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Issues with Reality: Defining and Exploring the Logics of Alternate Reality Games

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ISSUES WITH REALITY:
DEFINING AND EXPLORING THE LOGICS OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES

by
Jay Johnson

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

ISSUES WITH REALITY: DEFINING AND EXPLORING THE LOGICS OF ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES

by

Jay Johnson

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018
Under Supervision of Professor Stuart Moulthrop

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), a genre of transmedia experiences, are a recent phenomenon, with the first recognized ARG being *The Beast* (2001), a promotion for the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). This dissertation seeks to more clearly define and investigate contexts of transmedia narratives and games, specifically ARGs. ARGs differ from more popular and well-known contemporary forms of gaming in several ways, perhaps most importantly by intensive use of multiple media. Whereas a player may experience most or all of a conventional video game through a single medium, participants in ARGs must navigate multiple media and technical platforms— networks of websites, digital graphics, audio recordings, videos, text and graphics in print, physical objects, etc.— in order to participate in the experience of the ARG. After establishing a history of ARGs, the author defines both transmedia and ARGs and begins to build typologies to help distinguish individual examples of the genres. Then, after building the above framework for analyzing transmedia and ARGs, the author explores the relevance of the ARG genre within three specific contexts. These contexts serve as tools to excavate potential motivators from creative and participatory standpoints. The author refers to these motivations as three logics of ARGs: industrial, cultural, and educational. The industrial logic examines the advantages of transmedia and ARG production from the entertainment industry standpoint, in terms of an alternative to franchising and as a way to extend intellectual property (IP), as well as

offering interactive possibilities to an engaged audience. The cultural logic examines the relationship between the emergence of digital media, transmedia, and ARGs and the aesthetic appeal of the form and genre as paranoia, puzzle-solving, and collective meaning making within a shifting representation of reality through networked embodiment and challenging long-held assumptions of ontological and phenomenological experiences. Finally, the educational logic of ARGs analyzes the potential and use of the genre as an immersive, constructivist learning space that fosters self-motivated individual and collaborative analysis, interpretation, and problem-solving.

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To Ms bLue skies,
who helped me discover that
alternate universes are real

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Thank you, Sunrise: we did it. Now, on to our next collaborative adventure...

Introduction

This dissertation seeks to more clearly define and investigate contexts of transmedia narratives and games, specifically the genre known as alternate reality games¹ (ARGs). ARGs differ from more popular and well-known contemporary forms of gaming in several ways, perhaps most importantly by intensive use of multiple media. Whereas a player may experience most or all of a conventional video game through a single medium, participants in ARGs must navigate multiple media and technical platforms— networks of websites, digital graphics, audio recordings, videos, text and graphics in print, physical objects, etc.— in order to participate in the experience of the ARG.

ARGs also differ through their use of time and space. For example, while board games like *Monopoly* are designed to be played in a single synchronous space, participants in an ARG scattered throughout geographical locations must discover different game elements and collaborate on a larger scale (typically, hundreds or thousands of participants) in order to advance gameplay. Furthermore, the ARG's relationship to formal rules distinguishes it from other genres. ARGs operate with an aesthetic of radical realism, often declaring “this is not a game.” This stance creates a specific type of immersion for the player; the game is never acknowledged as a game, which is why the term “alternate reality” is employed. This immersion is what I define as “reflexive immersion,” a concept that combines the participants' recognition

¹ In the likely case you aren't familiar with the genre, here is one common definition of alternate reality games from game designer, academic, and ARG pioneer Jane McGonigal:

an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone (“Alternate Reality Gaming: 'Life Imitates ARG'”).

of the ARG as having a split existence between being a game and also operating within the context of everyday life using everyday media and objects. This specific type of immersion simultaneously challenges the ontological and phenomenological experiences of participants. Therefore, there is no formal documentation, announcement, or sometimes even enforcement of rules. With an ARG, the boundaries and rules that define the gamespace are soft and porous and negotiated by the players and, sometimes, the game designers. This porousness of boundary reflects Thomas Malaby's understanding of games and play, more than the historical approaches of Huizinga and other's. As Malaby contends, games should not be assumed to, by default, contain elements of a separable space (a "magic circle") but instead the relationship between game space and everyday space— as well as the varieties of pleasures and what is at stake in experiences considered as games— should be understand as "*cultural accomplishments* specific to a given context" (96). In this dissertation, I explore the various contexts in which ARGs have been used, and what the motivations, pleasures, and consequences of those experiences have meant for both creators and audience. Furthermore, in concluding this dissertation, I also suggest future uses of ARGs that push what is at stake in an ARG experience in socio-political activism directions.

Examining ARGs in the context of contemporary media systems and culture, they are particularly well-suited experiences for engaging audiences in interactive play and storytelling for the 21st century. This is due to the several factors listed above: the mix of digital and analog media; the use of wide-ranging digital networks to facilitate the self-assembly of participants; the harnessing of shifting experiences of ontology and phenomenology in everyday life.

First, I seek to establish a history of ARGs and a lineage that extends through previous

cultural artifacts, such as novels, films, and interactive web puzzles. This is important due to a lack of historical documentation on ARGs, in part due to the ephemeral nature of the Internet and that ARGs are almost exclusively one-time events that offer no reply possibilities. By providing a more detailed history of ARGs than was previously available in a single source, we can more easily and accurately excavate and understand the context of the phenomenon.

After establishing a history of ARGs, I define both transmedia and ARGs and begin to build typologies to help distinguish individual examples of the genres. The goal of these definitions and typologies is twofold: to build ways of analyzing each of the phenomena as part of a cohesive genre; and to devise a methodology to perform media-specific analysis on individual examples within the form and genre. Even though the term transmedia has been used in academic studies since 1991, the definition remains contested as evidenced by Marie-Laure Ryan's November 2016 article "Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling." In developing these definitions, I position the ARG as distinctly existing between a narrative and game—and as having the potential for a uniquely interactive experience. To illustrate these definitions and typologies, I analyze a set of transmedia experiences and ARGs, identifying the commonalities and distinctions among multiple examples.

Then, after building the above framework for analyzing transmedia and ARGs, I explore the relevance of the ARG genre within three specific contexts. These contexts serve as tools to excavate potential motivators from creative and participatory standpoints. I refer to these motivations as three logics of ARGs: industrial, cultural, and educational. The industrial logic examines the advantages of transmedia and ARG production from the entertainment industry standpoint, in terms of an alternative to franchising and as a way to extend intellectual property

(IP), as well as offering interactive possibilities to an engaged audience. The cultural logic examines the relationship between the emergence of digital media, transmedia, and ARGs and the aesthetic appeal of the form and genre as paranoia, puzzle-solving, and collective meaning making within a shifting representation of reality through networked embodiment and challenging long-held assumptions of ontological and phenomenological experiences. Finally, the educational logic of ARGs analyzes the potential and use of the genre as an immersive, constructivist learning space that fosters self-motivated individual and collaborative analysis, interpretation, and problem-solving.

Chapter 1: Introduction and historical survey of ARGs

This relatively new form emerged between the late 1990s and 2001. While it may be common for new forms and genres to undergo definitional uncertainty, this is particularly applicable to transmedia. In transmedia, the crossing of media leads to hybrid expectations and frequently to the mashing together of previous genres and forms: game and narrative; pervasive games and geocaching; flashmobs and Marxist Theatre; video blogs and short film; online message boards and billboards.

The timing of ARG's emergence is coincident with the continued rise of the World Wide Web in contemporary American culture as well as the beginning growth of more interactive web experiences, contemporarily referred to as Web 2.0. The tools of the ARG— message boards, wikis, blogs— become far more prevalent and familiar to a wide-range of individuals, thus facilitating one of the core components necessary for ARGs, what Pierre Lévy refers to as “collective intelligence” (or CI) computing (Lévy). Concurrent with Web 2.0 is the phenomenon

of what Thomas Elsaesser calls the “mind-game” film, wherein characters and the audience are both subject to being playfully manipulated; Jason Mittel also identifies the rise of the complex, “puzzle” aesthetic in long-form television narrative at the same time (Elsaesser; Mittel). ARGs share many of the narrative and aesthetic approaches, as well as being linked directly to the intellectual property (IP) of many of these films and television series.

The “first” ARG is commonly recognized to be *The Beast* (2001), a marketing experience used for the 2001 film *A.I. The Beast* established many of the characteristics of the genre: the use of multiple media; the “This Is Not A Game” (TINAG) aesthetic; the requirement of having a large, distributed group to advance the game through a variety of problem- and puzzle-solving; and the frequent use of the genre as a marketing tool. ARGs with success similar to *The Beast* followed with 2004’s *I Love Bees* (for Microsoft’s *Halo 2*), 2006’s *The Lost Experience* (for ABC’s *Lost*), and continued through the promotion of various popular IPs, like NBC’s *Heroes*, the *Terminator* franchise, HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, and many others. Shortly after *The Beast*, many independent and non-commercial ARGs were created by and for ARG player communities seeking to replicate and build upon their initial experiences.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework for understanding ARGs

Even after decades of discourse and debate, the boundary between games and narrative remains disputed ground, with a fairly clear binary of argument. On one side, ludologists argue for games being understood— and appreciated— as phenomena distinct from other forms of representation and experience, such as film, novels, and visual art. On the other side, narratologists argue that games are a type of narrative, only different from other forms of

narrative media through new technologies and the possibilities they offer for mediating and interacting a narrative world. The roots of these arguments can be traced to the 1990's, with Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) as an example of the ludological stance and Janet Murray *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) as an example of the narratological viewpoint; these viewpoints met head-on in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006). Despite being a decade later, Marie-Laure Ryan's November 2016 article "Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling" confirms the continued rift, especially in terms of transmedia and ARGs.

As noted above, the complexity and recency of transmedia is a barrier to a widely-accepted definition. Within the larger category of transmedia, many characteristics do align with what are traditionally considered to be narrative media. ARGs, however, as a genre of transmedia that focuses more heavily on interactivity, collaborative participation, and solving puzzles, have many elements that position them as traditionally game experiences. Due to this hybrid position of ARGs and the unsettled definitional ground of games and narratives, in general, I explore definitions of narratives and games in Chapter 2. In doing so, I seek to situate transmedia as distinct from strictly a form of content distribution. This distinction rests in part on Christy Dena's assertion that "both commerce and artistic concerns influence transmedia design" (24). Noted transmedia producer Jeff Gomez perhaps best summarizes the entertainment industry's perspective, claiming that "transmedia is a technique" that can be applied to any IP at any time ("Little Tamagotchis..."). However, using Jenkins's notion of "additive comprehension, I argue for a more integrated approach to understanding transmedia, which is represented by transmedia producer Michel Reilhac. Reilhac calls transmedia "more a state of mind than a technique" universally applicable to a narrative or game experience ("The State of

Storytelling...”). This perspective treats transmedia as being foundational to the creative process, being integrated into the conception of the experience from the beginning. This is a characteristic I describe as “metastatic” — growing from one medium to another through a rapid crossing of boundaries, a term informed by both pathology and rhetoric.

Understanding transmedia in this manner aligns with Ryan’s analysis of transmedia in “Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling,” in which she closely reads the discourses surrounding transmedia from three different communities: the industry, academia, and the participants. In her analysis, she focuses on the importance of the specific media used in an experience and the affordances therein. In order to expand looking at transmedia and ARGs in this way, I incorporate N. Katherine Hayles’ media-specific analysis (MSA) from “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis” (2004). This builds toward the foundation of a future typology for transmedia and, more specifically, ARGs, which . This typology is built on the work of Espen Aarseth, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Markku Eskelinen, and incorporates Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy. Through this analysis, I seek to approach a definition of transmedia and of ARGs that considers the specific media used and the ability for the participants to alter the outcome of the experience— a potential to explore new forms of interactive experiences, whether understood as games or as narratives.

Chapter 3: The Industrial Logic

While many ARGs and transmedia experiences of the past two decades have been unrelated to IP of the entertainment industry, the majority of popular ARGs and transmedia

experiences have been extensions of or marketing for mass media entertainment IP. The earliest commonly recognized ARG, 2001's *The Beast*, was a marketing product for Warner Bros.' film, *A.I.* Transmedia experiences have been heavily used in the television industry. For instance, *The Lost Experience (TLE)*— the ARG for the ABC television series *Lost*— was used to engage active viewers of the show both during the typical U.S. television season and to bridge the period between the end of one season and the beginning of the other. *TLE* extended the viewing experience— both in time and media— and immersed viewers in more complex narratives. In this chapter, I will argue for three ways of understanding the industrial logic for the entertainment industry's use of transmedia experiences as promotional tool and IP extension.

This first way of understanding the industrial logic of transmedia and ARGs is through the economic benefits of extending the viewing experience through new forms of distribution. Network television traditionally experiences a hiatus in new programming; in the United States this aligns with the summer months. As programming options for television viewers grew in the 2000s— through the proliferation of cable networks, some of them niche, others more focused on general audiences— and the critical success of subscription networks like HBO and Cinemax, broadcast networks began to lose viewers during the hiatus. This caused both a reduction in ad revenue for that period and a residual loss of viewership during the regular broadcast season. Through using transmedia techniques that extend the IP beyond the television screen, networks are more likely to retain viewers; they are also able to increase revenues through additional content sponsorships embedded in the transmedia experience. This is particularly true for what Jason Mittell refers to as the complex narratives of contemporary television, such as *Lost*. In *TLE*, the engaged audience searched various media, including websites, videos, and “fake”

commercials— transmedia content produced by characters and entities in the *Lost* storyworld. This experience bridged the gap in the viewing schedule in a way that immersed the engaged audience within the storyworld in a way that offers a deeper experience than extended an experience through a more traditional franchising model allows.

The second industrial logic is providing opportunities for engaged audiences to deeply interact with an IP's storyworld. As the examples in Chapter 3 show, long-form narrative television is well-situated for this, especially series that Mittell has described as exhibiting a focus on the “operational aesthetic” — a focus on “how it happened” (or the structure of the narrative itself) as opposed to a focus on “what will happen,” a series epitomized by *Lost* (Mittell 35). By having both a large amount and a wide distribution of clues across multiple media, *TLE* required both active participation by individuals and collaboration to share clues and combine knowledge. In order to advance the experience, engaged viewers were required to deeply explore the storyworld and collaboratively solve puzzles.

The third and final industrial logic explored in Chapter 3 is the use of ARGs in an instructional manner to provide the audience with productive ways of reading the televisual text. With the complexity of these contemporary television shows, there is an accompanying challenge in understanding how to follow and interpret the narrative. Specifically, *Lost* uses the character Desmond as a surrogate perspective to instruct the audience on how to “read” the televisual text. In a close reading of Desmond-centric episodes of *Lost*, I will connect his perspective with the aesthetics of *TLE* to show how an ARG is particularly effective of in embodying the reflexive immersion that is part of the viewing experience of complex narratives that feature an element of the “operational aesthetic.”

Chapter 4: The Cultural Logic

The emergence of the ARG is not only relevant in terms of shifts in the entertainment industry; the aesthetics and structure of ARGs also reflect the emergence and evolution of networked digital culture and the paranoia and destabilization of notions of reality. *The Beast*, for example, was only possible because of emerging digital practices in the early 21st century; it also embodied a core aesthetic of ARGs—a principle that is referred to as “this is not a game” (TINAG) (“This Is Not a Game”).

The launch of *The Beast* was an anti-launch; there were no official announcements to inform the public, nor was there every any acknowledgement of the existence of the game by the creators. The first clue, or rabbit hole, was a name on a theatrical teaser poster that lead to a website. From there, those who stumbled into the experience self-assembled using the digital tools, notably a Yahoo! Groups site. From here, what Lévy refers to as a “collective intelligence” emerged, and the Cloudmakers (the name the Yahoo! Group adopted) scoured the new digital landscape to collaboratively collect and solve clues from dozens of websites, television commercials, movie posters, phone calls, and live events (Lévy).

The TINAG aesthetic of *The Beast* heavily influenced the genre, establishing the distinct notion of an “alternate reality” as opposed to a simple fictional universe. As Jane McGonigal notes, the notion of an alternate reality overlaying our everyday spaces is connected to what Paul Virilio labels “metageography,” or the relative collapse of time and space due to advancements in digital communication technology that let viewers experience reality almost simultaneously no matter the physical location of the event (“This Is Not a Game”; Virilio). The potential for the

virtual to overlay everyday spaces is amplified as digital devices have become ubiquitous in almost all aspects of contemporary life and is an integral part of the transmedia structure of ARGs, allowing for clues to be embedded in everyday spaces that we consider to be real.

Finally, the use of everyday objects such as posters, billboard, websites, and television commercials and the overlapping of a narrative world onto one considered to be phenomenologically real produces a simulatary effect in which multiple realities become simultaneously experienced. Furthermore, this overlapping reality reverberates with the paranoia that Thomas Elsaesser identifies in films like *Fight Club* and *The Game*, the latter of which employs an ARG-like experience as a plot device to destabilize the protagonist's reality.

Chapter 5: Educational Logic

While there has been recent focus on the use of video games in the classroom, relatively little attention has been given to the use of ARGs for educational purposes. Primarily building on the work of John Seely Brown, Nicola Whitton, and the New London Group, I will examine the ARG *World Without Oil (WWO)*, among others, as an example of the potential of ARGs as tools for education and social activism.

ARGs lack a developed ruleset for participants to interact with the experience. While this is no doubt in part to the TINAG aesthetic and the overlapping of the alternate with the real, one effect is a space in which participants must navigate with minimal imposed guidance. These spaces can be considered “constructivist” learning spaces, in which participants (or, more traditionally, learners) develop autonomy in learning, collaborate with others of diverse perspectives in order to form meaningful understandings and solutions to relevant problems, and

use multiple modes of representation in the process (Whitton and Hollins). In *WWO*, players were simply asked to imagine their own reality under a different set of conditions: that of a spike in oil prices throughout the world. Then, they were asked to share their stories through whatever means they chose: blog posts, audio messages, video logs, or images.

In *WWO*, participants became part of a community navigating through an alternate reality oil crisis, contributing to the understanding of the effects through their individual responses. Collectively, these responses also shaped future prompts given to participants, as well as providing a cross-pollination of ideas between participants, leading to new perspectives in individual responses. This is a similar process to what Peter Lunenfeld refers to as “hypercontextuality” in his discussion of interactive cinema: “a rhizomatic and dynamic interlinked communicative community using networks to curate a series of shifting contexts” (383). The immersive aesthetic of ARGs like *WWO* also translates to what John Seely Brown refers to as “situated cognition,” or participants applying knowledge and learning skills in an authentic context, which leads to more meaningful learning. By being within a context they help to build, the participants of *WWO* gained a deeper understanding of potential problems and how to collaboratively find solutions.

Furthermore, the multiple modalities in which the *WWO* participants compose address the The New London Group’s urge for a growth in multimodal composition in order to better acclimate to the demands and contexts of an increasingly digitally connected world (*New London Group*). The learning achieved by the participants was not limited to an understanding of problems and solutions. By participating in a transmedia experience, they must also produce in a transmedia or multimedia manner. With the ARG hosted in a digital networked environment,

participants had to communicate with, interpret, and analyze text, video, pictures, and audio in order to become an active part of the collective learning community.

To extend the possibilities of ARGs as learning spaces for 21st century literacies, I conclude by speculating on the future use of these experiences. Due to the interactivity and focus on collaboration and production, I envision a future wherein ARGs might provide structures for social and political activism. This activism could utilize horizontally-organized structures to produce counter-narratives and actions that resist the dominant structure of contemporary society and provide alternate platforms for the subaltern. However, despite utopian rhetoric that surrounds some of the discussion on the categories of “serious games” or “games for change,” it is important to acknowledge the limitations— and very different stakes— of framing reality as a game.

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Chapter 1: A History of Alternate Reality Games

Introduction

While the concept of transmedia typically coincides with contemporary digital networked technology and an approach to the publication of content or the mediated experience of a story or game, transmedia approaches reach back into the 19th Century and predate the Internet, the microprocessor computer, and even electrical lighting. These approaches can be found in various forms, media, and genres, such as: games and narratives; novels and Marxist theatre; magazines and films. For instance, the use of multiple media to convey a more sensuously and phenomenologically robust meaning to the audience echos through editors Randall Packer and Ken Jordan's *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (2002), tracing the lineage of mixed media art dating back to Wagner's foundational nineteenth century concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or Total Artwork) and through present day experiences that make use of and cut across multiple media.

In looking at alternate reality games (ARGs) as a specific instance or genre of transmedia, 2001's *The Beast* is regularly accepted as the first example. There are, however, many previous examples of experiences that preceded *The Beast* and serve as ways to understanding the historical foundation for the ARG. These include novels (G.K. Chesterton's *The Club of Queer Trades*), films (David Fincher's *The Game*), and marketing experiences (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick's *The Blair Witch Project*).

In this chapter, I will investigate the history of the phenomena of transmedia and ARGs, a

history with porous borders— and a porousness that extends to unsettled definitions for both terms. This history serves to establish a contextual background for contemporary approaches to transmedia and ARGs, as well as to begin developing a link to theoretical analyses and practical usages of the ARG. The history in this chapter also seeks to show the evolution of the ARG genre as a whole in response to changing media, audience, and production situations. While the instantiation of the ARG and contemporary understanding of transmedia are coincident with— and often rooted in— the rise of the digital networked technology, specifically what is commonly referred to as Web 2.0, the foundations that provide a deeper understanding of these phenomena extend back into the pre-digital media past. In short, transmedia and specifically ARGs are media phenomena facilitated and supported by technological and cultural shifts in digital media in the 21st century.

A Brief History of “Transmedia”

In order to historically situate transmedia and ARGs, it is important to look at the language used to circumscribe the phenomena.² Two decades after its first usage, the term transmedia remains unsettled; definitions of the term are almost as varied and wide-spread as the individual examples of the form throughout its history. This lack of consensus is true in the academic discipline of media studies, within the community of producers, and in fan communities. This definitional ambiguity is recently reflected in Marie-Laure Ryan’s 2016 article, “Transmedia narrative and transmedia storytelling.” Ryan writes that, because there are people who consider themselves transmedia producers and their work is now officially

² Chapter 2 of this dissertation will focus in depth on building a definition and typology for transmedia and ARGs.

recognized by the Producers Guild of America, then “the fruit of their efforts, transmedia storytelling must exist” — yet no agreed upon definition exists (3). Before exploring the contemporary ambiguity, however, it is important to build an understanding of the terms historical usage. By building a historical understanding, it is possible to see the tensions that stem from examining the form through a variety of theoretical and practical frameworks held by academics and producers.

The first academic usage of the term transmedia dates to Marsha Kinder’s 1991 book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*. Kinder uses the concept of “transmedia intertextuality” to explore the “intertextual relations across different narrative media” primarily in order to understand how viewers make meaning from intellectual property that are retold in various media--such as how children navigate the historical and contemporary contexts of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* through a franchise distributed through movies, video games, cartoon series, and other forms (2-3). Kinder’s concern, however, is less about how a narrative or game crosses media to convey its meaning, and more about how viewers navigate the variety of media iterations of a story in order to build context and form meaning. For instance, Kinder explores how children experience a Saturday morning cartoon episode of a show like *Muppet Babies* in relation to their knowledge of other Muppet texts, such as film and toys, and the commodification that results from this intertextual interplay. As such, much of Kinder’s work focuses on understanding transmedia as a form of distribution, franchising, and translation of a previously existing narrative; this focus stands in contrast to exploring transmedia as a form in which narrative chunks are distributed and the traversing of the various media within a work are required for the viewer to form a complete or deeper meaning. This

latter understanding is key to more contemporary understandings of transmedia. Kinder's critical approach in this book, however, is noted as being important in leading to medium-specific analysis (MSA) (Kinder and McPherson xvi). In chapter two of this dissertation, N. Katherine Hayles' work on MSA serves as a foundation for building a definition of transmedia and ARGs.

The view of transmedia as crossing media within the boundaries of a single work— or piece of intellectual property (IP)³ — was perhaps most effectively popularized by Henry Jenkins in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. Jenkins examines the convergence of digital media technologies and practices and how those affect the creative and distribution strategies of media producers and the habits of consumers. He uses “convergence” to address multiple aspects of complex contemporary media ecosystems:

“...the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, culture, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about.” (2-3)

His writing focuses specifically on the notion of engaged viewers, which is linked to the expansion of both interactive digital media and the accessibility to these tools for both producers and consumers. For instance, Jenkins explores the role of practices such as fan fiction, photoshopping and sharing images, structured viewer experiences like fan voting on *American Idol*, and distributed meaning making through online message board communities. All these practices are made more possible through the increased ubiquity of digital technologies, devices,

³ I use IP to more appropriately capture what might historically be referred to and understood as a franchise: *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and others. The intention of using IP is to both break down the traditional notions of narratives or games (content in the terms of MSA) ensconced and encoded in terms like “film” or “movie” and to specifically allow storyworlds to exist simultaneously both in multiple media spaces and iterations and to exist independent of being reified as bound to any medium. IP also perhaps better captures the “West Coast” or industrial (of the entertainment industry) concerns of monetization and capturing new and more viewers through the spreading of a storyworld across multiple media and genres.

and networks-- such as streaming video, smart phones, and high-speed wireless networks.

Jenkins' views on transmedia are shaped by the notion of participatory culture, which he describes as being in “[contrast] with older notions of passive media spectatorship” which distinguish between the historical categories of producer and consumer “as occupying separate roles” (3). These roles, however, are now less binary and the borders between each are less defined, viewing all individuals or participants as being part of an experience or phenomenon in which behaviors and possibilities are governed by terms that are constantly being negotiated and in which not all participants have equal power. These power relations, some of which are explored later in this chapter and dissertation, can be circumscribed by access, knowledge, media literacy, and the participant's individual positioning in relation to the dominant culture's set of norms: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socioeconomic standing, beliefs, and many other factors. For instance, Jenkins and many, many others⁴ highlight the tension between the industry's penchant to retain control over IP, motivated by both revenue and by the ability to control future narratives within the IP's canon, and the viewers production of fan media. One primary example of this dynamic is the *Harry Potter* fan culture, in which readers become creators of their own stories within the *Harry Potter* storyworld. These fan-produced texts are harnessed by the industry when it profits them, such as by drawing audiences into fan websites and conventions. Nonetheless, the industry resists when these fan-produced media challenge the dominant cultural norms, such as through the “slash” genre, which creates alternate non-heteronormative relationships between heterosexual characters, such as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley from *Harry Potter*.

As we shall see in the following chapters, while important in the context of Jenkins'

⁴ Julie Levin Russo, Catherine Tosenberger, and Derek Johnson are some of the academics who have influenced my understanding of fan production and its relationship with the entertainment industry, with the former two focusing on queer theory and Johnson taking a more strictly Marxist approach.

foundational work on transmedia, the notion of participation is particularly crucial to understanding the ARG genre. Transmedia, in general, often employs ways in which participants can interact with the storyworld, whether characters, artifacts, physical or digital or hybrid spaces, or other parts of the content. In 2012's *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling*, transmedia producer Andrea Phillips implies as part of her definition of transmedia an expectation for audiences to interact through various media in order to dig deeper into the storyworld (Phillips 5-6). In general, transmedia involves audience participation at least for the tracking the details, sharing knowledge, and collectively making meaning between individual media instantiations of a storyworld, such as the movies, novels, video games, and animated series of *Star Wars*.

When it comes to ARGs, however, this participatory element helps define the genre as distinctive among multiple genres of transmedia. In ARGs, participation can take many forms. As suggested by its name, labeling the genre as a “game” implies built-in interactivity with, at least, a set of rules, and more specifically, other players. In Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's classic *Rules of Play* (2003), eight definitions of games are analyzed; one commonality among them is the focus on a player's or players' interaction with a rule system in a play space (71-82). These two characteristics are admittedly low bars to clear in terms of a definition— and perhaps one reason why discussion persists— and could be applied generously to many forms. A novel could be called a game when we understand the conventions of media and genre and reading practices as a set of rules and a play space as either the setting of the novel or even the situation of reading a novel. In ARGs, however, the interactivity is usually at least twofold and far more specific. First, the participants interact with the gameworld through, for example, having

conversations with characters, reading websites, watching videos, or listening to audio in order to gather clues, solve puzzles, and advance the gameplay. Without solving puzzles and further accumulating clues, players cannot bring the ARG to its conclusion. Second, due to the massively distributed nature of ARGs, participants must interact with one another to combine fragmentary information into clues and assemble knowledge and expertise to solve puzzles. By design, no one participant will likely be able to solve the ARG; collaboration is required. This requirement relies on what Pierre Lévy calls “collective intelligence” (or CI) communities⁵. Lévy’s concept is particularly applicable to the rise of transmedia and ARGs as it is based upon the proliferation of networks, which is concurrent with the genesis of ARGs specifically.

Jenkins’ acknowledgement of participatory culture leading to a negotiation of the traditional roles of producer and consumer also extends to a negotiation of rules in ARGs. One of the aesthetics identified early in the ARG genre is the premise “this is not a game,” or TINAG. This aesthetic embodied in this declaration reflects the approach of creators— often called “puppetmasters” in the terminology of the ARG community— in which an ARG is never explicitly acknowledged as a game or fictional space. This is one of the reasons why the genre has earned its name; the experience seems more real because it is not recognized as being manufactured. As we shall see in the brief history of ARGs that follows, this negotiation of rules is sometimes surprising and unexpected— both by the creators and the participants— and leads

⁵ Lévy defines collective intelligence in the following way:

It is a form of universally distributed intelligence [“no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity”], constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills... The basis and goal of collective intelligence is the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals rather than the cult of fetishized or hypostatized communities. (Lévy 13-14)

to opportunities for agency and resistance for those formerly cemented in the traditional role of consumer.

Finally, the historical context of transmedia as a form involves a rough dichotomy, labeled as “West Coast” and “East Coast” transmedia. This distinction was made by Brian Clark, a transmedia producer, to loosely define two main approaches to transmedia creation. This distinction rests on viewing transmedia as a strategy/technique for extending IP (West), versus viewing transmedia as central to the conception of content (East)⁶.

The West Coast approach is based on more of a top-down, franchising model that is typically adopted by the entertainment industry: the West Coast moniker is a direct reference to Hollywood. In this type of transmedia, the goal is to extend IP to as many platforms as possible. While this approach does seek to expand a storyworld in a manner that takes specific advantage of the affordances of different media--such as a blend of novels, video games, film, comic books, or animated series— it also involves the stitching together of mostly self-contained elements that do not require the experience of the other media. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins uses the intellectual property surrounding the film *The Matrix* (1999) as an example of transmedia – West Coast, in this instance. In the case of *The Matrix*, a viewer can experience a single film and still feel a sense of narrative resolution. More interested or engaged viewers, however, can explore the associated animated film *Animatrix* (2003) or play the video game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) to learn more about the backstory of minor and major characters in the context of the storyworld.

⁶ Though this dichotomy is useful for exploring varieties of transmedia experiences, it is problematic in many ways, as discussed later in this chapter and as seen in the many similarities and differences between transmedia and ARGs throughout the analysis in this dissertation. Though Phillips, among others, uses this distinction in her book, she readily admits the distinction has “much more to do with ideology than geography” and that there is a correlation of place due to the resources available in the geographic regions, such as theatre being more prominent in New York City (“Creating Transmedia: An Interview with Andrea Phillips (Part One)”).

The East Coast model understands transmedia as an original conception, as opposed to being applied to extend already-existing, stand-alone content. This is perhaps best represented by transmedia producer Michel Reilhac, who has asserted that transmedia is “more a state of mind than a technique” that can be applied to any IP (“The State of Transmedia...”). East Coast transmedia holds that the transmedia nature of a work is a fundamental condition of a work, as opposed to a content strategy employed after creative conception. Ryan, in “Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling,” offers a two-part definition of media that seeks to encompass both media as a channel of communication and the materials used to encode meaning.⁷ With respect to media as a means of encoding, she writes:

If stories are conceived as a mental construct, they can exist in the mind as pure meaning, which means as pure narrative potential; but the act of encoding will actualise this potential by shaping it into a distinct narrative. Selecting a medium for a narrative idea is like choosing a pastry head. Just as some heads are better than others depending on the kind of decoration you want to create, similarly, some media are better than others depending on the type of narrative material and on the effect you want to achieve. (2)

This analogy focuses on the specific affordances of media and assumes that the creator(s) carefully select multiple media for encounter in order to produce a specific, pre-conceived and desired experience for the participant. In other words, a transmedia work understood in this manner is neither haphazard nor is it simply an attempt to monetize through franchising.

A further way to distinguish between these two generalized approaches— which, while broad, do provide a path of useful inquiry both regarding history and analysis of transmedia— is the relationship between the content of each segment or unit of a transmedia experience. In Ryan’s view above, the complete experience is distributed among many different media.

Similarly, Jenkins defines transmedia as having an integral element of “additive

⁷ It might be useful to think of “mixed media” art—a work that might contain acrylic paint, papier mache, canvas, and found objects, for instance— as a way to understand the second definition of media.

comprehension” (127), the specific depth of which can help further resolve the difference between the two models. This additive comprehension is a way to separate the transposing or translation of a work from one medium to another from transmedia proper. For instance, Jenkins uses the example of *Enter the Matrix*, the video game that followed the first film in the trilogy and was released concurrently with the film *Matrix Reloaded* (2003), which primarily added backstory for two of the film’s supporting characters as a function of the game’s narrative and gameplay. As mentioned above, however, *The Matrix* would fall into the West Coast model—it is a high-cost major studio production with the expectation revenue in the billions.

East Coast transmedia, on the other hand, features a deeper level of additive comprehension. The additive comprehension of West Coast transmedia provides viewers with an opportunity to explore a deeper backstory, but is not required for each individual instantiation, such as the film or video game. In short, there are primary, self-contained elements of the transmedia experience, which are supplemented with secondary self-contained elements and/or smaller, extra elements, such as a mobile app experience, that do not seek to be self-contained, only to add experiences that extend beyond the original or primary IP. By contrast, in the East Coast model of transmedia, each element adds information that is meaningful to the resolution of the experience. In other words, each individual element is integral for a full experience regardless of its specific medium and no elements are non-required. The transmedia experience is only complete when all elements are experienced.

Both Ryan and Philips specifically position ARGs as part of East Coast transmedia, though, as we shall see in the following history, some of the most notable examples of the ARG genre are in fact the production of major film and television studios. The justification for this

sorting of ARGs into East Coast transmedia is based upon the interaction required (Jenkins' participatory culture) and the conception of the entire experience as transmedia, as opposed to creating the experience as simply and extra extension of IP. For Ryan, ARGs are part of the East Coast model because "[it] is necessary to follow the entire trail of clues to complete the game" (Ryan 3). This is particularly problematic, however, when ARGs are examined as being part of the extension of major film and television studio IP.

The First ARGs

Something unexpected happened in the spring of 2001. A few moviegoers across the United States noted an odd detail at the end of a teaser trailer for the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. Listed among the usual and expected credits for roles like Director, Producer, Actors, and Editors was a "Sentient Machine Therapist," Jeanine Salla ("A.I. Artificial Intelligence..."). Astute viewers took notice of this odd title and searched the Internet; they discovered several websites which were "rabbit holes" (a common term in the ARG player community for entry points into games) for what is widely considered the first alternate reality game. The aesthetics of the trailer itself also hinted toward the existence of an experience buried just below the surface of the presentation, as well as the practices that might be required to participate⁸. The trailer begins with shadowy, out-of-focus objects on a white background; text slowly appears, highlighting a few of the characters of the short sentences that eventually resolve on screen by bringing them into focus before the rest. This effect hints at the existence of some sort of code or hidden message within the displayed text. In another disconcerting effect, a

⁸ While *A.I.* and *The Beast* used official paratexts (posters, trailers, etc.) to instruct the viewer how to read the ARG, I argue in chapter 3 that, after this first ARG, the opposite is the literacy-instructing model: ARGs are used to cue viewers how to read complex narratives.

fingerprint appears on the screen, breaking the fourth wall by revealing the invisible surface that separates the viewer's reality from the diegetic world. After this detail appears, the view zooms in to show something unexpected: the human-looking fingerprint is in fact a series of electronic circuits. As the camera perspective zooms further into the two-dimensional fingerprint/printed circuit, an added depth in the circuitry is revealed, displaying a complex networked structure. Through kinetic typography, the trailer cues the viewer to look more closely at the letters displayed, which are tied to a second rabbit hole for *The Beast*. Also, the implication of a broken fourth wall⁹ and the presence of important details hidden by ordinary images (a fingerprint) further encourages the viewer to look deeper and beyond the surface of the expected, as the ordinary might not apply to *A.I.*

Furthermore, at around the same time, some viewers noticed on the backs of the teaser one-sheet poster for the film certain letters with squares and circles around them; when assembled, these spelled out the messages, "Evan Chan was murdered," and "Jeanine was the key" ("The Trail v9.0"). By following the digital trail of Jeanine Salla, participants encountered puzzles to solve that would lead them to further clues in a murder mystery set in the world of the *A. I.* film, an Earth of 2142 filled with sentient androids neglected and abused by the humans who created them.

While it was occurring in the spring of 2001, the phenomenon attached to these clues had no formal name; it was not even acknowledged or announced as a game by any formal entity, like the game creators (the very first "puppetmasters") or the film's production and marketing companies. Those who stumbled upon the phenomenon simply referred to it as "the game"

⁹ This fourth wall could also be unbroken but acknowledged— an important distinction that fits with my theory of "reflexive immersion," a simultaneous immersion in and awareness of the artifice of an ARG. This reflexive immersion is detailed in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

(Bushman 7). Instead of promoting their work to attract participants, the puppetmasters simply sprinkled clues in trailers and posters for the film. As a result, the audience of engaged and extremely perceptive viewers self-assembled using Internet message boards. According to Jane McGonigal, in the two days after being founded on April 11, 2001, the main group playing the game, who came to be called the Cloudmakers, had grown to 153 members; by the resolution of the game on July 24, 2001, the group numbered 7,480 (“This Is Not a Game”).

The Beast

What the Cloudmakers called “the game” came to be known by its creators as *The Beast*, because it had 666 assets in an early planning inventory, as well as for its often uncontrollable growth and unanticipated direction of the experience, based on the audience’s passionate and deep involvement (Bushman 7). *The Beast* established many of expectations and practices for the ARG genre, and inspired the growth of the genre by encouraging players to become creators.

As in most forms and genres, identifying the first of a kind is difficult, because of the tendency to give name to a phenomenon only after it is experienced. Though the definite categorization of what is and what is not an ARG is still challenging due to the variations between individual instantiations, several works can be identified at least as precursors of the genre, through their use of both individual and mixed multiple media, such as film, print, and live performance. Establishing a distinct moment when ARGs started being ARGs and stopped being something else is ultimately a subjective process— especially with a genre that seeks to hide its own artifice and not announce itself as what it might be. Reservations notwithstanding, *The Beast* is universally recognized as the first fully-formed ARG. This is acknowledged by

several sources: McGonigal, a major exponent and theorist of the ARG genre (“This Is Not a Game”) game designer Brooke Thompson (Thomspson); the major ARG player website Unfiction (Unfiction.com); and the International Game Designers Association Alternate Reality Game Special Interest Group (IGDA ARG SIG) (“History of ARGs”).

The Beast featured many design and aesthetic characteristics that became standards for the genre. Many qualities of *The Beast* mark the genre as a deeply immersive experience, such as the TINAG aesthetic and the use of real-world spaces as game spaces. In addition, *The Beast* emphasizes a high degree of large-scale collaboration to solve complex problems. The binding agent that holds these aspects together and allows them to resonate as a distinct genre is the transmedia approach in both delivery and participation—a method that is deeply connected to the ubiquitous presence of digital networked technology in the audience’s everyday lives. This approach spreads the experience across multiple distinct media with each piece a specific, differentiated part of the whole, as opposed to the simple repetition through a variety of media of an experience that could be contained within a single medium. Though these dynamics will be further discussed in the following chapter, it is worth providing some detail on how they worked in *The Beast*, in order to form historical context for the genre.

The Beast was a joint venture between Warner Brothers, producers of the *A.I.* film, and a group of experience managers or puppetmasters at Microsoft, Inc., Elan Lee, Sean Stewart, and Jordan Weisman. To maintain the immersive fiction, there was no public announcement of the experience—certainly a counterintuitive decision in the case of promotional activity for a Steven Spielberg film that was hoped to be a summer blockbuster. After the initial rabbit holes for *The Beast* were discovered by a curious few, more and more flocked to the phenomenon, as

McGonigal mentions above; these thousands of audience members were not recruited by advertisements, but self-assembled based upon their own fascination with the mysterious websites that had been discovered, in addition to telephone calls received by people who identified themselves on those sites, and even live experiences. By not publicly acknowledging a manufactured experience, players were able to immerse themselves in something both mysterious and real— a fictional murder adventure with clues scattered in everyday media and physical spaces in a way that blurred the boundary between fictional experience and everyday life. Identifying the experience as an artifice would break the illusion of reality, akin to what is referred to as the “fourth wall” in theatre, television, and film; yet, the experience existed primarily on the viewers’ side of the fourth wall. This TINAG aesthetic is a hallmark of the ARG genre, an aesthetic that seeks to preserve the reality of the fiction— but, as we shall see in later chapters, it also creates tension in how ARGs are defined, how they often serve as promotional experiences for commercial products, and how the audience and puppetmasters interact in a space with minimal declared rules.

Another aspect of immersion in ARGs is the intentional confusion of real spaces and everyday media with the fictional world and transactions of the experience, which is also related to one of the consequences of the TINAG aesthetic. In *The Beast*, many physical real spaces were used as part of the experience. These physical spaces were mixed with a primarily digital mix of media, starting with the clues about Jeanine Salla embedded in the online teaser trailer for *A.I.* By having these clues based on websites found through a Google search, the puppetmasters inextricably wove the game’s fictional reality of 2142 into the audience’s contemporary reality of Internet search in 2001. While the audience didn’t assume they were really in 2142, the

artifacts of that future were presented in an immersive manner and without the acknowledgement of being part of a manufactured experience; the clues were potentially ubiquitous and without clear origin or declared purpose— and the boundary of what was in game and out of game was not defined or contained within a singularly mediated experience, such as an Xbox game, and also spilled into physical spaces that mixed the experiences of 2001 and 2142, including a public bar. Furthermore, the manner in which most puzzle clues were embedded into web code or the text of sites created a deeper sense of immersive experience: no matter where you look, there might be a clue to a deeper mystery— thinning the line between perception and paranoia, as we shall explore in Chapter 3. So, even though the audience was living 41 years before *The Beast's* setting (marking 2142 as fiction), the process of search and discovery of these unannounced clues created an immersion rooted in their current everyday phenomenological and ontological experiences; these clues lived in the everyday media spaces of 2001. In that sense, the mystery that surrounded and contextually-grounded the experience was real in a way that a more traditional approach— such as the game makers telling the audience they are playing a game and explicitly setting the expectation that immersion is achieved through a willing suspension of belief— is not able to create.

The Beast also used the overlaying of realities in physical space to create an immersive experience. In one example from the phenomenon, Jay Bushman recounts his participation in a meet-up in one of three locations:

One of the in-game [Internet] sites, a hub for the technophobic Anti-Robot Militia[36], announced that they would be holding “rallies” in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago on May 6th... Walking into the New York rally was daunting. Amidst the regular bar patrons, lurkers clumped in ones and twos. We’d been instructed to wear red to identify each other, but in the dim bar light it wasn’t easy to see color. After I had milled around for ten confusing minutes, a man appeared claiming to represent the A.R.M. He assembled us all in the back of the bar and gave us a puzzle to solve, the first of several

that evening.

... To my eyes, what stood out were the non-game elements. A few people left quickly, turned off by the weirdness of the situation. The forty or so people who remained at the New York rally quickly assembled themselves into a riddle-solving team. The network assembled with stunning ease, three physical locations in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles connected via phone, email and IRC to countless virtual nodes. People who had only known each other as names were now feverishly collaborating face-to-face and voice-to-voice. (Bushman 12)

One of the aspects that stands out in Bushman's description of this part of the ARG is the overlapping of contexts. The unknowing bar patrons that evening— those completely unaware of *The Beast*, of the fictional ARM, or of a self-assembled collective dedicated to solving an unacknowledged mystery without origin, stated purpose, or announced rules for winning— were enlisted in the experience whether they knew it or not simply by being there. The unsuspecting bystanders were in fact playing the part of unsuspecting bystanders within the fictional, alternate world of *The Beast*; just as the ARM would be meeting in a clandestine fashion in a bar in 2142, so did those playing *The Beast* in 2001. This performative aspect of ARGs, wherein some are knowingly operating in an alternate reality and others, who share the same space, serve as backdrops differentiates ARGs from other experiences like traditional role-playing games (RPGs) or live-action role playing (LARPing), wherein players fully acknowledge the fictionality of the game setting and have an agreed upon set of rules and means of play that govern the experience. This situated context of the bar space being part of the 2142 reality, in combination with “real” props, like actual movie posters and trailers and websites that serve a dual purpose in promoting *A.I.* and holding embedded clues for *The Beast*, supports the distinct immersion of ARGs. While it is important to note that the use of promotional materials does reinforce that *The Beast* is, ultimately, an experience connected to *A.I.* (a filmic work of fiction), the TINAG aesthetic facilitates a persistent layer of mystery and immersion that makes ARGs

approach the experience of reality far more closely than other narrative and gaming experiences.

