

The two classes that I took with Sarah Berry, Media and Print Culture and New Media Studies, were some of the most thought-provoking classes I've had since my years as a philosophy student. It was great to be surrounded by smart, enthusiastic people all excited about media and its future. It was in these classes that I was able to really begin to explore the topics that had intrigued me since my arrival at PSU; indeed, since my first introduction to the possibilities of electronic media when my father brought home our first computer in 1982 and bought a copy of the Microsoft game *Adventure* for me.

Games and books have always been closely related for me; I first read *The Lord of the Rings* in the same year that I started playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, and I found that books absolutely influenced the games that I played (my first character was named Zandolph, and the only reason I didn't make him a wizard was that my friend's older brother, who was teaching us how to play, said that a wizard would be too complicated for me). I am convinced that there is room for new kinds of artistic expression at the boundary of games and books, and in the two papers that follow I explore some different offerings from those borderlands.

# An Examination of Alternate Reality Games

IN SPRING OF 2001, a team at Microsoft launched a new kind of advertising campaign for Steven Spielberg's upcoming movie *A.I. :Artificial Intelligence*. Called *The Beast*, this campaign started out not with TV commercials and newspaper ads, but with simple clues hidden in other promotional materials; movie posters with credits for Jeanine Salla, sentient machine therapist, hidden telephone numbers in trailers, and coded messages on promotional material were all "trailheads" that lead people who noticed them to engage with the campaign. This marked the launch of the first alternate reality game (ARG).

From the trailheads (also called "rabbit holes" by aficionados), players found their way to other sources of information—Googling Jeanine Salla, for example, leads you to the home page of Dr. Jeanine Salla, an AI researcher from the fictional Bangalore World University. This page introduces backstory for AI and helps to engage potential viewers with the movie world before they view the movie, and also gives many more opportunities for people to explore the world of AI by doing things like researching Bangalore World University or attempting to hack into Dr. Salla's voicemail. Each of these options leads to still more avenues to explore, and eventually sets up a murder mystery for players to solve. In the end, *The Beast* involved "thousands of webpages, as well as phone lines, fax machines, email accounts, and live events".

The story of *The Beast* was so complex, and some of the clues so hard to follow, that online groups were formed where people could collaborate and share what they had learned. The largest of these groups, the Cloudmakers (<http://www.cloudmakers.org/>) started as a Yahoo! Group, and eventually contained thousands of people all working together to try to solve the mystery behind *The Beast*. Cloudmakers and the other online groups that formed became so effective at solving the puzzles of *The Beast* that the ARG's developers had to constantly add and alter content based on what these groups had discovered, which was often more than the developers had planned for. In her 2003 paper "'This is Not a Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play", Jane McGonigal quotes *The Beast's* lead producer Elan Lee:

What we quickly learned was that the Cloudmakers were a hell of a lot smarter than we are, and that really kept us on our toes... Here, I'll show you this. [He shows a slide entitled 'Beast Beat r', a puzzle schedule.] Now, there's a color key here for puzzles: hard, easy, not so hard, etc. [Pointing to different colors] These were the puzzles that would take a day, these were puzzles that would take a week, and these puzzles they'd probably never figure out until we broke down and gave them the answers. So we built a three month schedule around this. And finally we released. [Pause] The Cloudmakers solved all of these puzzles on the first day.

In order to deal with this utterly unanticipated rush of player involvement and problem-solving ability, the producers of *The Beast* had to respond to what players were doing and how they were analyzing the game. The level of player involvement has direct impact on the speed of progression of the narrative, and as the narrative of *The Beast* is constrained by time (running until the release of *A.I.*) the producers had to work to ensure that there was enough narrative

to fill the time given, but also not make the narrative puzzles so difficult to solve that people would get discouraged and stop trying.

As a marketing campaign, *The Beast* was a huge success—it involved over 3 million people and “generated over 300 million impressions for the film through mainstream press such as Time, CNN, and USA Today as well as niche outlets” according to 42 entertainment (a company created by former Microsoft employees involved in *The Beast*). Perhaps more importantly, it sparked interest in a whole new medium. ARGs have exploded in popularity since the launch of *The Beast*; as of December 4, 2009, the community site ARGnet lists 11 current ARGs being played, while the forums at Unfiction, another large community site, lists 13. Many of these ARGs are marketing campaigns for products, such as Exoriare, which is advertising for a graphic novel, as well as backstory for an upcoming videogame series, but some are strictly noncommercial; *Marble Hornets* is based on a forum-created myth called the Slender Man, and has no commercial tie-in.

