



This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement Understanding Alternate Reality Games

Ivan Askwith

Executive Summary

During the summer of 2001, a Microsoft team developed an interactive cross-media murder mystery known as “The Beast” as a promotional campaign for Steven Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence*. Designed to require audience participation and collaboration, The Beast is now recognized as the first significant “alternate reality game,” or ARG.

Since the conclusion of The Beast, more than a dozen major ARGs have been designed and implemented, engaging participants in collaborative experiences that last anywhere from days to months.

A range of motives have driven the development of these projects. Several have been volunteer efforts, designed to provide engaging experiences to other ARG enthusiasts. Others have experimented with models for monetizing ARGs as commercial products and services. But most of all, ARGs have followed the example Microsoft set with “The Beast,” developing these interactive campaigns to market and promote products, brands and companies.

There are many compelling reasons for companies to explore the use of ARGs in promoting their products and brands. Alternate reality games encourage the creation of strong player communities, and center the attention of these communities on whatever material the designers can effectively incorporate into the game experience. At their best, ARGs capitalize on the growing awareness that *experience* is one of the most powerful marketing tools available, and most ARGs have proven both cost-efficient and highly effective in generating public awareness and media coverage for their sponsors and designers.

ARGs are not without their problems, however. If ARGs are not designed with a clear understanding of the motives that compel audiences to participate and the expectations that participants bring to such campaigns, as well as an awareness of the successes and failures that have already taken place, they can be not only ineffective but damaging.

This white paper is intended to provide a basic historical context of ARGs; to draw upon several short case studies to demonstrate how ARGs have been used, and with what results; to give potential designers a better understanding of the factors that draw audiences to participate in such campaigns; and to provide initial guidelines and considerations for those who are considering the use of alternate-reality campaigns for marketing or promotion.

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Understanding Alternate Reality Games

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Defining Alternate Reality Games (ARGs)

Like more traditional games, **alternate reality games** are often easy to identify but difficult to define. Several definitions have been proposed, but in each case there are exceptions that render the definition incomplete at best. Any attempt to define ARGs is further complicated by the frequent conflation of several different emerging fields, which, while similar, have distinct and identifiable characteristics. These emerging fields include:

- immersive marketing
- immersive storytelling
- pervasive gaming
- viral marketing
- hybrid-reality games
- extended-reality games
- augmented-reality games

As these related fields evolve, it seems probable more concise terms and definitions will emerge to describe and better differentiate between them. In the interim, however, the most effective solution seems to be to conceptualize ARGs using the same formulation that Wittgenstein used to describe games: we cannot define them in their own right, but we *can* define them in terms of “family resemblances,” drawing upon networks of “similarities and relationships” rather than a single common trait.¹ Using this approach, it is possible to assemble a list of the elements, components and attributes that describe ARGs.

We can begin such a list with some of the partial definitions ARG creators and participants have proposed. The most basic of these definitions can be found in an online *ARG Quick Start Guide*, which suggests:

Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) is a relatively new genre of games that encourages players (you!) to interact with a fictional world using the real world to do it.²

Andrea Phillips, who holds the enigmatic title of “Ad Hoc Polymath” at commercial ARG creator Mind Candy Design, adds:

In these games, a cohesive narrative is revealed through [a] series of websites, e-mails, phone calls, IM, live and in-person events. Players often earn new information to further the plot by cracking puzzles.³

These definitions suggest ARGs share two significant traits:

- (1) they utilize everyday media channels and
- (2) they unfold in the places where we work and live.

Phillips goes on to describe what she sees as the “most important” characteristic of ARGs, emphasizing that

the players of these games typically organize themselves into communities to share information and speculate on what it all means and where it’s all going.⁴

This last trait -- the tendency of ARGs to result in the formation of communities focused on collective tasks -- provides ample incentive for marketers and content producers to familiarize themselves with the new models of entertainment, interaction and communal problem-solving that ARGs generate. At their best, alternate reality games have already proven themselves powerful, cost-efficient, viral marketing campaigns, capable of both generating active communities and directing the attention and behavior of participants. In an online special-interest group mailing list dedicated to discussion of ARGs, media analyst Christy Dena offered the following as basic criteria for alternate reality games⁵:

- 1) Use a range of media platforms and real life spaces.
- 2) Have a high degree of both narrative and game-play experiences.
- 3) Are played collaboratively, mainly through online networking.
- 4) Respond to player activities through human intervention by “puppetmasters.”
- 5) Create an “alternate reality” where nothing is identified as being fiction.
- 6) Are played in real time.

While any given ARG may lack one or more of these traits, this list provides a solid foundation for identifying the most common “family resemblances” ARGs share.

Common Identifiers of Alternate Reality Games

- a) Unfold across multiple media platforms and real-life spaces.
- b) Offer an interactive, dispersed narrative experience.
- c) Require the player-participants to reconstruct the dispersed narrative.
- d) Often refuse to acknowledge themselves as games (“This Is Not A Game”).
- e) Often have no clear rules or guidelines.
- f) Often require players to solve difficult challenges or puzzles to progress.
- g) Often encourage/require the formation of collaborative communities.

Alternate, Not Alternative!

One of the most common misconceptions in discussion of ARGs is the assumption that *alternate* reality games and *alternative* reality games are the same thing. In a recent blog post, ludologist Ian Bogost emphasized the importance of differentiating between the two terms:

[ARG scholar Jane] McGonigal makes an important distinction between alternate and alternative realities. Alternate realities, she argues, are “real worlds that use games as a metaphor.” She contrasts this notion with alternative realities, realities one chooses between. McGonigal further traces the concept of “alternate reality” to science fiction, where the term refers to depictions of a world of changed history, and consequently of changed dynamics. This name, then, is central to McGonigal’s claims that ARGs allow players to actively change the nature of their real (?) reality by participating in these alternate ones.

Bogost, Ian. “Review of Convergence Culture.”
Water Cooler Games. August 1, 2006.
<<http://www.watercoolergames.org/archives/000590.shtml>>

Contextualizing ARGs

While alternate reality games are a relatively new media form, the immersive technique of presenting fictional narratives as factual events has precedent in many older media. The following are some of the most critical developments that have paved the way for modern ARGs.

Immersion Through New Media

On October 30, 1938, CBS broadcasted Orson Welles' radio adaptation of HG Wells' *War of the Worlds*, a classic novel about a Martian invasion of earth. Rather than using the familiar "radio play" format, Welles chose to tailor his adaptation to the strengths of the radio medium, and presented the narrative in the form of a simulated newscast. The results are legendary: many listeners, tuning in several minutes after the program began, missed the disclaimers that identified the broadcast as fiction, and believed the broadcast to be a legitimate report on events taking place. One documented account of the incident estimates that "some six million heard the CBS broadcast; 1.7 million believed it to be true, and 1.2 million were 'genuinely frightened.'"⁶

While the CBS broadcast of *War of the Worlds* was not intended as a hoax (nor was it the first to spark a widespread panic over fictional news⁷), it seems clear that Welles was interested in using the properties of the narrative medium, radio in this case, to make the fictional experience as immersive as possible. The precedent for this tactic can be found in 18th-century epistolary literature, which experimented with "found manuscript" stories that refused to acknowledge their own fictional status.⁸

Significant development: Used the established norms of a new medium to create an immersive fictional experience.



Armchair Treasure Hunts

In 1979, author Kit Williams wrote and illustrated *Masquerade*, a children's book that concealed clues in the illustrations and text on each page. When deciphered, these clues would reveal the location of a valuable jewel that Williams had crafted himself, and buried "somewhere in Britain." The competition lasted until 1982, when a businessman using the name Ken Thomas uncovered the treasure in a Bedfordshire park.

Six years later, however, an article in *The London Times* revealed Thomas, whose real name was Dugald Thompson, as a fraud.⁹ Instead of solving the riddle himself, Thompson had gotten information from Williams' ex-girlfriend to determine the approximate location of the treasure, and used metal detectors to uncover it. Shortly after Thomas received his ill-gotten prize, two physics teachers, Mike Barker and John Rousseau, uncovered the proper solution to Williams' riddle.¹⁰ The treasure itself was sold at a Sotheby's auction on December 10, 1988, for £ 31,900.

Masquerade was the first in a long line of contests that have come to be known as "armchair treasure hunts," which require participants to decipher a series of clues and puzzles to determine the location of a real-world prize. One of the most recent hunts was magician David Blaine's \$100,000 Challenge, which scattered visual ciphers and logic challenges through Blaine's semi-autobiographical *Mysterious Stranger*, released in 2002. The challenge was solved in March 2004, sixteen months after the book's publication.

The creators of one current ARG, Perplex City, frequently cite *Masquerade* as one of their most significant influences in designing the game, which contains a similar treasure-hunt element as players look for clues that will help them recover the missing "Receda Cube," and claim a \$200,000 cash prize. The treasure hunt format is also enjoying newfound popularity on television, most visibly in AOL's *Gold Rush* and NBC's *Treasure Hunters*, which challenge viewers at home to solve clues leading to hidden treasure.



Masquerade's hidden treasure: a jewel, made by Kit Williams out of 18-carat gold and jewels.

Significant development: Used the real world as the stage for a game.



Mysteries as Publicity: the Paul-is-Dead Conspiracy

On October 12, 1969, a caller to a Detroit radio program declared that Paul McCartney had died in a car accident. Many fans believed this rumor was supported by “evidence” embedded as clues and hints in the Beatles’ songs, album artwork, and movies. The most famous rumor insists a chant at the end of “I Am The Walrus,” when played in reverse, clearly speaks the words “Paul is Dead, Paul is Dead.” While generally believed to be a hoax, the international media coverage eventually escalated the rumor into a full-fledged conspiracy theory.

Despite denials from all four members of the Beatles, many fans believe the band intentionally perpetuated the hoax, and buried clues in their albums for devoted listeners to find. Whether the Beatles were responsible for perpetuating the rumor or not, they benefited from the wealth of free publicity that followed. Jordan Weisman, one of the lead designers for an ARG known as The Beast, has cited the Paul-Is-Dead hoax as a significant influence in the genre’s development.¹¹

Significant development: These rumors harnessed the collective curiosity of audiences and led to collaborative speculation and discussion that focused on a commercial property; even if the Beatles were telling the truth about their lack of involvement, this episode suggests the power of the “This Is Not A Game” (TINAG) philosophy in capturing an audience’s curiosity.