Imagine walking into the bar, as Jay Bushman did, and not knowing what was going to happen, who was aware of *The Beast*, or how to discern what was real in terms of 2001 or alternately real in the setting of 2142. Anyone at any time could reveal themselves to be part of the experience. How could you ask them? How could you trust their answer? Just like messages embedded in the source code of a web site, the potential for hidden meaning or messages lies everywhere in the bar around you— which until this moment of an announced ARM meeting was always just a bar located in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. By using the bar space, which also contained patrons who were not there to participate in the game, the “just under the surface” nature of the experience was carried from the digital spaces and into the physical world. The puppetmasters used an ordinary space— a bar— which also contained patrons who were unaware of the experience’s mystery. These non-participants added a “real world” context to the space; the patrons who showed up for an Anti-Robot Militia rally as part of *The Beast* added another layer of fictional reality to the same space. By combining these elements of the “real” and the “fictional” in the same space in this manner— the unwitting participation of the background patrons in the fictional experience of *The Beast’s* audience— a sense of reality and a sense of fiction are maintained simultaneously, creating an immersive environment. This “reflexive immersion” — the ability for a participant to be both deeply immersed in an experience and to reflect upon the artifice of that experience, to simultaneously be immersed and aware of the immersion— is a unique marker of ARGs, one which I will more thoroughly explore in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

This specific variety of immersion allows for both a fictional setting (the year 2142) and

also the phenomenological experience of being in the everyday real world. As opposed to virtually mediating a sense of reality through the use of VR goggles or digital graphics, ARGs use these real spaces to extend the fiction into a real space. Or using ludology to understand ARGs, as I will do in Chapter 2, the intentional blurring of the game space and non-game space serves to expand Huizinga's concept of the "magic circle" from a specific instantiation in space and time to include all spaces at any time¹⁰. Essentially, when the experience is not clearly marked as a game, there is potential for any object or person or event to be part of that game; when the game space overlaps the real world without explicitly marked boundaries, the real world is the game world. As McGonigal argues in response to David Weiser's claim that games are not meant to be embedded into the background of everyday existence, but instead are meant to aggressively occupy all of the participants attention:

Games may be exciting to their players, but it is precisely the encalming nature of ubicomp technologies that can help situate such excitement in everyday contexts without endangering the players or disturbing the more traditional use of the space. (*This Might Be A Game* 61-2)

McGonigal counters Weiser's notion of games as the antithesis of calming experiences that lead to an immersion that is loud and overrides the sense through new inputs (typical notions of wearable VR technologies) by reframing what situated experiences might look like. In other words, immersion in a game experience (McGonigal identifies ARGs as pervasive games) in the present day might look vastly different than Weiser imagined it to look like in 1997, due to the more seamless user interfaces and deeper integration of computing into our everyday existence. The embeddedness of ARGs through leveraging of ubiquitous computing and the ubiquity of

¹⁰ This complicating of the magic circle is a phenomenon incorporated into Thomas Malaby's writing on understanding games as culturally-mediated processes, as opposed to being solely understood as practices with no or reduced consequences inherent in many traditional theories of play ("Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games").

mediation helps to create the overlap of reality and fiction that leads to reflexive immersion.

The puppetmasters of the *The Beast* also conflated “real” spaces with fictional spaces through their use of media. As previously mentioned, the rabbit holes for the experience were placed in teaser trailers and posters for the film. While these paratextual artifacts are common in the contemporary everyday lives of media consumers, using them to convey a hidden experience blurs the lines between the real and the fictive. In addition to television ads and posters explicitly linked to the film, some of the experience’s clues and puzzles were embedded in newspaper ads, phone calls, faxes, and other media. In her doctoral dissertation about games and everyday life, McGonigal argues that the ubiquity of microcomputers primes contemporary media consumers to accept the digital as potentially part of all spaces (*This Might Be A Game* 1-45). The proliferation of other media, such as print and telephony, reached ubiquity long ago. By using these older media in combination with digital media, *The Beast* further created a sense of immersion and troubled the boundaries of reality. When parts of the supposed fictional world are hidden in plain sight and embedded within the common forms of media encountered in the non-fictional world, a there is a constant potential for the fictional to assert itself within the non-fictional with little distinction between the two. This creates an overlap of perception; the audience is simultaneously viewing the world as within and without the experience of *The Beast*.

11

The specific structure of the A.R.M. event also mimicked another quality of the digital space: collaboration. One of the important qualities of *The Beast* that established the ARG genre is a high reliance on joint action. As Bushman describes above, the participants who showed up

¹¹ In chapter 3, I will further explore Paul Virilio’s theory of “metageography,” as referenced by Jane McGonigal. These are discussed as a parallax effect of point of view, in which the viewer can see multiple realities dependent upon the overlapping of the viewpoint.

for the event were given puzzles of sufficient complexity to require coordinated effort. As is typical in ARGs, no single player is likely to have the knowledge and skill set to solve most individual puzzles, or to solve all the various types of puzzles. These puzzles can range from mathematical and linguistic cyphers to the embedding of data in the spectrum of a digital photograph or a digital audio file, a technique called steganography. Players of *The Beast* had to work together with groups across the country and access information from members of the community who were connected via their personal computers. Collaboration across time and space is important to ARGs for multiple reasons, including the use of diverse and distributed physical sites for the collection of clues, as well as the required collective intelligence of the group to solve these complex puzzles and thus advance the narrative.

Some activity spawned by *The Beast* condensed this collaborative, networked dynamic into a short period of time in discrete locations; however, the majority of the collaboration for *The Beast* extended asynchronously and over a wider range of locations. As mentioned earlier, this self-assembling community is akin to what Pierre Lévy refers to as Collective Intelligence. Thus, a transmedia approach was not only used for the delivery of *The Beast's* content, but required the audience to participate through digital networked communication technologies. As the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies became more widely available and commonplace in practice, *The Beast* relied on the ability for an engaged audience to be able to communicate with each other message boards. This interactivity and collaboration are integral to the genre and even figure into one definition of ARG:

an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which *dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone.* (“Alternate Reality Gaming: ‘Life Imitates ARG’”; emphasis added)

Even though some of the experience often takes place in a non-digital medium, like print, and in physical spaces, being engaged in *The Beast*— and other ARGs— would be prohibitively difficult without basic digital media literacy. The requirement of knowing how to connect with other audience members to acquire and share information, to apply various sets of knowledge, and solve problems is made clear to the audience community through the types of puzzles and digitally-encoded clues that were part of *The Beast* and the ARGs that followed. In this way, commercially-produced ARGs used for promotional purposes— and transmedia experiences, generally— can be seen also as ways of instructing engaged audiences on how to “read” the IP to which they are linked. Furthermore, to see the depth of digital literacy required, we can look at a specific example of a puzzle from *The Beast*. This puzzle presents an image that appears to consist only of a single color. However, using Photoshop “magic wand” tool with its tolerance parameter set to zero reveals hidden text in a slightly different color, which is effectively indistinguishable to the unaided eye. The puppetmasters provided neither notification that hidden messages might appear in graphics, nor instruction on how to solve this puzzle. A user needed to apply her/his own awareness and skills, in this case advanced understanding of Photoshop, in order to discover this digital clue. Though not all audience members possessed this skillset, collective problem solving required some to have this knowledge and perception. As a result, these skills were introduced to the rest of the community, where other members then had opportunity to learn deeper digital literacies, such as the manipulation of digital graphics files.

The deep level of immersion also had unintended and unanticipated effects. As the game did not exist as such, it also lacked one of the markers of games: a set of clear rules. Thus, by default, the audience was set with the task of creating rules for themselves. With an immersive

experience such as an ARG, the boundaries of what is part of the experience and what is not are blurred, much as some of the bar patrons were there for the Anti-Robotics rally and some were completely unaware of the fictional universe that was playing out around them. Because of the purposely confused boundaries, the audience sometimes transgresses what the puppetmasters anticipate as a limit of the game. This happened in *The Beast* in one major way: the Zartman Incident (Bushman 10). In their search for clues, some Cloudmakers discovered the name Zartman in the WHOIS directory listing— a public registry of who owns an Internet domain name— of one of the in-fiction websites. This led the Cloudmakers to assume that game designer Doug Zartman was somehow involved in the game, possibly as a puppetmaster. The Cloudmakers then began to track his location and movements. Given the fine detail involved in other clues, the Zartman name on the domain registry was seen as an obvious trace for players to follow, and follow they did— to such an extreme that Mr. Zartman, who had no connection to *The Beast*, reached out to the community and begged that they stop harassing him (Bushman 10). With the TINAG aesthetic, the lack of acknowledgment that the experience is a game leads to rules and boundaries often being unclear; thus the Cloudmakers had to assume everything was a meaningful clue, even though, in this specific case, Zartman had nothing to do with *The Beast*.

In spite of the Zartman incident, the puppetmasters continued to deny the game's existence while *The Beast* built to a climax throughout the spring and early summer of 2001— with one exception. puppetmasters had to enjoin player communities to welcome new audience members to the experience, even if these members were relatively late to discover *The Beast*. As the self-assembled Cloudmakers relentlessly scoured for clues and solved puzzles with

tremendous efficiency¹², the community had little patience to welcome newcomers (Bushman 11). This lack of accessibility illuminates two specific issues with ARGs: the difficulty with the temporal unfolding of the experience, and the serious commitment of time and energy required by the depth of immersion. Briefly, ARGs are single-instance experiences, playable only once and during a specific time frame because they frequently involve synchronous events. Unlike other narratives and games, ARGs are fundamentally not replayable. This tendency raises definitional difficulties when we think of ARGs in terms of games or narratives. It also presents challenges for archiving and preserving ARGs— both of which will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

The second of these difficulties is the depth of immersion inherent in ARGs, which is required in order search everywhere for potential clues and to solve complex puzzles. The player communities surrounding *The Beast* give one example of this specific difficulty— an example impactful enough on the goals of the experience that the puppetmasters chose to reveal themselves, at least in part. Undeniably, one of the experience’s main charges was to serve as a marketing device for the *A.I.* film. Because of this commercial connection, as well as a desire to be generally inclusive, the puppetmasters wanted to make sure that new players— those discovering the rabbit holes later than their release date and/or hearing about the ARG through one of the many news articles investigated this mysterious phenomenon— had an ample chance to participate. Bushman describes this in “Cloudmaker Days” (11). A small group of newer audience members created a new message board, called Spherewatch, to provide an alternative to

¹² According to puppetmaster Elan Lee, the creators of *The Beast* worked for month on designer the experience. They had worked out an elaborate schedule of puzzles of varying degrees of difficulty, with ones requiring days, weeks, and even puzzles that they assumed would never be able to be solved. Their puzzle schedule worked out to a 3-month timeline of content for the game. Once *The Beast* was discovered, however, the Cloudmakers managed to solve the entire 3-month schedule of puzzles in a single day (“This Is Not a Game”).

the Cloudmakers' forum, intending to protect newer players from being dismissed or derided by more experienced members of the community. The puppetmasters found the presence of a site that welcomed new players to be so important, that they incorporated the web site into the main experience, cueing new players to the existence of a friendly space for them based upon their current knowledge of *The Beast*. This move, however, at first prompted some members of Cloudmakers to also visit Spherewatch for the purpose of harassing the newer audience for their lack of knowledge. To maintain a safe space for new participants, lead designer Elan Lee contacted the moderators at Cloudmakers to implore their members to stop antagonizing the newer audience at Spherewatch and be more welcoming to newer participants. Lee continued the backchannel communication with the Cloudmakers moderators sporadically throughout the remainder of the game.

On the 24th of July, 2001, *The Beast* ended with a referendum, called the Mann Act II¹³, to decide whether or not to grant artificial intelligences the same rights as humans. After clearing the fictional 2142 Senate, the referendum was put up for a vote by the player community, who elected to grant rights to AIs. At the end of the experience, the rights of artificial beings were not the only new beginning: the genre of the Alternate Reality Games was also born.

Life After The Beast

As might be predicted with the culmination of a wildly successful and first-of-its-kind

¹³ Briefly, the Mann Act II is a play on the original Mann Act of 1910, also known as the White-Slave Traffic Act, which outlawed the transportation of humans across state lines for the purpose of illegal activity. It was primarily used to combat prostitution, but also used to prosecute any sort of sexually devious behavior of the time period, such as fornication and interracial relationships. For instance, the black World Champion boxer Jack Johnson was arrested twice in 1912 while traveling with white women. In the film *A.I.*, one of the main android characters, Gigolo Joe, was created to be a prostitute. The original Mann Act was introduced by Congressman James Robert Mann (R - Ill.) and the Mann Act II was introduced by Sen. Julia Mann (R - Ill.).

experience, 2001-02 saw a large community of highly engaged and excited participants with no ARGs in which to channel their newly discovered energy and affinity. In response, several ARGs were released in this period seeking to replicate success of *The Beast* and build upon the phenomenon. To establish a historical context of the ARG genre, I will provide a brief synopsis of a few immediate follow-ups to *The Beast*, roughly categorized into a dichotomy of commercial and independent, to focus on the genesis of the genre and on how the community of highly active members—a requirement of the CI needed for ARGs—both supplied their own demand and were satisfied by larger entities in the entertainment industry. This dichotomy continues to play out through the ARG genre today. Then I will move further afield in both time and categorization, looking briefly at the evolution of the genre and types of ARGs produced over the history of the genre: commercial promotions for films, television, music, video games, and live events.

Majestic

Released in July 2001 as *The Beast* was ending, *Majestic* by Electronic Arts (EA) was the first pay-to-play ARG. Despite being innovative, its short life and difficulty garnering an audience reveal some of the barriers to the commercial viability of ARGs. Intended by the game designer Neil Young as an experience “specifically for the medium” of the Internet, *Majestic* was a subscription-based game that made use of web sites offering backstory, phone contacts, videos, emails, and other media elements (Brown). To navigate these components, EA created a computer interface, the Majestic Navigation System, that served as a way for individual players to keep all the clues and messages that were part of the game in a central space. Young and EA

also targeted an audience that was willing to give a few minutes per day to engage with the game's content—a commitment typical of what are called casual games today—as opposed to the several hours per session of most then-contemporary interactive digital entertainment (Brown). In keeping with these limits, the content was released slowly and puzzles were relatively easy to solve. *Majestic* also was affected by the events of September 11th and was briefly shut down because the game's content involved government conspiracies and used phones and other media to blur the lines of the game world. Ultimately the game failed (Morris). EA lost five to seven million dollars and the game shut down after a single season. While 800,000 players began the registration process for *Majestic*, only 71,200 completed registration for the free first episode; of those, between 10,000 and 15,00 became paying subscribers.

A game created by a major video game studio faced more pressure to monetize the experience than was the case for *The Beast*. This exigency gave rise to several important differences from the earlier game. The first is that *Majestic* is a notable exception to the TINAG aesthetic in ARGs, though the game made use of in an interesting conceit to maintain the immersion. In order to gain subscribers, EA had to advertise the experience. This limited the potential for immersion—players understood the game as a game, at least at the point of purchase. In the initial advertising for *Majestic*, EA named a fake studio, Anim-X, as the creator. To kick off the experience, players were sent a message stating that the game had been cancelled due to a mysterious fire at the studio; players who had signed up then received a message declaring the fire to be a conspiracy, thus setting up a modified TINAG aesthetic (Salvador). Registrants were aware of playing a game, though ostensibly not the game they

initially signed up to play¹⁴. Despite this creative attempt at maintaining the TINAG aesthetic, EA also made choices that worked against an immersive experience. One of the most obvious was the in-game navigation interface, which made the experience seem visually like other digital games, complete with an Electronic Arts copyright notice [Figure 1.1].



[Figure 1.1. In-game Majestic Navigation System screenshot (Olivetti)]

The monetization of the game through paid subscription was also a new element introduced by *Majestic*. This aspect of the experience led to choices in pacing that limited success. To slow the gameplay and allow multiple players to follow along without being left behind, progress was artificially retarded through the game design, structuring the experience into smaller pieces that would advance the game daily. Also, the difficulty of the puzzles was far

¹⁴ In a way, *Majestic* was a very loose type of metagame, as described by Boluk and Lemieux (2017) — a game about a game. However, the game that players signed up to play that was destroyed as part of the fictional world of the ARG was a rabbit hole to facilitate subscriptions, as opposed to an important element of the experience. Rather, the destruction of that fake game was simply a product of the government conspiracy that was the central core of *Majestic*'s narrative.

lower than in *The Beast*, allowing players of differing skill levels to experience the game in a mostly simultaneous fashion.

A closer analysis of these choices also reveals one of the major differences between the first and second ARGs: a lack of collaboration. In *The Beast*, the difficulty of puzzles— even though they were solved far more quickly than the puppetmasters had anticipated— required a high amount of specialized knowledge. To solve these intricate puzzles, a community of diverse skills was necessary, leading to the integral formation of CI communities like the Cloudmakers. This group immersion also produced momentum and encouragement in the community— a shared experience that led to long-term friendships and even marriages, as noted by Bushman (Bushman 14). This specific mix of immersion and isolation in *Majestic* is highly abnormal for the ARG genre and changes both the element of communal gameplay and collaboration, as well as the win-state of the game, wherein individuals achieve the solution, rather than the collective solving a large and complex puzzle.

Majestic was an important development in the history of ARGs for a few reasons. Despite its commercial failure, it was the first attempt at producing an ARG for profit— and one that was developed and launched by a major gaming studio, Electronic Arts. Whereas *The Beast* was produced by Microsoft, it was not a commercial endeavor, but instead a promotional tool for the *A.I.* film and an Xbox game based on the film that was never released. In trying to monetize an ARG, Neil Young and EA discovered many barriers to structuring the immersive puzzles and pacing of the genre. Even though the game did fail financially and marked the only attempt at the genre by EA, *Majestic* received wide critical praise in mainstream and industry press and, as it was in development before the launch of *The Beast*, provides evidence that the ARG genre has

more than a singular origin.

Early Independent ARGs

With *The Beast* prompting the creation of a highly engaged community of players who were deeply immersed in the phenomenon, it is perhaps no surprise that several early ARGs were developed by members of the community in order to fill the vacuum after *The Beast* concluded. Players from both *The Beast* and *Majestic* were involved in the development of early independent ARGs.

Beginning in June 2001, Dave Szulborski, an early beta-tester of EA's *Majestic*, released a series of three ARGs, grouped under the common title *ChangeAgents* (Szulborski). These ARGs were loosely connected to the *Majestic* storyline and were attempts to appeal to fellow players of that game (Szulborski). According to the sitemap of Unfiction, one of the major ARG player sites, there was no presence of the player community located on their site, signifying confinement of the audience for these ARGs within the bounds of the *Majestic* community.

Though little is known of *Ravenwatchers*, a first attempt by members of the Cloudmaker community to create an ARG in September 2001, a second attempt at becoming puppetmasters was successful. In February 2002, *LockJaw* was launched by several members of the Cloudmakers ("LockJaw"). These players used their own enthusiasm and experience from *The Beast* to continue the momentum of that game and engage fellow community members. This ARG was more visible and impactful than *ChangeAgents*, leading to the formation of two major player communities, the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (ARGN) and Unfiction. *LockJaw* had an active community of 700 players during its 3-month run ("ARG Stats"). Perhaps, most

importantly, as Szulborski notes, the success of *Lockjaw* within the ARG player community gave hope for the sustainability of the genre and that, after the relative financial and cultural failure of *Majestic*, ARGs wouldn't disappear just as quickly as they arrived (*This is Not a Game*).

In addition to these notable early contributions to the genre, several other independent ARGs were released. However, due to the ephemeral qualities of these one-time experiences, little information is available for many, such as *Plexata* and *Codename: Constellation*, as the original web artifacts are no longer available and the player community was relatively dispersed, leaving no links or discussion to track these digital artifacts and player-supplied information using the Internet Archive. The sole remaining artifact of *Codename: Constellation* is a perhaps an appropriate testament to the difficulty of producing an ARG, especially without substantial financial backing. In a farewell blog post that ended the game prematurely, the independent puppetmaster "Karl" stated the following:

I began this game hoping that with it's [sic] conclusion I could prove a point. That point being that something great could be made without material funding, but with only the willingness to give time to something one believed in. "Codename: Constellation" was begun on zero cash, zero assistance, and only time and inspiration on my side. I now realize, sadly, that those things alone are probably not enough. I was also quick to find that, even with only a maximum of 73 individuals involved, many many people would have their own ideas about how this budding genre should be managed. Their relentless and destructive criticism contributed to the game's premature end. ("Codename: Constellation...")

Fortunately for the genre, the success of *The Beast* and the independent efforts after it carried enough momentum to sustain ARGs into their next phase of development.

Entertainment Industry Embrace of ARGs

Because *The Beast* served as promotion for the feature film *A.I.*, it is perhaps no surprise

that many large studios sought to explore the potential of ARGs as creative and immersive marketing tools. Based upon a brief historical listing of ARGs constructed from various sources and presented here as Appendix A, there was a steady increase in ARGs in the years that followed *The Beast*.¹⁵ These can be roughly split into three categories: Fan-produced ARGs, made by community members; ARGs produced by professional media companies for the sake of producing an experience, selling an experience, or building their project portfolio; and professionally-produced ARGs that seek to promote or extend a main IP for a major entertainment industry studio. While these categories are certainly porous and not without overlap, they do serve to delineate some important distinctions and patterns in the production of ARGs.

In the previous section, focus was given to community-produced ARGs; as a percentage of total ARGs, these peaked in the first year of the genre. According to Christy Dena’s “ARG Stats,” *The Beast* reached an audience of between 2.5 million in the U.S. and over 3 million people worldwide (“ARG Stats”). These numbers suggested a community both thirsty for and inspired by their deeply immersive experience. Even though *Majestic* failed commercially—perhaps due to the problematic pacing and other structural hurdles noted above—it did win various awards and critical praise from the press and gaming industry, including the “Best Original Game” award at the 2001 Electronic Entertainment Expo. The game was also named in the “Game Innovation Spotlights” at the 2002 Game Developers Conference Developers Choice Awards panel (“ARG Stats”). With a community, market, and accolades all in evidence, media

¹⁵ Though I refer to this history as “brief,” Appendix A is likely the most extensive single document listing ARGs. It was compiled from several player and community websites, as well as popular and academic sources. For example, the IGDA ARG SIG list contained XX entries; Christy Dena’s “ARG Stats” page contains YY entries; ARGN has tags for ZZ distinct ARGs, and Unfiction has AA; Wikipedia lists BB ARGs on the “List of Alternate Reality Games” page.

companies moved into the genre.

In the year after the culmination of *The Beast*, there were four professionally-produced ARGs; two of those supported television series, one was a promotion for a car company, and one was produced by a digital media company and a Swiss University as an academic research experiment.

:k: Uncap the Ride

In August 2001, the auto manufacturer BMW released “Ambush,” the first in a series of short films called *The Hire* featuring Clive Owen and directed by a series of high-profile directors. Embedded in these videos and a few related websites were clues that led to an ARG puzzle trail called *:k: Uncap the Ride* that 250 players solved, entering them into a drawing in Las Vegas to win a 2003 BMW Z4 Roadster (Peters).

Alias

In October 2001, the ABC television spy drama *Alias* launched an ARG, iterations of which would run through multiple of its seasons, that had engaged audience members interacting with the organizations in the show through websites and emails and solving puzzles to gain background information about the storyworld (“Yahoo Club: Alias Puzzle Group FAQ”). That *Alias* was the first television show to use an ARG to engage with its audience is perhaps indicative of a strong current in the ARG genre, given the aesthetic and production qualities of the series. The show was based on a hidden conspiracy with many twists and turns; characters were frequently revealed to be not who they were pretending to be and shadow organizations

lurked within the structures of widely recognized ones. In essence, the show itself had a hidden or alternate reality as part of its conspiracy theory aesthetic— a direct resonance with the hidden mysteries of the ARG genre. Though lacking the more traditional elements of live interactions and a robust multimodal communication approach with the players, the web-based *Alias* ARG ran through three seasons of the show. As evidence of the porousness of the categorization of ARGs, the third season of the ARG, called *Omnifam*, was independently created by players and fans of the show with the knowledge and skills they obtained participating in the ARG community (“Domini Pupae”).

Alias was created by J.J. Abrams, who is both a proponent of what Jason Mittel refers to as “puzzle” narrative and who frequently employs the use of ARGs to promote his productions and expand their storyworlds, as in the 2004-2010 ABC television series *Lost*, the 2008 film *Cloverfield* (including its 2016 and 2018 follow-ups), and the 2009 film reboot of *Star Trek* (Mittel). While the former two manifest a similar aesthetic to that of *Alias*— a highly complex narrative steeped in conspiracy and enigmatic organizations— *Star Trek* broke with this pattern and would therefore seem to represent a usage of ARG more strictly for the interactive expansion of the storyworld of the film.

Spooks

In May 2002, the BBC premiered a television show called *Spooks* (referred to as *MI-5* in Canada and the United States). Similar to *Alias*, this show was a spy narrative that often had the agents in the narrative solving complex mysteries within individual episodes as well as throughout a sustained narrative arc between episodes and series; these often featured a

conspiratorial theme, as well. To introduce the show, the BBC created a web-based interactive experience to allow viewers to participate in an ancillary narrative set in the storyworld of *Spooks*, assisting one of the main characters solve a mystery (Evans). Unfortunately, other than a footnote in a larger examination of the BBC Interactive's *Spooks* transmedia projects, nothing further is known about the 2002 experience.

M.A.D. Countdown

The Department of Mobile Application Design at the University for Design and Art in Zurich, Switzerland, conducted an experiment in cultural anthropology in May 2002. This “mobile multi-player hybrid reality game” sought to measure the comfort level of players with respect to their physical proximity to one another and also to digital media interfaces when in a game space that overlaps with a real-world space (Walz 17). In service of the study's goals, this game, called *M.A.D. Countdown*, employed many strategies particular to ARGs, including a mix of web- and location-based puzzles and scavenger hunts.

As can be seen in the year or so of ARG activity after *The Beast*, a fairly stable and consistent cross-section of entries in the genre was established early. With *The Beast* (film), *Spooks* (television), and *:k: Uncap the Ride* (BMW automobiles), ARGs were professionally produced as promotional tools. *Majestic* was commercially produced as an attempt to profit from the ARG itself, which eventually failed—a standard that still applies today, at least to some extent. After success of *The Beast*, several independent ARGs were produced by members of the ARG community and general onlookers: *ChangeAgents*, *Ravenwatchers*, *Plexata*, *Codename: Constellation*, and *LockJaw*. These were produced by individuals and groups with various

skillsets and expertise and served to keep fresh content available during the infancy of the genre. Academic interest in ARGs also began shortly after *The Beast*, with the Swiss and German higher education collaboration, *M.A.D. Countdown*, which used mobile user interface design to probe the social spatial interactions of ARG participants. Finally, *Alias* (television) used an ARG to promote and expand the storyworld of the television series. While this was a professionally-produced industry use of ARGs at its foundation, eventually independent creators extended the ARG experience in a manner that completely— and successfully— excluded industry control over the IP, creating a blurred boundary between creator and audience, puppetmaster and player, indicative of the interactivity of new media and the nebulous ARG genre.

Historical Precursors to ARGs

Many popular media examples can be understood as influencing and even suggesting the eventual existence of the transmedia genre. Though these will be analyzed more in depth in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, focusing on the cultural logic of ARGs, it is important to establish a brief historical foundation when discussing the origins of the genre. This connection from historical narratives and narrative practices to the contemporary immersive interactive genre can be examined in at least two ways: the blending of multiple media to blur the boundaries of usually stable categories of truth and fiction for the reader and viewer; and the use of conspiratorial narratives in which characters within the work experience a fractured sense of what is real and what is fiction, overlapping their own formerly stable reality with that of an alternate reality.

With the latter, perhaps the two most notable examples of narratives that foresaw the ARG are G.K. Chesterton's 1905 novel *The Club of Queer Trades*, a novel comprised of individual short stories, and David Fincher's 1997 film *The Game*. In the first chapter of Chesterton's novel, "The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown," the eponymous protagonist finds himself confronted with a flower bed of yellow pansies spelling out "Death to Major Brown" (Chesterton). This discovery leads the major and his private detective friends, who are the main protagonists that tie the individual chapter threads together, on a comical search for clues to solve the mystery— and eventually to an organization called the Adventure and Romance Agency, Limited. The employee they encounter describes the agency's business in the following manner:

The Adventure and Romance Agency has been started to meet a great modern desire. On every side, in conversation and in literature, we hear of the desire for a larger theatre of events for something to waylay us and lead us splendidly astray. Now the man who feels this desire for a varied life pays a yearly or a quarterly sum to the Adventure and Romance Agency; in return, the Adventure and Romance Agency undertakes to surround him with startling and weird events. As a man is leaving his front door, an excited sweep approaches him and assures him of a plot against his life; he gets into a cab, and is driven to an opium den; he receives a mysterious telegram or a dramatic visit, and is immediately in a vortex of incidents. (Chesterton)

This description intersects with several notable characteristics of the ARG genre. The focus on "startling and weird events" interjected into the everyday lives of their customers resembles the staging of events like *The Beast's* A.R.M. rallies in cities throughout the United States; this confusion represents a major form of physical and spatial overlapping of the real and the fictive or alternative. Furthermore, the use of everyday media, such as telegrams, is also linked to the creation of immersion— or being sent "immediately into a vortex of incidents" within the alternate reality experience.

The premise of Chesterton's work is similar to that of Fincher's *The Game*. In this film, the protagonist Nicholas Van Orton, an extremely wealthy investment banker, receives a mysterious birthday gift from his brother that sends him to Consumer Recreation Services (CRS), a mysterious company that creates custom game experiences for its exclusive clientele. Upon visiting their temporary office, which cannot be located when Van Orton returns to look for it, the company representative informs him that the game will find him, as opposed to Van Orton deciding when and where it will start. This characteristic is remarkably similar to a review included in *Majestic's* marketing electronic press kit: "the online game that plays you" ("Game Tapes Raw: EA Majestic Electronic Press Kit (7/20/2001)"). Slowly, Van Orton's life is taken over by a conspiracy of events that first seem to be part of his game experience, but then turn darkly into a plot to steal his fortune. After being chased, shot at, manipulated, drugged, and left for dead in Mexico, Van Orton returns to the San Francisco offices of CRS to confront those who have disrupted his life. The film culminates with a scene in which Van Orton cannot distinguish between what is real and what is part of the game— even when one of the actors leading him through the game tries to tell him that the conspiracy has all been part of his fictional experience. At the climax, Van Orton inadvertently shoots his brother, who is coming to kick off the birthday celebration that ends Van Orton's game. Sprinkled throughout *The Game* is terminology that would later be adapted by the community, including notions of being "behind the curtain" in reference to the puppetmasters, and the use of Jefferson Airplane's song, "White Rabbit," a nod to the rabbit hole of alternate reality into which Van Orton has tumbled.

Many examples of narrative fiction have explored the active blurring of reality and fiction, from the early novels *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* to many examples in the

twentieth century that use a metafictional strategy of acknowledging the artifice of a narrative (e.g., John Barth’s “Life Story” and Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter”). Perhaps the most direct corollary to ARGs and transmedia, in general, however, is Victorian sensation fiction. This highly-serialized literary genre is linked to the post-Industrial Revolution rise of literacy and publication in Great Britain in the 1860s and 1870s. These widespread periodicals aimed at middle class readers frequently incorporated themes of criminality, insanity, and secrets (Wynne). Often, these fictional narratives were interspersed with nonfiction articles that revolved around the same themes, leading to a hybrid form of realism—the nonfiction content would heighten the reality of the sensation fiction, giving it real-world context. While delivered in the same medium, the mixing of genres sought to destabilize traditional notions of Victorian Realism, the dominant preceding literary movement.

Literary precursors for ARGs can also be found throughout metafictional and postmodern narratives from the 20th century¹⁶. Starting with the Latin American metafictional tradition best exemplified by Jorge Luis Borges and extending into European metafiction, such as Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the acknowledgement of narrative as artifice within the pages of a book challenged the traditional view of fiction through the willing suspension of disbelief. In Calvino’s novel and many of Borges’s stories, the reader is directly addressed and the act of reading the very narrative in the reader’s hand is a featured part of the content. By explicitly acknowledging the fictional nature of fiction, the reader is positioned to both confront the experience as being both fictional (the characters and situations are made up) and real (the

¹⁶ Further exploration of the implications of the intertwining of the acknowledgement of artifice (metafiction), metareflexivity, and the modern and postmodern problematization of the certainty of “real” and “fictional” can be found beginning in Chapter 3 (The Industrial Logic of ARGs) and in depth in Chapter 4 (The Cultural Logic of ARGs).

books existence as acknowledged object). This is similar to the breaking of the fourth wall seen in ARGs and also facilitates a reflexivity for the reader to acknowledge the artifice of the fictional narrative; however, these metafictional narratives still maintain a sense of immersion—the reader is still able to be drawn into the fictional narrative in meaningful ways that resonate emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. This is a precursor to the reflexive immersion that is an essential component of the ARG genre experience.

Furthermore, Borges has a particular prescience when it comes to ARGs. His story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” features the theme of a complete country and society, Uqbar, that has been discovered hidden in a one-of-a-kind copy of an encyclopedia, *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia*— which is itself a “delinquent reprint” of an earlier *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Borges 68). Within the story, the narrator, Borges himself, searches out more information about the country with his friend and fellow metafictional author Alfredo Bioy Casares. Eventually, Borges discovers one volume of a massive encyclopedia of Tlön, one of two fictitious countries in which all literature of Uqbar is set within; this encyclopedia represents a collaborative fiction authored by a collective intelligence of experts in multiple fields. This deep world-building within the context of a rabbit hole planted in a unique reprint of an established work of nonfiction media reflects many of the elements of ARGs.

Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novella *The Crying of Lot 49* provides an example of the destabilization of categories of real and fictional within the context of a proto-ARG. The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, receives a mysterious letter which enjoins her to solve a complex mystery involving obscure clues and conspiracies. As in an ARG, Oedipa must decipher her own reality to discover clues and coded messages, and to determine who might be part of a hidden

network of secret societies— all of which might amount to an elaborate joke being played on her by her former lover, Pierce Inverarity. She encounters underground networks tied to ancient European postal systems on the streets of San Francisco in the 1960s. Characters may or may not be part of the hoax or conspiracy to lead her deeper into what seems to be a grand plot. As in an ARG, clues are embedded in physical spaces (bars and mailboxes and rare postage stamps) and in various media (pop music, theatre). While Pynchon's novella is also comic and full of ridiculous characters and occurrences, it ultimately asks questions about the nature of reality and certainty through Oedipa's sorting of what is real and rational and what is not. *The Crying of Lot 49* presents a type of inverted mystery, in which the further Oedipa digs into the ARG-like conspiracy puzzle, the fewer certainties she unearths. As her quest proceeds, logic and certainty unravel and she finds herself further and further from an Enlightenment concept of objective truth and reality, and closer to something like postmodern paranoia. As discussed in Chapter 4, the productive pathology of paranoia is an integral component of the cultural context of ARGs. Oedipa embodies the paranoid viewpoint, seeing potential conspiracies everywhere— and her altered perception is productive in navigating contemporary life now that the illusion of rationality and certainty has dissolved before our collective eyes.

Finally, the methods of distribution of content and the puzzle-solving aesthetics of the ARG merged in two prominent examples from the 1990s: *The Blair Witch Project* and *Dreadnot*. In what the IGDA ARG SIG refers to as a predecessor of the ARG, the viral marketing campaign for the independent horror film *Blair Witch Project* (1999), the filmmakers made use of a transmedia mystery to both build awareness of the upcoming film and to create a deeper immersive storyworld. Fictional websites were created to provide a backstory for the film's

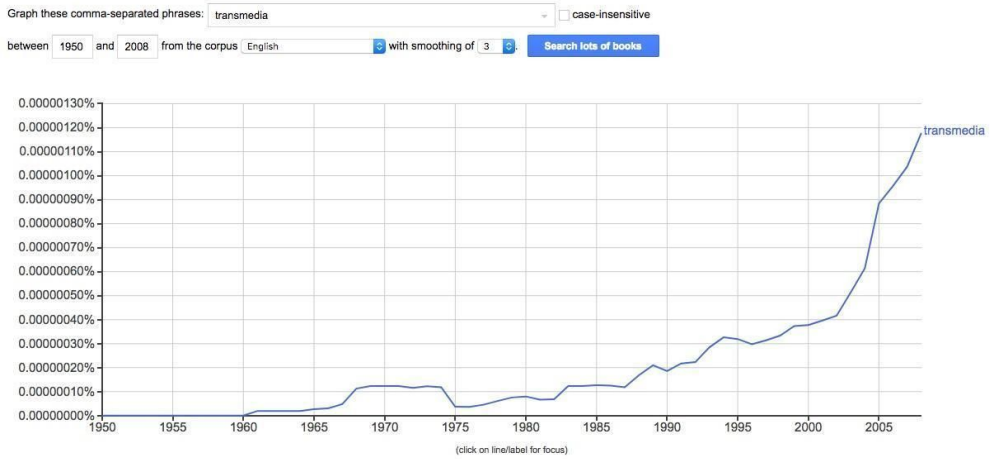
characters and mythology, a fake documentary was aired on the SciFi Channel and across college campuses, the film's *IMDB* page listed the actors as missing and presumed dead, and missing-persons flyers were posted around the country (Davidson). The use of everyday media and websites to perpetuate material invented for the film's narrative blurred the lines of reality for the audience.

In 1996, the San Francisco Chronicle's website, SFGate.com, published a ten-week long web mystery called *Dreadnot*. This game used many of the methods that would be eventually employed by ARGs, including clues embedded in webpage source code, emails and voicemails from fictional characters, and the incorporation of events in real world spaces and events (*Dreadnot*). The one major difference between *Dreadnot* and ARGs is the lack of true immersion; *Dreadnot* announced itself clearly as a fictional game, as opposed to existing within the TINAG aesthetic.

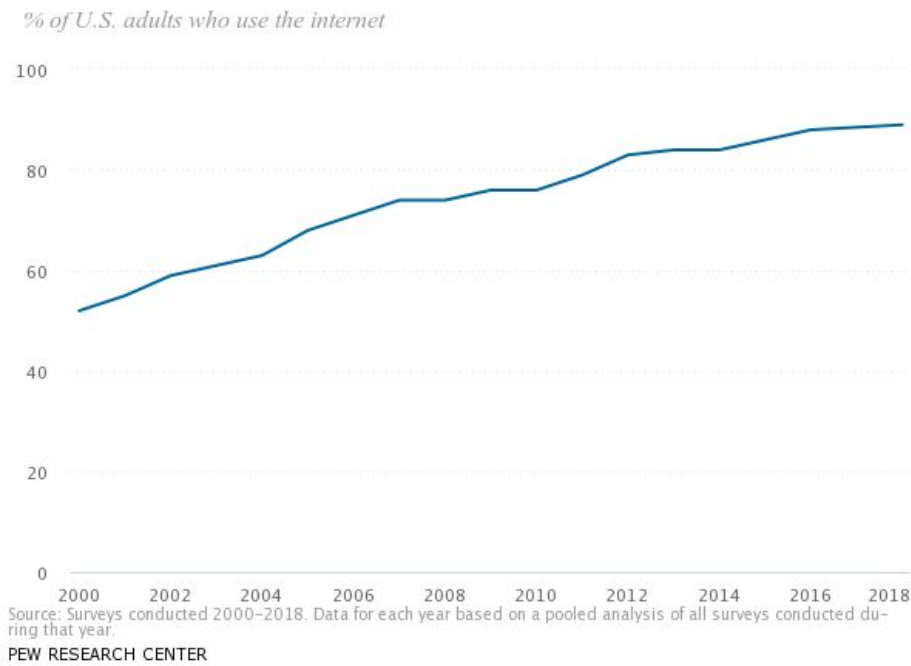
Conclusion

Though the term transmedia dates to the early 1990s, the phenomenon became more prevalent and relevant during the growth of digital networked technology in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This increase in prominence, supported by Google Books Ngram Viewer data (see Figure 1.2), coincides with the rise in internet access in the United States (see Figure 1.3) and even more so with the increase in interactive and user-generated "Web 2.0" sites, such as social media (see Figure 1.4).

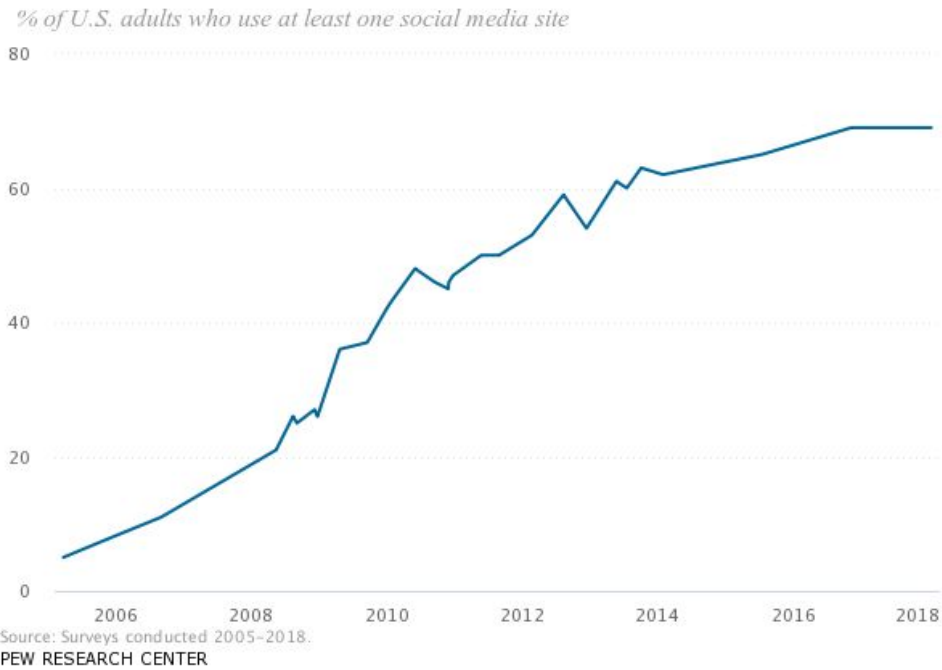
Google Books Ngram Viewer



[Figure 1.2. Google Books Ngram data for “transmedia” in English from 1950 to 2008.]



[Figure 1.3. Pew Research Center survey data on percentage of adults in the United States who use the Internet.]



[Figure 1.4. Pew Research Center survey data on percentage of adults in the United States who use social media sites.]

The vast amount of available media options and how those options are organized within a work of transmedia has made defining the phenomenon particularly elusive even to the present day. Some, such as Jenkins, have approached definition through the lens of media studies, while others, such as Ryan, have approached definition from a narratological standpoint. Producers, like Phillips and Smith, have taken an industry-centered approach to classifying transmedia, as well. The strengths and shortcomings of these may definitions will be more thoroughly analyzed in the following chapter.

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Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework for Understanding ARGs

Transmedia and ARGs can be understood through a variety of theoretical approaches. The scattering of narratively-aligned content across multiple, distinct media can be examined through an industrial distribution approach. For instance, Henry Jenkins regards transmedia, in part, as a way to expand IP across multiple distribution channels. From a more purely Marxist logic, P. David Marshall views transmedia in a way similar to franchising of children's toys, as an attempt to “[keep] the audience, viewer or player within the system of entertainment choices... effectively maintaining [the producer's] market” (73-4). Similarly, Derek Johnson in “Inviting Audiences In” explores transmedia as a part of what he calls “TVIII”— or a more interactive form of viewership— and positions the use of transmedia and ARGs almost exclusively as a tool for the exploitation of free fan labor for increased profit. While the examination of transmedia and its frequent interactive potential in terms of promotion and monetization are germane and integral to understanding the motivation of some creators, using this lens exclusively ignores many contexts of transmedia and ARGs, especially that of the immersed and engaged viewer or player.

Christy Dena, in her 2009 dissertation *Transmedia Practice*, argues that “both commerce and artistic concerns influence transmedia design” (24). The concerns of commerce can be understood through the words of the successful and well-known transmedia producer Jeff Gomez who claims that “transmedia is a technique” applicable to any IP, before or after its initial conception (“Little Tamagotchis...”). In opposition to that stance, transmedia producer Michel Reilhac calls transmedia “more a state of mind than a technique” universally applicable to a

narrative or game experience (“The State of Storytelling...”). These divergent views on production open a space for further exploration of transmedia.

In order to avoid confusion with franchising, I argue for an understanding of transmedia that is closer to Reilhac’s view. This approach incorporates Henry Jenkins’ idea that transmedia exhibits “additive comprehension” as a defining characteristic wherein each media component offers an integral piece of information that is necessary for a new, more whole understanding of a narrative or game experience (Jenkins 127). In order to describe the spread of an experience from medium to medium in a more organic manner, I propose a “metastatic” quality in defining transmedia. In both medical and rhetorical contexts, the term metastasis emphasizes a rapid, connected transition and growth. While the term has negative connotations in the former, the expanding growth of an experience from a single medium to multiple media in a manner that suggests a single organism or entity, as opposed to several smaller pieces simply cobbled together in a franchising model, encompasses the holism of a transmedia work. This metastatic quality takes Jenkins’ “additive comprehension” further, arguing that what is commonly referred to as transmedia only escapes being a form franchising when the transmedia experience is required to reach a narrative or ludic resolution and to have a full understanding of the IP, as opposed to a collection of individual media components that are merely an optional, consumable extension of a storyworld.

