

Exogenesis

An Alternate Reality Game Study

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Abstract

ARGs are a modern kind of gaming that was born after Web 2.0. ARG focus is in telling a story where players interact with a fictional world using the real world as scenario and interface meaning using the many technologies available online as well as the real world to tell a story. From this game concept, a practical study was done in how it works and how it can be used as a narrative tool focused on storytelling.

Keywords: alternate reality game, storytelling, narrative, social-media, pervasive computing

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1. Introduction

Games are one of humanity's most ancient forms of entertainment, following technologies tendencies through history. The video game industry is estimated to be worth \$68 billion by 2012 surpassing the movie industry [McLaughlin 2010]. Helped by the Internet, gaming is also expanding its social aspect. Remo observes that "online game time rose 10 percent year-over-year to make up 10.2 percent of Americans' Internet use in June [2010], up from 9.3 percent" [2010].

Internet facilitates the distribution of content, making it possible for independent developers to participate in a market once exclusive to big companies. Cheaper game distribution allows more conceptual games to be available in the market and experimentation can be rewarded. As Kolan & Shea argue, "the indie scene has come of age, and we have the online services to distribute affordable bite-sized games. Make something cool and the audience is there. Make something cool and it can spread like wildfire and become a hit" [2009]. Kolan, in his article about how franchising is destroying creativity in the video games, states that "we need to embrace creative thought, experimental gameplay (so long as it's fun, right?)". One very creative and different way of gaming is the Alternate Reality Games, or ARGs. In this game the player does not pick a joystick or a mouse and fight against the computer or each other, but solves problems and puzzles with help of a community.

ARGs are a modern kind of gaming that was born after Web 2.0. In some ways, ARGs are very similar to Role Playing Games (RPGs). ARG focus is also to tell a story where players interact with a fictional world using the real world as scenario and interface. They are somewhat different from traditional RPGs, though. RPGs commonly use tables and dices and sheets of papers to tell a story where players interpret roles, ARGs use the many technologies available online as well as the real world to tell a story. Like a treasure hunt, where the players go after riddles that lead to other riddles, an on-line community works together to solve puzzles that will leads from site to site and leads from puzzle to puzzle, while a story is being told in the background. It is a modern storytelling medium, allowing new possibilities of narrative, with the players influencing the story and participating in the solution of the mystery.

This research aims was to explore and understand the Alternate Reality Game as a new storytelling media, different from the usual commercial focus of the genre. The project focus on the composition of an ARG, experimenting with the possibilities of developing a short but complete game that tells a story that engages the players by making them eager for answers and interested in what would come next, lead players through puzzles, and promote community-thinking using several internet social tools like Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube and web forums.

The basic plot is a mystery/horror story about a young man called Phillip Blake that in a depressive state is recruited by a Cult that has insidious plans for Phillip and the humanity. When Phillip appears to be missing the players are given the mission to investigate what happened to Phillip and defeat the upcoming apocalypse.

2. Literature Review

In order to better guide the research of the theme, the following themes regarding the main points about developing an ARG focused in storytelling where researched:

2.1 The relationship between narrative and games through multi-media interactive fiction

Games are one of the most ancestral ways of human entertainment, but there is no absolute definition for it. Szulborski, in his book *This is not a Game*, observes that “there have been many attempted academic definitions of games but none that have ever been accepted as definitive and all encompassing” [2005, p. 19]. Many definitions pick important aspects of the nature of games but none of them are without flaw. Crawford defines games as “a closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality” [cited in Szulborski, 2005] which fits well this project.

Jesper Juul, who, in his book *Half-Real* [2005], proposes a “classic game model”, consisting of six features that work on three different levels, the first being the game’s rules, the second being the player’s relationship with the game and the third being the relationship between playing the game and the rest of the world. According to his model, a game is:

- i. A rule based formal system;
- ii. With variable and quantifiable outcome;
- iii. Where different outcomes are assigned different values;
- iv. Where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;
- v. The player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;
- vi. And the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.