Mysteries as Marketing: Publius Enigma

In 1994, shortly after Pink Floyd released their album *The Division Bell*, a ‘messenger,’ referring to himself as Publius, began to post cryptic messages on the Pink Floyd usenet discussion group. These messages suggested an enigma hidden in the album, and hinted a reward would be given to anyone who solved the puzzle. Many fans were skeptical of these claims, and assumed that Publius was an individual with no official connection to the band, seeking attention online.

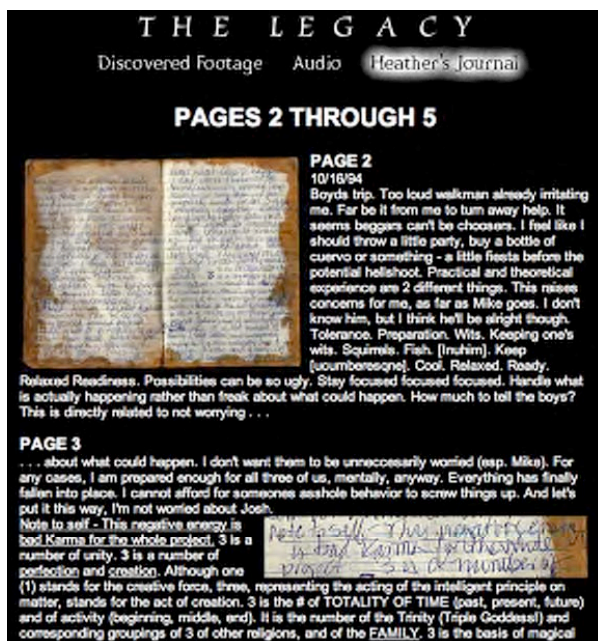
In response, Publius offered irrefutable proof of his association, delivering this prediction on July 16, 1994: “Monday, July 18, East Rutherford, New Jersey. Approximately 10:30pm. Flashing white lights. There is an enigma.”¹² On the night in question, Pink Floyd was performing at a concert in East Rutherford; at approximately 10:30 pm, white lights across the front of the stage spelled out the words PUBLIUS and ENIGMA. Since then, Pink Floyd fans and would-be detectives have scrutinized the band’s songs and album artwork, finding possible clues and hints, but have not managed to solve the puzzle. In April 2005, Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason revealed that the Publius Enigma was real, and had been designed by their record company:

That was a ploy done by EMI. They had a man working for them who adored puzzles... He was working for EMI and suggested that a puzzle be created that could be followed on the Web. The prize was never given out. To this day it remains unsolved.¹³



A still from a video taken at the Pink Floyd concert on July 16, 1994 shows the word “ENIGMA” flashing across the stage.

Significant development: Represents the first major example of a campaign designed to promote a commercial product by creating and directing audience curiosity toward a mystery, and offering a reward to encourage investigation.



The Blair Witch website included a wealth of "original" material, including a fictional journal that allegedly belonged to the missing filmmakers.

Immersive Marketing

The most immediate (and frequently cited) predecessor to modern ARGs was the 1999 promotional campaign intended to build anticipation for independent film *The Blair Witch Project*. Like Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast and the epistolary literature that preceded it, *Blair Witch* was produced as an immersive fiction. The film presented itself as the "found footage" of three documentary filmmakers who went missing investigating a local witchcraft legend in rural Maryland. The promotional campaign for the film took the innovative approach of deepening this immersive experience: rather than using traditional broadsheet posters and advertisements, the campaign used "Missing Person" fliers and newspaper notices directing anyone "with information about the missing filmmakers" to blairwitch.com, a website filled with the "known details" about the legend and the filmmakers.

It is worth noting that while the production budget for *The Blair Witch Project* is estimated at \$35,000, Artisan

Entertainment invested more than \$20 million in the film's promotional campaign¹⁴. The website, in particular, was considered a critical innovation in the field of immersive viral marketing.

The promotional campaign surrounding *The Blair Witch Project* represents a watershed moment in the evolution of ARGs. While there was not a specific riddle or mystery for the audience to solve, the campaign demonstrated the possibilities of using immersive fiction as a marketing technique. Even more importantly, the *Blair Witch* campaign began to blur the line between *product advertising* and *product expansion*, with the promotional material serving dual functions: it simultaneously promoted and deepened the immersive appeal of the film itself.

In the past several years, this has become an increasingly popular approach to entertainment marketing. Other notable campaigns in this space include the websites for *Memento* (2000) and *Donnie Darko* (2001), which extended the narrative arcs of each film beyond the events seen on screen.

Significant development: Represents the first major example of a campaign designed to promote a commercial property by expanding the immersive fiction surrounding the product itself; suggests the power of immersive fiction as a marketing technique.

While each of the cases described here represents significant advances in the evolution of ARGs, the *Blair Witch* campaign also marks a critical point where the line between marketing content and immersive fiction began to blur. The narrative extensions surrounding *Blair Witch* were simultaneously advertisement for a film *and* new entertainment content. This collision of traditional promotional marketing and new immersive narrative content is where alternate reality games begin.

The Birth of the ARG

The first “true” alternate reality game is believed to be **The Beast**, an elaborate project developed in 2001 to promote the Steven Spielberg film *Artificial Intelligence*. Like the promotional campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* two years earlier, the *A.I.* campaign was designed to expand and deepen the audience’s immersion into the narrative world of the film. The creators of *The Beast*, however, planned something far more complicated and demanding: rather than simply providing additional material and contextual information about the film’s narrative world, the *A.I.* campaign sought to bring the audience into direct interaction with that narrative world.

As lead writer Sean Stewart later recalled, “for years [lead designer] Jordan Weisman had been thinking about doing a game that would be sort of like the Beatles’ Paul-is-Dead mystery--an elaborate web of clues and possible conspiracies to be investigated by a huge group of fans.”¹⁵ Working from this basic vision, they developed a new story -- a futuristic whodunit centered on the murder of a man named Evan Chan in 2142 -- and concealed the answers to that mystery in clues and challenges spread across multiple media.

Stewart writes that the collective vision for *The Beast* was based on four critical assumptions, which can be considered the foundational principles for the first wave of alternate reality games:

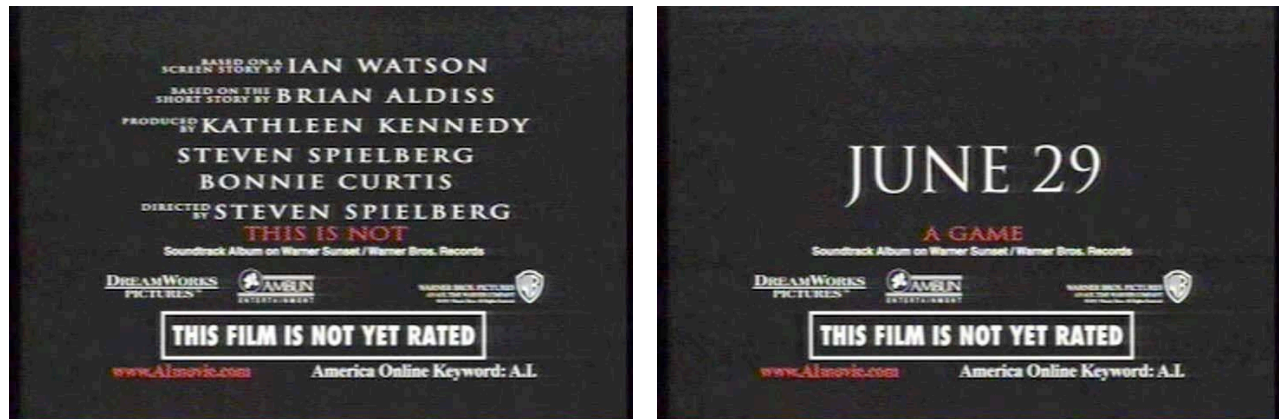
1. The narrative would be broken into fragments, which the players would be required to reassemble;
2. The game would be fundamentally cooperative and collective, because of the nature of the internet;
3. The game would be cooler if nobody knew who was doing it, or why;
4. The game would be cooler if it came at you through as many different conduits as possible.¹⁶

These assumptions also led the game’s design team to a larger, over-arching philosophy, “This is Not A Game,” which meant that, like the immersive narratives described in the previous section, the game would never *admit* that it was a game. Stewart insists that this final principle was absolutely essential:

The mantra--this is not a game--had another meaning particularly important to me. I didn’t want this to be a strictly intellectual experience. I didn’t want you to be able to view the

characters as...game tokens. I wanted it to work like art. I wanted people to care, to laugh, to cry—to be engaged the way a novel engages. To put all this ingenuity into the storytelling method, and then to tell a stupid story--that would be an unbearable waste.¹⁷

The public response to *The Beast* was remarkable: during the 120 days of the game, more than 7,000 active participants formed an online collective, referring to themselves as “the Cloudmakers,” and doggedly followed the clues that Stewart and Weisman prepared. Estimates for overall participation range from half a million to three million players overall -- the range being a function of how one defines “participation” -- and the press coverage was staggering, with the creators reporting more than 300 million impressions in both mainstream and niche media outlets.¹⁸



The *Beast* began with a reference to a “Sentient Machine Therapist” in the credits of the Artificial Intelligence Trailer. These final frames above declare “This Is Not A Game.”

In the process of running the game, Stewart and Weisman -- who, like all ARG runners, came to be known as “the Puppetmasters” -- also learned to respond to the collective desires and decisions of the game’s participants. As the game progressed, the puppetmasters found themselves scrambling to generate additional subplots and puzzle challenges, and in one case, moving a fan-favored peripheral character into a central role to keep players satisfied. Even in the first ARG, then, we see an emerging pattern that should inform our approach to alternate reality games:

Good ARGs generate strong, attentive, collaborative communities.

It is impressive enough that *The Beast* brought more than 7,000 individuals together in a collaborative effort in only four months. Even more impressive is the fact the Cloudmakers still exist as a cohesive, if sometimes dormant, community, more than five years after the conclusion of the game that brought them together.¹⁹

Effective ARGs allow participants a decidedly internet-era satisfaction: the experience of participating in massive, collaborative communities to solve common problems.²⁰ The best ARGs will be designed to encourage, emphasize, and in some cases require this sort of mass collaboration. To that end, it is important to have a better understanding of these communities, and the different roles players in such communities assume.

