

The Pedagogical Application of Alternate Reality Games: Using Game-Based Learning to Revisit History

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the Internet has been instrumental in producing new Game Based Learning (GBL) tools where education and games converge. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are one such GBL tool. Interactive narrative games that use the Internet as a central communications platform, ARGs challenge players to collaboratively collate a fragmented story. When used for educational purposes, Serious ARGs provide a novel form of GBL that encourages critical thinking, develops problem-solving skills and fosters collaborative learning. However, the pedagogical application of ARGs is still relatively new. This article presents a background to ARGs and Serious ARGs. It also outlines the lessons drawn from Plunkett's Pages, a Serious ARG that focuses on actual historical events. A selection of evaluation criteria, extracted from the reflections of those who played Plunkett's Pages are presented. These criteria are intended to enable novice ARG designers or educators to formatively evaluate an emerging ARG design.

Keywords: Alternate Reality Games, ARGs, Game-Based Learning, GBL, Serious Games

1. INTRODUCTION

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are cross media narrative-based games that use the Internet as a central communications platform. The interactions of

participants drive the progression and direction of the story and play experience. Boundaries between reality and fiction are disguised, as game designers ensure that the characters and scenarios react dynamically to player input. Work-

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ing collaboratively, players collate a fragmented narrative by deciphering codes and clues.

ARGs challenge players to work collaboratively to untangle an underlying narrative that is woven into the fabric of the real world (Bonsignore et al. 2013, Martin et al. 2006). Game creators, known as *puppetmasters* (PMs), typically use the Internet to initially disperse game clues and monitor the progression of their game, while simultaneously interacting with players, through game characters. Meanwhile, players, operating as digital detectives, uncover an underlying narrative; pooling their resources to solve problems, they piece together the narrative, and discuss the game, typically on *Unforum* (2014b) the primary message board for the ARG community. Games are played out on, and bound by the Internet, and yet, elements seep out into the real world, often becoming part of players' everyday lives. Online, collaborative communities, namely *Unfiction* (2014a) and the *Alternate Reality Gaming Network* (ARGN) (2014) are the driving forces behind all ARGs.

The emergence of ARGs at the turn of the 21st century has provided the public with a stimulating cross media storytelling game. The first of these Internet-based ARGs, *The Beast*, emerged in the spring of 2001. Developed by 42 Entertainment alongside Microsoft, *The Beast* was created as a marketing vehicle for the Hollywood movie *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. Blending aspects from the movie into a twelve-week, murder-mystery, interactive narrative game,

the success of the ARG pioneered the formation of a new game genre.

The features of this game genre are included in Table 1.

A Serious ARG typically uses a real-world storyline that offers credible game experiences, and has a primary objective to impart knowledge. ARGs can be used for deep learning, interdisciplinary multimedia inquiry, and offer rich case studies for media and information literacy (Alexander 2006, Barlow 2006, Bonsignore et al. 2013). Their collaborative nature encourages teamwork, develops interpersonal skills and enriches peer-to-peer learning amongst the players (ARGology 2010, Bonsignore et al. 2013, Fujimoto 2010, McGonigal 2007, Whitton 2011b). Game challenges present opportunities for players to learn experientially from problem-based exercises in high-fidelity and meaningful contexts (Bonsignore et al. 2013, Connolly et al. 2011, Moseley 2008, Whitton 2011b). ARGs also appeal equally to male and female players (Lee 2006). Players act as themselves rather than assuming the role of a fictional character (Bonsignore et al. 2013, Lee 2006), which can prove advantageous as it helps blur the lines of reality and fiction. This helps strengthen the aforementioned TINAG. Moreover, Serious ARGs with clear goals help develop and sustain high levels of player application, engagement and motivation (Carson et al. 2009, Fujimoto 2010, Markovic et al. 2007, Moseley 2008). Furthermore, the barriers to entry for ARGs are low; the creation of an imaginative narrative, affected by players through everyday

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