This model does not tie games to any specific medium. Juul classifies games as “transmedial”, “since many different medias (or tools) can be used for playing games” [2005, p. 7].

After defining games, the study tried to understand multi-media interactive fiction. Murray, in her book *Hamlet on the holodeck* [1997], rightly affirms that we are moving towards a moment of convergence as novelists, playwrights and filmmakers to multiplatform stories and digital formats: a loosened boundary between games and stories, broadcast media and archival media, narrative and drama and even audience and author [p. 63-64]. She presents Laurels proposal of an interactive fiction system “presided over by a playwright who would shape the experience into the rising and falling arc of classical drama” [1997, p. 200]. Aarseth, however, observes that we should be aware of the generic misuse of the term *interactive* for the various vague connotations in computer systems, while it should be keeping the notion of the “interacting act” [1997, p. 48].

Bogost starts his analysis on game narrative stating that “game engines move far beyond literary devices and genres. Unlike cultural categories like modern novel or film noir, game engines regulate individual

videogames’ artistic, cultural, and narrative expression” [2006, p. 56]. Bogost laments that the engines of the games are developed in order to provide better graphics and better playability and so do not often improve the narrative aspects or how characters reacts to the ambient they occupy [p. 64.]. He cites the works of Aarseth and Juul whom propose that the narratological analysis of games must be made of a “clean break” of literature and linguistics conventions. Regarding games narrative, Murray affirms that they are limited to rigid plotlines because they do not have an abstract representation of the story structure that would allow them to distinguish random elements and decisions taken by different players [1997, p. 198]. Richard Dansky introduces game narratives as a series of tasks to be developed: *story*, the overall plot; *dialogues*, that is everything that is said in the game; *supporting text*, other texts that supports the development, like literature reviews, character descriptions, and world bibles; and *cut scenes*, the cinematics that occur in game [Bateman, 2007, p. 12].

Nielsen, Smith & Tosca [2008] cite Juul’s label for this as *progression games*. Comparatively, they cite what Juul calls *emergence games*, a preferable form of game that each object reacts in different ways depending on players’ decisions, creating a greater sense of freedom and importance [p. 183]. Nielsen, Smith & Tosca agrees with Jenkins’ four narrative modes that can appear in games: *evoked narrative*, where the game reproduces universes already known by the players like *Star Wars* or *Lord of The Rings*; *enacted narrative*, that privilege spatial exploration to over plot development; *embedded narratives*, a kind of detective story where players must find clues and solve enigmas in order to progress; and *emergent narratives*, a more elegant narrative where the game space is oriented to plot development enabled by players activities [p. 200].

2.2 Alternate Reality Games

In order to understand Alternate Reality Games, it is important to understand some core concepts that came before.

William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* [1983] described a dystopia where humans connected their brains to computers and travelled into what he called cyberspace: “the virtual terrain of databanks along a surfable internet” [Murray, 1997, p. 22]. Bolter & Grusin, in reference to Gibson’s vision say, “cyberspace consisted of the network of all computers and information processing systems on earth or orbit” [1999, p. 181]. For Murray, the actual technological mind-set is a revision of this cyberspace, in a simplistic form, without exploring the real possibilities of non-linear narrative [1997, p. 67]. Of course, her statement is in the perspective of the late 90’s. Bolter & Grusin define cyberspace as the Internet and other manifestations of virtual media and classifies it as a nonplace, a term created by Marc Augé that means

“spaces which are not themselves (sic) Anthropological places” [1999, p. 181]. In the same chapter, the authors argue that Gibbon’s definition has become the paradigm for others like Novak, Tomas and Benedikt, who talk about “a global network [...] virtual reality [...] made up of data, of pure information” [cited by Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 181] in which Virtual Reality (VR) is a graphic representation of the cyberspace that takes people “beyond and through the display screen into virtual worlds” [Rheingold cited by Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 29].

Starner et al. [2000] points that while the virtual world is composited with the physical, it results in obvious restrictions to the simulation, but not without significant benefits like the fact that the designer does not have to worry about creating the whole environment, only the virtual objects, like data, metadata and 3D models [p.1].

