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TIME SHARE

TIME SHARE is a performance and a play on a consumer model within a time share sales experience as seen through basic design principles of the Alternate Reality Game and the basic principles of Consumer Theory. In TIME SHARE we will look at how in an Alternate Reality Game, Performance Play and Customer Sales Agents use Real Life as a Medium to win a game. We also look at what winning can produce for the player and how the win can add to the game narrative.

THE ALTERNATE REALITY GAME

Alternate reality games use the real world as a platform to create an evolving interactive narrative in real time. ARG is a kind of randomized fiction that is defined by its rule set, authorship, and coherence. A Puppet Master (PM) designs the ARG rule set and remains behind The Curtain, which is performers will call the fourth wall, and what gamers will call the outer wall, between the PM and the players. A Rabbit Hole is the point of entry into the game, however to remain coherent ARG's use the TINAG (This Is Not A Game) esthetic to maintain a seamless real world platform and to keep authorship open to the randomness of actual real world interactions. To maintain coherence an ARG utilizes Real Life as a medium, where a player operates within the game using his/her real-world identifiers, such as credit cards, license, address, phone number, but may build fictional stories to win challenges with other players.

PLAYING CUSTOMER AND CONSUMER THEORY

The word *customer* is only a label, it entails that the individual is human and has potential to be persuaded to consume a product and will return to consume again. To influence a customer the sales agent: does not need to be human; must use sales tactics; must compile and use complied data on this individual; must understand a consumer.

Consumers create demand for commodities, but a consumer is also a commodity that it is defined by what it does and does not buy. Different types of consumers create different consumption models. The “substitution model” exists within all types of models when a specific good or service is substituted by another product for a less costly one or one with “rewards”. There is also the, “gay lifestyle/subculture” consumption model based on service-scapes: consumption patterns in service environments. These models also rely on the assumption that the consumer; is rational but sometimes moody; has needs and is emotional; sticks to a budget; has taste, preference, or bias and understands that even with persuasion from a sales agent there will be exceptions to consumer behavior when the consumer will not act in self-interest.

For an artist-as-customer, consumer behavioral models and sales agent tactics are the line on which an ARG such as the Welcome Tour and TIME SHARE can unfold. TIME SHARE is a performance of the code scripted for and by a customer within a consumption model. Defining the challenges within this play is the sales agent and a system of managerial power above her/him. The further up in managerial power the customer goes to enable a commodity exchange the less power the customer has, unless the consumer’s rules of play change or the player suddenly adapts to a different consumption model.

How I Perform "The Customer"

To perform the role of The Customer I first consider consumption models, my purpose for shopping, and how my routines might be dictated or outsourced by a consumption model. When I become the artist-as-customer, I become as many shapes and types of customers as there are people watching when performing consumer routines: in public like at Target; semi-public like a drive thru; or private like online. To perform the customer you simply must show up at a place of consumption and be prepared to play the consumer.

The Consumer Play Toolbox

Playing The Consumer requires: engaging in customer relations / doing exactly what is assumed of your character and knowing how to change what is assumed of you / indifference and saying yes to everything solicited to you / ignorance of quality / being sensitive to your surroundings / being personable with your sales agent / performing consumer weaknesses / keeping engaged in conversation with your sales agent / knowing how long your sales person can show you attention and respect you as a customer / being able to walk away / sometimes knowing how to be relentless in your goal as a consumer which is to consume / being sensitive to which sales agent appears as the best to approach for help / performing having or not having a spending limit / knowing how to push your agent to perform their product knowledge in a way that make *them* feel good / performing that you seek expertise / performing that you trust experts / having or not having an idea about what people do and do not do with the products they buy / having a mental map of the store / having a few cancelled credit cards in your name / acquiring your product within a specific amount of time / knowing how to develop an escape plan on the spot / believable pretexting / knowing who the sales agent thinks or knows who you are / knowing the store policies / keeping the receipt and a good understanding of the stores return policy.

Player Product: Player as Product

The performance must look like a standard customer routine. The play must generate an outcome. You should consider your performance routine generative and the product your play generates is the documentation of your routine. Your product should also define your process and the breadth of your process will become definitive of your product. Your process should be replicated several hundreds of times in similar and different economic models.

