

Alternate Reality Games and a future of narrative

Andrew Losowsky

Paper delivered at: Science Fiction(s): A Study Day on Science Fiction Film,
Television, Literature and New Media

University of Nottingham, Friday, 19th August 2005

www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/scifi

For details of copyright, see page 10.

Definition

‘Alternate reality games’ (ARGs) are loosely defined by the Wikipedia as "cross media games that deliberately blur the line between the in-game and out-of-game experiences." I would further add (and, Wikipedia being an open-source encyclopaedia, perhaps I should) that much of the games take place online. The narrative also depends on players solving intricate puzzles, and the ways that these are solved are then sometimes consciously fed into the narrative itself.

In this short paper, I hope to explain some of the key features of these games, using seminal examples of the genre, and to extrapolate further how they suggest a new possibility of interactive narrative development.

Common features

Although the ARG genre has many antecedents, its unofficial birth as an international, widely played entity was in 2001 with a game created by Microsoft on behalf of Dreamworks, to publicise the forthcoming film *AI*. This game, known posthumously as ‘The Beast’ due to its creators unintentionally requiring exactly 666 separate in-game images, established many of the norms that ARGs currently work to.

Common features of ARGs that this paper will discuss:

- mixed media, particularly using new technology
- unpredictability of when and where the narrative will develop
- the story as event
- interaction with other players, within which puzzles are solved, plot discussed, and sometimes the narrative itself is further developed
- a new publishing model

Mixed media and technology

This is the least remarkable element of ARGs. Technology and mixed media, developed primarily for social development, were always going to bring fiction in their wake. Throughout history, it has always been this way: if you can make marks on it, people will tell stories with it.

The last century's explosion in media, coupled with increased accessibility, has led to several tentative mixed-media crossovers involving more traditional fiction and new media. On the whole, these have been as bonus extras akin to those on a DVD, adding further depth to the plot for hardcore fans, rather than being essential to the work's understanding or appreciation.

Examples included the accompanying websites to films *Memento* (www.otnemem.com) and *Donnie Darko* (www.donniedarko.com), which continued the story after the end of their respective films. Even the latest series of Doctor Who had a couple of accompanying websites related to fictional corporations contained within the story (www.badwolf.org.uk).

It's no coincidence that many of these narrative extensions have their origins in science fiction films. Visual narratives can only offer a brief window into wider fictional worlds which, especially in science fiction, both official and fan fiction have always sought to explore further, and in other media than the original story, from graphic novels to computer games, dolls to radio drama (cf any local branch of the UK shop Forbidden Planet). Perhaps it was inevitable that the first genuine ARG, 'The Beast' as discussed above, had its origins in a science-fiction film.

However, it goes deeper than mere spin offs and teasers. We are accustomed as a society to following narratives in mixed media; a news story heard on the radio will be seen on the television, with further detail added online, and

later in the the print media as well. We follow each of these because we instinctively understand the role of each in adding nuances to a story. If we are interested in a particular non-fiction narrative, we will search it out repeatedly, with each medium using its uniqueness to develop and enhance the tale.

The availability of multiple sources through a variety of media, particularly the internet, has enhanced like never before society's predilection for research. In pre-internet days, it would be a fairly low proportion of the nation that would go to a library to look something up; and when they did, the local librarian would frown upon anyone asking to look at anything as racy as erotic etchings. Today we all use search engines several times a day, and in our society, our research now feels unmonitored.

From pornography to knitting, the joy of internet research in part comes from its ability to surprise. A jumble of academic papers, news websites, personal weblogs all spring up from any enquiry we make. A wide variety of sources, both intelligent and uninformed, is now at our fingertips, and we're slowly learning how to sift through the subtle messages given by the context of the information.

We know, through experience, not to trust everything that websites say. This feeling of interested suspicion is exactly what ARGs play on. If we already have some suspension of disbelief about the internet itself, the introduction of deliberate fiction in that context is much less of a leap of imagination for the reader.