If ARGs are not exclusively marketing campaigns, what are they? Sean Stewart, a well-known science fiction and fantasy writer and lead writer of *The Beast*, says on his blog that the hallmarks of an ARG are:

- A story which is broken into pieces which the audience must find and assemble
- The story is not bound by medium or platform: we use text, video, audio, flash, print ads, billboards, phone calls, and email to deliver parts of the plot.
- This audience is massive and *collective*: it takes advantage of communication tech to work together
- The audience is not only bought into the world because *they* are the ones responsible for exploring it, the audience also meaningfully affects how the story progresses. It is built in a way that allows players to have a key role in creating the fiction.

In many ways, ARGs are similar to party murder mystery games—indeed, many ARGs, including *The Beast*, involve a murder mystery as a central part of the game. The format of one person or group of people (usually called puppetmasters) being in charge of the game and reacting to player contributions is very similar to pen-and-paper role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which the Dungeon Master essentially plays the part of narrator of a story in which players take the role of characters and decide what to do about the events the Dungeon Master describes. Party murder mysteries and RPGs are limited in size, however, and are generally not transmedia experiences; some games will incorporate physical props or soundtracks to help create a certain atmosphere, but these are not central to the nature of the game in the same way that transmedia experience is to an ARG.

The fragmented story line is likewise central to an ARG; it is this that keeps players trying to figure out the story. It is interesting to note that while this fragmented story line renders most ARGs non-chronological, with players discovering non-sequential events and having to piece them together, the ARGs themselves are almost invariably time-bound; that is, the puppetmasters release information as required, whether through new websites in *The Beast* or phone calls to previously identified payphones in *I Love Bees*. When the Cloudmakers solved three months worth of puzzles in a single day, the producers of *The Beast* responded by releasing further information on a weekly schedule, further reinforcing the time-bound nature of the game.

The audience is certainly in control of the narrative of most ARGs, and not just in terms of speed of progression—players frequently interact with actors playing the role of characters

in ARGs, and those interactions can have impact on the story line. In the ARG *I Love Bees*, for example, a central puzzle of the game revealed a list of dates and GPS coordinates. Players at the right place and at the right time found ringing payphones. Many of these calls were pre-recorded sections of a clip that had to be pieced together by players, but some were calls from characters in the game. One of these characters managed to extract the location of an ARG character the players were trying to protect from the player who answered the phone, which meant that the entire story line had to be re-written. This sort of narrative control sets ARGs apart from even the most writerly of traditional media; the players are also the storytellers, in a very real sense.

The question of scale in ARGs is an interesting one. While it is true that the great majority of ARGs are predicated on a massive number of participants pooling their resources to do things like string together audio clips recorded from payphones around the world or to analyze static through a spectroscope to extract a phone number to call for more content (as in *Year Zero*, which advertised the Nine Inch Nails album of the same name), not all ARGs require this scale of collaboration. The recently-completed *Must Love Robots*, for example, had about 300 participants, a far cry from the millions who were involved in *The Beast*. Many grassroots ARGs are of a similar size, which is unsurprising given that noncommercial ARGs frequently don't have the money to have the large staff needed to keep up with tens of thousands of players. ARGs can even be designed for a single player; Kiaya Steele's now-fiance proposed to her with an ARG he designed exclusively for her that involved "vans, staple guns, cameramen in trees, threats, red phone booths, and a series of hidden clues."

The alternate reality game is a new form of media, and its definition is still in flux, but I would posit that a massive player base is not a required characteristic of an ARG; player-driven story, transmedia experience, and fractured narrative seem necessary to what ARG aficionados think of when they think of ARGs, but not necessarily a crowd of players—though that is certainly true in the vast majority of ARGs, it is clearly not in all of them. As the genre becomes more matured, I would not be surprised to hear of more small-group or single-player ARGs.

We've seen that ARGs can be intended for a very broad audience, or a very focused one. The next question to ask is the composition of that audience—who are ARGs targeting? The answer to this depends on the individual game; the target audience of *I Love Bees* was 18-28 year old males, because the game was a marketing campaign for Microsoft's videogame *Halo 2*, and that's the demographic that the game is marketed to. Game designer and researcher Jane McGonigal notes that the demographics of ARGs are "more in line with casual games, which they say is about a 50/50 split men and women. And then there's the whole range of audience, from high school students and college students to people in their thirties, forties, and fifties. We've had people in their sixties show up to live events." McGonigal doesn't mention the involvement of the different demographics, and given that active players are outnumbered by "lurkers" who don't actively contribute by a factor of anywhere from five to twenty, that could be significant. One thing that can be said with certainty about the audience of ARGs, though, is that players have internet access, and can spend enough time online to peruse a large number of sites, even if they are only lurking and following discussions on a message board. It is possible, then, that ARGs are a media restricted to those on the "have" side of the digital divide, while the "have nots" don't have access to the tools that enable the sort of transmedia experience that ARGs require.