The Right Sales Agent

A critical stance at why and how products are sold to us is a crucial part of being a critical player of life but this critical perspective does not apply to the artist-as customer. A Sales Agents job is to represent a company and be on the selling end of a deal. I've come to know that a sales agent's motivation is not so often capital driven as it is role driven, and that often sales agents are just looking to make a personal connection while selling you a product as it has been sold to them. It is important to determine whether your sales agent has dual values and is interested in being honest and feels responsible for both parties. If so, this may make your play difficult and you might determine that this sales agent is not a player of the game. You may want to seek out a sales manager. Sales managers bring game; they are often profit driven and utilize consumer strategy in order to sell the highest value product.

TIME SHARE

ARG: The Welcome Tour.

Players: Liz, Blanqita, Grupo Mayan Sales team.

Platform: The Grand Mayan Resort.

Storyteller/Collaborator/Archeologist: Charles, Rosa, Kelli, Liz.

In March of 2009 I participated in, The Welcome Tour, at The Grand Mayan Resort in Playa del Carmen Mexico. My best friend from college has a best friend from high school who got married and took her honey moon in Mexico where they were looped into buying a time-share at a lavish resort. What looked like a sweet deal complete with property-flip options and estate value turned into unmentioned thousands of dollars a year in “pre-approved” credit card payments, landing them deep into a newlywed money hole. A few years later my best- friend from college asked her best friend from high school if we could vacation at her time-share. Her friend said Yes, but don’t sign up for the “Welcome Tour” it’s actually a vicious time-share presentation; very few people get out without being tricked into buying a time-share.

During our flight to Mexico I asked my friend about her friends Welcome Tour experience and why they have not ever used their time-share since they bought it some years ago. She told me a wicked story of deception, lots of “free!-free!-free!” and fraudulent lending, how what they bought was not actually what they were sold, no-renegotiation on consumer contracts out of US borders, and sales tactics that are tailored to individuals idea of the American Dream of ownership and estate building. I was more and more intrigued by my friends story of her friends experience and had a deep desire to know first what this time-share presentation was

like and how it could be so dangerously deceptive. I wanted to play! When we got to the reception desk at the resort a team of Grupo Mayan representatives invited us to the Welcome Breakfast, this was my Rabbit Hole.

My friends walked away from the group but I stayed, and against my friends' pleas not to, and her friends' warning, I signed up for the Welcome Tour with a game plan: I will perform the consumption model of a target customer and play my part; I will deny all deals packaged for me until either my sales agent grants me access to a 100 year time-share entirely for free or I get dismissed from the sale. (As part of the Welcome Tour allure, if my sales agent does not make the sale I get \$50 cash and 10% off of my entire vacation bill.)

The following morning of our vacation I show up to the Welcome Tour as the performing the perfect target buyer; *Liz: a white 29year old free-lance software developer/artist and single lesbian, with a lot of expendable income and perfect credit, who takes several international vacations a year with friends, family, and lovers, all whom love to drink go to museums and visit spas**. I handed in my handwritten profile to the sales agents, gave her my license and two (canceled) credit cards to photocopy and waited near the resort bar to observe their profiling process and resist the free blended cocktails being served to all Welcome Tour-ers. There is some dispute over profile papers as I observe a manager call over a dark haired woman in all black, cleavage, large earrings, a skirt, a black shiny purse, her eyes rounded with charcoal like a Mayan Moon Goddess. She was handed some papers and as she came toward me I tensed up. I knew she was a professional and although I had my intentions within this game I worried that she might be better than me at it and that I might get scammed into actually signing for a time-share myself. She smiled and firmly shook my hand. As I blushed toward her cleavage I knew

my game face was on. Her name is Blanquita, a Grupo Mayan specialist. I am Liz,-re-skinned as described above.

*Just a few months before this trip I had been asked to participate in research studies at UPENN. One, which at the time I did not fit the criteria for, was a gay couple marketing study where I was introduced to the work and research of Katherine Sender, author of *Business not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*. The concept of marketing to subculture was very interesting and likely influenced my profile description.

COMPLIMENTARY LUNCH: Real Life as the Medium

The assessment begins; it is pretty well known that sales agents will observe the ways in which their target pays attention to things such as the click of a pen, or the texture of a fabric, or the smell of a meal, or the weight of an item. The ways in which a customer finds an item interesting will become the agent's selling points.