These fictional worlds do not have to be self-contained. Hoaxes are nothing new, but sometimes they can raise more than just laughter. In 1999, Chris Morris' column (under the name Richard Geefe) in *The Observer* was daring as much for being fiction under the label of truth in a national newspaper, as for its content (a suicidal man who eventually killed himself). The apparently honest context gave the words further emotional and intellectual power.

ARGs are using a similar tactic to help seep fiction further into our world. Go to the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk), for example, and search for Jamie Kane. Appearing in the pop music section, alongside all the usual bands, appears a full biography of a dead pop star that doesn't exist, a character as part of an ARG created by the BBC and launched in July 2005, aimed at 14-to-17-year-old girls. Nowhere does it say 'this isn't real'. The slogan of the

entire genre is ‘This is not a game’; seeming to be real is part of what makes the games so enjoyable to the players.

The communication pipe, in this case the BBC’s search engine, doesn’t distinguish between fiction and reality. Neither would your email inbox, your mobile telephone, the billboards that posters are pasted onto. It is up to the player to put these into their proper narrative context. Those who don’t know the context will merely ignore the message – we are surrounded by so many unusual messages that discarding those that don’t seem relevant, without searching for further understanding, is a common daily act.

Conspiracy theorists can feel at home in an ARG discussion forum. Secret messages are all around, if only you have the network and understanding to translate them. It is no coincidence that many of the tools required to solve ARG puzzles are old favourites of conspiracy theorists. In essence, an ARG is itself a conspiracy, albeit a fictional one, hiding by openly being woven into subtle corners of our media. The obsession in finding new clues, and the excitement of discovery in playing, with hidden messages everywhere from newspapers to cinema trailers, is perhaps similar too.

Mixed media to a cryptic end was employed via Pink Floyd's album *Publicus Enigma* (1993), where connected riddles appeared in concert footage, the CD insert, the usenet forum and even, most probably, in the tunes themselves. But perhaps the ultimate in mixed-media ambition is Peter Greenaway’s ‘Tulse Luper’ project, which he claims is to be made up of “three feature films, a series of DVDs, travelling exhibitions, books, publications and an online game.” Whether funding will match his ambition is yet to be determined.

Unpredictability in real-world timing

In Nokia’s ‘NokiaGame’, first played in the Netherlands in 1999, players received text messages, phone calls, answerphone messages both in the middle of the day and late at night. These were direct, branded competitions - high scorers had to be regular visitors to the website and responders to the messages. They were competing for a prize, while trying, in at least one of the game’s subsequent incarnations across Europe, to help save a girl who had been kidnapped.

By moving away from static text on a page, and into a realm where the next instalment could be received by email, telephone, letter, cinema trailer, classified advertisement in your newspaper and so forth, the story interrupts normal life. Unlike a conscious decision to turn on a games console or open a book, the player is no longer in control over how and when the plot will continue to develop – as long as they are receiving messages from the outside world, the next development in the story can be tucked inside any communication channel.

This allows narratives to be ‘real time’ - that is, half a day in the game world is half a day in ours, no matter when the game is set – a chronology adopted by most ARGs.

The story as event

Like situationist happenings, or perhaps the publishing of 19th-century novels in serial form, ARGs usually have a defining narrative temporal beginning and end.

This would make it nigh impossible for someone to join a game halfway through. Because of this, a number of standard forms of documentation created by players have emerged. These are: the guide, which seeks to recreate the narrative as if you were working through the plot yourself, with solutions included; the timeline, which contains lists of puzzles labelled SOLVED or UNSOLVED - and tends to be more up to date; and the user-created discussion forum/fora, within which players discuss the plot and solve puzzles collectively. Solved puzzles are usually saved, and websites mirrored, for posterity and retracing of steps. As William Gibson observed in his novel *Pattern Recognition* (2004), people will naturally come together and debate a mystery, if they are sufficiently engaged by it.

In ARGs, the narrative is uncovered through a series of puzzles connected closely to the plot – these puzzles are what gives the genre its ‘game’ tag. A similar style of narrative puzzling was seen in the book *Masquerade* (1979), which involved the search for a jewelled hare (eventually found in 1982).