Who Participates In ARGs?

To comprehend the creative and economic possibilities ARGs offer, it is important to first understand the range of expectations and motives that compel people to participate. In this regard, ARGs are no different from more traditional media offerings: just as there are different types of television viewers, ranging from the casual channel-surfer to the obsessive fan, ARGs attract and allow for several different types of participation.

Writing about Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), game designer Richard Bartle proposed players can be classified by the motives that draw them to participate and their behavior patterns within the game. In the case of MMORPGs, Bartle proposed players assume one of four roles: Achiever, Explorer, Socializer or Killer.²¹ A similar approach can be used to describe the motives and behaviors of those who participate in ARGs. While individual players may take different roles in different ARGs, or even switch roles as a campaign progresses, it is still possible to identify four common types of participation that arise in most games:

Organizers: Given the highly collaborative nature of most ARGs to date, the role of Organizer is an essential one. Organizers concern themselves with the administrative “crowd-control” tasks that enable player communities to efficiently gather, share and interpret the various clues and leads uncovered. Organizers often have strong computer skills since the development and maintenance of blogs, databases, message boards and other collaborative tools are an essential part of the Organizer’s role. While Organizers may assist in solving puzzles or searching for clues where their skills permit, they are more focused on their work as moderators, mediators and communicators. Experienced organizers tend to be effective networkers who know which members of the community to ask when a given skill or area of knowledge is required.

Hunters: For many players, the most satisfying experience ARGs offer is the thrill of uncovering new clues. These players function as Hunters for the rest of the community, often spending hours scanning through known game resources, looking at source code, searching for new sites related to the game, and reporting their findings to the Organizers.

Experienced Hunters are usually familiar with previous ARGs, applying successful strategies from previous clue-hunting expeditions to uncover new clues.

Detectives: Many Hunters are also likely to be Detectives, players who take pleasure in the challenge of breaking codes, solving riddles, and determining the meaning of the clues and leads uncovered. Since many ARGs are designed to draw upon a wider range of skills and specialized talents than any individual player could possess, the work of Detectives is often carried out through collaborative discussion: as challenges arise, members of the community will offer their ideas about possible strategies, and draw upon the expertise of other Detectives to assist them in trying out their ideas.

Lurkers: Since site traffic statistics suggest the number of people visiting ARG-related sites vastly exceeds the number who “participate” in solving them, the largest group of ARG players are presumably Lurkers. Reported lurker-to-active player ratios range from 5:1 to 20:1.²² Lurkers tend to be fascinated with the *idea* of alternate reality gaming but lack the desire to work as active participants in advancing through a campaign’s mysteries. While lurkers do not seek out new clues or participate in the process of solving them, many tend to operate as “voyeurs,” waiting until a solution has been found and then visiting the relevant sites to “solve” the challenge themselves.

Veteran ARG players also differentiate between pure lurkers and “**rubberneckers**,” participants who will participate in chats, post on discussion forums, and offer ideas during the problem-solving process, but who avoid having any direct contact with in-game characters and often choose not to register at in-game websites.

While each of these player-types has distinct interests, skills and motives for participating, it is important to think of each one not as isolated groups but -- as in Bartle’s analysis of MMORPGs – dynamic components in a social ecosystem, each type of participant relying on other members of the community to make their respective contributions: without Hunters and Detectives, Organizers would not have much information to report or format; without Organizers, Detectives would have trouble coordinating to tackle larger challenges, and would be more likely to work in isolation and perpetually “recreate the wheel;” and, while Lurkers do not appear to make a direct contribution to the collaborative process, they may in fact serve a variety of useful functions, with some crossing over to participate in later stages of the game, and others spreading awareness of the game into their own social networks, which may bring other active participants into the community.

Since the game’s design will influence the relative appeal of the campaign to each type of participant, an awareness of these different player-types becomes particularly important during the ARG development process. In particular, ARG creators are advised to consider how the game can be designed to appeal to both active (Hunters, Detectives) and passive (Lurkers) participants, and to expect that for any sufficiently detailed campaign, Organizers will volunteer themselves once communities begin to form.



The Existing ARG Culture

As the recent five-year anniversary of the Cloudmakers suggests, the communities that grow around ARGs often outlast the campaigns that start them.

Many ARG “veterans” are now regular visitors to game-tracking sites such as the *Alternate Reality Gaming Network* (argn.com) and *Unfiction* (unfiction.com) as well as active members of the *Unforums* (forums.unfiction.com), a message board dedicated to discussing past, present, and future alternate reality campaigns. Some of the most dedicated veterans have gone on to design their own ARGs, both commercial and independent, and many of these aspiring and

established puppetmasters convene at small conventions, such as the annual ARGFEST, to share strategies and discuss the challenges involved in running effective campaigns. Novice and veteran puppetmasters also participate in an ARG-focused special-interest group of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA)²³; this group is currently nearing completion on its own detailed white paper on alternate reality gaming.

Diverse Participation Demographics

Marketers and content producers contemplating ARG development should also know that participation in previous ARGs has drawn a wide and diverse range of players. According to Michael Smith, CEO of Mind Candy, the list of participants in the current *Perplex City* ARG includes “plenty of people over 50 years old, and we know that about half of the people who play the game are women,”²⁴ a statement that suggests ARGs might be an effective way of targeting audiences far greater than just the adolescent male demographic.

Types of ARGs

Since the conclusion of *The Beast*, more than a dozen major ARG campaigns have been carried out for a variety of reasons. This section provides an overview of several “types” of ARG campaigns, drawing upon a prominent example of each to explore how ARGs have been used, and suggesting key lessons that can be learned from each.



The Promotional ARG

At present, the most common type of ARG is the **promotional ARG**, a campaign designed to create anticipation for an upcoming product, or to help associate brands with specific qualities and attitudes. Promotional ARGs are now often referred to as “**alternate reality branding**” campaigns, or **ARBs**.

One of the most prominent examples of an ARB campaign for a commercial product is Audi’s **Art of the Heist**, which launched on April 1, 2005, and ran for 90 days. Designed to build buzz around Audi’s forthcoming A3

compact car, the ARB commenced with a staged car theft at a New York City Audi dealership. When invitees arrived for the dealership’s annual car show, police tape and signs indicated the show had been cancelled following the theft of an unreleased Audi A3.

To participate in the story that followed, players had to seek out clues in magazine and television advertisements, fake blogs, and websites, engage in conversation with actors at the Los Angeles E3 show and the Coachella music festival, and find ways to assist a pair of fictional “art retrieval specialists” in tracking down the missing car.

While Audi wouldn't comment on the exact budget for the campaign, *BusinessWeek* estimated that Art of the Heist probably cost between \$3 and \$4 million to carry out.²⁵ The response, according to Audi, was well worth it: the company claims that more than 500,000 players participated in the game, with more than two million unique visitors checking out the main website for the campaign at least once. The campaign was also honored with several industry awards for innovation.

Audi's Art of the Heist campaign is significant for several reasons. For one, it was the first major ARB campaign designed to promote a material product (the Audi A3) rather than an entertainment product (a movie or video game). As such, Art of the Heist had to develop an original narrative around Audi's product rather than expanding upon pre-existing elements from another narrative. And, while it's hard to determine how effective the campaign was in selling cars, Art of the Heist's media coverage and participation figures suggest the campaign was an effective proof-of-concept for promoting commercial products and brands via ARBs.

Other significant ARBs include 42 Entertainment's campaigns for Microsoft's *Halo 2* (called *I LOVE BEES*) and Activision's *GUN* (called *Last Call Poker*), as well as a series of *NokiaGames* that have taken place in Europe.

The Grassroots ARG

Freed of the burden of promoting a product or brand, **the grassroots ARG** is often seen as the "purest" type of alternate reality game. Since the conclusion of the Beast in July 2001 there have been at least half a dozen grassroots ARGs, several of them the creation of former members of The Cloudmakers who drew upon their experience as ARG players to develop new campaigns. While many grassroots ARG campaigns feature self-contained narratives and "new" alternate realities, some of the most popular projects have chosen to use existing mainstream fiction "brands" as settings. One of the best documented is a campaign called **Exocog**, carried out in 2002 by interactive design consultant Jim Miller. Just as The Beast was designed to expand the narrative world of Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence*, Exocog was designed to elaborate upon another upcoming Spielberg adaptation -- this time Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report*.

As a grassroots effort, Exocog (and Miller) had no official affiliation with the film and, even more critical, no development budget. If commercial campaigns such as The Beast can be considered a form of interactive fiction, then grassroots ARGs such as Exocog may be viewed as a new type of interactive fan fiction. Using a six-person team of volunteer designers and writers, Miller coordinated and carried out the campaign over the five weeks leading up to the late-summer release of Spielberg's film. During these five weeks, Exocog received more than 150,000 site visits and over 2,600 unique visitors,²⁶ suggesting that even low-budget, volunteer ARGs have the potential to generate substantial interest and attention.

In his post-development report, Miller provides a comprehensive account of the development process, the narrative action, and the challenges he faced designing Exocog. Describing the campaign as an experiment in "a new genre in storytelling," Miller addresses a number of core questions that arose during development. While several of his findings are discussed later in this paper, his analysis, available online at www.miramontes.com/writing/exocog, is essential reading for prospective ARG designers.

Other significant grassroots ARGs include *Lockjaw*, another collaborative effort by several former Cloudmakers who wanted to create a suitable follow-up to the Beast; *Metacortechs* (or Project Mu), an unofficial campaign tied into the narrative world of the Matrix films; *Chasing the Wish*, and *Urban Hunt*²⁷.

The Narrative Extension ARG

From a creative perspective, one of the most enticing possibilities for the future of alternate reality games is the **narrative extension ARG**, a campaign designed to enhance stories that are unfolding in more traditional media. Narrative extension ARGs can be seen as an evolution of the immersive marketing strategies discussed in the previous section.

Like the *Blair Witch* campaign, narrative extension ARGs provide additional content and access that deepens viewer's immersion in a narrative world, making these ARGs a form of immersive marketing. ARGs require more active engagement from participants, however; to access content in an ARG, players must overcome challenges and solve problems. As such, ARGs are designed not only to immerse players in a narrative, but also to engage them in the events of a narrative.