Pervasive computing, initially called ubiquitous, is the third wave of computing technologies to emerge since computers first appeared. Rather different from when many people used one mainframe (the first wave), or a person used one computer (the second wave), now an individual uses many computers. Millions of computers embedded in the environment allow technology to recede into the background [Postnote, 2006]. Personal computer devices assume many different forms and sizes, like handheld units (PDAs and modern mobile phones like the iPhone) to near-invisible devices set into objects like furniture and clothing. These will all be able to communicate with each other and act ‘intelligently’.

Pervasive games were developed first by the Swedish company Its Alive! as a location-based game where “you’re walking through an adventure world draped on top of the real world, and people you meet may be characters in the same game you’re playing” [Girardin, 2005]. The term is a generic name for different game types that mix environment with computer. Montola, from the University of Tampere Game Research Lab, supports Huizinga’s definition that “the participants agree that some activities in some places by the players are interpreted playfully as a part of the game instead of ordinary life” [n.d.]. Mapping classic computer games onto real-world setting, focus on social interaction, touring artistic games and educational games are the most common variations according to Girardin. For Montola [n.d.], massively collaborative problem-solving games, location-based mobile games, the games augmenting the reality with ludic content, and the games staged with a combination of virtual and physical elements can all be defined as pervasive games.

Szulborski introduces Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) as

[...] a rapidly emerging game genre and is one of the first true art and entertainment forms developed from and exclusively for the Internet [...] although it’s nothing at all like most Internet or video games you may have played in the past. In fact, one of the main goals of an ARG is to deny and disguise the fact that it is even a game at all. [2005, p. 17]

Stewart [cited by Kim et al., 2009, p.4] suggests that an ARG is “a story that was not bound by communication platform”. For Kim et al.,

Alternate Reality Games are specifically designed to tap into the power of collective problem solving through powerful stories and participatory mechanisms. These participatory mechanisms extend digital gaming to incorporate aspects of ‘Reality’ in the form of text messages, phone calls, instant messages and real world meetings. [2009, p. 2]

The authors argue that people love stories and they tend to interpret the world through comprehensible narratives. For them, ARGs are nothing more than a kind of story, although the participatory mechanism includes new media like wikis and blogs, and commenting mechanisms, which allows constant feedback and participation on the part of the “audience”. For Kim et al., players will be motivated to participate by integrating in a collective story that they find fascinating, and forming social groups, teaming up and working for recognition.

Sean Stewart, ARG storyteller, describes the following rules for an ARG:

- i. A story is broken into pieces that the audience must find and assemble;
- ii. The story is not bound by medium or platform: we use text, video, audio, flash, print ads, billboards, phone calls, and e-mail to deliver parts of the plot;
- iii. This audience is massive and COLLECTIVE: it takes advantage of communication tech to work together; and,
- iv. The audience is not only bought into the world because THEY are the ones responsible for exploring it, the audience also meaningfully affects how the story progresses. It is built in a way that allows players to have a key role in creating the fiction. (Stewart, cited in Kim et al.)

Those rules work well as conventions of the genre and are present in most ARGs, although some never achieve some important points like let the players affect the outcome of the game.

2.2 Conventions of detective fiction and *film noir*

Not only game concepts are important when studying ARGs. Narrative is an essential part. For this specific project, detective fiction and film noir were studied so as the pretended narrative had the mood necessary in order to evolve the player.

Murray declares that story “Is an act of interpretation of the world, rooted in the particular perceptions and feelings of the writer. There is no mechanical way to substitute for this and no reason to want to do so” [1997, p. 204]. Marele Day, editor of the anthology *How to Write Crime*, introduces the theme saying that the reader expects a crime to be committed, and during the course of the story the writer will provide the how-why-who-where-and-when of the crime [1996, p. 8]. She also states that in crime writing, there are rules, but they may be bent or broken. In the same book, Stephen Knight states that defining the place where and when the story occurs is crucial to defining the link of story to be written [p. 6]. Different places give different kinds of crimes and investigators, while different times define how the investigation is done.