The phenomenon of lurkers makes determining the audience of an ARG an interesting problem; much of the work of problem solving is done by dedicated groups of “hardcore” ARG players, such as the Cloudmakers or those at [forums.unfiction.com/forums](http://forums.unfiction.com/forums); the lurkers just follow the hardcore players in their journey. This means that the game must appeal to the hardcore players and to the target audience; the target audience because they’re the ones the media is trying to reach, and the hardcore players because they are the intermediary, carrying the messages in the ARG to the target audience. If they aren’t interested, they won’t solve the puzzles, and the lurkers will not have anything to watch.

We’ve seen that some ARGs are marketing campaigns, such as *The Beast* and *I Love Bees*, and that others are grassroots games created for the sake of the game itself, such as *Must Love Robots*. There are many other reasons people create ARGs, however; for example, in late 2008 the Smithsonian American Art Museum hosted *Ghosts of a Chance*, an ARG designed to both “tak[e] our name and our collection to new audiences, particularly those who didn’t normally visit art museums but d[o] participate in on-line games” and to make people explore art more deeply. In this way, *Ghosts of a Chance* was both a marketing campaign and a campaign of public education.

An even more striking example is *CryptoZoo*, an ARG centered around the concept of tracking down and attempting to catch Cryptids, which are essentially unknown or fantastical lifeforms. Players need to learn the habits and favored locales of cryptids, including how they move, and then attempt to track them down through clues posted online. Cryptids all move very quickly, often in fairly erratic patterns, so players need to practice running in these same patterns to have a hope of catching a cryptid. The game is sponsored by the American Heart Association as part of an initiative to get more Americans outside running and being active.

*World Without Oil* is another socially conscious ARG; in this, players are invited to imagine life in America for the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis and send in accounts of what their lives were like in the wake of the crisis. The aim was not only to raise consciousness about the dependence of modern society on oil, but also to begin to find possible solutions to some problems that would come up in a similar situation before it happened. The organizers of *World Without Oil* reported that the game “sparked peer learning and inquiry-based exploration of the roots, outcomes, and prevention of an oil crisis.”

The medium of ARGs is a new one, but it is already demonstrating its flexibility—ARGs are useful for far more than just marketing, and can attract a huge audience. They also have the ability to engage people on a very deep level, even with subjects they previously had no real interest in; as one of the players of the Smithsonian’s *Ghosts of a Chance* said, “Even though we were ‘exposed’ to the whole museum, I also liked that there were a couple of pieces of art that we actually had to sit and ponder. [...] I never would have spent the time staring into [a] painting and trying to understand it if it weren’t part of a task.” They can drive awareness of or speculation into real-world problems, as *World Without Oil* did, or follow *CryptoZoo*’s lead to foster healthier behaviors in players, or just tell a good story like *Marble Hornets* does.

While it’s true that ARGs can be small scale or even solitary experiences, most ARGs foster a sense of community and involvement with a larger group. The ability to work as part of a large group to solve problems that no one person alone could possibly solve may well be one of the most important skills that ARGs can teach. If this is the case, it’s possible that the digital divide will only grow deeper, as people without the ability to access the internet as regularly

and be involved in ARGs and other collaborative projects fall behind in their ability to perform in groups the same way that digital natives can. For those who can, however, ARGs have the capacity to broaden perspectives and expose people to skillsets and viewpoints outside their own as players collaborate to solve puzzles. ARGs that involve the physical world can even bring players to places they would never have gone before.

Ultimately, ARGs are about looking critically at the world and tinkering with it, trying to figure out creative ways around problems and working together to find the answers to very complex questions, though it is worth noting that problems in ARGs are designed to be solved. The Cloudmakers ran into this problem shortly after *The Beast*, the ARG that had brought them together, ended—in the aftermath of 9/11, there were a number of people on the Cloudmaker discussion board who wanted to try to bring the group’s problem-solving skills to bear on the issue of who had perpetrated the attacks. In the end, the co-founders of the group asked members to not probe into 9/11, reminding players that *The Beast* “was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was \*narrative\*.... This is not a game. Do not go getting delusions of grandeur. Cloudmakers solved a story. This is real life”

ARGs have limitations, but they also have the potential to bring people together, to inspire critical thinking and collaboration on a massive scale, and to expose people to new viewpoints. It’s hard to ask for more from a new medium.