To date, the most intricate narrative extension ARGs have been tied to television programs, allowing interested viewers to “engage” with the show's plot between episodes by seeking clues, interacting with characters, and exploring objects and documents that exist (and appear) within the action of the show.

One of the most interesting attempts at a narrative extension ARG thus far has also been one of the biggest commercial failures. In September 2002, ABC launched *Push, NV*, a serial drama focusing on the mysteries that arise when an IRS agent is sent to investigate financial discrepancies at a casino in the fictional small town of Push, Nevada. While the show could be enjoyed as a traditional television drama, interested viewers could find more clues and details online at websites for fictional newspaper *The Push Times*, the Push Chamber of Commerce, the Versailles Casino, and several other “in-narrative” groups.

The real innovation of *Push*, however, was that it was also a real-time contest: viewers were promised that the missing money from *Push* was actually hidden, and that the first viewer to figure out where the money was being held would win the entire sum - - a whopping \$1,045,000, which (one hopes) would encourage even the less net-savvy viewing audience to venture online and explore the show's cross-media components. Clues hinting at the location of the treasure were also

The Push Times

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The Versailles Casino Recently Purchased By Watermark LLC

STRUGGLING PUSH CASINO HAS NEW OWNERS THAT SWEAR THEY WILL BRING BETTER TIMES TO THIS BUSINESS

PUSH - NEVADA

The Versailles Casino has been a Push establishment running on 50 years. It is a piece of history that everyone in this town has experienced and contributed to.

It is great to see that this living piece of history is going to continue on. For a while it seemed as if the Versailles might go under. The number of gamblers was down dramatically as the town was in the midst of hard times.

The facilities of the casino were old and in some cases decrepit. The casino was basically falling apart. About half of the slot machines worked. The tables were stained with drink spills and god knows what else.

The carpet was disgusting and it probably should have been replaced over 5 years ago. The restaurant was a place that only the bold with steel lined stomachs frequented anymore.

One resident commented, "I can't believe someone actually bought that place. It is so old and disgusting. I can't imagine what was attractive about it, especially to an out of town investor."

The details of the deal were fuzzy. When talking to prior Versailles management all they would say is, "I can't really comment about the transaction outside of the fact that it will be good for Push's future."

When asked what will happen to the existing Versailles employees he said, "I imagine there will be some changes, but the majority of people working there now will still be with the Versailles in 5 years."

The new owners were tight lipped as well. All they would offer was, "we are very excited about the money making prospects of this establishment. We believe we have found a great home for our Gaming venue in Push, Nevada."

Watermark LLC is a conglomerate with offices all over the US and the world. Their lines of business include almost everything, so it is not unusual for them to make an investment such as this.

It just seems a little strange why they would pick Push to get into the gaming business.

However, any outside interest in developing business in Push could do nothing but help the city, which recent past has left a great need for any economic stimulus.

Backjack and roulette appeared to be the games of choice for these lucky players.

Once again the casino is paying out large winnings to local players.

One winner this week said "Who needs Vegas when you have the Versailles. Everybody seems to be winning these days. Push might just be the luckiest town around."

"And now with other things in the town starting to turn around, this might make Push a desirable place to live again."

The first big jackpot winner was Michelle Berg. A few lucky spins of the roulette wheel, and Michelle, a long-time Push resident, walked out of the casino with a cool \$2,200,000.

"I just couldn't believe it. I just kept telling my lucky number and I just kept winning and winning."

That's to hoping more of the locals will be lining their pockets with the casino's money.

Inside Today's Times

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A BIG WINNER IN FIRST WEEK AFTER CASINO'S NEW OWNERS TAKE OVER

MICHELLE BERG IS THE CASINO'S FIRST JACKPOT WINNER ONLY 5 DAYS AFTER OPENING

PUSH - NEVADA

A total of \$700,000 was won this week at the Versailles Casino.

OUR LATEST WINNER:

VERSAILLES CASINO

MICHELLE BERG

\$2,200,000.00

Two Hundred Fifty Thousand and 00/100 DOLLARS

A fictional newspaper called 'The Push Times' was among the many immersive assets developed to bring players into the world of Push.

embedded in each episode of the show, in forms ranging from web addresses flashed in the opening credits to specific phrases spoken by the show's characters.

Despite the unique innovations of the program, and the development of a small but devoted fanbase, *Push* quickly proved itself a commercial failure. After airing seven of the planned thirteen episodes, ABC made *Push* the first cancellation of the 2002 fall season. However, since federal law required ABC to complete the contest and award the announced prize, the ARG-based competition continued.²⁸

Several campaign participants felt the cancellation of the show gave the producers a unique opportunity to expand the game's online presence, and suggested clues from the unaired episodes be integrated into online content. To their disappointment, ABC opted to simplify what remained of the contest, and aired a list of the remaining six clues during *Push*'s last episode, along with a rough date and time for the airing of a "Final Clue" which viewers would need to complete the challenge.²⁹

When the final clue was broadcast on October 28, during *Monday Night Football*, it took less than two minutes for Mark Nakamoto, a 24-year-old assistant editor, to call in the correct answer and claim the prize. According to ABC, more than 500 players called in the correct answer within the first twenty minutes, and more than 10,000 called in over the next twenty-four hours.³⁰

While ABC's post-campaign PR spun the game as a success -- describing it as "the largest TV and online game of skill ever played in America...rivaling some of the largest online games in existence" -- *Push*'s quick cancellation and poor ratings suggest ABC's experiment was ultimately a commercial flop. Several factors may have contributed to the show's poor reception, including episode scripts many viewers criticized as cliched and uninteresting, and an audience not yet prepared to engage with television content across multiple media platforms. By designing *Push* to emphasize competition for a prize rather than collaboration for a goal, ABC may have also undermined the formation of a community strong enough to sustain the broadcast show. Furthermore, even among dedicated ARG players, the game drew criticism for being too simplistic. Following ABC's announcement of the decision to list the final clues on-air, one player complained,

If I wanted a game like this, I'd be playing *Blue's Clues* along with my four year old daughter. It's bad enough they've been spoonfeeding the clues in each episode. Now, with the remaining clues being handed out, I feel the entire time I've spent has been wasted... the winner may as well be selected by sweepstakes instead of pretending we have a game of skill.

My vote: two thumbs down. The thrill of the chase is gone. I think Live Planet and ABC have a lot to learn before they jump into any similar ventures.³¹

The problems afflicting *Push* do not affect all narrative extension ARGs, however. Other significant narrative extension campaigns include the BBC's online extensions for *Spooks* and *Doctor Who*; a Canadian "extended reality" television-ARG hybrid called *Regenesis*; several small-scale campaigns surrounding ABC's spy-fiction show *Alias*, and a current large-scale ARG tied into *Lost*, called The Lost Experience.

The Monetized ARG

To date, the most problematic type of alternate reality game has been **the monetized ARG** -- campaigns designed as commercial offerings where player participation fees finance the campaign's development. Like grassroots ARGs, monetized ARGs benefit from the freedom to tell stories without attempting to promote or sell products; unlike grassroots ARGs, they face the challenge of convincing potential participants to pay for an experience most other ARGs provide for free. As such, there have been very few large-scale monetized ARG campaigns.

The scarcity of such monetized campaigns is due, in no small part, to the critical failure of the first major pay-to-play ARG, Electronic Arts' conspiracy-theory thriller **Majestic**. Launched on July 31, 2001, *Majestic* was expected to be a tremendous commercial and creative success. In February 2001, following a preview demonstration to attendees at the DEMO conference, the gaming megasite IGN.com wrote: "ambitious, exciting, and all around interesting, *Majestic* could be one of the most important computer games of the last 20 years."³² Drawing comparisons to a Michael Douglas "alternate reality" thriller *The Game*, *Majestic* promoted itself as "the game that plays *you*," and generated a level of anticipation that seemed to indicate ARGs would soon join video games as a new form of mainstream entertainment.

Game creator Neil Young explained that *Majestic* was designed to capture the appealing elements of ARGs -- the sense of mystery and excitement spilling over in the player's daily life -- while offering an experience that didn't require hours of participation each day. In an interview with Salon, Young explained that,

As you age, your ability to spend six hours a night playing a game changes. There are other demands on your life -- you get a career, maybe a partner and children. When I first started thinking about [*Majestic*]... I was struggling to find 30 minutes to an hour a night to invest in any type of entertainment, and wanted to create something that didn't require you to spend hours with it each night in order to feel successful at it.³³

While an ARG, *Majestic* was also planned as an episodic game -- a model just beginning to move into the mainstream with the arrival of network-enabled next generation consoles. *Majestic* was designed to unfold over eight episodes, released at a rate of one per month, with subscribers paying \$10 for each episode. With an estimated development budget of \$10 million, *Majestic* would have needed about 110,000 paid subscribers each month for its entire eight-month run simply to break even.



The actual response was devastating: while 71,000 players registered to participate in *Majestic*'s free "pilot episode," the subsequent episodes only drew around 13,500 paid subscribers. Estimates suggest EA lost between \$5 million and \$7 million on *Majestic*.³⁴ On April 30, 2002, EA cancelled the game, explaining there were not enough players to support the cost of development for the remaining three episodes.

Several possible factors may have contributed to *Majestic*'s failure. For one, the game required a dedicated software client, called "Majestic Alliance," which centralized the play experience into a single location. While this was presumably intended to make the game more accessible to casual audiences, it also limited

player's immersion into the narrative: part of the pleasure of a campaign like *The Beast* is derived from the awareness clues and secrets can be concealed anywhere, an approach that turns the entire world (and the entire internet) into a form of game-space.

Another significant problem is that *Majestic* was released only a few weeks after the conclusion of *The Beast*. While this might have offered a strategic advantage since the Cloudmakers were actively searching for new campaigns to help fill the void that the conclusion of *The Beast* had left behind, it also made *Majestic's* pay-to-play model an unappealing prospect. *The Beast* had been free to all participants, which made a paid ARG a less attractive proposition.