In the chapter about plot and structure, Garry Disher informs “there can be no plot until there is a crime” [p. 43]. In order to tell the story, he says the author must find which point of view will be used during the narrative. For him it can be *third person limited*, a form that concentrates on only one character point of view, or *first person*, where the narrator is a character in the story [p. 47]. Disher also advises “crime fiction depends on carefully placed clues, unexpected twists, sustained suspense, mounting tension, moments of relief, turning point and hidden truths” [p. 48]. For the writer, planning is an important task in writing mystery and crime. He considers writing defining first the basic shape of the story. The writer should set what will happen in three steps: the beginning of the story, in general something dramatic that will gather attention early, introducing the main characters; then the middle, a stage of building tension for the outcome, but delaying giving too much information, and also a turning point that will lead to the end; finally the end of the story, that will solve the mystery and close the missing links, but careful enough to not over explain [pp. 50 – 54].

The movie critic Tim Dirks says the term *Film Noir* was coined by the French movies critics and means literally black film (2010).

Fear, mistrust, bleakness, loss of innocence, despair and paranoia are readily evident in noir, reflecting the 'chilly' Cold War period when the threat of nuclear annihilation was ever-present. The criminal, violent, misogynistic, hard-boiled, or greedy perspectives of anti-heroes in film noir were a metaphoric symptom of society's evils, with a strong undercurrent of moral conflict, purposelessness and sense of injustice. There were rarely happy or optimistic endings in

noirs. [...] The primary moods of classic *film noir* were melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt, desperation and paranoia. [Dirks, 2010].

Muller traces the origins of the noir to the German cinema, “highly stylized, overtly theatrical form of storytelling” and American pulp literature, “inspired by Hemingway's modern, masculine pacing and vernacular speech” [2006].

3. Methodology

3.1 Project design

The development of the ARG started conceiving the game concept, its theme and general plot. Then the plot must be detailed, with characters, locations and outcome. Being a mystery, conventions of the genre was followed to better develop the story and aspects like clues, suspense and plot twists were widely used. The story borrowed elements from mystery, science fiction and horror and some media examples area were researched in order to get inspiration.

The next step was to define the game structure using Juul's [2005] game model. In this specific ARG, the players got in contact with the game and had to solve a puzzle (formal system rule). In order to solve this puzzle, the player had to search for tips in objects on the Internet and get in contact with other players for help (effort to influence the outcome). The first puzzle cracked led to new tips and another puzzle, consequently and consecutively (different outcomes with different values). The puzzles and tips told a story, creating an emotional attachment for the player about the outcome.

Parallel to this was also the matter of gathering players. The usual ARG calls players without ever being explicit that it is about a game. To get some players, a rabbit hole needed to be created. The rabbit hole is the ARG term that defines how the player gets in contact with the game for the first time. For this project, posters and banners were posted in web forums and physically in selected universities around the world in order to get attention for the game and gather players. Other tools like Facebook and Twitter were also part of the game and was expected that people who got in contact with them got interested in the game. Characters would be inserted in fake e-mails and Facebook accounts, web pages were developed, puzzles created and posted at the web to be found, sometimes using simple Flash programs, other images or audio. For credibility, game characters had MySpace pages, Facebook profile and Twitter accounts created in advance so they don't look like they started to exist just when the game began. An Internet forum was also created so that the players could easily communicate among themselves. The puzzles were going to be inserted along with the tips in the web.

In summary, the development used the following methodology:

1. Plot development and game structure design;
2. Game structure development;
3. Players recruitment;
4. Game publishing and activation;
5. Game evaluation.

3.2 Participants and Ethics Considerations

In this project, three different groups of participants were given different tasks. The first is formed by an actor/model. This person's role was only to allow the use of his image in form of pictures to build one of the non-player characters of the game in web profile in Facebook. The participants of the second group were the players and initially they did not know that they were playing a game and part of a research, because the maintenance of the illusion of reality is one of the requisites of an ARG. For this reason, those participants only had the chance to know technical aspects of the research, or even that it was a research, after the game was played. Those players were not actively recruited, they were expected to get in contact with the game through Facebook, Twitter and posts in web forums that may gather their attention and lead them to the game. The third group's role was simply to post the posters in public spaces in universities of their convenience and this group consisted of friends and relatives.