Finally, I explore a brief typology to classify transmedia narratives and games, or experiences¹⁷. This typology is built on the work of Espen Aarseth, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Markku Eskelinen, and incorporates Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concepts of

¹⁷ I use “experience” as a term to cover both narratives and games. Part of the transmedia typology seeks to classify differences between stories and games through the categories of the typology.

immediacy and hypermediacy. This typology is important in distinguishing transmedia experiences from each other and is necessitated by the large variety of media that could be used in a transmedia experience. It is also important, however, to preserve the possibility for medium-specific analyses, so that an experience may also be examined in terms of its individual media components. This is a major goal of the typology: to provide a classification system that creates a transmedia ecology, but also recognizes an experience's unique collection of media.

Medium-Specificity and ARGs

One of the most significant characteristics of alternate reality games (ARGs) as objects of study in academia is their lack of common definition. As ARGs are a genre of transmedia, this uncertainty should come as no surprise. Transmedia itself has a range of competing definitions and classifications, as well as multiple disciplines (such as digital studies, narratology, television studies, and film studies) and analytical frameworks (such legal, economic, cultural, and educational) that examine transmedia. For instance, *Storyworlds across Media* (2014), a follow-up to *Narrative across Media* (2004), traces some of the shifts in terminology that have become germane in the decade between those critical collections, starting with the shift from the concept of narrative to “storyworld” — a concept that addresses the broadening and deepening of the content of an IP across multiple media and representational forms.

When it comes to ARGs specifically, this definitional uncertainty is likely for several reasons. First, ARGs are a hybrid genre, made up of some elements that are traditionally aligned with narrative and some elements that are aligned with games. And, even though the debate between ludologists and narratologists to stake out what is a game and what is a story dates back

several decades, there is still no common resolution establishing a distinction between game and narrative. As presented in the previous chapter, ARGs also use a wide variety of media within their experience. One ARG might use video blogs on YouTube, voicemails to mobile phones, online comics, and twitter accounts created to interact with participants; another might use a short film, podcasts, posters placed in various locations throughout the world, public performances, and homemade zines. This variation in media— and the specific affordances and phenomenological experiences associated with each— makes it challenging to encompass diverse experiences in a single genre.

Therefore, when examining transmedia and especially ARGs, it is important to recognize a need for media-specific analysis (MSA). As N. Katherine Hayles writes in “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep,” her foundational work on MSA in digital media studies:

“[t]he power of MSA comes from holding one term constant across media— in this case the genre of literary hypertext— and then varying the media to explore how medium-specific constraints and possibilities shape texts.” (69)

The importance of MSA is particularly translatable to transmedia and ARGs. Given that transmedia, regardless of which disciplinary frameworks might be applied to a single analysis, is both combining multiple media and also a specific set of media that differentiates it from other examples of transmedia, accounting for the specific media used in an experience can help to explicate the meaning and interpretations that resonate within that work. For instance, we might look to an intellectual property (IP) such as *The Matrix* and analyze the use of transmedia to create its storyworld: film, comics, anime, and video games. By considering the combination of these specific media and their affordances, we can better understand how they create a specific experience with the audience— an experience that would be different if the media used were

television, novels, and an augmented reality mobile phone app. Furthermore, by considering the affordances of the individual that constitute a specific transmedia experience, we are able to see how each media instantiation— the film, the anime, the video game— is able to convey a specific meaning and experience on its own, as part of the overall media mix.

Because ARGs belong within the larger grouping of transmedia— a form that is particularly notable for its breadth of media used within a specific experience— applying MSA becomes even more critical. While the same reasons above apply to the use of MSA on ARGs, more specific benefits arise when looking at the specific affordances of the media used in ARGs, simply because the genre contains an extraordinarily wide variation of media within its examples. Though there is substantial reason to not exclusively think of ARGs as “texts,” Hayles claim is particularly salient because ARGs are a genre within the large conceptual category of transmedia; thus, looking at the specific media and characteristics of ARGs in comparison to the expectations of transmedia in general can help to better resolve what makes ARGs unique.

Thus it is important to establish as clear a framework as possible to differentiate ARGs from other forms of transmedia; by doing so, we can hope to understand what makes them unique in terms of utility for the entertainment industry, and for education we can hope to understand what makes them a particularly immersive and culturally-relevant form of transmedia experience. In assessing their defining characteristics, ARGs exhibit important distinctions that make them unique within the world of transmedia. While transmedia “narratives” or “storytelling” — terms employed by many disciplines— more readily fits into the schema of narrative, I will argue that ARGs inhabit a space that blurs the distinction between game and narrative. Because they inhabit this liminal space, ARGs offer a unique interactivity between

audience and puppetmasters.

Textual Combat: Games/Simulations and Narrative

As the definition of “text” expands to encompass new forms of media in our contemporary cultural space, so too does the spectrum of objects that fall within the purview of the humanities. Specifically, just as television and film studies have been circumscribed by more established academic disciplines, digital games and simulations have become objects of study by the disciplines of English and Communication in the beginning of the 21st century. Perhaps due to this association with English and Communication, narratology has often been applied in seeking to understand the forms, aesthetics, and cultural significance of games and simulations.

As the capabilities of microprocessors, digital memory, and audiovisual technology continue to grow, their output becomes more and more complex— and sometimes more realistic, blurring distinctions between what audiences experience phenomenologically as real and virtual. This leads to more cinematic digital games and simulations, especially within “cutscenes” — scenes that “cut” away from the interactive environment of a simulation or game, frequently with input control disabled. Due to this separation from the interactive environment, the scene is not necessarily produced using the game engine, but can be done with computer generated images or animation technology used in traditionally narrative media, such as film or television.

As digital technologies evolve, though, some games— such as Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain* (2010), which was lauded by the *New York Times* for its cinematic realism— achieve a more photorealistic gameplay that is not limited to cutscenes and, as a result, blurs the lines between game and narrative in popular discourse (Schiesel). In the *Times* review, the prominent

schema for assessing the aesthetics of the video game are filmic: “a noir murder mystery inspired by film masters like Hitchcock, Kubrick and David Lynch” (Schiesel). *Heavy Rain*’s gameworld is linked to realism and narrative trappings of other media types— having a substantial script (*Heavy Rain*’s runs to 2,000 pages), and the notion that a narrative arc moves from tension to resolution:

Of course, there would be no game if things stayed perfect. In fact, things go very wrong for Ethan, and *Heavy Rain* becomes the story of his journey — and yours — to rescue what little he can of his life. (Schiesel)

As we will later see, this notion of plot reflects one of the three traits that Marie-Laure Ryan identifies as historically defining narrative: “a development leading from equilibrium to crisis to a new form of equilibrium, and a rise and fall in tension” (Ryan 245). This application of narrative criticism to a video game is rooted in the reviewer’s understanding of *Heavy Rain*’s position within an emerging transmedia landscape, an experience geared toward “adults who want a glimpse of the future of interactive entertainment, a future when characterization, writing and emotional connection are more important than combat mechanics” (Schiesel). *Heavy Rain* is lauded as a game precisely because the characteristics that help to clearly define games through notions of genre convention— the violence of combat mechanics— are de-emphasized and other components of game experiences more readily assigned to narratology— character development and emotional depth— are used to define the experience as meaningful and culturally relevant. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Quantic Dream’s 2018 release, *Detroit: Become Human*, asserts itself more as an interactive story than as a traditional video game, announcing in its official release trailer the key selling points of “our most branching story ever” and “every choice matters” (“*Detroit: Become Human*”). The official website for *Detroit: Become Human*

reinforces the positioning of the game as narrative, using “narrative” three times in the marketing copy and “game” only once (“Detroit: Become Human”).

Furthermore, as Henry Jenkins describes in *Convergence Culture*, popular narratives are becoming less discrete with respect to specific media. In summarizing Lisa Gitelman’s definition of media as both “a technology that enables communication... [and] a set of ‘protocols’ or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology,” Jenkins dispels the notion that “all media content is going to flow through a single black box into our living rooms” (*Convergence Culture* 13-14). By using an Xbox One, I can watch episodes of *The Colony* via Netflix or listen to film scores via Pandora. These affordances do not make me confuse a narrative film like *American Beauty* or a song like “Mad World” as (heard both in the trailer for the video game *Gears of War* and the film *Donnie Darko*) for video games. Rather, this convergence refers to an intellectual property that is experienced across multiple media, whether through franchising or transmedia practices. For instance, as Jenkins discusses, most viewers experience *The Matrix* primarily as a film, but additional parts of the narrative may be experienced through other media— including a console video game and a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), as well as anime shorts and comic books (103). Therefore, in many ways, the game and simulation elements of *The Matrix* contain pieces of the transmedia narrative. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that video games have come to be seen through the lens of narratology.

This backgrounding is not to suggest that games are wholly accepted as narratives; games can be clearly non-narrative, as well. While we might consider the narratologist’s examination of games and simulations as a function of disciplinary structures, there are very few analogous

Ludology departments¹⁸. To see what has been described as a “blood feud” between narratologists and ludologists, one need only look to the titles from three chapters in the 2004 book *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*: Janet Murray’s “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama”; Ken Perlin’s “Can There Be a Form Between a Game and a Story?”; Espen Aaresth’s “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation” (“Game Design as Narrative Architecture”). This spectrum of viewpoints in *First Person* reflects games an assumption of games and simulations into narratology, creating a middle ground that allows for sometimes porous borders between the two categories (when considering games and simulations as a single category, as I will largely do here), and a decidedly separatist polemic that argues for the primacy of ludology¹⁹.

It is germane to build definitions of games/simulations and narrative that will seek to establish the common and distinguishable formal characteristics of the two. These characteristics will take interactivity/agency, replayability, and semiotic potentials into consideration. Building a clear definition for these two phenomena allows exploration of the distinct satisfactions that each might offer the audience, whether understood as reader or player. I will show these formal differences, as well as complicate the notion that clear boundaries exist between these two phenomena, while addressing the particular satisfactions present in each. In short, games and narrative are completely different systems: representational for narrative, simulational for games. And while narrative and simulations/games share interactivity in one sense, only

¹⁸ Though this claim of disciplinary structure is mostly a historical claim, it is important to acknowledge the change in the academic landscape over the past fifteen years. Higher education institutions have increased support for interdisciplinary approaches to game studies, such as the University of Southern California, MIT, Georgia Tech, and ITU Copenhagen, to name just a few.

¹⁹ For a clear statement of the separatist position, see Markku Eskelinen’s summary of the ludology/narratology conflict in *Cybertext Poetics* (2012).

simulations/games allow for a truly variable outcome and, consequently, uniquely rewarding replay. Markku Eskelinen comes to a similar conclusion in “The Gaming Situation,” wherein he articulates a careful and extensive list of elements— “the old and new game components, their dynamic combination and distribution, the registers, the necessary manipulation of temporal, causal, spatial and functional relations and properties not to mention the rules and the goals and the lack of audience” — that separate games from narratives (“The Gaming Situation”).

Finally, given these distinctions between the formal characteristics and satisfactions held by each, I will apply them to my major interest, transmedia narratives and alternate reality games (ARGs), in order to recommend design choices based on a potential work’s specific contexts: ARGs are better suited for purposes of seeking future solutions, while transmedia narrative can be more useful for interpretive entertainment.

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan defines narrative in a broad manner that cuts across several contexts, stating that narrative is a “discourse reporting a story as well as the story itself” (244). This definition does not seek to distinguish narrative from “story” — especially since it uses the latter term in the definition of the former; furthermore, the distinction of game from narrative or the subsuming of games into narrative is not among Ryan’s central concerns in this book. Rather, the definition is provided to analyze and classify narratives experienced within digital environments and narratives composed with digital media: primarily MOOs, MUDs, hypertexts, and other interactive literature. To reach a system of classification, Ryan creates a three-part definition of narrative. In this system, a text need only satisfy a single condition out of the three possible conditions. According to her theory, narratives can be understood:

- (1) as a representation of physical or mental events involving common or related

participants and ordered in a temporal sequence...;
(2) as an interpretation of events invoking causality...;
(3) as a semantic structure meeting certain formal requirements, such as a salient theme, a point, a development leading from equilibrium to crisis to a new form of equilibrium, and a rise and fall in tension. (Ryan 244-5)

In examining the structures of several types of texts, mostly of the digital-media variety, Ryan uses her criteria to classify the interactivity of each, a characteristic that will figure into the importance of distinguishing narrative from games/simulations.

Much as was seen above regarding the popular reception of *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human*, Espen Aarseth, in “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and Art of Simulation,” also briefly traces the history of how games might have come to be seen through the lens of narratology, albeit in a far more polemical way, through allusions to colonialism and a straw-man imputation that narratologists believe narratives are culturally superior to games. In a first step of separating games and simulations from narrative, Aarseth points out that “games are not new...probably older than stories...[perhaps] older than human culture, since even animals play games” (“Genre Trouble” 46). In referencing non-humans playing games, Aarseth is referring to the play between humans and animals, such as when I play fetch with my dog Lola, and the play between animals, such as when Lola and her best dog friend Moana chase each other and wrestle. This observation is crucial to Aarseth’s assertion of the separation of games and narrative, as if games predate narrative, it is hard to argue that they are a subcategory of narrative. Likewise, if games are not exclusively human phenomena, it is easier to separate them from the exclusive domain of textual studies, a product of human culture.

Aarseth builds a definition of games as having three integral parts: a system of rules, “a material/semiotic... gameworld,” and “the events resulting from the application of the rules to

the gameworld” — what Aarseth refers to as “gameplay” (48). First, it is clear that each or any of these three elements of Aarseth’s definition could be textual. The rules for Monopoly, for instance, are contained in a printed booklet, delineating acceptable ways in which the game should be played; those rules are presented in a sequence of events that describe the mechanics of a single turn and the general gameplay, as well as in a way that describes the definitions of various elements of the game (the object, equipment, preparation, banker, etc.) (“Rules of Monopoly”). Of course, these rules need not be written as printed text to be transmitted, but could be presented in a variety of media and modes. Furthermore, to build upon the example of Monopoly, complex game rules might be modified and negotiated based on specific contexts and agreements between players— though there might be an official rulebook for *Monopoly*, the rules are socially malleable²⁰. Finally, it would be hard to argue that the National Hockey League’s *Official Rules* fits into Ryan’s definition of narrative, as this document isn’t organized in a temporal sequence, isn’t an interpretation of interrelated causal events, and lacks a coherent move from equilibrium to imbalance and back, or rising tension. The *Official Rules* book is a collection of diagrams that provide a (mostly) strict system of rules (such as types of fouls and their penalties) for how the game is to be played, and the spatial and temporal makeup of the gameworld (the rink and how the game is divided into discrete sections of time, or periods). Though it is textual, the *Official Rules* is not narrative.

The gameworld can also be textual. For instance, text adventure games such as *Zork!* or *Colossal Cave Adventure* (common artifacts for analysis in the foundational writings on games and narrative, as well as ergodic and electronic literature) have a world based solely in text: the

²⁰ As one example of the malleable and adaptation of rules in unexpected and subversive ways, we can look to the notion of metagaming, as examined in depth in Boluk and Lemieux’s 2017 book, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*.

descriptions are similar to how settings are described in a novel, though dissimilar in that they are often represented as lexias (or discrete blocks of text) distinct from the actions of a character or events in the game. One example of this procedure would be a player of a text adventure game learning about the environment of their avatar's world through a textual command, such as *look* or *examine*, that elicits a physical description as determined by the game code. In a typical novel, however, such a description of setting would not be the result of a distinct input command, but revealed to the reader through the exposition of the narrator or the actions of the characters. Further, to return to a different game— ice hockey— there is nothing textual about the length and width of a regulation-sized rink, the faceoff dots, blue lines, red lines, and goal lines, or the goals themselves. I can use text to describe them to you— the NHL regulates that rinks be 200 feet long by 85 feet wide— but it would be impossible for me to play a game of ice hockey on top of or within this sentence. Therefore, while gameworlds can be textual, there is nothing inherently textual (or narrative) about gameworlds.

Finally, Aarseth defines games through their “gameplay” — the actual events and results that make up a game. Once again, Aarseth argues— and I concur— that there is nothing exclusively textual about the gameplay. We can, obviously, represent the gameplay through text— and in a manner which can meet all three of Ryan's above definitions of narrative. For instance, I can tell you about a memorable time I played *Monopoly*, how the game started, which properties were purchased by whom, the strategies my fellow players and I employed, and how the game ended. Or, we can look at the sports section of a print or online newspaper, wherein we can locate gameplay narratives: recaps of a hockey game that represent “the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld” (“Genre Trouble” 48). While we might learn

about what happened within that particular hockey game, the recap is simply a textual representation of the game itself that is written after the fact. It is not the same as playing the game—in terms of the experience, which means being able to influence the game’s outcome. A post-facto account is a representation that gives the reader information about the game, allowing the reader interpret their own distinct meaning of the participants’ actions within the game. Furthermore, a narrative recap is not the only form of textual representation of a game; we can look to a baseball box score for a non-narrative but still textual representation of a game. In terms of Ryan’s definition of narrative, the box score does not meet any of the three criteria. It is not solely ordered in a temporal sequence. While the list of batters imposes the order in which they appear relative to one another, each batter’s entire game line is represented at once. If a batter has two hits in five at bats, the box score indicates no distinction to the temporal occurrence of those two hits within those five at bats; we cannot tell in which at bats the batter got a hit— whether the first two, the last two, or any combination in between. Additionally, due to this lack of temporal detail, it is largely speculative to understand the causal trajectory of a baseball game simply by looking at the box score. Finally, as the box score presents all its information in a condensed space, with the result listed first, there is little to no narrative movement from equilibrium to crisis, or the reverse. While textual, box scores are not narrative, but perhaps better understood as something akin to tabular data that can be used to (with difficulty) construct a narrative of a game.

The key factor in distinguishing games and simulations from narrative is an understanding of systems of semiotics. While they might use the same types of signs at times, understanding the workings of the system in which those signs are generated is how we can clearly separate game

from narrative. To understand the difference between narrative and games and simulations as semiotic systems, I turn to Gonzalo Frasca's work in "Simulation versus Narrative." First, Frasca gives an important working definition of simulation for the humanities (as opposed to scientific contexts): "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system" (223). Traditional media, Frasca argues, are representational, as opposed to simulational: novels, film, photographs, painting, and sculpture, for instance, give the audience²¹ information about the object the medium represents—the color of the sky, the shape of the clouds within it, the humidity, etc. A simulation, however, contains a model of the sky's behavior "that reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions" or a system of rules (223). This set of dynamic rules allows simulations and games to be semiotically different from representational systems such as narrative.

This is perhaps best seen through Aarseth's definition of "ergodic" from *Cybertext*, which is cited by Frasca, as well. To differentiate text from cybertext, Aarseth defines the latter as requiring "nontrivial effort" to be read—or having to "[effectuate] a semiotic sequence" (*Cybertext 2*). In other words, the user of a cybertext must generate signs and order them to create a text that is perhaps individual to the specific work she has conducted. Therefore, in seeing simulations as "sign-generators," we can position them as cybertext, as opposed to traditional narrative text (Frasca 223). In their role as sign-generators, simulations produce

²¹ To describe what might be thought of as reader or player, depending on your preferred framework, I will use the term "audience" so as not to presuppose the language of any specific discipline. The term "user" which Eskelinen employs in *Cybertext Poetics*, seems to also be an attempt to avoid definitional assumptions—and reinforce the notions of interactivity that accompany ergodic literature and cybertext studies. With the wide-ranging uses of ARGs discussed in this dissertation, the term audience—with an established understanding that participation is part of the audience experience in the contexts herein—is employed.

various outcomes, a set of endings or non-endings²² dependent upon the system of rules that govern the situation. In playing a simulation, the output is typically representational. For instance, in playing the video game *Fallout 3*, the user gives the game engine (a simulation program based on models of probabilities and physics, among other factors) input through the controller, dictating where the player character (PC) goes and in what manner, when to use a specific tool, or how to respond to dialogue- and action-based social interactions with non-player characters (NPCs). These probabilities are also governed through the specific choices a player makes in the initial settings values to their PC profile through another model, the S.P.E.C.I.A.L.²³ system, which can be subsequently upgraded through experience points earned by performing actions and completing game missions (*Fallout 3*). The player understands the results of her input not through a full view of the simulation system, but through representational media that report the results of the simulation: text, moving and static images, and audio. However, “simulation cannot be understood just through its output” (Frasca 224). If we were to view the video game *Fallout 3* only through its output, we would likely perceive it as being narrative, as it looks like other representational forms, specifically film or computer animation. This would be an obviously limiting view that ignores the major feature of simulation: its ability to generate a variety of outcomes by utilizing user decisions as input to be run through a dynamic system that implements the rules, constructs the gameworld, and determines resulting events. In short,

²² As Frasca discusses, there are two types of games in ludology: *ludus* and *paidia*. *Ludus* is typified by two ending conditions: winning and losing. *Paidia* is open-ended play, wherein the ending is not solely determined by conditions for winning, such as sandbox simulations, such as the *Sim City* or *Civilization* series of games—or playing in your sandbox in the backyard.

²³ S.P.E.C.I.A.L. is an acronym for Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck. By allowing users to set and modify/upgrade this profile, they are given an opportunity to change some of the games rules. This is an example of what Frasca refers to as a “meta-rule... that states how the rules [of the particular simulation/game] can be changed” (Frasca 232).

viewing simulations/games as narrative simply because they use representational media as output paints an inaccurate and limited understanding of each.

Through this definition of simulations and games as distinct from narrative, we have begun to discern the formal features of simulations/games and narrative, and can continue in this line. Embedded in the discussion above is the notion of interactivity: the relationship between the object (whether text or cybertext, narrative or simulation/game) and the user, and the user's ability to dictate the progression and outcome of the experience (or "text" in terms of Aarseth's notion of constructing a "semiotic sequence") (*Cybertext* 1). This interactivity is a feature seen in ARGs, and not in the broader category of transmedia.

Simulations and games offer a specific type of interactivity that narrative does not. In "Will New Media Produce New Narratives?" Marie-Laure Ryan defines interactivity as a "response to a deliberate user action" (338). The use of *deliberate* here can be placed in parallel to Aarseth's use of *nontrivial* to describe the user's interaction with a cybertext. Ryan further defines the potentials for interactivity through a typology²⁴ that consists of the combination of two binary markers of involvement, internal/external and exploratory/ontological:

- (1) internal or external involvement (whether the user assumes a point of view as a character/avatar within the game, such as a first-person perspective in a game like *Fallout 3*, or as a removed third person perspective, such as "a god who controls the fictional world from above, or... [as] navigating a database" like in *SimCity*);
- (2) nexploratory or ontological involvement (whether the user can impact the outcome of the object [ontological], such as choices changing the outcome in *Heavy Rain*, or merely the order in which it is traversed [exploratory], such as Julio Cortazar's novel *Hopscotch* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*) ("Will New Media..." 339).

Though this method is critiqued by Eskelinen for creating a system that assumes the framework

²⁴ In Ryan's typology, there are four distinct types: internal-exploratory, internal-ontological, external-exploratory, and external-ontological.

that games are narratives²⁵, Ryan does extend her analysis to a variety of objects that coincide with Frasca's conception of simulations and games (Eskelinen 224-226).

From this typology and Frasca's definition of simulation, one of the key differences between narrative and game is the ability of the audience to alter the outcome of the experience in a nontrivial or deliberate manner, a characteristic that helps differentiate ARGs from other forms of transmedia. I focus here on outcome, as opposed to the ordering of the text, for the reason that we might choose to experience a text or cybertext in any order, regardless of whether the work makes sense in any particular order. For instance, a user might choose to read the chapters of any novel in reverse order—and still be able to piece together the point, or events, or theme of a work. Some novels are expressly created to be able to be read in multiple paths, such as *Hopscotch* or *Pale Fire*. In both cases, however, the order of reading doesn't change the content of the novel, but instead the potential interpretations of the narrative. A third example would be that of hypertext; assuming the permanence of the text is constant (i.e., that each section of text is permanent and fixed and the words therein do not change), hypertexts, such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon*, allow users to choose the order the text's elements into a potentially far greater degree of possible readings (what Aarseth calls "scriptons") than there are discrete units of text ("textons") (*Cybertext* 62). Each of these three examples reflect the representational system of narrative; the user is given (in these cases) textual representations of events, characters, and situations.

In simulations and games, however, the potential for an additional, distinct level of expression exists. This second level of expression consists of the simulation's use of a dynamic

²⁵ Furthermore, Ryan's use of the term "addicts" to label people who enjoy playing "computer games" also reveals a cultural hierarchy that preferences narrative as a more valuable art ("Will New Media..." 349).

system of rules to model behaviors or characteristics of the simulation experience. In introducing two terms— *narrauthors* and *simauthors*, authors who create narratives and those who create simulations— Frasca differentiates between the interactive possibilities of simulation as opposed to those of narrative:

Simulations provide simauthors with a technique that narrauthors lack. They are not only able to state if [for example] social change is possible or not, but they have a chance of expressing how likely they think it may be... by modeling difficulty. (Frasca 228)

In other words, the modeling component of simulation (like the rule system, gameworld, and gameplay in Aarseth's definition of game) allows users to experience variable outcomes and make nontrivial decisions or interactions through their experiences. This variability of outcomes characteristic of games can be seen in what Janet Murray describes as the *replay story*— one of the few concepts she ascribes to games alone. To Murray, “replay is an aspect of gaming, one of the most pleasurable and characteristic structures of [digital] gaming,” wherein the user saves the game at regular intervals in order to go back and explore different potential outcomes (Murray 6). While I frequently enjoy re-reading narratives to notice different nuances of the writing or appreciate characters or situations in a slightly altered understanding, the outcomes of those narratives themselves never change. That is not to assert, however, that my interpretation of the narrative does not change with each subsequent interaction with the text. Interpretation— and more importantly, the malleability of interpretation— is “present in all texts,” however, and therefore does not change mark a typological difference between text and cybertext, or narrative and game (*Cybertext* 64). This replay-ability is a signature pleasure of simulations and games— precisely because the outcome is at stake, a characteristic that is enabled by the system of simulation and prohibited through systems solely based on representation, such as narrative.

How, then, can these definitions, forms, and pleasures be applied to the understanding of transmedia narrative and ARGs? With this understanding of interactivity— and what that specifically means for varieties of transmedia experiences— creating rich narrative interpretation spaces, and producing knowledge that can help communities solve real world problems, both become possible.

In transmedia, a premium is placed on the construction of worlds. This is evidenced in Jenkins's discussion of transmedia as the product of "world-making" as well as the naming of the transmedia industry's flagship conference as StoryWorld (Jenkins 115-127). The worlds in question are expansive, partly due to their transmedial construction, but also as a precondition for being sustainable across media. If the world were not deep enough, the individual instantiations would be repetitive and fail to offer the additive comprehension that Jenkins identifies as a defining characteristic of transmedia. This effect of transmediality is sought to enable the audience to participate within the fictional world; by being expansive and available across a multitude of media, the representational and participatory opportunities of the work are multiplied. The audience can experience text, images, films, animation, audio, and games, for instance, to understand and interpret the world.

As I have established different degrees of interactivity between narratives and games above, I will use this distinction to differentiate between various potentials for transmedia design. In doing so, I will focus on two different purposes: that of interpretation and that of simulating future outcomes. Transmedia narrative is particularly well suited for limited interactivity. As discussed above, interpretation is a condition present in all texts. Transmedia narrative, however, offers a particularly expansive form of interpretation. This is in part based on

the collaborative extension of intellectual property²⁶ across media. Because of the unique skills required for work in a specific medium, collaboration is almost always required to transit between medium, such as from film, to comics, to animation, to video games— as is the case with *The Matrix*. Successful transmedia narratives allow collaborators to be co-authors, or to expand the world into their medium with their own unique concerns so long as it does not contradict other parts of the world, as opposed to having a single creator tightly controlling the choices of collaborators. This collaborative requirement allows for the “further [expansion of] the range of potential meanings and intertextual connections within” the intellectual property (Jenkins 115).

This increase in potential interpretations often leads participatory users to actively form communities to seek out answers, compare notes, test their theories, learn and teach, persuade and be persuaded when it comes to their individual and collective understanding of a narrative. While this socialization of reception is certainly a meaningful act--and one important to ARGs, as well--it is nonetheless a limited form of interactivity. Though our collective and individual understandings may evolve, the outcome of the *Matrix* trilogy of films is still the same as it was on its original theatrical release, just as the ending to each animated short from *The Animatrix* is still the same. The representational outcomes do not change upon each subsequent viewing or “reading.”

Alternate Reality Games, however, can employ a specific use of the simulational aspect of interactivity, seen in ARGs such as *Evoke* and *World Without Oil*²⁷— simulations that aid in producing an understanding of potential future outcomes. Both these games are intended to have

²⁶ Jenkins uses the term “franchise,” which I’ll avoid due to it sounding like a competing and different manner of extending intellectual property across media: franchising.

²⁷ Both of these games are further examine in chapter 5 on the educational logic of ARGs.

a social impact on their players and are geared towards shaping the real world in a specific fashion. *Evoke*, an ARG sponsored by the World Bank Institute and directed by McGonigal, was specifically “designed to empower young people all over the world, especially in Africa, to start actively tackling the world’s most urgent problems— poverty, hunger, sustainable energy, clean-water access, natural disaster preparation, human rights” (McGonigal 333-4). *World Without Oil* is an ARG funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a “collaborative simulation” that sought to ask users to react to a worldwide oil shortage and to document their adaptive strategies and thoughts on repercussions in real-time through various media (emails, blog posts, videos, images, podcasts) for six weeks (McGonigal 302-4, emphasis added).

In “Tracing the Logics of Contemporary Digital Media Culture,” Patrick Crogan notes the influence of military simulation technology on our current media environment, specifically in how “simulation... [becomes a means] of preparation for the future” (168). This aspect of simulation as a way of preparing for the future is exactly how some ARGs can make us of simulational interactivity. To understand ARGs as simulation, as McGonigal asserts they are, we can test the definition built by combining Frasca’s thinking with Aarseth’s. ARGs have specific rule systems; while these are sometimes negotiated by the players (and not the designers), in games like the two of concern here, they are clearly provided by the game designers and model some aspect of the real world that poses a current and future challenge to society. The gamespace, as is typical for ARGs, is in a real world slightly alternative to our typical everyday experience, and the gameplay consists of challenges given to the players, and their reporting back to the community on how they can or might overcome those challenges.

Thus, by applying the specific interactive features of simulation and games to specific

challenges facing society, ARGs are better equipped to provide players with agency in determining suitable outcomes that fit the scope of the designers' game, the values of the community of players, and even the values of the community that the gameworld models. Furthermore, because ARGs exhibit the qualities of games, ARGs like *EVOKE* and *World Without Oil* are also replay-able. With variable future outcomes, these “collaborative simulations” can be experienced repeatedly for various groups and contexts and as a learning experience aligned— or perhaps in conflict— with the designers' purpose.

This Is Not a Game or a Story

Transmedia presents a perhaps unique challenge for media studies in its shifting nature. Being, by definition, distributed across multiple media platforms, transmedia is perhaps resistant to singular analysis. It is, in a global sense, non-medium-specific. For instance, one work of transmedia might employ a film, a novel, and Twitter accounts for the supporting characters; another transmedia work might distribute content through email, web video, a live concert, and series of public posters. While both these projects count as transmedia, the specific media they use are variable and inconsistent with one another.

This multiplicity impacts the study of transmedia in a few ways. First, it means we cannot use a single set of traditional, medium-specific aesthetics to judge the value of a transmedia work. Clement Greenberg writes that “[p]urity in art consists in the acceptance... of the limitations of the medium of the specific art” (Greenberg qtd. in Jones 94). Given the variability of media in transmedia, this “materialist empiricism” — as Caroline Jones describes it— cannot be applied, even if we desired, to transmedia as a field. Second, a medium-specific analysis— as

opposed to aesthetic judgement— of the way a work of transmedia functions and how it relates to other transmedia works and other (mono- and multi-)media works becomes complicated by the variation of media used in a single experience as an example within broader form of transmedia. I am cautious here, as I feel as though I am tip-toeing the edge of an event horizon; but due to transmedia's many formations, sometimes containing common parts, sometimes diverse, a simple holistic approach to transmedia is elusive— just as a single aesthetic for the World Wide Web, or digital media generally, would be a gross simplification. This can be seen in the aesthetically-steeped definition of transmedia storytelling by Henry Jenkins:

Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergences— one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. (Jenkins 20-21)

Rather, we can build a tool kit that might provide for multiple analyses of individual transmedia works— and this is how MSA can be very useful to transmedia analysis. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand the way one transmedia work functions without a careful examination of all the specific media that individual work traverses. Or, to modify my original statement: while the field of transmedia as a whole is resistant to a single medium specificity, understanding individual works of transmedia relies on a robust system of medium-specific analyses. This robust system is ultimately a larger project, too large for the goals and scope of being a small part of this dissertation. However, let me provide a brief glimpse of what I pattern these larger thoughts on.

In thinking about a robust system for transmedia analysis, I am drawn to the typological approaches to texts offered by Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext* (1997) and built upon by Markku Eskelinen in *Cybertext Poetics* (2012). To a lesser extent in Marie-Laure Ryan's typology of

narrative texts offered in “Will New Media Produce New Narratives?” from *Narrative Across Media* (2004) offer a typological approach germane to transmedia and ARGs. While these models serve my goals through their robustness and ability to be applied to a variety of examples, their exact terms might need to be shifted for use with transmedia. For instance, a transmedia typology needs to address the distinction between narrative and simulation/game (a distinction that Eskelinen and Aarseth are more concerned with than Ryan), as thought out in the first half of this chapter. Transmedia narratives and transmedia games have different potentials based on their identity as narrative or as simulation/game, which can filter down to different types of interactivity (interpretation or the ability to influence outcomes). For instance, *Star Wars*, the transmedia narrative Ryan uses as a primary example in “Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling,” offers the audience a chance to participate in the form of interpreting a variety of source materials (films, comics, novels, video games, and television shows), but the audience does not change the outcome of the story, as it is authored only by the owners of the IP. ARGs, however, offer both interpretation and interactivity.

A typology of transmedia also needs to address the specificity of the distinct and discrete set of media in which and across which the experience is embedded. This focus on specific media can imply a few viewpoints, with an important one being that of the technological affordances of specific media. To construct this concept, I borrow a framework and a phrase from Friedrich Kittler: in order for us to see how specific “[m]edia determine our situation...” — where “our” can be understood as the individual or collective that experiences transmedia narrative or game — we need to examine the specific “technological media” in terms of those technologies (Kittler xxxix-xl).

What is perhaps more applicable to transmedia specifically is the theoretical framework established by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. In this work, the authors position new digital media in relation to previous print and electronic media. This approach is particularly salient for transmedia. For one, it focuses on what has been established as a central feature of transmedia: new media. It is central in that it is both frequently the general variety of media in which the experience is embedded and, as defined separately by Mark B.N. Hansen and by Lev Manovich, it is the type of media that is typically produced by *collective intelligence* communities, a digital networking term describing a specific social formation coined by Pierre Lévy, in response to transmedia experiences. In fact, Jenkins again reinforces transmedia's current reliance on new digital media by calling transmedia "entertainment for the era of collective intelligence" (Jenkins 97).

Another reason Bolter and Grusin's framework is important and highly applicable to analyzing transmedia is the emphasis placed on a medium's relation to other media. This relationship isn't exclusively presented as a difference; it also represented as an absorption, the act of consuming other media in the formation of a new medium. As Bolter and Grusin write, a "medium refashions its predecessors and other contemporary media... promis[ing] to reform its predecessors" (19). This is one way I have come to understand the term "remediation" — it involves reaching back and doing again, a reflection of previous mediations. Thus, in taking this relational view of media, we can start to look again at the specifics of the discrete set media used in a transmedia experience— and how they might compare to one another, whether through technological or other historical delineations.

Proceeding with Bolter and Grusin as a suitable framework— yet admittedly incomplete

in the larger view of transmedia, as it was not designed for that purpose— I will adopt their specific methodology for this chapter. They provide a “double logic of remediation” in which “[o]ur culture wants to both multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying it” (Bolter and Grusin 5). Their framework maintains this “double logic” of erasure and multiplication through the use of two terms: immediacy and hypermediacy.

First, let me start with hypermediacy. Bolter and Grusin define hypermediacy as a “style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium” (272). This is particularly applicable in the framework of understanding new media as remediated, due to new media’s reliance on consuming previous media. For example, Bolter and Grusin point to a typical Web page, which contains digital versions of several types of media: textual representations in articles and headlines and menus; still images; audio; streaming video— a remediation of film, which is itself a remediation of image and sound. Therefore, if we are to consider the Web page as a medium, it calls our attention to several other media.

Another example would be the graphical user interface of the personal computer, which is hypermediated on several levels. First, computer commands and data, which are at their root a type of text²⁸, are triggered via clicking on visual and textual representations: icons and labels that stand in for executable instructions (code) and collections of digital data (databases). Secondly, commercial computer operating systems are based on a collection of windows to display various digital content. These windows themselves are a type of hypermediation that Bolter and Grusin argue dates back to at least the use of windows, mirrors, other forms of visual

²⁸ While a discussion of the semiotics of computer code would be interesting in its own right, it is not part of the specific focus of this response.

representations within Dutch oil paintings, which are themselves visual representations (Bolter and Grusin 31, 36-7). Like the typical Web page, the windows of computer operating systems house a variety of representational media: text, video, animation, audio, and still images. The applications that display each medium also are hypermediated through GUI that controls the opening, closing, and re-sizing of the window, as well as the manipulation of the media itself, such as the playing, looping, or editing of a digital video file.

The other term used in Bolter and Grusin's framework is immediacy, which they define as:

a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation. (Bolter and Grusin 272-3)

Of specific interest to Bolter and Grusin— and I'll argue to ARGs, as well— is transparent immediacy, or immersion: making the medium and its technology disappear entirely in the mind of the viewer, leaving her with the belief of an authentic, real sensory experience (Bolter and Grusin 21-2).

One example— and a prominent focus for Bolter and Grusin in establishing their theory of remediation— is that of virtual reality technology. Virtual reality seeks to provide users with a completely manufactured (virtual) yet ultimately convincing simulacra of reality. It strives to do this through mediating the experience of everyday life through digital imaging, sound, and sensory feedback to alter the environment. However, the technology needed to create the virtual reality experience showcases the central claim of remediation: that remediation is a negotiation between the conflicting terms of immediacy and hypermediation. By wearing a helmet with visor and other prosthetics sensors that serve as extensions of perceptions connecting the virtual environment to the human body's nervous system, the virtual reality user is inescapably aware of

the technology and its materiality, as well as the mediation it creates. In another form of virtual reality, that Bolter and Grusin present as “caves,” the space of the experience itself becomes the mediating technology— rather than donning a helmet, glove, and/or bodysuit, the user is surrounded by Bradbury-ian wall-sized screens that display manipulatable digital imaging. While the prosthetics might be gone, the experience of transparent immediacy is still muted by the limits of the space and the limits of photorealism in computer generated images.

To apply this framework to transmedia, I will settle on a specific type and genre: the ARG. Specifically, I will apply hypermediacy and transparent immediacy to what is largely recognized as the first ARG: *The Beast*.

McGonigal, perhaps the most recognized expert on ARGs in both academic and popular discourse, provides this definition of ARGs:

an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone. (“Alternate Reality Gaming: 'Life Imitates ARG'”)

From this definition, we can see one of the characteristics of Bolter and Grusin’s framework: the focus on the erasure of mediation through the combination of real and the virtualized spaces of computer networks. Jordan Weisman, *The Beast’s* creative director— so, in some ways, the founder of the genre— offers this further definition, which further exemplifies the connection to transparent immediacy:

We take a pretty radical approach to games and storytelling. *Our gaming platform is the world.* The whole electronic sphere. *We don’t limit ourselves to the kind of game you can fit onto a disc. We’ll use anything with an electronic current in it, any communication platform we can get our hands on.* If we could get your toaster to print a game mission on your bread, we would do it. (“This Might Be a Game” 262-3, emphases added)

Here we can see that the foundations of ARGs are predicated upon transparent immediacy. The gameworld, as Aarseth would call it, is not separate from the real world, but instead the two overlap. There is no virtual about this explanation of the “alternate” version of reality presented in the game. The player does not need to wear an appliance nor walk into a room made of video screens; the appliance is an everyday object. The interface, then, is an interface-less interface²⁹.

Through Weisman’s definition of the genre, we also start to see the connection to the other pole in Bolter and Grusin’s framework: hypermediacy. Weisman states that ARG designers will “use anything with an electronic current” as they “don’t limit [themselves] to the kind of game that fits on a disc” (“This Might Be a Game” 262). To better fit Bolter and Grusin’s terminology of new media, “electronic” might be understood as digital media— Weisman’s example of a toaster withstanding³⁰. This reflects hypermediacy in two ways. First, Weisman acknowledges the media technology of a large segment of contemporary gaming culture by drawing attention to optical media discs. Specifically, the revolutionary rhetoric of Weisman’s approach to gaming seeks, in the words of Bolter and Grusin, the “[promise] to reform its predecessors... [which] inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium” — or, in this case, the new form of transmedia (Bolter and Grusin 19). Secondly, the mention of using anything further draws attention to the multiplicity of media employed in establishing the gameworld and gameplay.

One other factor that defines ARGs is the concept of ubiquitous gaming, which is coined by McGonigal. Ubiquitous games have no fewer than 15 characteristics in her account, but the ones that can be clearly seen to connect with hypermediacy and transparent

²⁹ I discuss the notion of an interface-less interface more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

³⁰ Though, if we were to legitimately try to have a toaster print a message on a slice of bread, we would likely do so through the programmability of a digitally-enabled toaster.

immediacy/immersion are as follows:

[McGonigal's #2] They are distributed experiences: distributed across multiple media, platforms, locations, and times.

[McGonigal's #3] They have a significant *physical* component, phenomenologically speaking, and a significant *material* component, ontologically speaking...

[McGonigal's #4] They are embedded at least partially in everyday contexts and/or environments, rather than in marked-off gaming contexts and spaces. They prefer to adopt everyday software, services and technologies rather than exclusively Gaming-platforms...

[McGonigal's #15] They encourage players to construct, consciously, a more intimate relationship between gameplay and everyday life. (*This Might Be a Game* 43-4)

As we can see from characteristic 2, ARGs as works of transmedia are clearly hypermediated in that they are “distributed across multiple media.” In terms of *The Beast*, this hypermediation took the form of “4000 digital texts, images, flash files and QuickTime videos... and offline game content, such as audio recordings of voice mail messages and digital photographs of clues left in public bathrooms in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles” (“This Is Not a Game...”). The players were hyper-aware of this hypermediation, too, as these media and clues were painstakingly archived by the Cloudmakers— and many are still available on their site 17 years later.

Characteristics 3, 4, and 15 address the transparent immediacy of ARGs— and show how ARGs are specifically able to create a unique immersive experience that cuts against Bolter and Grusin's assumptions about immersion vis-a-vis virtual reality. By having the physical, material component enabled by distributed experiences in specific, real world spaces and times— “everyday contexts and/or environments” — there is no need to technologically synthesize phenomenological and ontological experiences. Therefore, the alternate reality of the ARG setting replaces the digital virtual environment of the virtual reality system. In *The Beast*, the

designers or puppetmasters (PMs) wove real-world meet-ups into the gameplay. For instance, “one of the in-game [Web] sites, a hub for the Anti-Robot Militia, announced that they would be holding ‘rallies’ in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago...” (Bushman 12). This led a small number of players to a bar— which was also filled with regular patrons living their everyday lives: talking, drinking, simply being. While at the rally, a representative of the ARM (an actor) approached the players who attended, gave each a bandana and a two-sided flyer, as well as puzzles that led to more clues and puzzles (Hon). This overlapping of the alternate and the real in *The Beast* created an unparalleled immersive experience, wherein players had great difficulty separating the gamespace from the real world.

As evidence of this deep immersion, some Cloudmakers responded to the events in the United States on September 11, 2001, with a ludic frame. They treated the events as if it were part of an ARG, with the mediated clues being the newscasts and reporting that filled all forms of mass communication that day (*This Might Be a Game* 274-9). The immersion was so complete that real events were indistinguishable from alternate events³¹. By applying the skills developed and honed in *The Beast*, the Cloudmakers might have started a digital investigation similar to the ones undertaken by intelligence and law enforcement agencies throughout the world— gathering data and developing theories.

It is precisely the strong hypermediation of this genre of transmedial, ubiquitous game that enables this deep immersion. Rather than seeking to reproduce the representation of the world through virtualization, ARGs use the proliferation of media artifacts to encourage the player to re-examine their own real world. They are asked to decide what is part of the game and what is

³¹ This conflation of real and fiction, however, is perhaps even more timely and relevant when we consider the impact of conspiracy theories and fake news, like #Pizzagate and #QAnon, on our everyday lives through both discourse and violence.

not, as any object can be part of the game at any time— a way of prompting an ontological inquiry. This is more like a feature of ubiquitous computing, which is a far smaller focus of *Remediation* in comparison to virtual reality systems. As Bolter and Grusin write,

Ubiquitous computing... turns our whole world into a computer interface. So, while virtual reality refashions the immersive qualities of Hollywood film, ubiquitous computing appeals to us as a kind of interactive television that monitors and rearranges the real world. (213)

This rearranging is largely understood through the utopian manifestation of ubiquitous computing of that book's day: augmented reality. Due to this focus, however, Bolter and Grusin arrive at the following conclusion: "Ironically... augmented reality... can [not] make the same claim to transparency as the claim made by complete, and therefore opaque, virtual reality" (216). Published the year before *The Beast*, the authors would not have had another ubiquitous computing example to consider, the ARG, a phenomenon which complicates their claim.