It is also worth noting the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 created two distinct disadvantages for *Majestic*. EA chose to temporarily suspend the game due to its conspiracy-thriller content -- an interruption that may have alienated existing subscribers. In addition, it seems likely the events of September 11th made the game's content unappealing: the real world was confusing and frightening enough. Under the circumstances, there was little demand for a game designed to inject mystery into a player's daily life.

Possible Reasons for the Failure of EA's *Majestic*

- 1) Required a dedicated software client, limiting immersion and access.
- 2) Imposed a subscription fee, unlike *The Beast*, which was free to play.
- 3) Focused on content and themes that were uncomfortable after September 11.
- 4) Did not offer enough content to keep players busy between updates.
- 5) Did not challenge players enough to compel the formation of communities.
- 6) Limited access to a North American audience.

Adrian Hon, a former Cloudmaker turned commercial ARG designer, has suggested *Majestic* also failed because it was not designed to emphasize communal collaboration: since the puzzles were simple enough for an individual to solve, *Majestic* never required players to form communities and share knowledge. According to Hon's research, there were about 100 regular posters to the game's message boards, far short of the 7,000 plus participants who registered as Cloudmakers. Furthermore, the game was only available in North America, which limited the potential audience, and in turn, the potential pool of collaborators.

While *Majestic* failed on most counts, it was in one regard extremely successful: recognizing the value of user-generated content, and creating a process (called the "BIOS Program") for integrating fan-created work. Even during *Majestic's* closed beta testing period, fans of the game began to create their own sites and mini-games within the narrative space that *Majestic* had introduced. One such fan-created project, called **ChangeAgents**, was developed by Dave Szulborski, who would go on to design and execute several independent campaigns after *Majestic's* cancellation. Szulborski, who saw *ChangeAgents* as an attempt to entertain himself and the other beta testers, recalls that,

The unusual thing about EA's approach to fan fiction and these fan sites was that they not only accepted it, they encouraged and embraced it, actually making several of the better BIOS stories featured side plots to the game itself. At its highpoint, the BIOS Program included thirty different websites, all built around peripheral characters in the Majestic world and each including either original stories based on these characters or self-contained small ARGs created by the players.³⁵

Majestic's unconventional embrace of player-generated content had two important consequences: first, players felt more ownership and investment in the game once their own work was featured and promoted, and second, the game gained additional play value through these fan-created additions, which helped address the frequent complaint the game did not offer enough content to warrant the monthly subscription fee. Szulborski suggests a third important consequence, insisting the BIOS Program "inspired me and others like me to continue to create the independent ARGs that helped sustain the genre when company after company failed to find a sustainable business model for ARGs. In that, if nothing else, Majestic helped shape the future of ARGs for years to come."³⁶

Unfortunately, Majestic had a far more dramatic impact on the subsequent development of ARGs. Before its release, critics expected Majestic to usher in a new era of mainstream alternate reality gaming. Instead, the game's commercial failure had a chilling effect on the further development of the genre. Only in the

past two years, with the debut of new games such as *Perplex City* and *Edoc Laundry*, have monetized ARGs resurfaced as a viable form of commercial entertainment.



Perplex City, launched by Mind Candy in March 2005, appears to have addressed several problems that afflicted Majestic. Perplex City's economic model is built around the purchase of collectible puzzle cards, rather than a prepaid subscription service. Released around the world in a series of four "waves" between March 2005 and July 2006, Perplex

City's puzzle cards are sold in packets of six, for about five dollars (US) each. Each card features a puzzle, riddle or challenge players are asked to solve. While Mind Candy has not released specific figures on cards sold or overall revenue, the game's online "leaderboard", where registered players are awarded points for each puzzle they solve, indicates that by late August 2006, 40,000 registered players have been awarded points for solving more than 600,000 puzzle cards cards.³⁷

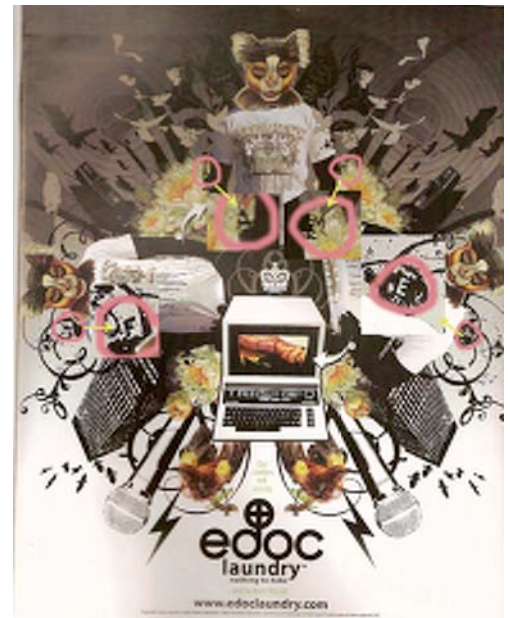
What most separates Perplex City from Majestic, and the majority of existing ARGs, is the fact the game is designed to be accessible on several levels. Unlike Majestic, which was simultaneously too demanding for casual gamers and too simplistic for dedicated gamers, Perplex City allows participants to determine their own level of participation. The game can be enjoyed as an unrelated series of puzzles and games, a product that plays well with a Sudoku-obsessed and *DaVinci Code* enamored nation. For more engaged participants, however, the game's puzzle cards are simply the first point of entry into an elaborate ongoing mystery set in a "parallel world" where the disappearance of an artifact called "the Receda Cube" has prompted a full-scale search. According to the game's designers, the authorities of Perplex City turned to Mind Candy to help establish a link to Earth, and are offering a \$200,000 reward to anyone who can help them locate the

missing Cube. While many of the game's clues are hidden in the puzzle cards themselves, providing ARG enthusiasts with an incentive to acquire and solve as many of the cards as possible, the campaign also draws upon free real-world events, several "in narrative" websites and blogs, and an ongoing narrative progression to provide players with an immersive long-term experience.

Unlike Majestic, Perplex City is also designed to encourage, and in some cases require, collaboration between players. This encouragement comes in several flavors, ranging from puzzles too demanding or complex for individual players to solve³⁸ to live events requiring players to work together to accomplish specific tasks and the hosting of wikis, message boards, and other groupware tools that players can use to share ideas, swap theories, and collaborate on difficult challenges. Little touches may also go a long way toward establishing a sense of community: the community section of the Perplex City website has a prominent section to announce the birthdays of registered players.

The financial success of Perplex City is also due, in part, to Mind Candy's innovative approach to monetizing their game: unlike Majestic, which forced would-be players to commit to a traditional subscription system, Perplex City's business model benefits from three significant advantages: first, it lets participants choose how much to invest in their play experience; second, it encourages players to "buy" their way through a game by allowing them to spend more money to advance farther (and faster); and third, it offers players a tangible product -- attractive, well-designed collectible cards -- in exchange for their investment. In essence, this means Perplex City depends upon the same system of buyer incentives as more traditional collectible-card game products, such as Pokemon, which thrive on the 'gotta collect 'em all' model of sales.

Whether these same incentives will work at a higher price point is unclear. A newer experiment, **Edoc Laundry**, is attempting to launch a similar ARG around seasonal clothing lines, with each item or accessory containing additional clues that help players solve a murder mystery. Even more so than Perplex City, Edoc's success will hinge largely on how well the company's product line appeals to the *non-ARG* market: unless Edoc's couture is compelling enough to wear in its own right, it's unlikely the integration of an ARG will be able to offset the costs of production.



The most significant lessons for prospective ARG designers to take from the success of Perplex City are (1) the importance of allowing for varied levels (and types) of player engagement, and (2) the logic of allowing participants to determine their own level of financial investment.

The Trouble With Categories

While these case studies describe the most common applications of ARGs to date, they also illustrate how ARGs can be difficult to fit into pre-existing categories. The Beast provides a perfect example: should that ARG be evaluated as a promotional campaign (advertising *Artificial Intelligence*) or as a narrative extension, expanding the film's narrative depth by using other media? To some extent, almost all ARGs face the same problem: Exocog is both a grassroots campaign *and* a narrative extension; with the addition of clues in purchasable products, current campaigns such as The Lost Experience could be considered promotional campaigns, narrative extensions *and* monetized campaigns.

What Do ARGs Accomplish?

One of the most important questions we must address about ARGs is also one of the most difficult to answer: what do ARGs accomplish? The Beast was hailed as a revolution in entertainment marketing, while Audi's Art of the Heist received several awards for innovation in product advertising. But, for all of their innovations, it remains unclear how successful these campaigns were in selling their core products.

Entertaining and immersive in their own right, ARGs often have a tangential relationship to the properties and brands that commission them. The Beast drew more than 7,000 active participants, but there is no clear way to gauge the effect of the campaign on box office sales. So was The Beast a promotion for *Artificial Intelligence*, or simply an effective advertisement for itself, and the pleasures of participating in ARGs?

There is no single, conclusive answer to this question. There are, however, a few useful observations we can make about the often ambiguous relationship between ARGs, specific products, companies and brands.

1) Narrative extension ARGs can help generate interest in core narratives.

While the narrative events of The Beast did not have a significant relationship to the events depicted in *Artificial Intelligence*, many subsequent ARGs -- especially those designed to promote the release of console video games -- have introduced narrative tensions and plots that are central to the products being promoted. The Beast's designers took this approach in their next major campaign, I Love Bees (ILB), to help generate interest in the months leading up to the release of XBOX title *Halo 2*. As ILB designer Jane McGonigal explains,

if you played that game and you saw yourself [as] responsible for helping [a group of aliens called] the Covenant find Earth, that's an actual part of the Halo 2 game, and every time you sit down to play and do battle with the Covenant, that experience is tightly connected to the console game.³⁹

In such cases, ARGs may prove to be an *extremely* effective promotional technique, capable of engaging campaign participants with a product before it even becomes available.

2) ARGs are better suited to building brand awareness and reputation than generating direct sales.

In their report on Audi's Art of the Heist campaign, *BusinessWeek* pointed out the business concerns that ARGs often raise:

In constructing an elaborate "alternate reality" game, Audi is risking that few of the people following the action will care about the A3. Are there many potential A3 buyers in this group? "Probably," says McKinney's group creative director, Jonathan Cude. That's a far cry from the usual certainty advertisers look for when spending tens of millions of dollars to launch a new vehicle.