3.3 Evaluating the game

The evaluation occurred according to Donald Norman's User-Centered Design point of view, a "philosophy based on the needs and interests of the user, with an emphasis on making products usable and understandable" [2002, p. 188]. The game was evaluated based on game requisites and users' behavior and posts registered in the web forum. People are characteristically critical inside web forums and it was a centre where the players could exchange ideas, tips and experiences. From there, information of the relation between the players and the game could be retrieved. It was expected that they inform of any difficulty, moments of insight, if they like the narrative or not, if it felt immersive or artificial, the most engaging moments and the most frustrating.

The information provided was analyzed from a qualitative point of view, interpreting the direct information given by players in the forum and comparing them with the information provided by the other players and literature review. The development of the ARG focused on what could provide for the players as an experience. In order to give incentive to players to share their opinion, the option to answer a post-game questionnaires' was provided.

4. Plot Development

4.1 Developing the plot

To create a plot that delivers a satisfactory level of mystery, the conventions of detective fiction and film *noir* were researched during the literature review step. In the story, Phillip Blake, a young British photographer is missing and his sister Ada is looking for him. Ada plays the role of the *Femme Fatale*, one of the most iconic characteristics of the *film noir* [Ebert, 1995]. She is smart, sexy and at first looks very vulnerable – but ends up revealing that she was someone very dangerous - and needs the players to help her. She is the first contact of the players with the world of the game and the responsible for the Rabbit Hole, the players' entrance to the ARG [Thompson, 2010].

Although the structure of the story was essentially a mystery with *noir* atmosphere, the supernatural has great importance on it. The main influence for this plot is the North-American author H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft created what is known as the Cthulhu mythos and is great influence of hundreds of professional and amateur authors in the horror genre [Petersen & Willis, 1999, p. 104]. The world of Lovecraft is full of cults and ancient god-like creatures that can bring madness to a sane man. Like *noir*, Lovecraft stories are full of fear, despair and paranoia. Through the game plot, the players eventually discover that Phillip was related to an ancient cult that intends to use technology to bring one of those creatures to our reality for their religious needs, even though this means the end of the reality as we know – as the creature actually feeds itself from reality. In the plot, the players eventually realize that they are being manipulated by the cult since the beginning in order to acquire knowledge about the creature and, through their collective thought, make it strong enough to breach our reality and consume it. The game ends with the players following one of the game characters doing its last attempt to avoid this destiny, but not knowing if it worked or not.

It is important to note that, being an ARG, the plot is not written in stone and players can and should influence the outcome [Stewart cited in Kim et al., 2009]. In other words, this means that the plot can go in directions that were not the ones proposed at first and the narrator must have a backup plan to tell them in a way that pleases the curiosity of the players and at the same time, leads the story to the course desired to tell the intended story.

4.2 Characters

In a RPG – a game that has many resemblances with ARGs – characters are divided between player's

characters, the PCs, and non-player characters, or NPCs. In this aspect, ARGs and RPGs are very similar. The difference is that the players do not interpret a role that is not their own. The NPCs on the other hand, works on the same way. They are characters used by the Puppet Master (analogue to the Dungeon Master for RPGs) in order to tell the story, leading the players or acting as antagonists. The characters were developed in advance to the game, getting e-mail accounts, Twitter accounts and Facebook profiles months earlier to make their existence more realistic. This use of Internet tools makes media convergence to be broadly used in order to provide the story, following Murray's idea of multi-media narrative.

The main characters in the game are Phillip Blake, a young photographer who is involved with the Cult and his sister Ada who is searching for him. The players also met Chapman, a guy fascinated by conspiracy theories and, Dom Paul Monsegur is an ambitious and devoted member of the *Iglesia Del Perfecto Círculo*. Besides them there are others characters that help the plot development. As a background story there is The Creature, an ancient God forgotten by the time that a Cult of worshippers is trying to bring back to our reality.

