A CONCISE HISTORY OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES: FROM TRANSMEDIA MARKETING CAMPAIGNS TO THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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This article traces the brief history of alternate reality games (ARGs) from their beginning as viral marketing campaigns associated with *The Blair Witch Project* and the I Love Bees global phenomenon to more recent efforts led by Jane McGonigal and other game designers to use ARGs as a platform for social awareness and social change.

KEY WORDS: alternate reality games, online viral marketing, transmedia McGonigal games for change, fiction mystery group, problem solving collective intelligence

Alternate reality games (ARGs), or immersive games, occupy an epic and complicated place in the evolution of digital media and interactive storytelling.† Looking back to the inception of the term as associated first with the marketing campaign developed by Microsoft's Jordan Weisman and Elan Lee for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.* (*The Beast*), followed by Bungie's Halo 2's console game (I Love Bees), Audi's The Art of the Heist (2005), and 42 Entertainment's Year Zero (2007) for Trent Reznor, and Why So Serious (2007) for *Batman: The Dark Knight*, these large-scale viral campaigns established a set of conventions as to strategies, complexity, and innovative audience engagement that are particularly challenging to replicate and difficult to fund at that level. The methods and insights developed by a coterie of digital agencies, 42 Entertainment (2006), Fourth Wall Studios (2007), No Mimes Media (2009), and Campfire NYC, led to the exploration of serious games as a mobilizing of the online collective hive mind's‡ capacity to problem solve at a vastly accelerated rate. The potential viability for educational initiatives and curriculum goals are rich and wide ranging since there is no limit to the topics that could be developed.

While the term "alternate reality game" was coined by Sean Stacey in 2002 to promote an alternate reality game, Lockjaw, that was developed by core players of Spielberg's *A.I.*

game, *The Beast*, arguably the strategies of ARGs were rooted in the success of the viral marketing campaign for Haxan Films' *The Blair Witch Project* (Rojas, 2001). (Notably, two Lockjaw moderators, Stacey and Steve Peters, created the two websites that continue to be central hubs of the ARG community: ARGN and UnFiction.) The producers of the film, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, launched a website a full year prior to the film (1998), www.blairwitch.com, detailing the legend, and then released a purported documentary, *The Curse of the Blair Witch*, screened on the Sci Fi Channel (July 1999) three weeks before the film's release. The veracity of the film was supported with the dissemination of cryptic content in the real world, including found footage, missing persons posters in Cannes, and IMDB credits for the three actors listed as "missing presumed dead" (Davidson, 2013). Trailers were created and shown on college campuses, the first as excerpts of the "found footage," and the second detailing the search for the missing filmmakers. For the initial audience, the effect of the online and in-world marketing content was one of stumbling on a legend and "documentary," which existed outside the norms of a traditional poster/trailer campaign for a feature. As such, the campaign generated teasing ambiguity first as to the truth of the legend, and then as to the unresolved disappearance of the trio of filmmakers.

Critical to early ARGs was the seeding of cryptic entry points to the "game," often through slightly off-kilter details underlying code or physical artifacts. *The Beast* (so-called by Microsoft co-creator Jordan Weisman for its initial corpus of 666 files) was discovered via a promotional trailer and poster credit for a "sentient machine therapist" (Rose, 2007). Online activity accelerated after Harry Knowles posted an article to Ain't It Cool News, on the various websites linked to Jeanine Salla, the Bangalore World University founded 2018, her purported employer, and other related material. Weisman and Elan Lee left Microsoft and founded 42 Entertainment, which launched ilovebees.com in the summer of 2004. The website discovery was triggered by a subliminal message in a trailer for Halo2 (Fandom Wikia Contributors, 2011). Set up as a personal blog for a beekeeper, the landing page presented as if hacked, with details suggesting that an artificial intelligence was the culprit. The ostensible beekeeper's message to the online community was a callout for technical help, a "Call to Action," which led fans to uncover an audio drama disseminated via payphone (yes, payphones ringing across America), revealing a complex unfolding story in aggregate.