Even if the early gamers drawn into "Heist" don't buy a car this year, Cude says, Audi believes in the importance of letting prospective customers know that the company is doing something cool and highly advanced -- not the same old ad campaign.⁴⁰

Cude's response reflects a solid grasp of what ARGs can accomplish. Unlike many advertising forms, ARGs are not designed to generate a single, quick decision. Instead, the strength of the ARG lies in its ability to create communities of interest, its power to focus the attention of players on relevant content, and its potential for establishing relationships that might encourage participants to affiliate themselves with the core brand or product line in the future.

Reasons to Use ARGs

- Can be exceptionally cost effective as promotional campaigns.
- Can be used to focus consumer attention on more traditional advertisements.
- Can be effective in creating, renewing, sustaining interest in existing properties.
- Can bring coherence to narrative or franchise expansion across platforms.
- Can be monetized as a new component in a larger franchise (eg, Perplex City).
- Can generate extensive press coverage and viral awareness (for now).
- Can build a community of interest around your product, franchise or brand.
- Can give your audience an incentive to spread awareness of your campaign.
- Can engender high, sometimes obsessive, levels of participant dedication.
- Can tap into the human desires to master challenges and solve mysteries.

Common Problems & Possible Solutions

Although ARGs represent a promising new approach to both storytelling and marketing, there are still a number of inherent problems and challenges that the field, and would-be Puppetmasters, must work to address.

ARGS APPEAR INACCESSIBLE

Since ARGs often require long-term involvement, gradual plot developments, and complicated narrative arcs, it is reasonable to expect the participation figures for campaigns will shrink, rather than grow, over time.

Challenge: How can we design or modify ARGs to *gain* participants as they go on, rather than losing initial participants and intimidating new ones?

Recommendations

1) Provide resources for new players to bring themselves up to speed; assume that many of your dedicated participants will do the same.

Perplex City's website features a "Story So Far" page that provides short entries summarizing the game's major narrative events; this summer, ABC sponsored their own blog to provide regular summaries of events in The Lost Experience.

However, once an ARG attracts a significant audience, most player communities establish their own informational resources for briefing new players. Collaborative information tools, such as wikis and blogs, make this easier than ever, as evidenced by an explosion of blogs, podcasts, forums and groups devoted to this summer's The Lost Experience, as well as the detailed post-game guides posted on the Unfiction forums.

2) Structure your narrative in episodes or acts to allow new points of entry throughout the campaign's duration. Emphasize that players joining at these points will not be at a disadvantage.

Exocog and Perplex City, among others, have used an episodic narrative structure to make the game accessible to late arrivals. Reflecting on his experience designing Exocog, Jim Miller explained that,

This [desire for the game to remain accessible] was another part of the reason for our taking an episodic approach to our story. While we inevitably built the game around the telling of a single story, we tried to structure the weekly episodes so that players could enter the game at the beginning of any episode and need only a simple summary of the preceding episodes to follow the new activity, and, ultimately, the outcome of the main story.⁴¹

3) Make sure prospective players know how to catch themselves up, and emphasize how simple the process is.

Since many current ARGs already use the previous strategies to make their narratives accessible, the greatest challenge here is one of *perception*: even if blogs, summaries, and episodic narratives enable late participation, most of your audience -- especially those who have no experience with ARGs -- will *assume* it's too difficult, and won't make any effort. Make it easy for them: help promote the best catch-up resources, including those developed by your players, and make sure all points-of-entry are well-marked.

ARGS APPEAR TOO COMPLICATED

For audiences used to more passive forms of entertainment, ARGs may seem too elaborate, confusing or demanding, making participation undesirable. The skills required to proceed through more complex ARGs may also make a large portion of the prospective audience feel they have nothing to contribute.

Challenge: How can we make games that don't intimidate most audiences?

Recommendations

1) Design games that are enticing to lurkers.

While some players won't have the dedication to tackle an ARG's challenges, or the interest to keep track of all of the narrative developments that unfold, most people *are* interested enough in ARGs to lurk from time to time. Design narratives that are satisfying to observe, as well as to play, and there's a better chance audiences will find your campaign compelling enough to check in from time to time.

2) Create games that function on multiple levels.

The Lost Experience presents one possible solution to this problem. While the first and second acts of the game required a great deal of attention and active problem-solving, the third act -- essentially a wide-scale scavenger hunt -- requires very little explanation. While more dedicated players may find it frustrating if your campaign shifts tone entirely, explore approaches that provide both simple and advanced levels of participation.

ARGS ONLY APPEAL TO CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

Until now, most alternate reality games have featured plots involving conspiracies and hidden information, since such narratives -- like most ARGs -- revolve around the reconstruction of scattered, concealed fragments, providing a logical space for participation. However, to expand the potential audience for ARGs, it will probably be necessary to expand outward, incorporating plots and narrative themes that appeal to broader demographics.

Since one of the most important elements of ARGs is the creation of a meaningful narrative role for participants, this is a particularly difficult challenge. At present, the only proven way to provide players with a meaningful sense of participation in a mass-media campaign has been to create games that focus on finding and interpreting information.

Challenge: How do we create more diverse plots and themes for ARGs, and in doing so, encourage a wider demographic to participate?

Recommendations

Some ARGs, such as *I Love Bees* and *Last Call Poker* (both detailed in Appendix 3) have shifted from plot-centric to experience-centric narratives. While these games have still required players to acquire information and formulate theories, they have also incorporated public events, giving players a chance to meet each other in person, and emphasizing performance as a form of participation. Future campaigns may find that shifting toward this live public performance model, and away from the online hunt-and-see model, allows for new narrative styles and more diverse themes.⁴²

ARGS APPEAR TO BE CRASS VIRAL MARKETING

When ARGs become too explicitly commercial, or don't follow the principles that make ARGs engaging and enjoyable to begin with, campaigns can suffer a backlash, striking participants as both transparent and crass. As ARGs become more prevalent, audiences will grow increasingly sensitive to this issue.

Challenge: Marketers, in particular, run the risk of players deciding that the entire campaign is nothing more than one big advertisement.

Recommendations

As with product placement in more traditional entertainment, advertising must either be organic and logical. If a sponsor's product or service cannot be integrated effectively, designers should either seek an alternate sponsor or find ways to recognize the sponsor's participation without disrupting the narrative. If you adjust your campaign for the benefit of a sponsor, you risk convoluting the player experience, and in turn, both alienating players and damaging the reputation of affiliated brands and sponsors.

Analysis & Recommendations

RULES TO COMPREHEND

While well-designed ARGs have the power to immerse and engage audiences, it is also increasingly clear poorly designed campaigns can be ineffective, and in some cases, damaging to the reputation of the brands that employ them. The following rules reiterate some of the most important points to keep in mind when exploring ARG development.

- 1) ARGs should not be approached as extraneous marketing projects.**
- 2) ARGs should be responsive to player attitudes and actions.**
- 3) ARGs should allow, encourage, and sometimes require collaboration.**
- 4) ARGs should offer a memorable and compelling experience.**
- 5) The game play *is* part of the narrative content.**
- 6) Respect your players enough to challenge them.**
- 7) Sponsors and product placements must be organic.**
- 8) Have a complete -- but flexible -- plan in place before you begin.**

CRITICAL DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

1) Deciding How “Real” To Make It

The more “real” and immersive your ARG is, the more likely it is that your more an audience will be able to lose themselves in it. However, you also increase the potential for angering non-participants by appearing to contaminate public space with false information. ARG designer Jim Miller has suggested that the following considerations are the most relevant in deciding how “real” your game will claim to be:

- The extent to which a game’s premise is obviously non-real.
- The way in which visitors discover the game.
- The business intent of the site.
- The subject matter of the site.⁴³

2) Designing for Cooperation or Competition

As the earlier case studies illustrate, the character of an ARG will differ depending on whether the game’s structure encourages participants to cooperate or compete with each other. Games that foster competition, such as *Push*, *NV*, are less likely to encourage the formation of strong collaborative communities dedicated to sharing information and debating clues; however, games that foster collaboration might be less accessible to participants who are expecting a more private, traditional experience, and lack sufficient interest to spend time participating in communal efforts.

3) Deciding Who The Target Audience Is

Who do you want your ARG to appeal to? Veteran ARG players, who tend to be the most invested and attentive, but expect the game to pose difficult challenges and require collaboration? New ARG players, who are often less demanding, but also less engaged? Are you hoping to target a specific demographic to sell a product or promote a franchise? The most effective ARGs will be those that strike a balance between the interests of the different target groups, and find compelling ways to appeal to new players without alienating or frustrating more experienced players.

4) Deciding On Continuity

The schedule for updating or advancing the game (in most cases, releasing new content, challenges and clues) has significant implications on the types of players a campaign will attract, and how they will relate to the campaign. The Beast was updated on Tuesdays each week. As Adrian Hon has written, while this might seem “horribly artificial and ungenerous,” it offered these tangible benefits: a pattern of regular updates “reinforces the community; reduces the strain on players; reduces the strain on programmers.”⁴⁴

5) Deciding Who Generates Content

Are you going to allow and encourage fans to make “official content” that can be incorporated into the official structure of the game, or opt to keep some distance between the game’s recognized content and the peripheral creations of fans and participants? Majestic did an excellent job of this through their BIOS Program, encouraging players to contribute their own content, and featuring it on the game’s official site⁴⁵. Perplex City is also doing a good job of creating space for player-generated content.

Appendix 1: Glossary

Several definitions provided below are drawn from the glossary on *Unfiction* (<http://www.unfiction.com/glossary>).

Alternate Reality Branding (ARB)

A specific type of *alternate reality game* designed to help promote a brand or product.

Alternate Reality Game (ARG)

Campaigns which create immersive, interactive narratives by using a range of communication technologies and delivery channels (eg, television, radio, newspapers, internet, e-mail, SMS, telephone, voicemail, postal service, etc). ARG narratives are often fragmented, and must be re-assembled through the collaborative effort of players, who may be asked to solve puzzles, crack codes, or participate in on- and offline activities to progress.

Cloudmakers

The group of 7,000+ dedicated players who collaborated to solve *The Beast* during the summer of 2001. Considered to be the first major ARG-solving community.

Collective Detective

Term frequently used to describe the collaborative communities that form to solve ARGs.

Curtain

Line separating players from *puppetmasters*. Probable reference to the *Wizard of Oz*, where the “magic” was done behind a curtain.