5. Game Structure Design and Development

5.1 Game design

After the plot was defined, it was broken and distributed into files and actions that would deliver the story for the players. In order to have access to the plot, the players must solve riddles, break codes, and debate with the community where each piece of the puzzle goes. The public should experience more if they share and change information and resources [Jenkins, 2006, p. 95]. Here the player is not only a viewer, also interacts with the outcome of the story [Aarseth cited by Murray, 1997, p. 48]. Therefore, the designer must cover most of the bases and be prepared for unexpected outcomes the players may deliver. In an ARG, nothing is written in stone.

In an ARG, the narrative is fragmented, and in this case the story was narrated using documents and letters produced by the characters, much like Bram Stoker did in his *Dracula*. However technologies like Twitter and e-mails were used to deliver information, allowing players to interact with the NPCs.

The game was divided in 6 stages where different events occur and players have access to different information. It is important to notice that this design is essentially a planning of what comes, but ARGs by its own nature tends to become unpredictable sometimes and some level of flexibility must be given, as players are not tied to strict game rules and can get unexpected

routes that may frustrate some of the plans, compelling the designer take fast and creative decisions in order to keep the game running the desired path, or at least at the desired pace.

5.2 Game development

Months before the game was scheduled to begin, many preparations were required in order to make it more believable. One key element of the game is the relationship between the characters Phillip and Chapman. The first puzzles required the players to break Phillip's password and get into his Gmail account and read his e-mails. Since the e-mails are dated, they had to be sent to Phillip months before the game started so the players had the illusion that they have been changing information for a while before he disappeared. The same thing happened in Chapman's twitter. It was created many months before the game start date – the first tweet being made on 28th October 2010, while the game only began by the end of February of the following year – and the character have been tweeting for a while some things that may lead to players through the story and others that will help them to solve the puzzles. Some tweets needed to be synchronized with the e-mails date so that the players could see their relationship. Ada's e-mail account was also a key to the game, since only by contacting her will players have access to the forum address. A standard automatic answer provided by AIM e-mail service responded to everyone who gets in contact with her providing the link and saying that the forum is where people where gathering to change information and joining to help.

Some of the texts were written along game, in order to deliver the relevant information at the right time and maintain flexibility to player's achievements. The background of the story needed to be clearly defined in advance for this strategy work. The main points – the characters and the background – were defined and archived to constant consult. Each character received a file that contained its story and data like full name, birth date and nationality, e-mail, passwords, Facebook, link and links to whichever other site the character used. Organization was fundamental when dealing with so many characters that must talk to players, answer e-mails and access the forum and all information that must be provided on the go.

Recruiting players was probably the hardest part of the project. Since this was a low scale, low budget project, it could not afford a multi-million dollar marketing campaign to show its face to potential players. Instead, viral marketing was done with help of a few people around the world and Internet mouth-to-mouth. The key for the players gathering was the poster named *Where is Phillip Blake*.



Figure 1: Poster

Contacting the e-mail provided in the poster led the person to the web forum where the game started.

6. Game Publishing and Activation

On the 23rd February 2011 the game officially started with the worldwide distribution of the posters. Slowly people started to get in contact, receiving the automatic message and registering in the forum. One of those players opened a meta-topic about it in the ARG dedicated forum unfiction.com to keep track of the events of the game. Once there were 3 people registered and participating, all the information necessary to break the first puzzle was delivered by the NPC Ada. Besides some plot basic information, Ada gave the players Phillip's email address and asked them to hack it, originating the first puzzle.

From this point unexpected things already happened. One participant tried several times to get into contact with a character that was not supposed to have any real relevant information. The character, Wallace, was Phillip's childhood friend and the password for the first puzzle. But, through Facebook, the player started to ask several questions to the character. Observing this unexpected interest and trying not to frustrate the player, it was created an exclusive piece of paper that had a little, but precious information about the church and the symbol in the pictures. Every new puzzle solved revealed a new piece of information and moved the narrative forward, but also led to a new puzzle. Sometimes the players

would fail to achieve an objective and information would be provided later in another form. Other times the players would simply have to deal that they lost the information and it would be inaccessible.