By embedding an uncertainty of function— whether gameworld or real world, Web site or toaster— the PMs of *The Beast* take advantage of the hidden interface of ubiquitous computing. Rather than an augmented reality network that project a representation in the form of information about the world, as we might expect from current augmented technology, the PMs have created a network of unstable objects that contain data, clues, and puzzles that are buried within hypermediated content. And because hypermediated new media— Web sites, GUI computer operating systems, television screens that scroll viewer comments and insta-polling data in real time— is pervasive in our everyday experience, the explicitly hypermediated transmedia experience of ARGs mimics our everyday experience in a convincing, immersive manner.

By examining ARGs in terms of ubiquitous computing, we are better able to realize a

phenomenon that eludes Bolter and Grusin’s examination of new media: the simultaneity of hypermediation and transparent immediacy, or reflexive immersion. This simultaneity allows players to experience the hypermediated real world and an immersive alternate world by creating an overlapping space: that of the real and that of the alternate. The subsurface meaning of objects— ubiquitous computing in the everyday world, clues and puzzles in the alternate reality gameworld— connects the two worlds.

And this connection is no accident; the ubiquitous computing model leads to an archaeological mindset in ARGs: the sifting through of artifacts to determine what is and is not important to the player. This mindset is exactly what was sought by the PMs of *The Beast*. We have seen Jenkins focus on story worlds in his definition of transmedia and gameworld in Aarseth’s definition of games. Sean Stewart, lead writer for *The Beast*, sought a way to connect the transmedia installments of the *A.I.* universe, a potentially difficult task considering the film’s dark ending. However, he approached his goal in terms of exploring that world, through the metaphor I’ve used above: the PMs designed *The Beast* “as ‘a collective archaeological dig’ through the digital artifacts of an imagined doomed society” (*This Might Be a Game* 269). Moving forward, one potential future exploration of ARGs might take this archaeological methodology in terms of epistemology, as in Foucault’s method from *The Order of Things*, or by exploring the connection with the current field of media archaeology.

Approaching the Asymptote of Definition

Though Kinder first introduced the term “transmedia” in 1991— and her usage is centered more on franchising of IP— the definition remains contested still today. Ryan’s 2016

article “Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling” not only acknowledges this ambiguity, but also addresses the confusion over the term head-on. She questions whether or not transmedia storytelling is “a truly new phenomena, different from the older concepts of adaptation and transfictionality” and analyzes the term through examining narrative as a “mental construct... [that] can exist in the mind as pure meaning” that is eventually encoded into a material form (1-2). This approach uses the term media as two overlapping categories: a method of delivering content (such as the Internet or television); the particular material of expression (such as sculpture or comics).

Recognizing the dual definition of media opens up a space to examine the variability of transmedia experiences. While one theorist, such as Ryan, might consider transmedia in terms of narratology instead of ludology, the framing of the specific experience as story or game does not erase the possibility for focusing on the exact media that constitutes the example. This interplay between frameworks echoes Hayle’s argument on the utility of MSA:

Materiality should be understood as existing in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts... Interpretation cannot be generated by the apparatus alone, independently of how it is used in specific works. (Hayles 71)

The connection between how one might classify an experience as narrative or game or whatever and the specific mediation it employs are not separate, nor are they entirely interlinked. In other words, just because one transmedia experience uses the same media as another transmedia experience, it does not mean that they are both narratives or both games.

Furthermore, Hayle’s MSA does not privilege one framework over another, meaning that materiality is important, but not more important than other elements that influence the experience and interpretation of a work. She writes:

The crucial move is to reconceptualize materiality *as the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies*. This definition opens the possibility of considering texts as embodied entities while still maintaining a central focus on interpretation. In this view of materiality, it is not merely an inert collection of physical properties but a dynamic quality that *emerges* from the interplay between the text as a physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers. Materiality thus cannot be specified in advance; rather, it occupies a borderland—or better, performs as connective tissue—joining the physical and mental, the artifact and the user. (Hayles 72; emphasis original)

From Hayles statement, I contend that the specific media used in a transmedia is crucially important to understanding an experience and the multiple potential experiences made possible through transmedia. However, the specific media used is not the only factor that helps to define the variety of transmedia experiences— and more specifically, the variety of ARG experiences. Thus, the variability and difference in the many definitions of transmedia can also be seen as a result of which specific experiences a theorist might use to understand the transmedia and ARGs.

For instance, Ryan focuses most heavily on “the commercial mega-franchises of the Hollywood entertainment industry,” sharing a focus with Jenkins on *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Matrix* (“Transmedia narratology...” 3). While these examples offer a variety of different media, they collectively share a focus on film, novels, and video games; as such, Ryan is able to focus heavily on narratology in the way she defines transmedia. The three components she desires to add to a narratological theory of “transmedia storytelling” reinforce this: transfictionality, or how distinct installments in an experience are both linked together and also consistent with the overall narrative; adaptation, or how an overall narrative travels across individual parts of the experience and how each of those media instantiations might leverage their affordances; a “mythical component” that aids in understanding how an IP becomes popular enough to sustain a deep, transmedia storyworld (“Transmedia narratology...” 8).

Though, much like the previous discussion in Chapter 1, in which varieties of transmedia are broken into a rough dichotomy of “East Coast” and “West Coast” styles, Ryan asserts the same rough separation³². She further classifies a few examples of transmedia from each of the two categories; each of her descriptions involve notions of storytelling, a reflection of her narratological viewpoint (5). Ryan’s definition is similar to Jenkins’s 2006 definition, which he modified slightly in 2007 to:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channel* for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (“Transmedia Storytelling 101”; emphasis original)

This modification still maintains Jenkins’s core concept of additive comprehension, wherein new and integral information is contained within each part of the experience; this makes each media instantiation within the experience a requirement for the audience to fully comprehend the IP. In the 2013 book *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Jenkins further revises his definition to make it fit more clearly within the expectation of the West Coast model:

Transmedia stories use additional segments to develop their fictional worlds, to construct backstory, or to explore alternative points of view, all in the service of enhancing the core narrative—the “mothership”—and ultimately intensifying audience engagement. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 138).

The notion of a “mothership” gives primacy— and privilege— to a single mediation, such as the *Star Wars* film, and makes other mediations as part of the storyworld, such as novels, instantiations that ultimately serve the main IP mediation.

³² Part of Ryan’s goal in “Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling” is to understand the phenomenon from various discourses— academic, industry, and fan. Thus, she analyzes the industry discourse of “East vs. West” and also adopts a rough version of it to move into the Hollywood-centric or “West Coast” forms which are more easily understood through narratology.

Dena offers a far more inclusive and specific definition of transmedia in *Transmedia Practise*. She defines transmedia as simply “creative practice that involves the employment of multiple distinct media and environments for expression” (Dena 1). In acknowledging the various disciplines— including media studies, narratology, and game studies— that study transmedia and use the term, Dena attempts to free the definition from the focus on the product; instead, her dissertation focused on the practice of creation, allowing for a relatively simple definition when compared to the ones above (Dena 16-21 ; 24). Generally speaking, definitions are as numerous as the amount of individual writings about transmedia and can range from the qualitative, as seen above and throughout the first two chapters of this dissertation, to the quantitative efforts of Marc Ruppel³³ (2012) and Colin B. Harvey (2014)³⁴.

As ARGs are within the general category of transmedia, their many definitions are similarly situated within those of transmedia— and the variety is equally large. As discussed in Chapter 1, ARGs are positioned in the East Coast category. In addition to McGonigal’s definition earlier in this chapter, Ryan defines them as similar to “jigsaw puzzles” with a “narrative core” but “played more out of an interest in solving problems than in discovering the story” (“Transmedia narratology...” 3). These definitions underscore ARGs place at the intersection of game and story— one that serves as perhaps the most obvious embodiment of the long-standing debate between narratology and ludology. The unfolding of the experience is predicated on the audience’s ability to solve these puzzles.

³³ Ruppel’s dissertation focuses on network visualization techniques to map transmedia works. He defines transmedia in the following way:

transmedia practices work to distribute narrative properties across platforms, environments and time, marking them with cross-modal affects and structuring meaning as a local to global process of integration. (Ruppel 8)

³⁴ Harvey approaches a taxonomy of transmedia from a legal framework, generally who is authorized to contribute to the IP and how closely those contributions are controlled by the owner.

Similar to Aarseth's and Eskelinen's definitions of games and ergodic literature, the audience's participation in an ARG shapes the experience in non-trivial ways. Along with reflexive immersion and collective intelligence, this interactive, problem-solving element is one of the key markers that separates ARGs from other forms of transmedia. In his memoir of *The Beast*, Bushman describes one of the distinctions that position ARGs in this intermediate space between narrative and game: "By the end, it seemed less like two camps of game designers and players and more like one giant collaborative team" (15). This interactive mode, wherein the line between creator and consumer— whether those roles are labeled as author and reading (narratology), or as designer and player (ludology)— is blurred is one of the more intriguing potentials for ARGs as a form of interactive experience that backgrounds many of the discussions that have historically informed and occupied the analyses of electronic media, digital media, and virtual reality. In the future, ARGs could be explored in terms of a more truly interactive experience that combines the input from a collective community, shaping the directions and outcomes in non-trivial ways wherein the possibilities approach the infinite.

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“As we close this chapter in our union's history, what we together have accomplished should not be underestimated. The 2008 [Minimum Basic Agreement] establishes a beachhead on the Internet and in new media that will guarantee our share of a potentially vast and bountiful future.” — Patric M. Verrone, President Writers Guild of America West, and Michael Winship, President Writers Guild of America East, Letter from the Presidents, 26 February 2008.

Introduction

As presented in the previous chapter, ARGs have a history of both many specific designs and configurations, as well as multiple uses, from educational to game to promotional experience. Despite the wide variety of individual materialization of ARGs, one of the major uses of ARGs is as promotion and extension of a larger intellectual property (IP) created by large and often multinational entertainment corporations. Due to the popularity of the IP in which they play a part, these ARGs have tended to be the most popular and recognizable of the genre. Examples include *Why So Serious?* for the *Dark Knight*, the *Flynn Lives* for *TRON: Legacy*, *Year Zero* for the Nine Inch Nails album of the same name, *i love bees* for the video game *Halo 2*, and what is widely considered the original ARG, *The Beast*, for the movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. These examples collectively reached millions of viewers, with *The Beast* gathering an audience of between 2.5 and over 3 million, *Year Zero* over 3.5 million participants, and *i love bees* garnering an audience of over 3 million participants, including approximately three-quarters of a million active participants (“ARG Stats”). Not only are these a large amount of impressions on viewers, the depth of the activity is remarkable given the immersive quality of ARGs. Clearly, ARGs— as a specific form of transmedia— offer the entertainment industry many advantages in generating engaging content and bolstering their own economic benefits,

from selling ads on websites and creating and selling additional commercial media that are part of the ARG experience to simply monopolizing more of the engaged viewers attention.

Therefore, it is not surprising that transmedia experiences have been heavily used in the television industry. For instance, *The Lost Experience (TLE)*— the ARG for the ABC television series *Lost*— was used to engage active viewers of the show both during the typical U.S. television season and to bridge the period between the end of one season and the beginning of the other. *TLE* extended the viewing experience— both in time and media— and immersed viewers in more complex narratives. Other shows, such as ABC's *Alias*, NBC's *Heroes*, CBS's *Numb3rs* and *Jericho*, and, more recently, Amazon's *Man in the High Castle* and USA's *Mr. Robot*, have used ARGs to recruit, engage, and maintain audiences. As evidence of the industry's willingness to explore transmedia strategies in conjunction with television, CBS even created *Harper's Island*, a short-lived show structured on audience participation through an ARG. As further evidence of the prevalence and importance of transmedia, the heavy exploration and use of new media and, in part, transmedia by the entertainment industry was the major dispute central to the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike, which interrupted production of the 2007-2008 television season in the United States (Veronne and Winship).

In this chapter, I will argue for three ways of understanding the industrial logic that underlies the entertainment industry's use of transmedia experiences as promotional tools and IP extensions.

The first of these ways is examining transmedia as a distinct form of distribution. For example, in *TLE*, participants navigated through websites, online videos, and fake commercials that aired during the show, all of which were produced by characters and entities in the *Lost*

storyworld, in order to collect narrative elements and assemble them to form a deeper understanding of the show's puzzle narrative. *TLE* encouraged viewers to extend their viewing experience through this continued exploration of the storyworld during the time in between episodes and in between seasons. This transmedia mode of distribution is different than older models of franchising content; transmedia distribution encourages the engaged viewer to participate in a different way than franchising allows, through Jenkins' notion of "additive comprehension" — the consumption of these transmedia products gives the participant something new to the IP's storyworld, whereas franchising simply repackages the telling of the IP into a different medium, such as a novelization or a set of toys (Jenkins 123).

The second of these logics is the creation of opportunities for engaged audiences to interact with the IP. Based on this extension of IP and interactive engagement, ARGs (and transmedia, in general) offer immersive world-building opportunities for creators. Transmedia creates a recursive cycle of authoring deeper and more voluminous IP. By developing an official canon for IP, the industry can provide guidance for the authoring of more content— and more revenue sources (Jenkins 114-115). In *TLE*, for instance, part of the experience was extended to *Bad Twin*, a novel positioned as being written by Gary Troup, who was a previously unknown character from *Lost*. Websites for shadow organizations only tangentially mentioned in the series episodes and by characters never included in the episodes became central to the surrounding narrative of the *Lost* universe. These provided added depth to the narrative for engaged viewers and storylines for the writers. For the viewers, transmedia experiences can provide vast amounts of history and context within a storyworld, providing canonical content outside of the frame of a traditional television episode, for instance. To create these experiences, writers further expand

the narrative possibilities by creating the deep details of these histories and contexts that exist outside of the episode, but inside the diegetic world of the narrative. This diegetic expansion can also be folded back into the main IP as a story element; when they do so, engaged viewers who have participated in an ARG experience are able to bring the context learned into the episode and, as a result, to better understand a potentially complicated new twist to the narrative. In *Lost*, for example, *TLE* provided backstory centered on the Hanso Foundation, a secretive organization that tied-into many of the show's characters and organizations. The genre and, perhaps more importantly, network expectations for prime-time television did not allow for the on-screen time for a deep exposition of this Foundation; instead, *TLE* was used in order to give engaged viewers context and content about an entity that was only a passing note on the television screen. Furthermore, with viewers having access to this new knowledge, the writers were able to weave the Hanso Foundation deeper into future episodes of the show.

A third logic of ARGs offers the opportunity for instructing engaged audiences on how to read narratives. This is particularly true for long-form narrative television, especially the types of series that Jason Mittell has described as having “complexity,” tied to the “operational aesthetic” — a focus on “how it happened” (or the structure of the narrative itself) as opposed to a focus on “what will happen” — a type of television series epitomized by *Lost* (Mittell 35). Due to the amount and the distributed nature of clues, *TLE* required both active participation by individuals and collaboration among viewer communities to share clues and combine knowledge. To solve the deep puzzles of the narrative, engaged viewers needed to explore the storyworld through the transmedia experience. While this is true for many shows, such as *Alias* and other conspiracy-infused series, it is perhaps best exemplified by *Lost*. By closely reading the character

of Desmond from *Lost*, I offer an extended example of how ARGs can be used to instruct viewers in ways of productively reading the complex narrative and to make meaning, both through individual and collaborative interpretations.

Down the Rabbit Hole of Distributed Consumption

As digital networked communication and ubiquitous computing became the norm for many people, especially in the United States, the way audiences consumed entertainment began to change in significant ways. These changes had direct impact on both how the entertainment industry produced and distributed content. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins argues that two television series, *Survivor* and *American Idol*, were the first major successful shows that were able to inhabit the space between old and new media, allowing for mass participation of the audience and massive profit to the entertainment industry (59 - 93). *American Idol*, in particular, presents a useful study of how changes in the demands of viewers and the economic landscape of growing media options and affordances have shifted the distribution patterns of television programming— both to suit the industry and viewers³⁵.

Transmedia, this new form of distribution, differentiates itself from franchising, thus realizing economic benefit to the industry. As Jenkins describes, transmedia is an extension of the storyworld of the parent IP in which the creators— such as Peter Jackson’s vision of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix* universe— exert at least partial creative control in the production of the different instantiations of the transmedia

³⁵ It is important to note, however, that while some of these shifts can be seen as benefits to both viewers and the industry as wholistic entities, there are many tensions that exist between the industry and participatory audiences, as well as a very diverse and heterogeneity in both categories of this relationship. Some of these tensions, such as authorship and creative control in spaces of contested production, will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

experience (106-110). At the very least, there is a degree of collaboration between the creators of specific instantiations of the transmedia IP experience. Jenkins uses video game producers for the *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Matrix* trilogies as examples of the collaboration inherent to transmedia and ARGs, detailing how artistic assets and vision are shared between the creators of the main IP and those overseeing the transmediation into specific media. Or, as Jonathan Gray states in his exploration of *Star Wars* toys as paratextual sites of viewer exploration, these franchised toys, no matter how important they might be to sustaining the narrative world outside of the original mediation (in this case the original *Star Wars* trilogy), do not alter the meaning of the canonical text³⁶ (181). The transmedia model represents a bidirectional relationship between each transmedia instantiation.

In the old model of franchising, there were two primary ways to spread IP into additional media from the original, both of which were unidirectional. One method was the creation of ancillary products such as toys and other merchandise. This method sought to monetize the IP; if it provided any additional context to the IP, it would be non-canonical and far removed from the communal storyworld of the IP. For instance, a child might have a set of toys from *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* and create her own narratives using them, but this would not change the primary IP in any way for any other viewers. The second main form of franchising is adaptation, in which the original IP is simply retold in a different media. Like ancillary merchandising, adaptation does not change or add to the original IP; reading the novelization of *E.T.* or playing

³⁶ The term “text” is used here both begrudgingly and problematically. When analyzing ARGs, the terms of both games and narrative are used in both academic and popular writings and discussions. However, Jonathan Gray, who I cite here, primarily addresses transmedia— which is a larger, and therefore more ambiguous, category than ARGs— from a cultural studies perspective. While I continue to try to use “experience” and “phenomenon” and “IP” as ludologically and narratologically neutral terms, I will try to echo the terms of the original critical sources when employed. Thus, in this chapter— which focuses primarily on the use of ARGs as a transmedia strategy in the television industry— the term “text” is used more frequently than in other chapters.

the Atari game based on the film does not give the audience any new information about the parent text. Furthermore, the term itself reflects the transference and separation from original authorship of the IP to a new party; a franchisee purchases the rights to characters, likenesses, and other aspects of the parent text, but is not directly authoring additions to the parent IP.

To contextualize the industry's readiness for change, Jenkins paints a bleak picture of network television on the decline heading into the 21st century. In 2002, cable networks such as HBO were becoming more and more popular both critically and with viewers. Their combined market share was larger than the broadcast networks for the first time. While the reasons for this were likely many—ranging from such factors as changing viewer tastes to fragmentation of the market into niche segments—Jenkins attributes part of this change to the fact that broadcast networks traditionally lose viewership during the summer, while cable networks were using that time to introduce new episodes of their most popular shows (60 - 61). In the United States, the traditional television season begins in September with the premier of new episodes and ends in May of the following year. Historically, the June to August network schedule, which corresponds with summer months, mostly lacked new programming and was filled with reruns and shows that generally garnered low viewership. In order to maintain viewer share into the Fall premier season, networks needed to address the movement of viewers to cable networks during the summer. As more viewers moved to cable networks during the summer, bringing their attention back to networks for Fall became more urgent. One way to stem the exodus of viewers during the summer was (and is) to keep them engaged with new content to bridge the gap between seasons. It is perhaps obvious that not all television shows that use transmedia successfully, by industry standards, employ ARGs as part of their content distribution strategy— and *American*

Idol is certainly no exception to this fact. However, Jenkins's claim offers contextual insight into how ARGs are economically beneficial to the entertainment industry, and in particular to the television industry.

ARGs offer producers the ability to continue releasing content throughout the summer months, which have historically lacked new ways of engaging viewers. Jenkins writes that creators of new show formats in the early 2000s that successfully created massive, engaged audiences, such as *American Idol*, understood that the most effective way to approach the dynamic between show and viewer was through a "shift... from real-time interaction toward asynchronous participation" (59). In real-time interaction, viewers have limited opportunity to participate, as the potential for interaction is bound to a single event in time—the broadcast of the episode. For instance, in the real-time model, viewers might be prompted to answer questions or vote on an outcome within a very limited scope of time, the hour or two length of the episode. With asynchronous participation, viewers are given a much longer timeframe to interact with the show's content, such as the extended voting period for *American Idol*. Part of this focus on asynchronous participation is also through the expansion of content that exists outside of the episode—content that is most frequently presented as transmedia. This includes background information on characters or contestants and further diegetic content—stories and events that may not have made it into the episode as aired, but serve as ways to further the experience and storylines in potentially meaningful ways. While the real-time interaction model keeps viewers in the moment of the episode while aired on the network, the asynchronous model pushes engaged viewers into other media, particularly the Internet, in an attempt to move the viewer deeper into the show.

All opportunities for participation are not the same, however, even if they are asynchronous in nature— which is evidenced by the manner in which *American Idol* and *Lost's TLE* utilize asynchronous participation within a transmedia strategy. With *TLE*, the focus was less on asynchronous participation within the confines of a broadcast season, such as was the focus in *American Idol's* transmedia experience. Rather, *Lost's* producers— and by extension the network, which provided the resources and opportunity to create the ARG— utilized the ARG to provide content for viewers between the May 2006 end of Season 2 and the September 2006 beginning of Season 3. Launched on 3 May 2006 during the airing of the episode “Two for the Road” (season 2, episode 20; or 2.20) in the United States, with three weeks of episodes and four hours of programming remaining before the end of the season (“The Lost Experience”). The five-stage ARG employed many of the hallmark characteristics of the genre. The experience was distributed over various media: text-heavy organizational websites, personal blogs, web video, and podcasts. Both web-based and physical locations were used for the experience, including public delivery of Apollo candy bars made specifically for the experience and the placement of pictographic keys that unlocked some of the 100 video clips presented as a secret revelation of the motivations of one of the main characters in the Hanso Foundation backstory. After accumulating clues from digital and physical spaces, collaboration and a wide-range of skills and knowledge were required for players to advance through the experience through solving puzzles. The ARG format provided engaged viewers with a way of staying actively engaged with *new* material from the *Lost* storyworld during the show’s traditional summer hiatus.

The ARG genre is particularly relevant to the *Lost* viewership, due to the overlapping aesthetics of the show and the specific transmedia experience— both are steeped in puzzles and

share a reliance on active and engaged communities to discuss and find meaning. While video distribution had previously provided additional content, whether diegetic or extra-diegetic, these “bonus” features or materials typically did not get released until at least several months after the culmination of the season. For instance, the *Lost* Season Two DVD was not released until September 2006, to coincide with the airing of the third season. Rather than watching reruns and rehashing the plot points and details from the previous season over the summer hiatus, engaged viewers had the opportunity to participate in an interactive treasure hunt online and in physical spaces that facilitated the formation of a new community, whose common interest was to discover and discuss new details about the storyworld of a show that members are already deeply invested in.

The adoption of these new patterns is in the entertainment industry’s own interest, of course. For instance, *American Idol* was a rebranded version of the UK’s *Pop Idol*, packaged and sold to the FOX network by Creative Artists Agency as a way for the Coca-Cola Corporation, one of their major clients, to reach a specific target audience of teenage and young adults (60). Jenkins outlines how these “transmedia”³⁷ franchises are heavily influenced by advertisers exploration of “affective economics,” a marketing strategy that is predicated on building a depth of interactions with niche audiences (61 - 63). In order to create the potential for this depth, the networks actively pursue distribution that cuts across both the traditional broadcast schedules, across a single medium, or— ideally— across both. When able to accomplish this, networks accrue more touchpoints with audiences and are thus able to provide more data on consumer

³⁷ Shows like *American Idol* are transmedia in the sense that their content is spread across multiple instantiations of consumption opportunities, such as music single, live tours, and feature films that are part of the larger *American Idol* experience. I argue that these are loosely transmedia and certainly intercompositional, to use Dena’s terminology, explored in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

preference and habits, as well as increasing the total impression of advertisements. All these commercial goals lead to better returns for advertisers and, therefore, more revenue for the network. The use of ARGs, in particular, satisfies these network goals.

In the case of *TLE*, the networks³⁸ airing the show and involved in producing the ARG coordinated with third-party advertisers and kept metrics on the effects of the experience. In the United Kingdom, 50,000 unique players took part in *TLE*, with 30,000 of those regularly interacting with the ARG; in Australia, 900,000 unique users participated in some aspect of *TLE* (Dena). Advertising partners for *TLE* included Sprite/Coca Cola, Jeep, Verizon, and Monster.com (“The Lost Experience”). According to Dena’s “ARG Stats” web page, a marketing study showed that Sprite, by airing a commercial containing links to Sublymonal.com and using print media advertising to display unique codes that could be entered on the site, had an increase of 400% in web traffic, an average increase of 275% for individual’s time spent on the site, and over 500,000 unique codes entered (Word of Mouth Marketing Association). From these numbers, the depth that “affective economics” marketing strategies seek to establish with consumers is clearly achieved— more interactions (increased traffic and unique codes) and longer, deeper interactions (increased time on site and total traffic)³⁹. The mere fact that the networks are measuring the impact of the *TLE* ARG in these terms shows that the motivation of the entertainment industry to produce ARGs is for their economic interests. The more viewer interactions they can produce, whether measured through traditional means such as Nielsen

³⁸ These networks were ABC (United States), Channel 4 (United Kingdom), and Yahoo!7 (Australia) (“ARG Stats”).

³⁹ As these specific statistics do not specify if the traffic and time on site was measured in terms of unique visitors, the data can support both an increase in total traffic, as well as a more page views by single users. The former would constitute an increase in the amount of interactions, while the latter would indicate an increase in depth and amount of interactions.

ratings for broadcast episodes aired or through visitors to in-game websites as part of an ARG, the more easily they can sell ads and the more they can charge for those ads. Additionally, this increase in advertising revenues is occurring during a traditional lull in ratings. Therefore, there is a dual benefit of the television industry's logic for using transmedia, and specifically ARGs: increasing profits and keeping audiences captivated in their IP during traditional periods of hiatus and low ratings.

Recursive World-Building

The second logic for the entertainment industry's use of transmedia and ARGs is to expand the narrative universe of individual IP, creating more opportunities for engaged viewers to interact with the IP and to generate more content that can be commodified. Whereas the first logic identified above created more advertising opportunities for networks and extended the traditional television viewing period to bridge gaps in engagement and ratings, this second logic benefits the industry in a different way by the direct selling of expanded content to consumers. Given the participatory tendencies of transmedia and ARGs, this logic also satisfies engaged viewers' desire to explore IP they find meaningful in deeper and more interactive ways. The immersive, interactive participation found in transmedia and ARGs can also be commodified by the industry by bringing story elements from the transmedia and ARG experience back into the main IP as new narrative directions.

As described in the previous section, transmedia and ARGs, when employed by the entertainment industry, seek to extend the main IP into new forms of media; by moving the IP into more forms of media, viewers are encouraged to consume more content and more forms of

media. In fact, this is also a traditional benefit of franchising, as well— and the central motivation of franchising as a distribution and profit strategy. In some ways, transmedia appeals to the “collect ‘em all” tendency of fans in the same way that franchising does. The difference, however, is that transmedia, and by extension ARGs, have a different relationship to the main IP; transmedia brings what is referred to as “additive comprehension”⁴⁰ or information and experiences that change or add to the meaning of the IP.

Despite this important distinction, the transmediation of industry-produced IP not only commodifies the time of the engaged audience through advertising revenue but also through the consumption of the transmedia material itself. Though it risks generalization, ARGs are more likely to be used for the former economic benefit by the entertainment industry. This tendency is directly connected to their frequent role as promotional experiences for the main IP. Relevant examples include: *The Beast* for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *Why So Serious?* for *The Dark Knight*, *Flynn Lives* for *TRON: Legacy*, *i love bees* for *Halo 2*, and *Year Zero* for the album of the same name. While there existed barriers for participation in these ARGs— time, accessibility to digital networked technology, ability to travel to specific physical spaces, and more— none of these experiences required direct purchase of any products.⁴¹ Due to their potential ties with advertising both third-party brands and products, such as Sprite and Jeep for *TLE*, these ARGs often bring in revenue to the production company to offset or to completely fund development of

⁴⁰ The term “additive comprehension” was introduced by game designer Neil Young, who developed the early ARG *Majestic* for Electronic Arts. Jenkins uses this term heavily in his chapter “Searching for the Origami Unicorn,” one of the foundational academic text on transmedia, to mark one the most defining characteristics of transmedia. A transmedia experience provides information that changes the meaning of the original IP in a substantial way.

⁴¹ It is important to note that in making this claim about the lack of direct economic barriers in industry-produced ARGs, the reality of required purchases for independent ARGs is very different for the budgetary reasons outlined above. Using the rough dichotomy of “West Coast” and “East Coast” transmedia, the latter is more likely to involve some direct purchase simply because it is not have a promotional relationship to a main IP instantiation.

the ARG. Furthermore, these ARGs themselves do not need to be profitable for the entertainment industry precisely because they are seen as promotional; their goal is to encourage consumption of the main IP— a television show, film, video game, etc.— by creating longer and deeper interactions with the audience. These ARGs are themselves advertising and therefore part of the marketing budgets for the production companies.

Conversely, major transmedia IP that is not an ARG or doesn't employ ARGs, such as *Star Wars* or the *Matrix*, heavily relies upon the purchase of content to further the transmedia experience and gain the “additive comprehension” that defines transmedia. For example, currently *Star Wars* is not just eight films (soon to be nine) in a three-part trilogy. Rather, it comprises the main films of the trilogies, plus additional “anthology” films that add narrative connection, such as *Rogue One* and the forthcoming *Solo*, which add narrative context to fill the gap between *Star Wars* Episodes III and IV. *Star Wars* also includes the animated *Clone Wars* and *Rebels* series, as well as novels, comics and video games. In May 2014, Disney, which in 2012 acquired Lucasfilm, the owner of the *Star Wars* IP, decided that hundreds of additional books, comics, and games authored between 1977 and 2014 were no longer within the official canon, or *Star Wars Expanded Universe (SWEU)*, which has since been rebranded as “Legends” (McMillan). The vast amounts of transmedia instantiations of the *SWEU* served to benefit Lucasfilm in two specific ways, both of which are representative of transmedia distribution. First, similar to the strategies employed by the television industry, the transmedia content of the *SWEU* has been extended across the traditional time to develop feature films, which are the main instantiations of the IP. For the first six films, engaged viewers had to wait three years between films; the gap between the original trilogy (Episodes IV through VI) and the prequel trilogy

(Episodes I through III) was 16 years. According to Kilian Plunkett, who is both the Art Director for the Disney XD series *Star Wars Rebels* and a long-time fan of the franchise, “At the time, there’s no video games, there’s no Internet, there’s none of that. It’s basically comics, novels, and waiting until the next movie comes out” (“The Star Wars Expanded Universe: Past, Present, and Future”). In other words, to fill the gap between production of the main IP, the audience can remain engaged by consuming additional materials. In the case of *Star Wars* and other transmedia franchises, this means reading books and comics, playing games, and watching other forms of media, such as cartoons and related films, to gain more knowledge of the storyworld.

In general, transmedia can serve two main economic benefits—the *Star Wars* type model, which increases the amount of instantiations to purchase, and the promotional model, which seeks to generate interest and advertise for a main IP. In *TLE*, however, a hybrid effect is present that positions the ARG into both realms of economic benefit; the promotional and advertising nature of the ARG is not enough to remove the presence of additional revenue sources for the industry through the purchase of additional content. Though *TLE* featured many free resources scattered throughout network broadcasts, across the Internet, in the pages of print resources, and embedded in physical spaces, it also included the novel *Bad Twin*. This novel was presented in the alternate reality of being written by a character from the *Lost* storyworld, Gary Troup. Though no viewer would have recognized it at the time, Gary Troup made only a brief and unnoted appearance on the show’s “Pilot - Part 1” episode (1.1), lasting the duration of approximately one second before being sucked into one of Oceanic 815’s jet turbines moments after the plane crashed on the island. For the typical viewer, less than five minutes into the first of the series’ 121 episodes, Gary Troup was no more.

Almost two years later, however, engaged viewers would find out about Troup for the first time, when *Bad Twin* was published on May 2, 2006, by Hyperion, which, like ABC Television, is owned by the Disney Corporation. The release coincided with the launching of *TLE* in the United States on the very next day, when the episode “Two for the Road” (2.20) debuted on the ABC network. The timing of the novel and the overlap of the context situate the novel as part of the ARG. Fittingly, *Bad Twin* is a mystery novel. Like the complex puzzle narrative *Lost* and the ARG genre, it is structured on finding and interpreting clues to solve a mystery; in a very real way, the novel and its genre model the act of solving an ARG⁴². Furthermore, the novel’s themes and characters were aligned with *TLE*. At the center of the novel were characters with the surname Widmore, which is the same name as a mysterious head of industry from the television show. The main focus of *TLE*, The Hanso Foundation, is also mentioned in *Bad Twin*, as are other companies and organizations from the television show. The original rabbit hole to *TLE* was a Hanso Foundation commercial airing during “Two for the Road,” directing attentive viewers to a website and telephone number; one week later, a press release by the Foundation condemned Troup’s novel (see Figure 3.1) (“The Lost Experience Sponsors”).

⁴² See the Chapter 1 reference to *The Crying of Lot 49* for more connection between ARGs and mystery novels as foundational texts/precursors.

A MESSAGE FROM
HUGH McINTYRE, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AT THE HANSO FOUNDATION

Don't Believe "Bad Twin"

For over thirty years, The Hanso Foundation has stood for compassion and innovation, but today, our reputation has been attacked in the novel "Bad Twin," written by Gary Troup and published by Hyperion books.

Throughout the pages of "Bad Twin," readers have found numerous passages featuring misinformation about The Hanso Foundation and its partners. The Hanso Foundation strongly objects to the book "Bad Twin," and encourages readers to make up their own minds.

The truth about The Hanso Foundation is available at www.TheHansoFoundation.org and not on the pages of Gary Troup's "Bad Twin."

Experience it for yourself.

Thank you, and namaste.



[Figure 3.1 Hanso Foundation press release about Gary Troup's *Bad Twin* from the Hanso Foundation website.]

The immersive aesthetic of the novel being written by a fictitious character also fits within the TINAG aesthetic of ARGs. The only markers that break the immersion are the *Lost*

logo on the cover and an easily overlooked note to the reader⁴³ on the publication page. This note, however, manages to live at the boundary of immersive fiction and reality, posing as a typical disclaimer that might be found at the front of any work of fiction; only if the reader is paying close thorough, attention and specifically looking for clues hidden in plain sight will they read the final statement—that the book’s author is also fictitious. This fictitious author also wrote a conveniently-out-of-print book, *The Valenzetti Equation*, which figures into one of the core themes and numerology of *Lost*, further aligning *Bad Twin* and Troup with *TLE* and the puzzles of *Lost*.

While *Bad Twin* was not required to play the ARG, it was clearly part of *The Lost Experience* media in time and content. The connection between book and ARG was lucrative for the network. According to a *New York Times* article from the eve of the *Lost* season 2 finale, *Bad Twin* was debuting on the New York Times Bestseller List at number 14 for that week and had already appeared on the Amazon.com and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists for fiction (“‘Bad Twin,’ a Novel...”). Hyperion made an initial pressing of 300,000 copies of the novel. To further highlight the hybrid existence between ARG artifact and traditional transmedia instantiation, the New York Times article reports that “‘Bad Twin’” represents a hybrid between content and marketing, said Michael Benson, the senior vice president of marketing at ABC.” It is worth noting that a senior executive in advertising is commenting about the novel to the media, as opposed to the show’s producers and writers, Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof. As part of *TLE*, *Bad Twin* represents the specific industry benefits of ARGs as a form of interactive transmedia.

⁴³ This note reads:

Note to Reader:
This is a work of fiction, and all names, characters, and incidents
are used fictitiously; the author himself is a fictional character.

Finally, *TLE* gives a clear example of how transmedia and ARGs specifically can bring content from the extension back into the main IP and encourage a recursive relationship between instantiations. Leading up to the kick-off of *TLE*, a copy of Troup's manuscript of *Bad Twin* was worked into two episodes in season 2. In "The Long Con" (2.13), the character Hurley discovers the manuscript; in "Two for the Road" (2.20), the character Sawyer is reading the manuscript. While these small details serve primarily as nods to engaged viewers and as invitations into the Hyperion novel, *TLE* provided important context details on the three organizations that are part of the show's main narrative and mythology: the Hanso Foundation, the Widmore Corporation, and Paik Heavy Industries. The content from *TLE* allowed the television series writers to produce more and different content for the broadcast episodes. Without the information presented in *TLE*, these narrative elements would have been far more cumbersome to weave into the show, requiring the producers to use broadcast time to accomplish the same work. In this sense, transmedia and ARGs also facilitate the authoring of new content in the main IP. Of course, the original themes and details of the main IP— in this case, the highly complex narrative puzzles of the science-fiction/supernatural/mystery/drama *Lost*— are what lay at the foundation of the transmedia and ARG experiences, as well. This recursive cycle— wherein main IP informs transmedia experience informs main IP and so on— generates more narrative possibilities and more content for the IP.

This recursive phenomenon is not particular to *Lost*, television, or ARGs, but is present in many instances of transmedia. Jonathan Gray writes about Kenner's Boba Fett action figure from the 1980s, which was licensed from Lucasfilm as an ancillary toy product. Boba Fett, who appeared very briefly as a side character in *Episode V* and *Episode VI*, became the focus of a cult

following and many canonical and non-canonical transmedia works in the *Star Wars* universe. Gray links this “opening up” of meaning in the *Star Wars* storyworld to the lack of detail about the character, as well as the rarity of the toy as a commodity (originally, Fett could only be acquired by collecting enough proof of purchases) and the “cool” factor of the toy’s firing missiles, armor, and other accoutrements (183). Due to the popularity of the ancillary product and subsequent transmedia exploration, Boba Fett and his father Jango were heavily included in the *Star Wars* prequels produced two decades after the original films, thus drawing the engaged audience back into the text through meaning and content that they themselves helped to shape.

This interplay between industry-produced content and engaged viewer-produced is not always easy or beneficial, however, to either or both groups. In Derek Johnson’s *Inviting Audiences In*, he further describes this new transmedia permutation of content strategy, which he tentatively calls “TVIII,” a departure from the creation of niche-targeted and blended-genre shows of the 1980s and 1990s, by means of which the industry and advertisers sought to better reach specific demographics (62). Johnson, however, primarily considers this shift in terms of fan production— or fans interacting with television IP and producing their own content in response— in contemporary media ecology models which extend into digital media, such as message boards on critique-centric web sites, such as *Television without Pity*. While the presence of transmedia extension is present in both Jenkins’s analysis of *American Idol* and Johnson’s exploration of “TVIII,” it is important to note that there is a major difference in how they examine the role of an engaged, participating audience. Jenkins’s main focus is on the benefit of the a transmedia approach to the industry: advertisers reach more deeply across more platforms and give engaged audiences more opportunity to interact with content they deem interesting;

ultimately, the approach of a show like *American Idol* is about getting more touch points with specific demographics and developing a deeper understanding of how to sell effectively.

American Idol uses a transmedia strategy for commercial benefit.

Johnson focuses more on how the transmedia strategies of television in the early 2000s affect the relationship between industry- and fan-produced content. Though Jenkins does acknowledge the tension between industry and audience in this transmedia form of content distribution, Johnson focuses on these moments of tension. For instance, review web sites like *Television without Pity* allow audiences to actively comment about shows. This can create both fan interest and media “buzz” for a show; it can also serve as a space for harsh critique to reach the show’s producers, allowing the needs of the audience to influence the unfolding of serialized narratives— which is perhaps something unique to television and the continuation of a long-form narrative over months and years of constantly in-process writing, filming, and editing. While these contested sites of authorship can be productive means of influencing production, Johnson also details the co-opting— and one might argue exploitation— of fan labor for the industry’s profit. In one method of engaging fans, Johnson draws attention to contents that allow fans to produce official content as amateurs, such as writing a script for the Showtime series *The L Word* or contributing audio commentary tracks to the official DVD release of a show like ABC’s *Alias*— one which has deep transmedia and ARG roots, as noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation (69). These audience contributions, though they can be cast as empowering, ultimately generate profit for the entertainment industry by creating content which they sell back to consumers or use to generate advertising revenue. These concerns about fan labor and production and their authorial and fiduciary relationship with the industry are not uniquely related to transmedia;

there are far deeper analyses of these dynamics in the discipline of media studies that focus specifically on fan production, the tension between fans and the entertainment industry, and the subversion of industry texts and expectations⁴⁴. Some of these concerns, however, are deeply integral to experiences that are transmedia and, more specifically, are part of the specificity of ARG experiences.

Finally, one further way of distinguishing transmedia in general from ARGs as a specific genre is to look at what Sharon Marie Ross labels as the “invitation” for viewers to interact with transmedia content. The presence of digital networked technology facilitates an engaged audience, allowing for the possibility of extended conversations about a television show as the narrative develops. As Ross notes in *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, engaged audiences find more than one way into fan communities. Traditionally, before the entertainment industry attempted to leverage new digital spaces to encourage the growth of engaged audience communities, viewers sometimes self-assembled using these spaces. Ross argues that some of the groups who have been able to self-assemble before industry-prompting are those groups who are more likely to be comfortable with and already using digital media to communicate; Ross suggests that these audiences prone to transmedia exploration of televisual narratives are Millennials and teens— ideal viewers for a show like *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (179). Ross also links cult television shows— and the deep audience engagement that are part of those fan communities— with genre: science fiction and fantasy, in particular, can be seen as texts existing outside the bounds of popular culture and mass viewing. These audiences, in particular, also have a history of deep fan communities that have been situated in physical spaces, such as

⁴⁴ Scholars mentioned already, such as Jenkins and Johnson, have written about fan communities and production. Particularly, the work of Julia Levin-Russo deals with resistance to industry and cultural dominance through fan production, such as text and video.

conventions dedicated to specific fandoms, like *Star Trek*, or larger genres, like the massive San Diego Comic-Con. Therefore, the extension of those communities, already rooted in physical spaces, into digital spaces may involve less of a barrier or resistance than those that exist for a more general audience, due to established non-digital networks of cult shows and engaged science fiction and fantasy audiences. These niche audiences have already had to extend further in order to find a sustainable affinity group.

Just as there are multiple forms of engaged audiences and interactivity, the pathways into transmedia are as varied as the specific instantiations of transmedia experiences. In discussing the different ways that television shows invite audiences into participation, Ross presents three categories: overt invitation, organic invitation, and obscured invitation (4). Overt invitation involves a clear and direct appeal to the viewer to gain her/his participation, such as *American Idol* explicitly asking viewers to vote for the contestant they most want to continue on the show. Organic invitations, according to Ross, involves cues that are woven into a series, such as the use of interstitial imagery of digital communication in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, to signal the move from the television screen to transmedia participation. The third category, obscured participation, however, is the method most applicable to understanding the link between ARGs and television shows.

Ross defines obscured invitation as marked by no obvious or intentional signals for participation made by the producers to the viewers; rather, the aesthetics of the show itself demands participation. As Ross notes, this is particularly true of shows with a high degree of narrative complexity, with *Lost* being her primary example (9). When looking at the obscured invitation through the context of ARGs, two connections to *Lost* and *TLE* become apparent: the

show's narrative structure itself calls on— even requires— the engaged viewer to participate in the sorting of clues, solving of puzzles, and forming meaning together; being an ARG and operating within the TINAG aesthetic, *TLE*'s own invitation for participation is both obscured and organic. As the puzzle narrative qualities of *Lost* have been explored above, the focus here is on the alignment of the immersive alternate reality aesthetic of ARGs and *TLE*. The engaged viewers of *Lost* were familiar with looking for hidden clues in the diegetic world, therefore, extending the experience outside of the diegetic world was likely an easy transition. In effect, the show trains them— or invited, as Ross might state— to engage in puzzle solving. When *TLE* launched with clue-embedded commercials that aired during broadcasts of new episodes, viewers were already in the mode of close reading. Thus, *TLE* did not need to rely on an overt invitation to the audience; the narrative complexity of *Lost* had already primed for *TLE*. The television commercial rabbit holes for *TLE*, however, also constitute an organic invitation, as they are prompts to explore a web site or call a phone number in order to enter into the ARG. But, because of these alternate reality and immersive fiction elements of *TLE*, these prompts are also obscured to fit within the storyworld. The fictional commercial that is presented as a “real” commercial during an episode of *Lost* calls attention to itself not by the suggestion of using transmedia, as Ross' *Degrassi: The Next Generation* example above does, but by merely calling attention to the external puzzle to be solved. A commercial for the fictitious Hanso Foundation or the fictitious Oceanic Airlines appears exactly the same as a commercial for the Gates Foundation or American Airlines might; they are designed to seem “real” to the viewers, only part of the alternate reality of the *Lost* storyworld. Moreover, the use of products like Sprite as a vehicle for *TLE* further make these invitations exist in a blurred space between the organic and

obscured. These rabbit holes, be it a website or a phone number, might require further sleuthing skills, such as web searches or complex encryption-breaking, as opposed to simply directing an audience to have a conversation online. Though these rabbit holes may appear on-screen like an organic invitation, with the case of *Lost* and *TLE*, these communities are already online participating in the same transmedia actions that *TLE* asks them to.