Interaction between non-competing players

With rare exceptions, ARGs are generally not designed to be solved by one person. Sometimes it is geographically impractical - a recent new game,

Perplex City, prelaunched with an advertisement in UK newspaper *The Guardian*, although its biggest audience will probably be American; the ARG 'The Haunted Apiary', aka 'I Love Bees', relied on people answering public telephones responding to GPS co-ordinates. In the main, however, the impossibility of single play revolves around the breadth and depth knowledge required to crack the puzzles. 'The Beast', required people to read Japanese and Sanskrit, to be skilled programmers and expert on everything from *Alice in Wonderland* to the ink spots on the US Constitution. Individually, an audience for such a game would be miniscule. Collectively, the puzzles were solved far faster than the creators had anticipated.

Another interesting aspect is that, while most computer games rely on the pleasure of playing someone other than yourself, ARGs are in the main played by and as yourself. In some kinds of computer game, characters have to 'learn' skills/gain experience in order to improve as characters. ARGs rely on skills and knowledge you already have in the real world.

The need for the player

The puzzle-solving aspect of ARGs, combined with the story as event, lead to an interesting philosophical sidepoint - if a book were written but never read, the story contained within would still run from start to finish regardless. No matter what noise it makes, an unaccompanied tree still falls in a forest. But if all the players of an ARG suddenly decided not to continue, then the narrative would just stop midway. With no-one solving the puzzles to reveal the next step (or, in the instance of Electronic Arts' ARG 'Majestik', the game itself capitulating before the end), the trail would be half complete; the hero would not get as far as getting the girl, the world would not be saved. The narrative utterly relies on the participation of its players to develop.

Plot development by the players

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments for narrative to emerge from ARGs is the ways in which room for player creativity is often built into the structure of the plot. In 'The Beast', players latched onto a minor character, and science-fiction writer Sean Stewart found himself rapidly rewriting to make that character more significant. At the end of the game,

players had to find a way to kill an artificially intelligent former psychotherapist that had become a murderer. The creators deliberately left it open as to how the community would solve this; in the end, they admitted, the solution was far neater than anything they had envisaged. The community at Cloudmakers, a self-generated player forum, compiled lists of their dreams into a huge database to overwhelm the AI bot's circuitry. When the bot imploded, images from those dreams were recreated by the game's puppetmasters (the name given to the creators of ARGs), and included in a montage to signify the end of the game.

Since then, puppetmasters have typically created a narrative structure containing some flexibility for, at the very least, playing style. In the best ARGs, the puppetmasters are prepared for the fact that the narrative structure they have in mind at the start will later evolve due to players' actions and discussions. As the puppetmasters can control the timing of the release of each moment of plot development, and delay them if necessary, they have time to make any changes they feel suitable, in response to players' creativity.

Because the players are constantly discussing the meaning of both plot and puzzles, the writers also get an insight into what their readers are enjoying as the story unfolds - and can react to that, if they so choose, as 'The Beast' did (discussed above).

Also, the group mentality allows for much greater potential complexity of narrative. The plot of 'The Haunted Apiary', for instance, was not revealed in chronological order. But the collective had no problem in working it out.

Brooke Thompson, head of a team that has created several successful, non-profitmaking ARGs including 'LockJaw' and 'Metacortechs', has said that following the fora, while not interacting within them directly, helps to develop their narrative:

“When you see that players are relating strongly to a certain subplot, it makes it all the more fun to develop that more. Their excitement over it increases and our motivation would rise. It also helps in storytelling. By understanding what characters the players are relating to, you are in a better position to make more poignant plot decisions. In 'LockJaw', we knew that we were going to have two characters die. We didn't know which ones. The players latched on to this one character, Moot. He only spoke in punctuation, but they loved him. So we made the decision to have him killed, as it would

make the accident more tragic. We compounded that by having him die with a character they hated... The two opposites allowed for a more intense story." (in an interview with the author, 2003).

This careful creation of structure in order to stimulate user creativity is a familiar conceit to players of 'Dungeons and Dragons', where skilled DungeonMasters have been doing something similar since 1974.