In a specific situation, the players outsmarted the game plan and found information ahead of time forcing to rethink the puzzle to deliver new information and restructure the sequence of game narrative.

6. Game Evaluation

This project chose to explore and study how Alternate Reality Games can be used as a storytelling media. For this reason the "game" aspect and the "story" aspect needed to be developed together, integrating one with the needs of the other. For the purpose of analysis, however, those two core aspects of the project are separated into the following topics: Alternate Reality Games as a multi-media narrative platform and Alternate Reality Game design and development practice/models.

5.1 Alternate Reality Games as a multi-media narrative platform

This project has no intention to argue that ARGs are literature, but they do have narrative possibilities that tell a story across a variety of media. More important than defend ARGs as literature is the need to understand its form and develop the media. Elizabeth Reid highlights the important point that "MUD interaction is not designed for an audience uninvolved in it" [cited by Aarseth, 1994, p.147], and while Aarseth disagrees with this point, I believe her opinion would fit very well most ARGs and specifically this one. Once the game is over, even though there are transcriptions and records of all activities, the overall experience is lost. A more coherent classification of an ARG, instead of literature, game or interactive drama is simply experience. While all those things are present in the ARG in certain ways, it is the experience of participating that counts above all other things.

Citing Kim et al. [2009], the goal of an ARG is not to create an alternate reality, but to create a storyline that infiltrates real life [p.3]. This definition implies that general objective of an ARG is to tell a story. Documents are delivered in form of PDF or DOC. The story was spread on those files, fragmented, giving the players the mission to find them and organize the narrative. Those mundane 21st century tools use, like in the above-cited horror books, brought a higher sense of immersion in the narrative. Players easily identify with those tools as an everyday information source.

Most of this project narrative can be related to 'Embedded Narrative' [Jenkins, 2005, p. 11]. According to this model, narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypothesis about likely narrative developments on

basis of information drawn from textual cues or clues. A good example is the detective story that has the development of the events in the time of the narrative and the development of the events during the crime. Therefore, one can imagine the designer of the game developing two kinds of narrative: one relatively unstructured that can be explored/modified by the players and another one pre-structured waiting to be discovered. Here this structure presented in the story that is being developed during player involvement. While players had no real power to change the main events – save Phillip, for example – some liberty was given in other minor events. Players interacted with other characters, other players and puzzles.

In general terms, observing players acting in the forum or their messages to NPCs is safe to affirm they felt reasonably immersed in the narrative responding right away every new information provided by the game. One reasonable critic was about the tone of language used. While early documents could be carefully crafted to avoid this kind of problem, sometimes urgency made necessary deliver texts not so well written which caused some players to get away from immersion for a short time. Fortunately this was a minor problem given the project scope.

5.2 Alternate Reality Games design and development practice/models

ARGs are a very new media and there are few references for development, but being essentially a game, other sources can be borrowed. Bob Bates' *Game Design* book is a good reference listing important principles that helped to design and evaluate the game.

Bates states, “a good designer always has an idea on what's going on in the player's head” [2004, p. 17] and he calls this Player Empathy. This is crucial during the design. Games are made for players, user-oriented design. The designer must imagine what situation players will face, how to solve it, and what will be their probable responses. Every puzzle was created by envisioning how players would react to it. Naturally, a complete foresight is impossible, but more frequently than not players acted as expected. Freeman in his book *Creating Emotion in Games* advises game writers to learn “all the ways to give actual or apparent freedom to the player, so that the player doesn't feel trapped into merely being a pawn in a story” [2004, p. 19].

The second factor to be considered during design is the feedback: “feedback is what distinguishes the game from every other form of entertainment” showing the player what he/she did right (by rewarding them) and what he did wrong (by punishing them) [2004, p. 18]. In an ARG this can be a thin line as there are no necessarily wrong choices. Failing to solve a puzzle will deprive players from some information or maybe

will not allow them to proceed to the next puzzle, but the story must proceed.