The entertainment industry employs multiple ways of extending IP through transmedia strategies, one of which is the use of ARGs. The use of transmedia benefits the industry in multiple ways: extending the viewing period across traditional gaps in programming; providing engaged viewers with more opportunities to interact with the storyworld; and, through those increased interactions, increase advertising revenues and opportunities for selling ancillary products. With it clear how the industry financially benefits from such expansion of a main IP, it is important to ask how the engaged audiences find pleasure through transmedia. How, in other words, does the entertainment industry use use transmedia and ARGs to create meaningful experiences for the audience? One way to understand this is through the convergence of ARG aesthetics with the aesthetics of complex televisual narratives. Specifically, the skills required to participate in an ARG model the skills required to more fully navigate the narrative puzzles of these shows. This is especially true for *TLE* and *Lost*, which, as a hybrid science fiction/supernatural/mystery/drama, is a show that exists within several of Ross's fertile genres for cult audience participation and interactivity. Furthermore, *Lost* uses a surrogate perspective to reinforce the commonality of aesthetics and skills shared by the show and *TLE* as a transmedia experience.

Issues with Reality

As the relatively popular television series *Lost* steadily accelerated to its grand finale, some of the complex narrative threads moved toward closure, while other narrative trajectories remained open. As viewers debate what individual meanings and significances might be taken from the six-season, 121-hour long narrative, we might focus on how a text relatively complex in character, emotion, theme and structure was able to engage the interests of—and perhaps more importantly, allow itself to be read by—so many viewers, despite the inherent challenges of tracking many seemingly open-ended and unsolved questions, intertextual hints, and structurally complex narrative techniques.

In “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” Jason Mittell takes up the question of *Lost* and why, despite its ornate and intricate systems of references and structures, it remains an enjoyable and readable text with high viewership. He argues that complex narrative structures appeal to contemporary television viewers partly through an “operational aesthetic”: a focus on the “how it happened” rather than the suspense of “what will happen” (Mittell 35). Viewers, then, adopt a reflexive perspective, where the narrative structures themselves become central concerns, as opposed to simply immersing themselves in the diegetic storyworld. Mittell provides lucid examples of narratively complex televisual texts and how they play with formal convention for his readers. He also notes that “[the] need for gaining competencies in the decoding stories and diegetic worlds is particularly salient across a number of media at the moment” and provides examples from “puzzle films,” like *The Usual Suspects* and *The Sixth Sense*, and that “narratively complex television encourages, and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement”—the new mode being a reflexive concern with

narrative structures (37-8). There is a need for viewers to gain this competency, and some of the pathways to this knowledge are through experiencing complex narratives—watching, thinking about, and discussing the texts themselves. If this narrative complexity is new—and remarkable precisely for that reason—how might narratively complex programs instruct their viewers in this new literacy of complex televisual narratives without the benefit of similar previous texts?

I argue here that the narratively complex *Lost* uses two specific and interwoven aesthetically-aligned strategies to both encourage and provide productive ways of reading the text: the surrogate viewpoint of the character Desmond and *TLE*. While the aesthetics of these do partially align with Mittell's concept of “operational aesthetics” (the “how it happened”), these strategies for imparting literacy to the engaged viewer have a greater focus on the act of puzzle-solving (the “what will happen”). To show this, I will examine several Desmond-centric episodes and the aesthetics and structure of *TLE*. The aesthetics of the television narrative and the ARG provide viewers with a productive (and instructive) way of reading the *Lost* televisual texts by rewarding groups of engaged close readers with additive comprehension. I will also argue that these strategies encourage a blurring of the boundary between realities—a concern specific to the show's unique structure, thematic content, and genre hybridity—and that this same aesthetic can be seen as a self-aware, reflexive immersion required by alternate reality games as a genre, as well as being potentially productive way of knowledge generation in our contemporary civilization, due to the proliferation of global digital networked technology.

Complex Rewards: The “narrative special effect” and “solving” the narrative puzzle

In “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” Mittell builds on

Jeffrey Sconce's "metareflexive mode" of viewership in order to introduce his own original concept of the "operational aesthetic" (35). This mode sees the viewer as dividing their attention and pleasure between the narrative developments within the diegetic world and the complex narrative structures that the authors create. While Mittell seems to value both, he privileges the "operational aesthetic" as the new quality of complex televisual narratives and a primary site of viewing pleasure. And this privileging does add to our understanding of why these complex narratives are enjoyable to engaged viewers, accounting for the more traditional focus on diegetic developments while also acknowledging the more complex structures found in contemporary televisual texts. If the viewer were to only appreciate the diegetic world, the emergence of complexity in television—an emergence that seems to span genre, with comedies such as *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development*, and dramas such as *Heroes* and *Lost*—would remain unaccounted for.

Evidence for the enjoyment of "operational aesthetics" can be found in Mittell's example of the "narrative special effect"—"moments [that] push the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the structured nature of the narration and asking [the viewer] to marvel at how the writers pulled it off" (35). In terms of *Lost*, Mittell astutely points to the season two episode, "Orientation" (2.3), in which John Locke views a Dharma Initiative instructional filmstrip, which gives the reader a limited explanation of some of the island's mysteries, including a brief mention of the Hanso Foundation, which figures heavily into the storyworld of *TLE*. After viewing this short, incomplete, but illuminating media, Locke says, "We're going to have to watch that again." Through this, Mittell argues, viewers see the convergence of the revelatory structure employed by the writers with the development of

characters' knowledge within the diegetic world. Viewers can marvel at the narrative use of the filmstrip to impart contextual knowledge to both viewer and character, as well as experience the importance of this new information and how it builds both the characters' and viewers' interpretation of the text.

While “operational aesthetic” does occupy a place of importance in understanding the appeal of narratively complex televisual texts, Mittell's positioning of the new mode of viewer enjoyment as a function of the “narrative special effect,” effectively displacing the “what will happen” with the “how it happened,” as pertains to *Lost*, may be a consequence of the limited viewpoint form which Mittell is able to engage the text in 2006, in the midst of the show's second season. At that moment, the show was actively playing with several conventions in order to develop the characters and their connections with each other, while also building the mysteries of the diegetic world. One of the most prominent features of the show during this period was the iterative use of analepsis (flashback) to both develop complex character histories and show interconnectedness outside of the temporal frame of the characters' shared experiences on the island. Thus, it is sensible that an analysis from this point-of-view might focus on the spectacle of revealing backstory and interconnectedness.

However, as the *Lost* narrative neared its televisual stopping point⁴⁵, we gained a different perspective of the aesthetics of narrative complexity: one which returned the focus to the “what will happen” without abandoning what Sconce and Mittell have established through a “metareflexive” viewing mode focused on the appreciation of narrative structure. And, while I describe it here as a different perspective, it should be noted that Mittell, while focusing on the

⁴⁵ Mittell's “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary Television” was published in the fall of 2006, and thus does not include material from beyond season 2 of the series.

operational, does not completely abandon the importance of the diegetic puzzle; therefore, in a similar fashion, I will refocus on the diegetic puzzle while maintaining the metareflexive view of the engaged viewers reading of text.

The Puzzle Aesthetic of *Lost*

J.J. Abrams, co-creator of *Lost*, is fascinated with puzzles. In an essay for the May 2009 issue of *Wired* magazine, which he guest-edited, Abrams speaks to the narrative power of the puzzle—and specifically links this power to the success of the show he helped to co-create and continues to produce, if not run, *Lost*. In this appreciation of mystery, Abrams is clear that it isn't necessarily about finding the answers. Admitting that engaged viewers often ask him how the show will end, what the answers to the numerous mysteries posed by the show will be, he wonders “do they really want to know?... They might have an aha moment, but without context” (Abrams 80). For Abrams, context isn't only what might happen in textual proximity to the answers; more important than more information, Abrams acknowledges the metareflexive “experience” of the viewer as being primary to the satisfaction of this puzzle narrative: “... the experience—the setup for a joke's punchline, the buildup to a magic trick's big flourish—is as much of a thrill as the result” (80). Thus, in Abrams' view, the pleasure of the narrative isn't solely found in the engaged viewer's simple solving of a mystery, it is modified and enhanced by a metareflexive understanding of the experience of puzzle-solving. Or, put another way, part of the engaged viewer's pleasure is derived from the acts of exploration and discovery, the sorting of information, and the formation of potential meanings. As opposed to being told, the engaged viewer find satisfaction in learning how to read the experience and doing— a hallmark of

interactivity in the era of new media.

In an interview given at Hitflix.com after the airing of the antepenultimate episode of the series, the divisively-received “Across the Sea” (6.15), which focused on the mythology and background of the two god-like characters, Jacob and the Man In Black, *Lost* show runners Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof also describe their show as a “mystery show” (Cuse and Lindelof). Though they assert the show is more about character resolution than about the solving of puzzles for their own sake, they do not deny the heavy emphasis placed on the solving of puzzles by the large communities of engaged viewers. While there are many productive ways to read these thoughts from *Lost's* show runners, such as exploring the battle lines between their intent as the show's authors and the many contentious pleas for specific answers to highly-specific (and often individual) questions, how many and what kinds of answers the creators feel are relevant to advancing their version of the show and how their creative decisions might disappoint or neglect the engaged viewer's desires, those analyses are more appropriate for a discussion of the industry dynamics between producers, consumers, and designations that fall in-between or adjacent to those traditional categories. However, my concern here is to investigate ways in which the narratively complex *Lost* asserts itself as a puzzle narrative and how it might impart its literacy to engaged viewers. Thus, for Cuse and Lindelof, navigating the tension between posing puzzles and revealing answers is a game centered on the aesthetics of complexity, multiplicity and open interpretation.

Much like Abrams above, Cuse and Lindelof are conscious of the metareflexive production of puzzle solutions and, instead of focusing on the simple revelation of answers, utilize a storytelling method focused on hypercomplexity and multiplicity. Cuse describes the

aesthetic in the following manner:

[Carlton Cuse]: We feel that we as storytellers, basically can only approach the storytelling the way that we do, which is it felt like *there was no way that we could just be answering existing questions without the show feeling didactic. There would have been no larger narrative motor.* For the show to devolve into running through a checklist of answers, we would have been, honestly, crucified for that version of the show. It's ironic that the episode that's generating so much controversy is one in which we answered questions, but it's not surprising to us. Between what the audience thinks they want and what they will find entertaining - we have tried to [sic] make the show in a way that people would find it entertaining, moving *engaging. To do that required having new mysteries.* That's the way we operated. (Cuse and Lindelof, emphasis added)

From these remarks it is clear that the show runners are not simply concerned with the generation of puzzles for the sake of providing a distraction or special effect to keep the engaged viewer occupied. There is, however, a relationship that Cuse sees between mystery and engagement: puzzles, whether newly-posed or long-unsolved, are central to *Lost's* ability to be engaging. The incorporation of puzzles, though, is complex and multiple: puzzles are not given only to be answered and answers, when they're given, are enshrouded in new mysteries. Furthermore, it is important to note Cuse's rejection of the "didactic" mode of storytelling that is represented by providing answers for the sake of simple clarification, an aesthetic that would dampen/destroy the complex narrative's momentum. Similar to Abrams, the show runners seek to entertain the engaged audience through the metareflexive experience of puzzle solving, an aesthetic that is highly-imbued with active interpretation by engaged viewers. Whether these interpretations are private or socially negotiated, made at the office water cooler or in an online collective interpretation community, such as a message board like TheFuselage.com, Cuse and Lindelof understand the importance of maintaining the possibility for active and multiple interpretations to coexist. Resultantly, they "don't want to offer up [their] interpretations" and

many, arguably most, of the shows diegetic developments are “in the area that is subject to interpretation purposely” (Cuse and Lindelof). Thus, while puzzles are posed, solved, and posed again in a complexly multiple manner, the text itself refuses and actively avoids strict, authoritative interpretation to preserve the engaged viewer's metareflexive experience of figuring out “what will happen.”

A show like *Lost* does need a way to instruct its engaged viewers on how it is to be read, regardless of the producers' vowed resistance to a didactic storytelling mode. This is especially true as this complexity is presented by Mittell in the context of a new development in televisual narrative; there is very little, if any, precedence for knowing how to read these narratives productively. As transmedia has shown through *American Idol*, the act of moving audiences to different media can serve in an instructive manner. For instance, one AT&T spokesperson testifies that their advertising sponsorship with *American Idol*, wherein they encouraged the audience to vote for their favorite contestant via text message, “has done more to educate the public and get people texting than any marketing activity in this country to date” (Jenkins 59). Similarly, *Lost* is able to experientially impart the knowledge of how to read the narrative through transmedia interactions, specifically *TLE*; the use of the ARG provides a method of instruction and practice for reading the television show.

Reading *Our Mutual Friend*

Having established the central role of puzzle-solving in the complex narrative, I would now like to consider both how the puzzles are presented and, moreover, how *Lost*, as a narratively complex text that was remarkable as something “new,” imparts its specific

puzzle-solving logic as a literacy to its engaged viewers. The question of how a text asks to be read is certainly not the only important question in how engaged viewers make interpretations. Many examples exist, both in academic articles and in online forums, where viewers arrive at their own unique and individual meanings, regardless of how the writers and producers of televisual texts might intend their work to be read. While these readings, transgressive or otherwise, are fertile ground for critical examination, they are not, however, the focus of my analysis here. Rather, the question that I am interested in, as posed by Jason Mittell, is how might the text itself inform engaged viewers of the literacy required to read a narratively complex text, specifically *Lost*? The first step in answering this question is to explore the puzzle aesthetic of *Lost* and to ascertain what, exactly, is unique about the way that this text is asking to be read.

In *Lost*, puzzles are embedded into the diegetic world. This embeddedness of clues is shown both through viewing the text, as well as in visiting active message boards of engaged viewers, where items found in the diegetic frame are catalogued and continuously probed for their individual meanings as well as for how they fit into the larger puzzle-narrative that is central to the show's structure. The proliferation and multiplicity of “clues” to these puzzles is a standard feature of *Lost*. One such manifestation of these clues can be seen in *Lost's* iconography. Whether the repetition of symbols and characters used by the Dharma Initiative, found in the seemingly ancient Egyptian statuary and temples, or an eight-pointed star appearing as a carving on a tree, as a castigation brand on a banished Other's back, or on a broach worn by Eloise Hawking in an alternate universe, the interplay and replay of these small details are one particularly, highly embedded puzzle within the frame. And these details are actively sought and

found by engaged viewers, who seek to draw interconnections between the various and multiple appearances and contexts. Despite their often tertiary placement in the diegesis, engaged viewers' immersion is so intense that these clues become central in the game of interpretation. This highly immersive viewing perspective, however, is made with a metareflexive view of the show's intertextual and complex puzzle aesthetic; while these diegetic clues are often unearthed by means of repetitive viewings, they are also immediately evident to many engaged viewers, with specific message board threads appearing within minutes of a show's first airing. Thus, in order for the viewer to read the narratively complex text, this mode of engagement is marked by a simultaneously immersed and metareflexive mode.

Reflexive immersion is further marked as unique, as the aesthetics of immersion and puzzle-solving, in general, can also be seen as in competition, as opposed to in harmony. In his analysis of the spectacle of amusement park rides based on films (“ride-films”), Geoff King draws attention to both immersion and puzzle-solving, as they relate to both the interactive story-world experience in video games and ride-films. Here, King cautions the reader that “we should not forget... that the impression of 'immersion' is precisely one of the illusions the Hollywood style of filmmaking seeks to create through continuity editing patterns and emotional identifications with character” (185). Furthermore, King reminds the reader, through quoting Ted Friedman⁴⁶, that “whereas classical Hollywood cinema is designed in every way to allow one to 'lose oneself' in the fantasy of on-screen, the stop-and-go nature of the puzzle-solving paradigm makes it very hard to establish the same level of psychic investment” (qtd. in King 185). For King, then—and for Friedman, as well, it seems—there is a tension between immersion and

⁴⁶ From *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.

puzzle-solving: one detracts from the other in the engaged viewers' experience. What is unclear from their discussion, however, is how a text that is based on immersive puzzle-solving might balance this apparent conflict, a question that is of utmost importance when talking about the engaged viewer's puzzle-solving experience in *Lost*. Before I suggest an answer to tension between immersion and puzzle-solving, however, I would like to focus on how the text instructs the reader to approach this immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic, namely through a technique that King refers to as a “surrogate” (189). In the case of *Lost*, this viewer surrogate is Desmond.

One of the most recognizable features of *Lost* is its large ensemble cast. This feature is also directly emphasized by the show and its official paratexts: each actor that appears in a season is credited in every episode regardless of if she or he is in that episode; the show's promotional imagery and DVD/Blu-ray cases, for example, often feature the entire cast (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). Similarly, episodes are, with limited exceptions, narratively structured around a single character's story-arc, both in the “present” of the island and iterative analepsis/prolepsis of that character's life off the island—or, in the sixth and final season, in an “alternate” reality, seemingly caused by some of the characters detonating the hydrogen bomb, Jughead, after traveling back through time to 1977 from 2007. Based upon this specific example, it is perhaps needless to state that this temporal narrative complexity is a specific challenge for engaged viewers to maintain their compass bearings, even without considering the island's infamous scattered magnetic anomalies. This temporal fracture of narrative elements also serves for fertile ground for the puzzle of “what will happen” to be introduced. Frequently, in addition to providing a historical and future intertext to emphasize character development, these shifts in time are rife with interspersed iconography (the same painting appearing in two characters'

private spaces), teasingly vague connections to other mysterious characters (Sawyer meeting Jack's father, Christian, in a bar in Australia), and, less frequently, the exploration of the history of some of the show's puzzles. These temporal fractures are structured in an iterative fashion—the viewer is bounced back-and-forth between the “present” of the island and the flashback/flashforward, with the engaged viewer drawing connections between temporal contexts and carrying narrative information between to form an arguably richer interpretation of the episode's and the series' narrative. Desmond-centric episodes, however, clearly break the established complex temporality of the narrative and, more importantly, mirror the engaged viewer's interpretative experience, serving as a “mutual friend” to the viewer— one who navigates the complex narrative puzzles of *Lost* in a similar way.



[Figures 3.2 (left) and 3.3 Promotional imagery featuring the ensemble cast of *Lost* from season 6 (left) and from season 3 (right).]

Beginning with the season three episode “Flashes Before Your Eyes” (FBYE) (3.8), Desmond's perspective establishes this break from the normative narrative structure and serves as a surrogate for the engaged viewer's perspective, embodying the collaborative puzzle-solving aesthetic and the reflexive immersion required to solve the diegetic puzzle. In this episode, we learn that Desmond can see the future, as a result of a massive release of electromagnetic energy from the mysterious hatch. While prolepsis was not established as a temporal narrative technique until the fourth season, Desmond's view—knowing the approximate outcome of narrative events on the island—gives him a uniquely metareflexive mode of viewing, a mode even more remarkable because it is a mode *within* the diegesis. This mode of viewing links Desmond with the engaged viewer: both are able to view the unfolding of the narrative from a viewpoint that seems independent of the diegetic reality and causality, allowing both Desmond and the engaged viewer to acknowledge that the narrative is constructed, fixed—no matter what the multiple possible variations for how it reaches its resolution might be. Or, as Desmond says to Charlie, whose impending death Desmond has temporarily postponed twice, “You can't change it. No matter what you try to do you can't change it... My life flashed before my eyes... those flashes didn't stop.”

The flashes to which Desmond refers to in the above quote begin as analepsis, the unique structuring of which immediately set this Desmond-centric viewpoint as different and remarkable. As previously mentioned, temporal fracture in *Lost's* narrative is exclusively iterative, going back-and-forth between an established “present” and a different moment in time. In “FBYE,” this exclusivity breaks down: we start with the present of the island and move to a

short flashback to the electromagnetic energy release at the hatch⁴⁷, then follow Desmond to 1996 for an extended and continuous flashback that comprises most of the episode, with very little screen time given to the established “present” of life stranded on the mysterious island. While this major structural shift signals a new narrative perspective to the viewer, it is not a solely operational aesthetic choice; rather, though the engaged viewer can appreciate a new structural form in the narrative from their metareflexive mode of viewing, it is more important to notice how Desmond's perspective aligns with the immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic.

Through the analepsis of “FBYE,” the viewer is given access to Desmond's character history—a history that the engaged viewer experiences with the immediate access to the knowledges and contexts of what will eventually happen to Desmond vis-a-vis his experience on the island. On the surface, this is much like the standard use of analepsis in *Lost*. What is radically different through Desmond's surrogate perspective, however, is that, instead of the viewer having scenes of Desmond's past being accessed, as if from a database of recordings made at the time of their occurrence, Desmond *re-experiences* his past life with the context of the island “present”—albeit with a vague notion of what has happened in the future. While future Desmond-centric episodes have Desmond more fully able to productively navigate temporal jumps through the application of contextual knowledge of the “present,” “FBYE” sees his perspective aligning with that of the engaged viewer, as both can be understood as a metareflexive mode: Desmond, like the viewer, knows what will happen when he is transported to the past, as he maintains his knowledge of the “present” point from which the narrative has

⁴⁷ *Lost* offers another metareflexive wink at the engaged viewer, as Desmond says to Locke, “I’ll see you in another life, Brother,” after retrieving the failsafe key from behind a copy of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*—playfully acknowledging the past historical interconnectedness of the characters and foreshadowing the multiplicity of alternate temporalities and realities the viewer, and Desmond himself, will consciously experience and navigate.

jumped back from. Thus, “FBYE” is remarkable in establishing Desmond's perspective as a surrogate for the metareflexive mode of the viewer and the immersion required for puzzle-solving in *Lost*.

As a result of the haziness of Desmond's recollection of his future on the island (and his having a vague notion of having lived these events in his life previously), Desmond's diegetic situation closely mimics the puzzle-solving aesthetic of the engaged viewer. Desmond's sense of *deja vu* leads to a variety of clues to be presented to him throughout the extended analepsis, clues which he seeks to solve in order to understand his reality. These immersive clues are closely linked to a metareflexive viewing mode.

After turning the failsafe key, Desmond awakes wearing a beige jumpsuit and covered in what appears to be blood. After a moment, however, both Desmond and the viewer realize they are in a different time and place: Desmond's apartment in 1996. Rather than his Dharma jumpsuit, he is wearing painting coveralls and is covered in red paint, not the blood expected from the hatch explosion. As Desmond prepares to ask Charles Widmore for permission to marry his daughter, Penelope, the focus of the viewer and Desmond meet through the diegetic frame being fixed on an alarm clock reading “1:08,” a clear reference to the 108 minutes between pushing the button—an act that Desmond has spent years doing in the islands’s Swan hatch. As the Sarah McLaughlin song “Building a Mystery” plays in the background, Penelope tells Desmond that, no matter what her father says, “it's not the end of the world.” Immediately thereafter, the microwave beeping in the apartment kitchen is the exact frequency and duration of the sound of the Swan’s warning countdown timer—a timer that signals the supposed and impending literal end of the world—and Desmond, as a result, experiences a flashforward to the

timer expiring before the electromagnetic release that caused Desmond's flashes. The diegesis here is layered with intertemporal clues and references through the soundtrack and dialogue, all presented with a metareflexive view. Several clues appear when Desmond goes to visit Widmore: a delivery man says he has a package “for 815,” a rephrasing of the first three numbers in the Swan's numerical failsafe input sequence (4, 8, 15), which cause Desmond to demand the man repeat what he says; the viewer/Desmond focus on a painting featuring a polar bear and the word “namaste,” both references to the Island; Widmore refuses to serve Desmond MacCutcheon whiskey—the same brand that Desmond, Charlie and Hugo are drinking on the island before the flashback; Desmond compliments Widmore on his boat, a model of which is prominent in his office—a reference to Desmond's path to the island, via the actual boat the model represents during an around-the-world one-man sailing race, sponsored by Widmore. All of these are recognized as such by Desmond in his attempt to figure out what will happen next for him, clues viewed with the same type of intertemporal and contextual information that the engaged viewer applies to the temporal shifts in narrative.

As Desmond leaves his appointment with Widmore, he meets Charlie, a fellow castaway, who is performing Oasis's “Wonderwall” on the street, singing the following lyrics: “maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me”—a not-so-subtle metareflexive nod to Desmond's ongoing saving of Charlie's life on the island. As Charlie asks Desmond for change, he says “Can I get some help?”—a line of dialogue that crosses the narrative timelines, as Charlie also says this to Desmond before the Swan hatch explodes. Despite Charlie's lack of awareness, Desmond insists that they know each other from the island, saying, “It was real; I remember.” Desmond is reliving his life, but with the knowledge known only to the viewer across narrative

techniques—a knowledge that no other characters possess, save perhaps Eloise Hawking, whom we are introduced to in the episode and but can never serve as a surrogate to the viewer, as her perspective never guides an episode.

As Desmond is presented with what he recognizes as clues imbedded into his reality, the viewer encounters the same clues, though embedded in the diegetic world. Much like the engaged viewer who seeks to solve the puzzle posed by clues in *Lost*, Desmond attempts to make sense of these clues to figure out what will happen next. And Desmond is finally able to do this: recalling the surprising outcome of a soccer match and the playing of Cass Elliot's song "Make Your Own Kind of Music" (the same song that played when Desmond first appears in the text) cause Desmond to remember that the bartender in front of him will soon be struck with a cricket bat. However, when Desmond tries to apply his unique temporal contextual knowledge to alter history, he is struck in the head with the cricket bat and, like the viewer, he flashes back to island, post-key turning—the immediate result of his actions remains a mystery.

This surrogate perspective for the metareflexive reading of immersed clues is built upon in the season four episode, "The Constant" (4.5) In this episode, the engaged viewer is presented with a much more literate and active Desmond as surrogate, one who can not only recognize the imbedded, immersive puzzles, but one who seeks to actively solve them, as well. With this new agency, this Desmond-centric episode offers a variation on the uniquely different temporal structure found in "FBYE." While a simple analysis of the "The Constant's" structure might reveal that it's iterative approach to the use of analepsis is very similar to the established *Lost* narrative structure, it is Desmond's placement within this structure that draws his point of view into even closer proximity with that of the engaged viewer.

“The Constant,” like most *Lost* episodes, utilizes a typical flashback structure: iterative jumps between the island as “present” and scenes from a character's past. In this case, the present focuses on Desmond's journey to a freighter anchored off the island, while the analepses focus on isolated moments from his past in 1996, after the events of “FBYE.” Both of these timelines unfold linearly, a straightforward presentation. As is typical in *Lost*, temporal shifts are signaled by a sharp change in audio; however, in the use of audio we might start to see where this episode's structure—and Desmond's role for the viewer—begins to assert its uniqueness. Unlike typical episodes, the audio signal is not a feature of the extradiegetic dramatic musical score; rather, it is a sharp jump in the immersive sounds of the diegetic action. Thus, while the sharp contrast in sound between, for example, a helicopter and waking up in a military barracks, helps to signal a change in time, it also undermines the expectations of the viewer, creating a discomfort and confusion in the engaged viewer. This confusion from the suddenness in timeline shift without the typical cues for the viewer also mirrors the confusion in Desmond. His perspective is living in 1996 and his actions in that time literally transfer to the timeline established as the present for the other characters and the viewers; he literally reaches for a coin in the mud in 1996 and his hand ends up on the deck of a freighter in 2004. The transition between 1996 and 2004 is without warning to viewer or the surrogate. As further evidence of the confusion of his immersion in the alternate reality of 1996, Desmond loses all memory of his former “present” in 2004, forgetting the friends with which he flew to the freighter.

What most stands out about the temporal shift in “The Constant” is also what links Desmond most closely to the engaged viewer: Desmond is aware of the temporal jumps, as he is experiencing them in the same manner as they are presented to the viewer. When the viewer

follows the narrative from helicopter present to barracks past and then returns to the helicopter, Desmond's own consciousness follows in the exact same way. He experiences these temporal shifts in the progression that the viewer experiences them. He shares the awareness of temporal shift with the viewer. The typical expectations of the nonlinearity of temporal jumps are cast aside. Whereas, in an episode featuring another character as central, the viewer experiences a nonlinear temporal progression presented as a linear episode, the character has two separate linearities: one from the present and one from another time frame—a standard application of analepsis. Desmond, however, experiences the same progression of nonlinearity as the viewer—causing great confusion for his character, a confusion mimicked by the variation in sound editing.

Due to what is presented as relativistic time shifts by the show's resident physicist, Daniel Faraday, Desmond from 1996 bleeds into the present on the island in 2004: he doesn't know his friend Sayid or what he's doing back in the helicopter. As the episode progresses and Desmond's conscious shifts between time increase in frequency, his role as surrogate puzzle-solver becomes more pronounced and he is more closely fused to the perspective of the engaged viewer. In order to prevent his own death, Desmond must coordinate his puzzle-solving efforts in the past and the present, as well as transport knowledge between the two temporal points—two simultaneous temporal contexts whose existence he is reflexively aware of. In his conscious traveling between past and present, he is also represented as being highly immersed in his own oddly constructed reality; actions, such as bending down to pick up a coin in the past, are transferred into actions carried out in the present, as in trying to grab that no-longer-existing coin on the deck of the freighter.

The application of knowledge between temporal contexts is perhaps the key benefit of a text that makes use of temporal shifts. Through the use of flashbacks in any narrative, the viewer is able to see how a character's past, present, and future might influence the character's actions and these varying contexts help to create what we commonly refer to as a more three-dimensional or realistic character. The same is true of the use of transmedia and ARGs in order to provide deeper context for the storyworld and its inhabitants. This perspective of shifting temporal context, however, is also made available to Desmond in “The Constant” and, much like the viewer, he must learn and apply knowledge between temporal contexts in order to solve his puzzle. In this episode, he is able to gain information from Daniel in 1996 and 2004 in order to find out that he needs to be able to reach Penelope at the specific moment of his present on the island: December 24, 2004. Through a series of shifts of time that both Desmond and the viewer experience in the same manner, Desmond is able to transport knowledge between temporal realities, such as learning that he needs a phone number for Penny and when his consciousness shifts to the past, asking her for it, and upon his return to the present retaining the number. At the beginning of the episode, Sayid asks Desmond, “What do you expect to find when you get [to the boat]?” and Desmond replies, “Answers.” While it is highly unlikely that Desmond foresaw how he might find these answers by conscious temporal shifts, he found his own answers, as well as providing answers for how the engaged viewer might learn the puzzle-solving literacy of this narratively (and temporally) complex series.

Viewing Desmond as an immersed, yet metareflexively aware, puzzle-solving surrogate for the engaged viewer provides us with one way of understanding how a narratively complex show imparts its literacy to the viewer. From my analyses, we can see how, as King described,

the use of “continuity editing patterns” creates a feeling of immersion that is inextricably linked to Desmond and both his experience of time, as well as his identifying of trans-temporally imbedded clues and the pursuit of solutions to those puzzles. If we are to consider the narratively complex televisual text as something new, however, we must also admit that immersion itself is certainly not new. However, what is specifically remarkable about *Lost's* brand of immersion is its simultaneous focus on puzzle solving, a combination that King and Friedman believe ought to be prohibitively challenging. With a large and engaged viewership and wide critical acclaim, it would seem that *Lost* has successfully overcome this challenge. To understand one possibility as to why *Lost* has been able to deliver, I will return to the thread that Mittell cited as the reason for why narratively complex television is noteworthy, but will argue that it is not the metareflexive “operational aesthetic” (the “how it happens”) that is prevalent in *Lost*, but rather an aesthetic that returns the focus to the immersive experience of puzzle solving (the “what will happen”) while maintaining a reflexive mode of viewing. This is what I call “reflexive immersion”— the ability for a participant to be both deeply immersed in an experience and to reflect upon the artifice of that experience, to simultaneously be immersed and aware of the immersion. To explore reflexive immersion, I will turn to the immersive aesthetics of ARGs. In addition to the aesthetic similarities of ARGs and *Lost*, the final Desmond-centric episode of *Lost* holds many specific correlations with the genre. The show’s employment of an ARG, *TLE*, as a inter-seasonal experience for engaged viewers extends the puzzles-solving aesthetic and specifically provides a framework for becoming literate in the aesthetics of reflexive immersion.

Reflexive Immersion

While, at the outset, there may be clear distinctions between a televisual text and an ARG, I would like to first re-establish a few similarities between ARGs as a genre and the narratively complex *Lost*. What is important to the discussion on “reflexive immersion” here is the TINAG aesthetic of the genre. In her examination of the aesthetics and rhetoric of *The Beast*, Jane McGonigal, who was responsible for monitoring the community of players on behalf of one of the game's designers, 4orty2wo Entertainment, catalogues many examples of high level of immersion in engaged players.

First, ARGs, due to their immersive nature, present themselves as purposefully murky, “some kind of game, but one without clear rules, objectives or rewards”; this confusion allows *The Beast's* immersion to be “less of a 'virtual' (simulated) reality or an 'augmented' (enhanced) reality, and more of a 'layered' (alternate) reality” (“This is Not a Game”). Furthermore, structurally, ARGs are highly complex, requiring collaboration to solve puzzles and make meaning of the text. If we are to understand the aesthetics of reflexive immersion in ARGs in terms of *Lost*, two points of convergence to note are the highly complex narrative of both, as well as the lack of clarity with respect to rules, objectives, or rewards.

At these points of convergence, we can see how *TLE* was useful as a literacy-forming tool for engaged viewers to access and interpret the *Lost* text. Using Henry Jenkins' idea of “additive comprehension,” *TLE* can be understood as a successful transmedia experience, in that it provided a new understanding about the mythology of *Lost* for those willing to play *TLE*, yet it did not affect the non-players ability to interpret the strictly televisual text (Jenkins 127). Furthermore, the presence of puzzles embedded in the immersive diegesis of websites, for instance, closely mimics the televisual aesthetic seen in the Desmond-centric episodes described

above: the clues are there, so long as the viewer looks from the vantage point of an immersed view and with reflexive knowledge of the narrative.

As previously delineated, collaboration is central to the genre's structure. In both McGonigal's discussion of the *I Love Bees* ARG and in Jenkins' discussion of ARGs as a specific type of transmedia narrative, this collaboration is linked to Henri Lévy's theory of collective intelligence—a collaborative culture of knowledge sharing and production enabled by the widespread growth of digital networked technologies, especially the Internet (“Why I Love Bees” 199). In the *I Love Bees* ARG, “players could collect, assemble, and interpret thousands of different story pieces” and by “reconstructing and making sense of the fragmented fiction, the fans would collaboratively author a narrative” — or, in other words, solve the narrative puzzle (“Why I Love Bees” 202). This collaboration, in Jenkins' transmedia term, is directly linked to active interpretation communities of engaged fans for contemporary complex narratives, such as *The Matrix*. While fan communities for *Lost* existed before *TLE*, that ARG required the network that fan sites had established; in essence, *TLE* can be understood as both a way for *Lost*'s producers to engage an already existing fan communities that were involved in active interpretation and puzzle-solving, as well as growing these networks by introducing televisual rabbit holes to fans who had not already participated in collaborative communities. This engagement and cultivation enabled by a ARG strengthens the ability for the text to be read in its immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic.

To more closely return to the reflexive immersion that is found in *Lost* and in ARGs, let us revisit the “layered' (alternate) reality” of the TINAG aesthetic. The “layering” of reality in ARGs is achieved by embedding narrative clues into the players accepted reality. This is often

achieved by the above methods—signs posted in public spaces, communications from “fictional” characters delivered through the same channels players receive “real” communications, such as email, telephone, podcasts. These methods actively seek to confuse the “real” and the “game” worlds, necessitating a reflexive mode of viewing by the game player, who must actively discern what is “real” and what is “fiction” masquerading as “real.” As a result of the game world overlapping with the real world, the player, while maintaining a reflexive viewpoint is also heavily immersed in the experience. On the surface, we can see this reflexive immersion at play from the beginnings of *Lost*, wherein the first season, the characters and the viewer actively ask themselves if many objects within the diegetic world are in fact real and running through the island jungle: a deceased Christian Shephard, a polar bear, a horse, and a cloud of nefarious smoke. While these elements are also features of the show's unique genre hybridity, the show adopts a much higher focus on the aesthetics of layered alternate reality and immersive reflexivity.

In *Lost*, this layering is most clearly present in the sixth and final season, which has seen the introduction of an alternate timeline to the text, a phenomenon likely caused by the detonation of “Jughead.” In this season's Desmond-centric episode, the layering of realities becomes a central concern: both for Desmond and for the engaged viewer for which he has been established as a diegetic surrogate. In “Happily Ever After” (HEA) (6.11), Desmond in the alternate timeline (or “alt-Desmond”) is presented with clues from the primary island timeline, clues which bleed into the alternate reality from the primary reality. Alt-Desmond and alt-Charlie are placed in a traumatic underwater situation that recalls events from the primary timeline, both for the engaged viewer and for alt-Desmond, who is made aware of the connection through a

flash of consciousness from the primary narrative timeline that he, like the viewer, is able to witness. As a variety of clues from the primary timeline present themselves to alt-Desmond in a similar manner, he is tasked with making sense of his reality—a reality that he eventually realizes, through collecting these unsettling clues embedded in what he originally takes to be his reality, is ultimately not real, but a constructed version of reality. This questioning of the veracity of his own reality directly accesses the aesthetic at play in ARGs: the player must take a reflexive view of their own immersive world (what we can call the player's reality, or life outside the ARG's fiction) in order to be able to question it.

Like a synthesis of two previous Desmond-centric episodes, “HEA” combines an extended shift in alternate reality timeline like the prolonged analepsis of “FBYE,” but sees Desmond able to solve puzzles by consciously carrying knowledge between the contexts of alternate realities, much like his ability to transport knowledge across temporal shifts in “The Constant.” In “HEA,” the viewer can see Desmond as achieving the literacy necessary to read the complex *Lost* puzzle text and to act to influence the outcome—an agency that plays out as alt-Desmond begins to assemble the alt-characters by using his understanding of the primary reality. He has learned to find clues and apply contextual information to solve the diegetic mystery. Resultantly, the viewer is shown a zen-like Desmond, contentedly at peace with the violent and dangerous situation he finds himself in on the island in the primary timeline, a Desmond seemingly acting as a single consciousness that can move at will between alternate realities.

Negotiating Reality

As previously established, several other television shows have used ARGs as promotional tools: J.J. Abrams' *Alias*, The A&E mini-series *The Andromeda Strain*, HBO's *True Blood*, NBC's *Heroes*, and CBS's *Numb3rs* and (the short-lived) *Harper's Island*, to name a few. As this cross-section of shows might imply, the use of ARGs as a televisual paratext requires neither a specific genre of text, nor a text with a reflexively immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic. Rather, if *Lost's* use of ARG to impart a literacy of its reflexively immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic to engaged viewers has a place in any larger conversation it is one that is circumscribed by the larger cultural implications of a questioning of reality in contemporary culture. This cultural logic will be explored in the next chapter of this dissertation.

As McGonigal shows us, the success of the Cloudmakers, the primary web collective that grew to over 7000 members during the few months of gameplay for *The Beast*, was enabled by “developing a kind of stereoscopic vision, one that simultaneously perceived the everyday reality *and* the game structure in order to generate a single, but layered and dynamic world view”—a point of view which also led many Cloudmakers to react to the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, as if the events were a game-puzzle that they could solve, through their collective intelligence community (“This is Not a Game,” emphasis original). In relation to this stereoscopic vision that combines the “real” and its “alternates,” McGonigal points to Paul Virilio. In his discussion on the consequences of advances in and the global proliferation of digital networked technology, Virilio proposes that: “it is essential today to effect a split in primary reality by developing a *stereo-reality*, made up on the one hand of *the actual reality* of immediate appearances and, on the other, the *virtual reality* of media trans-appearances” (Virilio 15, emphasis original). This virtual reality, for Virilio, is not necessarily a representation of the

traversal through cyberspace, but instead “the amplification of the optical density of the appearances of the real world,” a “grand-scale optics” necessitated by the collapse of time and space through instantaneous communication technologies, an audiovisual system of representation based on “tele-surveillance” aesthetics (Virilio 12-14). What Virilio is arguing here is that we experience an almost constant precession of images that are both real (in that they represent real people, objects, occurrences, places events, etc., through tangible modes of representation like video, audio, and photography) and virtual (in that they collapse our common understanding of spatial and temporal restraints by being instantly accessible through the appropriate and networked mediated screen). Much like the engaged viewer, the surrogate Desmond, and the ARG player, this constant exposure of signs and clues within the immersive experience of reality causes us to experience this layering and to consciously— reflexively— assess the boundary between these layers.

Conclusion

Transmedia, whether a more traditional spreading of narratives across different media or through the use of the specific genre of the ARG, has many logics for use by the entertainment industry. Many of these are based on economic benefits. Transmedia distribution relies on interactivity, inviting engaged audiences to participate; typically this participation takes place in digital spaces facilitated by new media— message boards, wikis, blogs, vlogs, and other settings that allow for communities to form and share meaning. Transmedia allows for building of extensive context and histories and to expand a storyworld for engaged audiences. While the IP that utilizes transmedia can be of a variety of main media and genre, cult genres, such as science

fiction and fantasy, have perhaps an advantage of pre-existing communities that are acclimated to participation in both digital and non-digital spaces. When it comes to the use of ARGs specifically, an alignment with complex narratives, often with conspiracy themes, is common.

The entertainment industry benefits from the use of transmedia in three main ways. First, the traditional gaps in media production are able to be filled in with transmedia experiences. Though this also applies to films such as *Star Wars* and the *Matrix*, wherein several years or even decades can pass between instantiations of the main filmic IP, this is particularly applicable to the television industry. The use of transmedia and ARGs allows for producers to maintain the interests of an engaged viewership during the annual hiatus between broadcast seasons. In using transmedia and ARGs for this purpose, the television industry is also able to increase advertising revenue from a promotional experience, as the interactions of the engaged viewers are often quantified and supported by product placement and advertiser sponsorships. Furthermore, in more traditional transmedia, like *Star Wars*, and even in some promotional ARGs, like *TLE*, each new installment is another product for the fan to purchase. Engagement in the transmedia world can also lead to the recursive creation of content, moving characters and plot lines originating in transmedia extension content to the main IP instantiation. Finally, as seen in *TLE*, ARGs can be used to instruct viewers in ways of productively reading a complex, layered narrative.

If we are to think about the larger implications of the aesthetics of immersive reflexivity in *Lost*, Virilio's notion of the “stereo-reality” of contemporary life offer some potential for an exploration of this complex narrative as a way for viewers to gain awareness of and to negotiate how to read this layering of realities, much in a similar way that Jon Dovey explores another representation of reality in contemporary television—the reality game show *Big Brother*—and its

role as simulation for the production of knowledge (Dovey). *Lost* imparts its reflexively immersive puzzle-solving aesthetic to the engaged viewer to offer a productive means for reading the show; in a similar fashion, this same reflexive immersion can be used to negotiate texts, televisual or otherwise, and contexts that explore the “dizzying whirl of *the acceleration of reality*,” what Virilio sees as a particular concern of contemporary civilization (Virilio 3). Or, as J.J. Abrams reminds us, we must focus on the “what will happen” *and* the “how it happens:” “Perhaps that's why mystery, now more than ever, has special meaning. Because it's the anomaly, the glaring affirmation that the Age of Immediacy has a meaningful downside. Mystery demands that you stop and consider—or, at the very least, slow down and discover” (Abrams 81).

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Chapter 4: The Cultural Logic of ARGs

Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, one of the main characteristics that sets ARGs apart from other media and even other transmedia experiences is the extremely immersive nature of the phenomenon, one which takes place in a space that intentionally blurs the line between traditionally stable categories of real and fictive. This is, after all, where the genre gets its name: *alternate reality*. By using everyday media to create a deep gameworld, participants feel an illusion that the experience feels similar to the setting of their everyday reality in many ways. This is also aided by the ARG's defining TINAG aesthetic: the game is not clearly marked as fiction. This combination facilitates both a phenomenological and ontological blurring. The embeddedness of the game experience within the real world is made possible through multiple factors, including the rise of digital media and ubiquitous computing. These material technological factors provide the media through which ARGs so thoroughly achieve immersion. For instance, the CI communities predicted by Lévy are facilitated by the accessibility and growth of digital networked communication technologies. The overlaying of the real and mediated becomes more prevalent for our phenomenological experience of everyday life, what Paul Virilio calls the "field effect" of super-imposing digital imagery over organic visual perception and the collapse of time and space through the near-instantaneous transmission of experiences through digital technology.

Due to the ubiquity of digital technology, the interaction with digital devices and mediated experiences has become commonplace. The mediation of existence has a phenomenological effect on contemporary culture, as well. Friedrich Kittler writes in

Gramophone, Film, Typewriter that “media determine our situation,” an aphorism that reflects how our collective existence is a product of mediation—the way we experience, view, hear, feel the world is directly interwoven with the how we receive the data we use to understand our own reality. Reasoning on similar lines, Jonathan Crary writes in *Suspensions of Perception* about the ocular-centric culture of the 20th century. We now live in a contemporary reality where seeing is believing, or “pics or it didn’t happen,” in the parlance of our time. With the overlapping of images in augmented reality and real-time communication with people and places literally on the other side of the planet, our mediated experience becomes our reality. By using media artifacts embedded in the fabric of everyday life, ARGs leverage this phenomenology to create a deeply immersive experience that differentiates the genre from other games and narratives.

