative by his or her actions, becoming an author in a way, since only certain aspects of the entire narrative will be evident--those that the player has successfully solved.

## Who is "Tracking Agama"?

Principal Authors: Will Carter, Todd Furmanski, Tripp Millican, Bradley Newman, Scott Ruston, Jen Stein (School of Cinema-Television, USC).

Technical Engineer: Will Carter

Narrative Wranglers: Scott Ruston, Jen Stein, Bradley Newman

Audio Production: Tripp Millican

Technical Consultant: Professor Julian Bleecker, PhD

## Appendix

### Sample from Blog:

[Final Post]

July 30, 2005

help

To all who might read this: My friend and collaborator, Agama, the creator of this blog, has been out of contact for sometime. If you've read the blog, you know of my friend's interest in the occult, the supernatural and the mysterious. Recently, his messages had been strange - paranoid even. As if he was being chased or stalked. Silly. Except he claimed to have found the lost half of a map that would unlock a great mystery. It would confer great power and knowledge upon whomever learns the truth of this mystery. I suppose Agama's fears might not have been unfounded?

I've been trying to unlock Agama's voice memo system and finally have been successful! He uses keywords as the trigger code, something evident in the location he records the note or pertinent about the subject he's talking about. So, you dial his AgamaNote number, then speak the keyword and the associated AgamaNote plays.

I am house-bound and cannot follow Agama's trail. If you're willing to help me track down my friend, I can assure you we will all share in the riches when we find his secrets.

Thinking about conversations I've had with Agama, and reading the blog, I think I've found two keywords for AgamaNotes. One is an early one, in which he describes the Red Line. The second is hard to make out, but I'm sure he's talking about the mirror he found.

Here's the AgamaNote phone number: 877-730-XXXX

Try these two code words:

Mirror

and

Red Line.

Those are the only two vague words I could make work. Try using specific words found in the locations from here on out.

Sounds like he was going to hide the mirror where it would blend in with some artifacts, maybe in a piece of art? Did he say it was at Union Station?

If you'd like to help, I can be contacted by text message. Try texting those keywords to me. Example: send the text message 'red line mirror' to me at: agama@mail.trackingagama.net

When you're done with a location, text me the keywords for that location, just like you've just done with "red line mirror". That way I can do some research on these words, remember conversations I've had with Agama, and help guide you a bit.

Posted by shufelt on July 30, 2005 | Comments (13)

February 28, 2005

### silent angels

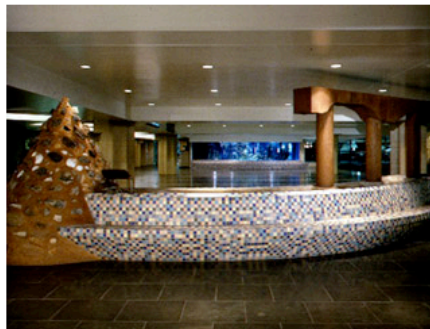
I had a chance to wander around downtown again today. I generally try to take the Metro (Red Line mostly, but also need the gold line to get to Union station) when I go downtown, so I got off at Pershing Square today and did a little exploring. Stopped into Grand Central Market for some lunch and then continued with the mighty exploration of this ghost town. It seems that no matter what hour I wonder, there is still no more than a handful of people around, yet it always feels like someone is following me. Perhaps it is called "city of angels" for a reason...if you believe that kind of stuff.

Speaking of angels, also felt the need to go to Angel's Flight, across the street from the Market. I was inspired by a little piece I read in the LA Downtown Newspaper, "Grand Central Market goes 99" which was actually about, of all things, the grand opening of a 99 cent shop in Grand Central Market! but this is the more interesting part: "When the Grand Central Market opened in 1917...99 cents could buy three-dozen eggs or 99 trips up and down Angels Flight Railway." I suddenly had a flashback to a lively, thriving downtown of yesteryear, with people carrying their eggs, taking their weekly groceries up Angels Flight, the hustle and bustle expected in a big city. This vision led me across the street to the old Railway. but when I got there, I felt as if this place had a darker past than that of the locals tossing a penny to ride up Bunker Hill. I felt an eerie silence all around, again feeling like someone was watching over me. Another slight breeze blew around me, sending a bag from the 99 cent store over my shoulder, the rustling of the plastic bringing me back to the present, standing alone in front of angels flight. perhaps I will look further into the history of Angels Flight when I visit the library next time.

Posted by agama at [09:44 AM](#) | [Comments \(4\)](#)

February 27, 2005

### riverbench



Cool artwork in the Gateway Center part of Union Station, beyond all the tracks.

Easy to miss if you arrive by car.

Posted by agama at [10:57 AM](#) | [Comments \(16\)](#)