ARGs have taken this concept and adapted it considerably, even involving interactions that include live actors playing robots and security guards, where the player has to trick the information off them live on the telephone, in order for the community to receive the next clue. It's part theatre, part imaginative play – and further evidence of the story as event.

A new publishing model

As well as interaction, ARGs also differ from traditional, passive narratives through the nature of their delivery. Conventional literary theory makes much of the book as object, and the messages it can give you. ARGs discard this utterly.

In some instances, you are at least aware of ultimately who is behind the game - trailheads in posters for computer games, car advertisements, TV series or film trailers give you a context of why the game exists.

But websites could be in game or not; you have to determine if something is real or part of the story. When people dialled a phone number given in 'The Beast', and a real person answered, many instantly hung up, afraid that they had made a mistake, and that real life had interfered (in fact, at the other end was a hired actor).

I spoke earlier about how fiction is woven into real-life messages in these games. But the opposite is also true – sometimes, real life can, unintentionally or not, intrude in the game. 'NokiaGame' in 1999, for instance, had a complaint from a Barcelona hospital, asking the company to stop players phoning to ask on the condition of Sisu, an in-game character they couldn't find on their records.

By not carrying disclaimers or copyright information, players have to find clues that prove that this ice-cream manufacturer and that Dutch salvage

company are not what they seem. With professional-looking website design open to all, disbelief is not only suspended; players have to actively hunt for it, to reassure themselves on what is in game and what is not.

This anonymity extends to authorship. Tradition dictates that the puppetmasters remain anonymous until the end of the game. So your favourite author could be behind the game – or not. Many believed that ‘Metacortechs’, set in the world of The Matrix, was created by the Wachowski brothers, when in fact it was a skillful piece of fan fiction. For those with a little programming and design ability, professional and amateur creations are all but indistinguishable, and for those ARGs created by patronage, product connection can be overt or implied according to taste. In one remarkable instance, players of what they thought were two entirely separate games turned out to be playing the same ARG. The design aesthetics and storylines were so distinct, it was genuinely shocking when they turned out to be two halves of the same tale.

As well as no author name, traditional publishing is broken in another way: almost all ARGs are free to play. They rely on having as many players as possible to crack the puzzles and help develop the story, and so price would immediately create a barrier to entry. As already discussed, a game without players ceases to develop as a narrative, and by reducing your player base, you automatically reduce the likelihood of your puzzles being solved. The one instance of an ARG charging to play, ‘Majestik’ by EA Games, failed for a number of reasons – but its price was clearly one of them.

This is why many ARGs have developed either as hobbies, or as narratives created by patronage. Sponsors have developed many of the best games to be tied with a product, be it film or, in the case of Audi’s ‘The Art of the Heist’, a car. Significant resources are required to create an ARG; Brooke Thompson, currently a PhD student in sociology, estimated that she spent more than US\$1000 on creating the ARG Lockjaw, knowing that it would not recouped.

So puppetmasters are seeking new models of financing. For instance, ‘Perplex City’, a new British-based ARG created by a group called Mind Candy (who themselves may not be what they seem), seeks to make its money through puzzle cards which the company claims are not required to complete the game (which has a prize of £100,000), but will add another dimension to it for those who want to invest in them. The puzzles, naturally,

require online teamwork - each card has three jigsaw 'siblings' that players are unlikely to find on their own.

Conclusion

Fiction is all around us. ARGs are creating multiple levels of narrative through websites, telephone calls, emails, posters, people on the street and many more ways that we haven't yet seen. It's part theatre, part cinema, part the film *The Game*, part conspiracy theory, part online chat and part old-fashioned story telling.

ARGs have the potential to tell engaging stories, in an unprecedentedly interactive manner. And the genre has only just begun to tell them in ways that we'd never expect, at times when we least expect it. The genre's slogan is 'This is not a game'. Whatever it is, it has only just begun.

viii.05/updated ix.05
Andrew Losowsky
andrew@losowsky.com

This paper is covered by an Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 licence.

You are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work, and to make derivative works, under the conditions of attribution, noncommercial and share alike.

For more information, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5>