There are larger cultural shifts at work, however, that lead to the ARG phenomenon’s deep immersion for players; these include the shifting understanding of many formally dialectical/oppositional/binary categories of real and virtual. As digital media became more widely available at the turn of the 21st Century, formerly stable categories of production and consumption became porous. This transformation is evident in the technology and media most commonly used in ARGs. Remix culture and associated tools for altering and distributing digital content allowed those traditionally in the sole role of consumer to produce their own content and co-opt established narratives and storyworlds. In one critical framing, ARGs can be viewed as simulations of the real: the alternate view of reality serves as simply another potential reality—a result of a simulating model being altered to produce a new result that seems plausible. In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Jean Baudrillard theorizes that the simulation has now supplanted the real; in contemporary society, it is the “hyperreal” that erodes the difference between the real and

the simulacra. By this theory, the alternate reality is as real as any other reality— which is precisely why the immersion created by ARGs is so convincingly deep.

As discussed at the end of the previous chapter on the industrial logic of ARGs, the immersion found in ARGs is not a more common form, but one that requires a reflexive quality. In a mediated interactive experience, immersion is a general possibility; for instance, a first-person shooter video game like *Fallout 3* can produce immersion in the player through a variety of sensory effects: the visual, auditory, and kinetic feedback of the game. In ARGs, however, players must be both aware of what is in-game and what is not in-game, because of the overlapping of these spaces. This mutation of Huizinga’s magic circle produces an effect wherein everything— objects, people, spaces— looks like it might be in the game and wherein participants must navigate both spaces simultaneously in order to find clues. This double navigation applies to both physical and digital spaces. For instance, participants in an ARG may have to meet in public and as part of the collection of information, they might need to discern who and what is or is not part of the ARG experience. This was the case in *The Beast’s* ARM meetings that were staged in bars during normal hours of operation and at Nine Inch Nails concerts that also served as venues for the distribution of clues. Similarly, participants in *The Lost Experience* discovered clues on the Amazon product page for *Bad Twin*, the novel released as part of that ARG experience. This is what I refer to as “reflexive immersion” in the ARG-like puzzle solving for engaged viewers of *Lost*. Participants must be both aware of the artifice of the experience and of the tension between the real and the alternate reality, and yet completely immersed in the experience.

This dual viewpoint, much like Virilio's "field effect," can be found in Michel Foucault's writings, as well. In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault writes of *heterotopias*, which he defines as spaces both existing in real spaces and in virtual spaces simultaneously (24). These overlapping spaces are particularly tied to notions of utopia, which are idealized spaces that do not exist in real space. Despite their paradoxical nature, these heterotopias are experienced as very real. As applied to ARGs, this duality of space—the real and the virtual coexisting—is instead focused on a specific sub-genre of the utopia, the dystopia. This dystopian aesthetic of ARGs aligns with science fiction genre theory, as well. This is also particularly relevant to ARGs' common association with the science fiction genre. The immersed events can be seen as what Darko Suvin refers to as the "novum" — or "strange newness" — of science fiction/speculative literatures (Suvin 373). In his "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," Suvin defines science fiction as being "the literature of cognitive estrangement," which frequently leads to a sense of verisimilitude punctuated with an element of difference— or, in other words, a reality that is slightly alternate (Suvin 372).

The foundation of this confusion of the formerly real and virtual and the reflexivity that ARGs use to view it can be found in the epistemological shifts from the Enlightenment to modernity and post-modernity. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault analyzes the role of humans in the study of anthropology and other social sciences. Through this analysis, Foucault challenges notions of certainty when the object of study (humans) is also the one conducting the study. Much as in the paradox of Schrodinger's Cat, the act of observing— and in this case who the observer is— influences the conclusions formed. Part of Foucault's argument establishes that only through becoming reflexively aware of the subjectivity of knowledge and experience can

we seek to more fully understand it. It is important to note that Foucault's focus was on the social sciences and not on mediated experiences or games. However, in his inquiry on epistemology does lead to the questioning of what is held as verifiable or real. This challenge to the assumptions that lay at the base of human knowledge reflect a larger shift in certainty in the context of what we as humans deem to be real through our experiences— ontology and phenomenology. ARGs, as they rely upon their own reflexive mode of immersion, wherein the participant is both aware and immersed, are aligned with this shift in certainty.

Furthermore, it is not only the shift in social sciences that grounds the context of the development of ARGs, but a general post-Enlightenment destabilization of rationality and certainty. This shift from certainty and rationality has been documented by several theorists through the study of modernity and postmodernity. For instance, in "Truth and Politics," Hannah Arendt theorizes categories "rational" truth and "factual" truth in an effort to distinguish between the product of human subjectivity ("rational") and witnessed events ("factual") (Arendt). This shift in the absoluteness of notions of truth can also be understood as transforming reality into speculation, or realism into speculative fiction.

The combination of all these factors— digital media, ubicomp, overlapping of realities, deep immersion, the phenomenology of a digitally mediated culture, the shift from long-held notions of certainty— help to make ARGs significant as a genre for transmedia and also makes them a salient product of contemporary cultural contexts. This uncertainty between thinking and knowing, real and virtual, exhibits itself through aesthetic markers in ARGs of paranoia, conspiracy, and dystopia. To underscore the importance of these themes in contemporary culture,

these markers are also found in other media examples, such as “Mind-Game” cinema and other contemporary narratives and games (Elsaesser).

In this chapter, I will explore the cultural logic of ARGs to show that these media artifacts are connected to currents deeply interwoven into the fabric of contemporary culture. To do so, I will first examine the aesthetics of new media and how the phenomenon of ubiquitous computing produces a highly immersive effect that blurs distinctions between formerly stable categories, particularly that of reality and fiction. Then, I will further explore the cultural resonance of ARG aesthetics in terms of the shift from post-Enlightenment belief in certainty and rationality to the Modern and Postmodern acknowledgement of the constructedness and mutability of the same beliefs. The progression of these cultural currents seen in ARGs are supported by the work of several theorists, such as Foucault, Guy Debord, Paul Virilio, Baudrillard, Alex Galloway, McKenzie Wark, and others. This instability is traceable to thematic threads of conspiracy, paranoia, and dystopia found in other forms of media, such as film and literature.

The Ubiquity of Digital Media

In her 2006 dissertation, McGonigal explores ubiquitous computing as a pretext for pervasive play (*This Might Be a Game*). Examining two writings on Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images*, McGonigal links the reproduction of images and the effects of displacing objects and images we recognize as original or real with ones that are digital reproductions. These connections are briefly explored in the context of both the phenomenological— our experience of a pipe, its materiality, etc.— and the ontological— our willingness to recognize each as being

thought of as real, whether original or replication (1-5). While McGonigal is interested in exploring the consequences of blurring these phenomenological and ontological boundaries, her analysis is focused on determining the significance of computing devices as objects that are central to play and performance— quasi-magical objects with hidden meanings and functions that lay just beneath the surface of the ostensibly everyday.

For my purposes in exploring the cultural logic of ARGs, I am instead interested in the way ubiquitous computing may facilitate a larger cultural concern with the *potential* of layers of reality and hiddenness in our everyday experiences. Ubiquitous computing means that at any time and in any place, the possibility exists for an object to have a hidden functionality and for our experiences to be digitally mediated through sensory experience. The embeddedness of computing in everything from televisions to light switches and from thermostats to automobiles makes interaction with digital devices the norm. Whether through display screens, tactile input interfaces, or networked connections that allow these objects to communicate with us and each other, interaction with digital devices is pervasive. These devices themselves are phenomenologically and ontologically as real as a non-digital device with the same purpose and appearance, such as a refrigerator.

In addition to ubiquitous computing, the genesis of ARGs is also facilitated by the rise of digital media. The genesis of ARGs is tied to a specific moment in time that corresponds to digital media being thought of as “new media” — the early 2000s. Critical theory on contemporary media has moved beyond the notions of “new” and “old” media in many important ways, such as focusing on the processes of mediation instead of only the material objects in Kember and Zylinska’s *Life After New Media* (2012). However, the timeliness of the term “new

media” coinciding with the foundation of ARGs also reinforces the destabilization of older systems and artifacts of life, whether technology or schemata. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich defines new media as being situated at the intersection of computing and media technologies (44). For Manovich, two important principles of new media serve to distinguish it from old media and to serve as a logical foundation for the remaining three principles he identifies. These two principles are digital/numerical representation and modularity. The former allows for computing devices to more easily share and manipulate data sets that represent various modes of media— graphics, audio, text, video, and more. Modularity refers to the individual instantiations of media and media elements that can be combined to form other media. For instance, a web page might contain multiple text, video, animation, and picture assets that are combined into a single page, such as the frontpage of the New York Times website, which is made up of several article excerpts, digital video and images, and more. These assets are stored individually in separate locations on a media container, such as a digital server, but can be combined and recombined into media experiences, such as the frontpage. Much like hypertexts with textons and scriptons, these media assets can be pulled from a database and reassembled in new formations, whether by a script or an individual user (Aarseth 15).

Digital media, when seen through Manovich’s first two principles, enmesh with ubiquitous computing to lay the foundation for one of the most important qualities for ARGs: deep immersion. Ubicomp establishes a means for distributing digital media through a saturation of devices mutually accessible via a network. These devices are often embedded in objects that have existed outside of the experience of digital computing, such as appliances and self-checkout registers. Ubicomp devices such as the smartphone and the tablet have also become

commonplace and part of our everyday reality. Through network connections, users of these devices can share, disseminate, and experience media in digital circulation. Representational media, such as audio and video, represent our experience of reality through stimulation of our senses. In “Senses,” Caroline Jones writes about this through a similar historical dichotomy of feeling and thinking and how, through the allegory of Plato’s cave, the knowing (ontological) has been privileged over the feeling (phenomenological) historically (Jones). In ARGs, however, the participants ontological and phenomenological schemata are challenged; the experiences both feel real and are thought to be real in that they use everyday objects to deliver clues.

Due to the commonality of digital devices that can deliver media that simulate reality through the stimulating the senses and also that these devices are themselves everyday objects, a dual immersion is possible and this is the immersion that is unique in ARGs. The first level of the immersion is the mediated experience presented through digital media. This immersion is a type of immersion that is the focus of Murray, Bolter and Grusin, and others who have explored virtual reality. These studies look at mediation and technology through the direct stimulation of sensory perception via an interface, such as VR goggles. More common examples would include the immersion found in surround-sound cinema or contemporary video games played on large screens with controllers that give tactile feedback. However, a second layer of immersion is present in ARGs. This second layer consists of reflexive simulation, in which the participant is aware of the mediated nature of contemporary culture even as the experience itself is embedded in the recognition of the interface as an artificial extension of the senses. The interface of the ARG is the mediated world itself. The potential for in-game clues to be discovered is equal in mediated digital spaces, such as a website, and in physical spaces, such as a park or bar. This

duality of interface is echoed by the reality (ontological and phenomenological) of the website itself, whose interface in the context of everyday life is indistinguishable from its context in the alternate reality of the ARG.

Players see the ARG as artifice, as something constructed— which is why the assertion that *this is not a game* (the TINAG aesthetic) is required for the experience. Though the ARG is constructed, players apply traditional suspension of belief not to events within a fictional world of a film or novel, but instead within their everyday lives. But, due to the immersive use of reality layers, they must also see the entire world— including the layer of reality we have traditionally privileged as “real” — as being constructed and mediated, in order to acknowledge that clues can be embedded within reality and its objects and media. This furthers immersion, similar to the effect Virilio describes in *The Information Bomb*:

... far from setting the **actual** perspective of optical presence of the Quattrocento against the **virtual** perspective of electro-optic tele-presence, the real-time perspective of telecommunications combines the two, thus creating a ‘field effect’ in which the actual and the virtual together produce a new kind of **relief**, not unlike the ‘soundscape’ of hi-fi with its treble and bass notes. (119, emphasis original)

Virilio suggests that, through the digital network or “perspective of telecommunication,” the virtual (“electro-optic tele-presence”) and the real (marked by the traditional mediated view of 15th century Italian Renaissance visual arts, or “optical presence”) merge into a single perspective. This “relief” has a texture or dimensionality to it; it is the combination of material properties and digital data that creates a new type of sensory perception, a combination of real and virtual. Through the proliferation of digital networked devices and their occupation of many spaces, the potential for digital computing to influence our collective perception of reality is magnified.

While Virilio might be primarily concerned with virtual realities that are of the digitally-mediated Oculus Rift variety, Baudrillard, whose writing predates the commonality of virtual reality devices, focuses on the virtual created through physical spaces and ontological experiences. First, to understand the relevance of Baudrillard's writing in the context of ARGs, an understanding of simulation is needed. In "Simulation versus Narrative," Frasca provides a working definition of the simulation: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system" (223). According to Frasca, the distinguishing feature of a simulation is that it "does not simply retain the...characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors" (223). Based upon this definition, models can be understood to be concerned with representation, but also a dynamic behavior—a simulation does not just look or smell or taste like something, but does all those things: it replicates experiences, phenomenologically and ontologically. We can look to common simulations to understand this difference. For instance, organizations simulate disasters for training purposes to more thoroughly convey the experience of an event, as opposed to simply presenting a textual or graphic scenario. The participants in these simulations play roles to give a dynamic behavioral depth to the exercise, one that creates a deeper immersive experience, such as SIMUVAC from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*⁴⁸ or any war game training exercises employed by the militaries of the world for the past one hundred years. Baudrillard argues that

The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance... In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops

⁴⁸The irony of DeLillo's airborne toxic event is that the SIMUVAC workers help in managing an actual disaster evacuation, creating confusion as to what is real and what is simulated—a confusion that cuts to the core of the breakdown of notions of certainty discussed in this chapter.

it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere... simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.” (2-3)

The ARG, with its immersive use of both media and physical space, is a simulation of reality—or, stated another way, serves as a possible reality, hence the name “alternate” and not simply the use of “fiction” or “fantasy” or, as Baudrillard says, “imaginary.” This physical space connection, as opposed to thinking of only digitally-mediated virtual reality as a simulation, is seen in Baudrillard’s example of Disneyland as a “perfect model” that “[conceals] the fact that the real is no longer real” (12-13). This use of both physical space and everyday media creates the paradox of an interface-less interface. Kittler writes that “the general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interfaces” (1). With ARGs, participants have the experience of both interface and no interface. In having online discussions and searching through HTML source code and sharing information, they experience the digital interfaces of contemporary life. However, with these clues and the game space subsuming the space of reality, the interface also slips away, and the experience of the ARG is through the regular perceptions and practices of everyday life.

The ontological experience of the real is shifted through the ubiquity of computational objects; the machines that mediate our existence are real in our existence and the mediation is real, as well; therefore, the experience of an alternate reality that is presented through these same means seems no different than the reality we label as genuine. The genuine is only a privileged version of reality, one that has been historically informed and created and mediated by the structures of bourgeois society, whether that be through bureaucratic regimes of perception,

policy, or commerce. And citizens have been trained in how to participate in these regimes through popular media. However, though ARGs can be understood in terms of extensions of the dominant structures of the marketplace, as seen in the previous chapter on the industrial logic, they are not solely objects of mass communication and marketing. These experiences also blur the lines between systems of control and sites of collective resistance, between consumption and production. By looking at Debord's theory of the spectacle, we can posit that ARGs offer a new form of agency in the age of mass media.

“It's not fucking marketing”

In 2007, Trent Reznor, the creative force of the band Nine Inch Nails, was making a concept album that captured the sense of the dystopian, fascist pathway down which he saw the United States heading (Rose). This album, *Year Zero*, was a project in search of a medium to provide contextual backdrop for its musical and artistic statements. Having closely observed recent developments in media technology, Reznor understood that the distribution of digital music had expanded the range of possibilities for undertakings like the one he had in mind. Having been fascinated by the first ARG, *The Beast*, Reznor thought a transmedia experience—specifically an ARG—would be the appropriate way to create a deep experience and realization of the storyworld in which his album was set. While we could perhaps dismiss this ARG as an attempt simply to advertise the album, this would not be fair to the project. Reznor specifically rejected any commercial intent. According to an article about Reznor's effort appearing in

Wired:

Reznor would like to make one thing about the *Year Zero* game perfectly clear: "It's not fucking marketing. I'm not trying to sell anything." That's why he paid for the game himself, out of his recording budget. For a while, he didn't even tell his label what he was

doing. (“Secret Websites, Coded Messages: The New World of Immersive Games”)

That this distinction is important to Reznor is clear by the emphasis of his response; this distinction is equally important if we are to regard ARGs as having a deeper cultural context than just one that is accessible through the lens of industry⁴⁹. To show this cultural relevance, I will suggest that ARGs can be understood as more than simply a phenomenon of commodification, using Debord’s notion of the spectacle and contemporary media theory regarding the blurring of production and consumption. From a Debord’s Marxist standpoint, ARGs might appear as the ultimate mass media distraction. However, if we take into account yet another major affordance of digital media and the cultural shifts that run parallel to the rise of digital media, we can see that— through an understanding of the blurring between consumption and production and the agency of the viewer, as seen in more contemporary media scholarship— ARGs resist being read simply as a media spectacle.

A common method of critically examining media is to approach the study through the dichotomy of production and consumption. With the turn from the pre-industrial, artisanal mode of media production— represented in textual production by the scribal system and in image production by the painter— to mechanized production and reproduction— represented in part by the printing press and the lithograph— the scale of this production and consumption grew exponentially. More recently, digital networked technology has also increased the sophistication of media production and, sometimes, increased the accessibility and speed of media distribution. Marxist media theorists from Walter Benjamin to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to Guy Debord have focused on the mass production and consumption of media and culture, a condition

⁴⁹ This approach is also offered by Elsaesser, as presented later in the chapter.

precipitated by the production technologies of Fordism and industrial capitalism. In a very broad view, these approaches have largely considered production and consumption as functions of separate spheres of society: production is set by the bourgeoisie by means of the labor of the proletariat; those who have power produce, those who lack power consume. Thus, as Guy Debord argues in *The Society of the Spectacle*, this contemporary media, especially mass media, is “essentially *one-way*” (19, emphasis original).

Recent approaches to media studies, however, seek to complicate this simple dichotomy of production and consumption as being mutually exclusive categories. One of the common threads to these studies has been the importance of digital networked technology. Henry Jenkins, in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, explores fan production as a complicating factor in this dichotomy. Examples of fan production, or consumer production, cover a wide range of examples: vidding—creating video mashups of favorite scenes in tribute to a favorite television show or movie; machinima—using video game graphic engines, such as those of the *Halo* and *Grand Theft Auto* franchises, to create narrative movies, with the game world as the backdrop and the players' avatars as the actors; writing fan fiction (fanfic) that creatively extends characters from mass media produced narratives into new—and sometimes transgressive—contexts, such as “slash” fiction for the *Harry Potter* narrative world; fans of films and television series flocking to message boards where they exchange theories, interpretations, knowledge, and experiences and build community in order to appreciate, critique, and celebrate their enjoyment of a particular narrative.

While these are all ways of thinking about production by individuals we might traditionally view as consumers—the purchasers of video games and novels, viewers of

television and movies— most of these productions do not require a community, per se. An individual can make a machinima, write a piece of fanfic, or edit a vid on their own and choose or not choose to share it with others. The work is produced in isolation and doesn't necessarily meet a community or even an audience. In this manner, then, these examples of production might complicate the “one-way” claim of Debord; they do not, however, address another of Debord's central claims:

The reigning economic system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn...” (22)

This isolation is not necessarily overcome through many of the types of production about which Jenkins writes. Fan communities centered on the narratives produced by mass media corporations do exhibit shared production, however, and do so in a manner that resists Debord's claim that technology is only an agent of isolation. This specific type of production can be understood through Pierre Lévy's concept of *collective intelligence* (or CI). CI seeks to understand collaborative production enabled by the proliferation of digital networked technologies, such as the internet. Lévy argues that the exchange of information and ideas through global digital networks should “mobilize and coordinate the intelligence, experience, skills, wisdom, and imagination of humanity” (qtd. in “Why *I Love Bees*” 199). It is important, though, to also view productive fan communities within the “reigning economic system” of today—which, of course, is similar to the system at the time of Debord's writing in 1967. Though the types of commodities being produced and the manner and place in which they are produced have changed, Western society remains steeped in consumerist capitalism. In one sense, the CI production of fan communities comes as a reaction to the content produced by the dominant

forces (or the *administrators of society*, as Debord might say). As a reaction, it is dictated by what the entertainment industry chooses to produce. Another way of approaching this distinction between production and consumption in CI communities is through Hans Magnus Enzensberger's notion of a “socialist strategy” for using contemporary media to undermine and resist the power of bourgeois society through collective production and manipulation of media (Enzensberger 267). By using the means of production available to mass media, workers could potentially push back against the dominant institutions, creating competing narratives that serve their own collective aims.

(Dis)Ordering Perspectives

In “The Mind-Game Film,” Thomas Elsaesser examines what he describes as a phenomenon in cinema, as opposed to a genre—the mind-game film. In much the same way we might consider ARGs as not only as marketing tools for industry, Elsaesser gives cultural valence to these films because they exist not solely for commercial purposes, attaining mostly cult status, not blockbuster levels of ticket sales. Rather, the dedicated attention these films receive from engaged viewers, critics, and academics—all of them through writing in various spaces—is perceived as a sign that they be viewed “as symptomatic for wider changes in the culture’s way with moving images and virtual worlds” (39).

This type of film is characterized by “playing games” with either characters within the diegesis or with the audience -- or both -- through two methods: withholding information or presenting competing realities, both of which are feasible and believable (14-15). Examples include *Fight Club* (1999), wherein the main character, an unnamed narrator, is unaware of his

dual personalities and instead sees his other personality, Tyler Durden, as a separate character; *The Sixth Sense* (1999), wherein the main character is dead throughout the film, but neither the character nor the audience know this; *Donnie Darko* (2001), in which the main character has schizophrenia, though the viewer is only left with partial indications of this condition through the diegetic perspective given to them; or, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), wherein the protagonist has an imagined friend that, for a majority of the film, is presented as real to the viewer and main character. While Elsaesser writes about these films from the viewpoint of 2009, it is important to note that most his examples only slightly pre-date the first ARG, 2001's *The Beast*, and temporally overlap into the ARG genre only slightly. In addition to those mentioned above, an enlarged list might include *Se7en* (1995), *The Game* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *Memento* (2000), as well as films from 2001-2002: *The Others*, *Vanilla Sky*, *Adaptation*, *Spider*, and *Mulholland Drive*. In many ways, these films represent predecessors to the ARG and can be viewed in conjunction with the cultural conditions of contemporary life that Elsaesser applies to these films, the same ascribed to ARGs in this chapter.

Of particular interest in the mind-game film is its role as symptom of contemporary culture, which is a role similar to that of the ARG. Elsaesser is very careful to avoid labeling the films he identifies as a genre, as they belong to multiple, otherwise stable, genres: science fiction, mystery, drama, and the like. Instead they are a “phenomenon” to be understood as “symptomatic” of something larger: cultural shifts. These shifts, in general, are related to “broader changes in the field of (bourgeois, Oedipal) subjectivity, of (theories of) consciousness

and identity...” — the same larger cultural shifts outlined in this chapter via Foucault, Baudrillard, and Virilio (36).

The ties between ARG and mind-game film are both broad and specific. First, mind-game films can part of the transmedia ecology, such as *The Matrix* (1999). *The Matrix* is a mind-game film based upon two potential realities: the one within the digitally-mediated construct (the “matrix”) and the one outside of it. In this way, *The Matrix* is about a similar type of immersion that can be found in ARGs: the simulation of the sensory perception through digital media. In the film, the characters that gain entry through being physically wired into the digital construct by a direct connection to their brain. The characters who enter the “matrix” from the world outside the “matrix” are unique in that they are aware of the constructedness of the reality experienced digitally; it is only by a sort of conscious awakening that a select few are able to distinguish between experiences in and out of the digital environment, as the majority of humans in the world of the film are suspended in this constructed reality without any knowledge of its artificiality. These characters achieve a complete immersion of both the senses and their perception of reality through being digitally mediated. The complexity of this narrative, similar to the complex televisual narratives⁵⁰ explored in the previous chapter, requires the deeper storyworld provided by a transmedia experience, as well. These complex narratives are part of the cultural backdrop of the mind-game film; their complexity allow for the condition of multiple viewpoints, several twists and turns, and the careful maintaining of internal logic so that they maintain internally self-consistent logic— or, in one sense, follow their own rules (Elsaesser 19-20).

⁵⁰ Elsaesser gives credit to Jason Mittell’s work in understanding similar mind-game phenomena in television linked to complex narratives.

The complexity of the text is further linked to a marker of transmedia and ARG immersion: the database logic of digital media. As described above by Manovich, new media productions are modular and digital, allowing them to be recalled from a database and assembled in multiple forms by various users, by automated scripts, or some combination of both. This database logic is also applicable to narrative and is specifically positioned as emblematic of the mind-game film. In his discussion, Elsaesser posits that the linearity of historical verbal and mimetic narrative, epitomized by the print book and easel painting's single window to the world, is starting to give way, in some instances, to the ostensibly disorganized, non-linear tendencies of modernity and postmodernity—a shift that is facilitated and prompted by the affordances of modularity and digitality in new media (23-24). Though he recognizes the limitations of this theory due to the linear structuring of the films themselves—they are, after all, shown in the same order as determined by the films' creators, and order locked in before the film is released to the viewing public—we cannot overlook the importance of the database aesthetic. Without the disordering of linear time and the ability for multiple perspectives, as in a real-time surveillance monitor that records several camera perspectives, the eventual revelation and resolution of the mind-game film's puzzle would not be possible. One fan of the mind-game film phenomenon describes the reflexive pleasures of this perspective in the following manner:

the 'oh-my-god-everything-has-changed' feeling in *The Sixth Sense* is reinforced by the 'gotcha' feeling of replayed scenes from earlier in the movie that you now understand differently. The viewer gets to have it both ways: have the oh-my-god feeling and watch the protagonist experience it too. (18)

Only by looking back and seeing the narrative special effect, as film scholar Jeffrey Sconce might call it⁵¹, is the pleasure of the shift in perspective, the realization that perception and reality

⁵¹ See Chapter 3 on the "operational aesthetic" in complex televisual narratives.

are not aligned in the manner we had supposed fully experienced. This characteristic also aligns with the film *The Game* (1997), which— as described in greater detail and depth in the first chapter of this dissertation— stands as an early predecessor of the ARG. Specifically, the plot of the film concerns the protagonist unknowingly being a participant in a personalized, ARG-like experience. At the climax of the film, the viewer is presented with the same situation described above: we see on the screen how diegetic details have been overlooked and how the film has not only played a game with the character but also that we, the audience, have been duped both thoroughly and fairly by the film.

Mind-game films that align with ARGs also fall within a second category: the conspiracy film. Both *The Game* and *The Matrix* fall within this category, as do several other films, such as *Minority Report* (2002) or *Flight Plan* (2005)⁵². Elsaesser describes these films as important to contemporary culture in the following way:

Yet paranoia, one can argue, is also the appropriate – or even “productive” – pathology of our contemporary network society. Being able to discover new connections, where ordinary people operate only by analogy or antithesis; being able to rely on bodily “intuition” as much as on ocular perception; or being able to think “laterally” and respond hyper-sensitively to changes in the environment may turn out to be assets and not just an affliction. The “creative potential” of conspiracy theories lies in the way they help deal with impersonal bureaucratic systems, based on protocols and routines, and practicing mysterious forms of inclusion and exclusion, rather than implementing transparent laws and explicit prohibitions... Paranoia and conspiracy theories, by shifting perspectives and generating horizons with higher degrees of complexity, can lead to new kinds of knowledge. (26)

When taken in the context of contemporary culture, with the highly bureaucratized structure of the bourgeois state, the conspiracy is a common and, perhaps, productive schema in

⁵² It is perhaps no coincidence that most of the films that I have highlighted in this category are tied to ARGs: Steven Spielberg directed *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, the main IP for the first ARG; David Fincher directed *The Game*, which served as a model for ARGs, and later used an ARG in conjunction with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; *The Matrix* is a prime example of transmedia and had an independent ARG, *Metacortex*, produced as a spin-off experience.

understanding the world. In the article, Elsaesser uses the term “productive pathologies” to describe how these new ways of viewing can be seen as perceptively “other” and traditionally undesirable. In using both paranoia and schizophrenia as mental illness frames of reference, we can see how these psychological frames can be used to understand differences in both narrative and, more globally, human experience in contemporary culture. The challenges— I hesitate to use “crises”— posed by a world in which certainty, linearity, and other previously stable frames of reference for our experience, both phenomenologically and ontologically, are deep and, sometimes, shocking. New regimes and schemata are required to adapt, and the connections to paranoia and schizophrenia are apt. We can understand the schizophrenic mode as relating to ordering time and perspective in a new way, an overthrow of the dominance of linearity and causality that are hallmarks of post-Enlightenment worldviews. In essence, the fragmentation of the mind and senses is appropriately matched to the fragmentation of time and perspective. This signifies an ability to make connections from a diverse array of input information, reflected in the requirement to juxtapose information and clues in an ARG experience.

Furthermore, the frame of paranoia is firmly at the convergence of ARGs, mind-game films, and the light they collectively shed on the contemporary cultural logic they satisfy. Perhaps more telling than schizophrenia as a productive pathology, the paranoid viewpoint encourages a focus on hidden narratives that are organized into a plot; it encourages sifting through the everyday experience to find a hidden agenda and the ordering of those clues into a coherence recognizable to the viewer. In the world of the conspiracy theory, it is the paranoid who succeed at navigating the hidden and embedded clues that others assume to be part of a different everyday reality. Perhaps the most obvious current narrative that embodies the paranoia

perspective is the Showtime television series *Homeland*, wherein the protagonist Carrie Mathison is a (sometime) CIA operative who struggles to manage her own different diagnosis: bipolar disorder⁵³. To Mathison, almost everything has a deeper meaning and connection; her perception is a clear advantage in resolving the parallax perception of what the majority of society perceives as real and what are actual conspiracies, buried within bureaucracies that are domestic or international or both. As happens in most seasons, Mathison is the key player in solving these deeply concealed plots, making the connections that others cannot— and she is routinely presented with the choice of a normal life, which involves being medicated to alter her perception, or rejecting medication, which preserves her ability to see the hidden connections inherent in the conspiracy plot, but disorders her personal life. In effect, she can choose to save herself, or she can choose to save the world; she can choose to live a muted life in which her senses are dulled, or she can choose to live her authentic, disordered life which affords her the ability of a productive pathology. Through shows like *Homeland* and the films mentioned above, Americans have become more comfortable with the advantages of these “productive pathologies.”

Paranoia is the mode of the ARG, steeped in the tradition of conspiracy. As previously discussed *Year Zero*, was focused on a conspiracy. The contextual framing of the ARG is centered on a hidden agenda of a despotic, theocratic government had established rule in the United States of 2022. In something akin to conspiracy theories about fluoride, the government in *Year Zero* adds a drug to the country’s water supply under the auspices of pharmacological

⁵³ Even the terminology “disorder,” the preferred nomenclature of mental health practitioners and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, reflects the breakdown of a presupposed order— an order that seeks to manage the body and the mind through the encyclopedic normalizing of behavioral, sensory, and cognitive experiences. Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic* addresses this pathological view of certainty, and his “Of Other Spaces” places those in spaces that are purposely outside communal spaces.

prevention of a potential biological terrorist attack. The drug, however, makes citizens more docile and less likely to resist the despotic and militaristic government. Appropriately, on the website of the ARG's developers, Forty2wo Entertainment, the *Year Zero* case study page features the following pull quote from a New York Times about the experience: "In this paranoid world, everything worth knowing is a secret" ("Year Zero"). According to a fan-community-produced wiki, when citizens of *Year Zero* stop taking this drug, Parepin, they experience a "clarity of thought, which the government claims is mere paranoia" ("Year Zero Research"). In the case of *Year Zero*, the paranoia of the conspiracy is productive— in participating in the transmedia experience itself and in the immersed alternate reality of resisting a hegemonic state. Participation in this ARG involved a number of investigative techniques. Players of the game had to find typographic clues on the back of tour T-shirts, unearthing a network of websites detailing the historical and political context of the fictional world. To advance further, they would have to use spectrum analysis to uncover visual images embedded in unreleased Nine Inch Nails tracks found on unmarked thumb drives inconspicuously left in a bathroom at three concert performances. They would be encouraged to attend live events, to create and post resistance art, and take part in other individual and collective acts. The core of ARG participation consists of being able to view the everyday, whether T-shirt or website or newspaper advertisement, and see an underlying organization of meaning connected to a larger plot.

Furthermore, not only does *Year Zero* rely on digital media and its practices for the distribution of and the participation in the experience, the project addresses the shift from old media to new by remediating the concept album. Reznor wanted to create a contemporary

concept album, which traditionally have a central, unified theme and narrative, such as David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, wherein the artist takes on the identity of a character, or Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, wherein the band created a dystopian narrative somewhat similar to *Year Zero*. In order to maintain the logic of consumption essential to the popular music industry, the concept album has remained commodified in a way that allows it to be sold as a discrete and predominantly personal listening experience, as opposed to a piece of musical theater. The singles from a concept album are meant to be broadcast on radio or sold for use in personal music system. Historically, this has meant that the context of the behind the album – its concept – has needed to be part of retail packaging. This context has been mediated through liner notes (text) and album art (image). With changes in distribution facilitated by digital media, however, the music industry no longer relies on the production of physical media, such as the vinyl record, magnetic cassette tape, or compact disc; rather, music is predominantly distributed via digital devices and networks—MP3 download, or whatever encoding standard might be currently equivalent. These changes in technology led Reznor to explore different means of evoking the world of his concept album, through the new media aesthetics and experience of the ARG (Rose). The creative lead of the *Year Zero* ARG, Jordan Weisman⁵⁴, further connects the phenomenon of ARGs to contemporary media culture, stating that reaching people in that culture can be difficult due to the high saturation of mediated stimuli available on a daily basis: “Your brain filters it out, because otherwise you'd go crazy”⁵⁵ (Rose). Thus, ARGs are effective at reaching audiences in a manner that is instead subliminal, implying a sly pathway that allows for participants to find agency on their own. It cannot be ignored, however, that the ARG takes on a

⁵⁴ Weisman was also the creative director for *The Beast* and *i love bees*.

⁵⁵ This notion of “crazy” produced by hyperstimulation in an oversaturated media environment is, ironically, the same reason why “productive pathologies” are used as effective means of navigated contemporary life.

perspective of a mental disorder in order to productively experience contemporary life. While this seems potentially paradoxical, in a cultural condition in which the overabundance of information creates a need to turn “crazy,” it is only through these perspectives of paranoia and schizophrenia that we can organize our phenomenological and ontological experiences.

Immersion— and Production

To conclude, I will seek to show how ARGs problematize the distinction between producer and consumer that Debord enacts, that Enzensberger seeks to reverse, and that Baudrillard, in “Requiem for the Media,” seeks to transgress. To show this blurring of producer/consumer, I will examine the effect and agency that players—who are a type of collective intelligence community or communities—exhibit in controlling not only the outcome but the development of ARGs. In a sense, players collaborate with the game designers (or *puppetmasters* [PMs]) in order to create the game as it unfolds. To show this, I will examine a discrete pair of ARGs: *The Beast* and *Push, Nevada*.

Further, I will explore how ARGs operate within the current economic reality in order to closely examine the degree to which strategies of resistance to the dominant system are available and affected. For instance, if most ARGs are produced as marketing for primary products of the entertainment industry, how transgressive or revolutionary might these sanctioned forms of CI be? One way I hope to approach this question is to study the way ARGs affect our experience of reality, particularly through their use of digital networking technologies (DNT) and ubiquitous computing (ubicomputing). I will argue that the ascendance of DNT and ubicomputing aligns the ARG with the conditions of the rapid pace of contemporary capitalism (or “fast capitalism”), which the

New London Group, among others, see as a major influence on the literacies required for active citizenship in a networked world (New London Group). The CI structures of ARGs provide potential to resist and shape these economic conditions and power structures through the power of the collective. As Mitchell and Hansen argue, ubicomp and DNT change time and space—which are, in combination with communicative media, the components of collaboration (Mitchell and Hansen).

A major factor in the resistance to definition in the ARG genre stems from the immersive quality of these experiences. One convergence between individual examples of ARGs might be the aesthetic expressed in the statement, “this is not a game,” for which Jane McGonigal suggests the tag “TINAG” (“This Is Not a Game” 3-4). As McGonigal shows through her chronicling of *The Beast*, one of the primary factors in creating the immersive environment of an ARG is the lack of official pronouncement that an ARG is, in fact, a fictional game. Great pains are taken to create the immersive alternate reality as “real”; an explicit acknowledgement of the narrative world as fictional or fake would effectively undermine the structure of the game. In one definition created by members of the community, ARGs attempt to “enmesh the game within the fabric of the player’s real world” by using “concealed” artifacts and “real-time interactions” (“What is an ARG?”). Therefore, to maintain this central feature, standards and rules are tacit, at best.

This implicitness of rules provides an important role for the player-as-consumer and producer in ARGs. As there are no published rules for particular ARGs, or explicit meta-rules for the genre as a whole due to its relative infancy, players themselves are left to negotiate and determine their individual and collective actions—a type of in situ creation of rules and

meta-rules for an individual ARG based upon the unique experiences of the specific community of participants. Returning to Debord's notion of the spectacle as a monodirectional media phenomenon, we can perhaps begin to see some resistance to this claim in the agency of the players in determining the structure or the game.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Bushman describes one useful version of the inner workings of the Cloudmakers, an online group of players formed for *The Beast*. One particular instance that brings into question some of Debord's assumptions of media spectacle as one-way is the "Zartman Incident," in which players, attempting to find answers to this opaque and cryptic game, cyber-stalked a game designer, Doug Zartman, who had registered one of the game's numerous websites with his own name (Bushman 10). While Zartman eventually begged the group to halt its constant investigation of the details of his everyday life, Bushman cites this instance as "a catalyst for a wide-ranging conversation about the ethics of playing the game and what could be defined as cheating"—a conversation that could only be self-assembled by the players, as "[t]he game itself published no rules" (10). This anecdote is significant in at least two ways. First, it shows that the players of *The Beast* had the agency to determine the rules of this medium experience. In Debord's view of the power structure of mass media spectacle, it is the producers who have this role, which, in this case, would be some combination of the designers at Microsoft who had created the game and the filmmakers, marketers, producers, and executives at Warner Brothers who created *A.I.* However, as Bushman illustrates, it is to a large extent the players themselves who decided on how they would interact with the game, not Microsoft and Warner Brothers. The players determined the ethics of what was allowable and what was forbidden. Rather than following the structures and preferences of industry producers, the players

determined the ethics of their actions in terms of what mattered to them.

Among these concerns was respect for the PMs. By setting ethical boundaries for the community, a similar occurrence during *The Beast* was avoided when a repeat of the mass intrusion of the Zartman Incident was avoided after an actual puppetmaster was discovered through the metadata attached to a particular media artifact (Bushman 11). The other major concern of the community's in this case was preservation of their own autonomy. Rather than being overtly concerned with the aims of what was primarily an elaborate marketing campaign for a summer Hollywood blockbuster, the Cloudmakers wanted to maintain the value of their entertainment. As Bushman writes, the "players agreed that in order to get the maximum enjoyment out the experience it was important to stay in front" of the "dividing line" between player and PM, between the game's manifestation in the world and the processes of game creation, "since this dividing line was invisible, it was up to the players to decide where" that line was drawn (10-11). The immersive, TINAG aesthetic of ARGs gave players agency to determine the boundaries of their individual and collective experiences.

The complexities of ethics require negotiation. To achieve a consensus, the collective must engage in elaborate communication: through both synchronous chats and asynchronous message posting that collects the voices of players from around the globe. In this act, we can begin to see the significance of how CI communities might begin to enact a more equitable exchange of communication than Debord's model allows. An understanding of this effect is better illuminated through Enzensberger's "Constituents of a Theory of the Media." There Enzensberger posit how those without the imprimatur of capitalism might begin to resist

imposed power structures through contemporary media production⁵⁶. He writes that:

“[a]ny socialist strategy for the media for the media must...strive to end the isolation of the individual from the social learning and production process,” as “the proper use of the media demands organization *and* makes it possible.” (267, emphasis added)

While the resistance to capitalism was likely outside the defined scope of the Cloudmakers interests, Enzensberger’s theory is applicable in pointing out both the significance of CI communities and the deficiency of Debord’s spectacle as applied to ARGs.

To return to Debord’s first concern, as stated above, he argues that the predominant economic system is both built upon the isolation of individuals and seeks to produce that same isolation. To Debord, it is technology that enables this isolation. In the case of ARGs, however, and the Cloudmakers specifically, we can see digital networked technology being employed in an apparently opposite manner, just as Enzensberger allows. As *The Beast* is told through various digital networked technologies—websites and source code, databases, digital text documents, online movie trailers, email addresses—it places its players in a similar environment. As the players consume the digital clues, they use the same media and networks to organize themselves into a CI community. The ARG demands an organized player community and the media through which it is experienced provide the tools that make organization possible. In a complex narrative game without rules, based on the aesthetics of concealment and opacity, progression relies on the specialized skills of community members, skills use to make obscure connections and solve highly technical puzzles (“This Is Not a Game” 2). Thus the Cloudmakers, who viewed themselves “as a hive-mind, a distributed intelligence made up of thousands of individuals,” throw off any supposed isolation and use media to organize and shape the outcome of their own

⁵⁶While Enzensberger is writing about pre-digital media in 1970, his inclusion here is less about the materiality of the technology and far more about the organization of the network that distributes a counter-narrative of the Left. For more on this, see Chapter 5.

experiences (Bushman 13).

We must further complicate this distinction between Debord and Enzensberger, however, to ask, more specifically, what type of communication is taking place between players and PMs and between members of the CI community. In *The Beast*, the players responded to the artifacts released by the PMs by negotiating their meaning within their community structures of communication: mailing lists and message boards. On the surface, these two types of communications (players reacting to PMs, players negotiating between themselves) offer a useful type of distinction. In “Requiem for the Media,” Jean Baudrillard critiques Enzensberger’s characterization of resistance through media, as it fails to discard a model of communication (transmitter-message-receiver) that upholds simple categories of producer and consumer, or “the dialectic itself which has reached the moment of deadlock” (286). For Baudrillard, it is not the simple reversal of this common model that is worth seeking, but rather an upheaval: “an original form of exchange... *neither transmitters, nor receivers*” (286, emphasis original). As pertains to *The Beast*, the negotiation between players would seem to constitute this transgressing of the standard model. To interpret the artifacts, players must combine their knowledge and collaborate to build understandings of individual events within the game. There is no single voice that manipulates players’ interpretation as a group, as the necessary knowledges are distributed. While the interaction between players and PMs might seem opposed to this player autonomy, it is perhaps hasty to make this assumption. As noted at the beginning, we can see many types of engaged fan communities arising in reaction to dominant industry practices. This type of communication would fall into the standard model of communication: a response to a message. In this model, as Baudrillard argues, the response is largely unheard—or, more appropriately, not

in turn responded to—by the industry. Stephanie Meyer did not change the outcome of her books based on trends of *Twilight* fanfic. Or, as Barthes eloquently writes, the reader or viewer “is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*” (qtd. in Baudrillard 281). With ARGs, however, this non-response— or non-interactivity— is not always the case, as players can alter the experience in meaningful ways.

Yet again, *The Beast* offers a useful example of this type of interactivity. The PMs for *The Beast* created a three-month schedule of puzzles that they categorized with varying degrees of difficulty— and they were all solved on the first day by the Cloudmakers (“This Is Not a Game” 2-3). This forced the PMs to design new challenges in response to the skills of their players, such as releasing partial bits of artifacts simultaneously at separate physical locations, which required the players to coordinate in an advanced manner to collect and interpret those clues. The collective actions of the players determined how the game progressed by influencing the behavior of the PMs, forcing them to adapt to unforeseen challenges.

Finally, *Push, Nevada* offers an anomalous example of player production and agency at an extreme; it also embodies an interesting potential for interactive narrative in a communication model other than the transmitter-message-receiver. As part of their fall 2002 television series *Push, Nevada*, ABC incorporated an ARG that asked players to collect and solve clues in order to win a single, large cash prize. Like the short-lived series, however, the game ended in an abbreviated fashion; so disappointing was the resolution of the game, that a group of players, calling themselves “Shove,” decided to hijack the game and continue to extend it through their own production for the benefit of their community (“This Is Not a Game” 6). In this example,

the relationship between traditional producers and consumers is both reversed and transgressed. Unhappy with what was created by the industry, the players took control of the means of production and re-wrote the game as a collaboration within their own community of players. ARGs, despite their nuances and dissimilarities between individual aims and goals, offer their players the opportunity to produce at multiple levels. Players are ceded the agency to determine how to interpret artifacts and how to establish the rules and ethics of play that guide their communal interpretation. Their production can also influence the pace and direction of the unfolding of the game narrative. In this way, they embody the socialist strategy of media resistance espoused by Enzensberger, and they apply this strategy directly to mass media by seizing control of DNT and ubicomp resources. The collaborative communications within CI communities are better understood in terms of the transgression of the transmitter-message-receiver model, as detailed by Baudrillard. Through these multivalent opportunities for production, there is a potential for developing an interactive mode of storytelling and game-play that relies less on virtual reality— the immersive interface of three-dimensional computer-generated imagery— and more on an alternate reality accessed through the hidden interface of ubiquitous, everyday media technologies.