Epistolary Literature

Fictional work presented as a series of documents (letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, etc), with the author often presenting their work as a “found” narrative, rather than one which has been created. One of the oldest forms of *immersive fiction*.

Guide

Written during and after ARGs, guides tend to recreate and narrate the events of the campaign narrative in a linear fashion, acting as “walkthrough” documents for readers.

Immersive Fiction

Stories designed to blur the line between the audience’s own world and the world of a narrative; related to *epistolary literature*.

Lurkers

Those who follow games or community discussions without directly participating. Past game stats estimate the ratio of lurkers to active players ranges from 5:1 to 20:1, depending on the scale and nature of the campaign.

Meltdown

The phenomenon of an ARG being unexpectedly canceled before it can conclude its narrative arc. An extremely frustrating experience for dedicated participants.

Pervasive Gaming

Emerging field similar to alternate reality gaming; emphasizes the use of familiar and mundane locations and technologies (cell phones, IM, e-mail, public spaces) in games that are designed to take place in “the real world.”

Puppetmaster

An individual working “behind the curtain” to plan and execute an ARG. Traditionally, the identity of a campaign’s puppetmaster(s) remains unknown until the game has concluded.

Rabbit-Hole

The initial site, page or clue that brings a participant into the game (“down the rabbit hole”).

Red Herring

An intentional or unintentional distraction that diverts players from the path toward a correct solution, often sending them off in fruitless and tangential directions.

Rubbernecker

A step above lurkers, these players may attend game chats, post on discussion boards and contribute to finding solutions, but avoid having direct contact with in-game characters, and often choose not to register with in-game websites.

Shill

An employee or representative of a company who poses as a consumer, player or satisfied customer to create interest in a campaign or product.

TINAG

Stands for “This Is Not A Game.” Is considered one of the defining characteristics of traditional ARGs. Emphasizes the importance of immersion, and insists that ARGs should not acknowledge their own fictional status.

Viral Marketing

Marketing campaigns that are designed to spread through word-of-mouth and media attention, rather than ad placement. Unlike ARGs, viral marketing campaigns will often allow for limited levels of interactivity, but will not unfold a narrative sequence in response to participant actions (eg, the *HEX360* campaign to promote the XBOX 360).

Appendix 2: ARG Timeline

1938	Oct 30	Welles' radio broadcast of <i>War of the Worlds</i> frightens confused listeners.
1969	Oct 12	A caller to a Detroit radio program initiates the "Paul is Dead" conspiracy.
1979		<i>Masquerade</i> is published, marking the debut of "armchair treasure hunts."
1982		<i>Masquerade's</i> treasure is located, though the finder later admits to cheating.
1994	Jun 11	An anonymous usenet poster initiates the <i>Publius Enigma</i> mystery.
2001	Apr 11	<i>The Beast</i> launches with a movie poster sent to Aint It Cool News.
	Jul 31	<i>Majestic</i> launches.
	Jul 24	<i>The Beast</i> is completed through the collective efforts of the Cloudmakers.

2002	Apr 30	<i>Majestic</i> is shut down due to insufficient membership.
	May	<i>Exocog</i> launches. <i>Spooks</i> launches.
	June	<i>Exocog</i> concludes. <i>Spooks</i> concludes.
	Sept 17	<i>Push, NV</i> premieres on ABC.
	Oct 24	<i>Push, NV</i> is cancelled after airing seven episodes.
	Oct 28	A viewer wins the <i>Push</i> prize of \$1,045,000 after catching the final clue during a broadcast of <i>Monday Night Football</i> .
2003	Oct 1	<i>Metacortechs</i> launches.
	Nov 22	<i>Metacortechs</i> concludes.
2004	July 16	<i>I LOVE BEES</i> launches with the delivery of clues to ARG websites.
	Oct 24	<i>RegensisTV</i> launches ARG for first season.
	Nov 9	<i>I LOVE BEES</i> concludes.
	Sept 15	Sharp launches <i>Legend of the Sacred Urns</i> .
2005	Jan	<i>RegensisTV</i> concludes first season.
	Apr 1	<i>Art of the H3ist</i> begins with a live event in New York.
	Apr 22	<i>Perplex City</i> launches first wave of cards.
	Jun 29	<i>Art of the H3ist</i> concludes with another live event.
	Aug 5	<i>Jamie Kane</i> is released by the BBC.
	Sept 24	<i>Last Call Poker</i> launches.
	Nov 19	<i>Last Call Poker</i> concludes with a public event.
	Nov 26	<i>Perplex City</i> releases second wave of cards.
2006	Mar 19	<i>RegensisTV</i> launches ARG for second season.
	April	<i>Perplex City</i> releases third wave of cards.
	May 3	<i>The Lost Experience</i> begins in the US with a broadcast ad.
	Sept 24	<i>The Lost Experience</i> ends with a live podcast talk show.

Appendix 3: ARG Profiles

The Beast

Dates	April 11 - July 24, 2001 (120 days)
Producers	Microsoft, 4orty2wo Entertainment
Purpose	Promotion for theatrical release of <i>Artificial Intelligence</i> .
Plot	In 2142, a man named Evan Chan was murdered. To determine the murderer and the motive, over 7,000 players formed a collective called “The Cloudmakers” and followed clues which led them to 30 different websites for organizations ranging from The Coalition for Robot Freedom to a sleep clinic and an architecture magazine. Several subplots were introduced, many designed in response to the behavior of the Cloudmakers. The Beast helped dramatically expand and complicate the narrative world depicted in Spielberg’s film.
Details	The first significant demonstration of alternate reality gaming, and still one of the most popular. The Cloudmakers live on as an active community; many players went on to design and run popular grassroots campaigns, including Lockjaw and Metacortechs.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International participation figures range from .5 to 3 million. • 7,480 registered Cloudmakers produced 43,000 forum posts. • Over 300 million impressions in mainstream and niche media. • Awards from <i>New York Times</i>, <i>Entertainment Weekly</i>, <i>Time</i>
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.seanstewart.org/interactive/aiintro/ • http://www.42entertainment.com/casestudy_ai.html • http://www.cloudmakers.org

Majestic

Dates	July 31, 2001 - April 30, 2002
Producers	Electronic Arts
Purpose	First significant attempt to monetize the ARG form.
Plot	Weaving together a number of existing conspiracy theories about alien abductions and government secrets, Majestic took its name from the Majestic 12, an alleged group of government officials and experts formed in 1947 by President Truman. Players downloaded a special software client to access the content, which was distributed in episodic format.
Details	The original advertising pitch proclaimed “You don’t play Majestic. It plays you.” Cost of development estimated at \$10 million; the game was intended to consist of 8 monthly episodes, at \$10 each.
Results	71,000 participants completed registration for the free “pilot episode.” EA estimated that it would need 110,000 paid subscribers to break even, but the game only attracted around 13,500. The financial failure of the project may have discouraged the development of further commercial ARGs for several years.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majestic • http://www.thestandard.com/article/0,1902,24513,00.html

Exocog

Dates	May - June 2002
Producers	Jim Miller, Miramontes
Purpose	Grassroots experiment; unofficial promotion for <i>Minority Report</i> .
Plot	Centers around a conspiracy involving Exocog, a company offering commercial precognitive services to any paying clients. While Exocog’s president schemes sell political and military secrets to foreign spies, a young woman investigates the disappearance of her precog boyfriend, which seems to be related to Exocog’s insidious plans.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 150,000 visits to in-game sites, and over 2600 unique visitors.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.exocog.com • http://www.miramontes.com/writing/exocog

Push, Nevada

Dates	September 17 - October 24, 2002
Producers	ABC and LivePlanet
Purpose	First significant attempt at crossmedia television narrative.
Plot	The television drama follows IRS agent Jim Prufrock, who travels to the mysterious town of Push, Nevada, to investigate an accounting glitch made by the Versailles Casino. As he continues to investigate, he finds out that embezzlement might be the least of the strange and corrupt events taking place in a town where everyone has a secret.
Details	Cancelled after seven episodes. Final prize of \$1,045,000 was won within two minutes of the airing of the final clue during a <i>Monday Night Football</i> broadcast.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 600,000 active participants; 200,000 online participants. • 10,000 people called in with a final answer over a 24 hour period.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://abc.go.com/primetime/push/index.html • http://arghive.com/push/pushtimes/

Metacortechs

Dates	October 1 - November 22, 2003 (80 days)
Producers	fan-produced
Purpose	Grassroots campaign; unofficial association with the <i>Matrix</i> films.
Plot	Centers around Beth McConnell, an employee at a company called Metacortex. Beth is obsessed with using her personal website to document what she believes to be paranormal phenomena. As she investigates, she begins to uncover the truth: that these incidents are actually glitches in the Matrix that imprisons her.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 125,000 participants from 115 countries. • Mailing list had 8,300 members subscribed. • <i>Unforum</i> discussion board produced 12,900 forum posts.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.metacortechs.com/ • http://www.metacortechs.com/mumowmow/ • http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~mlpatter/matrix/

I Love Bees

Dates	July 16 - November 9, 2004 (100 days)
Producers	Microsoft/Bungie, 4orty2wo Entertainment
Purpose	Promotion for the release of Bungie's <i>Halo 2</i> for Xbox.
Plot	When a beekeeping enthusiast's website is hacked to display cryptic messages and a countdown clock, players uncover a detailed plot about a damaged artificial intelligence that has crash-landed on earth and taken over a server to survive. In the events that ensue, players help prevent a threatening attack on Earth from a dead race known as "the Flood," but in doing so alert another alien race to the location of earth, setting in motion the narrative events depicted in Bungie's <i>Halo 2</i> .
Details	The first clues were honey jars sent to active ARG players, with letters stuck in the honey which could be reordered to spell "I LOVE BEES." Participants coordinated to receive 40,000 payphone calls, and reassembled the audio clips from these phone calls into a coherent, ordered narrative.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 3 million participants worldwide. • <i>Unforum</i> discussion board produced 54,000 forum posts. • Widespread coverage in both gaming and mainstream press. • 2005 Webby winner; awards from GDA.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.ilovebees.com • http://www.42entertainment.com/casestudy_bees.html • http://www.thebruce.net/ilovebees/