Bates' Interface is the third aspect worth noticing. In this project, this is how Jenkins 'Evocative Spaces' narrative was used. The commitment to make everything as real as possible directed the visual design of the project in almost every instance. The use of tools recurrent in people every day like Gmail and Facebook provided an interface intuitive and familiar. Besides some image treatments, everything looked as pedestrian as it could be found in the Internet. Emails were simple and direct. Twitter had an explosive background and a just-a-little-disturbing bud icon, but that is about it. The forum was dark, but nothing extraordinary like one wouldn't have seen many times before in the Internet. The more normal everything looked, the strange things, as subtle as they were (a picture a little distorted, a misspelling somewhere) would register in the eyes of the players. The familiarity players had with those tools sometimes even allowed them to go beyond the initial design intended, like finding this project's supervisor.

The last aspect was creating equilibrium between the difficult levels. From the beginning the puzzles were intended to be cracked socially, meaning that players should share information with others players and together solve it. Some puzzles were a little more difficult, while others were simpler, so everyone has the opportunity to accomplish something.

6. Conclusion

This project tried to explore through practice how storytelling could benefit from new media, with players participating in its development as active characters, uncovering clues and modifying the plot in a form of game. It gathered fifteen registered players and an unknown number of lurkers – users who follow games or board discussions without directly participating – although according to the website *Unfiction.com* [2011] there are an estimated number of 5 lurkers for each participating player. Maybe this is a too large estimation, but is safe to assume that at least 30 people were involved with the game at some point.

This research identified some key issues regarding the design and running of an ARG. The first is the importance of preparation since the plot must react to player's interaction. . An ARG must be flexible and give the players the illusion that their actions matters for the story – the second issue – and sometimes things can go to much unexpected directions. But if the Puppet Master created a cohesive plot, rich characters and is prepared for eventualities, those unexpected directions will only contribute to the experience. Attention to details is a great tool to keep the illusion.

It is also a nice practice to give enough attention or feedback to players so their attention is kept. It can be hard to manage this in a bigger project, with thousands

of players, but with creativity the PM can satisfy most of their attention needs. It is also a good idea to reward the more dedicated players, delivering an exclusive piece of plot or maybe sending a file not seen before, like a document, image, or even audio or video. Those rewards will make the player feel special and will make him more willing to participate with the possibility of receiving more privileged information. The fourth aspect may sound obvious, but during the game it is crucial for the PM keep a close eye on events. Sometimes players can go in completely unexpected directions and fast action is necessary to put things back on track. An ARG demands time during the preparation but also during the game. Although the PM can often dictate the pace, unexpected events demand quick reactions.

ARGs are a great example of the interactive, participative and social possibilities of media in the information age. In a connected world, people do not want to be passive anymore, they want to communicate, contribute and modify. The time to sit and receive has passed. All media can be social. An ARG is a game, a story and a performance, but most of all an ARG is an experience. It is a chance to participate in the construction of a story, defeat challenges, escape reality by playing a role, share their experiences, and meets new people, even if the community formed during the game is fragile and will likely disband as soon as the game is over.

At that period, the group worked together to uncover this story in a way that will not ever be repeated the same way. Those who shared information and changed information and resources experienced more. For lurkers, the majority of the participants, an ARG provides the chance to see a story being unfolded before their eyes, with all the surprises that a live act can bring – thus the reason why an ARG must maintain a puzzle trail – and open their minds to participate actively in the future. Their hands might have been guided, but there were no interface or rigid plotline limitations. Players took part in a Lovecraftian horror story where they do not follow a character or impersonate a character suffering the dark events that will bring an old entity back to Earth, but themselves are those characters and where object of the events. They were not following the detective, but were the detective and what they found, the way they found, the testimony they decided to take, changed how the story moved. ARG is a new way to tell a story, a unique event and an unprecedented experience.

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