In ARG players will use stories from their real life as a platform for deception and a medium for building a stronger character. As a customer as player, being aware of this allows you to play a more critical game in which to challenge your opponent.

Before seeing the properties Blanquita and I sat down to a *complementary* lunch over which she asked questions about me as listed on my profile such as my career as an artist and software developer. She expressed concern over my being an artist as it might not bring in a steady income. Blanquita claimed to have no artistic talent herself and complimented me on my solid income from software developing calling it "responsible". I didn't take her cue to elaborate on my income status, projects, or career. I told her a few true stories about my childhood, traveling with my parents in New England on roller-coaster and waterslide tours,

being an observant Mormon, and traveling to Italy when in college. I created stories about failed relationships with other women and tell Blanquita that being good at dating and the romance is what is important to me, settling down is not.

Blanquita tells me about her life: she lives in Cancun and is single, she tells me, she has two teenage children, and one is great at soccer. She showed me 4x6" prints of her with two children. She said that her brother works for Microsoft and she has family in Seattle. She tells me she wants to take her kids skiing in Massachusetts someday and that she dates often and has a crush on one of the other male agents who is married.

Blanquita comments on my choice of traditional Mexican foods from the elaborate buffet. She describes each dish and tells me what region these dishes are from. I find myself commenting on the colors and smell of the food. We enjoy each other's company and finish up our lunch and move on to the presentation rooms.

THE PROPERTY TOUR: This Is Not a Hoax

It's a long warm tropical weather walk to the edge of the Grand Mayan Property where the presentation rooms are located. It is during this time of being sold on beautiful weather, "natural" landscaping, and luxurious odorants of tropical blooms that I am made aware of the subtle meta-communications between me and Blanquita, "The presentation rooms are the rooms of the future, ones that you will "upgrade" to in 10 years after they are built." She is introducing me to the framework of the game, *'let's trade something that appears real but does*

not exist in actuality', referring to both the time-share she is trying to sell me and the money (or credit) I have to finance such a purchase.

We approach what looks like a bunker, a single square solid concrete building. We enter and walk up two flights of stairs to the first dwelling. Blanquita stops before we walk in to tell me that the first space we see is the highest upgrade a Grand Mayan member can get, and that I am not yet eligible for this upgrade because I have to first be a member for many years. She points out toward the ocean and says that plans for a water park to be built on the ocean front have been made, then continues to guide me in to the Master Suite.

"All of the rooms are master suites that can be broken down or paired up depending on the amount of guests you wish to bring to the resort", she says which translates into '*the more guests you bring to the resort the more people Grupo Mayan has to sell time shares to*'. She asks me if I plan to bring guests here and says that there are "free vacations" for family and friends but they are exclusive deals and we can talk about them later.

We enter through the Master Room, the substitution model, which has a King sized bed, a pull out that makes two more twin beds, an in-room Jacuzzi, a marble bathroom, air conditioning, and a safety deposit box. From there we enter The Master Suite which has a mini-pool on the balcony, sofa beds, a full kitchen, two twin trundle beds, 1 ½ full marble bathrooms, a dining room, a breakfast nook, a/c and more. The Master Room and the Master Suite become the Grand Master Suite when connected by removable doors.

PRESENTATION ROOMS: This Is Not a Game

Blanquita left me alone to look and touch things around the rooms; a few times she sat down and watched me look around while occasionally commenting on things like Egyptian cotton sheets 600tc, local art, private Jacuzzi. She said that if I did not like the art in the showrooms that here were catalogues of art to choose from. Blanquita sold me on subculture type interests as she described the spa and the several types of luxurious massages and amenities, the gym, karaoke night, night shuttles to Cancun clubs, private VIP happy hour I'd have access to as an upgraded member, and the several types of room service made to order.

As she sold me on perks, my consumer-self found it easy to forget that I was not eligible for this space and that this space doesn't exist anywhere else in the resort. Standing at the marble island in the kitchen, in my consumer-mind, I imagined the parties I could host at the resort, with family and friends to invite along with new friends I meet at the resort. In the Master Suite bedroom I listened to Blanquita tell me of all the young professionals that visit the resort during spring break every year, my consumer-mind elaborated on the networking-vacation opportunities this space could afford me. There were many mirrors and I took the time to look at myself in them just to see myself in this space. In my consumer-mind I imagined myself as the person who vacations here year after year, a person who affords this facade for luxury and I thought about quality of experience. In the Master bathroom I sat on the edge of the bathtub while Blanquita told me stories of large families who all take their time share at the same time every year. In my consumer-mind I imagined the fun kids must have swimming and hanging out in these large lavish spaces and I remembered my mom putting a bunch of kids in a tub to clean

up after the beach. Blanquita didn't have to try too hard in this space as it pretty much sold itself as I was lost in trance with consumer-imagination.