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Introduction

When it comes to the study of games and learning, a great amount of research is available on the use of several types of games for educational purposes. The focus of these studies is largely video games such as simulations— both close-ended objective-defined, and open-ended “sandbox” simulations— and video games designed with specific educational/physiological goals, to name a few. There is, unfortunately, far less available on the potential and impact of immersive games, such as pervasive games—those based on specific locations, such as geocache treasure hunts or Pac Manhattan—and, more importantly, I will argue, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). ARGs and pervasive games share some overlap in design and characteristics of play: both use “real” world features and artifacts, such as streets, buildings, public spaces, payphones, and publicly available media, such as billboards, posters, or media made available through mobile networked technology. ARGs tend to use multimedia clues to direct players on a narrative-driven puzzle-solving experience that takes place in the participants’ “real” world, as opposed to taking place in a completely virtual, computer-mediated space, as in *Civilization* or *World of Warcraft*. □

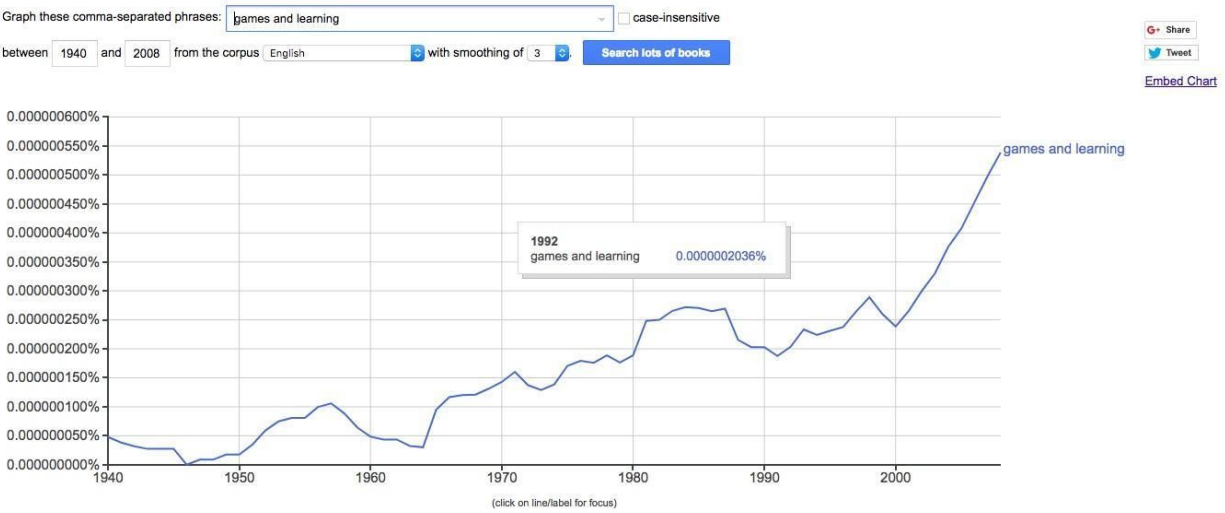
Perhaps because of the paucity of academic research on ARGs as educational tools, a standard definition of the genre is still elusive. As argued previously in this dissertation, there appear to be two reasons for this problem. The infancy of the form likely contributes to a lack of definition. Another barrier to a single definition is the large variety and complexity of the media incorporated into any single ARG experience: interactive web-based technologies, DIY

publishing, remix and the co-opting of popular narratives and artifacts. □ The educational application of video games, in general, seems to have achieved a large body of work only over the past 20 years, as media and technology have continued to evolve and converge, and as video games have become a topic for media, cultural, and ludological studies. Over this same period, non-game new media technologies have also begun to creep into pedagogy— particularly in the humanities— through blogs, wikis, and other digitally networked text-based tools. □

The large question I hope to address through this chapter, then, is: how can an ARG serve as a pedagogical tool both inside and outside of the classroom? In this chapter, I will argue that ARGs are ideal constructivist environments that facilitate situated cognition through the formation of immersive communities. ARGs also provide authentic opportunities for learning emerging 21st literacies. To support these findings, I will examine a case study and principles of ARGs situated within educational institutions designed for student induction and orientation in terms of the educational benefits that resulted from play. While ARGs have been used as texts for academic study in media studies classrooms, my aim is to apply the knowledge from the above approaches to illustrate how an ARG might serve as a structure for motivating and producing student writing within the curricular goals of two specific first-year writing programs in which I have taught: Gateway Technical College (GTC) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). □ □ Finally, I will analyze how ARGs outside of educational institutional settings can provide potential avenues for knowledge creation, learning, and activism within a more general social context and in resistance to dominant institutions.

The Alternate Reality Environment

As previously mentioned, there has been much research on the connection between learning and games, specifically digital or video games, in the 21st Century. As digital media and tools become more accessible and ubiquitous in our culture, they also become more available and prominent in our schools. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that this increase in the presence of digital networked technology has led to an increased interest in understanding how a segment of this technology and media— digital games— effects learning and, furthermore, can be best utilized to promote learning. One such example of the increase in interest was the formation of the Games + Learning + Society research center and conference in 2003 at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, which had the goal of researching the potential for digital games as effective learning environments and to initiate collaborative dialogue between the video game industry, video game researchers, and the general video game community (“Departure of UW Scholars...”). Also, the use of the term “games and learning” (Figure 5.1) shows a sharp increase from 2000 to 2008, coincident with the rise of the term “digital media” and “transmedia” (see Figures 1.2 for an ngram the latter term).



[Figure 5.1 Google ngram of the phrase “games and learning” from 1940 through 2008.]

One of the important benefits of digital games as learning environments lies in the ability for games to provide and structure experiences for the player, as opposed to offering simple didactic instruction. In his analysis of games and learning, linguistics and literacy scholar James Gee states that “people primarily think and learn through experience, not through abstract calculations and generalizations” (21). In other words, the most effective learning tends to take place when learners are presented with situations in which they experience a need for solving real problems (or problems that seem real) by using knowledge and skills. This is in direct contrast to learning via memorization of abstract rules or definitions. In one simplistic example, a learner is better able to master throwing a baseball by actually throwing the ball as opposed to reading about throwing the ball.

Gee details five conditions that mark effective learning environments. While he is mainly interested in their application to video games, all five can be applied to the typical structure of an ARG as well. In summary, these conditions state that:

1. Experiences are more effective when structured by specific goals.

2. Experiences are more effective for future problem solving when reasoning and actions are interpreted in terms of how they relate to the learning goals during and after the experience; this helps learners to identify and anticipate when those problem-solving skills will be needed in future experiences.
3. Experiences are more effective when learners receive immediate feedback on their actions and reasoning.
4. Experiences are more effective when they provide multiple opportunities to solve similar problems, allowing learners to adjust their approach based on past iterations and feedback.
5. Experiences are more effective when learners are part of a learning community of peers and experts. (21-22)

Gee’s first condition regarding goals applies to ARGs to some extent. While the goals of ARGs are not always clearly presented to the audience due to the TINAG aesthetic of the genre, there are many clear examples of ARGs wherein goals are explicitly stated. The ARGs *World Without Oil* and *Evoke*, both designed in part by McGonigal, explicitly communicate their goals to the audience precisely because they are designed to be learning experiences. *World Without Oil* (2007) was an ARG created by writer and designer Ken Eklund and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Independent Television Service that sought to have participants “spend six weeks imagining how [a global oil shortage] might play out in their local communities, their industries, and their own lives” by prompting them to respond by creating social media posts and “to prompts delivered via an “alternate reality dashboard” of news updates in the imagined world with the oil shortage (*Reality Is Broken* 302-303). The in-game website, which served as a central hub for the game, displayed daily⁵⁷ goals for participants to encourage them to confront solving an evolving set of local, national, and international problems. For instance, the twelfth week’s official prompt from the puppetmasters outlined several changes in the alternate reality situation: shortages in previously reliable diesel; high demand for bikes—

⁵⁷ In *World Without Oil*, each “weekly” update was delivered daily on the ARG’s website. Thus, the participants 32 weeks of a global oil shortage crisis over a 32-day period.

and consequently high theft; airline demand crumbling (dessum9). For the participants, these specific developments served as challenges to solve and goals to meet.

The second condition of Gee's framework for effective learning environments also applies to educational ARGs in a deep and connected manner. Due to the immersion in the alternate reality of the experience, such as a global oil shortage, each response to a detail of the crisis is made within the context of the slightly fictionalized setting. After *World Without Oil's* goals of understanding the consequences of a potential oil shortage were made clear to participants, their personal responses to the daily news updates issued by the puppetmasters were always structured within those goals, such as the participant nitefoll's LiveJournal post in response to the "Week 4" news update prompt. In the post, "Crazy Experiment #4: Food Glorious Food", nitefoll applies knowledge and experiences from a previous career as a chef to propose a solution to food shortages: communal meals, wherein each person needs to contribute food or labor to participate. Furthermore, nitefoll makes another connection in this speculative problem-solving exercise, linking community meals to reducing malnutrition risks by providing a wider range of foods for each individual's diet. This *World Without Oil* participant's plan is interpreted through the lens of the alternate reality experience, and also anticipates future problems to be solved by extending the reasoning to related contexts and challenges.

nitefoll's post also reveals the presence of Gee's third condition, immediate feedback to learners about their problem-solving strategies. Following nitefoll's proposed solution to food security challenges caused by oil shortages, two fellow participants offer their individual assessment—and, in this particular case, praise—for the proposed solution, as well as examples of how they might fit nitefoll's reasoning and approach into their own contexts. User

illianaspeedstr specifically augments the idea of local harvesting of food through her/his arrangement with a neighbor. The neighbor scavenges unwanted morel mushrooms from the yards in the neighborhood and then prepares them as meals, sharing some with neighbors—presumably in return for the access to the otherwise unused food source. Additionally, *Evoke*, another game designed by Jane McGonigal and funded by the World Bank Institute to promote economic innovation in Africa by having participants respond with social media posts proposing solutions to a variety of contextualized problems, incorporated an immediate feedback mechanism through rewards. In *Evoke*, fellow players could bestow increases in attributes for ten different categories: collaboration, courage, creativity, entrepreneurship, local insight, knowledge share, resourcefulness, spark, sustainability, and vision. These “plus one” rewards were given to participants by peers in direct response to the proposed solutions to a variety of challenges regarding social and economic development. Due to ARGs’ reliance on digital social media for establishing the required community to solve complex clues, immediate feedback through blog comments, message board posts, and live chats is a standard and required feature.

The recursive nature of *World Without Oil*’s alternate reality—the unfolding of a crisis over a 32-week period—also provided participants with the opportunity to satisfy Gee’s fourth condition, applying problem-solving iteratively throughout many similar situations. By isolating the experience to this specific context, the problems to be solved persisted across each week; a global oil shortage is not solved with a single solution, nor is it solved immediately through a range of solutions. Rather, in *World Without Oil*, the participants were regularly challenged to solve energy, transportation, food security, and employment problems that both persisted and evolved from week to week. To focus on food security as an example, we can look at the

community's featured posts— those given “top” blog, image, video, or challenge status— over the first eight weeks of the experience: “Wild edibles, backyard straw bale gardening, start now!” (week 2 video); “Crazy Experiment #4: Food Glorious Food” (week 4 blog); “CSA” (week 5 video); “Planning food relocalisation” (week 7 blog); “composting the past” (week 8 blog). Each of these posts deals with securing local food sources within a community-centered approach. Similar trends can be seen with other problem-solving adaptations, such as re-engineering bicycles to better serve the transportation needs of the participants. With this repetition of context, participants were not only given a sense of the real persistence of the problems associated with an oil shortage, they were also able to continually improve their proposed solutions.

Finally, ARGs address Gee's fifth condition, which focuses on learning from peers and experts through shared reflections. At the end of *World Without Oil*, participants were urged to reflect upon their contributions to solve the challenges resulting from a simulated oil shortage. For the final prompt of the game, the puppetmasters asked the participants to reflect on their experiences by explicitly asking “did we make a difference?” (“Week 32”). Some of the responses from participants featured a clear focus on incorporating the problem-solving from *World Without Oil's* alternate reality into their everyday lives: generally using less electricity at home; recycling more; shopping with reusable bags; utilizing alternative transportation, such as walking or biking, in order to burn fewer fossil fuels (*Reality Is Broken* 310-312). For these participants, and many others, the meaning found in the ARG did not stop once the experience officially ended. The public sharing of these reflections through the experience's “alternate

reality dashboard” made them accessible to all players. Furthermore, expert tutelage happened without any prearranged guidance in the experience. McGonigal writes:

Peakprophet, a self-described “hobby farmer” in Tennessee... took it upon himself to train other players how to grow their own food and increase their food self-sufficiency. (*Reality Is Broken* 306)

This type of knowledge sharing is a common occurrence in ARGs, wherein cryptography, the concealing of messages through hidden codes— and especially steganography, hiding messages within other non-secretive messages and media— are used extensively. The complexity of these methods can require very specific sets of skills and knowledge in order to decipher. For instance, in the ARG *Year Zero*, images were embedded in static within the audio file of a previously unreleased demo song. The song itself was discovered on an unlabeled USB flash drive found in the bathroom of the venue hosting a 2007 Nine Inch Nails’ concert in Lisbon, Portugal. Processing the static through a linear and logarithmic spectrometer revealed two slightly different images of a giant hand descending from the sky, which turned out to be a major plot element of the ARG (*NIN wiki*). Digital audio manipulation skills were required to find Morse code patterns hidden at the end of MP3 files that were part of the ARG experience. Through the online communities in which they coordinate and share information, those who have the skills to solve these highly complex puzzles often share their knowledge through explanations and tutorials.

This pattern can further be seen in *The Beast*, the first ARG, in which Cloudmakers frequently shared their problem-solving strategies with each other through message board posts. This was especially helpful for the community, as the puppetmasters made regular use of a variety of cryptographic codes, such as Enigma machine code from World War 2, and other

substitution ciphers. Eventually, the formal solutions and methods for each puzzle of *The Beast* were incorporated into a living document called “the trail,” which is over 60,000 words and went through at least 66 distinct published versions, from 1.0 through 9.0, during 105 days from 11 April to 25 July 2011 (“the trail v9.0”). A sample of this dynamic learning can be seen in Figure 5.2.

Version 6.4 Update:

On the page with the enlarged picture of paintbrushes [here], there is a Shockwave sound file with water dripping. This is Morse code. The first part is plain text which says "TO MARTIN." The rest is an Enigma code:

```
TO MARTIN
1304 1300 1 TLE SRY SRY 1TL53
SLRXG FXUNE AXPWT LRKLP TEOFY YZCGA ZZFUQ LINRS HPWLR BHBMM ZOM
```

By noticing certain strange things in the other pictures on the page, we get the Enigma settings required to decode this.

- C (cat in the mirror)
- Rotors: 412 (clocks frozen at this time)
- Ringstellung: CNI (carrot, nutcracker, and icepick with rings around them)
- Indicator: SRY (repeated in message, procedure convention)
- plugboard: MR LT AS DF (objects paired strangely: Moon-radish, ladle-teapot, artichoke-Shakespeare, dragon-flower)

Using an Enigma simulator, this is decoded to:

"I'm so sorry. I don't have a choice. He's got my sister."

This summary was provided by fladnagster. He credits fortytwo and wooper with helping solve this, as well as other Cloudmakers.

[Figure 5.2 “3.52 The Cahir Images/MSD Enigma Puzzle #2” puzzle solution entry from “the trail v9.0”.]

In this example, the complexity is highly evident. The puppetmasters combine several cryptographic techniques into a single puzzle: Morse code, Enigma code, and the embedding of an audio file into an image-centric webpage. The repetitive use of Enigma codes in *The Beast* made the explanation of the strategies important to all Cloudmakers regardless of their experience level and entry point, as it provided the feedback and knowledge of how to approach and solve future problems. Those who may have struggled with their attempts to solve this specific puzzle could then see feedback and guidance from the collaborative group— in this case users fladnagster, fortytwo, wooper, and others— who had solved this portion of the puzzle. Lastly, the example in Figure 5.2 only constitutes a single portion of a puzzle; the entire puzzle

consists of four JPEG image files and a webpage with interlinked clues leading to geo-coordinates for Alexandria, Egypt, an ancient founder of the early Christian church, two in-game websites, and a string of future puzzles— all of which use variations of previous approaches while increasing the degree of difficulty. The interweaving of experts and peers enables the community of participants to move the ARG forward toward its eventual culmination.

Situating Cognition in Alternate Realities

In addition to meeting the conditions Gee sets forth for effective learning environments, ARGs also are highly effective sites of situated cognition. In “Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning,” their foundational work on situated cognition, Brown, Collins, and Duguid emphasize the importance of the context of learning. They write:

Recent investigations of learning, however, challenge [the] separating of what is learned from how it is learned and used. The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed, it is now argued, is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned. *Situations might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity.* Learning and cognition, it is now possible to argue, are fundamentally situated. (32, emphasis added)

This means that, much as Gee claims above, people do not learn effectively through abstraction, but rather through experiences that give meaning and context to concepts— the understanding of the use of a tool or the application of knowledge as a skill is situated in that use or application. In other words, to fully know a concept or tool, a person must be able to apply or use that knowledge within a context. Therefore, appropriate settings and contexts become crucial when it comes to effective learning. The institutional setting of a classroom— with the traditions of

reading about and memorizing definitions, principles, and concepts— often serves as a direct impediment to meaningful learning activities. ARGs, however, offer a vast potential for creating contextually relevant learning environments— and have already provided them.

In their article, Brown, Collins, and Duguid identify two major components of situated cognition: to learn most effectively, learners must engage in authentic tasks, and do so within communities of practice (33-34). These authentic tasks are “coherent, meaningful, and purposeful” and presented in direct contrast to “school activity,” which is decontextualized from the actual situations wherein practices are genuinely applied (34). For instance, a student might learn about waveforms, spectrography, and audio files in a physics or computer science course through reading textbooks, watching videos, or solving assigned problems— but never be asked to use this knowledge in a setting wherein the use of spectrography is meaningful and required, such as audiology and the study of human speech or biology and the study of animal communication. History students might learn about the Enigma code from World War 2, but never be asked to use an Enigma machine to decipher a code. Citizens might learn about food security, but never be asked to implement a plan to overcome food shortages. Clearly, however, there are limits to the viability of providing the exact situations that are inhabited by expert practitioners, like audiologists or biologists, other than through an apprenticeship model, which is unable to scale to serve the educational needs of the public due to the near 1:1 relationship between learner and expert. Due to their immersive properties, however, ARGs can provide realistic, authentic situations for learners to acquire and practice these skills by linking the acquisition to meaningful outcomes— as opposed to learning for the sake of learning in the traditional classroom context. In *Year Zero*, spectrography was needed to find clues in order to

resist a despotic, theocratic government that controlled citizens through pharmacological means. In *The Beast*, knowing how Enigma ciphers work and how to decipher them was required to help find Evan Chan's murderer and to advocate for the rights of artificial intelligence. In *World Without Oil*, participants were required to find solutions to food security stemming from a global oil shortage— and many implemented them in their own everyday life outside of the alternate reality of the experience.

Through the use of immersion, ARGs become similar to simulations, which have a long history of use for education and the generation of knowledge. The use of simulations as an instructional tool is particularly tied to the military. Patrick Crogan (2009) extensively details the connection between the development of digital networked technology and the rise of simulation in the United States military from the 1930s through ARPANET and SIMNET. Bruce Sterling (1993) further delves into the details of the United States Army's use of digital networked tank simulators and SIMNET to train crews and replay actual battles— while tweaking variables within those battles— from the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq. When thinking of situated cognition as connected to simulation, Sterling's article features an appropriate main character: Col. Jack A. Thorpe, Ph.D., who is a “cognitive psychologist specializing in training techniques” and special assistant for simulations at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). According to Sterling, Thorpe is advocating for a “seamless simulation” to teach soldiers in a way wherein “the seams between reality and virtuality will be repeatedly and deliberately blurred... ontology be damned— this is war!” The blurring described by Sterling approaches the blurring that happens within ARGs— a conflation of the virtual and the real. In a further similarity to ARGs, SIMNET's phenomenological experience is mediated in the same way as the

real experience of being in an M1 Abrams, from being in a to-scale fiberglass model of the interior to, more importantly, seeing the same digital image displays:

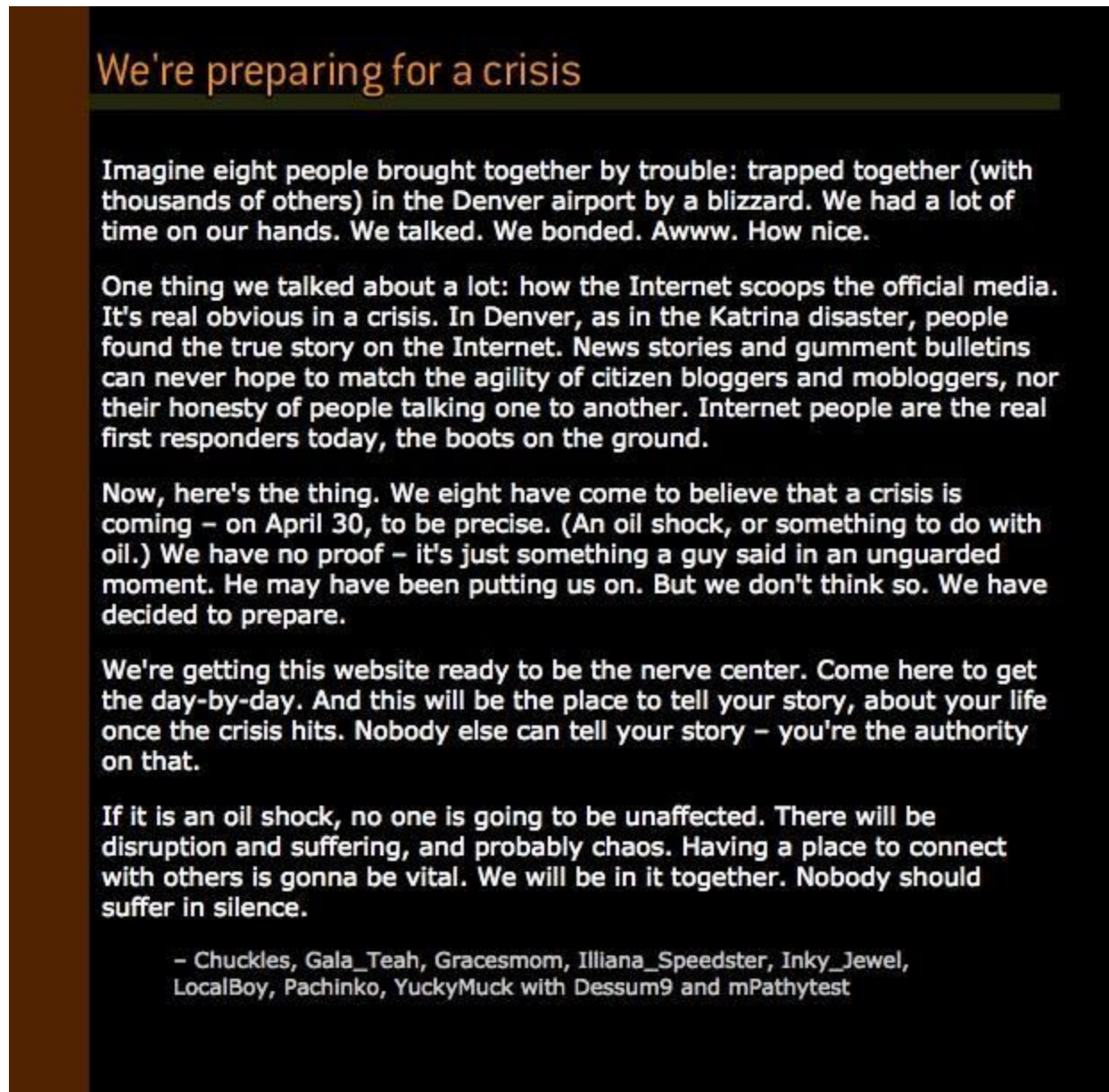
Most of the means of human perception in modern vehicles of war are already electronically mediated. In Desert Storm, both air pilots and tank crews spent much of their time in combat watching infrared targeting scopes. Much the same goes for Patriot missile crews, Aegis cruisers, AWACS radar personnel, and so on. War has become a phenomenon that America witnesses through screens. (“War is Virtual Hell”)

In other words, the blending of virtual spaces (SIMNET) and real spaces (war zones) is made much easier due to the fact that the mediation of both is the same⁵⁸. The blending is not limited to the soldiers’ experiences, either; the public experiences war in a similar manner, viewing combat through the bird’s-eye perspective of smart weapons and the real-time, on-the-ground reporting of embedded journalists with live video feeds from the field of battle.

This use of common mediation of the senses is the same strategy employed in creating the deep immersion of ARGs— the use of the same media that we experience in our everyday lives and embedding alternate reality artifacts in them. Just as the view through a targeting scope is the same whether in an M1 Abrams tank or in a simulator, the surface-level experience of media in an ARG is the same for participants in-game and out-of-game is the same in many cases. In *Year Zero*, the static that contains the image hidden in the audio spectrum is part of the Nine Inch Nails’ song, whether or not you are participating in the ARG or not; the concert t-shirt is still a t-shirt whether or not you use it to find the typographic code that leads to one of the experience’s web-based rabbit holes. In ARGs that are more clearly revealed to participants as experiences designed for education and, therefore, operate less under a TINAG aesthetic than ARGs like *Year Zero* or *The Beast*, other ways of creating this simulatory immersion are used.

⁵⁸ Paul Virillio, referenced in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, writes about a similar effect on perception through the collapse of geography that results from the overlapping of virtual and real.

World Without Oil, for example, emphasized a narrative veneer that normalized the mediated experience of the ARG by connecting it to the mediated experiences found in everyday life (see Figure 5.3).



[Figure 5.3 The call to participate before the start of *World Without Oil*. (*World Without Oil*)]

In order to maintain the TINAG integrity, the puppetmasters created a situated context that was linked to the media and methods for the specific ARG and its educational goals. By beginning

with the context of a small group of people with varied backgrounds and places of origin brought together by a crisis (the blizzard that stranded them at the Denver airport), the puppetmasters constructed the immersive situation in at least two ways. First, they created a realistic explanation of their roles as leaders of the experience— a small cohort of people who are connected with each other and who have a history and interest of working with crises. Second, by introducing the concept that “the Internet scoops the official media,” the puppetmasters provided the context of having a meaningful experience live on the Internet through the use of social media posts— the type of contributions expected from the participants, through blogs, images, and videos located on their own social media platforms, such as LiveJournal and YouTube. This imbuing of social media with meaning can be explicitly seen in the assertion that “news stories and [government] bulletins can never hope to match the agility of citizen bloggers and mobloggers, nor their honesty of people talking to one another” (*World Without Oil*). By stating this claim as part of their call to action, the puppetmasters are seeking to empower the participants, encouraging them to find a genuine and authentic context for engaging in the experience and produce contributions that they— and, by extension, the community— find meaningful.

In addition to authentic tasks, like the ones mentioned above, Brown, Collins, and Duguid identify communities of practice as the other main component of situated cognition. The importance of community is not only due to support, encouragement, or feedback, as Gee focuses on in his conditions of effective learning environments, but extends to the actual definition of the skill and knowledge being acquired itself. They write:

Learning how to use a tool involves far more than can be accounted for in any set of explicit rules. The occasions and conditions for use arise directly out of the context of activities of each community that uses the tool, framed by the way members of that community see

the world. The community and its viewpoint, quite as much as the tool itself, determine how a tool is used. (33)

While emphasizing that learning requires more than abstraction, they also establish that the application of knowledge itself is contextual— and that context is defined by community. ARGs meet this criterion extraordinarily well, as they are predicated on massive collaboration. The distributed nature of the clues— both in medium and physical location— requires that a large and diverse group is required to simply collect all of them. To successfully solve clues and advance an ARG experience, players largely must combine knowledge and skills in solving problems that are too complex for one individual to be able solve on her/his own.

Even when a single puzzle can be solved by a sole individual with the precisely appropriate skill set and knowledge, the number and variety of problems to solve in an ARG ensure that community collaboration is frequently required. In *World Without Oil*, the regular participants “brought together an astonishingly diverse range of personal concerns and real-life expertise” to the community, including a farmer, a dispatcher at a manufacturing plant, a graphic design student, and a soldier who contributed daily while in active service in Iraq (306). This diversity facilitates a greater range of contexts and skills, based upon the individual’s life before joining the ARG community. If the community were homogenous and members shared the same skill sets and knowledge, there would be little opportunity for learning as all members already possess the same ability and understanding. Thus, not only do ARGs provide the contextually relevant, immersive, authentic experience participants need to learn skills through simulation, they also create authentic communities that combine a spectrum of individual skill sets and knowledge— another key to learning.

New Literacies

Beyond offering opportunities for education to happen within the structure and theme of an ARG, the specific structure of and media utilized by an ARG are themselves learning tools. With the emergence of ARGs being largely coincident with the emergence of new media, the literacies required to participate— such as manipulating digital files, creating collaborative documents, interacting through message boards, searching source code, and other specific skills and knowledge— are the literacies of the 21st century, intimately linked to new media. In one of the few articles to explore the use of ARGs in an educational setting, Bonsign, et al., assess ARGs in terms of their ability to fully engage with new literacies. In reviewing literacy frameworks from several scholars, the writers synthesize a comprehensive literacy matrix, the Unified Metaliteracies Framework (UMF), that incorporates seven components: gather, make sense, solve, create, manage, respect, collaborate (8). This group also recognizes the potential for ARGs specifically to meet these literacy needs:

ARGs also enable us to explore literacy practices in both local and global contexts, as the technologies and communication modes used in them enable collaboration across distances large and small, with groups small and large, at varying levels of scale and speed. Moreover, most ARGs are enacted within specific time constraints, which allows us to consider technologies and literacy practices that are affected by opportunities for interaction among many people in relatively short periods of time. Finally, because ARGs are played out in “real-world” contexts, they offer a high-fidelity simulated environment in which students can practice the skills they need to fully participate as productive citizens in their society. (9)

Bonsign, et al., affirm that, because of their media and structure, ARGs are intriguing and potentially rich opportunities for enacting new literacies identified in the UMF.

The first literacy, “gather,” directly addresses two of the characteristics that make ARGs unique— the embeddedness of clues in everyday media and the TINAG aesthetic. As identified earlier, the clues in ARGs are hidden within many varieties of everyday media— websites, t-shirt, posters, images, and others. For instance, we can look at several examples outlined in this dissertation in which clues have been embedded in various objects or contexts: in websites, t-shirts, and audio files from *Year Zero*; in the source code of web pages, in printing on the back of theatrical posters, and in the credits of trailers from *The Beast*; in television commercials, Amazon product pages, packaging for chocolate bars, and blogs for *The Lost Experience*. An individual unaware of the ARG can easily interact with the media at the surface of these examples— visiting an Amazon page for Gary Troup’s *Bad Twin*, watching a trailer for *A.I.*, or listening to a Nine Inch Nails song— and they can do so without ever being aware of the information and experience layered beneath the surface. Regarding this depth of content, Bonsign et al., write that:

the initial process of gathering information in an ARG is actually a process of both synthesis and differentiation— synthesis in the sense that the sites themselves must somehow “connect,” and differentiation in the sense that this stage of ARG interaction often involves simply discovering information that is a viable entry point to the ARG itself. (9)

Furthermore, the notion that “this is not a game” further blurs the distinction for participants, as the clues themselves are rarely announced or marked as clues. This means that the differentiation between alternate reality and everyday reality is purposefully made to be difficult to discern. Therefore, before even attempting to solve puzzles, participants are required to use critical literacy skills simply to enter the game and find clues.

The second component of metaliteracy in the UMF is “make sense,” which focuses on “analyzing, synthesizing, and reflecting” (11). Bonsign, et al., link this literacy to the communication of interpretive schema to the participants from the puppetmasters through the use of protagonist experiences within the fictional context of the alternate reality storyline. They focus on two novels with transmedia/ARG properties— the *39 Clues* (2008-2016), which is a series of novels with an accompanying ARG, and J.C. Hutchins and Jordan Weisman’s *Personal Effects: Dark Arts* (2009), a work of “chaotic fiction”⁵⁹ — to illustrate how the characters’ experiences impart direction and productive schemas to the participants in order to help them solve puzzles, such as having a character in the novel focus on anagram and then using anagrams in the ARGs. Bonsign, et al., focus on textual examples; however, the sharing of points of view also extends to other media, such as television⁶⁰ and film. However, all ARGs, regardless of the specific media mix they employ, ask participants to analyze content, to synthesize information, and to interpret the meaning of clues in the context of the alternate reality construct. Participants must also be able to pause and reflect upon the experience as it unfolds to assure they are on a productive path— whether the focus of the reflection is on the community’s collective hunting, problem-solving, or theories of the overall trajectory or meaning of the experience, or even if the focus is on determining what is or is not part of the experience.

⁵⁹In a lengthy multi-page online essay about how to define the ARG genre written by SpaceBass (Sean Stacey), creator of the Unfiction.com community and person who coined the term “alternate reality game,” he writes:

I define chaotic fiction as a fictional construct that begins with a set of rules, uses those rules to run its scenario through an organic "computer" comprised of audience and author, and ends with a finite body of work that was not predetermined. This is to say that, though the authors (those who set the rules and started the production of the fiction in motion) may have been able to predict with some measure of certainty what they might end up with upon completion of the product, since they did not have complete control during production of every element of creation, they could not say with absolute certainty beforehand exactly what would be created by the process. (“Undefining ARG”)

⁶⁰ For instance, see Chapter 3 on *The Lost Experience* and the surrogate perspective of Desmond.

The third imperative of metaliteracy is “manage,” which combines elements of “managing, organizing, and preserving” — which can be seen in the community’s documenting elements of and about the ARG experience. As noted above, the Cloudmakers’ collective efforts in solving *The Beast* were centralized at their Yahoo! Groups community site, providing them an infrastructure to preserve, and then revisit, communications about the ARG’s clues and theories, to facilitate progress in the ARG. Also, the 60,000-plus word “trail” document referred to above is further evidence of the management of literacy in *The Beast*. Outside of *The Beast*, most ARGs utilize similar digital means of preserving and sharing knowledge: blogs, message boards, and wikis. With the presence of already established communities of engaged fans, participants in *The Lost Experience* and *Year Zero*, for example, created extensive wikis to track in-game developments, such as the media, clues, and puzzle solutions that were part of the respective ARGs. Considering the very large numbers of participants in these two experiences— 3.5 million people participated in *Year Zero* over the ten weeks of the experience; nearly 1 million from the United Kingdom and Australia participated in *The Lost Experience*⁶¹— the amount of information to be managed and made accessible to the community was massive (“ARG Stats”). Because of the number of participants, extensive management work was also requisite to make sure efforts were not duplicated and that those with needed knowledge and skills to solve puzzles were promptly identified and enlisted. Without a robust ability to manage information, ARGs would not be sustainable; by being structured in a way that distributes a large number of clues and requires a diverse blend of specialized knowledge and skills, ARGs ensure that this literacy is learned and practiced in a contextually relevant space, not just through abstract concepts.

⁶¹No statistics are available for the United States.

Related to management of literacy is “creative” literacy, which incorporates “creating, remixing, and modifying” (17). While the resources made by participants also apply to managing information, they also engage with the ability to create. Whether it is a wiki with over 100 pages or a 60,000-plus-word collaborative, updated document, like “the trail,” the ability to create content is essential to an ARG. This is also seen in experiences like *World Without Oil* and *Evoke*, wherein participating was through the production of blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and images. Additionally, ARGs may call upon players to participate through other forms of media. This was true in *Year Zero*, which prompted participants— who were recruited into the Resistance, a movement opposing the theocratic and despotic government that had come to rule a future United States— to produce original protest art that was published in magazines like *The Village Voice* and *LA Weekly*, and placed in everyday physical spaces in the same manner that public art is typically exhibited (42 Entertainment). In all, “thousands of original [artworks]” were produced and shared with the community (“ARG Stats”).

The literacy of “respect” can also be found in every ARGs, as a result of both the required community element and the TINAG aesthetic, as well as being incorporated into the goals of specific educational ARGs. This literacy encompasses “acting ethically, respectfully, and legally” (19). Bonsign, et al., point to two ARGs that specifically link ethics to their goals: *Evoke* and *World Without Oil* (19-20). *Evoke*, which was largely focused on encouraging and developing sustainable growth in Africa, incorporated a segment dedicated to human rights and to “learn[ing] about and tak[ing] action on problems regarding traditionally under-represented, under-privileged groups,” such as women (Bonsign, et al. 19). As previously discussed, the goals of *World Without Oil* were to find solutions for the public good in the face of a simulated oil

shortage, to do so without promoting a specific agenda, while maintaining an environment that encouraged and valued open participation from all members (“Goals and Methods”). Beyond the specific goals of educational ARGs, the conditions required to participate in any ARG also engage with literacy of “respect.” As collaboration is required due to the massive scale and distributed structure of an ARG, participants must be able to communicate with others in a way that builds a cohesive community willing to share information and knowledge— and to contribute ideas and solutions to move the experience forward for the entirety of the participants. The complexity of ARG puzzles also requires that knowledge and skills be shared within a community. Finally, the TINAG aesthetic makes the ethics of play essential to the navigation of an ARG. When the experience is not defined as a game, it also lacks a clear set of communicated rules for the participants to use as guidance for what conduct is allowable and what is forbidden. As exemplified in the Zartman incident detailed in Chapter 1, the lack of formal rules in many ARGs leads to instances wherein players must establish their own norms for appropriate behavior in the community. When the boundaries of the experience are not clear, the ways in which participants engage with in-game and out-of-game contexts rely on ethics established by the community.

The remaining literacies in the UMF— “solve” and “collaborate”— have already been established at length as being foundational literacies for ARGs. ARGs are predicated on finding solutions to complex puzzles and the complexity of those puzzles, as well as the distribution of the clues that form the puzzles, require a high amount of collaboration. Based upon their analysis, Bonsign, et al., conclude that “the set of skills needed to collaboratively tackle an Alternate Reality Game is the same set of skills needed to solve many of our most pressing

real-world problems” (26). By discovering, developing, and honing their skills in a collaborative community environment, ARG participants acquire skills that directly apply to citizenship in a digitally-networked society stoked by the demands outlined by the UMF. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will explore some of these potential uses for ARGs in education.

Applying ARGs in Higher Education

In order to overcome some of the decontextualization of learning situations in formal education settings, ARGs can simulate contextually relevant situations within the classroom. As Brown, Collins, and Duguid argue,

Classroom activity very much takes place within the culture of schools... Many of the activities students undertake are simply not the activities of practitioners and would not make sense or be endorsed by the [communities] to which they are attributed. (34)

Because of the immersive qualities described above, the use of ARGs can produce a situation that better approaches an authentic activity within the classroom while achieving the desired learning goals.

In their 2008 analysis of the use of collaborative games as educational tools in higher education, Nicola Whitton and Paul Hollins position the collaborative environment of game worlds as a pedagogical tool for constructivist— as opposed to didactic— education models.

Citing P. C. Honebein, they state that constructivist collaborative learning environments should:

encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, including what and how they learn; provide multiple perspectives; create self-awareness of the learning process; make learning relevant and authentic; make learning a collaborative and interactive social experience; and use multiple modes of representation and rich media. (222)

In addition to the work of Brown, Collins, and Duguid, and Bonsign, et al., I will adopt these principles in my discussion of ARGs in the context of two Freshman Year Composition (FYC)

programs in which I have teaching experience— Gateway Technical College and the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee. This adoption is based upon a translation of these philosophies that can be seen in the documents and pedagogies within these programs. □

While both programs share a combined focus on purpose, audience, analysis, and production, the constructivist principles are perhaps best seen in how the programs describe themselves in terms of what they ask their students to value. For instance, Gateway requires a set of nine “core abilities” be printed on the syllabus for every course. The abilities are presented under auspices of relevance and authenticity, as being necessary “to succeed in a career and life.” Included amongst these abilities are analogs to several of Honebein’s above principles: students should “value learning” and they should “work collaboratively” and “respect self and others as members of a diverse society.” □

The UWM English 101 “Course Description” (2009) positions the course as a collaborative environment, as discussions are framed as “individual and collective attempts at discovering what makes reading and writing effective in particular contexts,” as well as stating that students— in both their collaborative and individual work— are responsible for the quality of the outcome (3). Additionally, the program's emphasis on reflection encourages students to assess their own writing strategies and learning processes. Furthermore, the inclusion of texts that “look, feel, and read differently from one another” in order to contextualize and complicate notions of purpose, audience, and context, align with the multi-modal approach of these constructivist principles (2). The multi-modality of texts read by students is strictly encouraged by the construction of the First Year Composition Reader, which contains traditional print essays, printed hypertexts, comics, magazine articles, and more. Instructors in the program have

recently used multi-modality to encourage their students to produce knowledge, as well. Course blogs, wikis and discussion boards encourage students to assemble their interpretations, reflections, and thoughts for their classroom community to see—and with the express purpose of receiving feedback in the form of comments and posts from colleagues (both peers and instructors) that serve to further the discourse. In what follows I will consider how Honebein's principles, considered as characteristics of an appropriate gaming environment, could be applicable to a FYC program. □

One approach to understanding the educational promise of ARGs is to look at a related study of transmedia narratives, more specifically in the way contemporary students are already employing collective intelligence communities to interact with “texts” and form individual and collective meaning through collaborative production— all outside the University-inscribed classroom. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the educational potential for collective intelligence communities in terms of fan cultures. Jenkins sees the reading of transmedia narratives by collaborative intelligence communities as one way in which individuals and groups can interpret and construct meaning (3-4). Furthermore, collective intelligence communities trouble the boundaries and hierarchies of production and consumption— shifting the ability to make meaning from a single authority (media producer) to individual hermeneutics of the consumers. In this way, we might see facilitating this type of collective interaction, one that employs various media and occasions for discourse, as a way for students to critically engage with the participatory multimodal texts that they may be encountering via their own everyday media choices: websites, television, film, video games, varieties of printed texts, and so on. □

In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” The New London Group (2000) makes a similar argument for the relevance— and need— for multi-modal pedagogies in the composition classroom. Their claim is tied to the changing nature of networked technology-facilitated communications that can span cultures and subcultures, nations and socio-economic categories, as well as to the collaborative structuring of the corporation in an era of fast capitalism. And while it may be an altogether different scope and focus of a project, an ARG, when understood in terms of Jenkins's transmedia narrative, could very easily be adapted to address the concerns of producing a more multimodal text. Critical engagement with this type of narrative within the FYC classroom can encourage students to develop a more critical new media literacy: reading/writing/resisting multimodal rhetorics and representations. However, this chapter’s scope of examining ARGs within the composition classroom remains focused on the goal of students producing print texts that fit within the assessment practices already existing within these two FYC programs⁶². □

To return to what is more immediately related to FYC practices (specifically the act of interpretative writing), troubling definitive authority— whether in texts or in pedagogical roles— is not new to composition theory. In “Reading” from Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux's *The Theory Toolbox*, the authors approach interpretation through the lens of the death of the author. They discuss active interpretation as a reversal of “a passive consumption model (the reader consuming the author's meaning)” and a resultant “freeing up of multiple points of view—as many good readings as there are readers” (21). We can see from the word “consumption” where Jenkins's terminology intersects with these concerns. Nealon and Giroux

⁶² However, as the acceptance and need of multimodal and multimedia texts grows within our educational institutions, workplaces, and Western culture, in general, the potential for ARGs to be used to teach these literacies is an increasingly important concern.

are quick to point out the danger in a simple reversal, however: “If we're not careful, the absolute control of the author can give way very quickly to the absolute control of the reader, who then usurps the author's role in the *game of meaning*” (22, emphasis added). To achieve some middle-ground between these, the authors situate interpretation as “a process of negotiation among contexts,” mediated by language, which is, in turn “a social system of meaning” (23- 25). The ARG is, by definition, reliant on community participation (or, “a social system”), which makes it particularly suited to a composition classroom concerned with creating a space for multiple interpretations. In order to advance the game narrative, players must “work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone” (“Alternate Reality Gaming: ‘Life Imitates ARG’”). If students must play the ARG game of interpretation in the same space— a space that is structured to encourage collaborative work— the formation of a collective group and the subsequent sharing and negotiation of interpretations can be encouraged— even required— by the game's structure. Furthermore, as players solve interpretative puzzles, their moves are incorporated into the evolution of the game, often prompting the direction of the next challenge issued. In other words, players themselves dictate the course of the game, which helps to “blur the line between player and game designer... in a way that goes beyond simply 'playing the game’” (“Alternate Reality Gaming: ‘Life Imitates ARG’”). Thus, the ARG structure can also help students to become—and, importantly, see themselves as—autonomous learners. □

When conceptualizing an ARG in terms of an assignment sequence, I turn to David Bartholomae's “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins.” Bartholomae engages with ideas on how to create a space allowing students to enter into a discourse in the composition

classroom. In asking how a student might “invent the university when he sits down to write,” Bartholomae finds relevance in allowing students to form or even approximate discourse communities for the basis of discovering knowledge through repetitive and slowly expanding writing practices. The benefit of using ARGs as a platform for ludic pedagogy is that they do not require the mastery of graphically-mediated virtual spaces. Many platforms can serve as the foundation for collective intelligence or collaborative communities, such as multi-user virtual environments (MUVES) like *Second Life*, massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft*, or commercially produced simulators, like the *Civilization* series. These games, however, often require the learning of a complex interface to navigate their spaces. While the learning of a game's rules and structures is central to critically engaging with procedural rhetoric of the game's argument itself, the challenge of learning the interface can detract from the curricular goals of the game by forcing the player to focus on the interface and a host of other complex advanced features (Whitton and Hollins 224). Though learners may not be expertly literate in all or any of the multimodal forms employed in ARGs, they are familiar with the essential technologies: blogs, message boards, wikis, and digital geolocation. Therefore, by using an ARG structure, the benefits of using games as an educational tool are less likely to be undermined and complicated by forcing participants to learn the mechanics of a complex interface and an accompanying set of rules. .□

Furthermore, as we learn from Jenkins's discussion of ARGs as a form of transmedia narrative that elicits collective intelligence and the production of meaning for players, the transmedia and multi-modal nature of ARGs also frequently encourages texts to be viewed in

intertextual and hypercontextual⁶³ ways. That is, in assembling meaning from a variety of texts or from various sections of the same text, players make interpretative “moves” to frame and juxtapose different texts, narrative threads, and contexts in terms of others. Perhaps most easily recognized in these “moves” would be the academic writing technique of framing: a player might understand one text by means of analyzing another. This intertextuality/hypercontextuality might also serve as a way into accessing what matters to a writer and reader, a common way to understand a text’s purpose. The intertextual interpretative move might involve the player searching through their database of texts that already matter to them, texts that have remained with them because they had an impression on them. By speaking in terms of something that already holds meaning for them, a player might be able to better articulate—or at least approach—this notion of what matters in a text, and why that might be important to the writing they produce. □ □

Lessons Learned from Previous Educational ARGs □

The well-documented use of ARGs in higher education has been limited to student induction projects —introducing students to the expectations and resources of university life, both academically and socially. Several campus libraries have used the collaborative puzzle-solving structure to encourage students to get physically into the stacks, utilize library

⁶³Peter Lunenfeld, in “The Myths of Interactive Cinema,” describes the term *hypercontextual* in this way: “a rhizomatic and dynamic interlinked communicative community using networks to curate a series of shifting contexts” (383). Similar to intertextuality, hypercontextuality addresses a groups’ ability to create a meaning for a text based on assessing and accessing multiple contextual experiences and situations with either the same text or with similar texts. Besides serving to bring in the subject of context into the composition classroom through students’ own enacting of a hypercontextual reading, this hermeneutic strategy might also lead students to understand “what matters” about a text in terms of their own contextual experiences. Fittingly, Lunenfeld’s example of hypercontextualization is *The Blair Witch Project*, which is also one of the primary proto-ARG examples listed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Furthermore, hypercontextuality might also be understood in the terms of The New London Group: available design being applied to new rhetorical and hermeneutic situations.

resources (such as reference librarians and search engines), and create social networks—all with the over-arching goal of helping students to become more familiar with campus spaces and life, in order to increase retention rates, especially with first-semester students. □

The most well-documented study of an ARG in higher education is from Manchester Metropolitan University's Alternate Reality Games for Orientation, Socialisation, and Induction (ARGOSI) project (ARGOSI Final Report). While this in-depth study—and the resources created for other institutions to create and disseminate ARGs for educational ends—provides several insights into the benefits and drawbacks from MMU's experience, it is also important to note some important differences in the structure and context of their project and what might be specifically incorporated in the FYC classroom. Whitton's assessment of the successes and failures of ARGOSI are largely based on participatory hurdles: creating a compelling, engaging plot for the game; reaching a “critical mass of players” whose participation is necessary to solve puzzles and move the game forward; providing multiple entrance points, so players can more easily enter or re-enter the game as it unfolds. While these issues are very legitimate to designing and executing a successful ARG, one of the benefits of bringing an ARG into the classroom, as opposed to using it as an induction and orientation tool, is that participant numbers and engagement are far more static, because course enrollment and the requisite nature of an FYC program. In short, issues of engagement and participation are (or should be) always a concern for classroom instructors; this very project concerning the incorporation of an ARG into the classroom seeks to increase engagement and participation, by adopting a more specifically collaborative structure. Thus, while engagement and participation are, of course, a concern, an FYC program assumes a more inherently fixed set of variables here, as opposed to an optional

first-year induction program that operates on-campus, but outside the context of an official course. □

Further, the creation of an overarching fictional narrative that is central to traditional ARGs might not be necessary or even applicable to the composition classroom. The “narrative,” in this case, is the goal of interpreting a text within the goals of the FYC program. In this context, players advance the game to reach a fully-formed interpretation, not necessarily to reach a resolution in a storyline. However, the concept of an overarching narrative might be employed to encourage students to see their learning process as a narrative: one in which they control the direction and outcome through individual discrete “moves” made in response to both the texts themselves and to the collectively produced knowledge of their classmates. Seeing their progress as a narrative may help to provide the viewpoint necessary for both reflective writing within the FYC classroom and for autonomous learning within the broader context of the university and the community. □ Bonsigner, et al., also address the presence of a fictional overlay in their conclusions on the effectiveness of ARGs for education. They find the fictional overlay, which is part of the “alternate” distinction from participants’ everyday reality, as a means to promote counterfactual thinking, a cognitive skill that “helps us make discoveries, generate novel ideas, and prepare for the future” (23). Much like simulations, these fictional settings help us prepare for scenarios that have (at least ostensibly) not yet occurred— such as peak oil— and, as a result, to actively shape our collective future through the knowledge generated by participating in an ARG.