Jamie Kane

Dates	August 5, 2005 (<i>can be completed at any time</i>)
Producers	BBC Interactive, Preloaded, Creative Virtual
Purpose	Experiment in interactive fiction.
Plot	Players attempt to uncover the truth behind the death of a pop star named Jamie Kane, drawing upon a "fan-run" web site and several blogs for new information.
Details	The game can be started at any time, and takes about 15 days to complete. Game content is interspersed throughout the BBC's website, and leveraged their assets to make it as believable as possible. The games sites have since been linked into a network of ARGesque sites supporting the BBC's new <i>Doctor Who</i> series. Cost of development is reported at more than £250,000.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11,000 players signed up for the game as of November 2005 (unverified). • No current figures on participation are available at time of publication.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.jamierules.co.uk/ • http://www.guardian.co.uk/computergames/story/0,11500,1512131,00.html

Art of the H3ist

Dates	April 1 - June 29, 2005 (90 days)
Producers	Audi, McKinney-Silver
Purpose	Promotion to build buzz around the Audi A3 compact car.
Plot	When an art thief steals an Audi A3 from a Manhattan dealership, Nisha Roberts and Ian Yarbrough, owners of an art retrieval business called Last Resort Retrieval, set out to track down the stolen car and prevent the world's greatest art heist, assisted by Nisha's video game designer friend, Virgil.
Details	Campaign began when visitors to a car show arrive to find that a 2006 Audi A3 has been stolen, turning the show into a crime scene. The game featured several live events, including the initial theft of an Audi, a spy mission at the Coachella music festival, and interaction with actors on site at the E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo).
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 500,000 story participants, almost 2 million unique site visitors. • 45 million+ PR impressions; 10,000 leads to dealers. • Extensive awards and recognition from IAB/<i>AdWeek</i>.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://microsites.audiusa.com/a3/heist/default.htm • http://argn.com/archive/000044letter_to_the_editor_the_art_of_args.php

Last Call Poker

Dates	September 24 - November 19, 2005
Producers	4orty2wo Entertainment
Purpose	Promotion for the Activision video game <i>Gun</i> .
Plot	Lionel "Lucky" Brown passes away, and his final will instructs that a portion of his estate be used to fund poker-tournament "wakes" in several cemeteries across America. He also leaves an antique gun which he used during WWII to his daughter, sparking a series of events that culminates in a graveyard murder, and requires players to simultaneously investigate events from both 1865 and the present. Present-day events and characters are intended to introduce the narrative world of Activision's <i>Gun</i> .
Details	Featured live weekly poker events in graveyards across the US, where radio transmissions would point participants toward the next stage of the game.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimated 10,000+ participants.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.lastcallpoker.com • http://deaddrop.us/lastcall/index.php/Main_Page

Perplex City

Dates	March 2005 - present
Producers	Mind Candy Design
Purpose	Commercial ARG based on the sale of collectible puzzle cards.
Plot	While players may choose to limit their engagement with <i>Perplex City</i> to collecting and solving the individual challenges on each collectible card, the individual riddles also serve as components in a larger narrative. The plot focuses the theft of a priceless artifact known as the Receda Cube, which has been buried somewhere on earth. Whoever can find the Cube will win a \$200,000 reward.
Details	The longest-running ARG to date, and the most successful commercial ARG yet. To move forward in the narrative, players have written a book, released a CD, collaborated to crack encrypted data, and attended several in-game events. One live event culminated with a “spy” escaping from players in a helicopter.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 34,000 registered players have solved more than 455,000 puzzle cards. • More than 700 players signed up for a live event within a week.
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.perplexcity.com • http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perplex_city

Edoc Laundry

Dates	March 2006 - present
Producers	Edoc Laundry
Purpose	Commercial ARG based on the sale of clothing with embedded clues.
Plot	In the face of legal disputes with their record label and the mysterious death (or murder) of a man who might be their manager, the band Poor Richard dissolves. The plot is advanced through video clips documenting the band’s history in the recording studio, which can be unlocked online after solving clues which someone appears to be leaving in the defunct band’s merchandise.
Details	Clothing and accessories are released in seasonal waves through an online store; the company plans to expand to retail outlets. In a much-publicized move, <i>Edoc</i> apparel was a featured element in the plot of the October 11, 2006 episode of <i>CSI: New York</i> .
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing at time of publication
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.edoclaundry.com • http://wiki.munsy.net/edoc/

The Lost Experience

Dates	May 3 - September 24, 2006
Producers	<i>Lost</i> production team, ABC Marketing
Purpose	Narrative extension; promote engagement during summer reruns.
Plot	With the guidance of a mysterious hacker named Persephone, players delve into the mysterious background of an organization known as The Hanso Foundation, which has been identified in the broadcast episodes as the group responsible for funding the experiments which were, and perhaps still are, being held on the tropical island where the show takes place.
Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the largest and most visible ARG campaigns to date. • Joint effort of broadcasters on several continents. • Designed with the participation of the show's creative team.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing at time of publication
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.thehansofoundation.org • http://blogs.abc.com/inside_the_experience/ • http://www.thelostexperience.com/ • http://thelostexperienceclues.blogspot.com/ • http://www.lostpedia.com/wiki/The_Lost_Experience

Appendix 4: Further Reading

Essential Reading

If you read and watch nothing else about alternate reality games, the following three resources should be considered absolutely essential. The first two, written by experienced ARG players-turned-puppetmasters, offer detailed insight into the problems and considerations involved in developing effective ARG campaigns, and recount their own experiences.

Hon, Adrian. "The Guide X: A Tale of the A.I. Trail." February 9, 2001.

<<http://www.vavatch.co.uk/guide/index5.shtml>>

Miller, Jim. "Exocog: A case study of a new genre in storytelling." November 2004.

<<http://www.miramontes.com/writing/exocog>>

ARGFEST NYC 2005. Video Coverage of all sessions. Available as downloadable, burnable DVD image.

<<http://greylodge.org/gpc/?p=318>>. Copy included with this paper.

Historical Context

For more information on Masquerade, The Blair Witch Project, and other milestones in the development of immersive fiction and alternate reality gaming.

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Hon, Adrian. "The Reality Artificers." <<http://www.mssv.net/archives/000665.shtml>>

Telotte, J.P. "The Blair Witch Project: Film and the Internet." *Film Quarterly*; Spring 2001. 54:3. 32-39.

Alternate Reality Games: Going Deeper

These articles, editorials and academic works offer useful insight for potential puppetmasters, as well as for those looking to understand how participants think about and respond to design decisions made in the development of ARG campaigns.

Bonasia, Maria. "MetaMystery." Cloudmakers.org. May 30, 2001.
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McGonigal, Jane. "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play."
Presented at Melbourne DAC 2003.

Phillips, Andrea. "Soapbox: ARGs and How To Appeal to Female Gamers."
Gamasutra.com. November 29, 2005.
<http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20051129/phillips_01.shtml>

Szulborski, Dave. *This Is Not A Game: A Guide To Alternate Reality Gaming*.
New Fiction Publishing. 2005.

Stewart, Sean. "The A.I. Web Game."
<<http://www.seanstewart.org/interactive/aiintro/>>

Totilo, Stephen. "Want to Live Like Neo? Alternate Reality Games Might Be Your White Rabbit."
MTV News. April 10, 2006.
<<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1528282/20060410/index.jhtml?headlines=true>>

WEBSITES AND BLOGS

The following websites and blogs are among the most useful resources available online for monitoring the evolution and future development of alternate reality games.

ARG Network (argn.com)

The most active and best-maintained source of information about new and ongoing ARG campaigns, ARGN also features occasional commentaries and articles focused on many of the themes addressed in this paper. Provides a comprehensive “ARG Roll” of links to other sites with content about ARGs.

AvantGame (avantgame.com)

The personal site of ARG scholar and designer Jane McGonigal. Provides full text of McGonigal’s published articles and downloadable versions of her public presentations. Includes an active blog, and downloadable PDFs of McGonigal’s just-completed doctoral dissertation on “ubiquitous gaming.”

Cloudmakers (cloudmakers.org)

While the Cloudmakers site is not updated anymore, it provides a rich repository of material generated by the Cloudmakers community during and after *The Beast*. Includes several compelling op-ed articles and commentaries, a comprehensive guide to the game, archived in-game elements, and more.

Immersion Museum (miramontes.com/writing/museum)

A database providing overview information and basic analysis of several immersive fiction projects, including both ARGs (*The Beast*, *I Love Bees*) and viral marketing campaigns (*The Blair Witch Project*, *The Grudge*). Allows for browsing by feature, project date or project title.

Massive (mssv.net)

Personal blog of Adrian Hon, former Cloudmaker turned professional ARG designer. Updates are infrequent, but consistently insightful -- Adrian tends to be one of the best-informed members of the ARG community, and has insights that should be compelling reading for both players and designers.

Unfiction (unfiction.com)

An essential site for both ARG novices and veterans, Unfiction’s resources are useful to those looking to understand ARGs (history, glossaries, etc) and those participating in them (links to online tools, detailed compendiums and summaries of previous games). Unfiction is also the home of the Unforums, the most active discussion site for the ARG community.

Endnotes

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- ¹³ "Nick Mason, Inside Out US Book Tour, Seattle Appearance." <<http://www.brain-damage.co.uk/news/0504201.html>>
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- ¹⁵ Stewart (see above).
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- ¹⁹ “The Fifth Anniversary of the Beast.” *ARGN*. April 11, 2006.
<http://www.argn.com/archive/000404the_fifth_anniversary_of_the_beast.php>
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- ²² “Lurker.” *Unfiction Glossary*. <<http://www.unfiction.com/glossary>>
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- ²⁴ Berger, Adam. “Interview: Michael Smith, CEO of Mind Candy.” *Gadgetell.com*. June 13, 2006.
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<http://www.argn.com/archive/000335interview_with_jane_mcgonigal.php>
- ⁴⁰ Kiley (see above).
- ⁴¹ Miller (see above).
- ⁴² Jane McGonigal’s research has emphasized the pleasures of participatory performance in ARGs. Several articles, and her dissertation, can be viewed online at <avantgame.com>.
- ⁴³ Miller (see above).
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ For more on Majestic’s approach to integrating player-generated content, see the discussion of Majestic and the BIOS Program in the earlier section on Monetized ARGs.

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