After the Grand Master Suite tour, I could very well understand how my friend's newly-wed friends got *pwned*; they were so taken by their ideals and dreams. It was easy to see after hearing ways in which this could be made affordable how they could just hand over their credit cards and ask where to sign.

Blanquita and I looked out to the beach front to take in the view one last time before the contract signing. I thought about this code of squares and rectangles that she kept drawing on her folder to explain the space and time and costs of the time shares and at the same time I was so saturated with luxury and imagining my consumer-self in these spaces: hosting parties; sending family on vacations; bringing lovers on vacation and having sex in big beds on a Caribbean night in February, it was as if her codes were drawn in sand and washed away with the tide by the time we got to the contract room.

THE CONTRACT: Collaborative Storytelling.

We walk back through the lush landscape toward the resort to the contract room, which is a huge open and cool conference room filled with hundreds of small round white plastic tables and fold out chairs, and hundreds of people- more agents than customers. This is where the Grupo Mayan Puppet Masters live, I can smell it. This is where all the content from the

Complimentary Lunch, the Property Tour, and the Presentation Rooms will culminate into a faceoff in player data speculation and analysis.

We sit down; she gives me a glass of water, and goes to a counter to retrieve paperwork. When she returns she says, "Congratulations! You've been pre-approved a line of credit!" and pulls out her contract. The contract is the "white space" that Blanquita needs me to "author" in order to complete our narrative on her terms. My performance as artist-as-customer-as-player is tested while I refuse to sign immediately and ask about the free vacation deals she mentioned when asking about my family. As she explains the cheap deal, one free vacation for two, I refuse it. This was especially difficult after I did actually feel comfortable with her over the hours we spent together. Blanquita continued to make offers based upon her observational understanding of me- both customer and consumer. I tried to remain aware of her sales tactics and I did but it was hard when she offered more free vacations for my family I thought about how much my real-life-mom would love to sit by the sea and how much my real-life-dad would love to play golf here. Blanquita drew the squares and rectangles on yellow paper this time, with pencil indicating "free vacation" space for relatives if I sign for her offer, but I only get this offer once and if I don't sign now I can't get it again. I considered breaking fourth-wall or "outer border" and signing her contract but I successfully pulled out of my emotionality when remembering the highlighter on yellow paper trick Blanquita began to employ. This is when I came full force with my game as a consumer. She offered me more free vacations and perks, and I repetitively demanded that she cut me a better deal. I told Blanquita, "I'm not leaving here until you sell me a free time-share." After several attempts at re-packaging the perks she couldn't deliver the deal I was demanding which was free everything, without signing a

contract. She forfeited the sale I think mainly because she had no idea what I was trying to do, and she brought over another Grupo Mayan agent.

He wore reflective wrap around sports sunglasses on his head, a sports style polo shirt, had tan muscular arms with a thick layer of fat grown over the muscle, piercing blue eyes, a condescending attitude, and an accent. He attempted to offer me more free vacations and more perks in highlighter and yellow paper (which does not translate to a photocopy for proof of offer). He said only he could offer me these great deals and if I don't accept them by signing now I will not be offered them again. I denied all of his deals but continued to demand a better deal from him.

He invited another agent over, he was a thin attractive man with a blue button up shirt and black pants, gelled hair, and he had a simple "matter of fact" selling attitude. His grand deals of free snorkeling and dinner packages were vocalized and highlighters and pencil on yellow paper were used to describe his deals, which I led on to include free vacations for friends, and family, free golf, and now free car rental for a week's stay. I said that these were nice deals but I know he could cut me better deals and I wanted more.