The entry points to 42 Entertainment's Year Zero, created for Trent Reznor's Nine Inch Nails CD of the same name (2007) were even more tenuous, being designed as off-set boldfaced typography on band T-Shirts sold at a show in Lisbon, which together spelled out "i am trying to believe" (Rose, 2007). Typing "iamtryingtobelieve.com" led to online content depicting a cryptic totalitarian future world and the resistance movements attempting to counter it. Famously, a data key left in a concert hall washroom with a previously unreleased track provided metadata linking to layered in-game websites documenting the counter forces at war in this dystopian future. Prior to contacting 42 Entertainment, Reznor had been mulling on how a concept album in the aughts could be

promoted: "So I started thinking about how to make the world's most elaborate album cover," he says, "using the media of today" (Rose, 2007). Notably, Reznor has stated the Year Zero ARG was not a marketing campaign since he paid for it himself.

The ARG approach of integrating physical and digital content in designed experiences was built on highly adaptable and cooptive strategies both of attempting to stay ahead of the accelerated problem-solving capacities of online collaborative communities (the hive mind) and of aiming for highly innovative and surprising means of content delivery. As Jordan Weisman said early on, "If we could make your toaster print something we would. Anything with an electrical current running through it. A single story, a single gaming experience, with no boundaries. A game that is life itself" (McGonigal, 2005).

Key design principles emerged early, including the catchphrase "This Is Not a Game," a position whereby the game never acknowledges its constructed nature; hence, "in-game" refers to a state of immersion and belief in the story and details of the story world. Elan Lee, however, countered this stating, "Players were never meant to believe the 'This is not a game' rhetoric," he explained, "but rather to be baited by it." "It was obviously a game," Lee said. "There was nothing we could do about that. What we could do was make it a game with an identity crisis. If I know it's a game, and you know it's a game, but IT doesn't know it's a game, then we've got a conflict" (McGonical 2005).

The phenomenon of early ARGs and the amplified capacity of collaborative problem solving prompted questions as to what real-world problems might be solved, if game designers harnessed that intelligence? In 2007, game writer and designer, Ken Edlund, launched *World Without Oil*, in partnership with the Independent Television Service, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The premise of *World Without Oil* as an immersive game was that the community of players could "Play it—before you live it." Puppet Masters included Jane McGonigal, who wrote extensively on pervasive and immersive play in *The Beast* and a dissertation on experimental game design, and was the Community Lead/Puppet Master in 2004 on I Love Bees.

"*World Without Oil* was the first ARG to draw upon the Internet's vast collective intelligence and imagination to address peak oil concerns," said *World Without Oil*'s Participation Architect and Futurist Jane McGonigal. "Alternate realities signal the desire, need and opportunity for all of us to redesign reality for real quality of life. I'm honored that *World Without Oil* was recognized for its contribution toward solving a real-world problem."

Her argument as to the power of games and gaming to envision solutions to real-world problems is outlined in part three of her book, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (McGonigal, 2011). McConigal's argument shifts the power of ARGs from selling games to solving problems. The two essays that follow show instructors, instructional and curriculum designers, and other educators how to further harness the transformative potential of ARGs in a formal learning environment.

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NOTES:

† A formal definition of an alternate reality game is: "A cross-media genre of interactive fiction using multiple delivery and communications media, including television, radio, newspapers, Internet, email, SMS, telephone, voicemail, and postal service. Gaming is typically comprised of a secret group of Puppet Masters who author, manipulate, and otherwise control the storyline, related scenarios, and puzzles and a public group of players, the collective detective that attempts to solve the puzzles and thereby win the furtherance of the story" (UnFiction, 2017).

‡ You can think of the "hive mind" as the collective collaborative problem-solving capacity of networked, online communities. The idea most likely derives from philosopher Pierre Levy's work on collective intelligence (Levy, 1999).