Finally, Whitton highlights the challenge of creating sufficiently difficult, yet accessible and solvable, puzzles for ARGs in a university setting (ARGOSI Final □Report). If puzzles are

not complex and challenging, they likely will not require, nor necessarily benefit from, collective intelligence communities; if they are too difficult, they can discourage involvement. While this is most definitely a concern for typical ARGs, even those used in University induction, the composition classroom has an established “puzzle” that navigates this difficult terrain: the combined move of rhetorical analysis and interpretation. This “puzzle” is already central to the structure of the assignment sequences from GTC and UWM. Because understanding this combined move as a puzzle might not seem initially clear, I turn to the Fall 2009 standard sequence for UWM’s English 101 to illuminate:

Anything you can see in the essay as a choice—individual words, the speed of a sentence, why one paragraph comes before another—ought to be something you can explain in terms of the purpose you’ve identified. *Give it a try: see if you can explain everything to yourself.* □ Once you’ve tried your own explanation of the whole essay (*which is challenging but not impossible*), choose the four or five strategies you think most support Dillard in achieving her purpose (emphasis added).

Considering this language from the standard sequence, the acknowledgment of both difficulty and uncertainty is clear, yet the task is presented as ultimately possible. More important, considering this scenario as the type of puzzle for a FYC ARG, we can avoid the notion of a single “answer.” Individual students will see multiple and varying choices and purposes and each student will arrive at their own conclusion. This provides a common goal (using rhetorical analysis to interpret a text), but allows for individual answers—answers that can be achieved through a blending of individual thought and collective intelligence. These individual answers to a common problem, then, can offer a balance between individual authority in interpretation while aligning to the structure of the game and thus enabling the benefit of actively participating in a collective intelligence community. Additionally, the question of how difficult to make the

“puzzle” is set by a negotiation between student responses and comments from both peers and the instructor. □

As the solving of puzzles in traditional ARGs serves to advance the experience in a linear— if sometimes unanticipated— fashion, the allowance for multiple and varying interpretative answers to the FYC “puzzle” allows for a more complex network of progressions in a potential composition ARG. This openness to a variety of answers and ways to advance the experience can help to students to see the unique variability in the composition process—no two approaches and textual products are the same. By making this process more visible, we may better facilitate both student reflection and student ownership of their own individual learning process. □

Several benefits of using an ARG structure in the classroom are evident and in line with the ethos and structures of the two FYC programs discussed here: multimodality of texts; collective intelligence communities; understanding shifting contexts; visibility of and reflection on the composition process; interpreting a text based on rhetorical analyses. An ARG, when adjusted to the interests of the composition classroom, could serve as an ideal structure for motivating and producing the types of texts that we traditionally see: text printed on paper. In the future, the multimedia/transmedia nature of the ARG might be leveraged into creating complex and critical multimodal texts, by using multimedia texts or transmedia narrative as the source for interpretation and allowing for students to leverage the web-based playing field of the ARG to house their multimodal interpretative texts. □ □ Beyond the individual multi-modal texts, students might even produce their own ARGs, perhaps to be used by the following semester’s students, as a form of collaborative design.

Future Realities: New Activism Outside of— and Resisting Against— the Institution

ARGs provide a fertile environment for the formation and practice of new literacies. The previously discussed context positions ARGs as spaces that, first, promote learning through the experience and, second, shift traditional classroom learning to a more contextually relevant situation that facilitates learners to be able to practice and acquire knowledge and skills in a more authentic manner and within a community of practice. What remains to be understood is how ARGs might be used outside of institutions, perhaps in less top-down ways. By looking at previous ARGs, we can speculate on how ARGs might be used as spaces for education and activism that destabilize the typically hierarchical structure of education and other institutions. By teaching literacies in the context of autonomous, self-assembled communities, individuals are encouraged to make their own decisions that reflect the ethics they find important using a growing set of literacies to produce content— often resisting the intentions of established institutions.

In *The New Media Reader* (2003), editors Noah Waldrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort chose to include Hanz Enzensberger's 1970 essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media." They did this not because it foretold in some way the presence of digital media devices and the ability for consumers to become producers; they included it because it encouraged the proletariat to use media in order support social activism and provide alternate points of view in the global media ecology (259-260). Enzensberger envisions leveraging the ubiquity of devices— such as compact audio visual recorders— to be used as tools against oppressive institutions. These tools, in the hands of the workers, can support a new Socialist movement that creates its own media to

reflect the concerns, beliefs, and aims of the proletariat. Though these claims date back to 1970, they remain relevant. We can look to recent history to see examples of what Enzensberger was concerned with. In 2006, then-Senator George Allen of Virginia referred to S. R. Sidarth, a native-born Virginian of Indian descent and a paid staffer for Allen's Democratic opponent (and eventual victor) Jim Webb, as "macaca," a racist term equating Sidarth to a monkey. Sidarth, who was paid by the Webb campaign to openly gather information on the Allen campaign, happened to be recording Allen's comments and uploaded the video to YouTube, creating a public backlash against Allen that contributed to his electoral loss. In 2012, Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney was secretly recorded answering a question about an alleged 47% of Americans who did not pay income tax. As in Allen's case, this digital video had a significantly negative effect on Romney's campaign.

But while these individual moments captured by citizens using digital media were influential and affected the outcomes of elections and public opinion, they do not entirely fulfill what Enzensberger proposed. In these instances, the resistance to one dominant institutionalized ethos was simply an extension of binary struggle between competing institutions—the Republican and Democratic political parties that make up the ruling political establishment in the United States. The concern of replacing one top-down institution with another is an echo of Nealon and Giroux' concern with creating fixed meaning in composition by replacing one authority with another. The Black Lives Matter movement, which incorporates mobile digital technology to capture historical events of systemic violence perpetrated against African-Americans by law enforcement and then uses social media in order to organize resistance to the institution through protests and education, would be more in fitting with his theory (White

86-88). And, while the literacies embedded in ARGs facilitate these important forms of activism in productive ways, it is equally important to note that there is as vast as possible a gap between the consequences of immersive play and simulation and the reality of being a target of state-sanctioned violence against brown bodies—a true alternate reality that my white male privilege will never permit me to fully understand or experience.

Enzensberger describes traditional media— and by extension, the Left’s then-current media strategy— as “[allowing] no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver” which only afford competition between two alternate media narratives— that of the bourgeoisie and that of the Left; however, both narratives are produced by a select few, and therefore participate in the same system of top-down communication (262). Enzensberger goes on to proclaim that “the new media are egalitarian in structure” and, furthermore, “are oriented towards action, not contemplation; toward the present, not tradition” — which, by documenting historical events from multiple perspectives, reveals the manufactured nature of recorded and, more importantly, broadcast history (265). As a result, popular media has “eliminated one of the most fundamental categories of aesthetics up to now— fiction” (274). To be effective in resisting institutional structure, however, these tools must be organized into a movement, not left in isolation through single users trying individually to resist. In other words, community and collaboration— a collective intelligence— are needed. Thus, it is not only new media literacy that is required to produce the counter-narratives of the under-represented, but also collective action to autonomously organize the dissemination of that counter-narrative into the media landscape to resist the dominant structures of society.

ARGs have already shown the ability to challenge the dominant hierarchical system of media. As discussed in Chapter 4, ARGs frequently exhibit resistance to the puppetmasters' goals, such as in the ABC Network's *Push, Nevada* ARG, which was eventually taken over by the participant community in an attempt to extend the experience for a more meaningful outcome. Other similar examples exist, as well; these fall into two broad categories. The first is that of the independently-produced ARG, those made without the backing of the entertainment industry but employing or exploiting the IP of that industry. In this category are ARGs like *Metacortechs* (2003), an extension of *The Matrix* storyworld by members of the Cloudmakers community, and *Omnifam* (2005), an extension of the *Alias* storyworld by fans of the television series who also participated in the previous *Alias* ARGs. The other general category is more in line with satire and critique, as opposed to appropriating the industry's IP: *Chasing the Fish* (2003), a parody of the successful independent ARG *Chasing the Wish* (2003); *We Love Beef* (2007), a parody of the massively popular *i love bees* (2004), an ARG that preceded the release of the video game *Halo 2*. *Invoke*, a response to *Evoke*, took a more critical than parodic stance, using satire to critique the World Bank Institute, the organization that funded the development of *Evoke*.

From the list above, *Invoke*, developed by Katharine Neil and Christian McCrea, provides the clearest example of resistance to an institution. The World Bank Institute, which is a sovereign organization with legal immunity, operates with the goal of reducing global poverty through the support of largely neoliberal, free-market economic policies in developing countries. While *Evoke* claims to be a "crash course in changing the world," *Invoke* declares itself "a crash course in saving capitalism" (*Evoke; Invoke*). As a direct response to the World Bank Institute's

attempt to further its agenda through an ARG, *Invoke* is loudly critical of the Bank's approach and mission, defining itself in the following manner:

INVOKE is a ten-week propaganda game inspired by the game EVOKE.

EVOKE is a game commissioned by the World Bank, an international financial institution widely criticised for its practise of using crippling debt to impose its socially and economically destructive policies on the Third World. EVOKE challenges players to become "social innovators" and devise solutions to the world's social and environmental problems.

As game-playing social innovators, we gladly accept this challenge. And after extensive research and development we are proud to present: INVOKE.

As our contribution to the EVOKE game process, INVOKE is a game even more brilliant and world-changing than the World Bank's EVOKE.

Our game INVOKES the guise of progressive social activism and community organising to promote pro-capitalist ideology. Its implicit message is that the problems of the world – including hunger, poverty, environmental destruction, injustice and disease – can and must be solved within the logic of the free market system.

The objective of INVOKE is to ideologically demobilize the next generation of potential anti-capitalist activists all over the world. It targets educated layers of African youth – young people most in danger of critiquing and opposing the World Bank's policies in their region.

After receiving their education, players will "graduate" to become "certified" in World Bank style "innovation". (*Invoke*)

□□ While it can be easily argued that the impact of *Invoke* was very minimal— its eight weekly missions over the course of two months garnered 45 comments/contributions, as opposed to the more than 19,000 participants who contributed more than 35,000 solutions to problems presented to the community in *Evoke*— the structure of *Invoke* exhibits many of the markers for ARGs as sites of resistance (*Reality Is Broken*).

By taking on the World Bank, which draws membership from 189 countries and distributes tens of billions of dollars in funds annually, *Invoke* is certainly pushing back against a powerful and well-entrenched institution that has little liability for recourse, due to its immunity and wide-reaching bureaucratic support from the world's economic and military superpowers.

Though the impact was small, the resistance was coordinated in a manner that accords with what Enzensberger predicts. For instance, the “Evidence” page of the *Invoke* website has contributions from multiple individuals. Their contributions are a portfolio of journalistic videos, from sources such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and reports on the negative effects of the World Bank programs by Non-Governmental Organizations; the participants also created a flickr group of images of protests, newspaper articles, and other artifacts that presented an alternate view of the World Bank Group. While relatively small scale, *Invoke* facilitates organization of participants in order to resist the policies and actions of the World Bank through collaboration, research, and amplifying their critical message.

Invoke also uses creative literacy in order to resist the World Bank. *Evoke* employed comics as a part of its multimodal strategy and the creators of *Invoke* remixed the comics in order to subvert the original message with their own counter message (see Figure 5.4).



[Figure 5.4 Comparison of the first pages of the *Evoke* first mission comic and the remixed *Invoke* first mission comic.]

The satire of the remixed panels of the first mission focuses on *Invoke*'s active troubling of the existence of the *Evoke* ARG as an attempt to whitewash the World Bank's "debt gouging model" and criticize the notion of marketing through social media like Twitter and institutions like TED as contemporary propaganda to convince general population, whom *Invoke* argues are negatively preyed upon by the World Bank, that the institution is acting to benefit the developing world. In a remarkable moment of satire, the creators of *Invoke* chose not to alter the fifth page of the mission one comic, as it already unabashedly focused on profiting from the human and

ecological tragedy of the citizens of Tokyo in a fictional 2020— thus further reinforcing their argument about the true aims of the World Bank. This strategy is particularly effective as they are working with an audience, ARG participants, who are attuned to focusing on details within media in order to find clues. Neil and McCrea’s critique of *Evoke* as an ARG that supports the World Bank’s dubious aims reaches completion in the final panel of their remixed mission one comic, in which a World Bank executive realizes the genius of the *Evoke* ARG’s true function— a sleek marketing misdirection. One of the game’s designer states: “So, the game element? A cypher for the real ‘game.’ A game we’re rigging.”

The activist potential of ARGs is also important in that it seeks to compete for power against dominant institutions within a relatively new and less closed-off media landscape. The consolidation of older mass media such as radio and television, enabled through the relaxed restriction on media ownership included in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, made it increasingly difficult for the voices of people with viewpoints and experiences outside of those endorsed by mainstream institutions to be heard by a mass audience; at the same time, access to digital tools and networks increased in the United States (Costanza-Chock 2-3). Rather than facilitating the skills and literacies needed to try to produce and broadcast a television show, for instance, ARGs focus on new literacies that can allow for people to resist in more contested spaces, such as Podcasts instead of broadcast radio— spaces that had yet to be fully colonized by the dominant institutions.

The collaborative community and distributed structure of ARGs— particularly when social media platforms are integrated into the experience— also facilitates the organization of the counter-narratives of a diverse group of people, whether Latin@-centered movements or those

assembling under the Black Lives Matter banner. In *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets!*, Sasha Costanza-Chock cites the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” protest against the World Trade Organization as a primary example of the use of new media to horizontally organize a resistance movement (6-7). As part of this well-known event, protesters used new media to cover the protests from the inside; their reporting directly conflicted with that of the mainstream media, revealing the alternate perspective and eye-witness experiences of the participants. The Battle of Seattle’s organized media campaign was the birth of IndyMedia, an umbrella organization that provides a platform for local, non-corporate journalism in communities around the world, and continues to operate today. In her book, which focuses on transmedia and the immigrant rights movement in the United States, Costanza-Chock goes on to define *transmedia organizing* as:

The creation of a narrative of social transformation across multiple media platforms, involving the movement’s base in participatory media making, and linking attention directly to concrete opportunities for action. (50)

The ability for people, especially the young activists who are a major feature of multiple chapters in Costanza-Chock’s book, to be literate in transmedia practices is one of the key factors in the effective examples of activism that are presented. As previously argued, these literacies are learned particularly well through participation in ARGs. When looking at Costanza-Chock’s definition of transmedia organizing, the parallels to ARGs are clear: a “story” that extends across multiple media and requiring the participation of a community able to collaborate and create. Furthermore, ARGs regularly employ a dystopian theme—the notion of a richly-detailed, hidden narrative just below the surface of everyday life requires institutions willing to perpetuate conspiracies against the population. This can be obviously seen in *Year Zero*, an ARG predicated

on resistance to a government, and is also present in *The Beast*, *Majestic*, *The Lost Experience*, and many other ARGs.

Conclusion

It is perhaps not too difficult to imagine, then, an ARG with the goal of activism that mirrors the activism of current movements of resistance. This ARG would be an experience that requires its participants to participate in the same protest actions and methods of resistance. It might use a storyworld focused on contemporary social issues that extend into the phenomenological and ontological “real” world through both the use of popular social media networks and by creating opportunities for participation in physical spaces, such as protesting in a public plaza. It could feature puzzles that ask how to bring awareness to and to best educate about an issue, with the puzzle’s solution determined by the community. Participants could be encouraged to meet in public spaces for protests to advance the ARG. This theoretical ARG would perhaps be similar to *Evoke*— but created by the people who are affected by the issues, as opposed to the World Bank. It could be an ARG focused on achieving environmental activism similar to *World Without Oil*, in which the participants would be specifically tasked with making real world changes to energy, agricultural, or other policies and practices in order to achieve sustainability either on a local or global context. Though in many ARGs the context of resistance might be initiated through dystopian themes created by the puppetmasters, the activist ARGs of the future might initiate a theme of hope in the participants by organizing communities in a way that creates agency and power for marginalized peoples.

Regardless of how they have been used and how they might be used in the future, ARGs are effective learning tools. Being predicated on deep collaboration, participants are required to work together using a wide array of skills and knowledge to both find and solve complex series of problems. Due to this structure, ARGs are effective game spaces for education, as defined by Gee. Along with the inherently collaborative community aspect, the immersive TINAG aesthetic of ARGs creates the potential for the authentic contexts necessary for situated cognition. By incorporating digital media and leveraging the affordances of the multiple forms of media the experience spreads across, ARGs are sites for observing and developing new literacies through encouraging deep participation in a digitally-based collective intelligence community.

Because of these specific characteristics and qualifications, ARGs can and have been used in educational contexts. These have been within the physical walls of educational institutions (*ARGOSI*; *Pheon* and *Ghosts of a Chance* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum); they have been used outside the walls, allowing for wider simultaneous participation via the Internet (*World Without Oil* and *Evoke*). In the future, they show promise to be used for activism. While previous ARGs (*Year Zero*) have focused specifically on elements of organized resistance to dominant institutions as part of their fictionalized experience, they also illustrate how ARGs might be used as part of the horizontally-organized transmedia activism already in practice in contemporary society.

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Conclusion

Although the potential for ARGs to support new and established forms of activism, it is important to approach this speculation from a critical and careful standpoint. If ARGs are to serve as platforms for transmedia activism that lead to new future realities, designers and participants must be aware of not repeating some of the structural patterns that reinforce the dominant systems that have produced exclusion, disparity, and oppression of a multitude of varieties. While many game advocates tout “serious games” and “games for change,” it is important to look to the current and historical issues that complicate the efficacy of these proclamations and the barriers that activist ARGs might face.

The optimism surrounding ARGs as experiences is perhaps best embodied by Jane McGonigal. In popular culture, she is likely best known for her TED Talk “Gaming can make a better world” (2010), in which she argues that playing games more frequently will help people learn the skills to empower new optimistic, collaborative solutions to the world’s problems. McGonigal has helped to design many of the most popular ARGs— *World Without Oil*, *Evoke*, *i love bees*, *Last Call Poker*— several of which are discussed here as examples of ARGs that successfully create effective learning environments for participants. The work and careful thought that she has put into the framing of games in this way is evident from her dissertation, articles, conference presentations, and her book, *Reality Is Broken*. In that book, we can see the deep optimism in chapter titles like “Saving the Real World Together,” which focuses on *WWO* and *Evoke*.

Therefore, McGonigal’s optimism is not without warrant. This positive view of games as agents of social and political change is also mirrored by some of the rhetoric that surrounds the

“serious games” movement. Serious games are those defined as those played and designed for purposes beyond entertainment— a definition that is largely credited to theorist Clark C. Abt in 1970— and the notion of serious games can be traced back thousands of years, to at least Plato (Wilkinson). The belief that we can “drive real-world change using games and technology that help people to learn, improve their communities, and contribute to make the world a better place” is part of the core philosophy of New York-based non-profit Games for Change, which was founded in 2004 and has been hosting an annual games festival since 2005 (“About Us”). As evidence of the mainstream acceptance of this notion, scholars like McGonigal, James Gee, and Eric Zimmerman serve on the board of directors and advisory board of the group. Similarly, the European-based Serious Games Society (SGS), which publishes a quarterly peer-reviewed journal and hosts an annual conference on serious games, positions itself in the following manner:

The SGS’s core purpose is to foster technological innovation and excellence in the field of Serious Games and Gamification for the benefit of all the people. The SGS fosters research and technology transfer between research, industry and educational establishment in the multiple disciplines involved in SGs design, development and deployment. (“About”)

From the SGS’s mission, many of the potentials discussed in this dissertation are apparent: multidisciplinary approaches across a variety of cultural, educational, and entertainment industry contexts. However— and this is the major caveat I want to identify in closing— the notion of being “for the benefit of all the people” while simultaneously working within the structures of the established, dominant structures of society is far more complicated and elusive than this almost-utopian rhetoric reflects.

As Thomas Malaby notes in “Beyond Play,” games do exist in more complicated contexts than simply “exceptionalist position” — that games are not a part of the context of everyday life with consequences outside of pleasure, fun, or entertainment (97). With the blurring of the everyday and the alternate in ARGs, then, the same is true— and perhaps more so due to the purposeful overlap of those spaces through ontological and phenomenological manipulation. Thus, when I speculate on the potential for ARGs as structures for activism, it is important to both embrace and to be painfully aware of the very real and high stakes of games. For instance, we can look to lotteries for immigration, such as Malaby points out, or for affordable housing in major metropolitan cities in the United States, such as San Francisco, where 6,580 people applied for 95 rent-controlled apartments in a new high-rise complex in 2018 (Badger and Wilson). The ability to live in adequate housing— and sometimes simply to live, in the case of immigrants fleeing persecution or better living conditions— comes to down to the probability of a game.

In exploring the use of transmedia activism in the Black Lives Matter and the Immigrants Rights movements in Chapter 5, these stakes become even more clear. Diamond Reynolds’s live-streaming on Facebook of the death of Philando Castile, who was shot seven times by a police officer because he reached for his licence while sitting in the driver’s seat of his car, while Reynolds and her 4-year old daughter sat there, watching Castile bleed to death, reinforces that the stakes of transmedia activism are very real. The same can be said of deaths of numerous African-Americans: Sandra Bland, 28, whose traffic arrest was filmed by bystanders; Alton Sterling, 37, who was shot to death by police outside a convenience store, an event recorded on the mobile phones of multiple bystanders and security cameras; Eric Garner, 43,

who was choked to death by a police officer in response to selling cigarettes on the street, which was recorded on video by the mobile phone of Garner's friend. Tragically, the list of those who have been recorded while being killed by police is extraordinarily long and continues to grow. Understanding the role of ARGs in transmedia activism of the future must confront the serious—often mortal—consequences of the context of everyday life.

Beyond these two movements, we can see other examples of “alternate” realities and perspectives that overlay everyday life and produce serious consequences. For instance, the #PizzaGate instance provides an example of conspiracies that proved to be untrue leading to actual violence. In 2016, the email of the Democratic National Committee was hacked and many messages were released to the public through Wikileaks⁶⁴. A conspiracy was propagated by right wing media, such as InfoWars, that claimed Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman was at the center of a pedophilia ring and was using “cheese pizza” as a code word for “child pornography” (Aisch, Huang, and Kang). By way of this theory, various emails and mentioned artifacts were read as clues—much like would happen in an ARG—with wild interpretations formed to conjure up a reality that supported the conspiracy theory involving high-ranking Democrats, human-trafficking, Satanism, and other elements. Eventually, a man from North Carolina traveled to Washington, D.C., in order to investigate one of the businesses the conspiracy centered on and, while doing so, fired shots from his assault rifle into the building.

⁶⁴ As noted in The New York Times article tracing the development of #PizzaGate, “fake news” played a crucial role in propagating the conspiracy to a wider audience. This wider audience included a tweets from that of future National Security Advisor Michael T. Flynn, who would later plead guilty to lying to Federal investigators focusing on contact between Donald Trump's campaign and the Russian Government, which has been accused of hacking the emails of the DNC. Furthermore, the cultural context of ARGs, transmedia activism, and “fake news” deserves a far deeper analysis than is within the scope of this dissertation, especially when taking into account the illegal use of Facebook data by Cambridge Analytica in an attempt to influence the 2016 United States Presidential election.

Even though the consequences of play and games go beyond contexts of entertainment, it is important to consider the concept of leisure when thinking about future uses of ARGs for activism. In *Critical Play*⁶⁵, Mary Flanagan examines the role of games beyond that of entertainment; part of her focus is on pervasive games which use everyday spaces as an integral part of the experience, such as ARGs. In her exploration of the use of games in this manner, she connects the current use of location in gaming experiences to the Situationist International⁶⁶ movement founded in the 1950s and their use of public space and the everyday in critiquing the capitalist structures of Western culture— structures which included manufactured notions of leisure to lead to more consumption for mass entertainment (Flanagan). Within this conception of leisure is the assumption of excess time. In order to fully consider the activist potential of ARGs, we must consider who is able to take the time to “play” these games. For instance, in *Evoke*, which is focused on developing economies in Africa, who is able to participate?

Accessibility is also a major concern with the technological aspect of ARGs. If transmedia is to be the groundwork for this organizing and activism, access to the technology and the networks of communication is paramount to participation. Within this framework, we also must ask who controls the technology and the network and if the means of communication will be made available during the times they are most required. For instance, will governments, mobile carriers, other Internet service providers (ISPs), and even platforms themselves (such as Facebook and Twitter) remain available during times of unrest?

⁶⁵ For a deeper investigation of locative media, from games to installation art, *Critical Play* is an invaluable resource.

⁶⁶This history connects back to writers like Guy Debord, whose writings are mentioned throughout this dissertation as a foundation of ARGs and their relevance to multiple logics.

McGonigal begins the conclusion to *Reality Is Broken* with two bold statements: “We can play any games we want” and “we can create any future we can imagine” (345). While alluring, these statements reflect a lack of critical understanding of the restrictions placed on the under- and non-privileged— the subaltern— in our societies. Rather than providing statements, Flanagan focuses on asking important questions that address this disparity between the realities of different populations: “who has time to engage in ‘alternate playgrounds?’ Who has the freedom to explore...?” (200). When considering the future use of ARGs— experiences grounded in the cultural and technological contexts of the 21st century that exist on the border between game and narrative— for both activism and for other uses, we must be sure to ask these questions so that participants can cross the boundary of being invisible to resisting the dominant structures of society. Though play and games have historically been positioned as marginalized in seriousness, being strictly assigned to entertainment, leisure, play, or distraction, many theorists and many games themselves have shown this understanding to fail to account for the real consequences of games outside of the gamespace and in our everyday lives. While we can view this dischord in our understanding of games as having trouble with defining those experiences in terms of our everyday lives, we can also view this through a somewhat antithetical, alternate perspective: we have issues with reality.

Though optimism is the overall tone of *Reality Is Broken*, McGonigal does close with a stance very much in-line with an understanding that the traditional and historical view of games is no longer the most applicable view: “We can no longer afford to view games as separate from our real lives and our real work” (354).

Or, to put it another way, when it comes to ARGs— this is not a game.

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Appendix A:
Chronological List of ARGs

The Beast
Apr 2001 to Jul 2001
Type: Commercial, promotion for the
movie, A.I.: Artificial Intelligence
puppetmasters [PMs]: Jordan Weisman,
Elan Lee, Sean Stewart

Change Agents: Creative Chip
Jun 2001 to Jul 2001
Type: Independent
PMs: Dave Szulborski
www.daveszulborski.com

Majestic
Jun 2001 to Oct 2001
Type: Commercial
PMs: Electronic Arts
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majestic_%28vi
deo_game%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majestic_%28video_game%29)

Plexata
Jul 2001 to Jan 2002
Type: Independent
PMs: Scott Rossi

Change Agents: Operation Mindset
Aug 2001 to Sep 2001
Type: Independent
PMs: Dave Szulborski
www.daveszulborski.com

:k: Uncap the Ride
Sep 2001 to Dec 2002
Type: Commercial, promoting BMW

Ravenwatchers
Sep 2001
Type: Independent
PMs:

Alias “Web Game”
October 2001 to May 2002
Type: Commercial, TV tie-in
PMs:

Lockjaw
Feb 2002 to May 2002
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Karetao

Change Agents: Out of Control
2002
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Dave Szulborski
www.daveszulborski.com

Spooks [Evans]
May 2002 to Jun 2002
Type: Commercial, promotion for Spooks
television show
puppetmasters: BBC

Codename: Constellation
May 2002 to Jun 2002
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Karl

Exocog
May 2002 to Jun 2002
Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Jim Miller

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

M.A.D. Countdown

May 2002

The game had a handheld/location aspect to it, but also collaborative gameplay, automated calls to a phone booth with clues, hidden websites, real world props and puzzles.

[Developed by a games collective for a Swiss University to research the social boundaries of proximity in gameplay]

<http://www.madcountdown.com>

Push, Nevada

Sep 17, 2002 to Oct 28, 2002

Type: Commercial, television program

puppetmasters: Ben Affleck, Sean Bailey, Matt Damon, Chris Moore

Search4E

Sep 30, 2002 to Dec 31, 2002

Type: Commercial (Pay to Play) [Walter John Williams *TINAG* & Unfiction]

puppetmasters: ?

NoahBoddy

Jan 2003 to March 2003

Type: Independent (spin-off of *Push, Nevada*)

PMs: Team Noah Boddy

Chasing the Wish

2003

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Dave Szulborksi

<http://www.chasingthewish.net/>

Acheron

Aug 31, 2003 to Jan 31, 2004

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Liquidcrack, Bill Shaw, Jackie Kerr, danman_d, Marie Lamb, sarkenobi, Dee Cook

Metacortechs

Aug 31, 2003 to Oct 31, 2003

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Karetao

AWARE

Mar 31, 2004 to Aug 31, 2004

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Real World Gaming

I Love Bees [w3]

Jun 30, 2004 to Oct 31, 2004

Type: Commercial, promotion for Halo video game

puppetmasters: 42 Entertainment

www.ilovebees.com

Urban Hunt (aka Dread House)

Jul 2004 to Oct 31, 2004

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Dave Szulborksi, Dee Cook, Caterpillar, Diandra, Lazarus_Long,

Sin_Vraal

<http://dreadhousecredits.addlepated.net/>

Project Gateway

Aug 31, 2004 to Sep 30, 2004

Type: Independent

puppetmasters: Colin Brennan

Legend of the Sacred Urns

Sep 2004 to Dec 2004

Type: Commercial, promotion for Sharp
Aquos televisions
puppetmasters: GMD Studios

Regenesis
Oct 2004 to Jan 2005
Type: Commercial, promotion for the
Regenesis television show
puppetmasters: Xenophile

Art of the Heist
2005
Type: Commercial, promoting the Audi A3
puppetmasters: Dave Szulborski, Audi,
McKinney-Silver, Chelsea Digital, GMD
Studios
http://www.mckinney.com/A3_H3ist/

Omnifam
May 2005 to Dec 2005
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Bill Shaw, Dee Cook, Marie
Lamb, Kender, Jackie Kerr, Haley Moore,
Michelle Senderhauf

Jamie Kane [CD]
June 2005
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: BBCi, Preloaded, Creative
Virtual

ARGtalk
Jun 2005 to Jul 2005
Type: Independent
puppetmasters:

Vaporlofts
Aug 28, 2005 to Jan 26, 2006
Type: Independent

puppetmasters: ???

Last Call Poker [w4]
Sep 24, 2005 to Nov 15, 2005
Type: Commercial, promotion for *Gun*
video game
puppetmasters: 42 Entertainment

Orbital Colony
Nov 16, 2005 to Jan 21, 2006
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Michelle "varin"
Senderhauf, bagsbee, Karl "QBKooky",
White_Knight, Jchillerup, Flynn, Slyfox,
Magesteff, Sunny, Colin, Angela

Who is Benjamin Stove?
Jan 2006 to Apr 2006
Type: Commercial, General Motors, "Live
Green, Go Yellow" promotion
puppetmasters: Campbell-Ewald, GMD
Studios, Dave Szulborski

The Lost Experience
May 2006 to Octo 2006
Type: Commercial, tie-in TV
puppetmasters: ABC, Channel 4 (UK),
Yahoo!7 (Aus)

Catching the Wish
May 24, 2006 to Sep 28, 2006
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Dave Szulborski, Nick
Braccia, cem, Dee Cook, Haley Moore,
Michelle Senderhauf, Kassandra Standridge

Ocular Effect
Aug 2006 to ?

Type: Commercial, TV tie-in for ABC
Family movie *Fallen*
PMs: Xenophie Media, Double Twenty
Productions

Sammeeeees

Oct 2, 2006 to Dec 12, 2006
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Jan Libby

Heroes Evolution/360 [CD]
Jan 2007 to ?
Type: Commercial, TV
puppetmasters:

Year Zero [not on argology, w5]
Feb 12, 2007 to....
Type: Commercial, tie-in experience for
NIN album *Year Zero*.
Dev: 24 Entertainment
puppetmasters: 42 Entertainment

Unnatural Selection (aka Monster Hunter
Club)
Feb 2007 to Mar 2007
Type: Commercial, promotion for the
movie, *The Host*
puppetmasters: Magnolia Studios,
ARGstudios (Dave Szulborski, Dee Cook,
Michelle Senderhauf, Nick Braccia, cem,
Kassandra Standridge)
www.monsterhunterclub.com

MeiGeist
Jan 2007 to March 2007
Type: Commercial
PMs: Licorice Films, HP Labs, UK Film
Council, Watershed

Eldritch Errors
Apr 2007
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: GMD Studios
<http://www.eldritcherrors.com/>

World Without Oil
Apr 2007 to May 2007
Type: Independent, funding by ITVS
puppetmasters: Ken Eklund, Jane
McGonigal, Cait Zorn, Corrina McFarlane,
Dee Cook, Marie Lamb, Michelle
Senderhauf, Erik Wohlgenuth, Krystyn
Wells, Bonnie Primbsch, Mark Bracewell
www.worldwithouthoil.org

Wrath of Johnson (Sammeeeees II)
Jun 2007 to Sep 2007
Type: Independent
puppetmasters: Jan Libby

Cloverfield
July 2007 to Jan 2008
Type: Commercial, promotion for
Cloverfield
PMs:

Hope Is Missing
? to Oct 2007
Type: Independent, promotional ARG
element of narrative (main film *Head
Trauma*)

Why So Serious?
Oct 2007 to July 10, 2008 2:20 PM
Type: Commercial, promotion for the Dark
Knight movie
puppetmasters: 42 Entertainment
www.whysoserious.com

Silver Ladder
Nov 2007 to Feb 2008
Type: Independent
puppetmasters:

Jericho ARG (Tom Tooman)
Nov 2007 to ?
Type: Commercial, TV tie-in
PMs: CBS

Find the Lost Ring [w6]
Feb 2008 to July 10, 2008 2:23 PM
Type: Commercial, promotion for
McDonald's and the 2008 Olympics
puppetmasters: Jane McGonigal
www.findthelostring.com

Ghosts of a Chance [CD]
18 July 2008 to 25 October 2008
Type: Commercial, Smithsonian American
Art Museum
puppetmasters: John Maccabee

[Added from Wikipedia]

Commander Video
2008

Alert Vulcan
April 2009 to May 2009
Type: Commercial, promotional for *Star
Trek* (2009)
PMs: Watershed?

Xi
2009

Gbanga Famiglia

2010

Lewis Hamilton: Secret Life
2010

Conspiracy for Good
2010
Dev: The Company P

A Map of Floating City
2011
Dev: Thomas Dolby

Potato Fool's Day
2001
Dev: Valve

Phrenic
2014
Dev: Mike Vogel

Frog Fractions 2
2014
Dev: Twinbeard

The Black Watchmen
2015
Dev: Alice & Smith

Afterbirth
2015
Dev: Edmund McMillen

Oxenfree
2016
Dev: Night School Studio

Archimedes
2016

Dev: Joshua Hughes

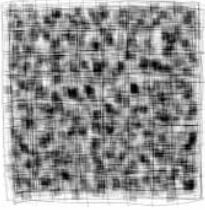
LEVELS ARG School
2016

Sombra
2016
Dev: Blizzard

Hello Neighbor
2017
Dev: tinyBuild, DynamicPixels

Waking Titan
2017
Dev: Hello Games

Derelict Radio
2017
Dev: The Closet Gamer



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EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, May 2008
MA, English-Creative Writing

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Dissertation Title: Issues with Reality: Defining and Exploring the Logics of Alternate Reality Games
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PUBLICATIONS

PEER REVIEWED:

“This Is Not a Game: Alternate Reality Games as a First Year Composition Course Structure,” *GLS 8.0 Proceedings*. ETC Press, 2012.

FICTION:

“Anaphylaxis.” *GUERNICA/a magazine of art & politics*. May 2009.
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Communication, Fall 2010 - Present
Gateway Technical College, Kenosha, WI

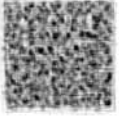
- Program Effectiveness Chairperson, 2017 - Present
- Design, write state curriculum, and teach Games & Culture course, 2013.
- Teach and design course sequence for: first- and second-semester First Year Composition courses; introductory technical communication course; writing for digital media course; developmental writing course.
- Design and teach a special section of English Composition 1 as a sustainability-themed alternate reality game, Fall 2013.
- Create program expectations for English Composition 1.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Fall 2009-Spring 2010
University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

- Teach and design course sequence for English 101, Fall 2009 & Spring 2010.

Associate Lecturer, Fall 2008-Spring 2010
University of Wisconsin—Parkside, Kenosha, WI

- Teach and design course sequence for English 100 and English 101



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CONFERENCE PAPERS & PRESENTATIONS

“This Is Not a Writing Class!” presentation and workshop facilitated at the North American Simulation and Gaming Association conference, October 23-26, 2013.

“When the Outside Looks In: Accountability, Assessment, and Apprehension in a Technical College Setting,” panel presented with Kathryn Nordhaus and Katy J. Vopal at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), March 14-17, 2013.

“Examining Placement Testing,” presented at the Wisconsin Technical College System Assessment Conference, February 28-March 1, 2013.

“This Is Not a Game: Alternate Reality Games as a First Year Composition Course Structure,” poster presentation at Games, Learning, + Society (GLS), June 13-15, 2012.

“Un/Available Designs: Exploring the Multimodal Rhetorics of Lynda Barry’s ‘Common Sense’ in the First Year Composition Classroom” proposed as part of “Re-Working Visual Literacy through Comics: Production and Analysis in Composition” panel for the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), April 6-9, 2011.

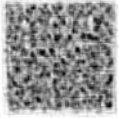
“Publishing Creative Writing” panel, Parskide Writers Conference, UW—Parkside, Kenosha, Wisconsin, May 7, 2010.

“This Is Not a Game: Alternate Reality Games as Composition Course Structure,” presented at Emerging Compositions and Other Digressions: UWM FYC Professional Development Conference in Composition, UW—Milwaukee, May 1, 2010.

“Facilitating Communication and Collaboration Across English 101 Using Web-based Resources” presented at The Sixteenth Annual First-Year Composition Graduate Student Conference, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December 7, 2009.

“Reading Androids: Binaries, Hybrids, and Simulation in the Metagenic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*” presented at Liminal Literature: Borders and Genre, sponsored by the University of Wisconsin—Madison Department of English and the Anonymous Fund at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, February 26-28, 2009.

“So How Do I Get Published, Anyway?” panel presented at the Fox Cities Book Festival, Neenah, WI, April 14-19, 2009.



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READINGS

“And Nothing But,” CutBank and cream city review AWP reading, Columbia College, Chicago, February 14, 2009.

“And Nothing But,” UW—Milwaukee Student/Faculty reading, Linneman’s Riverwest Inn, Milwaukee, January 17, 2008.

CAMPUS & COMMUNITY SERVICE

Gateway Technical Education Association, 2010 - Present
President, 2014-2016; 2018 - Present
President-Elect, 2013-2014
Past-President, 2016-2018
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LGBTQ Safe Zone Trainer
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Faculty Advisor, Kenosha
Gateway Gazette (Student Newspaper), 2010-2012

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Writing Placement Test Departmental Study, Co-Principal
Gateway Technical College, 2011-2013

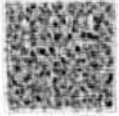
Faculty In-Service Presenter and Trainer—Presentation Strategies and Software
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Editor-in-Chief
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Judge, Short Fiction Contest
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Star Faculty Award Nominee, Gateway Technical College, 2010-2017
Online Teaching Certification, Gateway Technical College, Fall 2012
THAT Camp Bootcamp Fellowship, November 2010
Wisconsin State Technical College Certificate (3-year), 2010-2013
Faculty Innovation with Technology grant, Gateway Technical College, 2010-2011
James Sappenfield Award for Outstanding Graduate Studies, UW—Milwaukee, 2009
Best New American Voices 2009 Nominee, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, 2007
University Writing Award, New School University, 2005
Academic Excellence Award, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2004
NASA Space Grant, Arizona State University, 1999-2000
President's Scholarship, Arizona State University, 1999-2000
Sun Devil Award, Arizona State University, 1999
National Merit Finalist, 1999

SKILLS

Proficient with:

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