More agents came to the table and stayed at the table because depending on whose deal I accept it's that agent that gets the commission. Finally, the supervisor was called over with several agents standing around me, he flipped through the pile of collected yellow papers and in a very thick accent said that he was looking at some of the best deals he has ever seen so what was the problem. I was intimidated and aware that I was causing a scene in a large room of prospective buyers. I told the supervisor that I demanded to be cut all of those deal AND a better deal and that I wanted to buy a free time-share. At this point the supervisor placed

down the yellow papers, handed me \$50 in cash and a signed paper that my bill would reflect 10% off. He helped me out of my chair and escorted me forcefully, his-hands-on-my-shoulders, out of the sales room and told me I was not welcome to participate in a Grupo Mayan time-share presentation ever again- in other words, the game is not re-playable. I was, as Huizinga says, “literally cast-out”, like a spoil-sport because I “rob play of its illusion.., and threaten the existence of the play community.”¹

¹ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, London: Roy Publishers, 1950 Kindle Edition Location 244 of 4612

THE PRODUCT: Storytelling as Archeology

I left feeling terrified and wondering how I was going to tell this story to anyone, how could anyone understand what I just put myself through?! The adrenaline I was feeling left my hindsight scattered while trying to tell my friends the story it came out as largely disassembled. They said, *silly Liz just doing her social experiments again*, it wasn't just a social experiment or just another one of my performances: it was a game and I had won! It took nearly a year to get the story out in a way that feels relevant to how I approached it and experienced it. To get there I had to do a lot of research. I found blog upon blog post by people who've been on Grupo Mayan timeshare tours. I read consumer theory and the scary book, *Social Engineering and The Art of Human Hacking*. I found lawsuits from the State of California against Grupo Mayan. I found out that Grupo Mayan partners with Bank of America in pre-approved credit line for its actually "ineligible" customers. Online, Grupo Mayan is consistently listed as one of the top 3 major resort time-share scams of all time. By law any business transaction is reversible within three days, but you can only take the Welcome Tour on your first day and often a Grand Mayan vacation is five days long, and it's a month and a half before you receive your first bill and see that all that "free" isn't at all free, in fact for some it is over 1,000 a month in debt for decades. In Robert Pisolla's CA state class-action lawsuit he accuses *El Grupo Mayan Palace of bilking U.S. citizens of "hundreds of millions of dollars" in Mayan Resorts*

*timeshares, using “high-pressure fraudulent sales tactics that are comparable to the worst tactics ever employed by used car salesmen in a Hollywood movie.”*²

This suit, filed in California against time-share credit lenders FIA (Bank of America) and sales group Grupo Mayan, lost due to a Federal Trade Commission document released in March 2005³

The thought of owning a vacation home may sound appealing, but the year-round responsibility — and expense — that come with it may not. Purchasing a timeshare or vacation plan may be an alternative. If you consider a timeshare or vacation plan, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation’s consumer protection agency, says it’s a good idea to do some homework.

-An excerpt from *Time And Time Again: Buying and Selling Time-Shares and Vacation Plans*. FTC 2005

posting awareness of the predatory lending engine as, how I interpret it, risky but like gambling it’s legal. I won an award for doing my homework! Finding these pieces all over the internet helped me reassemble my game experience, place meaning on my win, and relevance for the art I created about my win.

² <http://www.mycollector.com/mayanclassactionpaisola.pdf>, p.2

³ <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/homes/rea15.pdf>

THE PICTURES: The Platform-less Narrative

The Platform-less narrative is, “a story that is not bound to a single medium and exists independently of the medium. But it is also a story that will use whatever medium it can to make itself heard.” When I got dismissed from the time share I was terrified, and was pretty sure they were going to kick us out of the resort or that my friends and I were going to have to find another place to stay or that our passports and money in the safe weren’t safe. I’m reminded of what gamers call “Boss Battles” and the psychological repercussions of “GAME OVER”.

I booked time with the resort Photographer to document my experience.

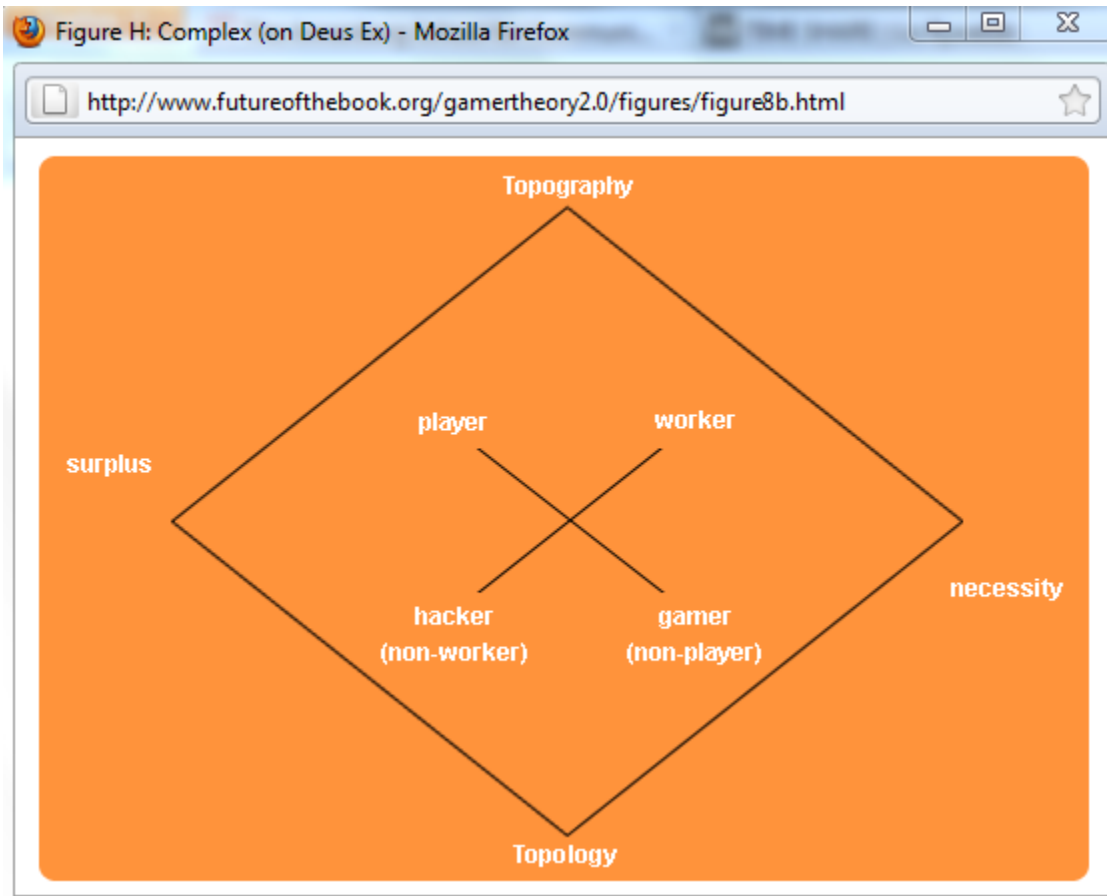
CONCLUSION/Proposal

The Grupo Mayan Welcome Tour is an Alternate Reality Game, it is commercial, uses real world as platform and real life as medium, it relies on storytelling and almost anyone can play. It is not the typical non-committal, calming and low-risk level leisure game people expect to slip off to when escaping stress on a Caribbean Vacation. The typical person on such a vacation is also unaware the ARG even exist. The game of customer/consumer I played within their game is a super small part of the entire Grupo Mayan ARG Narrative. There are likely thousands of other non-players who didn't buy a timeshare and gave their agent a hard-time just like me. The difference between us and them is that despite online blog posts and lawsuits our stories are largely disorganized and Grupo Mayan is stream lined and organized. As the Puppet Master, Grupo Mayan has their narrative and the money of people they cut open for lines of credit in defense of their own game. I take inspiration from Gamer Theory 2.0, 179. where, regarding a multiple ending video game, McKenzie Wark says:

For the gamer, it is always a matter of starting at the beginning and playing through to the end...there are different ways of getting from beginning to end.* It can be done by stealth, by violence, or negotiation, but either way the game reveals itself level by level, from start to finish. For the gamer as theorist, perhaps ... it's a matter of taking the end as the starting point. The question of what can constitute

an end state is the question of what occupies the limits to thought within game space.

For my narrative to be the stronger player I must begin where I left off in search of alternate endings. I must replicate my game at the several Grupo Mayan locations worldwide and to other time-share presentations like it to produce more images and further the TIME SHARE story. This way I will have a narrative of my own wins collected and a steady guideline as to how other people can play TIME SHARE too.



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